

Introduction

The juvenile justice system was created to address the legal issues of youth who have been involved in criminal misconduct. The aim being to promote rehabilitation rather than focusing on punishment. It is widely understood that adolescence is a critical developmental period marked by profound changes in youths' cognitive, emotional, and social capacities (Grisso et al., 2003). The public perceptions of juvenile justice also play a crucial role in the focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment. The role of discretion is a critical feature of the juvenile justice system, with court judges, probation officers, and law enforcement and all employees within the system having some level of discretion or flexibility in deciding how to rehabilitate youth involved in the criminal legal system. The juvenile justice system is typically regarded as a strength of the system because it allows for individualized rehabilitative approaches based on each youth's circumstances, ensuring that the juvenile justice system's core value of positive reintegration back into society is achieved. By focusing on rehabilitation and discretion, and by understanding public perceptions of juvenile justice, the juvenile justice system can focus on the reintegration of youth back into society while also attempting to promote youth's long-term success.

Blameworthiness and culpability are the core of public perceptions toward young criminals (Steinberg, 2009). These factors influence an individual's development stages, including their cognitive and emotional maturity levels (Rourke et al., 2020). Adolescents lack mature judgment, impulse control, and emotional responses compared to adults, making it more challenging to understand the severity of their actions and consequences (Feld, 1999). As a result, prior research suggests that their level of blameworthiness and culpability should be considered throughout their sentencing (e.g., Poythress et al., 2006). For example, when assessing juvenile age variation, younger adolescents (ages 14-15) are generally viewed as less

blameworthy due to their immature cognitive and emotional capacities, which affect their ability to make sound decisions. In contrast, older adolescents (ages 16-17) are often seen as more responsible for their actions, as they are believed to have acquired better decision-making skills and greater awareness of consequences (Poythress et al., 2006). However, despite these age-related differences, both groups remain minors in the eyes of the law. Thus, it is important for the actors within the juvenile justice system to consider the full context of each individual and recognize that even older adolescents are still undergoing significant emotional and cognitive development. Courts should emphasize support and rehabilitative services to help young offenders reintegrate successfully into society while also prioritizing their long-term development.

Punishment for youth charged with a felony crime varies based on age and crime severity (Ackerman, 2022; Feld, 1999). However, some states still maintain strict punishments, even for adolescents who commit felony-level offenses (Hamparian, 1982). Children between the ages of 14 and 15 are usually considered less guilty and, therefore, more likely to be transferred to juvenile facilities with rehabilitation rather than a punishment approach. However, older adolescents (ages 16-17) are more likely to be given adult sentences for felony-level offenses (including adult prison terms) because the court feels they are more accountable for their behavior (Poythress et al., 2006). However, this age distinction is problematic because even older adolescents who commit these level offenses have not reached full maturity (Poythress et al., 2006). Moreover, both age categories still have profound developmental changes to endure. These changes impact their impulse control and decision-making (Steinberg, 2009).

Drawing on data collected from 398 adults in North Carolina, the current study has two objectives. The first objective is to examine how the public distinguishes between the blameworthiness and culpability of youth and adults, focusing on the extent to which

developmental factors influence views on moral responsibility in young offenders. The second objective is to investigate whether the public believes that juveniles who commit felony offenses should face the same legal consequences as adults or if they are more inclined to support age-appropriate sentences for adolescents. Through these objectives, this study will provide more up-to-date insights into public perceptions toward juvenile justice, informing ongoing discussions about the fairness and effectiveness of current practices in North Carolina.

Literature Review

Philosophy of the Juvenile Justice System

The philosophy of the juvenile court has essential distinctions from the adult criminal justice system. As one distinction, the juvenile justice system focuses not only on factors related to an offense but also related to a youth's amenability to treatment and danger to the community (Bilchik, 1999; Brown & Sorensen, 2013). When youth are removed from juvenile court jurisdiction, the focal point of factors shifts from treatment and rehabilitation to punishment based on the offense committed.

