

## BRIEF REPORT

## Adolescents' Confidence in Institutions: Do America's Youth Differentiate Between Legal and Social Institutions?

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It is widely believed that there is a crisis of confidence in law enforcement in the United States. What remains to be seen, however, is whether adolescents actually differentiate between legal authorities and other types of authorities. Leveraging cross-sectional, nationally representative data of 12th graders from every year from 2006 to 2017 from Monitoring the Future ( $N = 10,941$ ), the results indicate that adolescents distinguish between legal authorities (e.g., law enforcement, justice system) and social authorities (e.g., schools, religious institutions). Youth report more confidence in social authorities than in legal authorities. Furthermore, whereas confidence in social authorities remained largely stable between the cohorts over the last decade, confidence in legal authorities, and in law enforcement in particular, has declined markedly. Although there may be an era of mistrust in legal authorities, it cannot be attributed to a ubiquitous anti-authority attitude among modern adolescents in the United States.

*Keywords:* adolescent development, confidence, perceptions of authorities, procedural justice

National conversation surrounding individuals' perceptions of legal authorities has become widespread in recent years (see Friedman, 2017). Scholars believe there is a crisis of confidence in legal authorities such as law enforcement and the justice system (Tyler, Goff, & MacCoun, 2015; Tyler & Trinkner, 2018; White, Weisburd, & Wire, 2018). Researchers have found that confidence in institutions, or the belief in the reliability, honest, and ability of the institution (see Dalton, 1996; Smith, 1981; Twenge, Campbell, & Carter, 2014), recently reached historic lows in the United States (Fine, Rowan, & Simmons, 2019; Twenge et al., 2014). However, it remains to be seen whether adolescents actually differentiate between legal authorities and other types of authority institutions. That is, youths' low confidence in legal authority may simply be indicative of a more general antiauthority attitude (Amoroso & Ware, 1983; Hall, 1904). Using nationally representative samples of youth in the United States, we explore whether America's adolescents distinguish between authorities and whether their confidence in authorities have declined in the last decade.

### Developing Perceptions of Authorities

For many years, research on adolescents' attitudes toward authority was guided by the generalization perspective (Amoroso & Ware, 1983; Levy, 2001). This perspective, which is a subtype of social learning theory, contends that adolescents tend to develop similar attitudes toward different authority institutions in their socialization process largely because their views on authority stem from experiences in the home environment (see Liu & Crank, 2010). The central proposition is that children develop their notions of authority from interacting with parents, and these attitudes are then generalized from the parents to other authority figures (Tyler & Trinkner, 2018). In support of this framework, studies have found that adolescents do exhibit a similar attitude toward various authority figures including their parents (e.g., Amoroso & Ware, 1983; Clark & Wenninger, 1964; Krause, 1975; Nihart, Michelle Lersch, Sellers, & Mieczkowski, 2005).

Grounded in stage theories of moral judgment and developmental perspective taking (e.g., Kohlberg, 1984; Selman, 1971), the cognitive developmental model (Kohlberg, 1963; Vollebergh, Iedema, & Raaijmakers, 2001) has also emerged as a dominant perspective in understanding adolescents' perceptions of authorities. In part, this is because it is able to explain developmental changes in youths' perceptions. The cognitive developmental model (CDM) recognizes that changes in developmental capacities, contexts, and experiences may jointly affect how youth perceive various authority figures. The CDM considers emerging developmental capacities to be of paramount importance to understanding youths' perceptions of authorities.

Indeed, adolescence is marked by improvements in the ability to reason abstractly as well as in the ability to take and integrate

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perspectives (see Smetana & Villalobos, 2009; Steinberg, 2014). Developmental cognitive changes that occur during adolescence enable youth to more effectively question the limits and efficacy of adult authority (Cohn, Bucolo, Rebellon, & Van Gundy, 2010; Cohn & White, 1990). Cognitive neuroscience studies demonstrate that the regions underlying the ability to think abstractly actually show prolonged structural development during adolescence, and adolescence is a critically important period for developing higher order cognitive skills (see Dumontheil, Burgess, & Blakemore, 2008). Adolescents can operate at a new level of thought because they can integrate the results of multiple types of lower-order processing (Dumontheil, 2014). As they age, adolescents become better able to evaluate their own perspectives within a broader social context (Selman & Jaquette, 1977) and these developmental improvements enable adolescents to begin considering complex aspects of the social world (Steinberg, 2014). Corresponding with these age-graded cognitive improvements are emerging beliefs about a broad array of moral and social concerns during the period (see Smetana & Villalobos, 2009).

