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### The Influence of Demographic Information on Public Attitudes Towards Individuals Who Commit Sexual Offenses

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The Influence of Demographic Information on  
Public Attitudes Towards Individuals Who Commit Sexual Offenses

Emily Bogdan  
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### **Abstract**

Research exploring the factors that shape public attitudes towards individuals who commit sexual offenses is needed to inform policy and reduce stigma that these individuals face as they reenter society. Prior research has explored demographic factors of those who offend and have been victimized, but few have studied how these variables may interact with one another to shape attitudes toward people who commit sexual offenses. The current study explores whether offender gender, victim gender, and victim age shape the public's attitudes towards these individuals. Participants were presented with a vignette describing the offense and then they were asked to respond to a series of scales, reporting their suggested length of sentence, perceived seriousness of the offense, and whether they think the individual should be punished or rehabilitated. Victim Age had a significant impact on Perceived Seriousness, Recommended Sentence, and Balanced Justice, with more punitive and negative responses in offenses with younger victims. Offender Gender also had a significant impact on Recommended Sentence, such that male offenders received longer sentences. Finally, Victim Age and Victim gender interacted to impact Recommended Sentence and Balanced Justice. Findings have implications for reentry and addressing stigma faced by individuals who sexually offend.

### **The Influence of Demographic Information on Public Attitudes Towards Individuals Who Commit Sexual Offenses**

Individuals with a criminal record face many challenges in the United States (U.S.), and this is especially true for those who have committed a sexual offense (Quinn et al., 2004). For someone to successfully reenter society, among other things, they need to find a safe place to live, and they need to find a stable job. These tasks may be simple for most people, but they are challenging for people who have committed sexual crimes, partly due to restrictions given to them by the state, but also because of the major stigma they face that can even lead to acts of vigilantism (Cubellis et al., 2019). Even perceived, anticipated stigma can have a negative influence on these individuals' self-stigma, their adjustment back into the community, and on possible parole violations due, in part to the lack of general support they experience (LeBel, 2012; Moore, et al., 2016a; Moore, et al., 2016b).

The public has a difficult time accepting individuals convicted of sex crimes back into society because they fear for the safety of their communities (Quinn et al., 2004). A large part of this stigma is due to misconceptions that are held about those who commit sexual offenses, which are often shaped by stereotypes developed through the media (Harper, et al., 2017). Most people believe that those who have committed sexual offenses will inevitably offend again, but recidivism among this group is far less common than perceived (Vess & Skelton, 2010). In fact, individuals who commit sexual offenses recidivate at a lower rate than individuals who commit any other type of offense (Alper & Durose, 2019). Even just the use of the label "sex offender" can reinforce the public's negative attitudes towards this group of individuals. For example, Harris and Socia (2014) found that when the term "sex offender" was used, it reinforced public support for policies that limit the freedoms of individuals who commit sexual offenses, such as

their use of social media or living in certain areas. It is important to measure public attitudes towards individuals who commit sexual offenses to gauge how accurately these individuals are depicted in society. When information is based upon stereotypes, it causes unfounded fear surrounding individuals who commit sexual offenses, thus leading to more restrictive laws and less available support upon reentry. This is a public safety issue in itself because there is some evidence that sex offender policies may actually destabilize individuals during the high-risk reintegration period putting them at increased risk for recidivism (Cubellis et al., 2019; LeBel, 2012; Moore, et al., 2016a; Moore, et al., 2016b; Wakefield, 2006).

In many states and counties, laws have been passed that prohibit individuals convicted of sexual offenses from living in certain areas that are within close proximity to places that children frequent, such as school and parks (Levenson and Hern, 2007). There are also laws that mandate registration and require community notification which research has shown do not typically have a positive impact on communities. These laws have been implemented largely as a response to public fear, however they are not evidence-based and therefore often have adverse effects (Stamatel, 2010). Levenson (2008) sampled 109 people convicted of sexual offenses regarding the impact of residence restriction policies. They found that these policies make it difficult for these individuals to find available housing and employment, increasing homelessness and financial difficulties. The majority of the people they sampled also reported that they did not find the laws to be an effective way to reduce child sexual abuse or to help with risk management as intended. Research has also found that stable employment and relationships can decrease recidivism by allowing individuals to be prosocial members of society (Levenson and Hern, 2007). Although laws that restrict housing, force people to be on registries, and inform

communities of their presence are designed to increase public safety, they actually make reentry more difficult, increasing the circumstances that lead to recidivism (Levenson, 2008).

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of studies examining said public attitudes towards individuals who commit sexual offenses, but many questions remain unanswered. As Harper and colleagues (2017) discussed in their review of the literature on general attitudes towards individuals who commit sexual offenses, many studies have had inconclusive or contradictory findings. Specifically, little conclusive evidence has been found regarding attributes that shape the way the public views individuals who commit sexual offenses.

