

What They Don't Know *Can* Hurt Them: Mothers' Legal Knowledge and Youth Re-Offending

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Juvenile offenders may be too young to manage the terms of their probation independently; a parent's participation in the probationary process is critical for youths' successful transition to crime desistance. However, a parent's capacity for support during his or her child's legal process may depend on the parent's knowledge of how the justice system operates. The present study is the first to quantify mothers' knowledge of the juvenile justice system. The authors examine the association between mothers' legal knowledge, legal participation, and youth re-offending using a longitudinal sample of 324 dyads (total $N = 648$) of mothers and their sons, all first-time juvenile offenders. Results indicate that mothers averaged a 66% out of 100% on a test of legal knowledge. Importantly, those mothers who knew the least about the system also participated the least in their son's legal process, and mothers who participated the least had sons who self-reported re-offending more within the first year after his arrest. Practitioners are encouraged to educate parents of juvenile offenders about their rights and responsibilities in the courtroom and on probation, to create meaningful avenues for parental involvement, and to set youth up for success after a first arrest.

Keywords: justice system knowledge, juvenile justice, parenting, delinquency

Juvenile offending inflicts high costs on individuals, families, and communities. A principal goal of the juvenile justice system is to ensure that youthful offenders desist from crime during and after their time on probation, as re-offending results in prolonged justice system involvement (Austin, Dedel, & Weitzer, 2005). However, juvenile offenders may be too young to independently manage all the terms of their probation (e.g., transportation to court appointments, understanding of the court system, finances to pay for court fees, etc.). For this reason, a parent's capacity to provide support during the probationary process is critical for a youth's successful transition to crime desistance (Burke, Mulvey, Schubert, & Garbin, 2014; Vidal & Woolard, 2016). Although adolescent offenders still depend upon their parents in many ways, including guidance in navigating the juvenile justice system (Henning, 2005), families may carry their own set of risk factors that may impede youth desistance from crime (Hoeve et al., 2009). For

example, a parent's participation in his or her child's legal process may vary greatly based on the parent's knowledge of how the justice system operates and of their responsibilities as a parent of a justice system-involved youth. Indeed, some parents may be at a disadvantage in their knowledge of how to navigate the juvenile justice system (Woolard, Cleary, Harvell, & Chen, 2008). The present study examines mothers' legal knowledge, and whether less knowledge results in less participation in their children's legal proceedings and probationary process, which, in turn, increases youthful re-offending.

Parents' Legal Participation

Parental engagement and support is key to youth success in academic settings (Jeynes, 2007), autonomy development (Barber, Stolz, Olsen, Collins, & Burchinal, 2005), relational competence (Engels, Finkenauer, Meeus, & Deković, 2001), and a host of other domains. For example, parents who participate more in their children's education (e.g., attending parent-teacher conferences, making sure that homework is completed) have children who are more successful in school (see the meta-analysis by Jeynes, 2012). It is also likely that parents who participate more in their children's legal proceedings (e.g., attending court dates and meeting with probation officers) will have children who are more successful in crime desistance after their first arrest. Indeed, it is assumed that parental involvement in youths' legal proceedings after an arrest is important (Bradt, Vettingburg, & Roose, 2007). Yet, the relation between parents' participation in legal proceedings and youth re-offending has not been tested directly. There is longitudinal evidence that mothers who hold more negative attitudes toward the justice system have sons who likewise feel the justice system is not legitimate, resulting in increased youth re-offending behavior (Ca-

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vanagh & Cauffman, 2015). In the same way, it is likely that parents' participation in youths' legal proceedings give youth a metric with which to gauge the importance of desisting from crime.

Furthermore, because youths may be too young to manage certain conditions of their probation independently, the degree to which parents provide support for probationary requirements may affect youths' re-offending behavior. Indeed, a supportive parent-child relationship is an important protective factor in desistance from crime among youthful offenders (Hoeve et al., 2008; see also the meta-analysis by Hoeve et al., 2009). Importantly, parents with limited legal knowledge about the juvenile justice system may not know how to help their children succeed on probation and, ultimately, desist from crime.

Parents' Legal Knowledge

A wealth of literature suggests that children lack an understanding of their rights, responsibilities, and courtroom procedure, rendering it difficult for them to navigate their justice system experience unaided. Several qualitative studies with youthful offenders revealed that the majority of youth interviewed did not understand their rights (Goodwin-DeFaria & Marinos, 2012) or did not know about such possibilities as transfer to adult court (Miner-Romanoff, 2014; Redding & Fuller, 2004). Notably, youth in these studies indicated that they may not have engaged in crime if they had been better informed about the legal repercussions (Miner-Romanoff, 2014). In addition, in a large study of 1,393 youth, those under 16 demonstrated significantly less understanding of courtroom procedures and rights than adults, to the extent that they might be considered incompetent to stand trial (Grisso et al., 2003).

Knowledge of the justice system is also not a function of experience for youth. Barnes and Wilson (2008) found that youthful offenders who had been incarcerated did not possess greater knowledge of the justice system compared to youthful offenders who had not been incarcerated, nor a control group of nonarrested youth. These results were echoed in a qualitative study of detained juveniles, which found that juvenile justice system experience resulted in a limited understanding of the system and its actors (Rajack-Talley, Talley, & Tewksbury, 2005).

As a result of children's well-recognized dearth of legal knowledge, a foundational expectation of the juvenile justice system is that parents partner with the system and help guide their youths through the process (Rozzell, 2013). However, there is a great deal of contradiction regarding what role parents are expected to play in their children's legal proceedings (Burke et al., 2014; Henning, 2005). On the one hand, parents are expected to protect their children's legal welfare (e.g., monitoring and enforcing probation terms, providing practical assistance such as transportation to court appointments; Davies & Davidson, 2001). On the other hand, parents may also be expected to partner with legal actors in a way that might not be considered in their children's best interest. For example, a parent may report his or her child's violations to his or her probation officer, or encourage the child to make a confession for moral, rather than legal reasons (Henning, 2005). In addition, parents, who are accustomed to making important choices for their children in many other contexts (i.e., decisions that affect the children's health, education, and standard of living), are not the

ones who make the critical decision as far as how their child will plead ("It is the child, not the parent, who is the client and decision maker. . . . It is the juvenile, not the parent or guardian, who faces a potential loss of liberty at the pretrial detention and disposition stages of the proceeding. . . . It is the juvenile, therefore, who possesses a fundamental due process right to legal representation," *In re Gault*, 1967), a point which many parents misunderstand (Henning, 2005). Given these tensions and inconsistencies in the proper role of parents in the court room (see Burke et al., 2014), a thorough knowledge of the juvenile justice system is necessary for parents to understand their role in aiding their children.

