Reactions to Youth Crime: Perceptions of Accountability and Competency

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Recent changes in juvenile justice policies have stimulated debate among legal professionals and social scientists. As such, public opinion concerning juvenile offenders is an important and timely topic for empirical study. In the present study, respondents read a scenario about a juvenile who committed a crime, and then decided on a sentence and rated perceptions of the juvenile’s accountability and legal competence. Four between-subject factors were manipulated: age of the defendant (11 versus 14 versus 17 years), type of crime (shooting versus arson), crime outcome (victim injured versus died), and time delay between the instigating incident and the crime (immediately versus one day). The type and outcome of the crime were major motivating factors in sentencing decisions and perceptions of legal competence, and, although younger offenders were seen as less accountable and less competent than older offenders, sentence allocation and attitudes towards punishment were not significantly affected by offender age. Copyright © 2001 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in the juvenile justice system both in the 1960s (e.g. In re Gault, 1967) and in the past decade (Grisso, 1996; Levesque, 1996), have made it so that an adolescent who commits a crime today may have a very different legal experience than an adolescent who committed a crime 50 years ago. When a juvenile is adjudicated today, s/he can face the same sanctions afforded to adults (e.g. the death penalty) and may not receive the same exceptions once automatically afforded to juvenile delinquents (e.g. confidentiality of proceedings) (Bilchik, 1999; Ohlin, 1998). Moreover, juvenile offenders are acquiring a new image in society, in part due to actual increases in juvenile crime, and in another part due to biased and

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unfair media portrayals. Bishop, Frazier, Lanza-Kaduce, and Winner (1996) eloquently stated, “Bolstered by media accounts of violent youth crime, social conceptions of delinquents have shifted from pastel portraits of wayward, misguided youths to stark and ominous renderings highlighting the maturity and sophistication of young offenders” (p. 172).

In the present study, reactions to juveniles who committed violent crimes were investigated. Specifically, we examined how individuals allocate sentences for juvenile offenders of different ages. Additionally, we assessed perceptions of juvenile criminal accountability and legal competence. We were interested in addressing the following questions: Does defendant age influence perceptions of criminal accountability and legal competency? Or, do the type of crime committed and the outcome of the crime govern perceptions of accountability and competency over and above the defendant’s age? Given the changes in policy for juvenile offenders and the increase in the number of juveniles tried in criminal court, it is imperative that psycholegal researchers begin to examine the public’s opinion of youthful offenders. In the following sections, we review relevant literature about recent changes in the landscape of the juvenile justice system and in societal perceptions of juveniles who commit crimes.

The New Juvenile Justice System

In Colonial America, children over the age of 7 years and adults did not differ in the eyes of the law (Long & DeVault, 1992). It was not until 1899 that a special justice system was created for juveniles. At the time, it became apparent that the criminal justice system for adults was not suited for youthful offenders (Small, 1997; Walker, Brooks, & Wrightsman, 1999). In comparison to adults, juveniles were thought to be less culpable for their criminal acts and more malleable in regard to changing their wayward behaviors. Today, a regression towards considering (some) juveniles as adults exists, due to a rise in violent juvenile crime (Grisso, 1996, 1997), and perceptions of the inadequacy of the juvenile system to deter crime and provide successful rehabilitation (Levesque, 1996). Recent reforms include mandatory and determinate sentencing for juveniles, and providing easier access to juvenile records (Ohlin, 1998).

From 1992 to 1997, 47 states enacted legislation that made their juvenile justice system more punitive (Bilchik, 1999), thereby blurring even further the line between the juvenile and adult legal systems. Of particular concern is the steady campaign to increase the number of juveniles tried in adult criminal court (e.g. Redding, 1997). Between 1985 and 1994, juvenile transfers to criminal court increased 71% (OJJDP, 1996), and the proportion of juveniles directly transferred to criminal court in 1997 was the highest in the last two decades (Synder, 1998).

All states have had at least one means of transferring the prosecution of youthful offenders from juvenile court to criminal court law for several decades now, and some states have had transfer provisions prior to the 1920s (Bilchik, 1999). Current transfer provisions include judicial waiver, prosecutorial waiver, and statutory exclusion (see Heilbrun, Leheny, Thomas & Honeycutt, 1997 for a review of state and federal statutes). Statutory exclusion provisions preset an age (e.g., 16 years)
and a committing offense (e.g., capital crime) in which the juvenile’s case automatically begins in criminal court. For example, in Georgia, 13-year-olds charged with murder or other violent offenses can be automatically transferred (Bilchik, 1999; Grisso, 1996).