Modern cognitive developmental studies posit that as a result of these improving capacities, a sophisticated understanding of social authority agents materializes during adolescence. In particular, youth become less idealistic and tend to question authority both more frequently and more skillfully (see Smetana & Villalobos, 2009). Marked improvements are observed in adolescents' abilities to critically evaluate the fairness and efficacy of different social and governmental authority practices (Tyler & Trinkner, 2018). With age, it is likely that youth become better at contextualizing their judgments of authority and evaluating their practices and behaviors in terms of their cultural and historical context (see Smetana & Villalobos, 2009). Indeed, concern about the competence of authority agents appears to increase during the developmental period (Cohn & White, 2012).

Just as adolescents' cognitive capacities are expanding, so too is their social world. From a developmental contextual perspective, adolescence itself is characterized by increasing exposure to institutions beyond the family (Smetana & Villalobos, 2009). Simply put, adolescents spend more time outside of the home interacting with various authority figures than any other previous developmental epoch. This becomes critically important considering individuals' confidence in authorities develops through a cyclical process: scattered personal and vicarious experiences with authorities are generalized into specific attitudes, deviance from expectations are detected following subsequent experiences, and attitudes are reformed as a result (Torney, 1971).

Although adolescents interface with a variety of authorities, much of the literature on youths' perceptions of authority has traditionally focused on parents (Tyler & Trinkner, 2018). Studies show that although youth become less satisfied with parents' authority over their personal domains (see Darling, Cumsille, & Peña-Alampay, 2005; Kuhn & Laird, 2011; Rote & Smetana, 2016; Smetana, 1988), adolescents still see their parents as important authority figures (Douvan & Adelson, 1966). At the same time, youth also begin to critically evaluate legal authorities such as law enforcement and the justice system (Fagan & Tyler, 2005; Twenge et al., 2014; Tyler & Trinkner, 2018). Part of this is attributable to their expanding world and increasing personal and vicarious contact with legal authorities. As a result of crime and delinquency increasing sharply during adolescence (Loeber &

Farrington, 2014), youth are far more likely to personally and vicariously encounter legal authorities. Research routinely shows that youths' perceptions of legal authorities derive from personal experiences as well as the experiences of friends (Fine et al., 2016), neighbors (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011), and family members (Cavanagh & Cauffman, 2015). Unfortunately, youth generally perceive legal authority negatively (Augustyn, 2016; Geistman & Smith, 2007; Tyler & Trinkner, 2018), and such negative perceptions are linked to less crime reporting and system reliance (Desmond, Papachristos, & Kirk, 2016) as well as to delinquency and noncompliance (Friedman, Lurigio, Greenleaf, & Albertson, 2004).

In addition to legal authorities, adolescents certainly interact with school authorities (Amemiya, Fine, & Wang, 2019; Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flangan, 2010). In fact, school has long been considered a central avenue through which notions of authority develop (Justice & Meares, 2014; Tapp & Kohlberg, 1971; Tyler & Trinkner, 2018). Developmental changes observed in adolescents' concepts of parental authority are also present in their judgments of school authority (Smetana & Bitz, 1996). The experiences youth have in schools likely also affect their perceptions of legal authorities more generally (Tapp & Kohlberg, 1971). For instance, interactions with teachers and school officials likely contribute to youths' perceptions of legal authorities (Levy, 2001; Tapp & Levine, 1970; Tyler & Trinkner, 2018).

Student confidence in teacher authority is critically important because it affects cooperative behavior and student achievement (see Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Critically, however, discipline has shifted toward criminalizing misbehavior in ways that mirror law enforcement and the justice system, particularly for youth of color (see Kupchik, 2010>; Rios, 2017; Welch & Payne, 2018). Racial/ethnic minority students receive more and harsher discipline at school (Mizel et al., 2016; Rios, 2017), including under "zero tolerance" policies (see Curran, 2019; Hoffman, 2014). Coupled with evidence that punitive school environments create cultures of fear (Fuentes, 2013; Kupchik, 2010; Shedd, 2015), it is plausible that youth of color perceive schools as control, authoritarian institutions that dole out punishment, similar to legal authorities.

In addition to schools, religion is an important social authority during adolescence, though comparatively less research has been devoted to the topic (Wallace & Williams, 1997). Religion provides standards to guide youths' behaviors (Smith, 2003). Research shows that positive perceptions of religion are associated with lower rates of delinquency (Charles, Curry, & Chalfant, 1985; Powell, 1997). Yet, it appears as though religiosity may be declining among American adolescents (Twenge, Exline, Grubbs, Sasser, & Campbell, 2015).

