

Contact with the Criminal Justice System, Social Support, and Depressive Symptoms in Women

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Introduction

Over the last four decades, the number of people incarcerated in the United States has increased exponentially, from roughly 500,000 to over 2.2 million as of 2015. Previous research has indicated that contact with the criminal justice system is associated with poor physical and mental health outcomes. For example, compared to the general population, prison and jail inmates have significantly higher prevalence rates of depression and PTSD (Binswanger et al., 2010; Dumont et al., 2012; James & Glaze, 2006). Research suggests that social support buffers individuals from the adverse effects of stressful life events (Thoits, 2011; Umberson & Karas Montez, 2010), but this has not been tested in relation to criminal justice contact.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine whether social support moderates the relationship between contact with the criminal justice system and depressive symptoms among women.

Methods

Participants. The final sample consisted of 535 women who were the adult caregivers of youth who participated in the Mobile Youth and Poverty Study (Mugoya et al., 2017). Participants had an average of 4 children, and ranged in age from 19 – 93 years ($M = 39.41$). Although race/ethnicity was not captured among adult caregivers, researchers who collected the data estimated that nearly 95% of participants were African American (Bolland et al., 2016).

Measures. Social support was assessed by a 30-item questionnaire. Women indicated how likely people in their neighborhood would help them out in various ways. Sample items include: "Have lunch or dinner with me," and "Comfort me if I was upset." Depressive symptoms were assessed using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Short Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). Participants were asked to indicate how often they felt a certain way in the past week. Sample items include: "I felt lonely," and "My sleep was restless." Criminal justice contact was assessed by asking participants if they had ever been arrested.

Results

Consistent with previous research, descriptive statistics suggest that women with a history of arrest reported more depressive symptoms than those with no arrest history. Contact with the criminal justice system remained a significant predictor of depressive symptoms even after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics. Although there was a main effect of social support on depressive symptoms in the regression analyses, the interaction between having ever been arrested and social support was not statistically significant.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix for Study Variables.

	Depressive Symptoms	Ever Arrested	Age	Education	Num. of Children	Employed	Ever Married	Social Support
Depressive Symptoms	1							
Ever Arrested	.10**	1						
Age	-.05	-.13**	1					
Education	-.15***	-.10**	-.03	1				
Num. of Children	-.00	.05	.30***	-.20***	1			
Employed	-.15***	-.08*	-.21***	.16***	-.15***	1		
Ever Married	.01	-.02	.50***	.03	.28***	-.10*	1	
Social Support	-.14**	.03	.10**	.11**	.04	.03	-.01	1