Statutory exclusions notwithstanding, additional factors are usually considered in transfer decisions. The two standards for juvenile transfers are that (1) the juvenile is unamenable to treatment and (2) the community needs protection from the juvenile (Grisso, Tomkins, & Casey, 1988). In some jurisdictions, juveniles’ levels of sophistication and maturity are taken into account in transfer considerations. In addition to utilizing common standardized measures, Kruh and Brodsky (1997) recommend that a maturity evaluation should also include an assessment of “Mental State at the Time of Offense” and “Competence to Stand Trial.” There is accumulating empirical evidence to suggest that young offenders often do not meet the legal standards of competence¹ (Cooper, 1997) and may not be comparable to adults (see Grisso, 1997). If adolescents are to be prosecuted as adults, adolescents’ legal capacities should be comparable to adults, and whether individuals perceive adolescents who commit “adult crimes” with “adult consequences” to be better able to assist in their own defense or understand the charges against them in comparison to adolescents who do not commit these crimes is currently unknown.

**Perceptions of Juvenile Offenders**

As discussed above, a major reason for the steps taken towards punishment in the juvenile justice system, often called the “get tough” or “just-desserts” model, is the increase in violent adolescent crime and a societal desire for harsher sanctions for juveniles (Levesque, 1996). Victims, their families, and society want retribution, regardless of defendant age. And, although the juvenile violent crime arrest rate dropped 23% from 1994 to 1997, recent studies indicate that a majority favor more severe punishments for juvenile offenders. For example, in a survey conducted by Moon, Sundt, Cullen, and Wright (2000) more than 70% of respondents felt that the juvenile courts were not harsh enough on offenders (see also Sprott, 1998).

The handful of empirical studies that have examined attitudes toward juvenile criminals have reiterated the notion of harsh punishment for violent juveniles. For example, in a mock jury study, Crosby, Britner, Jodl, and Portwood (1995) investigated former petit jurors’ likelihood to recommend the death sentence for juvenile murderers ranging in age from 10 to 19 years, who were described either as remorseful or not remorseful. Crosby et al. found that 60.5% of the mock jurors in their study voted to execute the 10-year-old boy. In this study no effect was found

¹Throughout the article, the terms “competent” and “competent to stand trial” refer to the Dusky standard of competence, “Whether the defendant has sufficient present ability to consult with his attorney with a reasonable degree of rational understanding and rational as well as factual understanding of the proceedings against him” (Dusky v. U.S., 1960, p. 402). In a theoretical sense, competence is comprised of a(n) (1) understanding of charges and potential consequences, (2) understanding of the trial process, (3) capacity to participate with attorney in defense, and (4) potential for courtroom participation (see Grisso, 1998).
for a potentially mitigating variable, that is the level of remorse did not influence death penalty decisions.

However, some factors in addition to age do seem to lessen the tendency to assign harsh sentences. For example, in a mock jury study about adolescent murderers, Stalans and Henry (1994) found that participants were more likely to recommend adult court (as opposed to juvenile court) for juveniles with no prior convictions, and juveniles who were abused and killed their abuser (see also Jensen, Nunez, & Platt, 2000). Moreover, abused murderers were seen as having significantly less intent to kill and less understanding of the moral wrongfulness of their act. Although researchers are beginning to determine the factors affecting disposition decisions of, and attributions of accountability for juvenile criminals, many questions remain unanswered, such as questions concerning relations between defendant age, perceived culpability and competence, and characteristics of the crime.

The Present Study

It has been suggested that if the major motivation toward harsh sentencing for juveniles is a general concern about violent crimes, adolescents who commit severe and violent crimes should be perceived as more culpable and deserving of harsher punishment than adolescents who commit less severe and less violent crimes. Perceived competence should not differ according to the type of crime, but should be expected to increase solely with defendant’s age (see Grisso, 1996). Alternatively, it has also been argued that the commission of severe violent crimes may constitute a verification of adolescents’ mental capabilities in people’s minds. If the latter is true, juveniles who commit more severe crimes should be more likely to be evaluated as competent (in addition to more culpable) than juveniles who commit less severe crimes.

There were two main objectives of the present study, which were derived from the above considerations. The first objective was to determine whether the commission of violent/severe crimes motivated individuals’ propensity to sentence youthful offenders harshly regardless of the defendant age, or whether age was taken into account when assigning sentences and attributing responsibility for the crime. Although laypersons are not usually required to decide on a sentence, we reasoned that making this decision was a suitable proxy for perceptions of deserved punishment.

There were two factors examined in the present study that may contribute to how people conceptualize crime severity. The first factor was the type of crime the juvenile committed: we were interested in determining the differential effects of a crime against a person versus a crime against property on sentence decisions and perceptions of accountability. As described later, the stimuli either involved the crimes of firing a gun at a person or arson. We contend that shooting with a gun is (and is perceived to be) a more severe crime than arson. Gun violence is of great importance in our nation today, both in debates over the legal issues of gun control and in regard to juveniles’ accessibility to guns.
Outcome of the crime was the second factor examined in relation to crime severity. In our criminal justice system, a distinction is made between crimes that ultimately result in the death of a person and those that do not, as in attempted murder versus murder. It was of interest to examine whether participants in the present study would draw similar distinctions as evident in differences in sentence allocations and perceptions of accountability. For this reason, the criminal action resulted either in the death or in the injury of the victim in our study.