#### *Gender of the Individual who Commits the Sexual Offense*

Some researchers have studied how characteristics of the perpetrator and victim of a sexual offense may play an important role in influencing public attitudes towards the individuals who commit sexual offenses. Many studies have found that participants respond more negatively to offenses with male perpetrators, including general attitudes, perceived seriousness of the crime, punitive attitudes toward the perpetrator, etc. (Banton & West, 2020; Beeby, et al., 2020; King & Roberts, 2017; Socia et al., 2019). For example, Shields and Cochran (2020) found that among sentences given in Florida between 1995 and 2010, males who commit sexual offenses were given longer and more severe sentences than matched females.

In a study by King and Roberts (2017), survey methods were used to measure the ways in which various factors, such as details about the offense and the person committing the offense shape public opinions. They found that participants displayed the most punitive attitudes towards males who commit sexual offenses in comparison to females who commit sexual offenses. They also asked participants to read vignettes describing the offense then report on the individual's

sentence length and the duration of time they should be on the sex offender registry. They found that participants assigned longer registration requirements for offenses that were considered more serious and involved male offenders, older offenders, and younger victims. However, it should be noted that the participants were not given context on sentencing and registration guidelines and this may have impacted responding.

Beeby et al. (2020) also explored the influence of the gender of the individual who commits sexual offenses on punitive attitudes using real cases. They compared sentencing outcomes for cases of 10 male and 10 females that committed sexual offenses in New Zealand from 2011 to 2018. They found that in general, females were significantly less likely to receive a prison sentence than males in matched cases.

### *Victim Demographics*

Overall studies examining the role of victim gender and attitudes toward those who perpetrate sex crimes tend to show that offenses perpetrated against males to be viewed more negatively, although results are inconclusive. For example, offenses in which victims are male result in the most punitive attitudes, such as higher prison sentences, but this only holds true for adult victims (Socia et al., 2019). However, stereotypically, the public sees males as being the perpetrators of sexual offenses and females as being the victims (Depraetere et al., 2018). Of note, several other studies either did not include this variable or did not find any significant impact of victim gender on attitudes towards individuals who commit sexual offenses, suggesting a gap in the literature (Banton et al., 2020; King & Roberts 2017; Rogers et al., 2011).

Victim age also plays an interesting role, especially when considered alongside offender and victim gender because female individuals who commit sexual offenses are more likely to

offend against children than they are to offend against adults (Sandler & Freeman, 2007). Most research on this topic has found that, in general, participants respond most negatively towards individuals who offend against children when compared to individuals who offend against adults and this effect gets stronger for younger children (Rogers et al., 2011; Socia et al., 2019; King et al., 2017). However, the measures and sampling procedures used among these studies varies greatly, including perceived seriousness, various measures of general attitudes, sentence length, and post-release policies.

### *Intersection between Gender and Age*

It is also important to study the ways in which demographic characteristics interact to shape attitudes, because identities are multifaceted and thus should be treated as such. Banton and West (2020) explored the influence of offender, victim, and observer (participant) gender on perceived seriousness of child sexual abuse. They presented an online sample of British participants with a vignette describing a 35-year-old person who was attracted to prepubescent children and acted upon this attraction at a party. While the gender of the child varied, the age was held consistent. Following the vignette, participants were asked to rate how serious they found the offense to be on a scale of 0 to 100, to measure perceived seriousness of child sexual abuse. They found a main effect of participant gender such that males rated the crime as being more serious than females did. However, they did not find any effect of victim gender, which the authors postulated could be due to the fact that all victims in their study were children and crimes against children are perceived as more serious in general (Banton and West, 2020). They also found an interaction effect whereby female participants rated the vignette with a female offender and a male victim more negatively than the male participants did. The authors speculated that

this could have to do with men internalizing the media portrayal of this type of sexual offense as being less serious.

Socia and colleagues (2019) conducted a similar vignette study using an online sample of adults. They looked at the effects of offender and victim gender, victim age, and the relationship between the two individuals. Similar to Banton and West (2020), they presented a 2x2x2 design using a vignette which varied by perpetrator gender, victim gender, and victim age (8-year-old vs 25-year-old). Their vignettes also provided context to the participants by describing the average sentence for this type of offense, overcoming some of the limitations of previous research (i.e., King & Roberts, 2017). Following the vignette, they asked participants how long they think this offender's sentence should be (from 1 to 19 years). They compared these values to the average sentence of 10 years and found several main and interaction effects. They found that the longest sentences were given to cases with male offenders (versus female offenders), male victims (versus female victims), and child victims (versus adult victims). Interestingly, in cases with child victims, there was no difference in attitudes based on victim gender, but for cases with adult victims, sentences were longest for offenders with male victims. However, it is hard to compare their findings to those of previous studies as they only used sentence length as an outcome measure and did not assess other measures of punitive or negative attitudes, such as perceived seriousness.

