

Sánchez-Díaz, Javier (2019) Children's reporters' attitudes toward young offenders. *Journal of Applied Psychology and Social Science*, 4 (2). pp. 25-51.

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Children's Reporters' Attitudes toward Young Offenders

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Abstract

Children's reporters are Scottish Government officials. They decide whether a child is in need of compulsory measures of care. Their role is regulated by the Children's Hearing (Scotland) Act 2011. The present study aimed to explore children's reporters' attitudes toward young offenders and whether or not they hold classical views toward the causes, prevention and treatment of crime. The methodology used was based on a quantitative methods design. Two measures, the *Attitudes towards Prisoners* scale (ATP) and the *Attitudes towards Crime* scale (ACS) were administered. The responses of a population sample of 102 out of 194 children's reporters were examined. The analysis involved the use of statistical tests between variables. Three major findings emerged from the analysis: (1) a significant difference was found in relation to children's reporters' attitudes towards the prevention of crime by qualification; (2) statistically significant differences were found in relation to children's reporters' attitudes towards the prevention and treatment of crime by experience; and (3) years of experience in the job was found to predict children's reporters' attitudes towards the prevention of crime. Overall, children's reporters' subgroups were found to hold similar attitudes in terms of the scaled variables, which demonstrates that by large, children's reporters do not hold classical attitudes toward young offenders and crime.

Keywords: children's reporters, attitudes, young offenders, Scotland

Introduction

The care and justice system for children and young people in Scotland is called the Children's Hearing System (CHS). The Scottish Children's Reporters Administration (SCRA) is responsible for the administration of the CHS. SCRA was formed following the introduction of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1994 and became fully operational on 1st April 1996 (SCRA, 2014). It is an executive, non-departmental, public body responsible for providing a need based service to vulnerable children at risk of abuse and/or neglect, or whose conduct are likely to place them or others at risk of serious harm (Scottish Government, 2013). Within the legislation framework SCRA is required to assist the work of children's reporters, employ and manage staff to facilitate that work, and to provide sufficient venues for children's hearings to take place (SCRA, 2014). Children's reporters are Scottish Government officials who decide whether a child is in need of compulsory measures of care. Their role is regulated by the Children's Hearing (Scotland) Act 2011. CHS works with young offenders aged 17 years, or under. Its principles differ from those of the criminal justice system in that it is primarily concerned with the welfare and wellbeing of the offender, and not on the nature of the offence, in itself. Incidents of youth crime are taken as indicators of potential risks for the welfare of the individuals concerned.

It had been long established within the Scottish legal system that any child under eight years old lacks the capacity to commit a crime and cannot, therefore, be criminally responsible for their actions (Cipriani, 2009; McDiarmick, 2013). This is to be raised to the age of twelve in line with the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) with the introduction of the Age of Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Bill to the Scottish Parliament on 13th March 2018, following a period of consultation and intensive work across the Scottish Government. The Bill will mean that the age of criminal responsibility will increase from 8 to 12 years old, and no child under 12 will attract a criminal record for their behaviour. The Bill will also safeguard children under the age of twelve in that they cannot be prosecuted in court, but referred to the CHS for support in addressing their behaviour. However, the Bill provides that children aged 8 to 11 can no longer be referred on the ground that they have committed an offence but on care and protection grounds, under any other section 67(2) grounds, of the Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011.

The issue of children's reporters and the connection of their statutory decision-making functions and attitudes toward young offenders and crime has not been defined by the literature to date. A prior piece of research, however, did examine the attitudes and

assumptions towards justice of another group of decision makers which plays an important role in the CHS called panel members. Panel members are volunteers from the local community who deals with children and young people who offend in an informal discussion setting known as a Children's Hearing. Ollenburger (1986) found that that the education, occupation and gender of panel members were all important influences on their attitudes towards justice, with men without a degree level qualification and in less professional positions, holding the most classical attitudes towards justice.

