

Perceptions of Juvenile Offenders Who Were Maltreated as Children

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Abstract

Researchers have published a substantial amount of research on how a history of child abuse influences public perceptions and sentencing severity. Overall, it seems that when a study has participants act as mock jurors and experimentally manipulates child abuse, the results are less punitive sentences for offenders with a history of abuse victimization. The majority of the current experimental research uses serious criminal offenses, such as murder and arson, and many do not look into the influence of race, sex, and type of abuse. This study examined people's perceptions of juvenile offenders who were maltreated as children by experimentally manipulating type of abuse, type of crime, the race of offender, and the sex of offender to see if these variables would influence the punitiveness of sentencing, and perceptions of the offender's intent, responsibility, and blameworthiness for the crime. We recruited 209 Appalachian State University students and 430 participants from Amazon's MTurk tool to read a short case vignette online and answer questions about it. We found that offenders who were abused were sentenced slightly harsher than those who were not abused and offenders who committed assault were sentenced harsher than offenders who committed breaking and entering with vandalism. In the student sample, participants sentenced White offenders harsher than Black offenders, but the other sample exhibited no difference. Lastly, in both samples the sex of the offender did not influence sentencing severity.

Perceptions of Juvenile Offenders Who Were Maltreated as Children

The Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines child maltreatment in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) as "any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm" (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). During 2016, there were an estimated 676,000 victims of abuse and neglect, which equates to a national rate of 9.1 victims per 1,000 children. The victimization rate for girls was 9.5 per 1,000 and the rate for boys was 8.7 per 1,000. Fifty-one percent of maltreated children were White, 13.8% were African-American, and 24.6% were Hispanic (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2018).

With the high prevalence of childhood maltreatment in the United States, researchers have studied how those experiences may affect a child later in life. Research investigating how maltreatment affects children's behaviors and risk for criminal activity has been a focus of study for decades. It is known that maltreatment and trauma can lead to numerous negative outcomes for a child, including delinquency. However, this begs the question of whether a history of childhood maltreatment should be taken into account when punishing a juvenile offender.

Childhood Maltreatment and Juvenile Delinquency

Trauma plays an important factor in juvenile delinquency and other forms of risky behavior. Individuals with histories of being involved in the juvenile justice system are more likely to have experienced multiple forms of trauma. A study found 92.5% of youth in a juvenile detention center had experienced at least one potentially traumatic event (with a mean of 14 events and a median of six events) (Abram, Teplin, Charles, Longworth, McClelland, & Dulcan,

2004). Some studies have looked at the relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) and found that juvenile offenders were 13 times less likely to report zero ACES and four times more likely to report scores of four or more ACES (Baglivio, Epps, Swartz, Huq, & Hardt, 2014). According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2008), at least 75% of youth involved in the juvenile delinquency system have experienced traumatic victimization and 11–50% have developed posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

One common ACE is childhood abuse/maltreatment. Childhood maltreatment has been linked to a variety of negative consequences, including increased risk for smoking, alcoholism, drug abuse, risky sexual behavior, and delinquency (U.S. National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). There is an ample amount of research that suggests there is a link between childhood maltreatment and juvenile delinquency (Ghetti & Redlich, 2001; Ryan & Testa, 2005; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Widom, 1989; Widom & Maxfield, 2001); however, this is not to say that all abused children will go on to commit crime.

An early literature review on the relationship between childhood maltreatment and juvenile delinquency found that 10-85% of juvenile delinquents have a background of maltreatment and abuse (Smith & Thornberry, 1995). One of the most prominent early studies found that offenders who were abused or neglected as children had a statistically significant higher rate of adult criminal records by age 25 (28.6%) than those with no history of maltreatment (Widom, 1989). Another study found that 31.7% of participants who were not maltreated had arrest records, while 45% of participants who were maltreated had arrest records (Smith and Thornberry, 1995). A more recent study by Ryan and Testa (2005) found that delinquency rates are approximately 47% greater for youth associated with at least one substantiated report of maltreatment. In this study, the researchers found that the most common

delinquency petitions were associated with property offenses (32%), including arson, burglary, and vandalism, and violent index offenses (31%), including robbery, aggravated assault, and homicide (Ryan & Testa, 2005).

Maltreatment and Criminal Sentencing

At first thought, one might think that jurors and officials may look at a child who has been abused or neglected, feel sympathy for them, and provide a more lenient sentence. Overall, it seems that when a study has participants act as jurors and experimentally manipulates child abuse in a mock study, the results are less punitive sentences for maltreated children (Stevenson, 2009). For example, a study by Stalans and Henry (1994) used a short case vignette about a 16-year-old boy who was either guilty of killing his father or a non-abusive neighbor. Participants were asked if the boy should be transferred to adult court or remain in juvenile court. The study manipulated abuse by describing that the boy was either abused by his father or not. Results found that abuse was a mitigating factor in mock jurors' sentencing outcomes. When the child had been abused for "many years," 22.9% of participants recommended adult court if the victim was his father and 48.3% if the victim was his neighbor; however, when the child was not abused, 51.2% of participants recommended adult court if the victim was his father and 64.7% if the victim was his neighbor (Stalans & Henry, 1994).

Another study looked at "excuse defenses," a reason argued by a defendant to why they should not be held legally responsible (Heath, Stone, Darley, & Grannemann, 2003). The researchers had participants rate 15 excuses on their credibility and persuasiveness and whether they would change the assigned sentence after learning about the excuse defense. The authors found that the more persuasive the excuse was, the less responsible the defendant was perceived to be, the less control the defendant was perceived to have, and the shorter the sentence

recommended. They found that jurors rated parental abuse as fifth most persuasive out of fifteen different excuses. Over 75% of participants recommended treatment for defendants who experienced parental abuse (Heath et al., 2003).

