

# Young, Labeled, and Registered: Examining College Students' Perceptions of Juvenile Sex Offenders

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**Abstract:** This study utilizes an online survey to examine college students' perceptions regarding juvenile sex offenders using a 3x3x2 factorial design ( $N = 603$ ). Manipulations within the vignette include the offender's age (14 vs 17 years old), offense type (oral sex, penetrative sex, or digital penetration), and level of coercion (no coercion, verbal coercion, or physical coercion). Several ANOVAs, ordinary least squares, and logistic binary regressions were predictive of perceived dangerousness, severity, willingness to recommend incarceration, and more. Participants perceived the offender and scenario more negatively when presented with a 17-year old, who used physical coercion to commit a penetrative sexual assault. This indicates that juveniles are viewed more negatively when the commission of the crime reflects those committed by adults.

**Keywords:** community member perceptions; factorial design, juvenile sex offenders; sex offender registry

## Introduction

Similar to their adult counterparts, juvenile sex offenders (JSOs) engage in a variety of actions including both contact sexual offenses against other minors (i.e. sexual assault), and in non-contact sexual offenses (possession or distribution of child pornography, voyeurism, or exhibitionism) (Finklehor *et al.*, 2009). Although JSOs do commit sexual offenses against adult victims, these crimes happen at a less frequent extent. The Adam Walsh Act, also known as the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA; 42 U.S.C. § 16911), provides for registration of

JSOs who are adjudicated in the juvenile system or who are convicted in the adult system, thus eliminating the mandatory need for these individuals to only be tried and convicted as adults. SORNA mandates that juveniles as young as 14 years of age at the time of the offense are eligible for registration, and, dependent on the state, the offender may be required to register for life. Currently, thirty-seven states either follow this federal legislation or have enacted similar provisions for juvenile sex offender registration (Interstate Commission for Juveniles, 2023).

Researchers have consistently found limited empirical support for the continued use of the sex offender registry as it is viewed as ineffective in reducing sex offense recidivism and instead has created a variety of collateral consequences (unemployment, housing stability, and harassment/stigmatization) that registrants must cope during the reentry process (Bailey & Klein, 2018; Jung *et al.*, 2020; Kavanagh & Levenson, 2022; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson *et al.*, 2007; Socia & Harris, 2016; Tewksbury, 2004; 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). These collateral consequences also extend to JSOs who experience unique challenges with school settings, in addition to those listed above (Harris *et al.*, 2016). Despite what researchers suggest about the efficacy of the sex offender registry, there is a high level of support in the community for its continued use in the supervision of sex offenders (Klein & Cooper, 2019; Meloy *et al.*, 2013). JSOs, however, are a different matter. Support for the registration of JSOs is considerably lower than for adults, and continues to decline based on the severity of the offense (Stevenson *et al.*, 2009). The current study seeks to examine college student perceptions about juvenile sex offenders and whether participants would advocate for incarceration and/or registry placement for these individuals.

## Literature Review

Despite calls for reform, current legal structures continue to criminalize juveniles for engaging in behaviors that are sometimes considered exploratory and in some settings, developmentally normal (Godsoe, 2020). While their actions could understandably result in harm to the victim, opponents of the registry system suggest that juvenile registration does not address the root cause of the behavior and further perpetuates the stereotype that JSOs are chronic recidivists (Godsoe, 2020). Researchers also suggest that in applying adult-based registration to juveniles, it gives the appearance that juvenile sex crimes are growing at an alarming rate

(Letourneau & Miner, 2005), which then in turn creates tighter restrictions for JSOs (Harris *et al.*, 2016). Despite the findings surrounding the limited support for JSO registration, less is known about the perceptions about JSOs and how they are viewed in relation to their offenses.

It is estimated that JSOs commit nearly one-third of all sex offenses (Finklehor *et al.*, 2009), commit crimes that fit within the role of their juvenile status. For instance, JSOs largely commit offenses against other children accounting for 38% of sex crimes committed against children aged 10-16 years old, and 32% of offenses against a child under the age of 10 (Kenny, 2015). This occurrence may be due to the closeness in age between the offender and victim (Campregher & Jeglic, 2016), or their physical proximity to the victim (Rasmussen, 2013). JSOs are less likely to display victim preference in comparison to adults (Finklehor *et al.*, 2009). This lack of preference may be due to the juvenile's minor status and what victim pool they have access too, as previously discussed. Despite having recidivism rates as low as 7.08% (Caldwell, 2010), they continue to be stigmatized into adulthood due to their registration status.

JSOs differ significantly from adult registrants including their biological and emotional development. Adolescent development continues through young adulthood and it is suggested that the brain does not fully mature until the age of 25 (Miyaguchi & Shirataki, 2014). As the brain maturely develops, the likelihood of rash and impulsive decision-making decreases (Cohen & Casey, 2013). Similar to concerns regarding whether juveniles have the developmental capacity to stand trial (Woodlard & Reppucci, 2000), there is concern that JSOs are not deterred by registration policies because they lack the legal understanding to actually be deterred (Cleary & Najdowski, 2020). Furthermore, researchers suggest that collateral consequences extend to JSOs with these individuals experiencing harassment, housing instability, and most importantly difficulty in school (Harris *et al.*, 2016). Blocking juveniles from completing their schooling limits their ability to form prosocial relationships and from developing the skills to achieve employment success as an adult (Harris *et al.*, 2016).