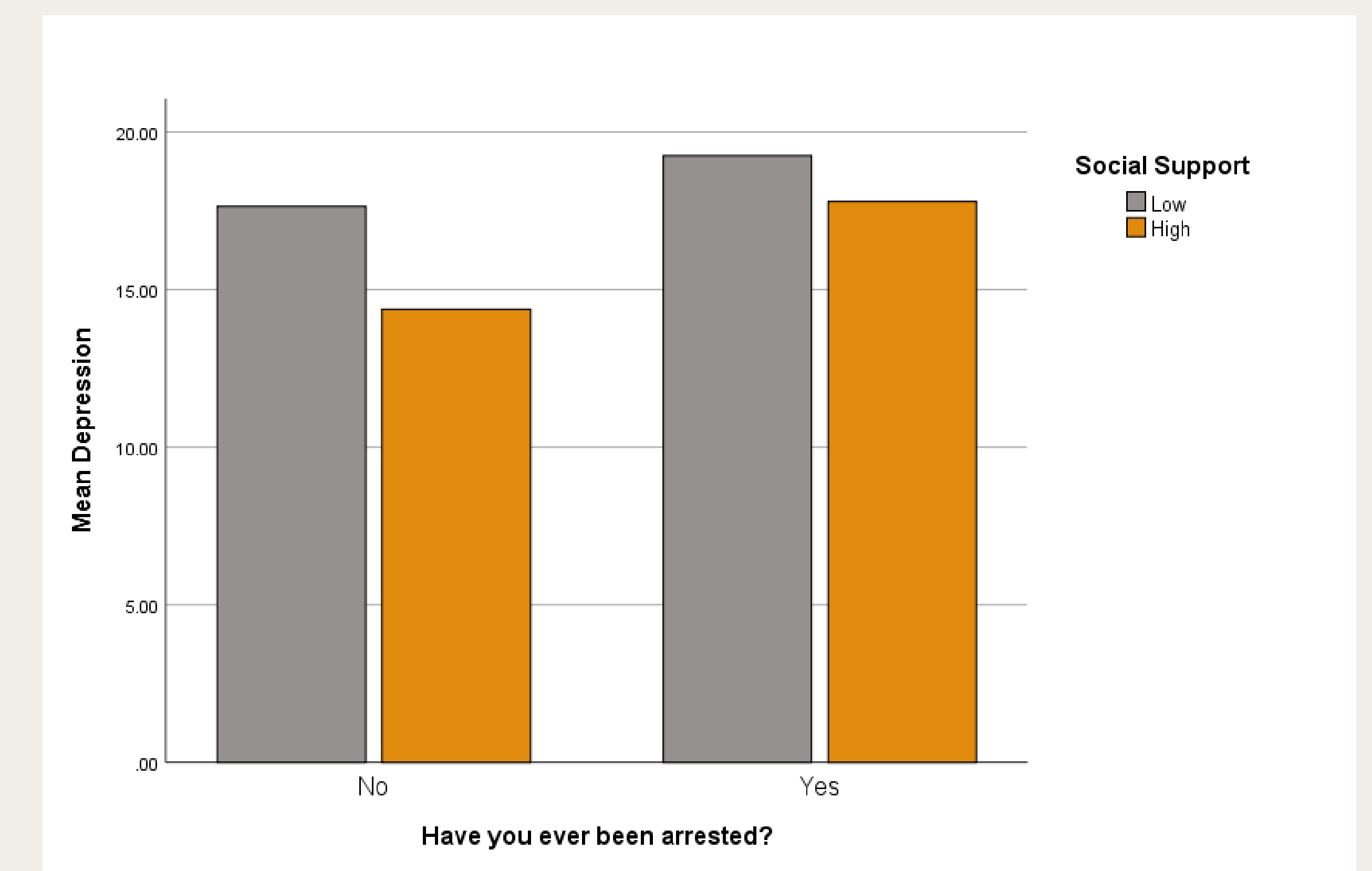
Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. OLS Regression of Ever Arrested on Depressive Symptoms (CES-D).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Ever Arrested	0.10**	(0.91)	0.11**	(0.99)	0.11*	(0.99)
Gender (ref. women)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Age	-	-	-0.05	(0.04)	-0.05	(0.04)
Education	-	-	-0.11**	(0.29)	-0.11*	(0.29)
Num. of Children	-	-	-0.06	(0.25)	-0.06	(0.25)
Employed	-	-	-0.17***	(1.00)	-0.17***	(1.00)
Ever Married	-	-	0.06	(1.10)	0.06	(1.10)
Social Support	-	-	-0.11*	(0.02)	-0.13*	(0.02)
Arrest X Social Support	-	-	-	-	0.03	(0.04)
Constant	16.18***	(0.52)	28.061***	(3.96)	28.19**	(3.97)
F	6.77**		6.57**		5.79**	
Prob > F	<0.01		<0.001		<0.001	
R ²	0.01		0.08		0.08	

Notes. b = standardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1. Arrest History, Social Support, and Depressive Symptoms.



Discussion

Results are consistent with previous research in showing that women who have ever been arrested are at increased risk of depressive symptoms, than women who have not been arrested. Results from this study adds to the literature by providing preliminary evidence that having ever been arrested increases the risk of depressive symptoms, regardless of the level of social support.

Results point to important areas of future research. First, it is clear that social support matters. However, the type of social support (informational, instrumental, or emotional) that matters most is still not clear. Second, this study only measured the social support that women received from people in their neighborhood, meaning that we may have underestimated total amount of social support. Future research that considers a wider variety of social supports and examines whether some types of support matter more than others would help advance our understanding of criminal justice involvement, social support, and health.