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Investigating Exoneration Patterns Among Juveniles

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A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Psychology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology,

concentration in Clinical Psychology

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by

Kristin Mahan

May 2025

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Keywords: exoneration, juveniles, wrongful conviction

## ABSTRACT

### Investigating Exoneration Patterns Among Juveniles

by

Kristin Mahan

Exoneration from crime has been studied among adults, but exoneration of juveniles (i.e., persons under age 18) has not been analyzed as a separate entity, despite distinct legal systems and developmental considerations. Wrongful conviction, while not always indicative of innocence, devastates lives of convicted individuals and their families, while increasing public mistrust and sometimes failing to convict truly guilty individuals. This devastation, as well as vulnerability to wrongful conviction, is significantly increased for youth who miss out on crucial developmental years, milestones, and opportunities.

In the current study, I examined differing and intersecting contributors (i.e., individual characteristics, crime characteristics, legal system processes) associated with juvenile exoneration. My sample, retrieved in August of 2023 from the National Registry of Exonerations (NRE, 2023b), included 293 juvenile exonerees. Interesting findings regarding sentence length emerged, with significant associations with age and race. Older exonerees and Black and other racially minoritized exonerees typically received lengthier sentences. Future research analyzing sentencing decisions is warranted to promote equitable treatment of all navigating legal systems. Similarly, Black exonerees were more likely to experience mistaken witness identification, which is in line with previous research. Contrary to prediction on false confessions, 17-year-old exonerees were more likely to falsely confess than younger counterparts, raising questions about what factors make youth more susceptible to falsely confess in real-world settings. Additionally,

interesting findings emerged for time before exoneration, with violent crimes tending to endure longer periods before exoneration than sexual and other non-violent crimes. Considerations related to exoneration and crime type are discussed. Geographic location was also analyzed, and US regions were significantly associated with time before exoneration, official misconduct, and false confessions. Interestingly, the Northeast and Midwest regions tended to be associated with more negative outcomes (i.e., longer time before exoneration, more official misconduct, more false confessions). Official misconduct was further analyzed, with significant relationships between crime type and witness tampering, crime type and interrogation misconduct, age and interrogation misconduct, crime type and prosecutorial misconduct, and age and prosecutorial misconduct. Discussion on these relationships with official misconduct are included, as well as implications for future research.

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## DEDICATION

I am honored to dedicate this dissertation to Anthony Ray Hinton, who I was lucky enough to hear speak about his experiences navigating exoneration in October 2023. Anthony was wrongfully convicted of capital murder (2 counts) and sentenced to death row in Alabama in 1987. Anthony then served 28 years of his sentence before finally being exonerated in 2015. Mr. Hinton's powerful story is just one of many that demonstrate errors within the legal system, and extreme resilience for those who are wrongfully convicted. Anthony faced extreme racism throughout his legal investigation, with many legal officials quoted saying that they knew he was not guilty of the crime, but that one of his "brothers" was guilty and Anthony needed to "take the rap." Upon release, Mr. Hinton filed a claim for nearly \$1.5 million to attempt to compensate for his time spent wrongfully convicted and has yet to receive any compensation from the state of Alabama.

Since being exonerated and released, Anthony Ray Hinton has gone on to share his story with others, including the writing of his memoir, *The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row*, and traveling the country to speak on the injustices he faced. Despite experiencing some of the worst treatment imaginable and wrongfully spending nearly three decades behind bars, Anthony continues to shine with his resilience, genuine care for others, and warm personality. I am lucky to have had the opportunity to listen to Mr. Hinton's heartbreaking and powerful story, and to read his shocking and influential memoir. Thank you, Anthony Ray Hinton, for continuing to share your story and for educating others on your unjust experience with the legal system. You are an inspiration to people everywhere.

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I would also like to thank my mentor, Jill Stinson, for all her guidance and support throughout the years. Jill has been a great mentor and has been crucial in my journey up to this point! I also want to thank my very influential current and past committee members, Aubrey Dueweke, Meredith Ginley, Matt Palmatier, and Alyson Chroust for their valuable feedback and professional encouragement in my time at ETSU. I wouldn't be where I am without all your help, support, and guidance over these years.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

Exoneration from a crime occurs when an individual who was convicted of a crime is later declared innocent of that crime, or otherwise absolved from legal consequences due to necessary case reconsideration (Gross et al., 2005; Mogavero et al., 2022). Though exoneration is not always synonymous with innocence (Mogavero et al., 2022), wrongful convictions still devastate the lives of innocent individuals and their loved ones, fail to sanction truly guilty individuals, and increase public mistrust of the judicial system (Gross & O'Brien, 2008; Norris & Mullinix, 2020). Though it is not possible to accurately measure the number of wrongful convictions (as they by nature are unobserved), it is estimated that they make up about .05-1% of all convictions in the United States (US), adding up to tens of thousands of cases (Gould & Leo, 2013; Gross & Shaffer, 2012; Gross et al., 2014; Jackson et al., 2022; Ramsey & Frank, 2007; Zalman et al., 2008).

Many wrongful convictions likely go undetected due to a lack of effort to reconsider the accuracy of cases post-conviction (Gross et al., 2014). Because the exoneration process is time-consuming and expensive, case review is often reserved for the most extreme sentences and crimes (Gross, 2018) such as murder, sexual assault, and child sexual abuse (Mogavero et al., 2022). Thus, as the perceived seriousness of crime and punishment increases, the effort to ensure accuracy increases (Gross et al., 2017). For instance, although capital punishment sentences occur in fewer than .01% of convictions in the US (Gross & O'Brien, 2008), about 12% of known exonerations from 1989 to 2012 involved a death sentence (Gross & Shaffer, 2012).

Though convictions may be infrequently re-evaluated, several known factors contribute to wrongful convictions. Existing research has identified mistaken witness identification, false accusations, official misconduct, inadequate legal defense, and false confessions as major

components involved in wrongful convictions (Gould, 2014; NRE, 2022; Scherr & Normile, 2022). False confessions are more likely when the accused believes that others (e.g., police, prosecutors, community members) assume they are guilty when accused as a suspect (Jackson et al., 2021). As research on exoneration and wrongful conviction has increased, community trust and confidence in the justice system has decreased (Norman, 2016), especially among racialized minority individuals and lower socioeconomic status (SES) communities (Guarino et al., 2015; Pennington & Farrell, 2019; Wines, 2014). Research specifically analyzing juvenile exoneration is surprisingly minimal and has the broad potential to identify discrepancies and biases in the justice system and inform future policy to prevent wrongful conviction of vulnerable and innocent youths.

Among the thousands who have been exonerated from crimes are hundreds of juveniles (i.e., persons under the age of 18). Juvenile justice systems were created and implemented on the premise that youth are vulnerable and require special protections based on important developmental differences (Goldstein et al., 2003; Oberlander et al., 2001). Though the court has consistently recognized these differences (Goodman et al., 1999; *In Re Gault*, 1967; *Roper v. Simmons*, 2005), juveniles are still significantly overrepresented in false confession cases, making up about 33-38% of known wrongful convictions (Drizin & Leo, 2004; Garrett, 2015). Interestingly, ample published research describes preferred youth interrogative and investigative strategies, such as requiring mandatory recording of youth interrogations (Leo, 2001; Leo & Drizin, 2010), providing youth an opportunity to consult with a trusted adult (e.g., parent, guardian; Farber, 2004) or attorney (Goldstein et al., 2018; Powell, 2016), and simplifying *Miranda* warnings (Rogers et al., 2012). However, it is not required in all states to notify caregivers when a child is taken into custody or during *Miranda* right waivers (Goldstein et al.,

2018), only a few US counties have begun using simplified *Miranda* warnings (Clarridge, 2017), and few states have enacted policies mandating that youth consult with an attorney before legal decision-making (Baker et al., 2023). This neglect of including developmental psychologists' recommendations has led to devastating outcomes associated with the wrongful conviction of youth. Researchers need to analyze exoneration patterns among juveniles, a group made uniquely vulnerable by their cognitive and socioemotional development.

The findings from this dissertation will help inform policy, practices, and future research within the juvenile justice system. Exonerated juveniles, a group violated by the justice system, experience significant distress and injustice during some of the most crucial years of development. Many of these youths missed out on years of education, years of potential income, and passing of life milestones (e.g., graduation, sibling events) because of their convictions. In many cases, these crimes did not occur, the youth did not commit the crime, or the conviction was impacted by legal system misconduct. These devastating outcomes need to be prevented in the future, and research into patterns among exoneration cases can amplify inconsistencies within the current justice system and procedures and inform future needed changes to these systems. When combining all exonerees included in this dissertation, 4,535 years were lost due to wrongful convictions.

In this dissertation, I further investigate patterns and relationships of various intersecting factors in cases of wrongful convictions of youth. Youth are especially vulnerable to wrongful conviction for a multitude of reasons, each of which will be reviewed here. It is crucial to analyze adult and juvenile exonerations separately given important developmental differences between adults and youths, and differences between adult and juvenile justice systems. Factors related to the alleged perpetrator can include age, race, and sex. Interrogations and investigations

are relevant in a large portion of youth wrongful convictions, including aspects such as false confessions, interrogation techniques, eyewitness misidentification, and developmental differences. Additionally, distinctions in alleged crime (e.g., sexual versus nonsexual, victim type) may also be relevant among exonerated youth. Finally, I analyze differences between location (i.e., geographic region) among exoneration cases.

## **Factors Associated with Alleged Perpetrator**

### *Age*

Youth exhibit developmental differences depending on their age and experiences that can make them especially vulnerable to false conviction. Overall, youth demonstrate increased impulsivity, heightened immediate reward sensitivity, inadequate risk perception, susceptibility to peer influence, willingness to comply with authority, and challenges appreciating long-term consequences (Cleary, 2017; Galván, 2013; Kassin, 2017; Owen-Kostelnik et al., 2006; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996). These differences can impact decision-making abilities in interrogation and legal contexts, further increasing the risk of wrongful conviction (Haney-Caron et al., 2018; Pimentel et al., 2015; Steinberg, 2009). Youth are generally more compliant than adults, which impacts their risk for suggestibility, self-incrimination, and false confessions (van Golde et al., 2023). This, combined with minimal legal understanding (van Golde et al., 2023), further increases the risk of wrongful conviction.

As internal and external circumstances differ between youth, so does their susceptibility to false confession. van Golde et al. (2023) reported that youth who had been detained described that their false confession or decision to plead guilty was related to coercive or high-pressure interview strategies and extended duration of interrogations. Generally, youth falsely confess at significantly higher rates than adults, with some inconsistent findings related to juvenile age.

Most have found that younger youth are at an increased risk for falsely confessing compared to older juveniles through studies of known wrongful convictions and exonerations (Drizin & Leo, 2004), self-reports of confession experiences (Viljoen et al., 2005), and lab-based studies involving community samples (Stewart et al., 2018). Gudjonsson et al. (2015) reported that though older individuals (i.e., 17-24) were more likely to have been interrogated, younger youth (i.e., 14-16) were twice as likely to deliver a false confession during interrogation. Relatedly, Haney-Caron et al. (2018) found that the youngest youth reported the greatest risk of falsely confessing compared to the oldest juveniles, and all juveniles experienced a higher risk than adults. Mogavero (2020) corroborated that juveniles experience an increased risk for false confession, but found that the risk of doing so decreased with age.

A significant difference associated with adolescence is the importance of peer relationships, peer influence, and time spent with peers (Brown, 2004; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Pimentel et al., 2015). Adolescents may have an increased desire to seek acceptance and support from peers due to the need to establish a sense of autonomy and belonging (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). With these needs comes an increased risk of falsely confessing or self-incrimination to avoid getting others into trouble or to protect others. Warr (1993) reported that older adolescents (i.e., 16-19) were twice as likely to lie to police to protect peers than younger youth (i.e., 11-15). Relatedly, adolescents are also more likely to take responsibility for a confederate's cheating behavior in lab-based scenarios (Pimentel et al., 2015). Peer presence during interrogation has been found to increase the likelihood of false confessions among adolescents (Malloy et al., 2014). Adolescents are also more likely to commit crimes in groups (Piquero et al., 2007), which has implications for falsely confessing for a peer. Motivations for falsely confessing to protect a peer include believing that a peer would have faced more severe



consequences than themselves due to factors such as the peer's age or criminal history (Malloy et al., 2014), and fear of social rejection upon reporting a peer's crime (Syvertsen et al. 2009). The chances of falsely confessing to protect a friend may vary based on severity of the crime as well (Loke et al., 2011).