## The Present Study

The present study addresses several empirical gaps in our understanding of adolescents' perceptions of authorities. We begin by examining whether modern youths' perceptions of legal authorities are merely indicative of how they perceive other authorities. Based on extant literature (e.g., Rigby, Schofield, & Slee, 1987), we expect that youth will differentiate between legal and social authorities. Specifically, considering national conversation surrounding individuals' perceptions of legal authorities has become

so widespread in recent years (see Friedman, 2017) that scholars believe there is a crisis of confidence (Tyler et al., 2015), we expect to find that youth would report worse perceptions (i.e., less confidence) of legal institutions than of social institutions.

Second, are there differences by race? Consistent with prior work showing that racial/ethnic minorities are disproportionately affected by negative policing and justice system practices (see Fine & Cauffman, 2015; Peck, 2015; Weitzer & Tuch, 2006), we expect Black and Latinx youth will perceive legal authorities more negatively than White youth. Further, given racial/ethnic disparities in school punishment (Banks & Banks, 2010; Bennett & Harris, 1982; Mizel et al., 2016; Rios, 2017) that verge on criminalizing misbehavior in ways that parallel law enforcement and the justice system practices (see Kupchik, 2010; Rios, 2017; Welch & Payne, 2018), we expect that for youth of color, perceptions of schools will load onto their perceptions of legal authorities.

Finally, we compare findings across the years of 2006 to 2017 to examine whether (a) the way youth organize their perceptions of authorities has changed and (b) youths' general perceptions of authorities have declined. We expect to find (a) the way adolescents organize their perceptions of authorities will not have changed and (b) adolescents' perceptions of legal authorities will have declined more than their perceptions of social authorities. Researchers have found that confidence in institutions reached historic lows in 2012 (Twenge et al., 2014), yet the study did not consider whether youth differentiate between various authorities or if important differences may exist by race. These questions are particularly salient in the current era, in which national conversation surrounding individuals' perceptions of legal authorities has become so widespread (see Friedman, 2017) that scholars believe we now have a "crisis of confidence" (Tyler et al., 2015).

## Method

### Data

Data were obtained from the Monitoring the Future study (MTF; Bachman, Johnston, O'Malley, Schulenberg, & Miech, 2015; Miech, Johnston, Bachman, O'Malley, & Schulenberg, 2017). MTF conducts annual, cross-sectional, self-reported surveys of 12th grade students in the 48 contiguous U.S. states. MTF employs a multistage random sampling design with replacement to yield nationally representative cohorts. This analysis included youth sampled each year from 2006 (Johnston, Bachman, O'Malley, & Schulenberg, 2006) to 2017 (Miech et al., 2017). To maximize power while maintaining the ability to identify nuanced trends over time, data were pooled across four time periods: 2006–2008, 2009–2011, 2012–2014, and 2015–2017. Sample sizes are presented in Table 1. More detailed methodology, including informed consent procedures, is provided elsewhere (see Miech et al., 2017). All survey responses are confidential and all procedures are reviewed and approved on an annual basis by the University of Michigan's Institutional Review Board.

### Measures

Youth in each cohort were asked, "How good or bad a job is being done for the country as a whole by [institution]?" Responses were provided using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *very poor*

Table 1  
Sample Sizes (N) by Time Period

Race	Time period			Total
	2006–2008	2012–2014	2015–2017	
White	3,011	2,450	2,158	7,619
Black	546	421	493	1,460
Latinx	596	619	647	1,862

to *very good* with higher scores indicative of more positive perceptions of the institution. Youth were also asked the identical question regarding each of the following: (a) the police and law enforcement agencies; (b) the justice system; (c) public schools; and (d) churches/religious organizations. This type of question is traditionally used in large-scale data collection efforts (e.g., Euro-Barometer, General Social Survey) to measure confidence in institutions (see Dalton, 1996; Smith, 1981). Indeed, following Twenge and colleagues' use of the same measure, we refer to this construct as *confidence* (Twenge et al., 2014). These authors define confidence in institutions as "a belief in the reliability, honesty, or ability of institutions" (2014, p. 1914). Confidence is strongly affected by one's assessment of the institution's performance (Mishler & Rose, 2001) and refers to one's assessment of how well the institution serves public interests or performs (Wang, 2014, p. 1190).