Public Attitudes Toward Young People

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, when juvenile crime was on the rise, the term "super predator" was used to describe the increase in youth violence. "Super predator" was used to describe youth who were violent, thought of as relentless and impulsive, with no consideration for their outcomes of their behavior (Gilliam & Iyengar, 1998). The perceptions of youth as violent and engaging in widespread violence, coupled with a decrease in confidence in the ability of the juvenile justice system to reduce violent offending, served as a catalyst for tougher laws aimed at sentencing adolescents (Myers et al., 2011). What resulted was states lowering the maximum age of juvenile court jurisdiction and automatically waiving youth to adult court for certain offenses. Thus, more youth were being waived from the juvenile to adult court based on

offenses that the juvenile court no longer handled (Glick & Sturgeon, 1998). These laws garnered public support as the public believed that the juvenile justice system was too lenient on crime, and this leniency was responsible for the increase in violent juvenile crime (Bishop, 2000; Myers et al., 2011). By 2012, many states lowered their maximum age for certain offenses from 17 to 14 years old, and many states did not specify a lower age for juvenile court jurisdiction (Allen et al., 2012; Griffin et al., 1998).

The decision to waive youth from the juvenile to adult system is based on several factors, such as amenability to treatment, danger to the community, and prior record (Feld, 1981; Podkopacz & Feld, 1996). Research also suggests that perceptions of blameworthiness and culpability also impact sentencing Poythress et al. (2006). The next section discusses perceptions of a juvenile's blameworthiness and culpability.

Blameworthiness and Culpability

Research has shown that there are developmental differences between youth and adults, with evidence suggesting that the brain is fully developed once an individual is in their early twenties (Steinberg, 2009). According to this evidence, youth should not be expected to have the same impulse control or forward thinking about the consequences of their actions. Feld (1999) indicated that because of these developmental differences, juveniles should be afforded a "youth discount" when being sanctioned for offenses.

Youth discount is known as the "discount" of the punishment for youth offenders compared to their adult counterparts. This is due to the scientific fact that youth are less mature and more impulsive than adults (Grisso et al., 2003). Critical points revolve around youth development, social perception, policy recommendations, and legal implications. When considering the public perceptions of youth, juvenile court systems, and youth discount, it is vital to consider these factors to help better rehabilitate our youth rather than focus on punishment.

Culpability across youth age ranges from 14-15 to 16-17 compared to adults. Poythress et al. (2006) assess the performance of adolescents charged with crimes, and they found that cognitive and affective capacities differ widely even within the very short range of age between 14 to 17 years. Their findings showed that younger adolescents might be more unable to read trial testimony, while older teens show higher competence and are more likely to be treated well in court. According to Poythress et al. (2006), emotional maturity is significant for teenagers who struggle with stress, especially during stressful situations like court hearings. Their emotional reactions can make it hard for them to communicate with their lawyers, and social pressures can affect their choices. Poythress and colleagues (2006) discuss legal competence, which is known as a person's ability to understand the legal system. The authors point out that adolescents may need more time to be ready for this due to their level of maturity. This allows for moral questions to be raised as to why youth should be treated as adults instead of youth within court. However, one drawback of the study is the small sample size, which might restrict the generalizability of findings to other jurisdictions. Prior research shows that older youth and those with prior records are typically viewed as more culpable for their behavior compared to younger youth with no prior offenses (Poythress et al. 2006; Steinberg, 2009)

Punishing Serious Juveniles

Public attitudes about juvenile crime often serve as the impetus for new laws related to rehabilitation and punishment (Roberts, 2004). Although the public once supported youth receiving the harshest of penalties when punishing juvenile crime (Moore, 1994; Solder, 2001), more recent research suggests that the public few adults support the harshest sanctions but rather indicate support for rehabilitation and alternatives to prison (Kubiak & Allen, 2008). Importantly, Nagin and colleagues (2006) remind us that public perceptions vary depending on when and how their opinion is requested.

However, in the article Kubiak & Allen (2008) there is a more in-depth focus on the study of adolescent maturation, peer influence, and childhood abuse on views of treatment and juvenile justice. In a nationwide poll, the researchers found that feelings about adolescent development predict opinions about penalties for young people. Their analysis shows that beliefs about developmental aspects account for more of the punitive attitude variation than demographics and socioeconomics combined. The research focuses on the impact of developmental perspectives on attitudes toward justice and argues that understanding how individuals perceive adolescents as mature might inform decisions about appropriate juvenile sentencing. This review gives policymakers and practitioners some critical insight that shows developmental brain science is worth paying attention to in debates about juvenile justice reform. Differences in sentencing opinions are less based on demographic factors than on development perspectives. This statewide poll showed that this association between developmental understandings and punitive attitudes suggests that knowledge of adolescent development could affect how young people manage the justice system. This analysis provides valuable insights into the public response and professional practice in reforming juvenile justice (Kubiak & Allen, 2008).