Troublingly, a large-scale national review of parental involvement in juvenile courts concluded that there are few resources available to educate parents in the juvenile justice process (Davies & Davidson, 2001). Indeed, many probationary programs offer little or no education for parents as far as their family's rights and duties (Feierman, Keller, Glickman, & Stanton, 2011). Among laypeople, knowledge about the law is limited (Dunlap, 2013), and no previous research has comprehensively measured parents' knowledge of legal rights and responsibilities within a juvenile justice setting. Despite the expectation that parents will help their children meet their legal requirements, it is not presently known whether parents have the requisite knowledge to do so. For example, if a parent does not know that conversations with a youth's probation officer are not confidential, the parent may reveal incriminating evidence to their son's probation officer, resulting in harsher sanctions (see Fine et al. 2016) or extended probationary terms.

Although no previous research has directly tested parents' knowledge about the juvenile justice system generally, a recent study examined parents' understanding of the police interrogation process specifically. Woolard et al. (2008) interviewed a racially diverse sample of 170 community parent-adolescent dyads. The goal of the study was to evaluate the assumption that parents are able to compensate for well-documented legal knowledge deficits among youth during a police interrogation. Parents were assessed on their knowledge and understanding of police interrogation procedure and *Miranda* rights. Although parents generally had greater legal knowledge than their children, 23% of parents displayed a deep misunderstanding of police interrogation procedures (Woolard et al., 2008).

Particularly distressingly, there is reason to believe that the youth who are most at-risk for juvenile justice system involvement (e.g., children from low SES backgrounds or children of color; Woolard et al., 2008) may have parents who are the least well equipped to navigate the juvenile justice system. For example, low-income parents (Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, & Eggers-Piérola, 1995) and Latino parents (Harding, 2006) may be especially deferent to authorities in matters of specialized education (Gaitan, 2004), and may capitulate to the knowledge of legal authorities after their children are arrested. Furthermore, because of cultural and linguistic barriers, non-English speaking parents may not have a clear understanding of the requirements of probation. In fact, prior research has found that youth act as "language brokers," or an interpreter between his parents and juvenile justice system actors, a situation that relies on youth to correctly understand and interpret service plans (Weemhoff & Villarruel, 2011). Such situations could contribute to a youth's prolonged or more

serious involvement with the justice system (e.g., probation extended if the original terms are not met).

The Present Study

The current study extended the present literature in two important ways: First, we examined a sample of justice-involved parents and adolescents to improve the ecological validity of the study. Second, the present study evaluated parents' legal knowledge about the juvenile court and probation (back-end processes following an arrest), rather than police interrogations (front-end processes that precede an arrest). Doing so assessed gaps in parents' knowledge associated with youth re-offending after his first arrest, an important juncture for youth desistance from crime (Ryan, Abrams, & Huang, 2014). As a first step in examining the role that a parent plays in a child's success within the juvenile justice system, the present study sampled only female guardians. Compared to fathers, mothers of juvenile offenders are more likely to be present in their children's lives (see the meta-analysis by Hoeve et al., 2009) and to play a supervisory role within the home (Starrels, 1994). This is not to say that fathers' knowledge and participation in their children's legal proceedings are any less important, but rather that access to male guardians is often more difficult than female guardians because of the base rate with which they are involved with the child. Indeed, only 15.4% of youth in the present study listed a male as their primary guardian. As a result, the present study elected to sample female guardians only in order to present a more focused examination of a mother's role after her son's first arrest.

Specifically, the goals of the study were threefold. First, we aimed to quantify and describe two important aspects of a youth's probationary process: a mother's knowledge about the juvenile justice system, and her participation in her son's legal proceedings after an arrest. Second, we tested whether how much a mother knows about the legal process is associated with the degree to which she participates in her son's probationary processes. Third, we tested whether a mother's legal participation is associated with her son's re-offending behavior after a year. Ultimately, we pre-

dicted a mediational model in which mother's legal knowledge affects youth re-offending through mother's legal participation.

Method

Participants

Data for the current study were selected from a subsample of youth who are participating in the Crossroads study, a longitudinal study of first-time offenders. Specifically, of the 1,216 youths participating in the Crossroads study, a subsample of the 324 youth (ages 13–17) from Orange County, CA and Philadelphia, PA were interviewed. In addition, 324 mothers/female guardians were interviewed within a 5–7 month time window ($M = 5.80$ months) following the youth's baseline interview (within 6 weeks after first arrest). Of the primary female guardians interviewed, 91.67% were biological mothers to the youth (4.63% biological grandmothers, 1.54% stepmothers, 1.23% adoptive mothers, and 0.93% another relationship). All female guardians were included in the presented analyses, as results did not change when considering only biological mothers. The resultant subsample included 324 mother–son dyads (648 participants total) that were no different from the total sample on our outcome of interest ($p > .10$). Table 1 displays the demographic breakdown of the full Crossroads youth participants and their mothers considered in the present analyses.

Procedures

Youth participants. Youth were eligible if they were English-speaking males between the ages of 13 and 17 years old, charged for the first time with a qualified offense in Orange County, CA, or Philadelphia, PA. Eligible charges were midrange offenses, such as theft, simple assault, and vandalism. Youth participants were recruited with information provided by databases from the Orange County and Philadelphia courts, respectively. Signed parental consent and youth assent were obtained for all participants. Of youth who were contacted to participate, 72.17% consented to be enrolled in the study.