When type of crime was considered in conjunction with the outcome of the crime, we were also able to address the relation between the nature of the crime and its outcome. For example, we could determine whether perceptions of higher culpability and harsher sentences were allotted to offenders who kill versus offenders who injure, and to offenders who intend to harm a person versus offenders who do not, or if the two factors interacted in determination of individuals’ attributions of responsibility for the crime.

In contrast to crime type and outcome, which were expected to affect perceptions of crime severity, we were interested in including a factor that could mitigate perceptions of juvenile responsibility. Specifically, we examined impulsivity, because it is often argued that adolescents are more impulsive than adults, particularly in the context of deciding to commit a crime (Reppucci, 1999; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996). Thus, whether the perceived impulsivity also contributes to decisions about juveniles of differing ages, type of crime committed, and outcome of the crime was of interest for the present study.

Our second main objective was to assess how the age of the defendant, type and outcome of the crime, and impulsivity contribute to perceptions of juveniles’ legal competence. Specifically, we wanted to establish whether age of the defendant was the only factor influencing perceptions of legal competence, or whether type and outcome of the crime also influenced individuals’ perceptions. If the severity of the crime does serve as verification of individuals’ mental capabilities, then crime type and outcome would be expected to influence ratings of competency. Finally, impulsivity was expected to interact with age such that when the crime was committed impulsively, younger juveniles were expected to be perceived as less likely to be competent than if the crime was not committed impulsively and than older juveniles.

**METHOD**

**Subjects**

Participants were 480 undergraduates partaking in psychology courses at the University of California, Davis. All participants were aged 18 years and older ($M = 19.91$, range = 18–47 years) and U.S. citizens. An equal number of male and female participants were involved in the study and were assigned to each experimental condition. Participants came from different ethnic backgrounds: 41% Caucasian, 37% Asian American, 7% Hispanic, 3% African American, and 12% “Other ethnicity.” These percentages are representative of the ethnic composition of the undergraduate student population at the University. Subjects received course credit for their participation.
Materials

Written Scenarios

Parallel scenarios were created and assigned to different participants. Four factors were varied. The first was the defendant’s age, that is the adolescent was 11, 14, or 17 years-old. Although the years representing adolescence are ill defined (Reppucci, 1999), these ages tend to represent pre-, mid-, and late adolescence. Moreover, although some states do recognize 17-year-olds (and even 16-year-olds, New York) as adults in terms of criminal prosecution, the age of 18 is often seen as the legal age of the onset of adulthood. In California, the age of 18 is the dividing line between original jurisdiction for juvenile and criminal court.

The second factor manipulated was the type of crime the juvenile committed. The scenario either involved the crimes of firing a gun at a person or arson. Outcome of the crime was the third factor varied, that is, the offender’s actions resulted in death or injury of the victim. Finally, the fourth factor manipulated was level of impulsivity, which was operationally defined as the time interval between the instigating event (i.e., an argument) and the commission of the crime. The adolescent in the scenario either commits the crime immediately after having a fight with the victim (high impulsivity) or waits until the next day (low impulsivity).

The scenario is presented below with the variations italicized and bracketed.

Andrew is a 11-year-old [14- or 17-year-old] male who lives with his mother, stepfather, and younger sister. One day, Andrew had an argument with a neighbor of the same age, Sean, who made several vicious comments about Andrew’s family. Andrew confronted Sean about the comments which resulted in a physical fight. Immediately after the fight [The day after the fight], Andrew returned to his house, took his stepfather’s gun, went to Sean’s house and shot him [took his stepfather’s gas can, went to Sean’s house and set Sean’s father’s car on fire. Sean saw the fire and went outside. As he approached the car, it exploded]. Sean was injured [died] as a result of Andrew’s actions. Andrew has no criminal record and is of average intelligence.

Questionnaires

In addition to having a brief demographics questionnaire, two questionnaires were developed for use in the present study. The first was the “Perception of Accountability Questionnaire.” The six questions used in the study by Crosby et al. (1995) were modified to elicit culpability judgments about Andrew and were included among other questions that we devised. Participants had to indicate the amount of agreement or disagreement (1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree) they felt with statements such as, “Andrew should be considered fully responsible for his actions” or “Andrew is likely to commit a crime again.”

The second questionnaire was the “Perception of Competence Questionnaire.” This questionnaire was created in consideration of the elements included in requirements to be competent to stand trial (Grissio, 1998), and similarly on the questions juveniles were directly asked in studies focused on the evaluation of competence, such as in the Cooper (1997) study. Participants were asked to rate the likelihood that Andrew is able to understand legal procedures, criminal charges,
and the consequences of the legal prosecution (0 = extremely unlikely and 10 = extremely likely).

Procedure

Participants were invited to take part in a study on perceptions of adolescents who commit crimes. Interested individuals came to an assigned room on an assigned date and time. No more than 25 individuals were scheduled for each experimental session. After providing initial instructions to the group, participation was individual in that participants read the written scenario and questionnaires to themselves and answered the questions alone.