### **Study Overview**

In recent years, more research has been conducted on attitudes towards individuals who commit sexual offenses in an effort to elucidate the factors that influence the public's opinions and the misconceptions they hold, with the goal of gaining public support for evidence-based public policy. Research has shown that legislators policy decisions related to people who commit

sexual offenses align with general attitudes towards these individuals, demonstrating the importance of understanding these attitudes (Sample, 2008). Despite increased research, individuals with a sexual criminal record still face stigma and difficulty reentering society. As is evident from the literature discussed above, the misconceptions about individuals who commit sexual offenses that influence public attitudes can be harmful for the offenders and for public safety as a whole. In an effort to continue to improve these individuals' chances of successfully reentering society by targeting areas that need the most improvement, it is important to learn as much as possible about the factors that influence public attitudes. Literature on this topic has explored many factors that shape these attitudes, including various demographic factors of offenders and victims. One important question that needs to be addressed in more depth in the literature is the influence of offender and victim gender. This is important because learning more about the influences behind stigma towards individuals who have committed sexual offenses would help inform successful reentry efforts.

Research on attitudes towards individuals who commit sexual offenses suggests that various demographic factors influence these attitudes. Previous studies have found that the public tends to show the most punitive and negative attitudes towards males who commit sexual offenses against children, however some of the previous research did not manipulate the age of the child, which may have impacted outcome (see Banton et al., 2020). Other research exploring the intersection between offender and victim gender and victim age has been limited in their outcome measures. Thus, the goal of this study was to examine how offender gender, victim gender and victim age influence perceived seriousness, recommended length of sentence, and balanced justice. Based upon the extant research it was hypothesized that participants will rate male offenders who offend against young and/or male victims most negatively.

## Method

**Design and procedure.** Using random assignment, we created eight experimental groups based on our three independent variables using a 2 (offender gender) x 2 (victim gender) x 2 (victim age) design. We manipulated the presence of each level of these independent variables for each of our groups. To do so, we presented participants with a vignette describing a sexual offense that manipulated the gender of the offender and the victim as well as the age of the victim. Vignettes were identical in every other way. Our dependent variables were participants' ratings of perceived seriousness, recommended length of sentence, and balanced justice.

We recruited participants through Amazon Mechanical Turk via Cloud Research. Individuals who were 18 years of age or older, spoke English, and were located in the U.S. were eligible to participate. Participants entered the program and were presented with an informed consent form to read and sign which included the risks and benefits of participation as well as the contact information of the researchers and other important information. Once participants consented to the study, they were randomly assigned to read one of the eight vignettes. Once participants read through the vignette, they were taken to the survey where they were asked a series of questions about their attitudes towards the offender that they had just read about including their perceived seriousness of the offense, their recommended sentence for the individual committing the offense, and whether they think the individual should be punished, rehabilitated, or both. Finally, respondents were asked for demographic information before being presented with a debriefing screen and a code which allowed them to receive payment. We also including attention and manipulation checks. For example, we included a question where we asked participants to select a specific number on the scale. Participants who did not pass these

checks were also excluded. The entire study was designed to be completed in 10 minutes. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

**Participants.** A total of 414 participants were recruited and consented. 15 participants were excluded based upon failure to attend to attention checks. Of the 399 participants that remained, 145 (36.3%) identified as women, 250 (62.7%) identified as men, 4 (1.0%) identified as non-binary or transgender (male to female). The average age of participants was 39 and ages ranged from 22 to 70. Additionally, 305 (76.4%) identified as White, 36 (9.0%) as Black or African American, 22 (5.5%) Hispanic or Latinx, 22 (5.5%) as Asian, 10 (2.5%) as biracial or multiracial, and 4 (1.0%) as other. A post-hoc power analysis was conducted using G\*Power3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) using a medium effect size ( $d = 0.5$ ) and an alpha of .05. Results showed a power of 1.0.

**Materials.** *Vignette* The vignettes were adapted from Socia et al. (2019) and either stated that the offender was a male or a female, that the victim was a male or a female and that the victim was either an adult or a child. Unlike Socia et al. (2019), we used multiple measures, so we adapted the vignette to mention that we are asking for the participants' opinion on the case. All vignettes were identical aside from the perpetrator gender, victim age (8 vs 25-years-old) and victim gender which was varied across the 8 vignettes.