Table 1
Demographic and Descriptive Breakdown of Crossroads Youth and Mothers Sample

Variable	Full Crossroads sample ($N = 1,216$)				Crossroads youth in present sample ($n = 324$)				Crossroads mothers in present sample ($n = 324$)			
	Percent	n	M	SD	Percent	n	M	SD	Percent	n	M	SD
Age			15.29	1.29			15.38	1.24			46.24	7.23
Legal knowledge											.66	.10
Legal participation											.61	.27
Ethnicity												
Caucasian/White	14.30	160			18.52	60			21.36	69		
Latino/Hispanic	46.80	523			61.11	198			58.51	189		
African American/Black	36.60	409			16.67	54			17.34	56		
Other/mixed	2.30	26			3.70	12			2.79	9		
Born in the United States									51.23	166		
Self-report of offending at baseline (ever)	64.00	778			65.74	213						
Youth self-report of re-offending (after 12 months)	44.60	632			46.60	151						
Mother self-report arrests (ever)									20.99	68		
Youth official record of re-arrest (after 12 months)	28.10		364		26.32	85						

After obtaining consent, youth completed a baseline interview within 6 weeks of their disposition hearing. Follow-up interviews were conducted 6 and 12 months after the baseline interview. Each interview lasted approximately 2–3 hours. A trained research assistant interviewed youth in person, using computer-facilitated software to record responses in a secure database. Youth were paid for each interview, and payment increased at each time point to discourage attrition. All youth in the present sample were retained through their 12-month follow-up interviews.

Mother participants. The primary female guardians of enrolled Crossroads youth participants were contacted via telephone within 5–7 months of youths' baseline interviews ($M = 5.80$ months) and asked to participate in an ancillary study. This time window was chosen so that questions pertaining to court and probationary experiences could be answered with greater certainty once families had spent time in the justice system. Of the families contacted within the time window, 9.10% were ineligible (i.e., the youth had little or no contact with a female guardian). Of eligible women, 90.91% consented to participate in the study.

Mothers were interviewed by trained research assistants over the telephone. The hour-long structured interview was administered in English or Spanish, and responses were entered into an online database using Qualtrics, a secure online survey company that maintains all data behind a firewall and requires a password for access. Less than 5% (4.94%) of mothers elected to complete the interview online via a link to the interview program website, rather than over the telephone. Responses did not differ between telephone interviews and online interviews.

Mother and youth participants were informed of the nature of the study and told that participation was voluntary. Mothers were free to decline participation without affecting their sons' participation. All participants' names were replaced with a code number to ensure confidentiality, as well as to link mothers' and sons' responses. To protect participants' privacy, all responses are protected by a Certificate of Confidentiality issued by the Department of Justice. This permanently exempts participant identity and responses from subpoenas, court orders, or other types of involuntary disclosures. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California, Irvine.

Measures

Measures assessed demographic information and youth re-offending behavior. Although an eligibility requirement for participating youth was English fluency, mothers were eligible if they spoke either English or Spanish. In line with evidence that iterative, collaborative translation produces greater conceptual equivalence and cultural sensitivity than simple literal translations (Douglas & Craig, 2007; Harkness, Van de Vijver, & Mohler, 2003), all measures in the mothers' interview were translated and back-translated into Spanish by a team of native speakers. In total, 40.74% of women chose to complete the interview in Spanish.

Demographics. Both youths and their mothers reported general demographic information, including race, age, and arrest history (see Table 1 for a breakdown of both mothers' and youths' demographic information). Mothers additionally reported their country of birth, English fluency, educational attainment, arrests, and household income. Nearly half (48.77%) of women were born outside the United States; these women reported spending 3 to 54

years ($M = 21.63$, $SD = 7.98$) living in the United States. Approximately half (49.69%) of the women were not native English speakers, and 40.74% reported that they were not fluent in English and opted to be interviewed in Spanish. More than a quarter of mothers (26.48%) did not receive a high school diploma, but 29.59% received a college degree or higher. Mothers' household income varied widely, from less than \$825 per month to more than \$12,000 per month, where the average income was between \$1,601 and \$2,000 per month.

Legal knowledge. Adapted from previous research in this area (Hurley, 2009; Otto, Musick, & Sherrod, 2011; Woolard et al., 2008; Youth Advocacy Department, 2011) and in collaboration with the participating Department of Probation, we created a 44-item test to assess the mother's knowledge of rights, roles, and procedures in the juvenile justice system. The questions were designed to span pre- and postadjudication contexts to test the scope of parents' knowledge throughout the entirety of their children's justice system experience. Thirty-eight of the questions are true/false (e.g., "As the parent, I have the right to have an interpreter in the courtroom" and "Conversations I have with my son's probation officer are confidential") and the remaining six questions offer multiple choice responses to a courtroom procedure (e.g., "If you and your son disagree about how your son should plead, who gets to make the final decision about how your son will plead? (a) The judge; (b) The lawyer; (c) Your son; (d) You (the parent)" adapted from Harvell, 2008). There was only one correct response to each of the 44 items, and the scale was scored as the percent of items the participant answered correctly with higher scores indicating more legal knowledge. The measure displayed good reliability ($\alpha = .78$), and is available in full in Table 2.

Legal participation. Mothers were asked a series of five yes/no questions regarding ways in which they could have participated in their sons' legal and probationary process (e.g., "Did you attend your son's court date?" and "Did you meet with your son's probation officer?"). However, because not all youth experienced the same procedural or probationary requirements, the scale was scored as the proportion of the number of ways that mothers could have helped her son to the number of ways she did help her son. For example, some youth were not assigned a probation officer. In those cases, the question pertaining to mothers' contact with a probation officer was not included in the denominator of the proportion score, as doing so would unfairly "penalize" a mother's effort score for not engaging in a behavior that was not an option for her.