### ***Race***

The criminal justice system demonstrates dramatic racial disparities within rates of arrest, incarceration, and exoneration (Gross et al., 2017; Howard, 2019; Kutateladze et al., 2014; Mogavero et al., 2022; Olney & Bonn, 2015; Scherr & Normile, 2022; Smith & Hattery, 2011; Sommers & Marotta, 2014; Taslitz, 2006). Black individuals make up approximately 13.6% of the US population (US Census Bureau, 2022), but nearly 33% of incarcerated individuals (Gramlich, 2019), and more than half of exonerated individuals (Innocence Project, 2018; National Registry of Exonerations, 2022) are Black, showing an extreme overrepresentation (Hinton et al., 2018; Faison et al., 2023). Race has been analyzed as a relevant factor in arrest and incarceration errors (Bedau & Radelet, 1987; Harmon, 2004; Huff et al., 1996; Scheck et al., 2000). Also, Black defendants, especially those with White victims, are more likely to be given a death sentence (Baldus et al., 1990; Liptak, 2003).

Race can influence, both intentionally and unintentionally, an individual's thoughts, perceptions, and inferences about others (Crosby et al., 1980; Hewstone et al., 1988; Katz & Braly, 1933; Marotta et al., 2019; McConahay & Hough, 1976). In the US, perceptions of racial differences are largely present and influential, leading to negative judgements about members of racialized minority groups and intensified reactions to their actions. Starting as early as primary and secondary school, race is implicated in making negative judgments about Black students' behaviors, deeming them more deserving of discipline and more extreme than the same actions

committed by White students (Ferguson, 2001; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). These reactions can be translated to the legal context, where Black individuals are strongly and automatically viewed as more dangerous, culpable, and deserving of punitive treatment (Correll et al., 2002; Devine, 1989; Eberhardt et al., 2004; Payne, 2001). Rattan et al. (2012) reported that their participants expressed greater support for severe sentencing and charging juveniles as adults, and believing the youths were more inherently culpable when the offender was Black compared to White.

Racial bias is also present prior to arrest, which puts minority individuals at greater risk for negative outcomes (Goff & Buchanan, 2020; Katzman & Kovera, 2023). Beck and Blumstein (2018) reported that approximately 70% to 75% of racial disparities among incarcerated individuals are directly related to bias at the pre-arrest stage. Racial profiling, or using race as a basis for suspicion of delinquency, is often cited (Beck & Blumstein, 2017; Katzman & Kovera, 2023) as a clear cause. For example, in daily life, Black individuals are at greater risk for receiving an official traffic violation (Pierson et al., 2020), are less likely to be provided a reason for traffic stops (Langton & Durose, 2013), and are more likely to experience excessive force during an encounter with law enforcement (Kramer & Remster, 2018). The existing biases and stereotypes that profile Black individuals as dangerous significantly increase the risk of lethal force (Correll et al., 2002; Correll et al., 2007). In fact, unarmed Black individuals are 3.5 times more likely to be shot by police than White individuals (Ross, 2015). Young Black men generally describe being treated as suspects by both police and community members regardless of current or past delinquent behavior (Brunson & Miller, 2006). Similarly, young Black women reported being stopped for curfew violations more frequently and expressed concerns about police sexual misconduct (Brunson & Miller, 2006). Black individuals, regardless of age, are at

greater risk for experiencing aggressive policing and police violence (Bass, 2001), and are burdened by an automatic presumption of guilt (Brunson & Miller, 2006). These experiences have created a significant divide among laypersons' perceptions of the justice system. Black individuals tend to hold less trust for all layers of the justice system (Newport, 2016; Pennington & Farrell, 2019; Tyler & Fagan, 2008), due to frequent injustices within the community and a widely recognized increased risk of unjust arrest, accusation, or interrogation, or having elements of criminal cases overlooked in favor of conviction.

While a great deal of racial profiling occurs prior to arrest, racial biases are still very prominent and impactful post-arrest in situations such as eyewitness identification and interactions that occur during early investigative steps (Kovera & Evelo, 2021). Eyewitness testimony is already regarded as somewhat unreliable, and this is exacerbated by theories such as the other-race effect, which states that individuals are less accurate when recognizing people of races different than their own (Meissner & Brigham, 2001). Katzman and Kovera (2023) reported that discrepant accuracy rates for identifying White versus Black faces are not enough to explain racial differences found among exonerated individuals. Kovera and Evelo (2021) posited that racial disparities present in exoneration data are heavily influenced by social interactions that influence early stages of criminal investigation. Systemic and implicit biases shape the ways law enforcement professionals treat and locate suspects and present evidence to potential witnesses. Relatedly, most crime occurs within race, and there is significant racial segregation in the US, further strengthening the theory that biases in misidentifications are not the sole cause of misidentification (Katzman & Kovera, 2023).

Generally, misconduct by multiple actors within the legal system (i.e., police, prosecutors) and of greater frequency is more common for Black individuals who have been

exonerated from non-sexual homicide and sexual offenses (Mogavero et al., 2022). Interestingly, race has not been found to be a significant influence in likelihood of falsely confessing, with White and Black individuals doing so at similar rates (12.4% and 13.3%, respectively; Mogavero, 2020). Importantly, while Black and White individuals may falsely confess at similar rates, these groups are still disproportionately falsely interrogated and arrested for crimes. Relating to the exoneration process, Black individuals also experience greater duration between time of wrongful conviction and time at release compared to White individuals (Scherr & Normile, 2022).

Post-exoneration, Black individuals continue to face negative stigma and repercussions. Howard (2019) reported that laypeople perceived Black exonerees to be more aggressive, less deserving of government assistance, and more likely to reoffend and be reincarcerated than White exonerees. While perceptions are certainly harmful on their own, they also shape reality. On average, Black exonerees receive approximately \$42,000 less in compensation post-exoneration than White exonerees (Balko, 2018). Interestingly, this same sample of laypeople viewed White exonerees as more mentally ill than their Black counterparts (Howard, 2019). The author further described how these findings are in line with recent media coverage and communications about individuals who commit mass shootings (Ruiz-Grossman, 2017), with Black and Brown individuals more likely to be labeled as ‘terrorists,’ while White mass shooters are considered ‘mentally ill.’

### *Sex*

Results are inconclusive related to associations between sex and false confession and interrogation tactics. Some have found that males are more likely to falsely confess (Gudjonsson et al., 2015), while others have found this true of females (Calicchia & Santostefano, 2004;

Gudjonsson et al., 2008; Steingrimsdottir et al., 2007), and others have found no differences (Gudjonsson et al., 2006; Klaver et al., 2008). When analyzing non-justice-involved youth, boys have been found more likely to provide a false confession (Gudjonsson et al., 2016). Teplin et al. (2002) argued that justice-involved girls are at greater risk for false confessions due to greater mental health needs and gender stereotypes. Haney-Caron et al. (2018) specifically noted that justice-involved girls were more likely to provide false confessions, perhaps associated with increased risk for suggestibility (Calicchia & Santostefano, 2004). It is possible that gender differences exist that underlie contributors to false confessions within justice-involved youth (Haney-Caron et al., 2018), and this should be further investigated.

Biases and differences also exist within patterns of arrest and exoneration related to gender. Overall, women and girls are significantly more likely to be arrested for crimes that never happened, also known as no-crime cases (Jackson et al., 2022), at three times the rate as males (Jackson & Gross, 2014). Alarming, in approximately 64% of cases involving a female exoneree, it has been found that no crime actually occurred (Bluhm Legal Clinic, 2015). Also, females are more likely to be wrongfully convicted for murdering a close individual (e.g., child, significant other) than male counterparts (Fox & Fridel, 2017; Jackson & Gross, 2014; Jackson et al., 2022; Kellermann & Mercy, 1992; Lewis & Sommervold, 2015). Females exonerated from no-crime cases, compared to other female exonerees, are more likely to have experienced use of false and misleading forensic evidence and inadequate legal defense (Jackson et al., 2022). It is also believed that systemic biases and judgments on how women are expected to behave can affect these convictions (Henry, 2020). For example, when a family member or loved one dies following an injury, accident, or health-related reason, and a woman is perceived to be unemotional, aggressive, or insensitive, she immediately can become a suspect (Walker, 2017).

Oftentimes, these cases lack DNA evidence due to already existing contamination at the crime scene because of relational closeness (Temares et al., 2022). In contrast, males are exonerated at significantly higher rates than females, which appears to be directly attributable to the accessibility of DNA as conclusive exonerating evidence for crimes that males are disproportionately arrested for, such as sexual assault (Lewis & Sommervold, 2015).

Many discrepancies between genders are often based on misperceptions of gender stereotypes, assumptions, and other biases related to intersectionality of identity characteristics. Traditionally, masculine and feminine gender roles have shaped opinions on how others ‘should’ behave. Masculine traits include dominance, decisiveness, and aggression, while traditionally feminine traits include emotionality, empathy, and dependence (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). As previously stated, when women do not adhere to traditionally feminine traits, they may be viewed and treated with suspicion (Jackson et al., 2022). Young men face more extreme police violence, potentially due to preconceived stereotypes about male dominance and aggression (Brunson & Miller, 2006). This can lead to systemic mistrust and an increased risk of escalated police interactions and wrongful convictions based on the preconceived guilt and stereotyping of young men, especially Black young men. Additionally, young women reported being more likely to be stopped by police at night, while young men reported being stopped at all times of the day, implying that young men face more interactions with police and opportunities for negative treatment, and potentially wrongful arrest (Brunson & Miller, 2006). When examining race and gender interactions among justice-involved youths, we see an intersectional risk factor of being a Black male, with the two factors working together to increase the individual’s perceived risk of engaging in violent and criminal behavior, and thus increasing likelihood of wrongful arrest (Quillian & Pager, 2001).

## **Factors Associated with Criminal Justice Processes**

### ***Interrogations and False Confessions***

Errors in conviction often occur during the interrogation process, as youth are particularly vulnerable to interrogation tactics, yet treated similarly to adults. Many law enforcement officials are trained in and utilize Reid training (Inbau et al., 2011) for both child and adult suspects. The Reid interrogation method involves using accusatory statements, interrupting denials, including false evidence, using feigned sympathy and understanding, presenting alternatives for the accused crime, encouraging recollection of the crime (even if hypothetical), and then scribing the statement into an official confession (Inbau et al., 2011). Many of these strategies, particularly ones involving accusatory tactics, are widely used and favored in the US (Miller et al., 2018). Researchers who have attended these trainings reported that no special considerations or instructions are provided for interrogating youth (Meyer & Reppucci, 2007). In fact, the manual specifically states that the same general standards apply for children and adults (Inbau et al., 2011) despite best practice recommendations from developmental psychologists (Buckingham, 2023). Interrogators have been found to use these techniques with juveniles as often as they do with adults (Cleary & Warner, 2016; Feld, 2013; Kostelnik & Reppucci, 2009; Meyer & Reppucci, 2007). Alternatively, the British experience utilizes investigative interviewing techniques rather than accusatorial methods and has increased the rate of true confessions without also increasing false confessions (Kassin, 2017).

False confessions are a major contributor to wrongful convictions, as they are quite common and very powerful during trial. Kassin and Gudjonsson (2004) reported that 42-55% of individuals who are interrogated in the United States eventually confess, whether the confession is true or not. It is estimated that approximately 16% of confessions in the US are false

confessions (Garrett, 2008). Youth are significantly overrepresented among the known groups of false confessors (Kassin, 2017). In a lab-based study, youth falsely confessed to cheating on a research task at a rate of 59% compared to adults, who did so at a rate of 39% (Pimentel et al., 2015). However, different considerations are relevant for justice-involved youth (Stewart et al., 2018). Justice involved youth are at increased risk for falsely confessing to a crime they did not commit for numerous reasons. Aspects such as power differentials, acquiescence to authority, and susceptibility to interrogation tactics (Billings et al., 2007; Malloy et al., 2014; Redlich et al., 2004), developmental differences and less understanding of their rights (Feld, 2006; Grisso, 1981; Goldstein et al., 2003; Kassin, 2017; Redlich et al., 2004; Rogers et al., 2014), peer pressure, protecting someone else, or hesitancy to involve caregivers, (Gudjonsson et al., 2008; Malloy et al., 2014; Redlich et al., 2010; Viljoen et al., 2005; Volbert et al., 2019), and increased suggestibility (Cassel et al., 1996; Ceci, 1994; Gudjonsson et al., 2016; Lee, 2004; McLachlan et al., 2011; Memon et al., 1996; Owen-Kostelnik et al., 2006; Singh & Gudjonsson, 1992) will all be further discussed in the following section. Approximately 6% of surveyed justice-involved youth reported providing a false confession to police (Viljoen et al., 2005) and 17% of juveniles incarcerated for serious offenses reported their confession was false (Malloy et al., 2014). Similarly, adolescents are up to two times as likely to falsely confess as young adults (Gudjonsson et al., 2015; Kassin et al., 2018; Redlich & Goodman, 2003) and three times as likely as adults (Gross & Shaffer, 2012). While confession experts agree that age is a risk factor for falsely confessing, there is strong doubt that jurors understand this, as the concept of falsely admitting wrongdoing is unfathomable to most (Grove & Kuckuka, 2020).