Public Attitudes and Public Perception of Crime

There is a large body of research which has focussed on public attitudes toward crime and young people (Allen, 2002; Allen, Trzcinski & Pimlott Kubiak, 2012; Anderson, Bromley & Given, 2005; Halsey & White, 2008; McAra, 2008). Jansson's British Crime Survey (2007) found that public perceptions of levels of crime and youth crime were higher than those shown on official records and attributed the issue to be more prevalent than it actually was. Halsey and White (2008) also concluded that perceptions of youth crime are influenced by demographic and environmental factors. They found that positive views of young people are more likely to be present amongst adults the more contact they have with them. Further, the literature suggests that media coverage influences public perception in the manner youth crime is selectively reported, increasing the dichotomy of real and perceived level of incidents of crime involving young people (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001; Muncie, 1984; Schissel, 1997; Sprott, 1996; Welch, Price & Yankey, 2002).

Attitudes and public perception of crime, often influenced by media coverage, have shaped the way legislation and government policies have approached the issue of youth crime and, to some extent, the treatment of young offenders (Anderson et al., 2005; Dowler, 2003; Gideon & Sherman-Oren, 2014; Scott, Repucci, Antonishak & DeGennaro, 2006). Policy makers should avoid reinforcing stereotypes and suspicion about young people often portrayed by the media (Johnson et al., 2009; Maruna & King, 2009). Assumptions based on stereotypes have influenced the decision-making processes of those professionals involved with the criminal justice system (Côté-Lussier, 2015; Furnham & Alison, 1994; Thomas, Moak & Walker, 2012; Weitzer & Brunson, 2009). Over 30 years ago, Bodenhausen and Wyer (1985) found that once a first impression is formed based on stereotypes this will outweigh any other relevant information presented, contrary to the act first thought being committed. This is consistent with current literature and findings on attributions made against

the youth of black communities (Hall, Phillips, & Townsend, 2015; Mearns, Stewart, Warren & Simons, 2017), and increase support for punitive measures based on cultural characteristics (Brookeman & Weiner, 2015; Chiricos, Welch & Gertz, 2004).

Punitive Attitudes and Demographic Variables

The treatment of offenders and the on-going debate, punishment versus rehabilitation, have produced a large body of research which has in the main focussed on punitive versus less conservative attitudes towards crime (Bennett, 2010; Rogers & Ferguson, 2011; Sheffer, 1995; Válková, 1997). The literature available on this issue concerning the treatment of young offenders has come across with the public perception that young people once become criminals are unable to change; beliefs which reinforce more punitive attitudes towards crime (Maruna & King, 2009; Mohr & Luscri, 1995; Scott et al., 2006).

A number of studies have been undertaken with the purpose to examine attitudes towards crime of various categories of professionals which includes prison officers and criminal justice workers (Kjelsberg, Skoglund & Rustad, 2007; Young, Antonio & Wingard, 2009), social services workers (Chui & Chan, 2012; Moak & Wallace, 2000), and police officers (Cunha & Gonçalves, 2017; Fielding & Fielding, 1991). This research has mainly focussed on variables such as occupational roles and educational backgrounds with contradictory results, at times, from those which argue that professionals involved with the criminal justice system hold more punitive attitudes towards crime and less favourable attitudes towards rehabilitation (Moon & Maxwell, 2004), and those with opposite findings (Ortet-Fabregat & Pérez, 1992).

The relationship between educational levels and punitive attitudes extensive research on college students has shown that they are less likely to hold punitive attitudes towards crime at higher levels of education (Benekos, Merlo, Cook & Bagley, 2002; Falco, 2008; Farnworth, Longmire & West, 1998; Mackey & Courtright, 2000; Park, 2009). Robinson, Porporino and Simourd (1997) found similar results on their study with prison officers when looking at their level of educational attainment. Significant relationships between education and the support for punitive measures have also been found amongst the attitudes of the general public (Chiricos, Welch & Gertz, 2004; Hogan, Chiricos & Gertz, 2005). Sims (2003) found that individuals with higher education levels are more likely to support rehabilitation practices.

Other factors which seem to determine whether public attitudes about the treatment of crime lean more towards punishment or rehabilitation have often include other demographics such as gender (Hurwitz & Smithey, 1998) and cultural background (Mayhew & Van Kesteren, 2002). Costelloe, Chiricos and Gertz (2009) found that white males, particularly those with lower levels of qualification and low income showed a preference for punitive measures towards crime. This is consistent with Ollenburger's (1986) study on panel members' attitudes towards justice who found that the education, occupation and gender of panel members were all important influences on their attitudes towards justice, with men without a degree level qualification and in less professional positions, holding the most punitive attitudes towards justice. Geographical factors such as place of residence, size and environment can also be predictors of punitive attitudes and although the literature shows mixed results, a number of studies have found that people living in urban areas are less likely to demonstrate punitive attitudes and showing their support for rehabilitation instead (Baumer, Rosenfeld, & Messner, 2000; Borg, 1997; Holtfreter, Van Slyke, Bratton & Gertz, 2008; Rossi & Berk, 1997).