Despite their level of development, JSOs are viewed as more capable of rehabilitation whereas punishment is more commonly recommended for adults (Chaffin, 2008). Yet despite this, the sex offender registry often limits the registrant's ability to be rehabilitated or to escape the stigma of the sex offender label due to

the lengthy registration periods. Due to the many differences that JSOs exhibit in comparison to adult sex offenders, this study focuses on the participant perceptions about this youthful offender group. Specifically, this study examines the perceptions about JSOs in terms of dangerousness and severity of the offense among other factors, when taking manipulated conditions such as age, level of coercion, and sexual offense into account.

### *Perceptions about Juvenile Sex Offenders and Registration*

In examining different characteristics of JSOs, researchers suggest that when a same-sex offense occurs, participants are less supportive of registration and view the offense as less severe in nature in comparison to a cross-gender offense (Sahlstrom & Jeglic, 2008). Researchers also suggest that when there is a wider age gap between the JSO and the victim, participants view the offense more severely and more negatively than when there is a smaller age gap (Campregher & Jeglic, 2016). This provides rationale for the manipulation of the age of the offender within the current study.

In terms of registration for JSOs, between 59-76% of the general public supports registration for those JSOs who commit contact sex offenses such as sexual assault (Salerno *et al.*, 2010). Support for registration drops when asked about non-contact offenses such as viewing sexually explicit images of children, or 'sexting,' a behavior commonly associated with minors. In research conducted on knowledge associated with JSO registration, 42% of community members did not believe that juveniles under the age of 18 were eligible for registration (Stevenson *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, only 20% of participants were able to correctly identify the youngest age (14 years old) that a juvenile can be registered (Stevenson *et al.*, 2013). The majority of the participants in the study incorrectly believed that JSOs could be removed from the sex offender registry when they become adults, but in reality, many of them are required to register for life (Stevenson *et al.*, 2013). These results are concerning as high levels of support for the sex offender registry do not always equate to high levels of knowledge associated with the legislation that is supported (Klein, 2015; Stevenson *et al.*, 2013). This study contributes to the research by using the SORNA requirements to measure perceptions about JSOs and registration. This project investigates the influences of the offender's age, level of coercion used, and the sexual offense committed on participant perceptions about JSOs, in addition to whether they should be required to register on the sex offender registry.

## Methodology

As previous research has examined perceptions of severity of the offense and offender responsibility for the sexual offense (Klein & Cooper, 2017), the current study seeks to expand those findings by manipulating the conditions present in the 3 (level of coercion) x 3 (sexual offense) x 2 (offender age) factorial design where a sexual offense is committed by a juvenile. Based on those conditions, it is hypothesized that the *older juvenile* (17 years of age), *who commits a penetrative sex offense* through the use of *forced coercion*, will elicit stronger responses from participants in comparison to the younger offender (14 years of age), who does not commit a forcible, penetrative sex offense.

These predictions were based on prior literature in which participants viewed sex crimes more severely when there was a larger age gap between the offender and the victim (Campregher & Jeglic, 2016). Additionally, male juvenile sex offenders are more likely to use verbal or physical coercion to complete their sex crimes in comparison to female juvenile sex offenders (Fehrenback & Monastersky, 1988). Additional research also supports a high level of self-reported physical and verbal coercion used among sexually active 17 to 20-year old individuals (Kjellgren *et al.* 2010).

## Participant Recruitment

In order to recruit participants to complete the survey, a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request was filed at eight academic institutions which are part of a larger state university system in the southwest. Utilizing a FOIA allows researchers to access particular groups that may be difficult to recruit otherwise. More often used by journalists than academic researchers, FOIA requests are a useful tool for researchers to access large participant pools at minimal expense (Bows, 2017). The FOIA request only asked for the email addresses of all undergraduate students enrolled at their university, but did not request any other identifying information. Of those eight institutions, four provided the email addresses at no cost to the researcher. As there was no funding source for this project, the decision was made to only recruit participants from the no-cost universities.

From those four institutions, 64,953 undergraduate students were emailed a link to the Qualtrics based survey with an invitation explaining the purpose of the research study and included a disclaimer regarding the potentially sensitive nature

of the vignettes and survey questions. Based on power estimates, a total sample of 720 participants (40 participants x 18 conditions) was desirable to ensure that the models will be able to hold statistical weight based on the 3 x 3 x 2 factorial design described below (Faul *et al.* 2007). A total of 996 participants completed the survey. This results in a 1.53% response rate which is considerably low, however participants were not offered any incentive and due to the unsolicited nature of the email delivery, some survey invitations may have been lost to spam filters.

### *Design and Materials*

To investigate participants' perceptions about JSOs, an online survey was administered asking participants to read a fictional vignette related to a sex crime committed by a minor against a minor. Using a 3 x 3 x 2 factorial design, eighteen vignettes were created to present a narrative involving a sex crime with variations in the *offense committed* (oral sex, penetrative sex by a penis, or digital penetration), *level of coercion* (no coercion mentioned, verbal coercion, or physical coercion), and the *offender's age* (14 years old or 17 years old). The vignette included several static conditions including the age of the victim (9 years old), the gender of the offender (male), the gender of the victim (female), and the relationship between the offender and victim (pre-existing relationship, neighbors). The decision was made to manipulate the level of coercion and the type of offense committed as only 15% of JSOs engage in behaviors that would be classified as a violent sex crime, yet people stereotype these individuals as serial rapists when asked about the frequently committed sex crimes associated with JSOs (Stevenson *et al.* 2013).