Protecting others or perceived pressure and power are frequently cited as additional components that impact false confessions among juveniles (Gudjonsson et al., 2008; Redlich et



al., 2010; Viljoen et al., 2005). When authority figures are present in interrogations of youth, unreliable and false reports increase (Ceci, 1994; Quas et al., 2000). For example, when children were questioned by either a police officer or a neutral interviewer, those questioned by police provided both fewer accurate statements and greater inaccurate statements (Tobey & Goodman, 1992). Even stereotypically rebellious and noncompliant adolescents demonstrate these patterns and comply with authority (Bugental et al., 2001; Grisso et al., 2003), even potentially against their own interests. Adolescents have been found especially responsive to negative feedback and are more likely than adults to change their answers following negative feedback from an authority figure (Gudjonsson, 2003; Richardson et al., 1995). Youth demonstrate heightened susceptibility to social desirability and impulsivity, while also experiencing decreased perception and appreciation of risk and potential consequences (Grisso et al., 2003; Steinberg & Scott, 2003). Additionally, youth may be less likely to inform potentially protective adults and caregivers due to caregiver disengagement (Steinberg, 2000) or fear of further punishment.

Additionally, police interviewers are often biased in favor of viewing behaviors as deceptive in hopes of obtaining a confession and closing a case (DePaulo et al., 2003; Masip et al., 2016) and tend to view suspects as guilty before interrogation (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004; Owen-Kostelnik, 2006). Investigators are trained to ask provocative questions and analyze the interviewee's body language and behaviors (e.g., delayed response, gaze aversion, postural changes) to identify supposed symptoms of lying (Inbau et al., 2001; Kassin, 2017), yet these behaviors are often not indicative of lying and are difficult to differentiate from other causes, like anxiety or fear. Police interrogators also report not recognizing developmental differences between youth and adults and assume that adolescents are equally competent (Meyer et al., 2006), despite ample evidence suggesting this is not the case (Bruck & Melnyk, 2004; Drizin &

Leo, 2004; Goldstein et al., 2003; Redlich & Goodman, 2003). Police officers are typically trusting of child victims (Perry & Wrightsman, 1991), yet believe youthful suspects are competent, dishonest, and deceptive (Kassin, 2005; Owen-Kostelnik, 2006).

In addition to concerns regarding interrogation techniques themselves, it is questionable how much youth suspects understand their civil rights during an interrogation. Following the rulings of *Kent v. U.S.* (1966) and *In Re Gault* (1967), in the US, all suspects, both adult and juvenile, are granted Miranda rights, which allow individuals the right to remain silent and the right to have an attorney present during interrogation and all court proceedings. At the time of the Miranda decision (*Miranda v. Arizona*, 1966), courts viewed coerced confessions as untrustworthy and believed the Miranda rights significantly protected individuals from coercion (Oberlander & Goldstein, 2001). For an interrogation to proceed, an individual must waive these rights, but must do so competently and voluntarily (Goldstein et al., 2003; Redlich et al., 2004). However, juveniles especially do not appear to be able to fully understand the importance or function of these rights (Feld, 2006; Grisso, 1981; Goldstein et al., 2003; Kassin, 2017; Redlich et al., 2004). Rogers et al. (2014) reported that adolescents could recall less than 40% of the Miranda warnings immediately after being read them. Additionally, younger adolescents are more likely to waive their rights, potentially due to not understanding their importance or function, or to comply with an authority figure, than older adolescents and adults (Goldstein et al., 2003; Redlich et al., 2004; van Golde et al., 2023).

Overall, approximately 80% of all suspects waive their Miranda rights and are at greater risk for coercive interrogation (Haney-Caron et al., 2018; Kassin et al., 2007), regardless of their potential true innocence. In fact, innocent individuals are more likely to waive their rights than truly guilty individuals (Kassin & Nowick, 2004; Kassin et al., 2010; Volbert et al., 2019). These

innocent individuals may feel as though they will appear guilty if they do not cooperate, may believe the truth will be revealed, or do not comprehend the threat posed by an interrogation (Guyll et al., 2013; Kassin, 2005; Kassin et al., 2010). Youth are again at a greater risk for mistakenly waiving their rights due to a lack of understanding, such as believing that innocent individuals do not need a lawyer and believing that the right to remain silent can be revoked at any time (Goldstein et al., 2003).

Increased suggestibility among youth is another major underlying factor for falsely confessing and experiencing wrongful conviction. Suggestibility involves one's memory of an event being influenced and potentially altered by external factors (Owen-Kostelnik et al., 2006). Generally, research has found that youths are more susceptible to suggestibility than adults, with a direct negative association with age (Cassel et al., 1996; Ceci, 1994; Gudjonsson et al., 2016; Lee, 2004; McLachlan et al., 2011; Memon et al., 1996; Owen-Kostelnik et al., 2006; Singh & Gudjonsson, 1992). Suggestive questioning is often used during interviews and can involve asking specific or forced-choice questions (Peterson & Biggs, 1997), using repeated or complex questions (Bruck et al., 2002), delaying questioning for long periods (Melnik & Bruck, 2004), emphasizing authority (Tobey & Goodman, 1992), and using cues, intimidation, and reinforcement (Carter et al., 1996; Garven et al., 2000; Gee & Pipe, 1995). Developmentally, youths have differing cognitive abilities related to both short- and long-term memory, making them more prone to make mistakes in the encoding, storing, and retrieval of memories (Brainerd et al., 2012; Poole & Lindsay, 1995). Especially related to legal terminology, children may struggle to effectively communicate and understand the full significance of an interrogation (Perry et al., 1995; Grisso, 1997; Grisso & Schwartz, 2000). Youth can also more easily be convinced that they did engage in a crime or behavior through suggestive and confrontational

interrogation tactics. These are referred to as internalized confessions, and the younger a child is, the more at risk they are to experience this (Ackil, 1998).

Confessions, whether false or true, are incredibly powerful in a courtroom and significantly influence judges, juries, and others involved in legal proceedings (Kassin, 2017). They are so influential because most people believe that they would never falsely admit to committing crime nor trust statements made directly against one's own self-interest (Kassin, 2017). Confessions are also typically detailed and may contain a narrative that feels too realistic to be false. In fact, mock jury research has shown that first-hand accounts are more incriminating than other forms of evidence, even when it makes logical sense to discount them (Drizin & Leo, 2004; Kassin, 2017). Decision-makers in general are more impacted by incriminating than exonerating evidence, and juries rely more heavily on existing evidence, like confessions, rather than the inability to secure evidence (Eerland & Rassin, 2012).

Even when evidence demonstrates that a confession was coerced or is likely false, jurors often still trust the veracity of the it (Appleby et al., 2013; Henkel, 2008; Kassin & Wrightsman, 1980; Wallace & Kassin, 2012). Despite this, the court system still expects that jurors can accurately detect and disregard coerced statements (*Arizona v. Fulminante*, 1991). Jurors also often consider evidence even when instructed to dismiss it (Kassin & Wrightsman, 1981). Although jury-eligible individuals recognize that coerced and false statements can occur, they still place high value on confessions and deem them as a true admission of guilt (Henkel et al., 2008). Potential jurors do, however, recognize and agree that interrogators using false evidence to elicit confessions (*Frazier v. Cupp*, 1969) increase the risk of falsely incriminating oneself (Mindthoff et al., 2018). Additionally, confessions impact the opinions and perceptions of witnesses, examiners, and attorneys, who will ultimately contribute or present evidence and do

so with their existing biases of guilt (Kassin, 2017). For example, police officers who fully believe a suspect is lying often struggle to consider alternatives (Meissner & Kassin, 2002). Jurors are more likely to interpret presented information in light of their own beliefs, experiences, and biases rather than completely objectively (Carlson & Russo, 2001).

Youth are more likely to falsely confess than adults (Chojnacki et al., 2008; Henkel et al., 2008). However, many jury-eligible individuals view age as a weak contributor to the risk of falsely confessing, and many do not see any increased risk for adolescents compared to younger children, who are perceived as being slightly at risk (Mindthoff et al., 2018). This leaves jurors likely to place heavy emphasis on adolescent confessions. Grove and Kuckuka (2020) reported that expert testimony on additional risks for juveniles are only minimally helpful in encouraging laypeople to consider age as a risk factor for false confessions. Mindthoff et al. (2018) reported that while nearly half of their sample believed juveniles should be able to have an adult caregiver in the room during interrogation, and more than half believed that adult interrogation methods should not be utilized for youths, over 40% also indicated that adolescent confessions elicited after caregiver presence was denied should still be admissible in court.

### ***Misconduct***

The National Registry of Exonerations (2023; definition 18) defined official misconduct as when “police, prosecutors, or other government officials significantly abused their authority or the judicial process in a manner that contributed to the exoneree’s conviction.” For law enforcement, the overarching goal of investigations is to elicit a confession (which inherently places interrogators and suspects on opposing sides), and often they are trained and encouraged to utilize many of the coercive methods described above (Inbau et al., 2001; Meyer et al., 2006). Many wrongful convictions are associated with police misconduct (Covey, 2013), but Mogavero

et al. (2022) noted that certain types of misconduct (e.g., violence, forensic evidence presentation) have decreased in recent years. Malloy et al. (2014) surveyed juveniles incarcerated for serious offenses and found that 81% reported police used deceptive tactics, 81% reported law enforcement used threats, 72% reported officers befriended them, and 59% reported that police used insults. Gross et al. (2020) indicated that police misconduct was present in 35% of exonerated cases, often involving witness tampering, interrogation misconduct, fabricating evidence, concealing mitigating evidence, and perjury. Three major ways that agents of law enforcement can engage in misconduct with juvenile suspects during interrogation are isolation, minimization, and confrontation or maximization.

In isolation, suspects are removed from familiar surroundings and denied access to known and comforting individuals, such as caregivers, in order to increase stress and desire to escape the situation (Owen-Kostelnik et al., 2006). Distress, paired with impulsive decision-making, further limit the youth's ability to consider consequences of their statements during interrogation. Other consequences of isolation such as fatigue and sleep deprivation can also negatively impact one's decision-making abilities (Harrison & Horne, 2000). Additionally, stress impacts judgment, limiting rational thought and decision-making abilities (Spear, 2000). Youth are further at increased risk due to being more susceptible to stress than adults (Furby & Beyth-Marom, 1992). Providing the interrogators with a confession is often presented as the only way to exit the stressful environment of the interrogation. Average interrogations last fewer than two hours, but the mean length of interrogations in a study investigating cases of false confessions was approximately 16 hours (Drizin & Leo, 2004). Isolating juvenile suspects without contact with caregivers or attorneys and depriving them the ability to leave the room could be considered police misconduct.

Minimization occurs when the interrogator attempts to provide moral justification for the alleged crime to make confessing appear more socially desirable (Owen-Kostelnik et al., 2006). Law enforcement agents will express empathy, emphasize the value of being honest, and appeal to the suspect's honor and self-interests (Feld, 2006). They may encourage suspects to confess and insist that confessing during interrogation will result in leniency in sentencing (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004). Youth often feel as though confessing is the only way to be able to go home (Drizin & Leo, 2004). Minimization techniques reportedly occur in about 17% of youth interrogations (Feld, 2013).

On the other hand, confrontation or maximization involves challenging interviewees with more confrontational methods such as expressing confidence in the suspect's guilt, interrupting denials of guilt, and presenting false evidence (Owen-Kostelnik et al., 2006). Presenting false evidence can drastically increase likelihood of offering and internalizing a false confession (Kassin, 2005; Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004; Stewart et al., 2018), especially for juveniles (Drizin & Leo, 2004; Redlich & Goodman, 2003). Maximization tactics occurred in approximately 69% of youth interrogations (Feld, 2013).