Self-report of offending (adapted from Huizinga, Esbensen, & Weiher, 1991). Youth self-reported their involvement in a range of 24 antisocial and illegal activities (e.g., destroying or damaging property, selling drugs, carrying a gun, killing someone). For each activity listed, youth reported whether or not he had engaged in the activity over the past 6 months (6 and 12 months after his first arrest). Because not all illegal behavior is detected or documented, self-report measures of offending are considered important and valid (see review by Farrington, Piquero, & Jennings, 2013). Data at the 6- and 12-month interviews were then combined to create a 12-month re-offending score. This variable was coded as a proportion (variety score), or the number of endorsed items divided by the number of total response options. Widely used in criminological research, variety scores are highly correlated with measures of seriousness of antisocial behavior, yet

Table 2
Legal Knowledge Questionnaire and Participant Responses

Question	Response choices	Correct answer	Percent of participants who responded correctly (ordered lowest to highest)
If you, as the parent, hire a lawyer for your son, who gets to decide how your son will plead?	(a) The judge (14.11%) (b) The lawyer (35.74%) (c) Your son (20.69%) (d) You (the parent) (29.37%)	(c) Your son	20.69%
If the court gets your son a lawyer because he cannot afford to pay for one, who gets to decide how your son will plead?	(a) The judge (15.46%) (b) The lawyer (39.75%) (c) Your son (22.40%) (d) You (the parent) (22.40%)	(c) Your son	22.40%
If my son violates the terms of his probation, he will <i>automatically</i> be sent to a juvenile detention facility.	True/false	False	22.74%
The probation officer sets the conditions of my son's probation	True/false	True	27.19%
If you and your son disagree about how your son should plead, who gets to make the final decision about how your son will plead?	(a) The judge (25.31%) (b) The lawyer (21.56%) (c) Your son (27.50%) (d) You (the parent) (25.62%)	(c) Your son	27.50%
Conversations I have with my son's probation officer are confidential (kept private)	True/False	False	29.19%
If your son does not have a lawyer, who gets to decide how he will plead?	(a) The judge (33.12%) (b) Your son (30.91%) (c) You (the parent) (35.96%)	(c) Your son	30.91%
If your son hires a lawyer for himself and pays the lawyer himself, who gets to decide how your son will plead?	(a) The judge (12.50%) (b) The lawyer (37.81%) (c) Your son (32.81%) (d) You (the parent) (16.88%)	(c) Your son	32.81%
The lawyer assigned to my son's case works <i>equally</i> for me and my son.	True/false	False	42.06%
A public defender is a lawyer who represents the victim.	True/false	False	42.90%
Juvenile records are automatically sealed (kept private from the public forever).	True/false	False	45.14%
The court is easier on (more lenient) children who are younger	True/false	True	47.17%
A District Attorney (D.A.) is a lawyer who represents the defendant (the accused person).	True/false	False	49.06%
Police officers have to wait for a parent to arrive at the station before questioning a youth.	True/false	False	57.37%
I do not have to let a probation officer into my home if I don't want to.	True/false	False	60.38%
The lawyer assigned to my son's case <i>primarily</i> works for me.	True/false	False	64.06%
My son will automatically be tried as an adult for his second offense.	True/false	False	64.89%
Judges won't hold me responsible for my child's behavior	True/false	False	65.53%
Public defenders do not need a law degree; they are government employees.	True/false	False	69.31%
I can still be held financially responsible for some of the lawyer fees, even if the court provided the lawyer.	True/false	True	70.03%
The juvenile court is required to provide all defendants (accused offenders) with a lawyer, free of charge.	True/false	True	71.56%
I am not supposed to show up at my son's court date	True/false	False	72.41%
Even if my son is not allowed to contact the victim, I am encouraged to confront the victim.	True/false	False	73.25%
A District Attorney (D.A.) is a lawyer who represents the victim.	True/false	True	73.44%
As the parent, I am financially responsible for my son's crime.	True/false	True	74.61%
The lawyer assigned to my son's case <i>primarily</i> works for my son.	True/false	True	76.25%
If my son has a lawyer, I am no longer able to give my son advice.	True/false	False	80.75%

(table continues)

Table 2 (continued)

Question	Response choices	Correct answer	Percent of participants who responded correctly (ordered lowest to highest)
If my son's probation officer does not have up-to-date contact information for my son, a warrant for my son's arrest can be issued.	True/false	True	81.70%
If my son is locked up, he will receive an education in the facility.	True/false	True	83.49%
Who gets to decide when a youth will go home from detention?	(a) His parent(s) (2.82%) (b) The superintendent of the detention center (7.21%) (c) The staff at the detention center (6.90%) (d) The judge (83.07%)	(d) The judge	83.07%
A public defender is a lawyer who represents the defendant (the accused person).	True/false	True	87.23%
Even if the court pays for my son's lawyer, it is possible to get a new one if the lawyer is not protecting my son well enough.	True/false	True	88.09%
I can be held in contempt of the court (e.g., I can be charged with a violation) if I don't tell my son's probation officer the truth about my son's probation violations.	True/false	True	88.16%
Part of the probation officer's job is to inform my family of resources and services available to me in the community.	True/false	True	88.68%
Probation reports include information about my son's behavior at home and in school.	True/false	True	89.10%
Conversations I have with my son's lawyer are confidential (kept private)	True/false	True	90.00%
I can be held in contempt of the court (e.g., I can be charged with a violation) if I interfere with any services ordered by the court	True/false	True	90.16%
Police officers have to tell parents if their son or daughter is being viewed as a witness or a suspect.	True/false	False	92.50%
The court may order my family to go to counseling or parenting classes.	True/false	True	93.19%
The judge sets the conditions of my son's probation	True/false	True	93.44%
Police officers have to contact parents when they arrest a youth and take him/her to the police station.	True/false	True	96.28%
If my son does not show up for his court date, a judge will send out a warrant for his arrest.	True/false	True	96.56%
If a youth is charged with a crime, it helps his case to tell his lawyer all of the information the lawyer wants to know.	True/false	True	97.49%
As the parent, I have the right to have an interpreter in the courtroom.	True/false	True	98.45%

are less prone to recall errors than frequency scores (Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1981; Thornberry & Krohn, 2000). Of sample youth, 64.51% self-reported having re-offended at least once in the year since their first arrest.