However, the origins of punitive attitudes towards crime are far more complex than initially thought (King & Maruna, 2009). Demographics aside, emotions, beliefs and ideology have been found to be much stronger predictors of punitive attitudes than the population characteristics alone (Chen & Einat, 2015; Hartnagel & Templeton, 2012; Tajalli, De Soto & Dozier, 2012). Chen and Einat (2015) argue that the strongest predictor of punitive attitudes is a firm belief in the principles of the classical and labelling theories beyond group characteristics. Falco (2008) found in his study on the attitudes towards punishment of criminology students that strong supporters of the labelling theory were less likely to demonstrate punitive attitudes towards crime than those students who favoured classical theory.

Theoretical Foundations of Attitudes toward Crime

In general terms, the classical theory of crime argues that people are capable of making decisions freely and act upon their decisions in a planned and calculating manner (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). People who break the law do this because it is inherent to their personality. Punishment is seen as the most effective deterrent of offending behaviour when it fits to the crime be committed, it is proportional to the nature of the crime, and it is given without delay (Bernard, Snipes, Gerould & Vold, 2015). In contrast, liberal theories of

crime deal with criminals in a sympathetic manner. Crime is the consequence of ineffective learning processes, lack of personal and social controls, and a culture where the abundance of criminogenic factors are not addressed by its social structure and organisation (Cullen & Gilbert, 2013). The labelling theory conceives crime as a social construct built on stereotypical assumptions of rule categorisation where the powerless and disadvantaged once named a criminal will conduct themselves in the way society expect them to behave creating a self-fulfilling prophecy effect (Becker, 2008).

There are a number of examples in the literature which support that professionals involved in the criminal justice system who favour a liberal conception of crime are more likely to identify environmental and social factors as the cause of criminal behaviour and err on the side caution by supporting the rehabilitation of offenders rather than the systematic use of punitive measures (Kennedy & Homant 1986; Ollenburger 1986; Ortet-Fabregat & Pérez, 1992), whilst supporters of the classical theory of crime favoured punishment and retribution (Moon & Maxwell, 2004; Young, Antonio & Wingard, 2009).

The United Kingdom (UK) ranked, in 2010, as one of the countries in Europe with the highest levels of public punitiveness (Sato & Hough, 2013). The modern criminal justice system and current sentencing policies are influenced by both the classical and the liberal approaches to crime (Siegel, 2015). The dichotomy, rehabilitation versus punishment, has long been the subject of debate within the criminal justice system. Efforts have been made to steer the debate towards the rehabilitation of offenders to varying degrees in modern times. The traditional view that there was something wrong with the character of those involved in offending behaviour and were predestined to a life of crime, has progressively been replaced with a focus on prevention as a mean to tackle recidivism (Ministry of Justice, 2010; McNeill, 2014).

The purpose of the present study is to investigate children's reporters' attitudes toward young offenders and crime and whether they hold classical or liberal views towards crime, its causes, prevention and treatment. Based on the literature review the following hypotheses were formulated and tested: (1) children's reporters' attitudes toward young offenders and crime differ in relation to their entry qualification into the profession; (2) children's reporters' attitudes toward young offenders and crime differ in relation to the years of experience in the job; and (3) children's reporters' attitudes toward young offenders and crime differ in relation to the five individual characteristics of gender, age, entry qualification, years of experience in the job and location of work.

Method

Participants

The sample of participants consisted of a population of 194 children's reporters, 27 males and 167 females, between the ages of 25 and 68, employed by SCRA. Children's reporters are qualified to degree level or equivalent in social work, law, or another relevant discipline, such as psychology, or education, with at least two years' experience working with children and families. The aim was to achieve just above the 50% response rate by recruiting at least 100 participants. The scoping exercise included the use of Online Surveys which was circulated to all 194 children's reporters across Scotland via their own local government secured email address. Permission to do this was granted by SCRA Head of Practice and Policy.

