What Explains Police Legitimacy and Youth Delinquency Across Urban and Rural Contexts? Contextual Variations in Legal Socialization

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Abstract

Legal socialization is a developmental process through which individuals develop and shape their understanding of the law and legal institutions. A significant body of research suggests that fair and just interactions with figures of legal authority, such as the police, foster positive orientations toward the legal system. In turn, these promote compliance and cooperation with legal institutions. While legal socialization research has largely expanded, evidence on urban and rural variations remains limited. This study addresses this gap by investigating the predictors of young people's perceptions of police legitimacy and youth delinquency across urban, semiurban, and rural settings. Using survey data, the study analyzes a sample of 341 secondary school students from two northern regions of Portugal. Among them, 131 students attended school in an urban setting, 113 in a rural area, and 97 in a semiurban environment. Regression models were estimated to identify key predictors of police legitimacy and delinquency in each setting. Results suggest that, among urban and rural youth, police legitimacy was best predicted by police's procedural fairness. However, in semiurban areas, none of the predictors included in the model were significant. Regarding delinquency, deviant group behavior was the strongest predictor in the urban sample. Male gender and deviant group behavior were significant predictors in the rural sample, while feeling of belongingness and parental procedural justice were the strongest predictors for semiurban youth. These differences suggest that distinct patterns of legal socialization may emerge across geographic locations. These variations will be discussed drawing on rural criminology research, bridging the gaps between this field and legal socialization.