Furthermore, the ages of 14 and 17 are meaningful when discussing the legal effects of the registry. All of these manipulations are legally relevant as they are imbedded within the classifications necessary for juvenile registration under SORNA, as previously discussed. SORNA guidelines state that the JSOs must be 14 years of age or older at the time of the offense to be eligible for registration (SORNA; 42 U.S.C. § 16911). Finally, individuals who are 17 years old are about to age out of the juvenile justice system and will officially be viewed as adult offenders once that occurs. Notwithstanding, many are still required to register into adulthood despite being adjudicated delinquent in the juvenile system. The age of the female victim (9 years old) was chosen based on the average age of onset (9-10 years old) for puberty in a young girl. Although it is acknowledged that juvenile sex offending



patterns vary from just a male offender/female victim dynamic, the choice was made to manipulate the offenders age, offense type, and level of coercion used as a way to expand on previous findings in which both the offender's and victim's gender and race were manipulated (Klein & Cooper, 2017). It is also acknowledged that participant perceptions could be influenced due to the conditions that were chosen to be manipulated, especially when the victim characteristics are considered.

**Vignette stimulus.** Using a between-subject design, participants were randomly assigned one of eighteen vignettes which they were required to read, and then respond to a series of questions focusing on their perceptions about the offender portrayed in the vignette. The vignettes were manipulated based on offender age (14 and 17), type of coercion used (*no coercion*, *physical coercion*, *verbal coercion*), and the sex act committed (*digital penetration*, *penile penetration*, *oral sex*). The vignettes were described as follows:

“Late Saturday night, Darryl Everett went over to the Price house to celebrate their latest football win against a rival team the night before. (14/17)-year old Darryl has been friends with Steve Price for years and the two played football together since their pee-wee days. Darryl has been over to the Price house many times and often eats dinner with Steve's parents and Steve's little sister Janey who is only 9 years old.

This particular night, Steve's parents went to bed early leaving Darryl, Steve and Janey down stairs to watch a movie after dinner. About halfway through the movie, Steve left the room and didn't return for a long time, leaving Darryl and Janey alone to talk. Darryl moved to the same couch as Janey, complimented her on how pretty she was becoming, and started to comb his fingers through her hair. (Inclusion of *coercion conditions* here... leads up to the *sex crime* here)

*No Coercion* (While she started to feel uncomfortable with the situation, Janey froze up completely when Darryl's hands started to undo her pants. Darryl then proceeded to...)

*Physical Coercion* (Although she tried to move away from him Darryl pulled her back down by the arm and kept a firm grip on her. When she started to struggle, he held her down and started to...)

*Verbal Coercion* (He told her that he would like to do sexual acts with her and this could be their secret. She didn't have to tell her parents at all. While she was unsure, Janey agreed and let Darryl undo her pants. Darryl then proceeded to...)

*Digital Penetration* (...use his fingers to penetrate her.)

*Penile Penetration* (...use his penis to penetrate her.)

*Oral Sex* (...perform oral sex on her.)

When it was over, Darryl immediately ran to Steve's room and left Janey alone in the living room. Janey went upstairs to wake her parents to tell them what Darryl did. They immediately called the police and waited for them to arrive since Darryl was still in the house. The police took Darryl down to the station for questioning."

The names of the characters were chosen in a way to limit any inference of racial, ethnic, or other characteristics that could affect participants' perceptions. As race and gender remained static conditions within the vignettes, it was important for the character names to be as universal as possible. After reading the randomly assigned vignette, participants were asked a series of manipulation check questions and additional measures focused on severity of the offense, how the participants felt about the offender as an individual, whether the offender was likely to recidivate, whether they considered the offender to be dangerous, recommended criminal sentence, and finally whether the juvenile should be on the sex offender registry. Participants were only able to read one of the eighteen vignettes, which was randomly assigned via Qualtrics. As the study was set up as a between-subject factorial design, participants were exposed to only one vignette in an attempt to isolate the different manipulated conditions and to reduce potential biases or confusion that might arise from being exposed due to more than one vignette.

### *Manipulation Checks*

Participants were asked three manipulation check questions to ensure that they were actively answering the questions based on the vignette that was randomly assigned to them. Participants were asked to correctly identify the age of the offender, the level of coercion used, and described sexual offense present in their vignette. Of the original 996 participants who completed the survey, 603 participants passed all three manipulation checks. This results in a 60.6% inclusion rate of the original sample in all final analyses with an average of 33.4 participants per vignette. A normal distribution of vignettes existed even after accounting for the manipulation checks, with no significant outliers in terms of assignment.

**Final sample.** Most commonly, the participants identified as being Hispanic (58.6%), White (75.0%), having never been married (77.0%), female (63.7%),



from a suburban hometown (51.4%), had been the victim of a crime at least once (65.3%), does not have a felony conviction (79.5%), and was not employed as a law enforcement officer (79.5%). In addition, the average age for this sample was 23.27 years old ( $SD = 7.497$ ). These measures will be used as control variables within the multivariate regression analyses proposed below. Categories like race and marital status were dichotomized for the full analyzes using the most frequent response for the reference group.