Alex Baker is a 35-year-old [Perpetrator\_Sex], with no prior criminal record, who has been convicted of one act of felony sexual assault against [Victim\_Age] [Victim\_Sex] victim. The judge in the case is requesting your opinion on the case and input on an appropriate sentence to impose on Alex Baker. The average sentence length for an individual convicted of this type of crime and with no prior criminal record is 10 years in prison, although any sentence between 1 and 19 years in prison is allowable.

*Perceived Seriousness* The perceived seriousness question was developed by Banton and West (2020) and asked participants to “Please indicate how serious you feel that the adult’s actions were, using the sliding scale below.” Response options ranged from 0 (“not serious at all”) to 100 (“very serious”). Participants who chose lower numbers perceived the offense to be less serious than participants who chose higher numbers.

*Recommended Length of Sentence* The recommended sentence length question was based upon Socia et al.’s (2019) study and asked participants to “Please indicate how long you think this individual’s sentence should be, keeping in mind that the average sentence for this crime is 10 years.” Response options ranged from 1 to 19 years. Respondents were told that the average sentence for this crime is 10 years and we calculated the interval between the average sentence (10 years) and their responses before comparing the values. Therefore, a score of 0 meant they thought the average sentence was fitting, a positive score meant they thought an above average sentence was fitting (up to +9), and a negative score meant they thought a below average sentence was fitting (down to -9).

*Balanced Justice* The Balanced justice question was adapted from Mears et al., (2014) and measured by asking participants, “Should punishment or rehabilitation be the goal of sentences for people who commit sexual offenses?” Participants then answered on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = only punishment, 2 = mostly punishment, 3 = both equally, 4 = mostly rehabilitation, and 5 = only rehabilitation.

*Demographic questions* Demographic questions included age, race, sex, gender, and information about whether they or someone they know have been arrested, what they were arrested for, whether they were incarcerated, and for how long.

**Data Analysis.** We used three-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) to measure the difference in scores between participants in each group of the three dependent variables. This allowed us to analyze our hypothesis stating that participants would rate offenders more positively if they were told that the offender was a female who offended against a female, adult victim. We also used independent-samples t-tests to explore the specific levels of effects between groups.

## Results

### *Perceived Seriousness*

A three-way ANOVA was conducted to determine the effects of Offender Gender (male/female), Victim Gender (male/female), and Victim Age (8 vs 25-years-old) on Perceived Seriousness. There were 18 outliers assessed as a value more than 2 standard deviations from the mean. Perceived seriousness was also not normally distributed ( $p < .05$ ) for all groups, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test of normality. All groups were strongly negatively skewed, as assessed by visual inspection of histograms. A reflect and inverse transformation was performed to bring the outliers closer to the mean and improve normality. Following this transformation, there were no longer outliers, but the distribution maintained a slightly less extreme lack of normality. Normality for residuals was also improved by this transformation, but not to the point of a completely normal distribution. However, there was homogeneity of variances, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances,  $p = .994$ .

There was no statistically significant three-way interaction between Offender Gender, Victim Gender, and Victim Age,  $F(1, 391) = .078, p = .780$ . There were also no statistically significant two-way interactions (Victim Age\* Victim Gender,  $p = .199$ , Victim Age \* Offender

Gender,  $p = .275$ , Victim Gender \* Offender Gender,  $p = .194$ ). There was a statistically significant main effect of Victim Age,  $F(1, 391) = 21.927, p < .001$  (see Figure 1). Participants rated offenses involving a 25-year-old victim ( $M = 88.75$ ) as being significantly less serious than offenses involving an 8-year-old victim ( $M = 93.33$ ), as assessed using Independent Samples T-Tests.

### *Recommended Sentence*

Prior to analyses being conducted for Recommended Sentence, a new variable was computed by subtracting the provided average sentence of 10 years from the responses given by participants. Therefore, a response of 0 meant that the participants recommended an average sentence, a negative response meant a lower-than-average sentence (minimum of -9), and a positive score meant a higher-than-average sentence (maximum of 9). A three-way ANOVA was conducted to determine the effects of Offender Gender, Victim Gender, and Victim Age on Recommended Sentence. There were 11 outliers assessed as a value more than 2 standard deviations from the mean. The outliers were kept to maintain the homogeneity of variances, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances,  $p = .057$ . Recommended Sentence was also not normally distributed ( $p < .05$ ) for all groups, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test of normality. All groups had negative kurtosis (kurtosis value  $< 0$ ). Due to the data not being skewed, transformations were not possible, so analysis was conducted on the original data.