Youth also self-reported their prior lifetime offending behavior. As all youth were first-time offenders, *lifetime offending behavior* refers to offenses undetected by law enforcement. Lifetime offending was assessed at the baseline interview using the same paradigm described above, but questions were reworded to read, "Have you ever . . . ?" implying that the behavior took place before the arrest.

Official record of offending. Through cooperation with the courts in Orange County and Philadelphia, official records of youths' arrests were obtained to augment youths' self-reported offending. Official re-arrests were new arrests (including status offenses but not including probation violations) that included a variety of person, property, drug, and other offenses. Data were

coded to reflect how many official arrests each youth experienced within the year following the baseline interview. More than a quarter (26.32%) of youths were arrested at least once within 1 year.

Analytic framework. The first aim of the present study was to quantify and describe mothers' knowledge about the juvenile justice system, and mothers' participation in her son's legal proceedings after an arrest, using descriptive statistics. To address our second and third aims, we examined the associations between mother's legal knowledge, legal participation, and son's self-reported re-offending behavior a year after the first arrest using structural equation modeling (SEM). Analyses were conducted using Stata 12, data were considered missing at random, and full information maximum-likelihood (FIML) estimation was used to handle observations containing missing values. Figure 1 displays the model's analytic framework. We included paths from variables

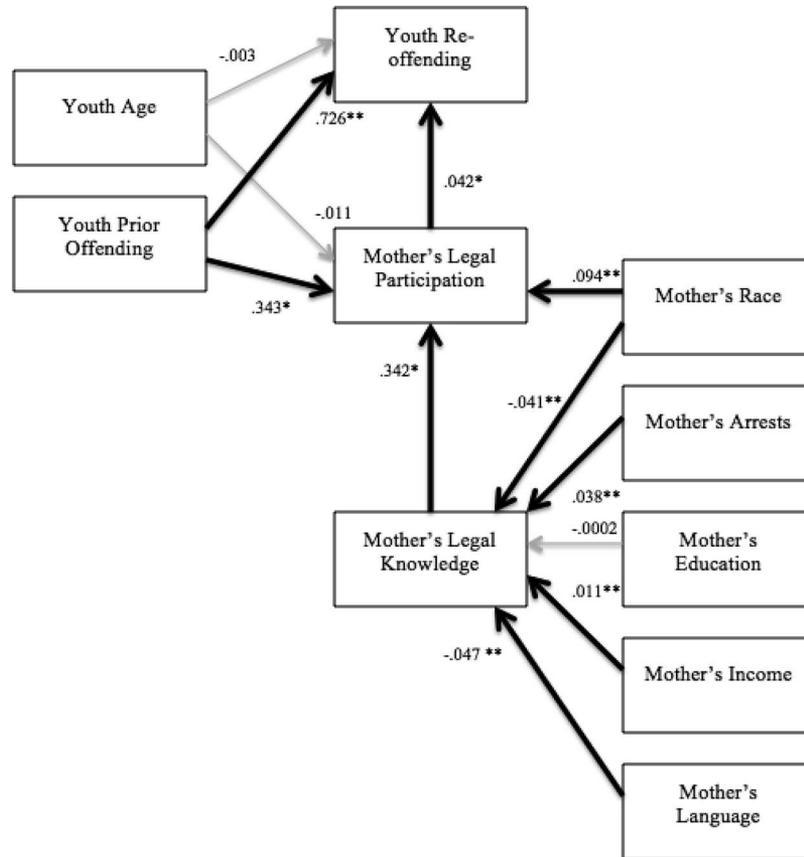


Figure 1. Visual display of Model 1 (self report of re-offending, 12 months). Bold lines signify paths that are statistically significant in the model. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

found to be associated in Aim 1 with each legal knowledge and legal participation.

Given the well-documented association between past offending and future offending (Kurlychek, Brame, & Bushway, 2006), we expect that youth with a greater history of past delinquent behavior will be more likely to re-offend. We also expect age to affect both participation and re-offending. Older youth may be more likely to re-offend than younger youth (i.e., risk for offending peaks in late adolescence; see Moffitt, 1993). In addition, mothers with younger youth need to participate to a greater degree than mothers of older youth, as age may preclude younger youth from completing certain requirements independently (e.g., adolescents who are too young to drive may need parental transportation to court). As all youth are experiencing their first contact with the justice system, we do not expect youth age and youth prior self-reported offending to affect mother's legal knowledge.

Results

Legal Knowledge

First, we quantified mothers' knowledge about the juvenile justice system. Overall, mothers received an average score of 65.99% out of 100% on the measure of legal knowledge ($SD = 0.10$, range = 34.09–95.45%). Many of the frequently missed

questions (20–29% correct, on average) seemed to be those regarding the roles and duties of a probation officer and the plea decision. The questions most frequently answered correctly (93–99% correct, on average) were those regarding courtroom procedure (e.g., the right to an interpreter in the courtroom, a warrant will be issued if a youth does not appear for his court date, court-ordered counseling may be mandated). Table 2 displays the percent of participants who answer each question correctly.

To determine whether knowledge varied between the mothers, we investigated associations between mothers' legal knowledge and demographic characteristics. In line with research by Viljoen and Roesch (2005), women who had themselves been arrested knew more about the justice system ($M = 0.70$, $SD = 0.01$) than those who had not been arrested ($M = 0.65$, $SD = 0.01$), $t(322) = 3.83$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.52$, 95% confidence interval (CI) [-0.79, -0.25]. Mothers with greater educational attainment, $F(1, 319) = 44.52$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = 0.12$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.02], and greater household income, $F(1, 301) = 71.28$, $p < .001$, $r^2 = 0.19$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.02], knew more about the juvenile justice system as well.