The study by Kurlycheck & Johnson (2010) uses a tendency score to generate similar sample sizes of young offenders from the juvenile and young adult populations using Maryland State Commission on Criminal Sentencing Policy data. The study found that children aged 16-17 received greater punishment than comparable younger adults even after they matched up, and no evidence showed that this was due to race or gender. The "juvenile penalty" was most severe for drugs and those cases where waivers were granted. This study suggests that policy changes matched juvenile courts to adult courts. One limitation of their study is that prior studies on the

disciplinary treatment of juveniles sent to adult court were excluded by employment propensity score matching to generate more similar samples of juvenile and young adult offenders.

When examining the public views about sentences for juveniles convicted of severe crimes, the study produced by Miller & Applegate; (2015) provides information on how the use of laws passed in the 1980s and '90s increased the number of children subjected to adult trials. The research used information from the National Judicial Reporting Program and responses to hypothetical questions. Four hundred seventy questionnaires were returned; a 47% response rate adjusted for eligibility. Participants explained how they felt about sending juveniles to adult court and their views on penalties for serious juvenile offenders according to a detailed scenario of an imagined juvenile defendant. Most individuals in their sample were in favor of leniency for minors, but most were also in favor of harsh adult penalties for severe crimes. That suggests a multifaceted public mindset in which the seriousness of the offense drives perceptions about punishment. The research revealed a disconnect between popular will and the judicial system. While most people like it fast, serious offenses should worsen, regardless of whether the perpetrator is aged. The result suggests that public opinion should be aligned with judicial procedure.

In addition, when studying the attitudes of youth in juvenile justice and public perceptions of the handling of the youth within the juvenile justice system, Allen et al. (2012) conducted a study in which they use random digit dialing of Michigan residents in 2005 and 2006, to examine youths attitudes and these public perceptions. The authors inquired about the age at which youths were entirely responsible for their actions. They also asked how much respondents agreed with three different statements related to youth receiving the same punishment as adults if they commit a violent crime if juveniles aged 14 to 16 should be able to be imprisoned in adult prisons if they commit a violent crime, and lastly, if youth should *not* be

sentenced to prison for life if they are convicted for a violent offense (Allen et al., 2012). Allen and colleagues (2012) also asked Michigan residents about the sanctions they thought youth should receive if they are convicted of homicide. Respondents were given three sanctions to select from: (1) the youth should be sanctioned to a juvenile facility and be released once they turn 21 years of age, (2) the youth should be sentenced to a juvenile facility and have the possibility of parole at 21 years of age, and (3) the youth should be sentenced to an adult facility and not have the possibility of parole (Allen et al., 2012). Results suggested that, first, when the public perceives youth to be responsible for their actions at a young age, the more severely they believe youth should be handled in the juvenile justice system. Second, results indicated that as the public's perceptions of youth's impulse control decreases, their perceptions of punishment increase. That is, adults reported that punishment should be more severe. Lastly, when adults perceived youth as susceptible to rehabilitation, they reported that less severe mechanisms should be used within the juvenile justice system (Allen et al., 2012).

When researching and analyzing sentencing data, Nwajei (2023) conducted a study within Pennsylvania that found disparity between punishments for teenagers aged 14-15 and 16-17. Nwajei studied the impact of sentencing disparities among youth by race, class, and place. Findings illustrated how minority youth and those with lower incomes are given harsher sentences than others. Nwajei (2023) also discusses how to handle juvenile justice, focusing on rehabilitation rather than punishment. More people recognize that rehabilitation is necessary because young people are still growing and learning. However, there are still strong trends toward harsher punishments for serious crimes. This study shows that tougher sentences do not lead to lower chances of reoffending, indicating that good rehabilitation programs are vital for helping young offenders stay out of trouble. According to these studies, juvenile offenders receive lower sentences as they grow older, a sign of how much less blame can be placed on

oneself. Studies show that adolescent attitudes play a significant role in determining sentencing decisions and the overall treatment of young offenders (Nwajei, 2023).

