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Public perceptions of indecent image offenders

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Abstract

Indecent images of children (IIOC) offences are on the rise year by year, in part due to the easy accessibility to this content with the augmentation of the internet. This has led to increased attention from the public and those involved with law enforcement. However, research into the public perceptions of these offences is very limited. While they do not directly dictate law enforcement, the views of the public have become dominant in penal policymaking and therefore, understanding their current perceptions and beliefs is paramount. One of the only items of research into this area was conducted by Lam et al (2010), who examined the perceptions of North American students on IIOC offences. The current study is a partial replication of this study, and examined these perceptions, using nine vignettes with varying victim and offender age, with a more generalisable U.K. sample. A total of 253 participants rated their perceptions of offence severity, appropriate justice response, the probability of reoffence, the probability of past and future physical sexual contact with a child, the probability that the offender is a paedophile, and the perceived gender of the offender. Victim age influenced perceived crime severity, appropriate justice responses and probability of reoffence. There was no influence by either victim age or offender age on perceived probability of past or future sexual contact with a child, but an interaction between the two independent variables was found on perceived probability the offender was a paedophile. The study notes variation between public perceptions and actual data.

Keywords: perceptions, indecent images of children, paedophilia, sexual abuse, criminal justice, between-subjects design, magnitude estimation.

Introduction

In the year April 2018 - March 2019, Police in England and Wales recorded over 73,000 sexual offences on children (Office for National Statistics, 2020), with the NSPCC suggesting around 1 in 20 children in the UK have been sexually abused, accounting for a third of all police-recorded sexual crimes (NSPCC, 2021). The majority of these crimes are committed by men, with the estimated number of men with a sexual interest in children between 0.1 and 5% of the population (Dombert et al., 2015; Seto, 2009). However, it has been suggested that convicted adult sexual offenders are in the minority, compared to the potential number of undetected adults with a sexual interest in children (Beier et al., 2009), leading to a substantial miscalculation in the actual figures of offending behaviours (Beier et al., 2015). This claim is supported by research that proposes that indecent images of children (IIOC) offences may be a better diagnostic measure of paedophilia, hebephilia, and ephebophilia (sexual interests in prepubescent, pubescent, and post-pubescent youth respectively (Blanchard et al., 2009)), than using physical sexual offences against children alone (Seto et al., 2006). Bourke and Hernandez (2009) suggested that IIOC may be used as an extension of their established paedophilic background and lifestyle, with 12% of online offenders having a previous known physical contact offence (Seto et al., 2011). However, research has also argued that IIOC may act as a diversion from physical contact offending (Riegel, 2004), with many IIOC offenders not developing into physical contact offenders (Osborn et al., 2010).

Between 2015 and 2019, nearly 62,000 obscene publications offences against children were recorded across 39 police forces within England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2020). In the same time frame, 8,318,529 unique indecent images of children were added to the Child Abuse Image Database (CAID), with over 700,000 falling into the most severe category of image. The actual number of IIOC offences is likely much higher due to the anonymous culture of the internet. Elliott and Beech (2009) also argued that offenders are only likely to reveal their identities by mistake, such as when using registered credit cards. Importantly, a substantial parallel has been identified between the volume, availability, and circulation of IIOC and the augmentation of the internet (Carr, 2003; Wolak et al., 2011). While possession offences of this nature are not new (the Protection of Children Act 1978 first made IIOC possession offences illegal within England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, with similar provisions in Scotland), the number of recorded offences has been growing year by year (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 2012). Despite the true figure not being known, it has been suggested that in 2013, around 50,000 individuals within the United Kingdom downloaded IIOC (Giles & Alison, 2021). These growing figures have attracted public interest in recent years.

Within the United Kingdom, the Protection of Children Act 1978 criminalised the production, distribution, and possession of IIOC. As such, persons behaving in contrary to this act are likely to receive a sentence, depending on the level of indecency (Sentencing Council, 2014). Offences are categorised into one of three categories. Category A (material depicting penetrative sexual activity, sadism, & bestiality), category B (material depicting non-penetrative sexual activity) and category C (material not falling into categories A or B, such as children in provocative poses). The possession of category A sexual images carries heavier sentencing possibilities than B or C images. Within the United Kingdom, offenders who are charged following arrest often receive one of three sentences including

community orders (such as community service), suspended sentences (a sentence held in the community), and custodial sentences (serving time in prison) (StopItNow, n.d.). The stricter the sentence, the longer the time the offender will also spend on the sex offenders register (SOR) (Home Office, 2018). For images rated as being less severe (such as category C material), an offender may avoid being charged and receive formal police caution but will still be placed on the SOR for 2 years (StopItNow, n.d.).