Additionally, both prosecutors and defense attorneys can engage in misconduct that results in wrongful conviction. Oftentimes, prosecutor misconduct is co-dependent on misconduct by agents of law enforcement (Trivedi & Van Cleve, 2020). Prosecutors have two roles: to prevent guilty individuals from going free and to prevent innocent defendants from conviction (*Berger v. United States*, 1935). The prosecution can work to keep innocent individuals from being convicted and sanctioned by ensuring that exculpatory evidence is presented (*Brady v. Maryland*, 1963). Prosecutors engaged in misconduct in approximately 30% of known exoneration cases (Gross et al., 2020), often by concealing exculpatory evidence,

engaging in trial misconduct, and tampering with witnesses. Interestingly, prosecutors were granted absolute immunity for such behavior in the case of *Imbler v. Pachtman* (1976) which determined that prosecutors cannot be sued for actions they take in their prosecutorial role, even if wrong or intentional (Chemerinsky, 2014). However, there is public support for prosecutors to be held liable for knowingly engaging in misconduct (Greenspan et al., 2022). Defense attorneys can also miss the opportunity to protect innocent clients by failing to investigate exculpatory evidence in favor of their client, putting minimal effort toward cross-examination, and not preparing for trial (Bernhard, 2001; Berry, 2003; Scherr & Normile, 2022).

### ***Eyewitness Misidentification***

Wrongful convictions due to mistaken eyewitness misidentification have occurred in about 27% of known exonerations (Mogavero et al., 2022). This type of error is most common in sexual assault cases (NRE, 2022). Eyewitness testimony is very impactful to juries (Loftus, 1984), especially when the witness is confident. Law enforcement can impact witness confidence and interfere with the evidence by providing feedback (Charman & Wells, 2012; Eisen et al., 2018). Though witness confidence may be high, eyewitness testimony is often inaccurate due to lessened ability to recall in heightened states of arousal either due to general adrenaline (Maclin et al., 2001) or the presence of a weapon (Loftus, 1979), significant time passed between seeing the suspect and the identification process (Chance & Goldstein, 1987), and explicit and implicit biases (Chance & Goldstein, 1996; Meissner & Brigham, 2001). Bias is particularly relevant among different racialized groups, explained within the own-race effect, other-race effect, cross-race effect, or own-race bias (Chance & Goldstein, 1996; Brigham & Malpass, 1985) which conclude individuals are less accurate when attempting to recognize a person from a different race than their own. Meissner and Brigham (2001) reported from their meta-analysis that facial



identifications within race are more likely to be accurate than those between different races. Systemic injustice is relevant here, with Black and other racially minoritized individuals mistakenly identified far more often than those who are White (e.g., Garrett, 2011; Gross et al., 2017). Promisingly, researchers have encouraged legal systems to be more stringent with their use of eyewitness testimony, especially when a Black suspect is identified (Doyle, 2001), and judges appear to be more cautious when examining cross-racial identifications than has been true in the past (Garrett, 2011).

### **Factors Associated with Specific Crimes**

Not all types of crime are equally likely to result in wrongful convictions. Sexual offenses tend to be perceived as more serious offenses and create more public fear and societal pressure to be resolved, especially when involving child victims (Fox, 2013). Interrogation environments for these crimes may be more stressful, with suspects being more fearful of severe consequences for not cooperating (Horgan et al., 2012). These interrogations are often longer than those for non-sexual offenses (Gross et al., 2017), and suspects may be more likely to succumb to interrogative techniques and falsely confess, particularly for sexually-related homicides (Mogavero et al., 2020).

There are also differences in rates of wrongful conviction when race and crime characteristics interact. Black individuals are significantly overrepresented and account for the greatest proportion of exonerations in all crime categories, except for child sexual abuse (Mogavero et al., 2022; NRE, 2022). In both sexual and non-sexual homicide cases, Black individuals experience significantly more official misconduct when compared to White exonerees (Mogavero et al., 2022). In sexual assault cases, Black individuals experience more cases of mistaken witness identification and official misconduct (Mogavero et al., 2022). In all,

Black individuals typically experience greater occurrences and severity of negative outcomes when analyzing discrepancies in crime type, except for child sexual abuse cases, where White individuals are more likely to be falsely convicted. Of note, these results portray patterns among all ages of alleged perpetrators, rather than solely juveniles, indicating a need for further investigation into these patterns among youth exonerees.

### **The Current Study**

While research on exonerated individuals has increased in recent years, studies specifically and intentionally analyzing the experience of juveniles who have been exonerated is extremely limited. In this dissertation, I analyzed the differing and intersecting contributors associated with juvenile exoneration. I investigated factors related to the alleged perpetrator, justice system processes, and crime characteristics, as described above. My primary research aim was to analyze patterns and associations among exonerated youth, as opposed to existing literature on some of these associations in adults. The following two research aims were further broken down and investigated: 1: Investigate relationships between personal characteristics of the alleged perpetrator, crime type, and legal outcomes; and 2: Investigate relationships between personal characteristics of the alleged perpetrator, crime type, and components of the legal process (i.e., interrogation, conviction, court procedures).

#### ***Research Aim 1***

Investigate relationships between personal characteristics of the alleged perpetrator, crime type, and legal outcomes.

- *Hypothesis 1a*: Length of sentence will vary by crime type, exoneree age, gender, and race.

- *Hypothesis 1b*: False confessions will be more prevalent among younger exonerees, exonerees who are Black and other people of color, and male exonerees.
- *Hypothesis 1c*: Differences in time before exoneration will emerge based on individual factors related to the alleged perpetrator (i.e., age, sex, and race), with more disadvantaged groups (i.e., Black and other people of color) experiencing longer times between conviction and eventual exoneration.
- *Hypothesis 1d*: False eyewitness identification will be more prevalent among Black exonerees and Other exonerees of color compared to White exonerees.
- *Hypothesis 1e*: Time before exoneration will vary by crime type (i.e., sexual, violent, other) and victim type (i.e., child victim, non-child victim).
- *Hypothesis 1f*: Differences will emerge among exoneration factors (i.e., time before exoneration, presence of eyewitness misidentification, presence of misconduct, false confessions, inadequate legal representation) based on geographic location (i.e., state)

### ***Research Aim 2***

Investigate relationships between personal characteristics of the alleged perpetrator, crime type, and components of the legal process (i.e., interrogation, conviction, court procedures).

- *Hypothesis 2a*: Frequency and type of official misconduct (i.e., witness tampering, interrogation misconduct, police misconduct, prosecutor misconduct) will vary by crime type and exoneree race, age, and gender.
- *Hypothesis 2b*: Those wrongfully convicted on a basis of inadequate legal representation will have a higher prevalence of false confessions than those without inadequate legal representation.

## Chapter 2. Method

### Participants

Data were retrieved from the National Registry of Exonerations (NRE, 2023b), which as of August 1, 2023, contained 3,349 exonerees. Of these, 293 cases involved a juvenile (i.e., under age 18) exoneree. Data were deidentified by the author to not include exoneree's first and last names. The cases provided by the NRE have been thoroughly reviewed, are considered accurate, and are frequently utilized in research projects (e.g., Mogavero et al., 2022). This project was determined to be not human subjects research from review by the ETSU IRB, as it involves publicly available archival data.

### Variables and Data Coding

Variables utilized from the NRE dataset included exoneree age, race, sex, state, presence of child victim, presence of a guilty plea, worst crime display (i.e., most serious listed crime exoneree was convicted of), sentence (categorically coded), year convicted, year exonerated, presence of DNA evidence, presence of false confession, mistaken witness identification, presence of false or misleading forensic evidence, inadequate legal defense, and presence of various types of misconduct (i.e., police officer misconduct, prosecutor misconduct, withholding exculpatory evidence, misconduct not in the form of withholding evidence, knowingly permitting perjury, witness tampering, misconduct in interrogation of exoneree, perjury by official, prosecutor lied in court.) See Table 1 for coding information for sentence. Missing data was not a concern, as only one case (0.3%) was missing a reported variable (i.e., presence of DNA). The remaining cases ( $n = 292$ ) were complete with all analyzed variables.

**Table 1***Sentence Coding*

Coded	Database Information
1	No sentence, probation, community service
2	Two years or fewer
3	Three to 10 years
4	10 to 20 years
5	20 years to a specified endpoint (e.g., 40 years, 52 years)
6	Anything that includes life
7	Death

Age ranged from 11 to 17 ( $M = 16.17$ ). Due to lack of normality in age distribution, age was coded categorically as 15 and under, 16, and 17, to make group sizes more equal. Race was coded to include White (1), Black (2), and Other (3), as the number of participants from other races (i.e., Asian, Native American, Hispanic) were too limited to be effectively utilized in this study. Sex was coded as either 1 (Male) or 2 (Female) as provided by the dataset. See Table 2 for demographic information. State was coded as 1 (Alabama) to 35 (Wisconsin) in alphabetical order by all states included, and then further coded based on geographic region. The remaining variables obtained from the NRE dataset were coded dichotomously as 0 (not present) or 1 (present). An additional variable was calculated to represent years from conviction to exoneration by subtracting the conviction year from the exoneration year. Independent variable descriptive statistics can be found in Table 3 and outcome variable descriptive statistics are provided in Table 4.

**Table 2***Participant Demographics*

Variable	Percent ( <i>n</i> )	Mean ( <i>SD</i> , range)
Age		16.17 (1.12, 11-17)
15 and under	20.48 (60)	
16	27.65 (81)	
17	51.88 (152)	
Race		
White	19.11 (56)	
Black	66.89 (196)	
Other	14.00 (41)	
Sex		
Male	94.20 (276)	
Female	5.80 (17)	

**Table 3***Independent Variable Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	Percent ( <i>n</i> )
Crime Type	
Sexual	15.4 (45)
Violent	67.6 (198)
Other	17.1 (50)
Child Victim	
No	71.3 (209)
Yes	28.0 (82)
Region	
Northeast	21.2 (62)
Midwest	36.2 (106)
South	31.4 (92)
West	11.3 (33)

**Table 4***Outcome Variable Descriptive Statistics*

Variables	Percent ( <i>n</i> )	Mean ( <i>SD</i> , range)
False Confession		
No	65.9 (193)	
Yes	34.1 (100)	
Mistaken Witness Identification		
No	71.0 (208)	
Yes	29.0 (85)	
Inadequate Legal Representation		
No	72.0 (211)	
Yes	28.0 (82)	
Official Misconduct		
No	28.3 (83)	
Yes	71.7 (210)	
Prosecutor Misconduct		
No	60.1 (176)	
Yes	39.9 (117)	
Police Misconduct		
No	43.3 (127)	
Yes	56.7 (166)	
Witness Tampering		
No	70.6 (207)	
Yes	29.4 (86)	
Presence of DNA in Exoneration		
No	76.5 (224)	
Yes	23.2 (68)	
Years Before Exoneration		15.48 (10.75, 0-58)

**Analytic Strategy**

Analyses were conducted in SPSS, version 27. The general study objective was to better understand factors and patterns relevant within juvenile exoneration cases. Specific analytic strategy for each hypothesis is discussed below.

*Hypothesis 1a:* Length of sentence will vary by crime type, exoneree age, gender, and race.

Exploratory multinomial logistic regression analyses were conducted using length of sentence as the outcome variable and numerous individual characteristics (i.e., age, gender, race) were used as independent variables. I controlled for worst crime display as this has clear implications with sentencing. Multicollinearity was not a concern among the independent variables. All other assumptions for multinomial logistic regression were met.

*Hypothesis 1b:* False confessions will be more prevalent among younger exonerees, exonerees who are Black and other people of color, and male exonerees.

A series of binomial logistic regressions were run to analyze these relationship. Presence of false confession was the outcome variable and sex, race, and age were independent variables. The continuous independent variable, age, did not meet assumptions of binomial logistic regression (i.e., Box-Tidwell test) and was transformed into a categorical variable (i.e., age 15 and younger, age 16, and age 17).

*Hypothesis 1c:* Differences in time before exoneration will emerge based on individual factors related to the alleged perpetrator (i.e., age, gender, and race), with more disadvantaged groups (i.e., Black and other people of color) experiencing longer times between conviction and eventual exoneration.

A series of linear regressions were conducted to analyze the relationships between time before exoneration (years) and individual characteristics, with time before exoneration as the outcome variable and age, sex, and race as the predictor variables. All assumptions for linear regression were met.

*Hypothesis 1d:* False eyewitness identification will be more prevalent among Black exonerees and Other exonerees of color compared to White exonerees.



A binomial logistic regression was run to analyze this relationship. Presence of false eyewitness identification was the outcome variable and sex, race, and age were independent variables. The continuous independent variable, age, did not meet assumptions of binomial logistic regression (i.e., Box-Tidwell test) and was transformed into a categorical variable (i.e., age 15 and younger, age 16, and age 17).

*Hypothesis 1e:* Time before exoneration will vary by crime type (i.e., sexual, violent, other) and victim type (i.e., child victim, non-child victim).

A linear regression was conducted to analyze the relationship between time before exoneration (years) and crime characteristics, with time before exoneration as the outcome variable crime type (i.e., sexual, violent, other) and victim type (i.e., child victim, non-child victim) as the predictor variables. All assumptions for linear regression were met.