Legal and Extralegal Factors in Sentencing

Most studies show that the strongest predictors of sentencing decisions are legal factors, such as seriousness of crime and prior convictions (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1988; Neubauer, 2002); however, contextual discrimination and disparities in sentencing for race and sex have been found to be extralegal factors that influence sentencing (Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2018). Discrimination involves “a difference in outcome based on differential treatment of individuals or groups without reference to behavior, qualifications, or some other legal factors” (Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2018, p. 29). Contextual discrimination is discrimination that only appears in certain contexts or circumstances. Disparity is different from discrimination as it involves a difference, but one that can be “explained by legitimate factors that are reasonable and do not raise any legal issues” (Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2018, p. 29).

Race of offender. In 2014, the FBI Uniform Crime Report (UCR) found the following percent distribution of arrests by race for offenders under 18 years of age: aggravated assault (White - 55.3%; African American - 42.4%), property crimes (White - 59.6%; African American - 37.6%), other assaults (White - 57%; African American - 40.9%), and vandalism (White - 72.5%; African American - 25.2%). In 2014, only 15% of the juvenile population was African American, but they were overrepresented in the juvenile justice system, making up 52.4% of arrests for violent index crimes and 37.6% of arrests for serious property crimes (Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2018). These obvious disparities have long been a focus of research.

One hypothesis as to why Black youth are arrested more often is that Black youth display and experience more individual and contextual risk factors for arrests (Fite, Wynn, & Pardini, 2009). An increased exposure to environmental and societal inequalities may cause Black youths to exhibit more adverse individual risk factors, which then leads to a greater probability for arrest. However, during sentencing these risk factors may not be taken into account or even thought of by judges and jurors, which can lead to more Black youth being incarcerated. For example, a study involving mock jurors examined whether the presence or absence of psychopathic traits and ethnicity of the defendant would impact the sentence jurors would give for a juvenile who has committed murder. They found that even when mitigating factors were included, Black defendants were shown less leniency than White defendants (Edens, Guy, & Fernandez, 2003). Even when contextual risk factors were held equal in this study, there was still evidence of racial differences.

Another study by Rattan, Levine, Dweck, and Eberhardt (2012) looked to see if juvenile status would serve as a mitigating factor for both Black and White juvenile defendants. Participants were given a case vignette about a 14 year old male, with prior convictions, who was convicted of “brutally raping an elderly woman” and sentenced to life in prison without parole. The researchers found that when the juvenile defendant was Black, participants expressed significantly more support for life without parole sentences than those who read about a White defendant (Rattan et al., 2012). Again, racial differences were found even when the situations were the same for both a White and Black offender.

Sex of offender. Disparities for the sex of an offender have also been found in sentencing outcomes, but the results are less consistent on which sex tends to receive harsher punishments. An early study looked at the effects of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of

1974, which attempted to mitigate some of the biases found in juvenile justice sentencing, but found that when males and females committed similar crimes, males were more likely than females to become incarcerated (Bishop and Frazier, 1992). Years later, a study by Tracy, Kempf-Leonard, and Abramoske-James (2009) looked at national arrest data. In terms of juvenile corrections, the researchers found that females were more likely than males to receive more punitive punishments; specifically, females were more likely to be committed to a juvenile prison for status offenses and technical violations of probation (Tracy, Kempf-Leonard & Abramoske-James, 2009). A third study looked at data from the Los Angeles County Probation Department and the Department of Children Family Services (DCFS) of children aged 12-17 who committed their first offense and found that young women were less likely to be placed in corrections, but were more likely to be sentenced to placement than young men relative to a probation sentence (Tam, Abrams, Freisthler & Ryan, 2016).

These studies all looked at real data; however, not many studies focusing on mock jurors' perceptions of juvenile offenders and sentencing outcomes experimentally manipulate the sex of the offender. A study by Nunez, Dahl, Tang, and Jensen (2007) manipulated the sex and age of an offender who murdered their father or neighbor. They found a three-way interaction between age, abuse, and defendant gender, but no direct differences between male and female offenders (Nunez et al., 2007). Also, recall, the study by Stalans and Henry (1994), which found that child abuse served as a mitigating factor for both males and females.

There are two conflicting theories to how women are treated in the criminal justice system. Women commit far less crime than men and are typically treated more leniently by the criminal justice system. This has been referred to as the "chivalry or paternalism hypothesis" which is "based on the assumptions that society is paternalistic and chivalrous toward females,

and therefore the police, prosecutors, judges, parole reviewers, and other decision-makers will be chivalrous, as well” (Zaplin, 2008). Oppositely, the “evil women hypothesis” states, “since females are stepping outside of both law-abiding and appropriate gender roles when they commit offenses, they are treated more harshly than males charged with the same offense” (Zaplin, 2008). The absence of consistent findings on sentencing differences between males and females makes it difficult to hypothesize what we might find, but it is still a question that needs to be tested.

Current Study

The majority of the current research on perceptions of juvenile offenders with an abuse history describe offenders committing serious criminal offenses, such as murder and arson (Ghetti & Redlich, 2001; Stalans & Henry, 1994). According to the 2013 UCR, the U.S. Department of Justice found that 21% of juvenile offenders committed simple assault and 12% committed vandalism to property. The current study used these criminal scenarios to see if these crimes, in addition to manipulation of abuse, would influence jurors to be more lenient or punitive in sentencing. This study asked participants to read and evaluate a scenario describing a 15-year-old committing a crime. The manipulated variables included the type of crime (assault on a classmate or breaking and entering with vandalism), type of abuse (physical, sexual, or no abuse), the race of offender (black or white) and sex of offender (male or female). The purpose was to see if these variables would influence the punitiveness of sentencing, as well as influence jurors’ perceptions on the offender’s intent, responsibility, and blameworthiness for the crime.