Research suggests reoffence rates of IIOC offenders are lower when compared to physical contact offenders (Elliott et al., 2019; Faust et al., 2015; Seto et al, 2011). Seto et al (2011) found 3.4% of IIOC offenders would go on to commit a new IIOC offence within 6 years of conviction, with 2.0% carrying out a new physical contact offence, with similar figures found by Eke et al (2010) and Elliott et al (2019). Faust et al (2015) reaffirmed that while as a group, IIOC offenders present a lower risk of reoffence when compared to physical contact offenders, IIOC offenders as individuals may still present anywhere along the spectrum of risk. Demographic differences and any previous criminal history are also important variables to consider. Aslan and Edelmann (2014) found that most IIOC offenders in London were white, well-educated, and younger than physical contact offenders. Previous criminal history has also been found to be significantly predictive of reconviction for both general and sexual offences (Elliott et al., 2019; Seto & Eke, 2005). With research suggesting that reoffence rates for IIOC offenders are low, the nature and efficiencies of treatment for this cohort may be brought into question. As Faust et al (2015) discussed, treatment programmes will likely not significantly reduce reoffences within this population, instead focus should be placed on higher risk groups. Perhaps instead, other variables that are associated with increased risk of reoffence should be applied when judging the risk of IIOC offenders, such as criminal background. However, Babchishin and Hanson (2020) noted that reoffence instances change over time and therefore, dynamic assessments of risk would need to be in place for numerous years as part of community supervision. It is also important to consider a person's arousal triggers. Physical sexual contact offences are more likely in those with a paraphilic interest in children (Faust et al, 2015). How this translates to IIOC offenders is not clear, but recent research has found a link between paraphilic sexual interests and an offender's online behaviours (Brennan & Hammond, 2017; Hammond et al, 2009). Therefore, those who access IIOC and have a paraphilic interest in children are at a higher risk of becoming physical contact offenders. However, Lam et al (2010) highlighted that not all IIOC offenders are paedophiles, so careful distinction must be made between those with a sexual interest in children and those committing these crimes for other reasons (such as desire to feel powerful or dominant).

The views of the public influence how a government will respond to those IIOC offenders, with public opinion being a dominant influence in penal policymaking (Mears et al., 2008). It is therefore vital to understand public perceptions on paedophilic interests and IIOC offenders (Richards, 2017). Despite this, the number of studies in this area is very limited. One important study in this area was carried out by Lam et al (2010). This study examined how age and gender of a depicted minor and offender influenced North American university student perceptions of the offence of possession of indecent images of children. Results suggested that the victim age held a significant effect on the severity rating of the IIOC offence, the younger the

age of the child, the higher the perceived severity. Victim gender, offender age and offender gender as variables held no effect on severity perceptions. Male offenders were thought to be a higher risk for future IIOC offences, and if the offender was perceived as being a paedophile, the crime was rated as more severe. Reoffence and likelihood of physical sexual contact probability was perceived to be much higher than actual data has previously indicated. Lam et al (2010) suggested that the discrepancies between their participant perceptions and previous official data may lead to implications in law enforcement, such as the public wishing for increased sentencing, despite evidence suggesting that reoffence levels are low and additional sanctions would be unlikely to result in a significant decrease in reoffence levels. While the study provides an important foundation for research, the sample used would be difficult to generalise, due to the sample consisting of North American young adult students in its entirety. The current study, which is a partial replication of Lam et al's research, identified this limitation and therefore, utilised a target sample of the generalised population. It must also be noted that Lam et al's study was undertaken over a decade ago and did not capture the views of a United Kingdom sample. Therefore, the current study aimed to explore more contemporary attitudes amongst in the researcher's nation of interest and as such, appropriate cultural adaptations were made. Furthermore, Lam et al (2010) was also not able to look at interactions between victim characteristics and offender characteristics (such as age difference between victim and offender). The current study aimed to focus on this interaction of offender-victim age characteristics on the perceived severity of IIOC offences.