*Hypothesis 1f:* Differences will emerge among exoneration factors (i.e., time before exoneration, presence of eyewitness misidentification, presence of misconduct, false confessions, inadequate legal representation) based on geographic location (i.e., state, region)

An ANOVA was run to analyze the relationships between geographic location and time before exoneration with time before exoneration as the outcome variable and geographic region as the predictor variable. A series of chi-square analyses were run with time before exoneration as the outcome variable. A series of chi-square analyses were run with presence of eyewitness misidentification, misconduct, false confession, and inadequate legal representation as the distinct outcome variables and geographic region as the predictor variable. Geographic region was analyzed based on US region (i.e., Northeast – 1, Midwest - 2, South - 3, West - 4).

*Hypothesis 2a:* Frequency and type of official misconduct (i.e., witness tampering, interrogation misconduct, police misconduct, prosecutor misconduct) will vary by crime type and exoneree race, age, and sex.

A series of binomial logistic regressions were run with presence of each type of official misconduct as the outcome variables. Crime type, race, age (categorical), and sex were utilized as independent variables.

*Hypothesis 2b:* Those wrongfully convicted on a basis of inadequate legal representation will have a higher prevalence of false confessions than those without inadequate legal representation.

A chi-square analysis was conducted to determine the presence of a relationship between inadequate legal representation and presence of a false confession for each exoneration case. All assumptions for chi-square analysis were met.

## Chapter 3. Results

### Hypothesis 1a

*Length of sentence will vary by crime type, and exoneree age, sex, and race.*

A series of multinomial logistic regressions were used to examine associations between exoneree age, sex, and race and length of sentence when controlling for worst crime display. The overall model was significant,  $\chi^2(12) = 86.835, p < .001$  and the main effects of race was significant,  $\chi^2(6) = 12.605, p = .05$ . Approximately 26.8% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variability in sentence length was explained by variability in race and worst crime display. Specifically, White exonerees were less likely to receive sentences up to life ( $p = .039$ ) and capital sentences ( $p = .048$ ) than Black and other racially identified exonerees.

When analyzing the impact of age and controlling for worst crime display, the overall model was significant,  $\chi^2(12) = 89.935, p < .001$  and the main effect of age was significant,  $\chi^2(6) = 15.704, p = .015$ . Approximately 27.6% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variability in sentence length was explained by variability in age and worst crime display. Exonerees who were 15 years old or younger more likely to receive lesser sentences than older exonerees (i.e., aged 16 or 17). Specifically, within the 15 and under category, 15.8% were given no sentence, probation, or community service, compared to 6.2% and 6.7% among 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds, respectively. Additionally, 36.7% of exonerees aged 15 and under were given sentences including life compared to 44.4% of 16-year-olds and 46.7% of 17-year-olds.

A multinomial logistic regression was utilized to examine associations between crime type (i.e., sexual, violent, other) and sentence length when controlling for worst crime display, and was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(12) = 145.606, p < .001$ . The main effect of crime type was also significant,  $\chi^2(6) = 71.375, p < .001$ . The model correctly classified 54.6% of cases, and

40.9% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variability in sentence length was explained by variability in crime type and worst crime display. Those who were sentenced for committing a violent or sexual crime were less likely to receive no sentence, probation, or community service ( $p < .001$ ) than those accused of committing an offense within the “other” category. Specifically, 46.0% of other crimes resulted in no sentence, probation, or community service compared to 4.4% of sexual crimes and 4.0% of violent crimes. Sentences including life were also significantly different between crime types ( $p < .001$ ), with individuals who were sentenced for a violent crime approximately 351 times more likely, and those who were sentenced for a sexual crime 69 times more likely, to receive a sentence length including life than those who committed other types of crimes. Notably, all sentences including death were for exonerees accused of committing violent crimes ( $n = 6$ ).

### **Hypothesis 1b**

*False confessions will be more prevalent among younger exonerees, exonerees who are Black and other people of color, and male exonerees.*

A binomial logistic regression was used to examine associations between exoneree age and false confessions and was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2) = 20.58, p < .001$ . The model correctly classified 69.3% of cases, and 9.4% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variability in false confession presence was explained by variability in age. Exonerees who were 17 years old were 4.2 times more likely to provide a false confession than the other age groups ( $p < .001$ ). Specifically, 33.3% of exonerees under 16 years old provided a false confession, compared to 25.0% of 16-year-old and 58.3% of 17-year-old exonerees. A binomial logistic regression was used to examine associations between exoneree race and false confessions and was not

statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2) = .838, p = .66$ , as was also true of a binomial logistic regression examining associations between exoneree sex and false confessions,  $\chi^2(1) = .388, p = .53$ .

When exoneree characteristics were analyzed together, the binomial logistic regression was significant in a way similar to when analyzing age alone,  $\chi^2(5) = 22.10, p < .001$ . The model correctly classified 69.3% of cases, and 10.0% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variability in sentence length was explained by variability among age, race, and sex.

### **Hypothesis 1c**

*Differences in time before exoneration will emerge based on individual factors related to the alleged perpetrator (i.e., age, sex, and race), with more disadvantaged groups (i.e., Black and other people of color) experiencing longer times between conviction and eventual exoneration.*

A linear regression was used to determine if exoneree sex was associated with years before exoneration and was significant ( $F(1, 291) = 5.730, p = .017$ ), with males waiting more years, on average, before exoneration than females ( $t = -2.394, p = .017$ ). Specifically, the mean number of years before exoneration for males was 15.85 compared to 9.47 for females. A linear regression was used to determine if exoneree age was associated with years before exoneration and was not significant ( $F(1, 291) = .954, p = .330$ ), as was also true for a linear regression used to determine if exoneree race was associated with years before exoneration ( $F(1, 291) = .915, p = .340$ ). When exoneree characteristics were analyzed together, the linear regression was not significant ( $F(3, 289) = 2.554, p = .056$ ).

### **Hypothesis 1d**

*Mistaken eyewitness identification will be more prevalent among Black exonerees and Other exonerees of color compared to White exonerees.*

A binomial logistic regression was used to examine the association of exoneree race on mistaken eyewitness identification and was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2) = 6.165, p = .046$ . The model correctly classified 71.0% of cases, and 3.0% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variability in mistaken eyewitness identification presence was explained by race. Black exonerees were 2.47 times more likely ( $p = .022$ ) to be mistakenly identified by an eyewitness than White exonerees. Specifically, 32.1% of Black exonerees were mistakenly identified compared to 16.1% of White exonerees. There was no statistically significant difference between the presence of mistaken witness identification between exonerees from Other racial groups and White exonerees ( $p = .074$ ).

### **Hypothesis 1e**

*Time before exoneration will vary by crime type (i.e., sexual, violent, other) and victim type (i.e., child victim, non-child victim).*

A linear regression was utilized to determine if crime type was associated with years before exoneration. This model was statistically significant, ( $F(2, 290) = 19.038, p < .001$ ). Crime type was a significant predictor in the model with an accused sexual crime ( $t = -2.949, p = .003$ ) and other types of crime (i.e., neither violent nor sexual;  $t = -5.889, p < .001$ ) associated with fewer years before exoneration compared to violent crimes. Specifically, the mean years before exoneration for violent crimes was 17.85 years, compared to 12.91 years for sexual crimes and 8.40 years for other crimes.

A linear regression was utilized to determine if victim type (i.e., child victim or non-child victim) was associated with years before exoneration. This model was not statistically significant, ( $F(1, 291) = .100, p = .752$ ).

## Hypothesis 1f

*Differences will emerge among exoneration factors (i.e., time before exoneration, presence of eyewitness misidentification, presence of misconduct, false confessions, inadequate legal representation) based on geographic location (i.e., region). Dummy variables were created for the geographic regions.*

An ANOVA was conducted to investigate potential relationships between geographic region and years before exoneration and was statistically significant ( $F(3, 289) = 7.268, p < .001$ ) between at least two groups. Tukey's HSD Test was used to further investigate these relationships and indicated that the time before exoneration was longer in the Northeast compared to both the South ( $p = .007$ ) and the West ( $p < .001$ ), and longer in the Midwest compared to the West ( $p = .021$ ). Specifically, the time before exoneration in the Northeast was approximately 5.54 more years than exonerations in the South and 9.99 more years than exonerations in the West, while exonerations in the Midwest took approximately 6.02 more years than those in the West. The mean number of years before exoneration was 19.77 for the Northeast, 15.81 for the Midwest, 14.24 for the South, and 9.79 for the West.

A chi-square analysis was used to examine associations between exoneree geographic location and *mistaken eyewitness identification* and was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2(3) = 2.330, p = .507$ . A chi-square analysis examining associations between exoneree geographic location and *official misconduct* was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(3) = 20.463, p < .001$ .

Approximately 82.1% of exoneration cases in the Midwest and 80.6% of cases in the Northeast included official misconduct, compared to 71.7% of cases in the South and 66.7% of cases in the West. A chi-square analysis used to examine associations between exoneree geographic location and presence of a *false confession* was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(3) = 10.167, p = .017$ .

Approximately 41.9% of exoneration cases in the Northeast and 41.5% of cases in the Midwest included a false confession, compared to 27.3% of cases in the West and 22.8% of cases in the South. A chi-square analysis examining associations between exoneree geographic location and *inadequate legal representation* was not statistically significant,  $\chi^{2(3)} = 6.104, p = .107$ .

## **Hypothesis 2a**

*Frequency and type of official misconduct (i.e., witness tampering, interrogation misconduct, police misconduct, prosecutor misconduct) will vary by crime type and exoneree race, age, and sex.*

### ***Witness Tampering***

A binomial logistic regression was used to examine the associations between crime type and witness tampering and was statistically significant,  $\chi^{2(2)} = 22.968, p < .001$ . The model correctly classified 70.6% of cases, and 10.7% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variability in witness tampering was explained by variability among crime types. Exonerees with an alleged violent crime were 2.76 times more likely ( $p = .015$ ) to experience witness tampering compared to exonerees with an alleged sexual crime. Exoneration cases with alleged violent crimes evidenced witness tampering 37.4% of the time, compared to 17.8% for sexual crimes and 8.0% for other crimes. A binomial logistic regression examining the associations between exoneree demographics (i.e., race, sex, age) and witness tampering was not statistically significant,  $\chi^{2(5)} = 2.648, p = .754$ .

### ***Interrogation Misconduct***

A binomial logistic regression was used to examine the associations between crime type and interrogation misconduct and was statistically significant,  $\chi^{2(2)} = 9.019, p = .011$ . The model correctly classified 80.2% of cases, and 4.8% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variability in interrogation



misconduct was explained by variability among crime types. Specifically, 24.2% of exoneration cases for violent crimes involved interrogation misconduct, compared to 13.3% for sexual crimes and 8.0% for other crimes. A binomial logistic regression used to examine the associations between exoneree age and interrogation misconduct was statistically significant,  $\chi^{2(2)} = 12.432$ ,  $p = .002$ . The model correctly classified 80.2% of cases, and 6.6% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variability in interrogation misconduct was explained by variability in age. Exonerees aged 17 were 3.42 times more likely to have interrogation misconduct in their case compared to those 15-years-old and younger ( $p < .001$ ). Additionally, 36.7% of exoneration cases with 17-year-old exonerees had interrogation misconduct compared to 17.3% for 16-year-old exonerees and 4.5% for exonerees 15 years old and younger. Binomial logistic regressions for associations between exoneree race and interrogation misconduct,  $\chi^{2(2)} = .615$ ,  $p = .735$ , and between exoneree sex and interrogation misconduct,  $\chi^{2(2)} = .956$ ,  $p = .328$ , were not statistically significant.

### ***Police Misconduct***

A binomial logistic regression examined associations between crime type and police misconduct and was not statistically significant,  $\chi^{2(1)} = .746$ ,  $p = .388$ . This was also true of a series of binomial logistic regressions examining the associations between exoneree age, sex, and race and police misconduct (age:  $\chi^{2(2)} = 1.558$ ,  $p = .459$ ; sex:  $\chi^{2(1)} = .485$ ,  $p = .486$ ; race:  $\chi^{2(2)} = 2.105$ ,  $p = .349$ ).

### ***Prosecutorial Misconduct***

A series of binomial logistic regression analyses examined associations between exoneree demographics (i.e., age, race, sex) and prosecutorial misconduct. Age was significantly associated with the presence of prosecutorial misconduct,  $\chi^{2(2)} = 15.934$ ,  $p < .001$ . The model

correctly classified 60.8% of cases, and 7.2% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variability in prosecutorial misconduct was explained by variability in exoneree age. Exonerees aged 15 and younger were more likely to experience prosecutorial misconduct compared to those aged 16 or 17 ( $p < .001$ ). Specifically, 49.3% of exonerees aged 15 and younger experienced prosecutorial misconduct compared to 30.9% of 16-year-olds and 25.0% of 17-year-olds. Race and sex were not significantly associated with prosecutorial misconduct (race:  $\chi^2(2) = 3.594, p = .166$ ; sex:  $\chi^2(1) = .164, p = .685$ ).