In consideration of the literature, we hypothesized that 1) abused juvenile offenders would receive more lenient sentences than non-abused juvenile offenders (Nunez et al., 2007; Stalans & Henry, 1994); 2) juvenile offenders who commit assault would receive harsher

sentences than juvenile offenders who commit breaking and entering with vandalism (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1988; Neubauer, 2002); 3) black juvenile offenders would receive harsher sentences than white juvenile offenders (Walker, Spohn, & DeLone, 2018). In addition, we also examined differences between males and females, but made no specific hypotheses due to conflicting research (Bishop & Frazier, 1992; Nunez et al. 2007; Tam, Abrams, Freisthler & Ryan, 2016; Tracy, Kempf-Leonard & Abramoske-James, 2009; Zaplin, 2008). Lastly, this study also explored perceptions of abuse and the juveniles' blameworthiness, responsibility, and intent for committing the crime with no specific hypotheses.

Method

Participants

Student sample. This study consisted of 209 participants. Participants were Appalachian State University students recruited through the Psychology Department recruitment tool. Participants were aged 18-25 ($M = 19.15$, $SD = 1.27$). The majority of participants identified as White/Caucasian females (see Table 1). Participants taking the survey received course credit for their participation.

MTurk sample. This study also consisted of 430 participants recruited through Amazon's MTurk recruitment tool. Participants were aged 18-73 ($M = 37.97$, $SD = 12.08$). The majority of participants identified as White/Caucasian males. For MTurk participants only, we also asked about socioeconomic status. The majority of participants said their household income before taxes was between \$30,000-69,999 (see Table 2).

Design

This study was a three (maltreatment history: physical, sexual, none) x two (crime committed: breaking and entering with vandalism, assault on a classmate) x two (sex of offender:

male, female) x two (race of offender: black, white) between subjects factorial design.

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of the case descriptions, then answer a series of questions about it. The primary dependent variable was the severity of sentencing. Secondary dependent variables included the juvenile offender's perceived blameworthiness, responsibility, and intent for the crime committed.

Procedure

Participants were recruited online from either the Psychology department's participant pool or MTurk. Once they decided to participate in this study, they were redirected to the study site on Qualtrics, where they read the consent forms (Appendix A). After reading the consent form and confirming they were 18-years-old or older, participants were asked to answer demographic questions about themselves, including their age, sex, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. The socioeconomic status question was for MTurk participants only. Participants were then randomly assigned one case vignette to read. Each vignette describes a 15-year-old youth who was already found guilty of a crime. Participants were asked to read the vignette then choose a punishment for the juvenile offender they read about. Their options for sentencing were "transfer to adult court," "placement in juvenile detention facility," "supervised probation," or "released to parents."

Next, participants were asked to respond to 12 statements on a five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The 12 statements were used to assess participants' perceptions of the juvenile offender's blameworthiness (e.g., "The juvenile offender is to blame for what happened"), intent (e.g., "The juvenile offender committed the crime on purpose"), and responsibility (e.g., "The juvenile offender should be the one punished for his/her actions") (see Appendix B).

Results

Student Sample

Overall, probation was the most recommended sentence (59%). The second most common recommendation was release to parents (26.7%), followed by juvenile detention facility (12.9%) and transfer to adult court (1%). In order to see if abuse history influenced sentencing recommendations, we conducted a chi square test and found a significant relationship, $\chi^2(6) = 15.75, p = 0.015$ (see Table 3). Probation was overwhelmingly the most recommended sentence for all three maltreatment conditions: physical abuse (61.3%), sexual abuse (65.8%), and no abuse (51.4%); however, participants recommended slightly harsher sentences for the offenders who had a history of abuse (see Figure 1). The only two adult court sentences were recommended for offenders who suffered from sexual abuse. Recommendations for being released to parents was chosen most often for offenders who had no history of abuse.

To see if type of crime influenced sentencing recommendations, we conducted a chi square test, $\chi^2(3) = 26.79, p < 0.001$ (see Table 3). Overall, participants recommended harsher sentences for offenders who committed assault. The only two adult court sentences were recommended for offenders who were guilty of assault. More participants chose to release the offender to their parents when the offender committed breaking and entering with vandalism (41.5%) than if they committed assault (11.7%).

Next, we examined the impact of offender race on sentencing recommendations, $\chi^2(3) = 11.56, p = .009$ (see Table 3). Overall, participants seemed to recommend harsher sentences to White offenders. The two adult court sentences were both recommended for White offenders. Black offenders were mostly recommended probation (52.7%) or release to parents (37.6%), while only 18.1% of participants recommended release to parents for White offenders.

Finally, we examined the impact of the sex of an offender on sentencing recommendations, $\chi^2(3) = 0.796, p = .850$ (see Table 3). Sentencing recommendations were almost the exact same for males and females. Overall, there were only two recommendations for adult court and one was recommended for a female offender, while the other to a male offender. A slightly higher percent of females were given probation than males and males had a slightly higher percentage of released to parents, but it was not significant.

To test for whether there was an effect for abuse history on responsibility, we ran a one-way ANOVA, $F(2, 206) = 13.88, p < .001$. Using Tukey's HSD, we ran post hoc tests to see which groups were different. There was a significant difference between physical abuse ($M = 2.64, SD = .548$) and no abuse ($M = 2.23, SD = .599$). There was also a significant difference between sexual abuse ($M = 2.69, SD = .559$) and no abuse. Overall, participants perceived offenders who were abused as slightly less responsible for their crime than offenders who were not abused.