The current study has seven experimental hypotheses, most of which are based on the findings of Lam et al (2010). Experimental hypothesis one predicts that the lower the victim age, the higher the offender age, and the greater the age difference between the victim and offender, the higher the perceived crime severity score. The next experimental hypothesis predicts that the lower the victim age, the perceived appropriate justice response would be harsher in nature. It is also predicted that offender age and the age difference between the victim and offender will have a significant effect on perceived appropriate justice response. In line with Lam et al (2010), experimental hypothesis three predicts that there will be no significant influence from victim age or offender age, in the perceived probability that the offender would reoffend by possessing IIOC again in the future. Experimental hypothesis four also predicts that there will be no significant influence from victim age or offender age on the perceived probability that the offender has had previous physical sexual contact with a child or will have future physical sexual contact (hypothesis five). Experimental hypothesis six predicts that the lower the victim age and the greater the offender age, the higher the probability that the offender will be perceived as being a paedophile. As such, an interaction effect is expected and that the greater the age difference between the depicted victim and offender, that perceived paedophile ratings will be higher than for smaller age differences between the victims and offenders. This study does not disclose the gender of the offender and therefore experimental hypothesis seven predicts that the offender will be perceived as male more often than female. This is due to the majority of offences being committed by a male (Seto & Eke, 2005; Seto, 2008).

Methodology

Participants

A total of 254 adult participants ($M_{\text{age}}=26.67$, $SD=12.12$) volunteered to take part in this research. One participant's data was excluded for not properly engaging with the task; therefore, results are based on a final sample of 253. Participants were recruited using online platforms such as social media sites, online forums (such as Reddit) and the University of Plymouth's Sona participation system by which psychology students are rewarded points for their participation. Within the sample, 63.6% identified as female and 35.2% as male (1.2% identified as other). The most prevalent highest education level was equivalent to A-Level. Most participants described their occupation as 'Student' (47.8%), 43.8% described themselves as 'Employed' and 8.4% as 'Retired/Unemployed/Prefer not to say'. Each of the nine conditions were completed by between 26 and 30 participants, following random allocation.

Design and Materials

The study was intentionally short in order to encourage high levels of participation and to reduce the possibility of fatigue effects. The study utilised a 3 (depicted victim age: 5 vs 11 vs 17 years of age) x 3 (depicted offender age: 19 vs 35 vs 65 years of age) between-subjects design, forming a total of nine different participant conditions, each with a different combination of victim age and offender age. This research design was carried out to minimise the risk of participants becoming aware of the hypothesis, in turn creating experimenter demand.

A briefing page provided participants with information regarding the research aims and objectives, potential psychological risks, and what data would be collected from each respondent. A consent page was provided to confirm an understanding of the research expectations. The consent form was also used to confirm that participants resided within the United Kingdom, were aged 18 or over, as well as not being a specialist or holding specialised knowledge in the field of child sexual exploitation or related areas. All conditions contained identical demographic questions for participants to complete (age, gender, employment status & highest education level).

An online questionnaire was constructed using Qualtrics for participants to record their responses. The study was online in order to reduce the possibilities of social desirability bias. All conditions contained a fictional vignette regarding an offender (known simply as 'Charlie', to deter any assumption of a singular gender identity) who possessed indecent images of children. The vignettes presented were consistent across conditions, with the only changes being the depicted ages of the victim and offender (independent variable). Across each of the nine conditions, participants' perceptions were obtained in response to seven questions, that were consistent across all experimental conditions, to measure the participants' perceptions of indecent image possession offence severity. Similar to that of Lam et al (2010), item one enquired about the perceived severity of the depicted crime, using Wolfgang et al.'s (1985) magnitude estimation procedure. A standard comparison stimulus of bicycle theft was presented and allocated a severity score of ten. Participants were instructed to score the severity of the possession offence, in comparison to that of bicycle theft (responses could range from zero to infinity). The next item asked participants which justice response(s), in their opinion, were most

appropriate for the possession crime, from a list of six options (therapy, formal caution, financial penalty, probation, sexual offence prevention order and imprisonment). The remaining questions asked subjects to estimate the probability (0-100%) that the offender (1) would reoffend, (2) has had previous physical sexual contact with a minor in the past, (3) would have future physical sexual contact with a minor in the future, (4) is a paedophile, and (5) what gender they believed Charlie would be (Male, Female or Other – Please explain). This last item was used to gain understanding of the participants preconceived viewpoint on the offender's gender.

