

Criminal Justice Contact, Racial Discrimination, and Health

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Abstract

This study extends research linking criminal justice contact to mental health by examining the mediating role of perceived racial discrimination among African American women. Using survey data from 561 African American women living in homes characterized by high poverty, a path analysis was used to test our hypotheses. We find that perceived racial discrimination fully mediates the relationship between having ever been arrested and depressive symptoms among women, but there was no evidence that perceived racial discrimination mediates the relationship between having ever been incarcerated and depressive symptoms.

Background

African American women are a growing subpopulation of people who have been arrested (Fedock & Sarantakos, 2017) or incarcerated (Carson, 2018). Such trends are concerning considering criminal justice contact increases the risk of mental health challenges. Thus, scholars have emphasized the need to identify pathways to better understand the relationship between criminal justice contact and mental health such as material hardship (Porter, & Novisky, 2016), stigma (Schnittker & John, 2007), and discrimination (Turney et al., 2013). More recently, racial discrimination has been explored as a mechanism between criminal justice contact and mental health among African American men (Assari et al., 2017; Turney et al., 2013). However, the role racial discrimination plays within this relationship among women is unclear.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to test whether racial discrimination mediates the relationship between criminal justice contact and mental health among women, as it has been shown to do so for men.

Sample

Mobile Youth and Poverty Study

This study used survey data collected from adults living in extreme poverty; these data are a component of the Mobile Youth and Poverty Study (MYPS; Mugoya et al., 2017). The survey was administered cross-sectionally between 2001-2010. The final sample consisted of 561 adult caregivers of youth who participated in the MYPS (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (N = 561)

	M(SD)	Min	Max
Depressive Symptoms	16.85(10.91)	0	53
Arrested (1 = Yes)	34%	0	1
Jail or Prison (1 = Yes)	13%	0	1
Racial Discrimination	8.36(9.90)	0	43
Age	39.19(12.74)	19	87
Education	11.42(1.71)	0	17
Num. of Children	3.58(2.08)	0	15
Employed (1 = Yes)	34%	0	1
Romantic Relationship (1 = Yes)	48%	0	1

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Min = minimum; Max = maximum.

Measures

Depressive Symptoms. Radloff's (1977) 20-item Center for the Epidemiological Studies-Depression (CES-D) scale measured depressive symptoms. Scores ranged from 0 to 60. Answers included (0) none of the time, (1) rarely, (2) sometimes, (3) occasionally, or (4) most of the time. ($\alpha = 0.86$)

Criminal Justice Contact. Indicators of criminal justice contact included: "Have you ever been arrested?" and "Since you turned 19, have you spent time in jail or prison?" Answer choices were dichotomous (no/yes).