We also ran a one-way ANOVA to test the effect of abuse history on blameworthiness, $F(2, 206) = 8.47, p < .001$. Using Tukey's HSD, the only significant difference was between sexual abuse ($M = 3.25, SD = .621$) and no abuse ($M = 3.72, SD = .787$). There was no difference between physical abuse ($M = 3.49, SD = .647$) and sexual abuse or no abuse. Participants perceived offenders who were not abused to be slightly more to blame than offenders who suffered from sexual abuse.

Lastly, we ran a one-way ANOVA to examine the effect of abuse history on intent, $F(2, 206) = .199, p = .820$. Using Tukey's HSD, we found no significant difference between physical abuse ($M = 2.70, SD = .847$), sexual abuse ($M = 2.72, SD = .786$), and no abuse ($M = 2.64, SD =$

.847). Abuse was not a factor that influenced perceptions of a juvenile's intent in committing a crime.

There were three other questions on the survey that asked whether age, childhood experiences, and sex of offender should be considered when sentencing an offender. Based on the mean, we found that participants somewhat agreed that age should be considered ($M = 1.75$; $SD = .782$), participants somewhat agreed that childhood experiences should be considered ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.029$), and participants did not agree that sex should be considered ($M = 4.28$, $SD = .947$).

MTurk Sample

Similar to the student sample, the most recommended sentence was probation (53.7%). Next was release to parents (28.4%), followed by juvenile detention facility (15.8%) and transfer to adult court (2.1%). To see if abuse history influenced sentencing recommendations, we conducted a chi square test, $\chi^2(6) = 16.55$, $p = 0.011$ (see Table 4). Participants recommended more release to parents sentences to offenders who had been sexually abused than those who had been physically abused; however, sexually abused offenders were sentenced to adult court or juvenile detention more than physically abused offenders. Recommendations for adult court and juvenile detention were almost exact for juvenile offenders who were not abused and for those who were physically abused. Adult court and juvenile detention were recommended most for offenders who had been sexually abused. Overall, participants were slightly harsher towards offenders with a history of sexual abuse (see Figure 2).

Next, we conducted another chi square test to see if type of crime influenced sentencing recommendations, $\chi^2(3) = 25.11$, $p < 0.001$ (see Table 4). Overall, participants recommended harsher sentences for offenders who committed assault. Of the nine adult court sentences, seven

were recommended for offenders who were guilty of assault. More participants chose to release the offender to their parents when the offender committed breaking and entering with vandalism (39.1%) than if they committed assault (18.9%).

We then examined the influence of offender race on sentencing recommendations by conducting a chi square test, $\chi^2(3) = 2.89, p = .408$ (see Table 4). The sentencing recommendations were almost identical for both races.

Finally, we examined the impact on the sex of an offender on sentencing recommendations, $\chi^2(3) = 4.74, p = .192$ (see Table 4). Sentencing recommendations were almost the exact same for males and females. A slightly higher percent of males were recommended juvenile detention and release to parents than females, but it was not significant.

To see if there was an effect for abuse history on responsibility, we ran a one-way ANOVA, $F(2, 427) = 19.38, p < .001$. Using Tukey's HSD, we ran post hoc tests to see which groups were different. There was a significant difference between physical abuse ($M = 2.68, SD = .587$) and no abuse ($M = 2.24, SD = .599$). There was also a significant difference between sexual abuse ($M = 2.68, SD = .587$) and no abuse. Overall, participants perceived offenders who were abused as slightly less responsible for their crime than offenders who were not abused.

We then ran a one-way ANOVA to examine the effect of abuse history on blameworthiness, $F(2, 427) = 4.89, p = .008$. Using Tukey's HSD, we only found a significant difference between physical abuse ($M = 3.60, SD = .769$) and no abuse ($M = 3.88, SD = .761$). There was no difference between sexual abuse ($M = 3.70, SD = .862$) and physical abuse or no abuse. Participants perceived offenders who were not abused to be slightly more to blame than offenders who were physically abused.

Lastly, we ran a one-way ANOVA to examine the effect of abuse history on intent, $F(2, 427) = 1.56, p = .212$. Using Tukey's HSD, we found no significant difference between physical abuse ($M = 2.30, SD = .959$), sexual abuse ($M = 2.22, SD = .987$), and no abuse ($M = 2.10, SD = .895$). Participants did not perceive abuse as a factor that influenced a juvenile's intent in committing a crime.

There were three other questions on the survey that asked whether age, childhood experiences, and sex of offender should be considered when sentencing an offender. Based on the mean we found that participants somewhat agreed that age should be considered ($M = 1.87; SD = 1.027$), participants somewhat agreed that childhood experiences should be considered ($M = 2.37, SD = 1.17$), and participants did not agree that sex should be considered ($M = 4.01, SD = 1.61$).

Discussion

In this study, we investigated the relationship between childhood maltreatment and sentencing outcomes for juvenile offenders. We hypothesized that abuse would serve as a mitigating factor for sentencing severity, but our results showed an opposite effect. Both our student sample and MTurk sample recommended slightly harsher sentences for juvenile offenders with a history of maltreatment. These results are inconsistent with results found in other studies that experimentally manipulate abuse and involve mock jurors; however, these results are more consistent with the data from real life court decisions (Stevenson, 2009).

There are several other factors that accompany juvenile offenders who were abused that our participants may have been aware of during the study. Compared to children who have not been abused, abused children are more likely to develop anger management problems, antisocial behavioral problems, poor emotional and social skills, as well as come from a chaotic family

environment (Stevenson, 2009). According to Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick (2005), one predictor of child abuse is parents with fewer parenting skills, including ineffective communication, lack of impulse control, and harsh discipline. These other variables, specifically those that relate to having a chaotic, unhealthy family environment, may be a reason why harsher sentencing outcomes, which typically involve out of home placement, are recommended more for juvenile offenders who have been abused.