IBM SPSS Statistics 25 was used for data analysis. All participants required internet access and a compatible device (PC, mobile phone, etc.).

Procedure

Participants who wished to take part in the experiment, described as “Public perceptions of indecent image offenders”, were required to click an anonymous distribution link that led to the online survey. Participants were first presented with the briefing page. Following the briefing, the consent form was presented. The study would only continue once the participant agreed to take part in the study and confirmed they had read all information presented to them so far. For those who wished to withdraw, they were instructed to close their browser window. The participants were presented a vignette and then asked to answer the questions that followed. The survey was designed to take between 5 and 10 minutes to complete. Following the survey, participants were debriefed and informed of the study hypothesis. Participants were reminded of their rights to withdraw, as well as their unique identification code. The online resources provided in the briefing were also listed again for participants affected by the content of the study.

Results and Analysis

The perceived crime severity raw data ranged from zero to infinite. In order to visualise this exponential data in a linear manner, a base 10 logarithm was calculated for each raw score. To avoid zeros, a constant of 1 was added to each raw score prior to base 10 logarithm calculation. The log perceived crime severity scores were used in subsequent analysis.

For the perceived appropriate justice outcomes, responses were recorded ordinally from 1 to 6, with 1 being the least strict justice outcome and 6 being the strictest. Therapy was assigned a score of 1, formal caution as 2, financial penalty as 3, probation as 4, sexual offence prevention order as 5 and imprisonment was assigned a score of 6. If multiple justice outcomes were selected, the strictest was entered for analysis.

A series of between-subject, one-way ANOVAs highlighted the main effects of the independent variables of victim age and offender age, on the dependent variables. The dependent variables consisted of perceived crime severity, recommended justice response, probability of reoffence, probability of past physical sexual contact with a minor, probability of future physical sexual contact with a minor and the probability that Charlie was a paedophile.

Perceived crime severity scores were significantly affected by the victim age ($F(2, 244)=5.62, p=.004$), but not by the offender age ($F(2,244)=1.54, p=.217$). No

significant interaction was found between victim age and offender age on crime severity scores provided ($F(4, 244)=.576, p=.680$). Tukey's HSD post hoc analysis showed a significant difference ($p=.003$) in the crime severity scores provided between a victim age of 5 ($M=2.48, SD=1.42$) and 17 ($M=1.92, SD=0.82$), across all offender ages.

Similarly, there was a significant main effect of victim age ($F(2, 244)=7.82, p=.001$) on the perceived probability that Charlie would reoffend, but not of offender age ($F(2,244)=.81, p=.445$). There was no statistical interaction between victim age and offender age on reoffending probability scores given ($F(4,244)=.98, p=.419$). Tukey's HSD highlighted there was a significant difference ($p=.009$) in the scores given, across all offender ages, between a victim age of 5 ($M=71.50, SD=19.50$) and 17 ($M=62.02, SD=23.57$), as well as 11 ($M=74.11, SD=18.93$) and 17 ($M=62.02, SD=23.57$) ($p=.001$). Across all conditions, participants thought it more likely than not that Charlie would reoffend ($M=69.1\%, SD=21.35$).

There was no significant main effect of victim age ($F(2, 244)=.44, p=.648$) or offender age ($F(2,244)=.78, p=.460$) on the perceived probability of past physical sexual contact. This was also observed for the estimated probability of future physical sexual contact (victim age: $F(2,244)=2.86, p=.059$; offender age: $F(2,244)=.74, p=.477$). Neither revealed any interaction effects of significance (Past: $F(4,244)=.32, p=.862$; Future: $F(4,244)=1.60, p=.175$). Across all conditions, participants thought it more likely than not that Charlie would commit a future physical contact offence ($M=53.74, SD=24.76$). This was not the case for the perceived probability that a past physical contact offence had been committed ($M=46.44, SD=24.65$).