With a final response rate of 53%, the final sample size came to 104 participants. This can be considered to be a good response rate for an online survey (Shin, Johnson & Rao, 2012; Greenlaw & Brown-Welty, 2009). Two respondents withdrew from the survey once started; therefore, the actual sample size of the analysis came to 102 children's reporters. Table 1 shows the frequencies and percentages for the five demographic variables.

Table 1

Frequencies and percentages for demographic variables (N = 102)

	Sample (N)	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	24	23.5%
Female	78	76.5 %
Age		
Under 40	34	33.3%
40 to 49	27	26.5%
50 or over	41	40.2%
Qualification		
Law	73	71.6%
Social Sciences	29	28.4%
Experience		
Up to 5 years	23	22.5%
5 to 10 years	20	19.6%
10 to 15 years	30	29.4%
Over 15 years	29	28.4%
Locality		
Urban	70	68.6%
Rural / Remote	16	15.7%
Mixed areas	16	15.7%

Materials and Procedures

The methodology used for this specific study was based on a quantitative methods design. To measure participants' attitudes toward young offenders the *Attitudes towards Prisoners scale* (ATP; Melvin, Gramling & Gardner, 1985) adapted to the young offenders population was used. The ATP measure consists of 36 items which assessed attitudes towards prisoners. Responses are recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = *Strongly Agree* to 5 = *Strongly Disagree*. Positive scores suggest that prisoners are viewed as persons capable of positive change, whereas the negative scores reflect the view that prisoners are basically distinct from the general population in that they are incapable of positive change.

In order to adapt the scale to the young offenders population the following modifications were made by the researcher: the term "prisoners" in the items were changed to

“young offenders” (Item 8, Item 13, Item 31, 36). The scale’s scores range from 0 to 144 made up with the sum of each participant’s response to the 5 categories assigned to each item (1 to 5). A constant value of 36 is deducted of each final score. The scores of the 12 negative items were coded on reversed order. A score of 0 (zero) shows the most negative attitude towards young offenders whilst a score of 144 indicates the most positive attitude toward them.

To measure participants’ attitudes towards crime, the *Attitudes towards Crime* (ACS) scale (Ortet-Fabregat & Pérez, 1992) was used. The ACS scale includes three Likert attitude scales: the *Attitudes Towards the Causes of Crime* scale (ACSc), the *Attitudes Towards the Prevention of Crime Scale* (ACSp), and the *Attitudes Towards the Treatment of Crime* scale (ACSt) which can be used independently from each other. The ACSc contains two dimensions *heredity and individual causes* of crime and *social and environmental causes* of crime. The ACSp also has two dimensions the *coercive prevention* scale and the *social intervention prevention* scale. Finally, the ACSt measures only the dimension *assistance versus punishment*.

Similarly to the ATP scale, responses are recorded on a 5-point scale, from 1 = Strongly Agree to 5 = Strongly Disagree. Higher scores on each subscales’ dimensions indicate positive attitudes. Items were adapted for the UK context (Item 1, Item 4 of the ACSc; Item 9 and Item 10 of the ACSp. Scores are obtained with the sum of the values of each item category (1 to 5) which are then divided by the number of items in each scale. The scores of the 11 negative items were coded on reversed order.

In the present study, the individual characteristics of gender, age, qualification, and years of experience in the job, and location or place of work were selected as factors that may affect children’s reporters’ attitudes toward young offenders. For the analysis, the variable of gender was coded as 1 for “Male” and as 2 for “Female”. For the variable of age, five initial categories were listed on the online survey “under 30”, “30-39”, “40-49”, “50-59” and “60 or over”, later regrouped in three categories, “under 40” coded as 1, “40 to 49” as 2 and “50 or over” as 3. In terms of qualification, participants were asked to indicate which qualification route they took to enter into their area of work. The initially presented categories of “Law”, “Social Work” and “Other” were then regrouped into two categories. Those who entered with a “Law” qualification were coded as 1, those with “Social Sciences” qualifications as 2. For years of experience, five categories were initially listed “less than a year”, “up to 5 years”, “5 to 10 years”, “10 to 15 years”, and “over 15 years”, and later collapsed into 4 categories, “up to 5 years” coded as 1, “5 to 10 years” as 2, “10 to 15 years” as 3, and “over 15 years” as 4.