There was no statistically significant three-way interaction between Offender Gender, Victim Gender, and Victim Age,  $F(1, 391) = .000, p = .991$ . There was a statistically significant two-way interactions between Victim Age and Victim Gender,  $F(1,391) = 8.808, p = .003$  (see Figure 2). Participants recommended that for offenses involving a female victim, offenses with

an 8-year-old victim ( $M = 2.49$ ) should receive a longer sentence than offenses with a 25-year-old victim ( $M = .85$ ), but for offenses involving a male victim, there was no significance ( $M = -1.34$ ;  $M = -.93$ ). The simple main effect of Victim Gender on Recommended Sentence for 8-year-old victims was statistically significant ( $F(1,391) = 8.128, p = .005$ ), but not for 25-year-old victims ( $F(1,391) = .496, p = .482$ ). There was no statistically significant two-way interaction between Offender Gender and either of the other two variables. There was a statistically significant main effect of Victim Age,  $F(1, 391) = 47.549, p < .001$  (see Figure 2). Participants recommended that for offenses involving a 25-year-old victim ( $M = -.112$ ), a significantly shorter sentence be recommended than for offenses involving an 8-year-old victim ( $M = 1.66$ ), as assessed using an Independent Samples T-Test. There was also a statistically significant main effect of Offender Gender,  $F(1,391) = 8.808, p = .003$  (see Figure 3). Participants recommended that for offenses involving a female offender ( $M = -.35$ ), a significantly shorter sentence be recommended than for offenses involving a male offender ( $M = .87$ ), as assessed using an Independent Samples T-Test.

### *Balanced Justice*

A three-way ANOVA was conducted to determine the effects of Offender Gender, Victim Gender, and Victim Age on Balanced Justice. There were 9 outliers assessed as a value more than 2 standard deviations from the mean. The outliers were kept to improve homogeneity of variances, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances,  $p = .012$ . Balanced Justice was not normally distributed ( $p < .05$ ) for all groups, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test of normality, however most groups appeared to have normal distributions as assessed visually using histograms. Both groups with female, 8-year-old victims appeared to be the most positively

skewed. Transformations were performed, but not used due to the lack of improvement of outliers and normality as well as the decrease in homogeneity of variances.

There was no statistically significant three-way interaction between Offender Gender, Victim Gender, and Victim Age,  $F(1, 391) = .792, p = .374$ . There was a statistically significant two-way interaction between Victim Age and Victim Gender,  $F(1,391) = 6.160, p = .013$  (see Figure 4). Participants recommended that for offenses involving a female victim, offenders with a 25-year-old victim ( $M = 3.00$ ) should be more rehabilitated than offenders with an 8-year-old victim ( $M = 2.58$ ), but for offenses involving a male victim, the opposite should be true ( $M = 2.80; M = 2.81$ ). However, the simple main effect of Victim Age on Balanced Justice for female victims was statistically significant ( $F(1,391) = 10.221, p = .002$ ), but not for male victims ( $F(1,391) = .075, p = .785$ ). There was no statistically significant two-way interaction between Offender Gender and either of the other two variables. There was a statistically significant main effect of Victim Age,  $F(1, 391) = 4.413, p < .036$  (see Figure 4). Participants recommended that for offenses involving a 25-year-old victim ( $M = 2.89$ ), punishment is preferred over rehabilitation to a greater extent than for offenses involving an 8-year-old victim ( $M = 2.7$ ), as assessed using an Independent Samples T-Test. There were also no statistically significant main effects of Offender Gender or Victim Gender.

## Discussion

This study examined the effect of offender gender, victim gender, and victim age on public attitudes towards individuals who commit sexual offenses. Our results confirm that demographic characteristics of the person who commits a sexual offense and the victim of the offense have an impact on perceptions of the criminal justice response to the individual.

Specifically, in certain cases, the public is more likely to show punitive and overall negative attitudes towards individuals who sexually offend against children than those who offend against adults in addition to men who sexually offend and those who offend against males.

### *Perceived Seriousness*

As hypothesized, victim age impacted public attitudes related to the perceived seriousness of an offense in that participants were more likely to rate an offense as more serious if it involved a child victim. However, gender did not have an impact on perceived seriousness and there were no interaction effects between any of the three variables. This was consistent with Banton and West (2020) who did not find an effect for victim gender. The authors suggested that this may have had to do with the fact that they did not include victim age which may have impacted the perception of seriousness as it related to gender. We did find an effect of victim gender for other outcome measures. They found that participants rated offenses as more serious when they involved a male offender, which was not an effect our results demonstrated. This could be due to our vignettes demonstrating less emphasis on the background of the offender than their vignettes did. Additionally, we used the gender-neutral name, Alex rather than the gendered names they used, so there may have been less emphasis on offender gender in our study. Their finding was consistent with the prior finding that in general, people stereotypically associate sexual offenses with male offenders and female victims (Depraetere et al., 2018).