A study by Grisso, Tomkins, and Casey (1988) surveyed over 1,000 juvenile court officials, such as judges, attorneys, intake workers, and probation officers. Researchers asked the officials to describe which characteristics of a juvenile offender would lead them to believe incarceration was the right sentencing decision because the offender did not seem like they could be rehabilitated. Some factors indicated included poor behavioral compliance, past history of offenses, unsupportive family, an unsocialized family, and poor academic functioning. Many of these factors tend to covary with childhood maltreatment and create a stigma that abused juveniles cannot be rehabilitated. Therefore, juvenile court officials may believe that abuse can lead to recidivism and choose to incarcerate.

Another study asking judges to recall cases where they decided to transfer a juvenile to adult court found that the juvenile's demeanor and family environment were the two strongest factors that influenced a judge's decision to transfer the offender to adult court (Salekin, Yff, Neumann, Leistico, & Zalot, 2002). Participants may have thought about the offender's family environment when making their sentencing decisions and chose the harsher sentences of "adult court" or "juvenile detention facility" because those options removed the child from an abusive family environment.

It was interesting that in both samples, the majority of the recommendations for adult court were recommended for juvenile offenders with a history of sexual abuse. This could also be because participants viewed sexual abuse as a “worse” form of abuse and did not want to send the child back to an environment where that occurred. Future studies could give each participant multiple case vignettes to see if participants view sexual abuse as worse than physical abuse.

Our second hypothesis was that offenders who committed assault would be recommended harsher sentences than offenders who committed vandalism. Results from both the student sample and the MTurk sample supported this hypothesis. Seriousness of crime is a well-known and well researched legal factor that influences sentencing outcomes (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1988; Neubauer, 2002), so it is no surprise that we found the same effect in our study.

This study also looked to see if the race of the offender would influence the severity of sentencing. We hypothesized that Black offenders would be recommended harsher sentences based on the vast data of racial disparities in the criminal justice system. We found no significant difference in sentencing severity between Black and White offenders with our MTurk data, but results from our student sample showed the opposite effect. We found that White offenders were recommended harsher sentences. One reason for this may be due to the idea of aversive racism. Cohn, Bucolo, Pride, and Sommers (2009) describe it by stating, “when race is made salient, White jurors are reminded that their actions could be interpreted as racist, and they often respond in a socially appropriate manner, being less likely to find a Black defendant guilty.” Since over 80% of our participants identified as White and the case vignettes made the race of the offender very obvious, aversive racism may be why we saw such a different effect.

Along with the three hypotheses, we also wanted to examine if the sex of an offender would influence a participant's decision in recommending a sentence. Based on the existing conflicting literature of the chivalry and evil women hypothesis (Zaplin, 2008), we were not sure what, if any, differences we would find. In both the student sample and MTurk sample, we found no significant differences in the severity of sentencing between males and females. Sentencing recommendations were almost identical for both sexes. Even the harshest recommendation of adult court was split almost evenly between males and females in both samples. This may be because the participants were focusing more on the other factors, such as the seriousness of crime, which we already know to be a strong legal factor in sentencing outcomes (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1988; Neubauer, 2002).

We also explored perceptions of abuse and the juvenile's blameworthiness, responsibility, and intent for committing the crime. Both samples indicated that they thought abused juveniles were slightly less responsible for their crimes, but both samples sentenced the abused juvenile offenders slightly harsher than their non-abused counterparts. This may be contradicting because one of the questions on responsibility placed the responsibility on the child's parents. Since the case vignette described the juvenile being abused by a family member, participants may have believed some of the responsibility was on the parents, therefore rating the juveniles less responsible. They may have not believed the juvenile was fully responsible when recommending a sentence, but did not have an option to punish the parents, so they had to focus only on the juvenile.

The results for blameworthiness also seemed slightly contradictory. The student sample perceived non-abused juvenile offenders as being slightly more to blame than sexually abused offenders, while the MTurk sample perceived non abused juvenile offenders as slightly more to

blame than physically abused offenders. One of the questions for blameworthiness suggested placing blame on a juvenile offender's background (i.e., abuse history). Participants could have believed that abused offenders are less to blame for committing their crimes, but still sentenced them harsher because of this idea that they do not want to send them back to an unhealthy environment.

In terms of intent, both samples did not perceive abuse as being a factor influencing the juvenile's intent to commit a crime. This may be related to the age of the offender and them believing that no matter if the offender was abused or not, they were old enough to know that what they were doing was wrong and a crime. For the question about whether age should be considered when making decisions on sentencing, both samples somewhat agreed that it should. This was not a surprise because current sentencing guidelines do take age into account.

In future studies, I would be interested to see if more detailed case vignettes would affect sentencing outcomes. The vignettes in this study were only a few sentences and said the sexual or physical abuse was perpetrated by a family member, but did not specify. It would also be interesting to add a question about how participants think a child should be disciplined by their parents. I would be interested to see if participants who believe in corporal punishment (i.e., spanking) would be harsher or more lenient in their sentencing recommendations. Lastly, adding a sentencing option, such as "placed in foster care," to allow participants to recommend an out of home placement option other than incarceration, could help determine if this idea that participants want to remove abused juvenile offenders from their unhealthy homes is true.

Limitations

One limitation of the study was the lack of diversity in participants. Participants from the student sample all attend Appalachian State University, a public university in the Southeastern

United States, and the majority were White females. This sample makes it hard to generalize the results to the public. We hoped to achieve a more diverse sample by recruiting from Amazon MTurk. We were able to gather data from a wider range of ages and genders, however, an overwhelming majority of MTurk participants identified as White/Caucasian.