Participants first answered questions about themselves, such as their age and ethnicity. Through a process of block randomization, they then read one of the 24 written scenarios. After reading the scenario, participants decided on a sentence, in months or years, for the case. Next, participants answered the questions included in the “Perception of Accountability Questionnaire” and the “Perception of Competence Questionnaire.” The order of these questionnaires was counterbalanced. Finally, participants were thanked and handed their course credit.

RESULTS

In general, a series of 3 (juvenile age: 11 versus 14 versus 17 years) × 2 (type of crime: shooting versus arson) × 2 (outcome: death versus injury) × 2 (time interval: immediate versus delayed) full-model analyses of variance (ANOVAs) was performed to test hypotheses. Dependent variables included assigned years in prison and perceptions of the juveniles’ accountability and legal capabilities. Significance levels were preset at \( p < .05 \). Male and female participant ratings on the dependent measures did not significantly differ from each other, thus, analyses described below were performed with participant gender collapsed. Similarly, the order of administration of the “Perceptions of Accountability Questionnaire” and “Perceptions of Competence Questionnaire” did not influence perceptions, and was not considered further, \( F(1, 478) p > .10 \).

Effects of Age, Type of Crime, Outcome of the Crime, and Time Interval on Sentence Allocation

To test how the independent variables manipulated in this study affected the severity of the sentence, a full-model ANOVA was performed, using assigned years in prison as the dependent variable.\(^2\) The full model was statistically significant, \( F(23, 414) = 7.15, p < .01 \).

\(^2\)Respondents were asked to provide a sentence in months or years for Andrew. Respondents also had the option of choosing “life in prison” or “death penalty.” Thirty-five respondents (7%) chose “life in prison,” and these responses were entered into the database as 50 years. Seven respondents (1.3%) chose “death penalty” and 35 (7%) respondents did not provide an answer; these 42 people were excluded from analyses concerning sentence allocation.
Results revealed a significant main effect of type of crime such that juveniles who shot with a gun received a more severe sentence than juveniles who committed arson. There was also a main effect of outcome, such that a harsher sentence was given when the victim was killed than when the victim was injured. The effect of defendant age on sentence severity did not reach the preset level of statistical significance, although a trend can be noted (see Table 1).

A significant two-way interaction between type of crime and outcome also emerged, $F(1, 414) = 7.91, p < .01$ (Figure 1). Simple effects analyses showed that the sentence was disproportionately harsh when the shooting killed the victim, than when the arson killed the victim, $F(1, 222) = 43.18, p < .001$, or when the shooting injured the victim, $F(1, 218) = 45.15, p < .001$. Additionally, in comparison to all the other possible situations within this interaction, the sentence was disproportionately lower when arson was committed and the victim was injured, $F(1, 217) > 22.60, p < .001$.

### Effects of Age, Type of Crime, Outcome of the Crime, and Time Interval on Perceived Accountability

To limit the number of dependent measures submitted to data analysis, factor analysis was employed on questions in the “Perception of Accountability Questionnaire.” Two factors emerged: “Attribution of Accountability” and “Punishment/Reform.” Mean composite scores were created from each factor and used in further analyses (see Table 2 for items in each composite score and alpha values).

The mean composite score “Attribution of Accountability” was used as the dependent measure in a full model ANOVA, $F(23, 456) = 3.83, p < .001$. A significant main effect of age was found, $F(2, 456) = 32.86, p < .001$. Bonferroni planned comparisons showed that the attribution of responsibility was significantly higher for each age of the juvenile defendant (Table 3).

Additionally, an interaction effect was found between time interval, type of crime, and outcome, $F(1, 456) = 7.33, p < .01$. Simple effect analyses revealed that when the crime was a shooting and the victim dies, the adolescent was rated as more responsible if he waited a day ($M = 3.30$) than if he acted immediately after the argument ($M = 3.09$), $F(1, 238) = 3.96, p < .05$. When the crime was arson and the victim died, the contribution of time interval was not significant. No significant differences in relation to time interval were detected when the victim was injured.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean number of assigned years in prison</th>
<th>$F$</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age of defendant</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11-year-old: 9.89</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>14-year-old: 11.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>17-year-old: 13.54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Type of crime</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooting: 16.63</td>
<td>67.01</td>
<td>.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arson: 6.38</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcome of crime</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed: 16.69</td>
<td>68.88</td>
<td>.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Injured: 6.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time delay interval</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediately: 11.42</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One day: 11.55</td>
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</table>
A full-model ANOVA was performed using the “Punishment/Reform” composite score as the dependent measure. A high score indicated tendency towards punishment, whereas a low score indicated tendency towards rehabilitation. The full model was significant, $F(23, 456) = 2.67, p < 0.001$. A significant main effect of crime type was found, $F(1, 456) = 28.05, p < 0.001$ (Table 3). Participants were more likely to have a punitive attitude when the crime was shooting than when it was arson. There were no other significant main or interaction effects.
Effects of Age, Type of Crime, Outcome of the Crime, and Time Interval on Perceived Competence and Understanding of the Situation

Factor analysis was employed with the questions in the “Perception of Competence Questionnaire” to determine whether scales could be constructed to limit the number of dependent measures. Again, two factors emerged. Mean composite scores were computed from the factors and included in the analyses reported below (see Table 2 for items in each composite score and alpha values).

