

Age-Related Differences in Perceived Severity of a Nonviolent Crime: A Vignette-Based Study

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Background

- ❖ Prior research has examined how demographic factors, particularly age, shape perceptions of crime and sentencing decisions [3].
- ❖ Studies indicate that younger adults tend to support harsher punishments, while older adults often favor more lenient sentences [4].
- ❖ Researchers suggest this disparity may be related to age-related increases in empathy and life experience, which can influence attitudes toward punishment [1], while another explanation involves younger adults' limited knowledge of the legal system, which can hinder judgments of proportionality [4].
- ❖ Even with judicial instructions to remain objective, sentencing decisions frequently reflect the influence of personal beliefs and prior experiences [2].
- ❖ However, fewer studies have examined how age influences perceptions of the severity of nonviolent crimes specifically, highlighting a need for further research.
- ❖ Participant age will influence sentencing decisions, such that younger participants will perceive the offense as significantly more severe than older participants.

Method

Participants

- ❖ Participants included 42 Tarrant County residents recruited from public locations. Participants missing data were removed from analyses.
- ❖ The final sample was comprised of 20 (50%) females, 20 (50%) males, all over the age of 18
- ❖ A full breakdown of participants' demographic info is shown in Table 1

Measures

- ❖ Participants were randomly assigned to one of three vignette conditions, all depicting the same offense but referring to either a male, female, or sex-neutral offender.
- ❖ Offender Sex: Male, Female, & Sex Neutral
- ❖ Crime Seriousness: 4-item, 5-point Likert Scale measuring seriousness, blameworthiness, societal impact, and severity of consequences.
- ❖ Empathy: 4-item, 5-point Likert Scale assessing empathy towards offender
- ❖ Punitive Attitudes: 6-item, 5-point Likert Scale measuring support of punishment versus rehabilitation

Table 1. Demographics

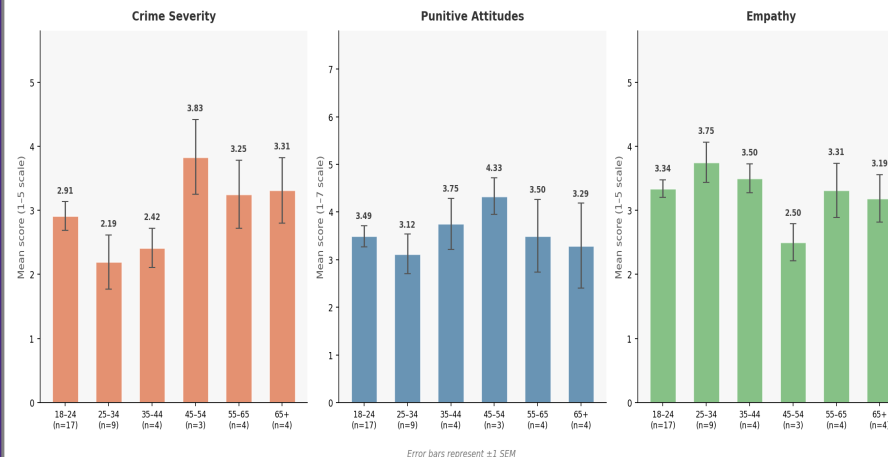
Characteristic	n	%
Total Participants (N = 42)		
Sex		
Male	20	47.6
Female	20	47.6
Prefer not to say	2	4.8
Age Range		
18-24	17	40.5
25-34	9	21.4
35-44	4	9.5
45-54	3	7.1
55-65	4	9.5
65 and older	4	9.5
Prefer not to say	1	2.4
Race/Ethnicity		
White, Caucasian	16	38.1
Black or African American	9	21.4
Hispanic or Latino	8	19.0
Other, Please Specify	3	7.1
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	2	4.8
Prefer not to say	2	4.8
Annual Income (before taxes)		
Less than \$25,000	22	52.4
\$25,000 - \$49,999	5	11.9
\$50,000 - \$74,999	5	11.9
\$75,000 - \$99,999	2	4.8
\$100,000 or more	4	9.5
Prefer not to say	4	9.5
Education		
Less than high school	1	2.4
High school graduate	7	16.7
Some college	18	42.9
2 year degree	4	9.5
4 year degree	6	14.3
Professional degree	3	7.1
Prefer not to say	1	2.4

Results:

- ❖ One-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine whether participants' age group was associated with differences in perceived crime severity, punitive attitudes, and empathy toward the offender described in the vignette.
- ❖ **Crime Severity** — $F(5, 35) = 1.76, p = .14$. The 45–54 group rated crimes most severely ($M = 3.83$), while 25–34 rated them lowest ($M = 2.19$), but the differences didn't reach significance.
- ❖ **Punitive Attitudes** — $F(5, 35) = 0.56, p = .78$. Very flat across age groups, with 45–54 again trending highest ($M = 4.33$).
- ❖ **Empathy** — $F(5, 35) = 1.53, p = .20$. The 45–54 group showed lower empathy ($M = 2.50$) compared to all other groups.

Note: None of the three ANOVAs reached statistical significance. The 45–54 group shows a consistent pattern of higher punitiveness and lower empathy, but the small cell sizes ($n = 3$) make that hard to interpret with confidence. See Graph 1 for ANOVA results

Graph 1. ANOVA Results



Sample Items

- Crime Severity:**
"How serious is the offense committed by the offender?"
- Empathy:**
"I can understand why the individual did what they did."
- Punitive Attitudes:**
"This offender deserves to be punished for breaking the law."

Limitations

- ❖ Recruiting participants only from local bus stops may limit the representativeness of the sample relative to the broader population (e.g., by overrepresenting individuals who rely on public transportation).
- ❖ A sample of individuals residing in the same county may limit the generalizability of findings to other states, counties, countries, etc. (e.g., attitudes may vary by region).
- ❖ Other factors, including prior victimization, political ideology, and knowledge of the legal system, were not measured but may influence a participant's perception of crime severity.

Future Directions

- ❖ Future research should focus on exploring psychological factors that could possibly explain age difference in how people perceive and judge crime offense severity. By this, studies can look deeper and observe how empathy, moral reasoning, and general life experience influence attitudes surrounding punishment, since older adults could adhere to greater empathy as viewed as 'wiser', while the younger people could favor more rule-based policies designed to inflict punishment (referred to as punitive policies) [1].
- ❖ Additionally, researchers could investigate attitudes related to social hierarchy or general beliefs about justice- what they *think* it means, giving emphasis on social dominance stances which could shape support for harsher punishment [5]. By looking into psychological experiences and social attitudes behind legal systems we could see how these two factors influence perception of punishment offense severity, and more importantly see why these age-related differences happen [2].

References

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