**Table 1: Sample Demographics**

<i>Demographic</i>		<i>N(603)</i>	<i>%</i>
Hispanic	Yes	351	58.6%
	No	248	41.4%
Race	Native American / Alaskan	14	2.3%
	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	0.2%
	Black/African American	39	6.5%
	Asian	32	5.4%
	White	448	75.0%
	Other	63	10.6%
Marital Status	Married	62	10.3%
	Living with a partner	52	8.7%
	Widowed	1	0.2%
	Divorced/Separated	23	3.8%
	Never been married	463	77.0%
Gender Identity	Female	383	63.7%
	Male	175	29.1%
	Non-binary / third gender	32	5.3%
	Prefer to self-describe	6	1.0%
	Prefer not to say	5	0.8%
Hometown	Urban	156	26.0%
	Suburban	309	51.4%
	Rural	136	22.6%
Crime Victim	Yes	392	65.3%
	No	208	34.7%
Felony Conviction	Yes	123	20.5%
	No	478	79.5%
Law Enforcement Officer	Yes	191	31.8%
	No	410	68.2%

### *Dependent Measures*

Although not the only method of analysis available, the use of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) is appropriate to determine which conditions were more likely to result in higher levels of 1) perceived dangerousness of the offender, 2) recommended criminal sanction, 3) perceived severity of the offense, 4) whether the juvenile should be charged as an adult, and 5) whether the juvenile should be required to register on the sex offender registry. In addition, several multivariate regression analyses were conducted using participant demographics and the manipulated conditions as predictors of the above listed dependent variables.

*Perceived Dangerousness Scale.* To measure dangerousness, a five-item summative scale was created based on the following items. Participants were asked, 1) Based on his actions in the scenario, Darryl should be identified as a sexual offender, 2) The sexual activity that took place in this scenario should be identified as a sexual offense, 3) Based on his actions in the scenario, Darryl should be considered dangerous, 4) I believe that Darryl poses a threat to minors, and 5) I believe Darryl would commit this act again if given the chance. All five items were measured using a five-point Likert Scale with options ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). These five measures are a subset of questions from a larger scale focused on sex offender dangerousness (Klein & Cooper, 2017). Confirmatory factor analysis showed that all five items loaded on the same factor and reliability analysis confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha of .889 for these measures.

*Recommended Criminal Sanction (Incarceration).* To measure incarceration, participants were asked whether they believed Darryl should be incarceration for his actions. This item was measured using a yes (1) or no (2) option. If participants answered "yes," they were asked a follow-up question for the recommended length of incarceration. Response options for the length of incarceration ranged from less than 1 year (1) to 16 years or longer (5).

*Perceived Severity of the Offense.* For this dependent variable, participants were asked how severe they would classify the sexual activity as. Response options included a five-point Likert Scale ranging from not very severe (1) to very severe (5).

*Charged as an Adult.* Participants were also asked if Darryl should be charged as an adult for his actions. This item was measured using a yes (1) or no (2) option with no follow-up questions being asked.

*Required to Register as a Sex Offender.* For the final dependent variable, participants were asked whether Darryl should be placed on the sex offender registry for engaging in his actions. This item was measured using a yes (1) or no (2) option. If participants answered “yes,” they were asked a follow-up question for the recommended length of registration. Response options for the length of incarceration ranged from less than 1 year (1) to 16 years or longer (5)

## Results

To analyze the 3x3x2 between-subject factorial design, several ANOVAs were used to test the manipulated conditions present in the vignettes. The data was presented with a normal distribution and no outliers for the different manipulated conditions, which allowed the ANOVAs to move forward. Although ANOVAs are not the only statistic available to analyze factorial designs, but they are appropriate given the nature of the data. Five, 3x3x2 ANOVAs were completed examining participants 1) perceived dangerousness of the offender, 2) recommended criminal sanction and length of sentence, 3) perceived severity of the offense, 4) whether the juvenile should be charged as an adult, and 5) whether or not the juvenile should be required to register on the sex offender registry. In addition, a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) and logistic binary regressions were completed to predict the above listed dependent variables.

### *Perceived Dangerousness Scale*

There was a statistically significant effect of all three manipulated variables on the *Perceived Dangerousness Scale* ( $F(1, 597) = 31.15, p=.001$ ). Tukey HSD and t-tests were used to analyze the difference in means between each variable condition. When presented with a 17-year-old offender ( $\bar{X} = 23.20, SD = 2.67$ ), participants were significantly more likely to perceive the offender as dangerous compared to those presented with a 14-year old offender ( $\bar{X} = 21.90, SD = 3.55$ ). In terms of Coercion, participants were significantly more likely to perceive the offender as dangerous when physical coercion was used ( $\bar{X} = 23.37, SD = 2.58$ ) when compared to verbal coercion ( $\bar{X} = 22.04, SD = 3.31$ ) and no coercion ( $\bar{X} = 22.14, SD = 3.72$ ). Results from the vignettes featuring no coercion showed no statistically significant difference from verbal coercion. Offense type was also significant, with participants significantly more likely to perceive the offender as dangerous when penile penetration was

present ( $\bar{X} = 23.03, SD = 2.76$ ) as compared to when digital penetration was used ( $\bar{X} = 22.23, SD = 3.42$ ). Results from the vignettes featuring oral sex showed no statistically significant difference from digital or penile penetration.