### Analytic Approach

To maximize power while maintaining nuance, we grouped the data into four 3-year time periods: 2006–2008, 2009–2011, 2012–2014, and 2015–2017. The analyses consisted of three stages. First, we examined bivariate correlations between variables within each time period. Second, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis to identify the number of latent factors. We picked one time period at random to serve as the sample (2009–2011) for the exploratory factor analysis. To maintain analytic integrity, these data were not reused for the subsequent confirmatory factor analyses or group comparisons. Considering that we expected the factors to correlate, we used Horst oblique rotation, as opposed to orthogonal rotation, because it permits factors to be correlated. If the factors were not correlated, the solution would be the same as that of an orthogonal rotation.

Third, within a structural equation modeling framework, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses using three remaining time periods (2006–2008, 2012–2014, and 2015–2017). A combination of model fit indices were used to assess model fit (Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2005), including the comparative fit index (CFI > .95; Bentler, 1990) and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI > .95; Tucker & Lewis, 1973). The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Browne & Cudeck, 1992) was not calculated because its use in models with small *df* has recently been problematic and potentially misleading (Kenny, Kaniskan, & McCoach, 2015). Further, to examine invariance across time, we fit a series of structural equation models using time period as the group variable. Finally, measurement invariance was compared between Black, Latinx, and White youth (Acock, 2013). Analyses were conducted in Stata 15 (StataCorp, 2015).

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

The results of the bivariate correlations in each of the four time periods indicated that although youths' perceptions of different institutions were all positively and significantly correlated, their perceptions of each authority institution differed (see Table 2). In 2006–2008, adolescents were more confident in religious institutions than both public schools,  $t(11,455) = 32.98, p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = -.31$ , and law enforcement,  $t(100943) = -30.33, p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = -.38$ . Interestingly, youth were more confident in law enforcement than the justice system,  $t(10,893) = 6.78, p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = .06$ . This general rank ordering was consistent across 2009–2011 and 2012–2014. However, whereas youth were more confident in law enforcement than in the justice system in 2004–2006, again in 2006–2008,  $t(10,893) = 6.78, p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = .06$ , 2009–2011,  $t(10,277) = 10.38, p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = .10$ , and again in 2012–2014,  $t(9589) = 17.94, p < .001$ ; Cohen's  $d = .18$ , they perceived law enforcement just as negatively as the justice system in 2015–2017,  $t(6266) = -0.10, p = .924$ ; Cohen's  $d = -.01$ . That is, in the most recent era, youth reported equally low confidence in both law enforcement and the justice system.

**Factor Analyses**

**Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses.** The results of an exploratory factor analysis depicted in Table 3 using the pooled data from 2009–2011 indicated that there were two factors (eigenvalues = 1.23, 1.02). As hypothesized, youths' perceptions of law enforcement and the justice system mapped onto a single factor that we call *Legal Institutions*, whereas their perceptions of schools and religious organizations mapped onto a second factor that we call *Social Institutions*. The results indicated that the factors were correlated, thus the Horst oblique rotation was suitable for providing the best approximate simple structure. Following the exploratory factor analysis, we performed confirmatory factor analyses on each of the other three periods of data. The results of confirmatory factor analyses using the data from any of the other periods indicated that in each case, the two factor solution fit well by conventional fit indices (see Table 3). As an exemplar, see Figure 1.

**Differences across time.** To examine invariance across time, we fit a series of structural equation models using time period as the group variable (2006–2008; 2012–2014; 2015–2017). We then fit a structural equation model that allowed the indicators to load onto the same latent variables in each group, but the loadings themselves were not required to be equal. The results indicated that the model imposing invariance constraints outperformed the model in which the parameters were not constrained to be equal,  $\chi^2(2) = 18.19, p < .001$ . This suggests that the structural form of the two-latent-construct model did not vary by time period. The next model examined whether the loadings varied by time. The invariant loadings model performed significantly worse,  $\chi^2(4) = 21.57, p < .001$ , indicating that the strengths of the loadings of the observed variables onto the latent variables varied over time. As expected, the intercepts were also not equal across time periods,  $\chi^2(8) = 248.76, p < .001$ , indicating that the means of the latent