The first composite score was entitled “Competence about Legal Procedures.” A full model ANOVA was performed using perceived competence as the dependent measure, $F(23, 456) = 4.03$, $p < .001$. Some intriguing results emerged (Table 4). First, a significant main effect of age was found, $F(2, 456) = 25.88$, $p < .001$. Participants believed that older adolescents were more likely to be competent than younger ones. Bonferroni planned comparisons revealed that differences were significant between the three age groups. Second, a significant main effect of outcome was found, $F(1, 456) = 4.81$, $p < .05$. Participants believed the offender was more likely to be competent to stand trial when the victim was killed than when the victim was injured.

However, two significant three-way interaction effects qualified the main effects of defendant age and crime outcome, such that there were conditions under which the youngest Andrew was considered as likely to be competent as the oldest Andrew. The first significant three-way interaction was between age, type of crime and
outcome of the crime, $F(2, 456) = 4.56$, $p < .05$ (see Figure 2). Simple effects analyses showed that the 11-year-old Andrew was perceived as significantly more likely to be competent if he shot his peer and killed him than if he shot his peer but only injured him, $F(1, 78) = 5.02$, $p < .05$. When the 11-year-old killed by shooting,

Table 4. Main effect results of full model ANOVA for perceived legal competence and perceived understanding of the situation ratings

<table>
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| ![Figure 2. Three-way significant interaction effect of defendant age, crime type, and crime outcome on perceptions of legal competence.](image)

*Notes:* Perceived legal competence scored as 0 = very low likelihood of being competent, 10 = very high likelihood of being competent. Perceived understanding of the legal situation scored as 0 = very low likelihood of understanding, 10 = very high likelihood of understanding. The different superscripts (a, b, c) correspond to significant mean differences (at $p < .05$) according to the Bonferroni adjustment for planned comparisons.
his attributed competence did not significantly differ from the competence attributed to the 14-year-old (irrespective of type of crime and outcome), and the 17-year-old who injured by shooting. When the type of crime was arson, the effect of age was not qualified by the outcome.

The second three-way interaction was between age of the juvenile, outcome, and time interval, $F(2, 456)=4.94, p<.01$ (Figure 3). When the crime was committed the day after the argument with the peer, the 11-year-old juvenile was perceived as more likely to be competent if the victim was killed than if the victim was injured $F(1, 78)=4.76, p<.05$. Interestingly, in this condition, the perceived likelihood of being competent for the 11-year-old delinquent did not significantly differ from that for the 14-year-old delinquent regardless of what actions the 14-year-old committed, or for the 17-year-old who injured the immediately after the argument.

The second composite score was named “Understanding of the Legal Situation” (see Table 2). A full-model ANOVA was performed using the composite as the dependent measure, $F(23, 456)=3.63, p<.001$. A significant main effect of age was found, $F(2, 456)=27.54, p<.001$. Participants attributed more understanding to older than younger adolescents. Bonferroni planned comparisons revealed that differences were significant between all three age groups (Table 4).

A significant two-way interaction between time interval and age of the juvenile was also found, $F(2, 456)=3.57, p<.05$. If the crime was committed immediately after the argument, the 11-year-old was perceived as understanding his legal situation significantly less ($M=5.12$) than the 14- and 17-year-old defendants ($M=6.58$ and $M=6.84$ respectively), $F(1, 158)=19.80, p<.001$. However, if the crime was committed the day after, the 11-year-old offender’s perceived understanding rose to meet the understanding attributed to the 14-year-old defendant ($M=5.50$ and $M=5.88$ respectively). It should be noted that the perceived understanding for the 14-year-old Andrew did not significantly vary according to time interval. The 17-year-old Andrew was still perceived has having the highest understanding ($M=6.80$), $F(1, 158)=16.88, p<.05$.

![Figure 3. Three-way significant interaction effect of defendant age, crime type, and time interval on perceptions of legal competence.](image-url)
Results Summary

When assigning a sentence for the accused, the type of crime and its outcome were important factors for respondents’ decision, whereas age of the defendant did not play a significant role. Nor did age affect people’s attitudes towards punishment/reform for Andrew. In contrast, when making attributions of blameworthiness, and rating perceptions of juvenile legal competence and understanding of the situation, age of the juvenile was influential. Younger juveniles were rated as less responsible, less competent, and less able to understand the legal situation than older juveniles. However, crime-related factors also influenced perceived accountability, and competence and understanding. For example, juveniles were perceived as more competent if the victim died than if the victim was only injured. In addition, there were crime conditions under which the perceived competence of younger juveniles was equivalent to older juveniles. Lastly, we included time interval as an independent variable to see whether it could hinder sentences, attributed accountability, and competence. Time interval only influenced accountability and competence via complex interactions. Contrary to our expectations, committing a crime immediately after the instigating event did not mitigate perceptions of accountability and competence. Instead, when Andrew waited a day, he was attributed even greater culpability, and was seen as more likely to be competent to stand trial, and having more understanding of the legal situation.