Racial differences in mothers' legal knowledge were also observed. Latina women knew less about the justice system ($M = 0.62$, $SD = 0.08$) than any other racial group ($p < .001$). Black women knew less ($M = 0.67$, $SD = 0.09$) than women who identified as White or another race ($p < .001$), and there were no

differences between White women ($M = 0.75$, $SD = 0.10$) and women who identified as another race ($M = 0.74$, $SD = 0.08$). Furthermore, mothers who were born in the United States knew more about the justice system ($M = 0.71$, $SD = 0.01$) than those who had immigrated to the United States ($M = 0.61$, $SD = 0.01$), $t(322) = 9.79$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.09$, 95% CI [-1.32, -0.85]). Likewise, mothers who spoke fluent English knew more about the justice system ($M = 0.70$, $SD = 0.01$) than those who spoke only Spanish ($M = 0.60$, $SD = 0.01$), $t(322) = 10.32$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.17$, 95% CI [0.93, 1.40]).

Legal Participation

Most mothers reported participation in their sons' legal proceedings. Scores ranged from 0 (*engaged in no participatory behaviors*) to 1 (*engaged in all possible participatory behaviors*), with an average score of 0.61 ($SD = 0.27$). Specifically, most mothers attended their sons' court date (74.28%), met with their sons' attorney (78.34%), helped to arrange probationary requirements like community service hours for their sons (75.59%), and contacted their sons' probation officer (60.45%). Fewer mothers gave their sons advice on how to plead (30.56%). Importantly, no associations were found between mothers' legal participation and the demographic characteristics listed above (e.g., English fluency, arrests, educational attainment, household income, race).

Are Mothers' Legal Knowledge and Legal Participation Associated with Youths' Self-Report of Offending?

A recursive SEM model was identified, and its fit was assessed using the comparative fit index (CFI) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Cutoff values of 0.95 or greater indicated good fit for CFI, and values less than 0.05 indicated good fit for RMSEA (McDonald & Ho, 2002). Overall model goodness-of-fit was good across a variety of indices, $\chi^2(12) = 8.44$, $p = .75$, RMSEA < 0.001, CFI = 1.00). Equation level goodness-of-fit indices suggested that the model accounted for 45.23% of the

variance in youth re-offending ($R^2 = 0.45$), 36.31% of the variance in mothers' legal knowledge ($R^2 = 0.36$), and 4.44% of the variance in mothers' legal participation ($R^2 = 0.04$).

Our model first tested whether a mother's legal knowledge was related to her legal participation. We found that a son's prior offending (self-reported), race, and a mother's knowledge of the justice system were all associated with legal participation (see Figure 1). Specifically, mothers participated more when their sons had a more extensive history of engaging in delinquent behavior ($p = .02$), and Latina mothers participated more compared to mothers of other races ($p = .01$). Importantly, as mothers' knowledge about the justice system increased, greater participation in their sons' legal process was observed ($p = .04$), such that every standard deviation increase in mothers' legal knowledge was associated with a 0.13 standard deviation increase in participation in sons' legal processes. All model coefficients are reported in Table 3.

Next, our model examined whether mothers who participated less in their sons' legal proceedings had sons who report more re-offending 12 months after their first arrest. We found that both maternal participation and youth prior offending were associated with re-offending. Even after accounting for past delinquency, mothers who participated more in their sons' legal proceedings had sons who re-offended less ($p = 0.02$).

Finally, the model explored indirect paths among variables. Our overall model hypothesis, that mothers' knowledge of the justice system would be related to youthful re-offending through maternal effort, was confirmed (95% CI [0.12, 0.66]; bias-corrected bootstrapped $SE = 0.13$). By dividing the standard coefficients of the effect of mothers' legal knowledge and effort, our model suggests that $(0.014_{\text{LegalKnow}}/0.042_{\text{Effort}} = 0.33)$ 33.33% of the effect of a mother's legal knowledge on youth re-offending was mediated through maternal effort in her son's justice system process ($p = 0.04$). In other words, the mechanism through which mothers' legal knowledge was associated with youth re-offending included, in part, mothers' participation in the legal process, such that mothers who knew more about the justice system participated

Table 3
Parameter Estimates for Model 1 ($N = 324$ Pairs)

Endogenous variable	Exogenous variable	Estimate ^d (SE)	Equation R^2
Youth self report of re-offending	Mother's effort	.042 (.02)*	.452
	Youth age	-.004 (.004)	
	Youth prior offending	.726 (.05)**	
Maternal effort	Mother's legal knowledge	.342 (.17)*	.044
	Mother's race ^a	.094 (.04)**	
	Youth age	-.012 (.05)	
	Youth prior offending	.343 (.23)*	
Maternal legal knowledge	Mother's race ^a	-.041 (.01)**	.363
	Mother's arrests ^b	.038 (.01)**	
	Mother's education	-.00002 (.002)	
	Household income	.011 (.002)**	
	Mother's primary language ^c	-.047 (.02)**	

^a Reference group is "Latina." ^b Reference group is "Never arrested." ^c Reference group is "Spanish." ^d All coefficients are standardized.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

more in the process, and ultimately had sons who re-offended less. No other significant indirect paths were observed (see Table 4).

Are Mothers' Legal Knowledge and Legal Participation Associated with Youths' Official Record of Re-Arrests?

A second SEM model was used to examine youths' official arrests (rather than self-reported re-offending) as the outcome to avoid issues related to shared method variance. In this model, overall model goodness-of-fit was good, $\chi^2(12) = 17.28, p = .14$, RMSEA = 0.04, CFI = 0.97. At the equation level, goodness-of-fit indices suggested that the model only accounted for 4.44% of the variance in official arrests ($R^2 = 0.04$) and 5.92% of the variance in mothers' legal participation ($R^2 = .06$), but accounted for 36.30% of the variance in mothers' legal knowledge ($R^2 = 0.36$). Results using official arrest records were similar to those found using self-reported offending. Just as was found in the self-report of offending model, the official arrest model found that mothers with greater legal knowledge participated more in their sons' legal proceedings ($p = .04$; see all model coefficients in Table 5). However, there were neither direct nor indirect effect of mothers' legal participation on youth re-arrests, suggesting that youth re-arrests differ from youth self-reported offending. Results did not differ by the type of re-arrest (e.g., person offenses, property offenses, drug offenses).