Table 2  
Means (SDs) and Bivariate Correlations

Variable	2006–2008				2009–2011				2012–2014				2015–2017			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
1. Law enforcement	3.13 (1.08)				3.17 (1.08)				3.15 (1.09)				2.95 (1.21)			
2. Justice system	.56***	3.05 (.97)			.53***	3.06 (.99)			.55***	2.95 (.99)			.57***	2.94 (1.03)		
3. Public school	.30***	.30***	3.15 (1.04)		.29***	.30***	3.10 (1.09)		.32***	.32***	3.06 (1.08)		.27***	.33***	3.07 (1.09)	
4. Religious organizations	.27***	.27***	.35***	3.54 (1.08)	.24***	.25***	.34***	3.51 (1.10)	.29***	.22***	.33***	3.44 (1.12)	.27***	.28***	.36***	3.42 (1.11)
Multi-variate means test	$F(3, 9575) = 445.88, p < .001$				$F(3, 8979) = 382.01, p < .001$				$F(3, 8423) = 386.23, p < .001$				$F(3, 5382) = 239.62, p < .001$			

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 3  
Principal Component Factor Analysis (PCFA) Factor Loadings and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) Loadings Results

Variable	Exploratory factor analysis				Confirmatory factor analysis											
	2009–2011				2006–2008				2012–2014				2015–2017			
	Legal (Factor 1) Loading	Social (Factor 2) Loading	Uniqueness		Legal Loading <sup>a</sup>	Legal Var.	Social Loading <sup>a</sup>	Social Var.	Legal Loading <sup>a</sup>	Legal Var.	Social Loading <sup>a</sup>	Social Var.	Legal Loading <sup>a</sup>	Legal Var.	Social Loading <sup>a</sup>	Social Var.
Law enforcement	.61		.58		.74***	.45			.77***	.41			.70***	.51		
Justice system	.61		.57		.76***	.42		.72***	.48				.80***	.35		
Public school		.44	.72	.63			.61***				.65***	.58			.64***	.59
Religious organizations		.45	.76	.69			.56***	.69			.50***	.75			.56***	.68
Model fit indices					CFI = .99; TLI = .99; AIC = 104933.136; BIC = 105026.309; CD = .84; SRMR < .001				CFI = .99; TLI = .99; AIC = 104933.136; BIC = 105026.309; CD = .84; SRMR = .011				CFI = .99; TLI = .98; AIC = 61,840.189; BIC = 61,925.877; CD = .86; SRMR = .009			

Note. CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; CD = coefficient of determination; SRMR = standardized root mean squared residual.

<sup>a</sup> Standardized.  
\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

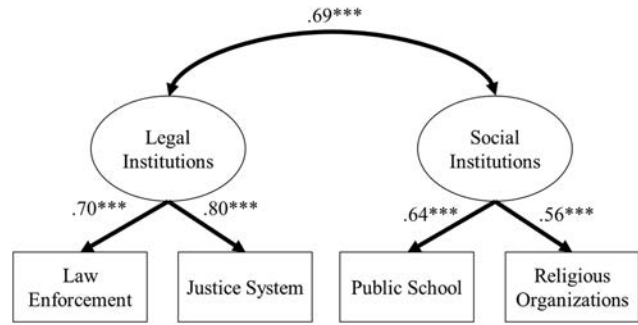


Figure 1. Results of a confirmatory factor analysis in 2015–2017 (results are standardized). \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

variables differed over time period. Compared with 2006–2008, youth in 2012–2014 ( $M = -.06$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Effect Size =  $-.07^1$ ) and youth in 2015–2017 ( $M = -.15$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Effect Size =  $-.18$ ) reported lower confidence in legal authorities. Similarly, youth in 2015–2017 reported lower confidence in legal authorities than youth in 2012–2014 ( $M = -.09$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ , Effect Size =  $-.10$ ). That is, over time from 2006 through 2017, cohorts of youth continued to report lower confidence in legal authority.

Compared with 2006–2008, youth in 2012–2014 ( $M = -.11$ ,  $SE = .01$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Effect Size =  $-.17$ ) and youth in 2015–2017 ( $M = -.10$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Effect Size =  $-.15$ ) reported lower confidence of social authorities. However, youth in 2015–2017 reported similar perceptions of social authorities as youth in 2012–2014 ( $M = .01$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p = .475$ , Effect Size =  $.02$ ). In contrast to the trajectory of youths’ perceptions of legal authority, the data suggest that youths’ confidence in social authorities may have declined from 2006–2008 to 2012–2014, but we uncovered no evidence that youths’ perceptions of social authority changed from 2012–2014 to 2015–2017. That is, confidence in social authorities between cohorts of youth declined from 2006–2014 before plateauing in recent years, whereas their confidence in legal authorities consistently declined over time.