### *Recommended Sentence*

As hypothesized, for recommended sentence, the longest sentences were given to individuals who offended against 8-year-old female victims. Participants recommended that for offenses involving a female victim, offenses with an 8-year-old victim should receive longer

sentences, but for offenses with a male victim, there was no significance. This demonstrates an interaction effect between victim age and victim gender, which is consistent with the findings of Socia et al. (2019). Also consistent with their findings, we found an effect of offender gender and victim gender, where participants responded with the most punitive attitudes towards male offenders, as compared to female offenders and for offenses involving 8-year-old victims, as compared to 25-year-old victims. The consistent findings of the significance of victim age and the way in which it interacts with victim gender suggests that when victim age is a factor, it is the most important consideration.

### *Balanced Justice*

For Balanced Justice, the public perceives those who offend against male children as the most in need or deserving of rehabilitation. We had hypothesized that the public would show the most punitive attitudes towards offenses with victims that are children and this is what we found, however, we found that victim age only has a statistically significant impact for offenses involving a female victim. These findings demonstrate that the public viewed those who offended against male children as more in need of rehabilitation and those who offended against female children as more in need of punishment. Socia et al. (2019) found that offenses with male victims received the most punitive attitudes, but this was only true for adult victims. Our finding that responses demonstrated the desire for more punishment for offenses with adult male victims than for adult female victims is consistent with Socia et al.'s (2019) finding. These findings suggest that the public holds the most punitive attitudes towards individuals who offend against female child victims and they do not think they can be rehabilitated.

Contrary to Mears et al. (2014), who found that the majority of respondents preferred balanced justice, followed by a more rehabilitation-based approach, we found that the majority of our respondents preferred punishment. However, this can be explained by the very high ratings of perceived seriousness of the offenses we presented.

### *Limitations*

A limitation of this study was the lack of normality for all dependent variables. Although multiple transformations were explored to improve normality as much as possible, normality was ultimately not accomplished. For Perceived Seriousness, the negative skew can be connected to the large range of the scale used (0-100) and the large number of respondents who reported that they found the offense to be the highest level of serious (100). Ultimately, we chose to test the differences in group means using a three-way ANOVA despite the lack of a normal distribution and found significant results. In the future, a smaller scale could reduce this limitation. Additionally, all dependent variables originally had outliers. Outliers were handled for Perceived Seriousness using the same transformation. They were kept for Recommended Sentence to maintain homogeneity of variances, however, outliers only made up 2.8% of the sample. They were also kept for Balanced Justice to improve homogeneity of variances, but again they made up only a small portion of the sample (2.3%).

Additional limitations related to the design of the study included the online, self-report nature. We were limited by COVID-19 restrictions and had to collect data online, but we are aware of the possible risks of doing so and checked for attention using multiple attention checks. Self-report is always a relatively weak way of collecting data, given that it is unknown how truthful responses will be, even with the lack of identifying information. Our results also may not

reflect real life, generalizable attitudes given the use of vignettes versus real life experiences in addition to the use of a sample of the U.S. population, rather than a global population. Other studies have taken place outside of the U.S. with similar results, which lays the groundwork for a possible international study, looking at cultural differences as an additional variable.

### *Implications and Future Directions*

These findings have implications for the reentry of individuals who commit sexual offenses. As the literature demonstrates, individuals who commit sexual offenses face stigma upon reentry, making it difficult for them to have a successful reentry into society, including finding housing and employment (Evans & Porter, 2015; Pager, 2007). Without these necessities, individuals may be more likely to reoffend, which is mutually harmful for the individuals and for society (Wakefield, 2006). People who commit sexual offenses also face punitive legislation that is influenced by public opinion, such as the requirement to appear on registries. If it is true, as we found, that the public is more critical and shows more punitive attitudes towards individuals who offend against children, which is to be expected, these individuals would have an even more difficult time being rehabilitated and moving away from the life they had prior to offending. Barriers to successful reentry can lead to increased recidivism, continuing a vicious cycle (LaCourse, 2019). It is important to improve policy relating to reentry and move towards a criminal justice system that sees the value of rehabilitation as a way to improve individual lives as well as public safety as a whole. Knowing more about the factors that influence barriers to reentry can help inform more targeted policy and community support programs.

Future directions of this research can include examining participant characteristics and how they influence opinions and may interact with the characteristics of the victims and

perpetrators. As women and girls are the primary victims of sexual violence (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998), understanding how their opinions would be important for a victim centered approach. Further, the impact on attitudes toward those who sexually offend based upon other characteristics such as race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status are not yet well understood. We also chose not to manipulate the age of the offender due to the need to limit the variables included, but this variable should be included in future studies.