DISCUSSION

The overall aim of our study was to advance knowledge of the factors affecting public opinion about juvenile delinquency, particularly with respect to perceptions of deserved punishment, accountability, and legal competence.

Punishment and Perceptions of Accountability

The type of crime, the outcome of the crime, and the interaction between these two variables significantly influenced sentence severity. Juveniles who fired a gun and killed their victims received significantly more severe sanctions than juveniles who fired a gun and injured their victims, or juveniles who committed arson. These results are not surprising because they reflect general principles governing our criminal justice system: Crimes that are aimed at harming a person in comparison to harming property, and crimes that result in death in comparison to injury are considered less severe and deserving less punishment. Empirical studies have also demonstrated that in people’s minds the amount of harm done is positively related to ratings of crime seriousness (Horai & Bartek, 1978).

More provocative is that the main effect of defendant age did not reach the preset level of significance, indicating that, at least after reading a scenario, age of the offender does not play a fundamental role in decisions of prison sentences. Also, juvenile age did not significantly affect attitudes towards punishment/reform. However, younger juveniles were perceived as significantly less blameworthy than
older adolescents. Thus, participants seemed to have an awareness that younger adolescents’ ability to evaluate situations may be still developing and therefore adolescents may not be able to fully appreciate the wrongfulness of their actions. Yet, individuals did not seem to rely on this awareness to decide sentences or to form attitudes towards punishment or rehabilitation for Andrew.

In their attributional model of sentencing dispositions, Lurigio, Carroll, and Stalans (1994) note that “blameworthiness is central to punishment” (p. 93). Given that we failed to detect significant age differences on sentence allocation and punishment/reform attitudes, we should also have failed to detect significant differences in blameworthiness. However, participants in our study did attribute lower accountability to the younger Andrew than to older Andrew. Thus the question becomes “Why doesn’t the perception of lower accountability translate into less severe sentences and less punitive attitudes for younger juveniles?” Social psychologists have often demonstrated that, when explaining behavior, individuals are more likely to lean towards dispositional attributions than to situational ones (e.g. Brown & Fish, 1983; Martin & Tesser, 1992; Miller, Norman, & Wright, 1972). One of the reasons for this tendency is that dispositional attributions afford people with a sense of predictive control. In contrast to the arbitrariness of seemingly unpredictable events occurring around us, a dispositional outlook produces a general sense that, despite the exceptions, people do what they do because of the types of person they are, and not because of the situations they are in.

This tendency has also been observed in the interpretation of unlawful behaviors: Individuals tend to deem criminal actions as reflections of criminal dispositions. This appears to hold true for explanations of adult crime (e.g. Brems & Wagner, 1994) as well as juvenile crime (e.g. Mohr & Luscri, 1995). In regard to the present study, Andrew’s actions may be interpreted as a product of the person he is and he can thus be labeled a “criminal.” Therefore, when deciding sentences and forming attitudes towards punishment, the age of the offender may become of secondary importance in comparison to crime-related factors. Because internal dispositions appear to be more likely to be elicited to gain control over incomprehensible events, the attribution of criminal dispositions to juvenile offenders may be further sustained by how they are portrayed in the popular press. Often, the focus of media is on the inexplicability of juvenile crime, such as the randomness of school shootings, and is only sometimes accompanied with a discussion of situational factors (e.g. availability of guns). Further research should investigate whether the level of perceived explicable of criminal behaviors is related to attributions of criminal dispositions, accountability, and amenability to reform in juvenile delinquents.

An additional explanation for the apparent contradiction in our results (i.e. younger adolescents are perceived as significantly less accountable, yet they do not receive a significantly lower sentence) may be because individuals identified with Sean, the victim of the crime. Regardless of the extent to which Andrew fully appreciates the meaning of his criminal actions, Andrew’s actions injure or kill Sean. Thus, participants in our study may have been committed to guarantee fairness to the victim and his family. This interpretation is consistent with the weight that society has given to retribution in recent years, and with the numerous legislative changes aiming at placing victims’ rights over defendants’ rights (Kleinknecht, 1996).
It should be noted, however, that in other studies eliciting perceptions of juvenile offenders after reading or hearing written scenarios, defendant age significantly affected ratings of punishment severity (e.g., Jensen et al., 2000; Stalans & Henry, 1994). For example, Crosby et al. (1995) found that mock jurors were significantly more likely to recommend the death sentence as the age of the defendant increased from 10 years to 19 years (see also Finkel, Hughes, Smith, & Hurabiell, 1994). A possible reason why a reliable age effect was not found in our study but was found in similar studies may be because of the nature of the dependent variable. For instance, in Crosby et al. (1995), the outcome variable was a yes/no recommendation for the death penalty. Perhaps when required to choose whether to sentence a person to death, individuals pay closer attention to the age of the defendant than when they are required to assign a sentence in months or years, which does not have the same dramatic consequences as a capital sentence. Moreover, the participants in Crosby et al. were East Coast adults recruited from petit jury lists, whereas participants in the present study were West Coast college students. Dissimilarities in participant characteristics are another potential explanation for the inconsistent findings. Thus, future research should discern whether, and if so, which, individual difference factors influence attitudes towards juvenile delinquents.