Current Study

While prior research that has reviewed culpability, blameworthiness, and juvenile sanctions has advanced our understanding of the perceptions of youth according to the public, this suffers from methodological limitations and sample size restrictions. In addition, prior research on this topic generally uses older data (e.g., from 1985 to 2023; Heuser, 1985 and Nwajei, 2023), and while results from these studies provide insight into the problem, a more current view of the perceptions of juvenile justice is warranted. Moreover, previous research on this topic typically assesses the public's general awareness and perceptions of youth crime, with less research assessing differences across juvenile age categories (e.g., 14 and 15 and 16 and 17). The current research seeks to expand upon prior studies by assessing adults' perceptions of juvenile blameworthiness, culpability, and sanctions using data collected in October 2024. There are two objectives in the current study: (1) determine how adults in North Carolina perceive blameworthiness and culpability across youth age groups and (2) assess how adults in North Carolina perceive juvenile punishment compared to those received by adults. These objectives translate into the following research questions:

1. What is the perceptions of blameworthiness and culpability between youth and adults?
2. Does the public believe that youth who commit a felony offense should receive the same punishment as adults?
 - a. Does this differ for 14–15-year-olds compared to 16– 17-year-olds?

Methods

Data and Sample

Original survey results were obtained via CloudResearch in September and October of 2024 as part of a more extensive study of youth crime in North Carolina. The study enrolled people with the following criteria: an open Connect participant account, current North Carolina residency, and aged 18 or older. Connect is a web-based crowdsourcing site that lets researchers place survey-like tasks for people who agree to fill them out in return for a cash reward. This was an open-ended study, and all subjects were notified by email by CloudResearch of their eligibility to participate in the survey. A link to the survey, which was published on Qualtrics, was provided so people could go and fill out the survey quickly.

The survey was administered to 389 qualified individuals, and 373 completed the questionnaire, with a response rate of around 96%. The participants were allowed a total of 45 minutes to complete the survey. The average time of completion was around 12 minutes. For respondents to qualify their answers, they had to get through two attention checks and give the correct completion code at the survey's conclusion. Participants who met these conditions were paid \$1.70 for their time. Data collection began following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for ethical reasons and participant privacy.

Measures

This survey was provided to better understand the public perceptions of juvenile justice, primarily focusing on how dependent variables such as age, culpability, blameworthiness, and crime severity influence attitudes toward juvenile offenders. Our survey incorporated several Likert-scaled questions, each incorporated to obtain our respondents' perception regarding the appropriateness of punishments for juveniles, their perceived culpability, and how their age affects blameworthiness. With these measures, we could evaluate the participants' public perceptions of juvenile offenders regarding their age, the severity of the crimes committed, and the corresponding punishment.

Our survey's main goal was to obtain a variety of public perceptions based on questions that perceived juvenile offenders' culpability, notably including survey questions regarding the opinion level to which respondents believed age should be of influence an individual's juvenile sentence. Participants were asked to rate their opinion regarding statements about the responsibility of youth offenders, including questions such as *“Youth aged 14 to 15 are just as responsible as adults for their actions”* and *“Youth aged 16 to 17 are less culpable for their behavior than adults.”* Responses were measured on a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree. These items were adapted from Birnbaum et al. (2023). They were provided to obtain a variety of public perceptions regarding a primary variable regarding youth culpability to better understand how respondents view the role of age in determining blameworthiness and responsibility for youths' actions.

Questions on whether respondents believe that a juvenile offender's age could influence the punishment process, especially in juvenile crime cases that have offenses that are identified as felonies or misdemeanors, were also asked. More specifically, questions such as *“Youth aged 14 to 15 who commit a felony offense should receive the same punishment as an adult”* and *“Youth aged 16 to 17 who commit a felony offense should be allowed to be imprisoned with adults.”* These items were scaled on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree, to examine respondents' perceptions on the relationship between crime severity, age, and appropriate punishment.

In addition, several questions were used to measure perceptions about the effectiveness of measures such as arrest and incarceration in preventing future crime and maintaining order in the community. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with statements such as *“Arresting youth when they commit a crime is an effective way of preserving order in the community”* and *“Involvement in the juvenile justice system deters youth from committing future crimes.”* These

questions were also scaled on a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree. These two questions, adapted from Wolf (2014), were placed within our survey to measure public perceptions about juvenile youth's deterrence and rehabilitation possibilities, ensuring each respondent's opinion toward the role of punitive actions in preventing possible future juvenile delinquency.