The perceived probability that Charlie was a paedophile was the only dependent variable that revealed an interaction of significance between victim age and offender age ($F(4,244)=2.42, p=.049$). Simple main effects analysis showed that only offences involving a victim aged 17 years produced a significant main effect ($F(2, 82)=5.21, p=.007$) in paedophile ratings across all offender ages, compared to those aged 5 ($F(2, 85)=0.24, p=.787$) and 11 ($F(2, 77)=1.81, p=.170$). Tukey's HSD found the only comparison within a victim age of 17 that did not yield a significant difference ($p=.972$) was offender ages 35 ($M=77.34, SD=25.69$) between 65 ($M=77.81, SD=27.12$). With offender ages 19 ($M=68.10, SD=31.72$) between 35 ($M=77.34, SD=25.69$) ($p=.023$) and 19 ($M=68.10, SD=31.72$) between 65 ($M=77.81, SD=27.12$) ($p=.013$) both showing significance. The simple main effects analysis also highlighted that offender age had significant main effects on paedophile scores, across all victim ages (OA19: $F(2,80)=13.91, p<.000$; OA35: $F(2,84)=3.83, p=.026$; OA65: $F(2,80)=3.38, p=.039$). Once again utilising Tukey's HSD, for an offender age of 19, there was a significant difference ($p<.000$) in paedophile rating in comparisons of victim age 5 ($M=82.00, SD=21.78$) versus 17 ($M=45.33, SD=34.83$), and 11 ($M=75.69, SD=25.25$) versus 17 ($M=45.33, SD=34.83$) ($p<.000$), but not 5 ($M=82.00, SD=21.78$) versus 11 ($M=75.69, SD=25.25$) ($p=.673$). An offender age of 35 found no significant difference ($p=.723$) in comparisons victim age 5 ($M=79.93, SD=22.17$) versus 11 ($M=84.96, SD=22.41$) and 5 ($M=79.93, SD=22.17$) versus 17 ($M=67.31, SD=29.39$) ($p=.132$), but did show a significant difference in comparison 11 ($M=84.96, SD=22.41$) and 17 ($M=67.31, SD=29.39$) ($p=.024$). An identical result was found for an offender age of 65 (5 ($M=77.64, SD=27.71$) versus 11 ($M=87.65,$

$SD=23.85$): $p=.349$; 5 ($M=77.64$, $SD=27.71$) versus 17 ($M=69.14$, $SD=27.16$): $p=.446$; 11 ($M=87.65$, $SD=23.85$) versus 17 ($M=69.14$, $SD=27.16$): $p=.030$).

Table 1 shows the frequency that participants selected each of the different justice responses. A Kruskal-Wallis test (corrected for tied ranks) was carried out on the ordinal data and found offender age ($H(2, 253)=1.94$, $p=.379$) did not have a significant effect on toughest perceived appropriate justice response. However, victim age ($H(2,253)=18.66$, $p<.000$) did. Pairwise comparisons (corrected by the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests) of victim age highlighted a significant difference between levels 5 ($M=5.09$, $SD=1.32$) and 17 ($M=4.51$, $SD=1.41$) ($p=.001$), and 11 ($M=5.23$, $SD=1.07$) and 17 ($M=4.51$, $SD=1.41$) ($p<.000$). There was no significant difference ($p=.786$) between levels 5 ($M=5.09$, $SD=1.32$) and 11 ($M=5.23$, $SD=1.07$).

Table 1: Perceived appropriate justice responses*

Justice Response	Frequency	Percent (%)
Therapy	173	68.4
Formal Caution	36	14.2
Financial Penalty	48	19.0
Probation	92	36.4
Sexual Offence Prevention Order	92	36.4
Imprisonment	103	40.7

*Participants were permitted to select more than one response

Participants judged the offender as being male (92.1%), more often than being female (1.2%). A total of 17 participants suggested that the offender could be either gender.

All study variables showed statistically significant linear relationships with each other (see Table 2), the largest of which was between the perceived probability that Charlie would have had previous physical sexual contact with a child and the perceived probability that Charlie would have future physical sexual contact with a child ($r(252)=0.67$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 2: Correlations for all dependent variables

Dependent variables	Perceived severity	Justice Response	Probability of same reoffence	Probability of past physical sexual contact	Probability of future physical sexual contact	Probability offender is a paedophile
Perceived severity	1	.359**	.233**	.202**	.299**	.256**
Justice Response	.359**	1	.460**	.417**	.475**	.464**
Probability of same reoffence	.233**	.460**	1	.412**	.608**	.501**
Probability of past physical sexual contact	.202**	.417**	.412**	1	.669**	.404**
Probability of future physical sexual contact	.299**	.475**	.608**	.669**	1	.507**
Probability offender is a paedophile	.256**	.464**	.501**	.404**	.507**	1

** $p < .01$.

Discussion

A key finding in the results is that all dependent variables have a significant, positive relationship with one another. As the probability or score of one scale increases, so do all other dependent variables studied. This is important to note, as dependent variables may influence one another, or provide insight into why participants scored certain questions in the matter in which they did.