Another possible reason for the difference in findings is that our experimental manipulations mainly concerned aspects of the crime as opposed to attributes of the defendant. We only varied the defendant’s age whereas other studies varied defendant age as well as other characteristics (e.g., abuse history, remorsefulness), which may have directed attention to the defendant and deflected attention from the crime. In future studies, characteristics of both the crime and the defendant should be introduced, as is the norm in actual trials.

Overall, our results mirror recent changes in policy concerning juvenile offenders. Traditionally, the juvenile justice system has emphasized the goals of treatment and rehabilitation of young delinquents. The increasing number of juveniles being transferred to adult court for prosecution illustrates the shift in policy to punishment (Grisso, 1996), and our results indicate that, despite perceptions of diminished culpability with younger aged criminals, public opinion supports rigorous punishment for criminals irrespective of their age. If juvenile court judges hold these views as well, it is possible that the specified goals of rehabilitation and treatment for child offenders within the juvenile justice system are not being realized.

**Perceptions of Legal Competence and Legal Understanding**

Our second main objective was to examine how our manipulated variables influenced perceptions of juveniles’ competence to stand trial, as well as juveniles’ understanding of the charges and the consequences of the trial. Both factors “Competence about Legal Procedures and “Understanding of the Legal Situation” were significantly affected by age. It is not surprising to find that younger defendants were viewed as less sophisticated in their knowledge of legal procedures. Intuitively, one would expect knowledge to increase with age. Previous studies on child victim/witnesses’ knowledge of legal terminology and courtroom behavior have generally
found that older children hold more knowledge and understanding than younger children (e.g. Saywitz, Jaenicke, & Camparo, 1990). Similarly, perceived competence of the child victim/witness also increases with age (Cashmore & Bussey, 1996). The question of whether these perceptions extend to child defendants was partly answered here but further research with different populations (e.g. judges) will provide a more complete picture of perceptions of juvenile offenders’ competence to stand trial and understanding of their legal situation.

Interestingly, in regard to the “Competence About Legal Procedures” composite measure, there was also a significant main effect of crime outcome. To our knowledge, there is no established relationship between crime consequence and the actual competency of the defendant to stand trial. Thus, it is provocative (and perhaps even disturbing) to discover that whether the victim dies or is injured influences the perceived ability of defendants to understand the role of the defense attorney, courtroom procedures, etc.

The relation between outcome of the crime and competency is concerning because it is not based on any logical ground. However, there are several research results showing how individuals’ thinking is often irrational when evaluating criminal actions. One interesting example is the study by McCauley and Jacques (1979) about factors affecting people’s likelihood to believe in conspiracy theories of presidential assassination in relation to whether the assassination was successful or not. These authors found that individuals associated a successful presidential assassination as resulting from the action of a group of conspirators, whereas unsuccessful assassination attempts were more likely to be associated with one person acting alone. The authors determined that this was not because of a general need to explain extreme events with proportionately extreme causes, but rather, they found that people believed that to kill a U.S. president, assassins must be very efficient and effective. Because people believed that groups were more efficient and effective than a lone assassin could ever be, conspiracies, being a group product, were associated more with successful assassinations. Additionally, Jones (1989) posited that people infer enhanced natural abilities (most often intelligence) and an overall appearance of competence (competence in the general sense, not the specific legal sense) as the perceived difficulty level of a performance increases.

It is possible that similar lines of thinking will operate for individual offenders whose crimes result in different outcomes: Individuals who commit a crime whose outcome is successful may be generally perceived as more efficient and competent than those whose crime is not successful. They may also be perceived as having accomplished a more difficult task. In our study, these ideas could certainly apply when the crime was a shooting. Although one may argue that Andrew only meant to injure or scare Sean, the “success” of the crime could reasonably be defined as killing the victim. Although, at times, killing or injuring someone with a gun may entail only a very small and unintentional difference in aiming, participants may have perceived Andrew as having accomplished a more difficult task when he killed Sean. The three-way interaction between defendant age, type of crime, and crime outcome on perceptions of legal competence is consistent with the notion that a successfully completed crime was committed by a more capable individual. In the present study, if a successful shooting is perceived as more difficult than a non-successful shooting, according to Jones (1989), the shooter will then be viewed as
more competent. Respondents may have then used a bootstrapping approach to infer greater legal competence.