Lastly, the severity of a juvenile's crime was another critical factor explored within the survey. Survey participants scaled out the importance of various factors that might influence the decision to arrest a juvenile, such as the seriousness of the crime, the quality of evidence, and the presence of a weapon. Survey questions included *“The seriousness of the crime should influence whether a youth is arrested”* and *“The presence of a weapon should influence whether a youth is arrested”* to assess how public opinion on if crime severity, regardless of age changes, should alter youth punishment. These questions were rated on a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 = Not at all important, 2 = Of average importance, 3 = Very important, and 4 = Essential, reflecting respondents' views on the factors that should guide juvenile decisions. Descriptive and sample characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Analytic Procedure

The analyses were conducted in a series of steps. First, descriptive statistics were computed to understand the distribution of key variables. During this step, the proportional odds assumption was tested for the ordinal level variables (i.e., punishment at 14-15 and 16-17, imprisonment). The Omodel logit and Brant tests were performed to test the null hypothesis that there is no difference in the coefficients between models. The tests for the model with 14–15-year-olds were significant, indicating that they could not be used as ordinal variables. As such, the dependent variable was recoded to a binary variable to distinguish between disagree and agree. Based on the distribution of the independent variables (shown in Table 1), these were also

recoded to be binary variables that represented disagree (coded 0) and agree (coded 1). Next, bivariate statistics were conducted across the variables of interest. Since all independent and dependent variables were categorical, chi-square statistics were computed. Then, two logistic regression models were performed to assess the relationship between the independent variables and the dichotomous dependent variables. Control variables were included in all models.

Results

Table 1 provides an overview of the sample characteristics. The study sample consists of 373 participants, with 62% identifying as women and 38% as men. Seventy-one percent of participants identified as white, while 29% identified as nonwhite. Slightly over the majority of 54% reported they did not have children. Most participants (97%) reported that they were not employed within the CJ system and had not committed an offense before the age of 18 (94%). Educational and collegiate level was also a surveyed question, with evenly distributed results, 51% of participants held lower than a four-year degree and 49% having a four-year degree or higher. Participants were also asked about youths' cognitive perceptions at the ages of 14-15 and 16-17. At ages 14-15, the majority 63% agreed they believe youth should have responded to treatment, whereas 22% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed. Regarding risk assessment, 88% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they considered risks at this age, while 12% disagreed or strongly disagreed. When individuals were asked about their preference for immediate rewards, 58% strongly agreed, and 36% agreed. Similarly, 94% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they perceived themselves as developmentally different from their peers. Additionally, 90% reported engaging in impulsive behaviors, with 57% strongly agreeing and 33% agreeing.

At ages 16-17, minor variations in these cognitive and behavioral tendencies were observed. More participants, 65%, agreed they would have responded to treatment at this stage,

though the proportion who strongly agreed declined from 14% at ages 14-15 to 10% at ages 16-17. Risk assessment remained relatively stable, with 78% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that they weighed risks, though a greater percentage (26%) strongly agreed compared to earlier years. The tendency to seek immediate rewards persisted, with 52% agreeing and 39% strongly agreeing, though this represents a slight decrease from the earlier age range. Similarly, 86% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt developmentally different, but fewer participants (34%) strongly agreed compared to ages 14-15. Reports of impulsivity showed a modest decline, with 51% agreeing and 40% strongly agreeing.

Participants also provided insights regarding their attitudes toward felony punishment at ages 14 and 16. At age 14, 46% disagreed with felony punishment, while 28% strongly disagreed. Conversely, 19% agreed, and 7% strongly agreed. By age 16, these attitudes shifted slightly, with 41% disagreeing, 16% strongly disagreeing, and a larger proportion (30%) agreeing compared to their younger selves. These results provide a foundation for further inferential analysis exploring the relationships between cognitive development, decision-making, and attitudes toward the youth in the justice system.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics ($N = 373$)

Variable	Value	N	%
<i>Control</i>			
Sex	0 – Man 1 – Woman	140 230	38 62
Race	0 – Nonwhite 1 – White	108 265	29 71
Has kids	No Yes	201 172	54 46
CJ employed	No Yes	360 13	97 3
Offense before 18	No Yes	349 24	94 6