**Racial differences.** The next set of analyses examined invariance across racial/ethnic group. To maximize the number of youth in each racial/ethnic group and power, we pooled the data from across the three analytic time periods (2006–2008; 2012–2014; 2015–2017). The results of the first two SEM models indicated that the structural form of the two-latent-construct did not vary by race/ethnicity,  $\chi^2(2) = 17.53$ ,  $p < .001$ . The next model examined whether the loadings varied by racial/ethnic group. The results, depicted in Figure 2, indicated that the degree to which the observed variables loaded onto the latent variables differed across racial/ethnic groups,  $\chi^2(4) = 33.26$ ,  $p < .001$ . As expected, the intercepts were also not equal across groups,  $\chi^2(8) = 255.73$ ,  $p < .001$ . In particular, models analyzed by race indicated that perceptions of law enforcement were comparatively more strongly associated with Black youths’ perceptions of legal authority (see Figure 2). Further, compared with White youth, Black ( $M = -.36$ ,

<sup>1</sup> Effect sizes are based on dividing the latent mean by the pooled standard deviation (Acocck, 2013; p. 231).

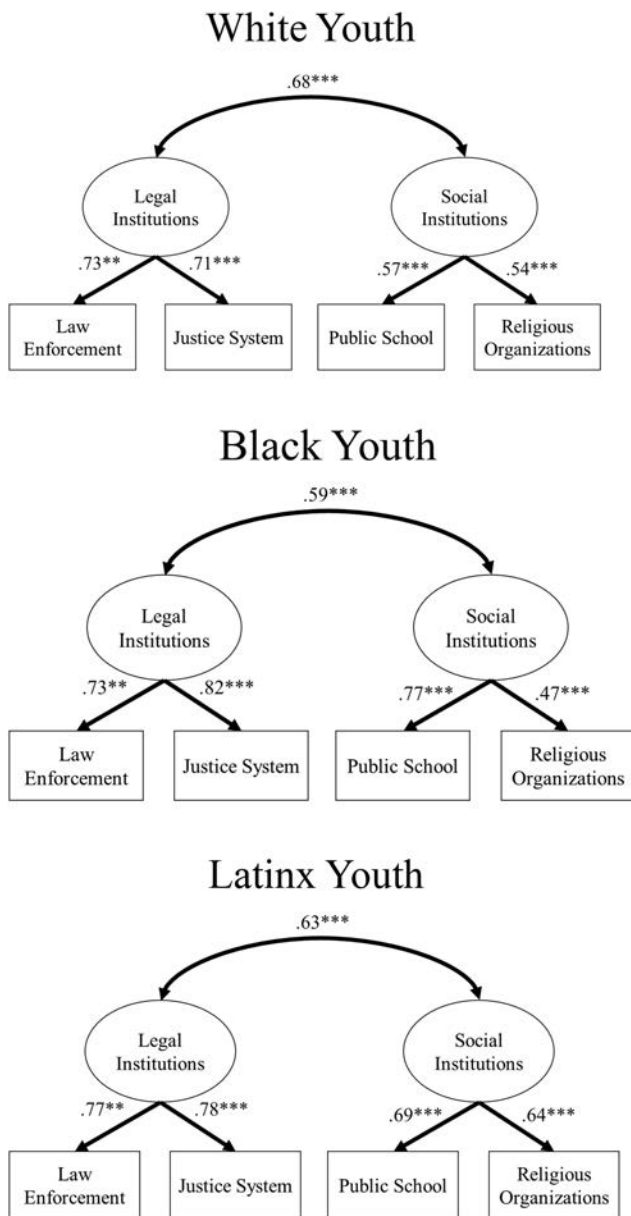


Figure 2. Racial/ethnic group model results (results are standardized). To maximize the number of youth in each racial/ethnic group and power, we pooled the data from across the three analytic time periods (2006–2008; 2012–2014; 2015–2017). \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

$SE = .04, p < .001$ ; Effect Size =  $-.42$ ) and Latinx ( $M = -.22, SE = .03, p < .001$ ; Effect Size =  $-.27$ ) youth both reported significantly lower confidence in the legal-institution latent construct, with effect sizes in the moderate-to-large range. Further, Black youth reported lower confidence than did Latinx youth ( $M = -.16, SE = .03, p < .001$ ; Effect Size =  $-.18$ ). That is, the results revealed a racial/ethnic gradient of youths' confidence in legal institutions.

Contrary to the results with legal institutions, Black youth reported more confidence in social institutions than did white youth ( $M = .13, SE = .03, p < .001$ ; Effect Size =  $.21$ ). Latinx

youth and White youth reported somewhat similar perceptions of social institutions ( $M = .05, SE = .02, p = .061$ , Effect Size =  $.07$ ). Black youth and Latinx youth also reported similar perceptions of social institutions ( $M = .05, SE = .04, p = .199$ ; Effect Size =  $.06$ ). That is, whereas confidence in legal institutions varied by race, confidence in social institutions did not vary by race/ethnicity, with the exception that Black youth reported more confidence as compared with White youth.