### *Recommended Criminal Sanction (Incarceration)*

There was a statistically significant effect of all three manipulated variables on *Incarceration* ( $F(1, 586) = 92.19, p=.000$ ). Tukey HSD and t-tests were used to analyze the difference in means between each variable condition. When presented with a 17-year-old offender ( $\bar{X} = 1.89, SD = .314$ ), participants were significantly more likely to desire incarceration compared to those presented with a 14-year old offender ( $\bar{X} = 1.67, SD = .470$ ). In terms of Coercion, participants were significantly more likely to recommend incarceration when physical coercion was used ( $\bar{X} = 1.86, SD = .351$ ) when compared to verbal coercion ( $\bar{X} = 1.74, SD = .441$ ). Results from the vignettes featuring no coercion showed no statistically significant difference when compared to physical or verbal coercion. Offense type was also significant, with participants significantly more likely to recommend incarceration when penile penetration was present ( $\bar{X} = 1.87, SD = .332$ ) compared to when digital penetration was used ( $\bar{X} = 1.71, SD = .453$ ). Results from the vignettes featuring oral sex showed no statistically significant difference when compared to digital or penile penetration. As discussed in the dependent variable operationalization, participants who were in favor of incarceration as a criminal sanction were asked a follow-up question regarding recommended length of incarceration. However, there was no statistically significant effect of the three manipulated variables on recommendations for the *length of incarceration*.

### *Perceived Severity of the Offense*

There was a statistically significant effect of all three manipulated variables on the *Perceived Severity of the Offense* ( $F(1, 589) = 13.36, p=.001$ ). Tukey HSD and t-tests were used to analyze the difference in means between each variable condition. When presented with a 17-year-old offender ( $\bar{X} = 4.50, SD = .607$ ), participants perceived the crime as significantly more severe when compared to those presented with a 14-year old offender ( $\bar{X} = 4.30, SD = .726$ ). In terms of Coercion, participants perceived the crime as significantly more severe when physical coercion was used ( $\bar{X} = 4.51, SD = .624$ ) when compared to verbal coercion ( $\bar{X} = 4.32, SD = .682$ ).

Results from the vignettes featuring no coercion showed no statistically significant difference from physical or verbal coercion. Offense type was also significant, with participants perceiving the crime as significantly more severe when penile penetration was present ( $\bar{X} = 4.65, SD = .540$ ) compared to when digital penetration was used ( $\bar{X} = 4.23, SD = .699$ ) or when oral sex was used ( $\bar{X} = 4.37, SD = .688$ ). There was not a statistically significant difference between vignettes featuring oral sex and digital penetration.

### *Charged as an Adult*

There was a statistically significant effect for all three manipulated variables on *Charged as an Adult* ( $F(1, 589) = 108.88, p=.000$ ). Tukey HSD and t-tests were used to analyze the difference in means between each variable condition. When presented with a 17-year-old offender ( $\bar{X} = 1.86, SD = .349$ ), participants were significantly more likely to recommend charging the offender as an adult compared to those presented with a 14-year old offender ( $\bar{X} = 1.48, SD = .501$ ). In terms of Coercion, participants were significantly more likely to recommend charging the offender as an adult when physical coercion was used ( $\bar{X} = 1.72, SD = .437$ ) when compared to verbal coercion ( $\bar{X} = 1.62, SD = .486$ ). Results from the vignettes featuring no coercion showed no statistically significant difference from physical or verbal coercion. Offense type was also significant, with participants significantly more likely to recommend charging the offender as an adult when penile penetration was present ( $\bar{X} = 1.75, SD = .434$ ) as compared to when digital penetration was used ( $\bar{X} = 1.65, SD = .477$ ). Results from the vignettes featuring oral sex showed no statistically significant difference from digital or penile penetration.

### *Required to Register as a Sex Offender*

There was a statistically significant effect of two manipulated variables on being *Required to Register as a Sex Offender* ( $F(1, 589) = 73.462, p=.000$ ). Tukey HSD and t-tests were used to analyze the difference in means between each variable condition. When presented with a 17-year-old offender ( $\bar{X} = 1.91, SD = .281$ ), participants were significantly more likely to recommend putting the offender on the sex offender registry compared to those presented with a 14-year old offender ( $\bar{X} = 1.71, SD = .454$ ). In terms of Coercion, participants were significantly more likely to recommend putting the offender on the sex offender registry when physical

coercion was used ( $\bar{X} = 1.86, SD = .351$ ) in comparison to when verbal coercion was used ( $\bar{X} = 1.74, SD = .441$ ). Results from the vignettes featuring no coercion showed no statistically significant difference from physical or verbal coercion. Offense type was not significant for any of the manipulated conditions.

### *OLS Regression Analyses*

Three OLS regression analyses were used to predict perceived dangerousness, incarceration length, and perceived severity of the offense. OLS regressions were appropriate given the way all three items were measured. All three analyses used participant demographics and the manipulated conditions from the vignettes to predict the three dependent variables in these models. Participant demographics were dichotomized with the dominant response option as the reference group for the regression models.