Discussion

The present study provides important evidence that parents' knowledge and participation during their children's probationary experience may be associated with youths' desistance from criminal offending. This study was the first to directly test the degree to which mothers understand their rights and responsibilities within the juvenile court, as well as the degree to which they

participated in their children's legal proceedings. Because our sample consisted of youth and mothers who had just experienced their first encounter with the justice system, the present study is uniquely qualified to test the typical knowledge and participation of families who are entering the justice system for the first time. Several important findings emerged from the study. First, we find that mothers, in general, averaged 66% correct on a series of questions designed to test their knowledge of the juvenile justice system. Second, mothers who knew less about the juvenile justice system also participated less in their sons' legal proceedings. Third, those mothers who participated less had sons who were more likely to report engaging in re-offending behavior. Overall, our results suggest that a mother's legal knowledge is associated with her legal participation, as well as her son's re-offending behavior after his first arrest.

Mothers' overall lack of knowledge about the juvenile justice system is troubling; particularly striking is the knowledge disparity among women. Results from the present study shed light on one mechanism through which juvenile offenders from minority and low SES families may be at a disadvantage in the juvenile justice system: their legal knowledge. Household income, primary language, and race were associated with less knowledge of the justice system. Although it may seem counterintuitive that mothers' education attainment was not associated with legal knowledge, this is likely because of the dearth of legal/civic instruction received during postsecondary education. As baccalaureate degrees become increasingly specialized (Gerstein & Friedman, 2016; Trow, 2007), higher educational attainment may not guarantee exposure to knowledge of legal and civic issues. Indeed, only through specific legal training is it likely that more education would amount to greater knowledge of the justice system (Bowal & Wanke, 2001).

Overall, however, the present results echo Woolard and colleagues' (2008) finding that minority race and low SES families displayed less knowledge of police interrogations. Importantly,

Table 4
Model 1 Indirect Effects ($N = 324$ Pairs)

Endogenous variable	Exogenous variable	Estimate ^d (SE) for indirect effect
Youth self report of re-offending	Mother's legal knowledge	.014 (.007)*
	Youth age	-.0004 (.001)
	Youth prior offending	.014 (.009)
	Mother's race ^a	.003 (.002)†
	Mother's arrests ^b	.001 (.0003)
	Mother's education	-.00004 (.00004)
	Household income	.0002 (.0001)
	Mother's primary language ^c	-.001 (.0005)
Mother's effort	Mother's race ^a	-.014 (.008)†
	Mother's arrests ^b	.013 (.008)†
	Mother's education	-.000001 (.001)
	Household income	.004 (.002)†
	Mother's primary language ^c	.016 (.001)†

Note. Each of the reported indirect effects represents the indirect effect of the exogenous variable on the endogenous variable through mothers' legal knowledge.

^a Reference group is "Latina." ^b Reference group is "Never arrested." ^c Reference group is "Spanish." ^d All coefficients are standardized.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$.

Table 5
Parameter Estimates for Model 2 (N = 324 Pairs)

Endogenous variable	Exogenous variable	Estimate ^d (SE)	Equation R ²
Youth official re-arrests	Mother's effort	.150 (.09)	.059
	Youth age	-.028 (.020)	
	Youth prior offending	.888 (.24)**	
Maternal effort	Mother's legal knowledge	.342 (.17)*	.044
	Mother's race ^a	.094 (.04)**	
	Youth age	-.011 (.01)	
	Youth prior offending	.343 (.15)*	
Maternal legal knowledge	Mother's race ^a	-.041 (.01)**	.363
	Mother's arrests ^b	.038 (.01)*	
	Mother's education	-.00002 (.003)	
	Household income	.011 (.002)**	
	Mother's primary language ^c	-.047 (.02)**	

^a Reference group is "Latina." ^b Reference group is "Never arrested." ^c Reference group is "Spanish." ^d All coefficients are standardized.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

these factors did not hamper mothers' degree of participation in their sons' legal proceedings, indicating that mothers at a disadvantage in terms of legal knowledge may be trying to participate without having the tools to do so.

To reduce youth re-offending after his first arrest, a youth's primary support system—his parents—must be informed and engaged about the process. This is particularly true of parents who, absent other intervention, may be at a disadvantage in helping their children navigate the juvenile justice system. Indeed, previous research suggests that limited parental involvement in juvenile court processes is not typically attributable to poor parenting, but rather to life stressors (Davies & Davidson, 2001). The present study extends this research by suggesting that lack of knowledge may be a reason that parents are less involved with their children's legal process.

Interestingly, Latina mothers showed the highest participation in youth legal proceedings. Parenting values and child rearing practices vary among different cultures. For example, the idea of familismo (a strong, loyal family unit) is highly valued in the Latino culture (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2001). Although familismo was not measured in the present study, it could be that Latina women displayed the highest participation because the sense of family unity is culturally salient within Latino families. Because strained family ties are associated with increased psychological distress among Latina women (Molina & Alcántara, 2013), it stands to reason that Latina mothers in the present sample may have stood by their sons after his arrest to reaffirm the strength of the family's relationship.

We were surprised to find that mothers' legal participation did not significantly predict youths' official re-arrests (Model 2), given that legal participation did predict youth self-reported offending behavior (Model 1). A much higher proportion of the variance in youth re-offending was explained in Model 1 (when operationalized through youth self-report) than in Model 2 (when operationalized through official re-arrests). In fact, re-arrests and self-reported offending were only correlated at $r = .255$ ($p < .001$) within the present sample. This suggests that factors associated

with re-arrest may be different than those associated with self-reported offending, given that not all crimes that a youth commits are detected by law enforcement or result in an arrest, and not all arrests stem from a crime that a youth truly committed. Indeed, previous research designed to compare metrics of criminal behavior among young adults (Gilman, Hill, Kim, Nevell, Hawkins, & Farrington, 2014) and juvenile offenders (Farrington, Joliffe, Hawkins, Catalano, Hill, & Kosterman, 2003; Farrington, Ttofi, Crago, & Coid, 2014; Kirk, 2006; Piquero, Schubert, & Brame, 2014) have found differences in self-reported offending and official arrest records, leading authors to conclude that the two sources of information provide valuable information about youth offending both separately and together (Gilman et al., 2014).