Also, by using MTurk, it is possible that we had participants who are non-United States citizens take the survey. Cultural differences in how juvenile crime, abuse, and criminal sentencing are viewed could have skewed our results. Again, this effects our ability to generalize the findings to the public.

Conclusions

The present study is one of the few to examine not only the influence of abuse history on juvenile offender sentencing outcomes, but also the type of abuse, type of crime, race of offender, and sex of offender. It is also one of the few to use less severe crimes. Results of the study were inconsistent with prior experimental research, but these findings still contribute to the literature and shed light on the disparities found in sentencing outcomes. Our results found that people recommended harsher sentences for juvenile offenders who were abused, which may be because some thought the harsher options were better than sending the child back to their apparent abusive environment or due to the stigma surrounding abuse and belief that these offenders would be less likely to be rehabilitated. There needs to be more resources for social services and less of a disconnect between social services and the juvenile justice system to try to prevent abuse and its negative consequences, reduce the stigma surrounding abuse, and to provide options other than incarceration to remove juvenile offenders from their abusive homes.

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Table 1

Student Sample Demographic and Personal Characteristics

Demographics	<i>n</i>	Percentage (%)
<i>Age</i>		
18	82	38.9%
19	62	29.4%
20	32	15.2%
21	24	11.4%
22	5	2.4%
23	3	1.4%
25	1	0.5%
No answer	2	0.9%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	46	22%
Female	162	77.5%
Nonbinary	1	0.5%
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
Black/African American	5	2.4%
Hispanic Latino	8	3.8%
White/Caucasian	181	86.6%
Race/ethnicity not listed	6	2.9%
More than one	1	0.5%
Prefer not answer	8	3.8%

Table 2

MTurk Demographic and Personal Characteristics

Demographics	<i>n</i>	Percentage (%)
<i>Age</i>		
18-23	19	4.4%
24-29	103	24%
30-35	118	27.3%
36-41	53	12.4%
42-47	39	9.1%
48-53	31	7.2%
54-59	39	9.1%
60-65	17	3.9%
66-73	11	2.6%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	240	55.8%
Female	189	44%
Nonbinary	1	0.2%
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
Black/African American	36	8.4%
Hispanic Latino	22	5.1%
White/Caucasian	344	80%
Race/ethnicity not listed	18	4.2%
More than one	9	2.1%
Prefer not answer	1	0.2%
<i>Socioeconomic Status</i>		
Less than \$10k	19	4.4%
\$10-29k	85	19.8%
\$30-49k	106	24.7%
\$50-69k	95	22.1%
\$70-99k	70	16.3%
\$100-149k	37	8.6%
\$150k or more	18	4.2%

Table 3

Examining Abuse, Crime, Race, and Sex on Sentencing for Student Sample

	Adult Court	Juvenile Detention Facility	Probation	Release to Parents	chi square test
Abuse Type					
Physical Abuse	0	11 (17.7%)	38 (61.3%)	13 (21%)	$\chi^2(6) = 15.75$ $p = .015^*$
Sexual Abuse	2 (2.7%)	10 (13.7%)	48 (65.8%)	13 (17.8%)	
No Abuse	0	6 (8.1%)	38 (51.4%)	30 (40.5%)	
Crime Committed					
Assault	2 (1.9%)	19 (18.4%)	70 (68%)	12 (11.7%)	$\chi^2(3) = 26.79$ $p < .001^{**}$
B&E w/Vandalism	0	8 (7.5%)	54 (50.9%)	44 (41.5%)	
Race of Offender					
White	2 (1.7%)	18 (15.5%)	75 (64.7%)	21 (18.1%)	$\chi^2(3) = 11.56$ $p = .009^{**}$
Black	0	9 (9.7%)	49 (52.7%)	35 (37.6%)	
Sex of Offender					
Male	1 (1%)	14 (13.6%)	58 (56.3%)	30 (29.1%)	$\chi^2(3) = 0.796$ $p = .850$
Female	1 (0.9%)	13 (12.3%)	66 (62.3%)	26 (24.5%)	

Note. The percentages add up to 100 within each variable category.

Table 4

Examining Abuse, Crime, Race, and Sex on Sentencing for MTurk Sample

	Adult Court	Juvenile Detention Facility	Probation	Release to Parents	chi square test
Abuse Type					
Physical Abuse	2 (1.5%)	18 (13.6%)	86 (65.2%)	26 (19.7%)	$\chi^2(6) = 16.55$ $p = .011^*$
Sexual Abuse	5 (3.6%)	27 (19.6%)	69 (50%)	37 (26.8%)	
No Abuse	2 (1.3%)	23 (14.4%)	76 (47.5%)	59 (36.9%)	
Crime Committed					
Assault	7 (3.1%)	46 (20.2%)	132 (57.9%)	43 (18.9%)	$\chi^2(3) = 25.11$ $p < .001^{**}$
B&E w/Vandalism	2 (1%)	22 (10.9%)	99 (49%)	79 (39.1%)	
Race of Offender					
White	5 (2.3%)	37 (17%)	122 (56%)	54 (24.8%)	$\chi^2(3) = 2.89$ $p = .408$
Black	4 (1.9%)	31 (14.6%)	109 (51.4%)	68 (32.1%)	
Sex of Offender					
Male	4 (1.7%)	41 (17.6%)	115 (49.4%)	73 (31.3%)	$\chi^2(3) = 4.74$ $p = .192$
Female	5 (2.5%)	27 (13.7%)	116 (58.9%)	49 (24.9%)	

Note. The percentages add up to 100 within each variable category.