For the first analysis predicting the *perceived dangerousness scale*, a total of 14.8% of the variance was explained by the predictor variables and was an overall significant model ( $F(2, 564) = 6.337, p = <.001$ ). Of the participant demographic variables, the Hispanic, Female, and Urban variables were significant predictors of the dangerousness scale. This suggests that Hispanic participants viewed the juvenile offender as being more dangerous than non-Hispanic participants ( $b = .650, p < .05$ ). Female participants also perceived the juvenile offender as being more dangerous than other genders ( $b = .877, p < .001$ ), and those who lived in urban hometowns perceived the juvenile offender as being more dangerous than those who lived in either rural or suburban hometowns ( $b = .776, p < .05$ ). In terms of the manipulated conditions, those who received a 17-year-old offender ( $b = 1.193, p < .001$ ) or who received the physical coercion condition ( $b = 1.067, p < .01$ ) viewed the juvenile offender as being more dangerous than those who received the 14-year-old offender, or a different type of coercion. The type of sexual offense performed was not a significant predictor within the model.

The second OLS regression predicts *incarceration length*, which was a follow-up question for those who recommended incarceration as a criminal sanction. For the model predicting the incarceration length, a total of 9.0% of the variance was explained by the predictor variables and the model was significant overall ( $F(2, 438) = 2.799, p = <.001$ ). Within this model, age was the only significant participant demographic variable. Younger participants were more likely to recommend a longer



incarceration sentence than older participants ( $b = -.025, p < .05$ ). Of the manipulated conditions, offender age ( $b = .428, p < .001$ ), physical coercion ( $b = 0.379, p < .05$ ), and penile penetration ( $b = 0.283, p < .05$ ) were all positively associated with longer incarceration sentences, suggesting that those individuals who received a vignette with a 17-year old juvenile offender who used physical coercion, and committed an act with penile penetration were more likely to recommend a lengthier prison sentence.

Finally, the last OLS regression predicts *perceived severity of the offense* and presented an overall significant model explaining a total of 13.8% of the variance as explained by the predictor variables ( $F(2, 557) = 5.801, p = <.001$ ). Within this model, Hispanic and Rural were the only significant participant demographic variables. Hispanic participants ( $b = 0.155, p < .001$ ) were more likely to perceive the vignette as being more severe in nature and those who lived in rural hometowns ( $b = -.025, p < .05$ ) were less likely to perceive the vignette as severe in nature compared to those individuals who were non-Hispanic and who lived in non-rural hometowns respectively. Of the manipulated conditions, offender age ( $b = .199, p < .001$ ) was positively associated with increased perceptions about severity, suggesting that those individuals who received a vignette with a 17-year old juvenile offender were more likely to perceive the scenario as severe in nature. Both verbal coercion ( $b = -.161, p < .05$ ) and digital penetration ( $b = -.168, p < .05$ ) were negatively associated with severity in comparison to those scenarios with penile penetration occurring ( $b = 0.280, p < .001$ ). Table 2 shows the full results for all three OLS regression analyses.

### *Logistic Regression Analyses*

Due to the dichotomous nature of the remaining three dependent variables, three binary logistic regression analyses were conducted to predict incarceration, being charged as an adult, and whether the juvenile offender should be required to register on the sex offender registry.

Beginning with recommendations for *Incarceration*, the overall model was significant in predicting the outcome of interest ( $X^2 = 100.59; p > 0.001$ ). The participant age ( $OR = .965; p < .05$ ) and female variables ( $OR = 1.665; p < .05$ ) were significant predictors with younger participants having a 3.5% decreased likelihood and female participants having a 66.5% increased likelihood of recommending

incarceration as a criminal sanction. Of the manipulated conditions, offender age (OR = 4.028;  $p < .001$ ) and digital penetration (OR = 0.542;  $p < .05$ ) were significant predictors of the incarceration variable. This suggests that when the participant was presented with a 17-year old offender they were 303% more likely to recommend incarceration. When presented with a condition including digital penetration, they were 45.8% less likely to recommend incarceration compared to the other types of offenses presented.

**Table 2: Linear Regression Models Showing effect of Participant Demographics on Dangerousness, Incarceration Length, and Severity**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Dangerousness</i>		<i>Incarceration Length</i>		<i>Severity</i>	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Hispanic	0.650*	0.254	0.102	0.120	0.155**	0.055
Age	-0.040	0.021	-0.025*	0.010	-0.001	0.005
White	-0.194	0.288	0.040	0.138	0.006	0.063
Married	0.415	0.378	-0.271	0.176	-0.080	0.082
Female	0.877***	0.259	0.048	0.124	0.042	0.057
Urban	0.776*	0.302	0.014	0.141	-0.014	0.066
Rural	0.283	0.310	-0.265	0.146	-0.146*	0.068
Crime Victim	-0.264	0.269	0.028	0.127	-0.109	0.059
Felony Conviction	0.223	0.321	-0.186	0.153	0.037	0.071
LEO	0.316	0.268	-0.052	0.127	0.051	0.059
Offender Age	1.193***	0.251	0.428***	0.121	0.199***	0.055
Physical Coercion	1.067**	0.356	0.379*	0.168	0.041	0.078
Verbal Coercion	-0.238	0.357	0.095	0.171	-0.161*	0.078
Digital Penetration	-0.415	0.304	-0.176	0.148	-0.168*	0.066
Penile Penetration	0.417	0.305	0.283*	0.140	0.280***	0.066
R <sup>2</sup>	0.148		0.090		0.138	

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

In the second logistic regression predicting whether participants felt the juvenile offender should be *charged as an adult*, the overall model was significant in predicting the outcome of interest ( $X^2 = 169.01$ ;  $p > 0.001$ ). In terms of demographic variables, participant age (OR = 1.665;  $p < .01$ ) was the only significant predictor in the model, suggesting that younger participants have a 4.8% decreased likelihood of recommending that the offender be charged as an adult. Of the manipulated conditions, offender age (OR = 7.221;  $p < .001$ ) and verbal coercion (OR = 0.542;

$p < .05$ ) were significant predictors of wanting to charge the offender as an adult. These findings suggest that when presented with a 17-year old offender, participants were 622% more likely to recommend the offender be charged as an adult. When presented with a condition including verbal coercion, they were 53.1% less likely to recommend the offender be charged as an adult compared to other types of coercion that were used.