In addition, future research should explore the ways in which framing of the vignette impacts responses to the outcome variables. The vignette we used, which was adapted from Socia et al. (2019) was short and concise, which may have placed too much emphasis on the demographic information presented. In future studies, the vignette should be lengthened and given more detail, perhaps in the form of a mock newspaper article or police report.

Additionally, we used the same gender neutral name for all vignettes, which may have had the opposite effect. If the readers paid more attention to the name than the pronouns presented, it may have downplayed the gender of the offender.

### *Conclusion*

The goal of this study was to measure the impact of offender and victim demographics on public attitudes towards individuals who commit sexual offenses. These individuals face a significant amount of stigma which makes it difficult to be successful members of society. It is important to understand this stigma by studying the factors that impact public attitudes, so we can make evidence-based public policy that will be mutually beneficial for the public and the individuals who commit sexual offenses and are directly impacted by the criminal justice system. Many current punitive attitudes are based upon myths, such as the idea that people who commit

sexual offenses recidivate at much higher rates than they actually do and stereotypes, such as sexual offenses only occurring between a male perpetrator and a female victim. Basing public attitudes, which can shape legislature, on myths may actually increase the risk of recidivism and negatively impact public safety for everyone.

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Table 1. Summary of Statistical Findings	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
<b>Three-Way ANOVA – <i>Perceived Seriousness</i></b>		
Three-Way Interaction	.364	.547
Two-Way Interaction – Offender Gender and Victim Gender	.033	.855
Two-Way Interaction – Offender Gender and Victim Age	.636	.426
Two-Way Interaction – Victim Gender and Victim Age	.486	.486
Main Effect – Offender Gender	.280	.587
Main Effect – Victim Gender	1.103	.294
Main Effect – Victim Age	11.441	<.001*
<b>Three-Way ANOVA – <i>Recommended Sentence</i></b>		
Three-Way Interaction	.000	.991
Two-Way Interaction – Offender Gender and Victim Gender	.105	.746
Two-Way Interaction – Offender Gender and Victim Age	.034	.853
Two-Way Interaction – Victim Gender and Victim Age	6.327	.012*
Main Effect – Offender Gender	8.808	.003*
Main Effect – Victim Gender	2.313	.129
Main Effect – Victim Age	47.549	<.001*
<b>Three-Way ANOVA – <i>Balanced Justice</i></b>		
Three-Way Interaction	.792	.374
Two-Way Interaction – Offender Gender and Victim Gender	.433	.511
Two-Way Interaction – Offender Gender and Victim Age	.085	.770
Two-Way Interaction – Victim Gender and Victim Age	6.160	.013*
Main Effect – Offender Gender	.249	.618
Main Effect – Victim Gender	.006	.936
Main Effect – Victim Age	4.413	.036*

\* Indicates a statistically significant finding.