A binomial logistic regression examining associations between crime type and prosecutor misconduct was statistically significant,  $\chi^2(2) = 35.451, p < .001$ . The model correctly classified 61.4% of cases, and 15.4% (Nagelkerke  $R^2$ ) of the variability in prosecutorial misconduct was explained by variability in crime type. Those accused of violent crimes were 3.64 times more likely to have prosecutorial misconduct in their case compared to sexual crimes. Additionally, 51.0% of cases involving violent crimes included prosecutorial misconduct compared to 22.2% of sexual crimes and 12.0% of other crimes.

### **Hypothesis 2b**

*Those exonerated based on inadequate legal representation will have a higher prevalence of false confessions than those without inadequate legal representation.*

A chi-square analysis was performed to examine the relationship between inadequate legal defense and false confessions. No significant relationship between these variables was detected,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.705, p = .054$ .

## Chapter 4. Discussion

### Sentence Length and Individual Characteristics

When examining the individual characteristics of age, sex, and race and sentence length while controlling for seriousness of crime, both age and race were significantly associated with sentence length among juvenile exonerees. In line with previous research (e.g., Doerner & Demuth, 2010; King & Johnson, 2016; Steffensmeier & Dumuth, 2000), exonerees who were Black and other minoritized races were more likely to receive harsher sentences, even when controlling for crime type. Almost half (48%) of the life sentences within the sample were given to Black exonerees. Notably, Black and White exonerees were nearly equal regarding most serious crimes committed, with 60.7% of White exonerees and 62.8% of Black exonerees convicted for murder charges, and 14.3% of White exonerees and 10.7% of Black exonerees convicted for child sexual abuse, two of the charges most likely to receive lengthy sentences (Hamilton, 2016; US Sentencing Commission, 2014). These results further support evidence of biased sentencing within the criminal legal system, where minoritized individuals face harsher or extreme sentencing than White individuals.

Age was also significantly associated with sentence length when controlling for most serious crime. Specifically, younger exonerees were more likely to receive lesser sentences than older exonerees. Notably, 68.3% of exonerees aged 15 and younger were convicted for murder charges, compared to 59.3% of 16-year-olds and 56.6% of 17-year-olds. This demonstrates the impact of age on sentencing decisions, as murder charges typically receive the lengthiest sentences. It is possible that the legal system views younger youths as more capable of reform, or less culpable and therefore more deserving of leniency, and therefore provides less punitive sanctions. If officials involved in the legal system view 16- and 17-year-olds more similarly to

adults, they may be more likely to try them in an adult court and impose sentences more like those in the traditional judicial system, while viewing the teenagers as less likely to reform or culpable at a more adult level of responsibility.

### **Sentence Length and Crime Type**

Crime type (i.e., violent, sexual, other) was significantly associated with sentence length. Specifically, non-violent and non-sexual crimes were more likely to receive lesser sentence lengths than violent and sexual crimes. Additionally, exonerees convicted of violent and sexual crimes were more likely to receive sentences including life. This is consistent with patterns of judicial decision-making and typical public opinion, as crime severity and legal factors have been found to be the most relevant in sentencing decisions (Cassidy & Gibbs, 2018; Kramer & Ulmer, 2009; Ulmer & Johnson, 2004). Previous research indicates that the public is generally not in favor of life sentences for juveniles except for the most violent crimes, such as murder (Greene & Evelo, 2013). The mentality of serving “adult time for an adult crime” has also been explored and indicates that the public favors longer sentencing for crimes viewed as more heinous, often including violent or sexual acts (Greene & Evelo, 2013; Schaefer & Uggen, 2016).

Notably, approximately 78% of the exonerees examined in my study who received sentences including life or death were convicted before 2000, with about 67% of those occurring in the “get tough” era of the 1980s and 1990s (Schaefer & Uggen, 2016), where the Zeitgeist of criminal punitiveness may have influenced sentencing at this time. Additionally, all death sentences ( $n = 6$ ) were given for accused violent crimes, specifically murder, which is also in line with previous research which demonstrates that murder cases receive the harshest sentences (Greene & Evelo, 2013). Reform of capital punishment for juveniles has since occurred with the

US Supreme Court decision in *Roper v. Simmons* (2005), ruling capital punishment for juveniles unconstitutional and in violation of 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment protections against cruel and unusual punishment. However, the US remains the only country that still permits juveniles to be sentenced to life when the youth is determined incapable of rehabilitation (Rovner, 2023).

### **False Confessions and Individual Characteristics**

I hypothesized that younger exonerees would be more likely to provide false confessions; however, 17-year-old exonerees were 4.2 times more likely to be exonerated with false confessions than younger individuals. Some have determined that older adolescents are more likely to lie to police or falsely confess than younger youth (Warr, 1993), while others have found minimal or no differences in likelihood of false confessions among youth (Pimentel et al., 2015). In contrast, others have found that younger youth were more likely than older youth to falsely confess, though this was true of confessions in the context of experimental lab studies and not actual law enforcement interrogations for real cases (Redlich & Goodman, 2003). Results from the current dissertation study add to the literature and indicate that especially within legal situations, older adolescents may be more likely to provide a false confession than their younger counterparts. Notably, all cases that involved interrogation misconduct resulted in a false confession ( $n = 58$ ), highlighting the importance of establishing and maintaining interrogation guidelines within the juvenile legal system to minimize false confessions. It is crucial to determine factors that increase likelihood of false confessions among juveniles, specifically to explore effects of interrogation misconduct versus internal motivations such as peer pressure, reciprocity, and desire to protect others. Further research within this area is imperative, especially as over one third of the exonerated youths in this dataset provided false confessions.

I also hypothesized that male and racially minoritized exonerees would be more likely to provide false confessions, but results were not statistically significant. Additionally, sex and race were not significantly associated with the presence of interrogation misconduct. When analyzing age, sex, and race together, age appears to drive most of the relationship between individual characteristics and false confessions. Previous research has indicated that males were more susceptible to false confession than females (Gudjonsson et al., 2015), but I did not find this in the current sample. Notably, only 17 of the participants in the available database were females, as compared to 276 males, which likely hindered my ability to determine significant relationships for sex. Surprisingly, race was not significantly associated with false confession likelihood among juvenile exonerees, contrary to similar literature that has suggested racially minoritized adults are at a greater likelihood to falsely confess (Redlich et al., 2010) and that Black youth are overrepresented when examining false confessions (Gross et al., 2005). In this study, Black youth represent approximately 2/3 of the whole sample, and a similar percentage (65%) of those who provided a false confession, further indicating that Black exonerees were not more susceptible to falsely confess than youths of other races. As previously discussed, the significant overrepresentation of Black youth in the dataset is still crucial to consider, as more Black youth were susceptible to false confession than other races. However, it is possible that among juveniles, age plays such a large role that it minimizes the effects of race. Interestingly, Najdowski (2011) posited that physiological aspects of stereotype threat (e.g., avoidance of eye contact, fidgeting, and laughing or coughing) may appear to be indicators of lying trained within the Reid technique. Aspects associated with the elicitation of a false confession were not available in this dataset and are intriguing topics for future research. While previous research has not investigated race and false confessions among juveniles, this work is imperative and should

include age as a predictor to determine if age truly is the most influential variable in this relationship and whether racial variations exist among different age categorizations.

### **Time Before Exoneration and Individual Characteristics**

I predicted that all available demographic variables (i.e., age, race, sex) would be associated with years before exoneration. However, only sex emerged as a significant predictor, with males typically being exonerated after a greater number of years than females, on average, which is consistent with previous literature (Braden, 2021). Braden (2021) explained this phenomenon of stereotyping based on sex, with prominent beliefs that females are less capable of committing crimes and thus viewed to be less deserving of punishment, while males are viewed as more dangerous. It is possible that these stereotypes carry into perceptions of juveniles, with society viewing girls as less likely to be guilty of crime than boys. This may lead to earlier considerations of innocence or wrongful conviction for girls, as well as swifter actions to exonerate them when questions regarding conviction arise.

I predicted that racially minoritized groups would endure longer wait times before exoneration due to systemic issues within the legal system (Davis, 2003; Gross et al., 2017; Rizer, 2003). However, neither race nor age were significantly associated with years elapsed before exoneration. Previous research has found that racially minoritized exonerees tend to serve more of their sentence than White exonerees (Itskovich et al., 2023; NRE, 2018; Olney & Bonn, 2014; Rafail & Mahoney, 2019). It is possible that more resources are available for juveniles to aid in post-conviction counsel, which could eliminate race effects among this group. Due to racial discrepancies in the dataset, Black youth still lost more years due to wrongful conviction than White youth due to overrepresentation and being involved in the legal system more frequently.

Age discrepancies among juveniles as they relate to time before exoneration have not previously been examined in the literature, but Gould and Leo (2015) reported that younger exonerees in general face longer times before exoneration due to lack of understanding of the legal system and less knowledge on securing resources post-conviction. In the current study, I was unable to determine whether exonerees were processed through juvenile or adult court systems, which may substantially influence judicial proceedings and timelines. Additionally, age data available for this study were not normally distributed, and ages were thus categorized as 17-years-old, 16-years-old, and 15-years-old and younger to create more equal groups. It is possible that juveniles are more homogenous than adults in their knowledge of navigating the legal system and the available resources post-conviction. Youth may have more resources, such as the Department of Children's Services, that offer assistance and aid in these circumstances, and more individuals who are invested in the youth's wellbeing (e.g., teachers, parents, coaches, relatives), potentially facilitating the exoneration process.

### **Time Before Exoneration and Crime Characteristics**

I hypothesized that time before exoneration would vary by crime type (i.e., sexual, violent, other) and victim type (i.e., child victim, non-child victim), and this was partially supported. Specifically, exonerees with alleged violent crimes typically endured longer periods of time before exoneration than exonerees with alleged sexual or other non-violent crimes. Those convicted for violent crimes were exonerated, on average, after about 18 years, while those convicted of sexual and other non-violent crimes were exonerated after approximately 13 and eight years, respectively. Previous research has indicated that crimes perceived to be more violent and serious, such as murder, are more likely to attract attention and resources potentially utilized for exoneration (Gross, 2013), but oftentimes the method of exoneration (e.g., DNA



testing, identification of true perpetrator) is very complex (Gould, 2015). DNA testing has been impactful in expediting the exoneration process (Zalman, 2010), which could help explain the discrepancy between the time before exoneration for violent and sexual crimes, with sexual crimes often involving a DNA component. While most of both murder and rape cases may involve biological evidence (Gould & Leo, 2015; Gross & Shaffer, 2012; Gross, 2013), rape cases are much more likely to be overturned by means of DNA evidence (Gould & Leo, 2015). There is minimal research on bases of exoneration for nonviolent and nonsexual crimes, and further research analyzing the timelines and means of exoneration for these cases is warranted.

Whether or not the victim of the alleged crime was a child was not significantly associated with length of time before exoneration. Gould and Leo (2015) reported a small association between the defendant and victim relationship and time to exoneration but did not expand on the nature of this association. They reported that the most influential factors in time before exoneration included geographical location (i.e., being in a politically conservative state), younger age, exoneration by means of DNA, and innocence organization involvement, implying that specific factors related to the alleged crime may not be as relevant in determining time before exoneration. This relationship has also never been studied within cases involving juvenile defendants, where opinions and perceptions may differ between alleged juvenile perpetrators of crimes involving child victims compared to alleged adult perpetrators of these same crimes. As previously stated, cases in this study were also not differentiated based on whether they were tried in the juvenile or adult courts, which could also affect findings. Future researchers should investigate differing opinions and practices within juvenile and adult courts regarding alleged crimes involving child victims.

## **Mistaken Witness Identification and Race**

My hypothesis that Black exonerees and other exonerees of color would experience mistaken witness identification more frequently than White exonerees was partially supported, with significant results emerging for Black exonerees, but not other exonerees of color, which aligns with previous research (Scheck et al., 2000). While own-race bias, or the finding that individuals are more accurate in identifying someone of their own race, has previously been cited as the leading reason for eyewitness misidentification (Meissner & Brigham, 2001; Wells & Olson, 2001), scholars have begun exploring systemic issues related to this error. Katzman and Kovera (2023) reported that systemic bias in the form of evidence provided in efforts to facilitate eyewitness identification is likely more responsible for these errors. They posited that law enforcement officers knowingly or unknowingly provide more evidence and treat accused Black individuals as more guilty than White individuals, increasing the base rate at which Black individuals are subjected to eyewitness identification. Specifically, Katzman and Kovera (2023) described how implicit racial biases, coupled with excessive discretionary practices by law enforcement officials, increases the likelihood that cases involving Black alleged perpetrators are subjected to identification procedures during investigation. In other words, legal officials tend to accuse more Black individuals of committing crimes and utilize tools such as lineups to determine guilt, increasing the potential level of incorrect eyewitness identifications among this group. Systemic issues and the impact of law enforcement training are crucial areas of research to aid in the prevention of mistaken eyewitness identification, especially for racially minoritized groups.