In the final logistic regression analysis predicting *Registration*, the overall model was significant in predicting the outcome of interest ( $X^2 = 113.31$ ;  $p > 0.001$ ). Of the participant demographic variables, Hispanic ( $OR = 2.110$ ;  $p < .01$ ), participant age ( $OR = .945$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and the Female variables ( $OR = 1.863$ ;  $p < .01$ ), were all significant predictors of whether participants wanted to see the juvenile offender register as a sex offender. These findings suggest that Hispanic participants are 111% more likely to recommend registration compared to non-

**Table 3: Logistic Regression Models Predicting Incarceration, being Charged as an Adult, and Registration Requirements**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Incarceration</i>			<i>Charged as an Adult</i>			<i>Registration</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>
Hispanic	0.079	0.235	1.082	0.350	0.214	1.419	0.747**	0.253	2.110
Age	-0.035*	0.018	0.965	-0.049**	0.018	0.952	-0.056**	0.019	0.945
White	0.117	0.260	1.124	0.083	0.240	1.086	0.211	0.278	1.235
Married	-0.312	0.356	0.732	-0.218	0.324	0.804	-0.365	0.388	0.694
Female	0.504*	0.231	1.655	0.188	0.215	1.207	0.607*	0.250	1.836
Urban	-0.377	0.286	0.686	0.083	0.251	1.086	0.104	0.299	1.109
Rural	-0.290	0.288	0.748	-0.445	0.268	0.641	-0.042	0.312	0.959
Crime Victim	-0.056	0.248	0.945	-0.176	0.228	0.838	-0.333	0.266	0.717
Felony	-0.053	0.298	0.948	0.458	0.266	1.581	0.183	0.315	1.201
Conviction									
LEO	0.086	0.246	1.090	0.083	0.223	1.087	0.032	0.266	1.033
Offender Age	1.393***	0.239	4.028	1.977***	0.222	7.221	1.475***	0.264	4.372
Physical	0.451	0.329	1.570	0.014	0.304	1.015	0.363	0.373	1.438
Coercion									
Verbal Coercion	-0.377	0.314	0.686	-0.756*	0.209	0.469	-0.728*	0.347	0.438
Digital	-0.613*	0.266	0.542	-0.275	0.250	0.759	-0.300	0.292	0.741
Penetration									
Penile	0.555	0.305	1.743	0.451	0.261	1.750	0.324	0.314	1.383
Penetration									
$X^2$ (df)	100.59 (15)***			169.01 (15)***			113.31 (15)***		

Hispanic participants. Younger individuals are 5.5% less likely to recommend registration compared to older participants. Female participants are 83.6% more likely to recommend registration compared to other genders. Of the manipulated conditions, offender age ( $OR = 4.372$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and verbal coercion ( $OR = 0.438$ ;  $p < .05$ ) were significant predictors of the registration variable. These findings suggest when the participant was presented with a 17-year old offender they were 337% more likely to recommend registration. When presented with a condition including verbal coercion they were 56.2% less likely to recommend the offender be required to register as a sex offender compared to other types of coercion that were used. Table 3 shows the full results off all the logistic binary regression models.

## Discussion

The current study utilized a 2x3x3 factorial design to examine the effects of offender age (14 vs 17), level of coercion (no coercion vs verbal coercion vs physical coercion), and sex offense (oral sex vs digital penetration vs penile penetration) on a variety of outcomes regarding sentencing and placement on the sex offender registry. It was hypothesized that when participants receive a vignette featuring an *older juvenile* (17 years of age), *who commits a penetrative sex offense* through the use of *forced coercion*, the scenario will elicit stronger responses from participants in comparison to the younger offender (14 years of age), who does not commit a forcible, penetrative sex offense. The results of this study suggest that this hypothesis is correct.

The findings suggest that when a juvenile commits a sexual offense, that participants place responsibility on that person for their role in the situation despite their own minor status. The offender's age was the strongest predictor in both the ANOVAS and the multivariate regression analyses as well. For those participants who received a vignette containing a 17-year-old offender versus a 14-year-old juvenile offender, they were more likely to perceive the offender as more dangerous and the situation as being more severe in nature. Additionally, participants were more likely to recommend incarceration, desired longer sentence lengths, being charged as an adult, and being placed on the sex offender registry when the offender was 17-years-old. Given that the 17-year-old juvenile is on the brink of legal adulthood, participants may have felt that this person was more developed and therefore, should have been more cognizant of his actions when interacting with the 9-year-old victim. This is consistent with prior research which suggests that when there

is a larger age gap between the offender and the victim, participants believe the offense to be more severe in nature (Campregher & Jeglic, 2016). Additionally, the participants' own age was also a strong predictor of the dependent variables, where younger participants are less likely to recommend stronger punishments compared to older participants. Given that the average age of the participants was 23.27 years old, these participants are only a few years removed from being in the potential place of the 17-year-old offender. This finding might suggest that younger participants feel more kinship to the offender based on age and therefore may not view the offender's actions as strongly predatory compared to older participants who might have children or who view these relationships differently. Future research would benefit from including a parent status variable or drawing comparisons between juvenile sex offenders and adult sex offenders given the same scenario.