The perceived severity of the IIOC offence was significantly influenced by the depicted victim age, with offences involving a victim aged 5 eliciting a higher perceived severity score than those aged 17, irrespective of offender age. This supports findings from Lam et al (2010) who found that the younger the victim, the higher the perceived severity of an IIOC offence. However, offender age did not influence participant scoring of severity, and there was no interaction effect between the depicted victim age and depicted offender age.

Similarly, the perceived probability that the depicted offender would reoffend was influenced by victim age, but not by offender age. Perceived reoffence probability was significantly higher for victims depicted as being aged 5 or 11, when compared to those depicted as 17, irrespective of offender age. These findings do not align with

Lam et al's (2010) findings (and therefore the study's second hypothesis), with this previous research suggesting victim age did not influence perceptions of offender recidivism risk. However, the current study supports Lam et al's (2010) claim that participants generally overestimate the probability of an IIOC reoffence, with their study mean being 69% and the current study finding a 69.1% perceived probability of reoffence, while previous data suggests reoffence rates are between 6% and 12.6% (Elliott et al., 2019; Seto & Eke, 2005). This overestimation may lead to unrequired changes within law enforcement due to the influence that the public has over penal policy making (Richards, 2017). Changes may include harsher sentencing for those who access IIOC content, a low-risk group, while taking up the resources required to reduce reoffence occurrences in higher risk populations.

Depicted victim age and depicted offender age had no influence on the participants perceived probability that the offender would have had a previous physical contact offence or will have a future physical contact offence against a child. This aligns with the findings found by Lam et al (2010). On average, participants in the current study thought it more likely than not that the offender, irrespective of age, would go on to commit a future contact offence (53.7%), an overestimation when compared to previous data that suggests between 2.7% and 4% (Elliott et al., 2019; Seto & Eke, 2005). This overestimation was also found for previous physical sexual contact offences. Once again, the implications of this public perception could pave the way for additional law enforcement changes, which are unlikely to significantly reduce reoffence rates within this low-risk cohort of the population.

An interaction between victim age and offender age was found for the perceived probability that the depicted offender was a paedophile. Victims aged 5 and 11 elicited higher perceived probability score that the offender was a paedophile than those aged 17. If the depicted offender was 19, this score was significantly lower than if the offender was 35 or 65. This supports the current study's hypothesis that the lower the victims age, the greater the offenders age and the greater the age difference between the two, the higher the perceived probability that the offender is a paedophile. Offenders aged 35 and 65 followed this trend for the most part, but interestingly, no significant difference in the scores provided was found between a victim age of 5 and 17. This may suggest that while participants were influenced by the victims age, offender age had a greater bearing on the scores provided. This does hold face validity, as this scale is looking at the offender's paedophile status, more than the victims' characteristics. This theory is supported by Lam et al (2010) who found that victim age did not influence paedophile status scoring in their study.

The perceived appropriate justice responses provided by participants were not influenced by offender age, but were influenced by victim age, with victims aged 5 and 11 resulting in a harsher justice response, than if the victim was 17. This supports Lam et al's (2010) suggestion that offences involving younger victims are assigned more severe punishments by the general public. An important take away from this section of data is the unexpected finding that most participants were in favour of treatment programmes (despite evidence showing that treatment of IIOC offenders may not be significantly effective (Elliott et al, 2019)), suggesting that within the sample studied, stigmatisation may be on the decrease with public support growing for more contemporary methods of reducing offences against children. This is perhaps surprising as in recent research by Jahnke et al (2015), the public's

perception of those with paedophilic traits was highly negative. However, in the current study, over 40 percent of participants did still wish to see the offender imprisoned, which includes some participants who were in favour of a treatment programme. This may suggest that some individuals may have some compassion for these offenders, while still having serious concerns regarding their risk of reoffence. Participants may also view imprisonment as an ideal opportunity to engage in rehabilitation programmes. The least perceived appropriate justice response was a formal caution, despite this being a common method of punishment within the United Kingdom (StopItNow, n.d.). There may be numerous reasons behind this distrust of formal cautions, the most likely of which is the overestimation in reoffence figures and therefore, members of the public may assume that more strict sanctions are required in order to bring these figures down.