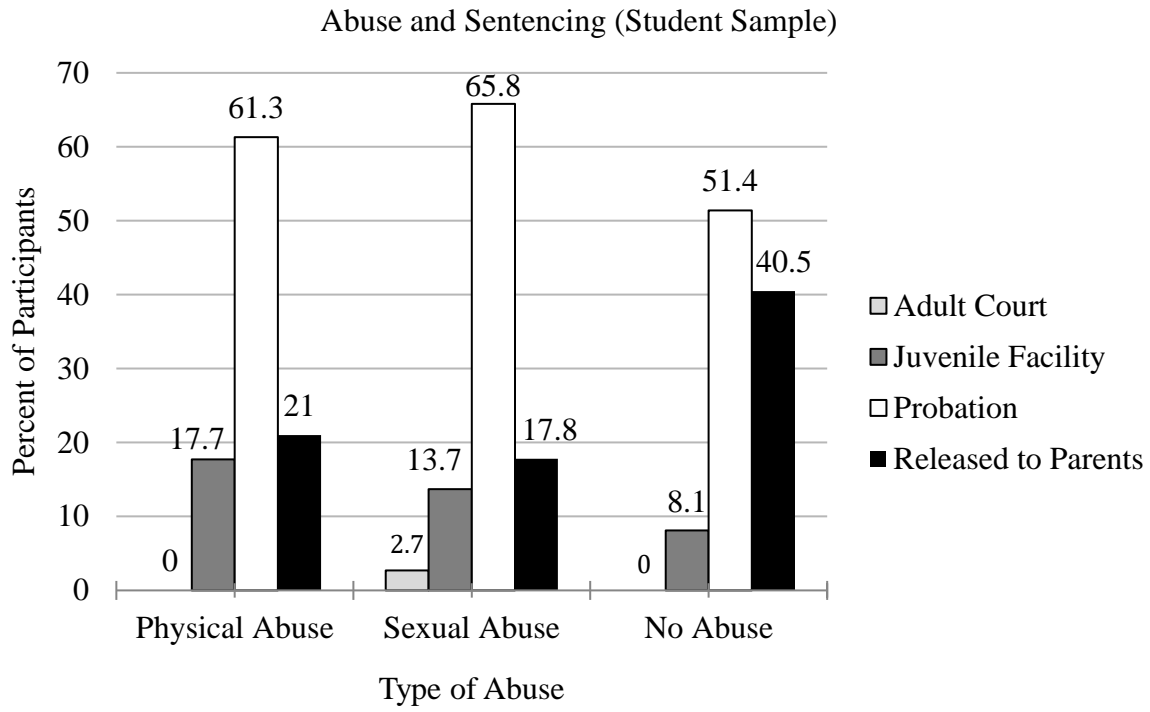


Figure 1. Influence of Abuse on Participant Sentencing Recommendations for Student Sample.

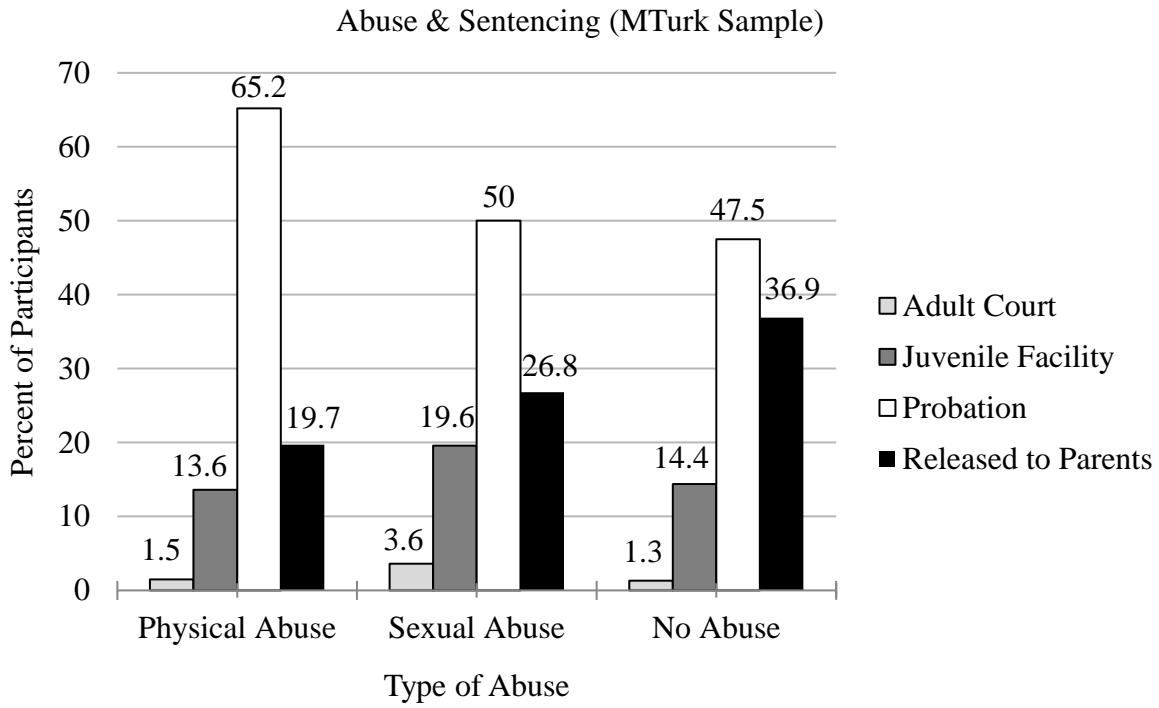


Figure 2. Influence of Abuse on Participant Sentencing Recommendations for MTurk Sample.