## **Exoneration and Geographic Location**

### ***Time Before Exoneration***

Exploratory analyses were conducted to analyze discrepancies in years before exoneration between geographic regions in the United States (i.e., Northeast, Midwest, West, South) and produced significant findings. Analyses revealed that juvenile exonerees in the Northeast experienced longer wait times before exoneration compared to the other regions, approaching almost 20 years, on average. Additionally, exonerees in the West were exonerated in the shortest time frame, which was fewer than 10 years, on average. Region has not been explored in exoneration literature previously. Interestingly, scholars have found that exoneration typically take longer in more politically conservative states (Gould & Leo, 2015), which contrasts with my findings here. The Northeast tends to overall be the least politically conservative of the four US regions (Religious Landscape Study, 2022). It is also possible that there is less aid, such as Innocence Project involvement, in the Northeast, lengthening time before exoneration. Additionally, within our dataset, the Northeast had the highest percentage of murder exoneration (79%) compared to the Midwest (59.4%), South (52.2%), and West (45.5%), adding support for the theory that cases were more severe, and even held to higher scrutiny in the exoneration process, in the Northeast. Relatedly, murder cases, in general, receive much more attention and review than cases with less serious consequences (Gross et al., 2005), helping explain why these cases are heavily represented in exoneration literature.

### ***Eyewitness Misidentification***

There were no significant differences related to the presence of eyewitness misidentification and geographic region. It is possible that analyzing by national region contains too diverse a sample to elicit significant differences. Significant discrepancies would potentially

emerge if analyzing based on more discrete components, such as rurality, population density, and within cities and towns versus regionally. Additionally, there are community-level factors such as socioeconomic status, political orientation, and education quality that impact both the makeup of the community population and potential susceptibility to eyewitness misidentification that were not available to analyze in the current study. Significant results related to these community-level factors and eyewitness misidentification would aid in policy change and law enforcement training to identify geographic locations that report greater occurrences of these errors.

### ***Official Misconduct***

In support of my hypothesis, differences emerged among US regions regarding the presence of official misconduct, with cases in the Midwest and Northeast exhibiting official misconduct more frequently than in the South and West. Social disorganization theory may help explain differences between level of misconduct among geographic regions. Social disorganization can generally increase potential for official misconduct due to residents not having access to necessary supports to disrupt malpractice and increased levels of law enforcement and citizen conflict (Kane, 2002). Disorganization in the form of publicized police corruption in New York (e.g., Levitt, 2010) has been associated with damaged relationships between law enforcement and local citizens (Rice & Piquero, 2005; Solis et al., 2009; Tyler, 2005). Over half (54.8%) of the exoneration cases representing the Northeast region occurred in New York, emphasizing the importance of further examining social disorganization and corruption within this state. Additionally, police and political corruption in Chicago has been well-documented (e.g., Eig, 2010; Haller, 1976; Lombardo, 2012) and creates social disorganization while impacting community relations among the public and law enforcement officers (Hagan et al., 2005; Skogan & Hartnett, 1999). In the current sample, Chicago is

overrepresented among Midwestern exoneration cases (61.3%). Continuing to research relationships between law enforcement officials and citizens, especially within the regions where official misconduct is more prominent, is imperative to preventing wrongful convictions and exonerations.

### ***False Confessions***

Analyses revealed that there were significant associations between geographic region and the presence of false confessions. Specifically, false confessions were more present in the Northeast and Midwest compared to the South and West. As analyses in this project have revealed, official misconduct is heavily associated with false confessions. Similar findings are presented here where both official misconduct and the presence of false confessions are more prevalent in both the Northeast and Midwest regions, which is notable to continue examining. As previously discussed, New York and Chicago are overrepresented in this sample, which is in line with previous research identifying more police and prosecutorial corruption in these areas (Drizin & Colgan, 2001). Historical corruption in Chicago, especially related to interrogations and false confessions, led to a push for reform, including mandated videotaping of homicide and sexual assault interrogations (Drizin & Colgan, 2001), which was enacted in Chicago in 2005. Approximately 75% ( $n = 49$ ) of exonerees in Illinois were convicted prior to 2005, making it challenging to analyze the potential positive impact of this reform. New York later passed a similar reform in 2018 (Innocence Project, 2018). Future research should investigate the effectiveness of these reforms to determine if they have had positive effects on the presence of interrogation misconduct and false confessions.

### ***Inadequate Legal Representation***

Results indicated that there was no significant association between geographic region and inadequate legal representation. This implies that although procedural components appear to have regional discrepancies, the quality of legal representation is not impacted by geographical region, or at least, not to the extent that it might result in exoneration.

### **Official Misconduct, Crime Type, and Individual Characteristics**

#### ***Witness Tampering***

Significant associations were found between crime type (i.e., violent, sexual, other) and witness tampering. Exonerees convicted for a violent crime were more likely to experience witness tampering than exonerees who were convicted of sexual or other non-violent crimes. Jaffe (2017) discussed the multifaceted tasks for prosecutors in complex and violent crime cases. They discussed how in the management of these cases, unique problems arise associated with maintaining contact with witnesses and preserving their willingness to participate. As a result, prosecutors may find themselves balancing social and occupational expectations to finalize convictions with the complicated task of keeping witnesses engaged, potentially resulting in unethical actions to obtain convictions, such as witness tampering. These findings further suggest that violent crimes are associated with increased involvedness and room for error. Contrary to what I found, Gross et al. (2020) reported that witness tampering was slightly more common in child sexual abuse exonerations compared to murder. Future research is needed to understand the differences between youth-on-youth alleged crimes compared to when there is a larger age discrepancy between defendant and victim, as this likely influences an official's likelihood to knowingly or unknowingly engage in misconduct.

Differences were not observed related to witness tampering and exoneree demographics (i.e., age, sex, race). This suggests that legal system officials may not be overtly demonstrating character-based biases toward juveniles as has been observed within the adult legal system (Gross et al., 2017; Rizer, 2003). Contrary to current findings, previous exoneration research has indicated that witness tampering occurred almost twice as often in cases involving Black murder exonerees compared to cases involving White murder exonerees (Gross et al., 2017). My current results suggest that at least within juvenile cases, witness tampering did not occur more frequently in investigations with racially minoritized defendants.

However, the overrepresentation of minoritized youth in the exoneration sample cannot go unnoticed, and biased legal proceedings are likely still occurring at other stages of the conviction process. These biases against minoritized individuals are likely less related to individual and overt acts of racism, but rather related to systemic and institutional biases that have developed through years of discriminatory practices and sociopolitical environments (Bass, 2001). Gross et al. (2020) reported that both police and prosecutors are responsible for witness tampering and that this occurs in the form of both threat and manipulation. Future researchers should further investigate the various stages of the legal process to determine where biases are more likely to be present and influential, and how these sequential stages potentially interact with one another.

### ***Interrogation Misconduct***

Similarly, significant associations between interrogation misconduct and alleged crime type demonstrated that exonerees accused of violent crimes were more likely than those accused of sexual or other non-violent crimes to experience interrogation misconduct. Specifically, interrogation misconduct was almost three times as prevalent in violent compared to other

crimes, and twice as prevalent compared to sexual crimes. *Shadow-of-the-trial theory* posits that expectations of trial outcomes are the greatest predictors of plea bargains (Bushway et al., 2014). This is especially relevant in exoneration cases because if evidence against the defendant is either nonexistent or illegally obtained (e.g., during a problematic interrogation), legal officials may feel less confident about a guilty verdict and more likely to engage in misconduct to obtain confessions or plea deals (Bettens & Redlich, 2023). Within my sample, those who experienced official misconduct were also more likely to settle for a guilty plea bargain ( $\chi^2(1) = 8.35, p = .004$ ), which is consistent with previous research. It is possible that due to factors that make trying alleged violent crimes more complex, such as difficulties recruiting and retaining witnesses to testify as well as seriousness of the offense and potential consequences, prosecutors have more motivation to settle on a plea bargain rather than take the case to trial (Johnson et al., 2016). Officials may also be more likely to engage in misconduct in these cases because of a heightened public or political motivation to close the case and convict.

Exoneree age was also a significant factor associated with the presence of interrogation misconduct. As previously discussed, older exonerees (i.e., age 17) were more than three times as likely to experience interrogation misconduct than younger exonerees. Interrogation misconduct was present in fewer than five percent of cases where the exoneree was 15 years old or younger compared to almost 37% of cases where the defendant was 17 years old. This implies that interrogators may take more precautions in the interrogation room with younger individuals compared to older juveniles. While 16- and 17-year-old adolescents possess cognitive processing abilities and moral understanding comparable to adults, their psycho-social maturity is not fully developed until later in life (Scott & Steinberg, 2010). This has implications for their decision-making and ability to appreciate behavioral consequences, particularly during high-stress



situations like interrogations. Despite these developmental differences, police and interrogators still heavily utilize the Reid Method, which relies on isolation and manipulation in the interrogation setting (Inbau et al., 2011; Leo, 2009), and does not account for developmental differences between older adolescents and adults. My results suggest that older adolescents may be especially susceptible to being treated as adults and experiencing misconduct in interrogations. Police may view younger adolescents, especially those 15-years-old and younger, to require more safeguards in the interrogation setting due to their young age and perceived immaturity.

Neither race nor sex was significantly associated with interrogation misconduct, indicating that interrogator biases may not be as present in the interrogation stage within this sample. Interestingly, previous research analyzing adult exonerees has reported on racial disparities in the likelihood of misconduct, with racially minoritized individuals experiencing misconduct more frequently (Gross et al., 2017). Kassin et al. (2013) utilized the term *forensic confirmation bias* to describe this – forensic investigators’ beliefs can impact their investigation and evaluation processes. In other words, if investigators believe one suspect to be guilty of a crime, they are more likely to seek out and favor inculpatory evidence while ignoring or discounting exculpatory evidence. Because of the previously discussed patterns in pre-arrest and sentencing procedures, we can conclude that biased practices still occur in the juvenile legal system. Indeed, Webb et al. (2020) concluded that racial profiling was most likely the leading factor in wrongful conviction of Black youth. Racial biases may be more impactful in introducing youth of color into the legal system than procedural misconduct once they are navigating this system. This emphasizes my previous point that investigating the aspects of the

legal process that are most impacted by biases is pertinent to the continued improvement and accuracy of judicial processes.

### ***Police Misconduct***

Opposed to my hypotheses, neither crime type nor exoneree individual characteristics was associated with the occurrence of police misconduct. Interestingly, Headley et al. (2020) analyzed police misconduct allegations in Chicago and found that Black and Hispanic complainants are almost five times more likely to receive “not sustained” outcomes on their allegations compared to White individuals. In other words, minoritized individuals are more likely to be informed that there was not enough evidence to rule on allegations of official misconduct, while White individuals tend to receive verdicts, and potentially more complete investigations. It is possible that police misconduct is occurring, being reported upon, and being dismissed in many cases that are never retried, reinforcing that there are more wrongful convictions that have not been rectified. Additionally, many of the instances of police misconduct in the current dataset include other forms of misconduct (e.g., interrogation misconduct) and occur following initial arrest. Continued research into policing practices and processes prior to official arrest remains an important topic to determine proceedings most affected by misconduct.

### ***Prosecutor Misconduct***

Prosecutorial misconduct is necessary to investigate in exoneration cases. Prosecutors make many crucial decisions independently, and current policies have minimal checks and balances to ensure accountability and accuracy (Davis, 2009). Prosecutorial misconduct was more prevalent in alleged violent crimes compared to sexual or other crimes, with more than half of those accused of violent crimes experiencing prosecutor misconduct compared to less than a

quarter of sexual crimes and around a tenth of other non-violent crimes. Explanations for this are consistent with above-mentioned factors related to official misconduct. Maintaining contact with other individuals (e.g., witnesses, victims) involved in complex violent crime cases can be challenging and may lead to unethical behaviors to close the case and obtain a conviction (Jaffe, 2017). Future research should investigate values within the legal systems and how these values can be altered to prioritize accuracy rather than certainty of convictions.