**Discussion**

Confidence in U.S. authority institutions reached historic lows in 2012 (Twenge et al., 2014). Since 2012, the public has witnessed repeated media broadcasts of unjust interactions between legal authorities and youth of color. Scholars are concerned that we now live in an “era of mistrust” of legal authority (Trinkner & Tyler, 2016) and have even reached the level of a “crisis of confidence” (Tyler et al., 2015). Despite these assertions, it remains unclear whether youths' perceptions of legal authorities merely reflect negative perceptions of authority in general.

Using independent cohorts of adolescents from every year from 2006 through 2017, the present study yields six important findings. First, consistent with prior research (e.g., Nihart et al., 2005), the present study suggests that adolescents tend to have the most confidence in religious institutions, followed by both public schools and law enforcement. In comparison, their confidence in the justice system tends to be the least favorable. Second, this study uniquely reveals that this gradient is largely consistent across the last decade, with one critical difference occurring in 2015–2017: adolescents perceived law enforcement and the justice system just as negatively. This notable finding is primarily driven by decreases in youths' confidence in law enforcement. Considering the decline was small by conventional effect size metrics, it may not reach the level of a “crisis of confidence” in law enforcement. Nonetheless, the results indicate that adolescents' confidence in law enforcement has declined more rapidly in recent years than their confidence in any other authority, including the justice system. We return to this point in the implications for policy and practice.

Third, adolescents' confidence in authority institutions loaded onto two factors. Adolescents' perceptions of religious institutions, public schools, law enforcement, and the justice system were somewhat interrelated. On its face, this provides some evidence for the generalization perspective (Amorso & Ware, 1983; Levy, 2001). Yet, the results of more complex modeling indicated that youth differentiated between two types of authority. Adolescents viewed law enforcement and the justice system as legal institutions, likely responsible for control and discipline, and perceived schools and religious organizations separately, likely as guiding and supportive social authority institutions. These findings align with the cognitive developmental model, which suggests that as a result of both emerging cognitive capacities that enable more complex reasoning and changing developmental contexts that increase exposure to a variety of authorities, youth become more capable of differentiating between authorities during adolescence than any previous developmental period (Kohlberg, 1963; Vollebergh et al., 2001). In support of the cognitive developmental model, the findings indicate that adolescents do, indeed, differen-

tiate between legal authorities and social authorities, and they have done so consistently across the last decade.

The fourth important finding pertains to purported differences in factor structure by race. In the United States, it is well understood that racial/ethnic minority students receive more and harsher discipline at school (Mizel et al., 2016; Rios, 2017). School environments have altogether shifted toward criminalizing misbehavior, particularly for youth of color (see Kupchik, 2010; Rios, 2017; Welch & Payne, 2018). Consequently, we expected to find that youth of color would perceive schools more closely with legal authorities, essentially viewing them as control-oriented institutions that unfairly and ineffectively dole out punishments. Contrary to expectations, we uncovered no such racial/ethnic differences. These findings may indicate that despite the statistics on disproportionate discipline, youth of color may still perceive schools as generally supportive social authorities, more similar to religious organizations than to legal institutions. In light of the discipline literature, this unexpected finding clearly warrants further investigation.

Fifth, whereas the overall factor structure did not vary by race, the results suggest that adolescents' confidence in various institutions do vary by race. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Fine & Cauffman, 2015; Peck, 2015; Weitzer & Tuch, 2006), the results indicated that Black youth reported the lowest confidence in legal institutions, followed by Latinx youth, and finally White youth. Uniquely, this study also examined whether such racial differences also exist in youths' level of confidence in social authorities. In contrast to the findings with legal authorities, the only difference uncovered with respect to social institutions was that Black youth actually reported *more* confidence than did White youth. That is, compared with White youth, Black youth reported lower confidence in legal authorities yet higher confidence in social authorities. Consequently, the fact that youth of color, and particularly Black youth, report significantly lower confidence in legal authorities than White youth becomes particularly noteworthy by comparison.