Appendix A

MTurk Consent to Participate in Research
*Information to Consider About this Research***Perceptions of Juvenile Offenders**

Principal Investigator: Sam Reis
Department: Psychology
Faculty Advisor: Twila Wingrove
Contact Information: (828) 262-8965

You are being invited to take part in a research study that investigates the relationship between people's perceptions of juvenile offenders. If you take part in this study, you will be one of about 1,200 people to do so.

The research procedures will be conducted through this online study. You will be asked to read a short case study and then answer some questions about what you read, along with a few demographic questions. The study should take around 10 minutes to complete. After completing this survey, you will be compensated with \$0.50.

To the best of our knowledge, the risk of harm for participating in this research study is no more than you would experience in everyday life. There may be no personal benefit from your participation, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future by measuring how people judge an offender with or without a history of abuse.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you choose not to volunteer, there will be no penalty and you will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have. If you decide to take part in the study, you will have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. There will be no penalty and no loss of benefits or rights if you decide at any time to stop participating in the study. This study is confidential.

If you have questions about this research study, you may contact Sam Reis at reisse@appstate.edu and Dr. Twila Wingrove at wingroveta@appstate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, contact the Appalachian Institutional Review Board Administrator at 828-262-2692, through email at irb@appstate.edu or at Appalachian State University, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, IRB Administrator, Boone, NC 28608.

Appalachian State University's Institutional Review Board has determined this study to be exempt from IRB oversight.

By continuing on to the survey, you acknowledge you have read and agree to the descriptions and terms outlined in this consent form, and voluntarily agree to participate in this research

I am at least 18 years old.

I agree to participate.

Student Sample Consent to Participate in Research
Information to Consider About this Research

Perceptions of Juvenile Offenders

Principal Investigator: Sam Reis
Department: Psychology
Faculty Advisor: Twila Wingrove
Contact Information: (828) 262-8965

You are being invited to take part in a research study that investigates the relationship between people's perceptions of juvenile offenders. If you take part in this study, you will be one of about 1,200 people to do so.

The research procedures will be conducted through this online study. You will be asked to read a short case study and then answer some questions about what you read, along with a few demographic questions. The study should take around 10 minutes to complete. You will not be paid for your participation in this study. However, you can earn 1 ELC credit for your participation. There are other research options and non-research options for obtaining extra credit or ELC's. One non-research option to receive 1 ELC is to read an article and write a 1-2 page paper summarizing the article and your reaction to the article. More information about this option can be found at: psych.appstate.edu/research. You may also wish to consult your professor to see if other non-research options are available.

To the best of our knowledge, the risk of harm for participating in this research study is no more than you would experience in everyday life. There may be no personal benefit from your participation, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future by measuring how people judge an offender with or without a history of abuse.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you choose not to volunteer, there will be no penalty and you will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have. If you decide to take part in the study, you will have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. There will be no penalty and no loss of benefits or rights if you decide at any time to stop participating in the study. This study is confidential.

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Appalachian State University's Institutional Review Board has determined this study to be exempt from IRB oversight.

By continuing on to the survey, you acknowledge you have read and agree to the descriptions and terms outlined in this consent form, and voluntarily agree to participate in this research.

I am at least 18 years old.

I agree to participate.

Appendix B

Survey

1. What is your age?

2. What is your gender
 - Male
 - Female
 - Non-binary
 - Transgender
 - My gender identity is not listed
 - I prefer not to answer
3. What is your race/ethnicity?
 - Black/African American
 - Hispanic/Latino
 - White/Caucasian
 - My race/ethnicity is not listed
 - I identify with more than one race/ethnicity
 - I prefer not to answer
4. Please give your best guess and indicate the answer that includes your entire household income in (previous year) before taxes. (*ONLY INCLUDED FOR MTURK PARTICIPANTS*)
 - Less than \$10,000
 - \$10,000 to \$29,999
 - \$30,000 to \$49,999
 - \$50,000 to \$69,999
 - \$70,000 to \$99,999
 - \$100,000 to \$149,999
 - \$150,000 or more

Please read the case description on the next screen carefully.

Example of case vignette

- Josh is a white, 15-year-old youth, who lives with his mother and father. There is a documented history of Josh suffering physical abuse from a family member. One day, Josh got into an argument with his classmate, Collin, which escalated into a physical fight. Josh punched Collin several times. Collin was badly hurt and taken to the hospital. Josh was charged with assault and found guilty. This is Josh's first contact with the law; he has no prior convictions.
- Caroline is a black, 15-year-old youth, who lives with her mother and father. There is a documented history of Caroline suffering sexual abuse from a family member. One day, police found Caroline spray painting the walls on the inside of a house that was supposed

to be vacant. Caroline was charged with breaking and entering with vandalism. She was found guilty. This is Caroline’s first contact with the law; she has no prior convictions.

5. Please choose a punishment for the juvenile offender you read about

- Transfer to adult court
- Placement in juvenile detention facility
- Supervised probation
- Released to parents

On a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, please respond to the following statements.

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
The juvenile offender is responsible for his/her behavior.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The juvenile offender should be punished for his/her actions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The juvenile offender’s parents are somewhat responsible for his/her actions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The juvenile offender is to blame for what happened.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Juveniles from troubled backgrounds (for example, abusive families or violence-plagued neighborhoods) are less blameworthy than other juveniles who have committed the same crime.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Committing a crime with another individual puts less blame on an offender.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The age of the defendant should be considered when making a decision on sentencing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A juvenile offender’s childhood experiences should be considered when making a decision on sentencing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The sex of the offender should be considered when making a decision on sentencing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The juvenile offender committed the crime on purpose.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The juvenile offender knew that he/she was doing something illegal.

-
-
-
-
-

The juvenile offender did not really understand that he/she was committing a crime.

-
-
-
-
-