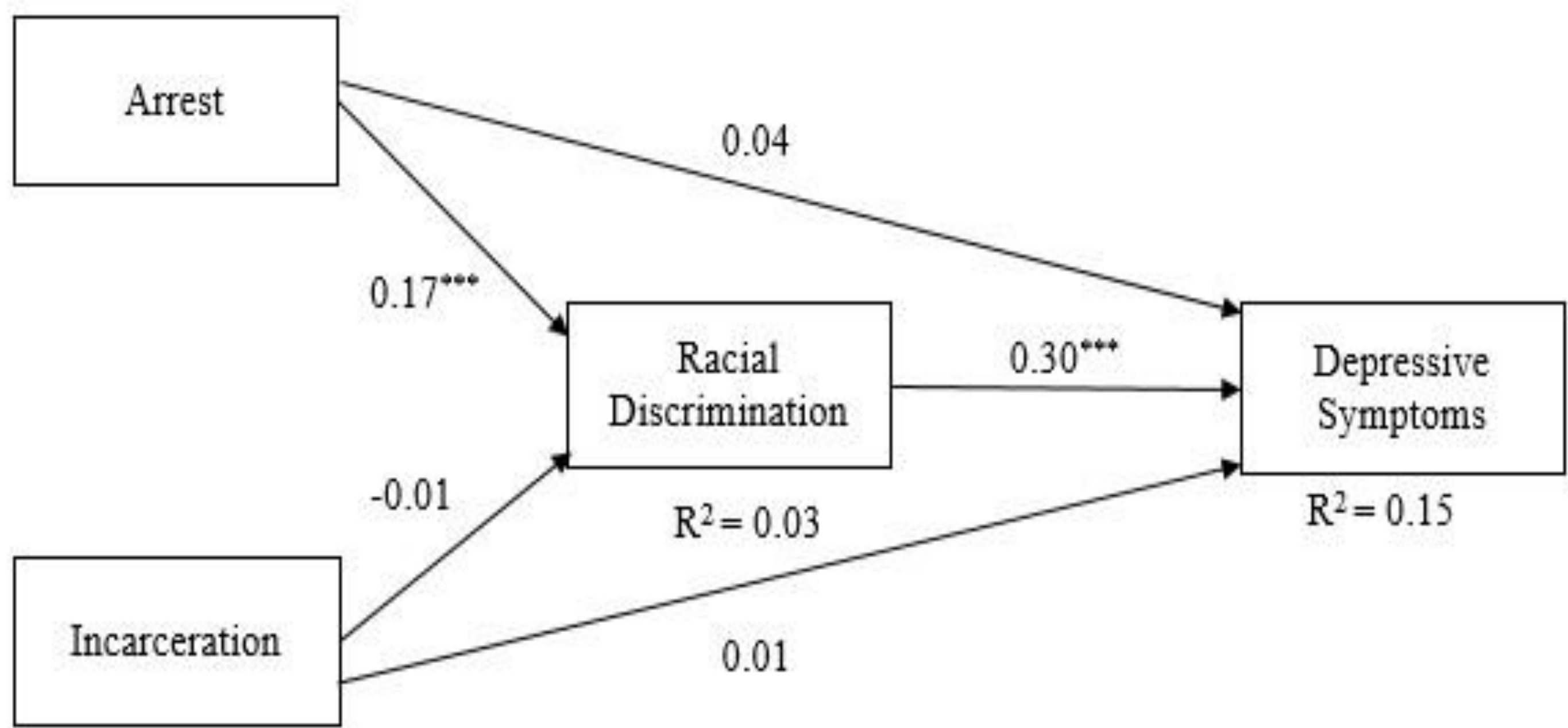
Racial Discrimination. The Daily Life Experiences (DLE) subscale of Harrell's (1997) Racism and Life Experience Scale (RaLES) was used to measure racial discrimination. Scores were summed resulting in a scale ranging from 0 to 51, with higher scores indicating greater perceptions of racial discrimination. Participants were asked, "During the past 12 months, have any of the following things happened to you because of your race?" (0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, or 3 = often). Sample item: "You were treated rudely or disrespectfully." ($\alpha = 0.94$)

Analysis

A path analysis using 2,000 bootstrapped samples was conducted, which allowed us to examine direct and indirect effects simultaneously. Age, educational attainment, number of children, employment and romantic relationship status were controlled for on the dependent variable. Each of the control variables were allowed to covary with each other, the independent variables, and the mediator. For racial discrimination to mediate this relationship, there had to be (1) a significant path from the indicators of criminal justice contact to racial discrimination, and (2) a significant path from racial discrimination to depressive symptoms (Zhao et al., 2010).

Results

Figure 1. Path Model



Note: Model fit [$\chi^2 = 5.68$ (df = 3), $p = 0.13$, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.04, NFI = 0.98]; Controls: Age ($\beta = -0.06$, $p = 0.16$); Education ($\beta = -0.14$, $p < 0.001$); Number of Children ($\beta = -0.06$, $p = 0.17$); Employment ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < 0.001$); Romantic Relationship ($\beta = -0.11$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 2. Standardized Indirect Effects on Depressive Symptoms in Path Model.

Predictor	Outcome	β	p
Women (n = 561)			
Arrest	→ Depressive Symptoms	0.05	0.00
Incarceration	→ Depressive Symptoms	-0.00	0.91

Note. β = standardized regression coefficient; p = significance value.

Implications and Future Directions

Findings complement and extend previous research by suggesting that racial discrimination mediates the relationship between having ever been arrested and depressive symptoms among African American women. These findings highlight the importance intervention techniques and strategies to decrease discriminatory experiences, which could improve mental health and well-being among African American women that have come in contact with criminal justice system.

Future research should consider:

- Nuances in racial/ethnic discrimination (e.g., global versus structural forms of racial discrimination)
- Effect modifiers of this relationship such as social support, racial identity, and religiosity
- Other racial/ethnic minority groups, such as Latinos/as,
- Longitudinal study designs that capture multiple forms of criminal justice contact and duration
- Examine reintegration experiences of racial minority women back into homes and communities.



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