The present study has clear implications for policy and practice. This study demonstrates that adolescents' consistently low confidence in the justice system since 2012 and declining in confidence in law enforcement in recent years cannot be attributed to a general mistrust of authority. In fact, youth differentiate between various authorities, and their confidence in social authority has remained comparably more consistent and much higher for years. The procedural justice literature demonstrates that unjust personal and vicarious experiences directly affect youths' perceptions of legal authority (e.g., Fagan & Tyler, 2005; Fine et al., 2016; McLean, Wolfe, & Pratt, 2019). Unfortunately, modern adolescents have been exposed to unparalleled media coverage of unjust police action (see Friedman, 2017; Moule Jr, Burruss, Parry, & Fox, 2019; Tyler et al., 2015). It is highly likely that this exposure contributed to their declining confidence in law enforcement, yet this study uniquely demonstrates that it does not translate to declining in views of other authorities. Considering negative perceptions of legal authority likely reduce crime reporting and promote both criminality and mistrust of legal authorities (Augustyn, 2016; Desmond et al., 2016; Friedman et al., 2004; Trinkner, Mays, Cohn, Van Gundy, & Rebellon, 2019; Tyler & Huo, 2002), efforts must be made to improve policing practices. Strategies must also focus on reducing racial disparities in both justice

system contact and unjust law enforcement actions because both practices likely affect adolescents' low confidence in legal authority.

This study is not without limitations. Primarily, a single item was used to measure perceptions of authorities. While single-item measures can still provide reliable and valid information, the single item may not capture the various ways adolescents' could evaluate the authorities. Relatedly, it is important to note that various scholars across disciplines have referred to this exact variable as a few interrelated constructs. For instance, Geistman and Smith (2007) previously referred to it as *satisfaction*. Flanagan and colleagues might conceptualize this metric as *trust* because, in their writing (Flanagan, Gill, & Gallay, 2014, p. 149), we perceive others as trustworthy if they do things that benefit rather than disadvantage others. Indeed, considering trust is so closely related to confidence (Cammett, Lynch, & Bilev, 2015; Tyler & Huo, 2002, p. 104), this variable could potentially be conceived of as trust. The public also conflates trust and confidence; in analyzing open-ended response data from the General Social Survey, Smith (1981, p. 169) found that respondents overwhelmingly believe that "confidence in the people running institutions means trusting them." However, Tschannen-Moran (2014) cogently depicted the difference, "Trust . . . involves both confidence in the other and a willingness to take risk on the part of the trusting party . . . trust is defined as the willingness to be vulnerable to the other party based on the confidence that the other party is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent." Consequently, we are more persuaded to see this variable as *confidence* rather than trust (see Twenge et al., 2014; Wang, 2014). Nonetheless, we believe convergent and discriminant validity analyses should be conducted in the future to more precisely identify the construct. Second, although we were able to focus on Black, Latinx, and White youth, the data do not include other racial/ethnic groups or youth who are multiracial. Further, youth were not asked about experiences that may affect confidence in various authorities (e.g., arrests, suspensions). Future research would clearly benefit from assessing other racial/ethnic groups as well as personal experiences that may affect confidence. Finally, the data were not longitudinal, so we were unable to track developmental changes in youths' confidence in authorities.

In recent years, the United States has borne witness to many high-profile and unjust interactions between law enforcement and community members (e.g., Michael Brown, Ferguson, Missouri, 2014; Freddie Gray, Baltimore, Maryland, 2015; Alton Sterling, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2016; Philando Castile, Falcon Heights, Minnesota, 2016). The events have occurred across the country and have often generated protests that lasted for weeks to months afterward. These events, as well as previous ones such as the nonofficer shooting of Trayvon Martin in 2012, certainly ignited widespread criticism of law enforcement and the justice system, the latter of which individuals may have felt was complicit in acquitting many officers. However, we were unable to assess youths' awareness of particular events, their specific location, or the day they actually completed the surveys. As a result, we were unable to evaluate their confidence in authorities before and after specific incidents (see White, Weisburd, & Wire, 2018; see also Lacoé & Stein, 2018) or multiple events. Nonetheless, this study's finding that youths' confidence in legal authorities declined over the last decade across cohorts does suggest that the events, on

aggregate, may have resulted in less confidence in legal authority. Nonetheless, this conclusion must be considered in light of the study's limitations.

The present study revealed several important findings. First, adolescents differentiate between legal and social authorities. Second, adolescents' confidence in legal authorities has declined over the last decade and their confidence in law enforcement in particular has markedly declined in recent years. However, America's youth do not exhibit a ubiquitous anti-authority attitude. In fact, their confidence in social institutions remains comparatively higher and more stable. Policymakers and practitioners should focus on improving adolescents' confidence in legal institutions.

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