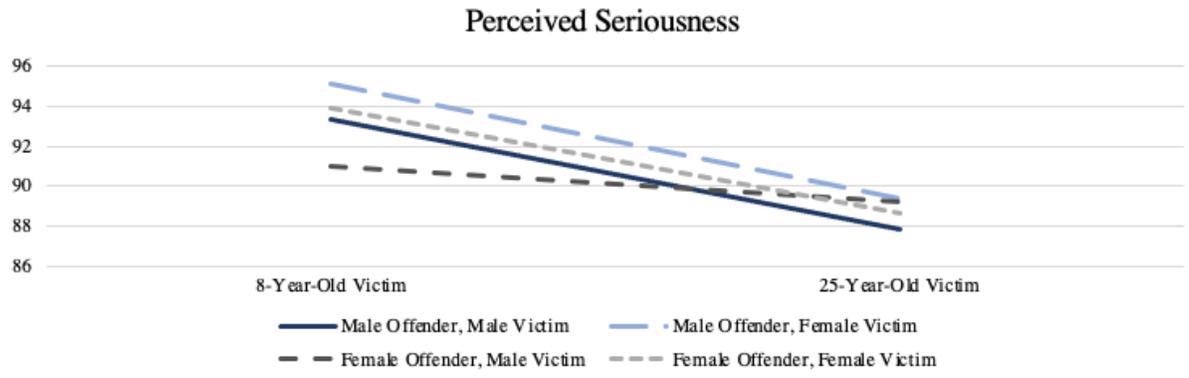


Figure 1

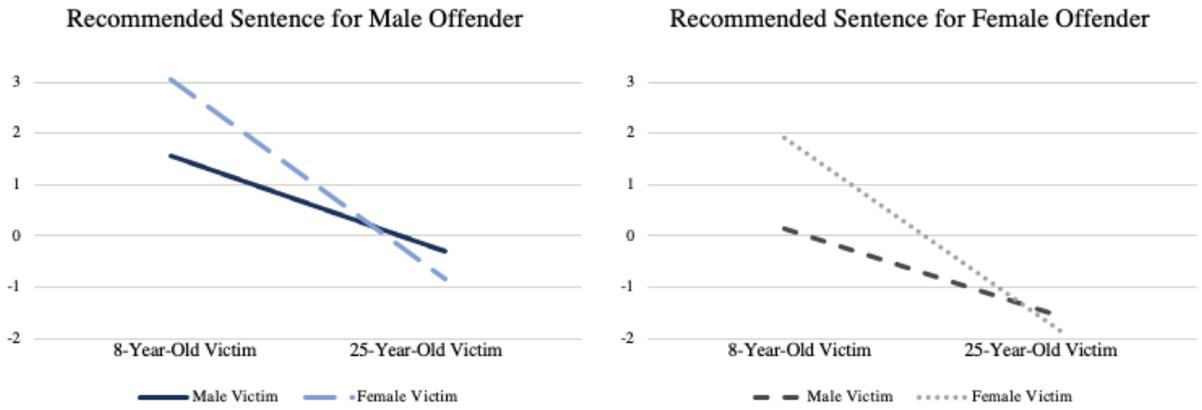


Figure 2

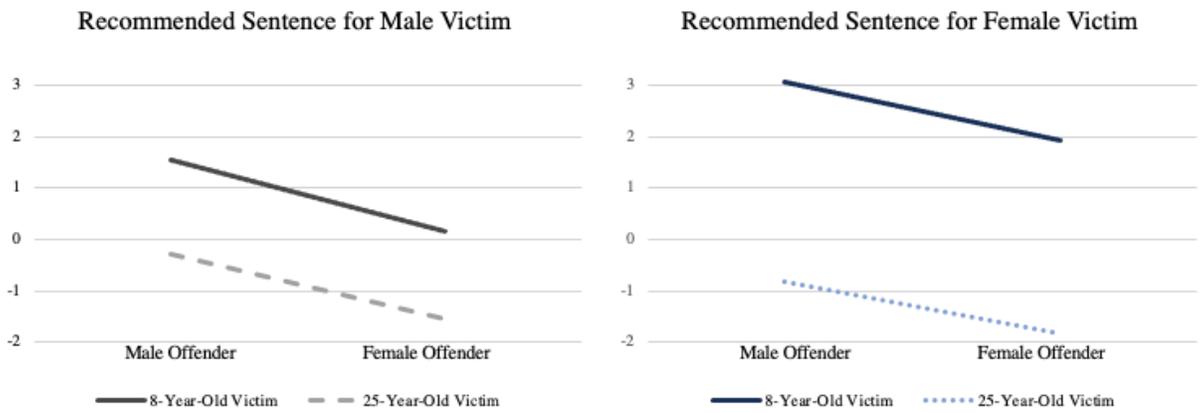


Figure 3

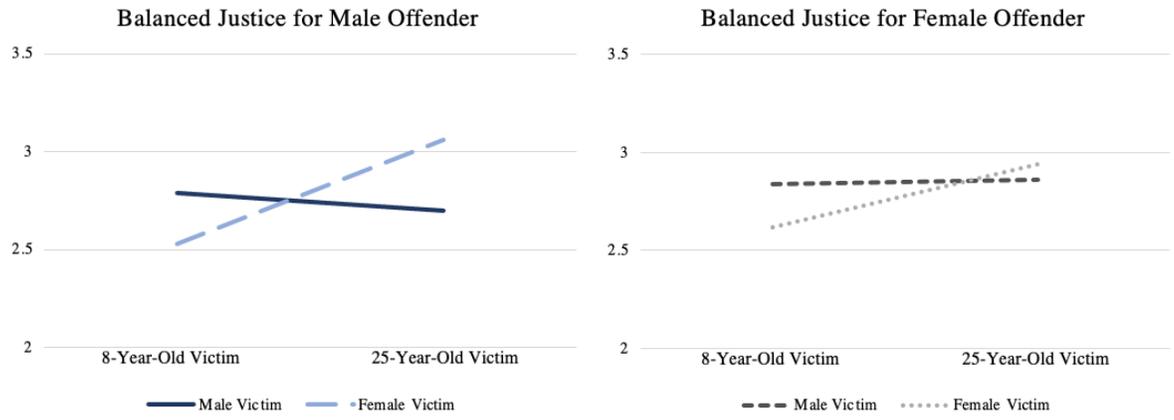


Figure 4