Education	0 – Less than 4-year degree 1 – 4-year degree or higher	192 181	51 49
<i>Independent</i>			
Respond to treatment at 14-15	1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Agree 4 – Strongly agree	6 81 233 52	2 22 63 14
Weigh risks at 14-15	1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Agree 4 – Strongly agree	8 38 159 168	2 10 43 45
Immediate rewards at 14-15	1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Agree 4 – Strongly agree	2 21 135 215	1 6 36 58
Developmentally different at 14-15	1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Agree 4 – Strongly agree	2 21 133 217	1 6 36 58
Impulsive at 14-15	1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Agree 4 – Strongly agree	3 36 123 211	1 10 33 57
Respond to treatment at 16-17	1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Agree 4 – Strongly agree	9 83 242 38	2 22 65 10
Weigh risks at 16-17	1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Agree 4 – Strongly agree	6 78 193 96	2 21 52 26
Immediate rewards at 16-17	1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Agree 4 – Strongly agree	2 30 195 146	1 8 52 39
Developmentally different at 16-17	1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Agree	5 47 194	1 13 52

	4 – Strongly agree	127	34
Impulsive at 16-17	1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Agree 4 – Strongly agree	3 30 190 150	1 8 51 40
<i>Dependent</i>			
Felony punishment at 14	1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Agree 4 – Strongly agree	105 172 71 25	28 46 19 7
Felony punishment at 16	1 – Strongly disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Agree 4 – Strongly agree	61 154 115 43	16 41 30 12

Bivariate Results

Next, bivariate analyses (not shown) were conducted to reveal any associations between the independent variables of interest and the dependent variable. Among all the control variables, only education was significantly associated with felony punishment 14-15 ($\chi^2(1) = 6.29, p < 0.05$). Four out of the five independent variables were significantly associated with felony punishment 14-15. Youth having more difficulty weighing risks was significantly associated with felony punishment ($\chi^2(1) = 63.72, p < 0.001$). The perception that youth placed greater emphasis on their immediate gains/rewards was also significantly associated with felony punishment ($\chi^2(1) = 12.15, p < 0.001$). The perception that youth are developmentally different from adults ($\chi^2(1) = 41.48, p < 0.001$) and that youth are more likely to behave impulsively ($\chi^2(1) = 12.03, p < 0.01$) were also significantly associated with felony punishment for 14–15-year-olds.

For 16-17-year-olds, like 14-15-year-olds, education was the only variable that had a significant association with felony punishments ($\chi^2(1) = 5.00, p < .05$). None of the other control

variables had any significant relationships to the outcomes for receiving felony punishments for this age group. In contrast to the above section of 14-15-year-olds, all five independent variables were significantly associated with the outcomes of felony punishment for 16-17-year-olds.

Responsiveness to treatment ($\chi^2(1) = 10.27, p < .01$), difficulty weighing risks ($\chi^2(1) = 83.46, p < .001$), placing emphasis on immediate gains/rewards, ($\chi^2(1) = 21.68, p < .001$), recognizing that youth are developmentally different from adults ($\chi^2(1) = 48.30, p < .001$), and the perception that youth are more likely to behavior impulsively compared to adults ($\chi^2(1) = 23.09, p < .01$), were all significantly associated with felony punishment for 16-17-year olds.

Multivariate Results

Table 2 presents the results of the logistic regression analysis predicting felony punishment for 14–15-year-olds. The results suggest that education, weighing risks, and youth development impact the perception of receiving felony punishment. If the public perceived youth ages 14 and 15 to have more difficulty weighing and assessing risks compared to adults, they were 86% less likely to support youth receiving the same punishment an adult would receive (OR = 0.14; SE = 0.06; $p < .001$). Increases in the perception that youth are developmentally different from adults resulted in a 90% decrease in the likelihood of believing that youth should receive the same punishment as adults for a felony offense (OR = 0.10; SE = 0.07; $p < .001$)

Table 2. Regression results predicting felony punishment for 14–15-year-olds

Variable	OR		SE
Age	1.00		0.00
Woman	0.59		0.17
White	0.58		0.19
4-year degree or higher	0.46**		0.13
Offense	0.17*		0.13
Children	1.49		0.42
Treatment	1.35		0.46
Risk	0.14***		0.06

Rewards	0.46		0.27
Development	0.10***		0.07
Impulse	1.03		0.48

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 3 presents the logistic regression results predicting felony punishment for 16–17-year-olds. The results suggest that gender, differences in perceived risk, and developmental factors substantially affect the likelihood of youth receiving a felony punishment. According to the table, being a female shows an association with a lower likelihood of felony punishment (OR = 0.60, $p < .05$). In addition, participants who perceived youth to have higher levels of perceived risk (OR = 0.11, $p < .01$) and youth with a higher developmental level (OR = 0.32, $p < .05$) both were significantly related to a reduction in odds of believing that youth should receive a felony punishment.