The present study has many notable strengths; chief among them is the sample. Dyadic, longitudinal data is difficult to obtain in a juvenile justice population. In addition, to our knowledge, no empirical study has interviewed the mothers of juvenile offenders regarding their own behaviors (rather than as a collateral reporter of their child's behaviors), nor collected data on mothers' knowledge of the juvenile justice system. An important next step is to compare the legal knowledge of mothers in the present sample (who are experiencing contact with the juvenile justice system for the first time) to individuals with more extensive history of juvenile justice system experience (e.g., individuals with past juvenile justice contact, legal professionals). However, by recruiting a sample of first-time justice system-involved families, we present an ecologically valid report of mothers' legal knowledge and participation during their initial encounter with the juvenile justice system. The results of the present study are further strengthened because it was possible to operationalize our primary outcome (re-offending) through both self-report and official re-arrests.

Despite these strengths, the results are limited by the possibility of sampling bias. Not all eligible mothers of the 1,216 total Crossroads youth participants were contacted within their eligibility window due to funding limitations, so not all eligible women had the chance to participate. However, it is important to note that there were no differences between families who participated in this

study and the total Crossroads sample on our outcome of interest (e.g., youth self-reported re-offending). Furthermore, our sample was comprised exclusively of male youths (all juvenile offenders) and their mothers. Although there is no reason to believe that mothers would have more legal knowledge if they had a daughter, fathers may know more about the justice system than mothers given the higher rate at which men are involved in the justice system compared to women, and evidence in the present study linking such involvement to greater knowledge. In addition, parental participation in legal proceedings may have differed among fathers or among parents with a female child. Future studies should test the generalizability of the results of the present study by recruiting a sample of parents and children of both genders.

In addition, it is likely that individual judges, probation officers, and other legal actors display variability in the amount of communication and support offered to parents. Unfortunately, data for the present study are not structured to allow for this type of analysis, as we did not collect data on individual courts, police, or judges. Finally, the present study used mediation analysis with cross-sectional data, where longitudinal data may have been more illustrative. For example, families may learn to navigate the justice system more effectively as time passes. Indeed, an important alternative explanation for the present findings is that parents who participate more in their children's legal proceedings develop greater legal knowledge over time. It could also be that parents who are frustrated with their children's repeated offending participate less with time. Future research should test the degree to which families learn more about the justice system over time, or participate more or less with time, especially in conjunction with repeated youth contacts with the system.

Despite these shortcomings, the present study has implications for juvenile justice policy in terms of improving the way that the justice system works with families. Perhaps the most important finding from the present study is that we suspect a downstream effect of a mother's legal knowledge to her legal participation, to her son's success after an arrest. The benchmark for appropriate participation may be unclear for some parents (Davies & Davidson, 2001; Woolard et al., 2008). Yet, our results indicate that mothers' participation in the legal process is associated with reduced youth re-offending, even above and beyond the effect of youths' prior offending behavior. Because mothers with greater knowledge of the justice system had sons who re-offended less, educating mothers about the juvenile justice system may be a critical point of intervention to improve youth probationary outcomes. This is especially important for families who are linguistic and racial minorities, as well as those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, given that these families displayed the least legal knowledge in the present findings. Indeed, results from the present study suggest that the families most in need of an education intervention are the very families whose children are often over-represented in the juvenile justice system (Hawkins & Kempf-Leonard, 2005; Piquero, 2008).

Given that most youths, including those with justice system experience, lack an appropriate understanding of the justice system to manage it alone (Goodwin-DeFaria & Marinos, 2012; Grisso et al., 2003; Redding & Fuller, 2004), calls have been made to create targeted, meaningful avenues for parental involvement in their child's justice system experience (Burke et al., 2014; Davies & Davidson, 2001; Peterson-Badali & Broeking, 2010). At the same

time, recent years have seen a growing movement toward including families in the rehabilitative process for juvenile offenders (Davies & Davidson, 2001; Pennell et al., 2011). Parents may be a cost-effective mechanism through which the justice system can maintain rehabilitative gains; thus, parents are natural partners to the juvenile courts. Because parents meet with legal actors over the course of a youth's arrest anyway, this is an avenue where intervention and education may strengthen youths' chances for success on probation.

The types of questions that mothers frequently missed, on average, can provide direction to improve targeted areas of legal knowledge. For example, many of the frequently missed questions involved the responsibilities of a probation officer, and the plea decision. Although it may not be surprising that parents, accustomed to making important decisions for or with their child, do not understand that their child makes his or her own plea decision (Henning, 2005), these results underscore the importance of ensuring that both parents and their children are aware of youths' due process rights early in the process (i.e., directly after a youth is arrested). Furthermore, if parents do not understand the roles and duties of a probation officer, they may misunderstand their own roles and duties in their child's probationary process and not engage in the process in a way that is consonant with the probation officer's goals. In contrast, the least frequently missed questions were those regarding courtroom procedure, suggesting that legal education programs may need to focus more energy on the probationary aspect of a child's legal process.

The results from the present study suggest that legal education should be a key component of parental involvement in legal proceedings. Although youth are not obligated to follow the advice of their parents but rather have the right to a client-centered attorney to advocate for them (Marrus, 2003), children are more successful in completing their probationary terms and desisting from crime when their parents are included in the legal process (Burke et al., 2014; Vidal & Woolard, 2016). Just as schools foster parental engagement in their children's education, so too should probationary programs educate parents on how they can help their youth succeed after an arrest. By giving parents the knowledge they need to navigate the justice system, parents will be better situated to truly partner with probation to help their youth succeed after a first arrest.

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