As hypothesised, participants believed the offender to be male in nearly all instances. This follows real-world data, where most offenders charged with IIOC offences are male (Seto & Eke, 2005; Seto, 2008). Although the study set out to obtain a generalisable sample from the United Kingdom, it should be noted that the sample age mean was lower than the average age for the nation's population, with the samples mean age being just 26.7, compared to around 39.5 nationally (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Therefore, this indicates that there was a substantially higher number of younger adults who participated in the survey. This is likely due to the online nature of the survey, with little distribution beyond this medium. As such, the attitudes of a larger more mature sample could not be analysed which therefore could restrict the generalisability of the findings to different age categories of the general population. In addition to this, the majority of the sample identified as female, with nearly half of the responses coming from students. Future research into this area should attempt to obtain a more generalisable sample of participants.

The current study did not look analyse the demographics of the participants and whether these demographics (such as employment, education, etc.) have a significant effect on the scales used. Research has previously suggested that IIOC offences are carried out by those who are more educated, for example (Edelmann, 2014). Additional research in this area would prove useful in understanding public perceptions amongst different subsets of the general population.

Conclusions

This research aimed to understand the public perceptions of indecent images of children (IIOC) offenders, and how these views may indirectly influence policymaking within law enforcement. As part of a partial replication of Lam et al (2010), a total of 253 participants rated their perceptions of offence severity, appropriate justice response, the probability of reoffence, the probability of past and future physical sexual contact with a child, the probability that the offender is a paedophile, and the perceived gender of the offender.

The depicted age of the victim influenced certain variables, with the lower the age, the higher the perceived severity, the harsher the perceived appropriate justice response, and the higher the perceived probability that the offender would reoffend. There was no influence by either victim age or offender age on perceived probability of past or future sexual contact with a child, but an interaction between the two independent variables was found on perceived probability the offender was a

paedophile. Victims depicted as younger produced significantly more “The offender is a paedophile” responses than older victims, with offenders depicted as older also producing this response from participants. However, the research indicates that the depicted offender age influenced these ratings more than that of the depicted victim ages, likely due to the rating focusing on that of the offender’s status. Interestingly, the majority of participants (68.4%) were in favour of providing therapy for the offenders depicted within the vignettes. Imprisonment was recommended by 40.7% of participants, with the least perceived appropriate justice response being that of a formal caution (14.2%).

As predicted, Participants judged the offender as being male (92.1%), more often than being female (1.2%). A total of 17 participants suggested that the offender could be either gender. Another interesting finding within this research was that all dependent variables were positively correlated to each other. As the probability or score of one scale increases, so do all other dependent variables studied. This is important to note, as dependent variables may influence one another, or provide insight into why participants scored certain questions in the matter in which they did.

This study not only highlighted the public perceptions of IIOC offenders, but also the potential implications on law enforcement and policymaking. One trend observed was that of the public’s tendency to overestimate the likelihood of certain events. Participants overestimated the probability that the offenders would reoffend and the likelihood of both previous and future physical sexual contact with a child, when compared to previous empirical data. This overestimation may explain the participants’ favour towards therapy and imprisonment within the justice response question, when in reality, these resources may prove ineffective in reducing physical contact offences within the cohort of IIOC offenders.

Future work

Future studies in this field should continue to focus on the public perception of IIOC offenders and how these perceptions influence law enforcement outcomes. Current data is extremely limited, and the current study is one of very few studies into this area. Small variations in the current study may also prove useful, such as looking at the public’s personal pornography usage and the effects this has on their perceptions of IIOC offenders, or providing more detail regarding the depicted offender, such as their living arrangements and marriage status (e.g., does the offender live alone, or are they married? Do they have children?). A more qualitative survey may also be a useful method of not only understanding the public’s perception of IIOC offenders, but also the reasoning behind these perceptions.

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