Additionally, participants who were given vignettes with penile penetration were significantly more likely to view the scenario as harmful compared to those participants who received the manipulated conditions of digital penetration or oral sex. This represented the most severe sex crime in the manipulated condition and was added purposely as a dichotomy to a non-penetrative sex act. Additionally, as the age of the victim (9-years-old) remained static, the severity of the penile penetration condition could be startling to participants especially when the offender was older. Those scenarios in which the offender used verbal or physical coercion were viewed more negatively than those where no coercion was used at all. Again, this is consistent with prior literature suggesting that male offenders and those between the ages of 17-20 years of age are more likely to use physical or verbal coercion (Fehrenback & Monastersky, 1988; Kjellgren *et al.* 2010).

To this point, the possible interactions were explored in the analyses but no significant interactions occurred between the manipulated conditions. Furthermore, no interactions were taking place between the participant demographic variables and the manipulated conditions. With both the ANOVAs and multivariate regression analyses showing similar results in terms of significance for the manipulated conditions, these results suggest that the victim's age may be the most strongly influential factor. Future analyses would benefit from incorporating the victim's age as a manipulated condition to pair with the offender's age. This could allow for a smaller or larger age range between the two individuals to see how this factor influences the dependent variables listed above.

## Limitations

Factorial designs which incorporate several manipulations require larger sample sizes to be able to hold statistical strength within the model. Although the attempts to recruit a large sample were somewhat successful, additional recruitment efforts could be implemented in order to increase the number of participants in general. This study utilized a college student sample recruited from several academic institutions within a large state university system, however there were some universities that were not utilized due to financial constraints. Future research would benefit from recruiting from all eight academic institutions within the university system should grant money become available. This would allow for the largest possible sample and would also allow for additional manipulations to be included in the vignettes themselves. Additionally, this study was only successful in achieving a 1.53% response rate when such a large pool of participants available for recruitment. Future recruitment efforts would also benefit from participant incentives should funding become available. Alternatively, researchers could work with departments to provide research credits for those students who need to complete research via SONA systems or their equivalents.

Another limitation rests in the final sample size after filtering out those participants who did not pass the manipulation checks. While 40 participants per cell is recommended (Faul *et al.*, 2007), this study ended up with an average of 33.4 participants per cell which still allowed us to hold statistical weight in the models given the number of variables also included. Additional expansions in terms of the manipulations would require an even larger sample size, which makes the need for participant incentives or a stronger recruitment model all the more important to implement.

Manipulations including age, gender, and race of the victims and the offender would provide even more insight into participant perceptions about JSOs. Additionally, the inclusion of an adult offender would allow for comparisons regarding situational dynamics between the offender and victim. Furthermore, the relationship between the offender and victim (i.e. family members vs acquaintances) would shed light on whether participants continue to believe in 'stranger danger' mentalities, especially as it pertains to JSOs. The vignettes within this study utilized an acquaintance relationship in which the victim and offender had a pre-existing relationship through the friendship of an older sibling. However, should the offender and victim be related to one another, an additional layer of complexity could be added



to how participants view the severity of the offense. Finally, the vignette concludes with the victim reporting immediately and the offender being arrested that night. It is not common for this resolution to occur in sexual assault situations so quickly (if at all) and this could have an impact on participant perceptions. Future research could include the offense resolution as a manipulated condition where participants could see whether the offender was arrested and/or convicted to provide additional legal variables. Additional research examining all aspects of juvenile offending patterns would only serve to compliment the multitude of research looking at adult sexual offending and the ramifications of the sex offender registry.

## **Disclosures and Declarations**

### ***Data Availability***

The dataset generated during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

### ***Funding Disclosures***

The current study did not receive any funding to complete the research, or the manuscript, and there are no financial disclosures to report.

### ***Author Contributions***

As this study is a solo manuscript, the single author completed all portions of the study including manuscript preparation, data collection and analysis. The first draft of the manuscript was completed by the sole author with edits completed by the sole author as well. Approval of the final manuscript was also made by the sole author.

## **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

### ***Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest***

There are no potential conflicts of interest, to the author's knowledge, that need to be disclosed in this submission.

### ***Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals***

This study involved an online survey of human participants in which the author first received permission from their university's IRB to conduct the research. The study received IRB approval (Study #FY2022-50) from the author's university

on December 21, 2021. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The study was approved by the IRB Board at the researcher's university.

### *Informed Consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. This was done electronically with a record of consent stored in Qualtrics, where the data were collected. In addition, participants were required to report that they were at least 18 years of age or older at the time of the survey. Any participant who did not provide electronic consent to participate in the survey, or who were younger than 18 years of age, were automatically removed and were unable to view any parts of the survey. No personal identifying information was collected and all participant demographics were reported at the aggregate level within the manuscript.

### *Author Note*

The manuscript submitted is original, has not been published before in any language, and is not currently under review with any other journals.

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