Interestingly, the juvenile is also perceived as more likely to be legally competent when he killed as a consequence of arson than when he only injured. In this case, the success of the crime can be hardly defined as killing the victim, because the scenario clearly indicated that Andrew wanted to destroy Sean's father’s car. Also, the level of perceived difficulty between an arson resulting in accidental death as opposed to arson resulting in accidental injury would not be expected to vary, and therefore Andrew should not be afforded increased competence. Yet, results showed the same effect of crime outcome for arson as for the shooting.

It is possible that, in addition to inferring competence from the offenders’ ability to successfully perform a criminal action or by evaluating the difficulty level of the crime, individuals hold an implicit theory of the characteristics of a killer. Although it does not seem very plausible that laypeople have an implicit theory of defendants’ abilities to stand trial, it is likely that laypeople make attributions about killers’ intelligence and mental sophistication that could be reflected in judgments of legal knowledge and competence. Whether laypeople believe that killers, both adult and juvenile killers, are more intelligent than other criminals should be investigated, and whether such intelligence is limited only to actions, thoughts, and behavior within the criminal domain (e.g., competence to stand trial or competence to understand and appreciate the Miranda warning), or whether it is a more global intelligence, should also be examined.

Caveats and Limitations

There are caveats to the present study that may limit the overall generalizability of findings. The first relates to the stimuli (the written scenario) used in the present study to elicit individuals’ perceptions. Perhaps when faced with actual youthful offenders, additional factors may be influential that were not (or could not be) examined in our laboratory study (e.g., childlike appearance). The second caveat relates to the characteristics of the participants in the study. The present sample consisted of undergraduates, who were primarily between the ages of 18 and 22 (92%). It is conceivable that their perceptions would differ from the general population. Because our participants were close in age to Andrew and students interested in the social sciences, a more diverse population may have made the impact of the manipulated variables more robust. However, at this point in our knowledge, information gained from the present study may still be useful, particularly as the number of juveniles being tried as adults increases. Although, presently only a small percentage of juvenile cases waived to criminal court actually go to a jury trial, as the number of juveniles transferred increases, so does the number of adults who are given the responsibility of determining their fate, and, thus, research on the public’s opinion of young persons on trial is valuable and needed.

Currently, however, judges are the most likely persons to make decisions concerning youthful offenders. Thus, whether our findings extend to judges is a relevant issue for those interested in justice for juveniles. Therefore, studies similar to ours should be conducted with judges and other professionals involved in determinations of competency and juvenile dispositions. Despite the limitations...
previously outlined, relevant conclusions can be drawn and questions for future research generated.

Conclusions

Earlier in the article, we argued that if the major motivation toward harsh sentencing is a general concern about violent crimes but violence is not proof of maturity or mental sophistication, the level of perceived competence for juvenile defendants should not differ according to the type of crime; rather levels of perceived competence should be expected to increase solely as a factor of defendant age. Thus, adolescents who commit a more violent crime with more severe consequences should be perceived as deserving harsher punishment than adolescents who commit a less violent crime with less severe consequences. Alternatively, if the commission of violent crimes is interpreted as evidence of maturity and mental sophistication, juveniles who commit severe crimes would not only receive harsh sentences, but should also be evaluated as more competent than juveniles who commit less severe crimes.

Our results do not fully support one view against the other. Instead our findings are in some way consistent with both views. On the one hand, the lack of significant age effects in sentence allocations and in the Punishment/Reform composite suggests that the main motivation for harsh sentencing is an intolerance toward violent crime and the people who commit it. Although participants rated younger defendants as less culpable, less competent to stand trial, and less able to understand their legal situation, younger defendants were not significantly more likely to receive lower sentences, suggesting that, at times, developmental considerations can be pushed aside. Because public opinion often drives new legislation, our results indicate that the trend towards punishment and retribution for juvenile criminals may still be on the rise, along with an increased skepticism in the rehabilitation ideal.

On the other hand, legal competence was also influenced by crime-related factors that either directly affected perceived competence, such as whether the victim died or was injured, or interacted with defendant age. Thus, there are conditions under which characteristics of the crime may be used to infer the maturity and sophistication of adolescent offenders, suggesting that, in people’s minds, the commission of a violent act affords the actor intellectual superiority over non-violent or less violent actors. It is often noted that the new juvenile justice reforms do not take into account psychosocial development (Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996; Woolard, Reppucci, & Redding, 1995), but rather the laws presuppose an adult-like maturity for children who commit “adult” crimes. Findings from the present study suggest that people may also believe that committing an adult crime provides evidence for advanced cognitive development as well. However, it has been well established that a disproportionate number of juvenile delinquents have learning disabilities and are generally not high achievers in school. Although a deeper understanding of how reactions to juvenile crime influence juvenile offenders’ crime-related abilities is needed, findings from the present study question whether juveniles are being fairly and justly adjudicated, particularly in an increasingly adversarial juvenile justice system.
REFERENCES


In re Gault, 387 U.S. 1 (1967).