Age was also associated with prosecutorial misconduct, with younger exonerees (i.e., 15-years-old and younger) more likely to experience prosecutorial misconduct than older exonerees (i.e., 16-year-olds, 17-year-olds). Interestingly, these findings differ from my previously discussed results where older youths were more likely to experience interrogation misconduct. While power differentials seem to occur in both interrogation and prosecutorial misconduct, the function of this differential may differ depending on scenario and defendant. In the interrogation setting, younger youth may be seen as more immature and in need of safeguards, whereas during courtroom proceedings, the motivation to finalize a conviction may outweigh developmental needs of younger youth. This finding has clinically significant implications related to the ethical treatment of young juveniles navigating the legal system. Prosecutors hold significant power in judicial proceedings (Davis, 2009; Fairfax, 2021), and their equitable treatment of all is necessary for upholding justice standards. My results suggest that prosecutors engage in misconduct more frequently with younger youth who have been exonerated compared to older youth. It is possible that as the perceived power over the alleged perpetrator of crime increases, so does the possibility of prosecutorial misconduct. With minimal safeguards in place for youth navigating the legal system, these results have serious implications for further investigating prosecutorial standards with individuals of all ages, especially younger defendants.

Neither race nor sex were associated with the presence of prosecutorial misconduct. This may demonstrate minimal biases related to these demographic characteristics for juvenile defendants. These results are contradictory to previous research findings from the adult legal system, where prosecutorial misconduct biases tend to disproportionately target marginalized individuals (Davis, 2009). Davis (2009) also noted that prosecutors often work without guidance or standards and may mean well, but still demonstrate implicit biases in their conduct. While these results are potentially promising for juvenile defendants, minoritized youth are still largely overrepresented in the legal system, indicating that biases are likely impactful at some judicial stage. This again further exemplifies the importance of deeply investigating all components of the judicial process and where these differences begin to emerge.

### **Inadequate Legal Representation and False Confessions**

There was no significant association between inadequate legal representation and false confessions. This may be due to the unknown timing during which inadequate legal representation occurred. If the legal representation was inadequate at a stage later than interrogation, it may have had no impact on the exoneree's likelihood to falsely confess. Notably, 100% of the cases that involved interrogation misconduct resulted in a false confession ( $n = 58$ ), implying that misconduct, rather than quality of legal representation, may be more relevant for false confessions. There is still a need to further study how legal representation can protect youth who are navigating the justice system to prevent interrogation and other forms of misconduct.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While findings from this dissertation have significant implications, there are some limitations. First and foremost, I am unable to capture the true number of individuals who have

been wrongfully convicted due to the nature of exoneration. Because wrongful conviction is by nature, unobservable, there are many youths still incarcerated despite innocence or wrongful conviction that have simply not been exonerated yet. Therefore, conclusions on patterns related to exoneration cannot be fully examined with this study, or any study utilizing available exoneration data. Additionally, restrictions in how race and sex are coded and reported in legal cases present analytic challenges. For example, Hispanic individuals are likely underrepresented in this dataset due to reporting standards for law officials, such as not reporting on ethnicity at all and not capturing identities of self-reported Hispanic individuals (Gross et al., 2017; Gross & Shaffer, 2012), making it challenging to explore unique disparities faced by this group (e.g., language barriers and fear of deportation; O'Brien et al., 2019; Rizer, 2003). Similar challenges exist for representing the experiences of multiracial individuals, including the influence of intersectionality and bias. Relatedly, the coding of sex does not account for gender representation nor capture identity beyond biological sex. Transgender and gender nonconforming individuals face significant stigma (Goodmark, 2020; Lombardi et al., 2002) that is not able to be measured by this study or others using archival legal system data. Also, males were significantly overrepresented in this dataset, making it challenging to draw conclusions based on sex due to unequal group sizes.

A similar limitation exists related to age groupings of exonerees and crime type coding. Because the age distribution was not normalized and heavily skewed toward 17-year-old defendants, I created groupings of 15-years-old and younger, 16-years-old, and 17-years-old to make the data workable. There may be differences within these age groups that could not be captured by the current study. Additionally, the sample was still mostly dominated by 17-year-old juveniles, potentially limiting the ability to draw conclusions based on age discrepancies. For

crime type, a wide spectrum of crimes were included in the sexual, violent, and other categories. This grouping, while helpful in identifying some patterns, created challenges in analyzing more specific differences. For example, assault and murder were both analyzed as violent crimes to create similarly sized and more appropriately distributed groups, while these discrepant crimes may have vastly different legal system experiences.

Another limitation is that findings related to race, both significant and non-significant, cannot adequately account for the overrepresentation of Black youths in the current dataset. Though not able to claim that all individuals included in the exoneration dataset were necessarily *innocent* of the alleged crime due to the nature of the exonerations dataset, the results and disproportionate number of minoritized youths is still relevant and informative. Black youths (i.e., 17-years-old and under) made up around 15% of all youths in the US in 2020 (Youth, 2021), while making up about 2/3 (66.89%) of the US youth who have been exonerated. This disproportionate number indicates that Black youth are being wrongfully convicted and experiencing misconduct at significantly greater numbers. This discrepancy also presents a limitation with the current study, as there is minimal racial variation, making it more challenging to identify more nuanced outcomes.

Additionally, due to the archival nature of the dataset, I was not able to establish causality between any of my variables. While the NRE dataset is very impressive in scope, it is not inclusive of all factors associated with exoneration and the legal system. For instance, police misconduct frequently overlapped with other forms of misconduct, such as interrogation misconduct and perjury, making the analysis of these separate variables challenging.

Regardless of these limitations, this study and further related research are necessary to drive improvements within the juvenile legal system and to reduce wrongful convictions.

Additional research is needed to understand factors discussed in this dissertation in greater depth. For example, analyzing exoneree as well as victim characteristics could help identify case characteristics associated with greater bias and likelihood of wrongful conviction. Youth age should also be further investigated at various stages of the legal process. Research in this area would benefit from including opinions and perceptions of officials who are involved in judicial processes to further understand overt and implicit explanations for misconduct. My findings also indicated that geographical and regional factors need further investigation. Specifically, official misconduct was more frequent in the Northeast and Midwest regions of the US. Future researchers should examine these associations in greater depth, such as at the state level or by examining the impacts of rurality and urbanicity, to provide greater insight into policy and procedural improvements to enhance accuracy and fairness within the legal system across the US. Additionally, I consistently concluded that more research needs to be done to determine exactly which stages of the judicial process led to the significant overrepresentation of Black exonerees. Examining all components of the legal process will help identify when errors occur and how biases influence outcomes, which will assist in the reformation of policing and judicial system policy.

## **Conclusions**

Multiple conclusions can be drawn from this dissertation. First, exoneree age had multiple interesting relationships with outcomes of interest. Specifically, older youth tended to experience longer sentences and more interrogation misconduct, while also being more likely to provide a false confession than younger youth. Younger youth, on the other hand, were more likely to experience prosecutorial misconduct. These results indicate that power differentials

appear to be relevant across various stages of the legal process, and that power and misconduct vary based on age, setting, and situation.

Related to race, I found fewer discrepancies than predicted, which could be perceived as promising, but this conclusion fails to consider and emphasize the overrepresentation of Black youth who were wrongfully convicted. As anticipated, racially minoritized youth received longer sentences and were mistakenly identified by witnesses more often than White youth, which both have relevant implications for policy development. However, racially minoritized youth were not more likely to falsely confess or experience official misconduct (i.e., witness tampering, interrogation misconduct, police misconduct, prosecutorial misconduct) compared to White youth. As previously emphasized, Black youth are significantly overrepresented among exonerees, and more research is needed to examine the causes for this.

Analyses related to crime type and geographic region also produced significant and interesting findings. Violent crimes tended to be associated with longer times before exoneration and a greater degree of some types of official misconduct (i.e., witness tampering, interrogation misconduct, and prosecutorial misconduct). However, other factors related to alleged crime, such as victim age, were not associated with any predicted outcomes. Additionally, geographic region was also associated with longer times before exoneration and greater presence of official misconduct and false confessions.

Overall, this dissertation accomplished the goal of further analyzing juvenile exoneration and will serve as motivation to continue investigating the experiences of youth within the criminal legal system. Important conclusions were drawn related to exoneree demographics, crime type, and geographic locations. Further research conducted by both developmental and



forensic psychologists is pertinent to offer policy recommendations and continue the improvement of the legal system as it relates to youth.

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## VITA

### KRISTIN MAHAN

- Education: Ph.D. Psychology, concentration in Clinical Psychology, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2025  
M.A. Forensic and Legal Psychology, Roger Williams University, Bristol, Rhode Island, 2020  
B.A. Applied Psychology, Bryant University, Smithfield, Rhode Island, 2018
- Experience: Graduate Behavioral Health Consultant, Families Free, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2023-2024  
Graduate Student Clinician, Frontier Health Holston Children & Youth, Kingsport, Tennessee, 2022-2023  
Graduate Student Clinician, East Tennessee State University Behavioral Health and Wellness Clinic, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2021-2023  
Adjunct Professor, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2020-2022
- Publications: **Mahan, K.** (2022). Examining sexual and non-sexual aggression and justice-system involvement in youth with direct and indirect experiences of childhood adversity. *ATSA Forum Newsletter*, 35(1).
- Presentations: **Mahan, K.,** Stinson, J., & Quinn, M. (2023, April). *ACE risk bands and health outcomes among a group of adults in secure forensic care*. Presented at the 2023 Annual Appalachian Student Research Forum, Johnson City, TN. (Awarded 1st place in doctoral student oral presentation competition)  
**Mahan, K. &** Stinson, J. (2023, April). *Associations between rurality and race among exonerated youth*. Presented at the 69th annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, New Orleans, LA.  
**Mahan, K.,** Stinson, J., & Quinn, M. (2023, March). *The relationship between ACEs and adult health in persons in secure forensic care*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychology-Law Society, Philadelphia, PA.  
**Mahan, K. &** Stinson, J. (2022, October). *Direct and indirect experiences of childhood adversity on deleterious outcomes in at-risk youth*. Poster presented at the 41st annual research and treatment conference of the Association for the Treatment and Prevention of Sexual Abuse, Los Angeles, CA. (Awarded Marnie Rice Student Poster Award)  
**Mahan, K. &** Stinson, J. (2022, April). *Examining effects of direct and indirect experiences of childhood adversity on suicidality in youth who have engaged in sexually abusive behaviors*. Presented at the 2022 Annual Appalachian Student Research Forum, Johnson City, TN. (Awarded 3rd place in doctoral student oral presentation competition)  
**Mahan, K.,** Carpenter, R., & Stinson, J. (2022, March). *ACEs and substance use*



*outcomes in a high risk population.* Presented at the 68th annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Hilton Head Island, SC.

**Mahan, K.** & Leguizamo, A. (2022, March). *Effectiveness of sexual offender prevention policies from a community sample's perspective.* Presented at the annual meeting of American Psychology-Law Society, Denver, CO.

**Mahan, K.** & Leguizamo, A. (2021, October). *Effectiveness of sexual offender prevention policies from a community sample's perspective.* Poster presented at the 40th annual research and treatment conference of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers. (Virtual Conference)

**Mahan, K.** & Stinson, J. (2021, April). *A brief characteristic analysis of a small sample of female youth who have engaged in sexually abusive behaviors.* Presented at the 2021 Annual Appalachian Student Research Forum, Johnson City, TN. (Virtual Conference; Awarded 2nd place in doctoral student oral presentation competition)

Leguizamo, A. & **Mahan, K.** (2019, November). *Cognitive distortions or social norms? Identifying and addressing sociocultural factors in treatment.* Invited pre-conference workshop presented at the 38th annual research and treatment conference of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, Atlanta, GA.

Honors and Awards: East Tennessee State University Graduate Student Research Travel Grant, 2023, 2022, 2021

Appalachian Student Research Forum Oral Presentation Award – 1st place, 2023

Association for the Treatment and Prevention of Sexual Abuse Marnie Rice Student Poster Award, 2022

Appalachian Student Research Forum Oral Presentation Award – 3rd Place, 2022

Appalachian Student Research Forum Oral Presentation Award – 2nd place, 2021

Professional Service: Developer of Clinical Psychology Mentorship Program, 2023

Senior Graduate Student Representative for Psychology Department, 2022-2023

Clinical Graduate Student Representative for East Tennessee State University Psychology Committee on Inclusion and Equity, 2021-2024

Member of Committee for development of Scientific Literacy in Psychology Undergraduate Course, 2023

Member of Committee for development of Proseminar Graduate Psychology Course, 2023

Mentee: Society of American Psychological Association Division 53, Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology Mentorship Program, 2022-2024

Junior Graduate Student Representative for Psychology Department, 2021