Table 3. Regression results predicting felony punishment for 16–17-year-olds

Variable	OR		SE
Age	1.00		0.01
Woman	0.60*		0.15
White	0.88		0.24
4-year degree or higher	0.83		0.21
Offense	0.41		0.24
Children	1.14		0.30
Treatment	0.74		0.22
Risk	0.11**		0.04
Rewards	0.82		0.51
Development	0.32*		0.16
Impulse	0.65		0.40

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Discussion

This study examined public perceptions on felony punishment for youth aged 14-15-years-old and 16-17-year-old. Results suggested that education, perceived risk, and

developmental levels were key factors when considering felony punishment for youth among the 14-15-year-olds. Participants believed younger adolescents had a more difficult time than adults when assessing risks were 86% ($OR = 0.14, p < .001$) less likely to support a felony level punishment for youth. Additionally, surveyed individuals who showed support in developmental differences between youth and adults had a 90% ($OR = 0.10, p < .001$) lower odds of supporting felony level punishment for youth. For 16-17-year-olds, the pattern remains similar. The results indicated that being female was associated with lower support for felony punishment ($OR = 0.60, p < .05$), which suggests potential gender differences in punitive responses. In addition, when individuals understand the risks of adolescent behavior and developmental differences ($OR = 0.11, p < .01$ and $OR = 0.32, p < .05$) there is lower support for felony punishment, which shows that the public differentiates between youth and adults.

This study's results support earlier findings that developmental psychology plays a crucial role in the public perceptions regarding juvenile justice systems. Previous research indicates that public education about impulse control and risk assessment leads to decreased support for punitive measures against youth offenders (O'Rourke et al., 2020). The current study findings validate prior research by showing that public awareness of developmental differences and immaturity benefits both age groups when considering felony punishments. However, stronger associations observed in 14-15-year-olds indicate that the public views significantly different than adults, a variation which previous literature has not always focused on.

The results of this study offer direct implications for juvenile justice policy. Public perceptions for felony punishment dwindle when individuals recognize the developmental differences of youth, this suggests that public education on these types of studies would play a significant role in the strengthening of public perceptions on juveniles and why rehabilitative justice and age-appropriate punishment systems are practical implications that should be explored further.

Policymakers should embed developmental science into youth sentencing guidelines to better determine why juveniles should not be receiving felony punishments. In addition, the influence of education on punitive attitudes suggests that individuals that are more aware of the divide between the developmental differences between youth and adults would likely be more supportive of reform focused policies, showing the importance of education on public opinions toward youth who commit criminal offenses.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged during this study. First, the study uses self-reported perceptions as its foundation, which has a possibility to lead to inaccuracies when compared to actual voting behavior or support for youth policy initiatives. Secondly, even though the survey accounts for several demographic variables and unmeasured factors including political ideology, family history, and levels of media exposure could affect individuals' attitudes toward juvenile felony punishment. Lastly, the design of the study focusing on the public's perception solely in North Carolina restricts the furthering of public perceptions out-of-state leading to possible limitations of public perceptions as a whole.

Further Directions

Further research should examine the effects of various amounts of information, such as neuroscience findings and policy framing (e.g., raise the age). The exploration of this information should focus on how these subjects influence public perceptions across the state. Longitudinal research would help further research and provide insight into whether education and awareness initiatives toward youth lead to actual change in public perceptions of youth who engage in delinquent behavior. In addition, to ensure findings apply to the population, further research should prioritize a larger study size, increasing the demographic and geographic variety in their samples.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates extensive amounts of information showing that the public does in fact make significant distinctions between youth and adults when considering felony punishment, especially when considering developmental factors of youth compared to adults. Support for felony punishment decreases significantly when individuals reported that youth lack risk assessment skills and that they are fundamentally different than adults. These results suggest that shifting public narratives and increasing awareness on the education of youth development can lead to more rehabilitative approaches within the juvenile justice system. These findings show that public perception plays a vital role in shaping youth justice policies as we go forward.

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