Finally, with regards to location of work, three categories were selected "Urban" coded as 1, "Rural / Remote" as 2 and "Mixed areas" as 3.

Pilot Study

A small pilot study ($n = 10$) was conducted to check that instructions and wording of the adapted measures, the ATP and the ACS scales, were comprehensible and to test whether the estimated time given to participants to complete the survey as a guide on the participant information sheet was accurate. Participants were invited to provide comments about the wording and whether the survey questions made sense and were relevant to the subject of study. Following their feedback, a text box was added to page 8 of the survey, question section 3 of the *Attitudes toward Young Offenders* scale, with a note stating that "please note that in this section responses are recorded on reverse order" as many participants had found this confusing. No further changes to the design of the survey were made. Data from the pilot was not included with data from the main study.

Results

Both measures, the ATP scale and the ACS scale, were all adequately completed by the sample and included in the analysis. Table 2 shows the sample's means scores and standard deviations of the scaled variables.

Table 2

Sample's means scores and standard deviations of the scaled variables

	Mean	SD
ATP	93.71	10.11
ACSc		
Hereditary & individual causes	1.48	.44
Social & environmental causes	2.95	.47
ACSp		
Coercive prevention	1.77	.55
Social intervention prevention	3.83	.45
ACSt		
Assistance vs. punishment	3.76	.46

Hypothesis 1

The sample's means scores of the scale variables in relation to the entry qualification variable were compared by conducting a series of independent sample *t*-tests. Table 3 shows the sample's mean scores and standard deviations by qualification.

Table 3

Sample's means scores and standard deviations of the scaled variables by entry qualification

		Mean	SD
ATP	Law	93.29	10.13
	Social Sciences	94.76	10.15
	Total	93.71	10.11
ACSc			
Hereditary & individual causes	Law	1.52	.47
	Social Sciences	1.39	.36
	Total	1.48	.44
Social & environmental causes	Law	2.97	.45
	Social Sciences	2.90	.54
	Total	2.95	.47
ACSp			
Coercive prevention	Law	1.85*	.57
	Social Sciences	1.55	.45
	Total	1.77	.55
Social intervention prevention	Law	3.83	.46
	Social Sciences	3.82	.43
	Total	3.83	.45
ACSt			
Assistance vs. punishment	Law	3.72	.42
	Social Sciences	3.87	.54
	Total	3.76	.46

* = $p < .05$

Overall, children's reporters who held a qualification in the social sciences scored higher than those qualified in law in the ATP and ACSt *Assistance vs. Punishment* scales. Law qualified children's reporters scored higher than those non-law qualified in both dimensions of the ACSc and ACSp scales. ATP higher scores means positive attitudes

towards young offenders. However, not all differences were significant. Independent sample *t*-tests found that children's reporters who entered into the profession with a law qualification compare with those who entered into the profession with a social science qualification were only significantly different in their attitudes towards the ACSp *Coercive Prevention* subscale ($t = -2.48, p < .05$). This result suggests that children's reporters with a law qualification are more likely to support the coercive prevention of crime than their colleagues with qualifications in the social sciences.

Hypothesis 2

A one-way MANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of years of experience in the job on the scaled variables. Table 4 shows the sample's mean scores and standard deviations by years of experience in the job.

Table 4

Sample's means scores and standard deviations of the scaled variables by experience

			Mean	SD
ATP	up to 5 years	91.04	11.80	
	5 to 10 years	93.80	9.54	
	10 to 15 years	95.63	9.36	
	over 15 years	93.76	9.83	
	Total	93.71	10.11	
ACSc				
Hereditary & individual causes	up to 5 years	1.57	.45	
	5 to 10 years	1.38	.40	
	10 to 15 years	1.37	.41	
	over 15 years	1.60	.48	
	Total	1.48	.44	
Social & environmental causes	up to 5 years	2.89	.53	
	5 to 10 years	2.89	.52	
	10 to 15 years	2.92	.48	
	over 15 years	3.06	.39	
	Total	2.95	.47	
ACSp				
Coercive prevention	up to 5 years	2.10**	.54	
	5 to 10 years	1.77	.53	
	10 to 15 years	1.73	.50	
	over 15 years	1.53	.53	
	Total	1.77	.55	
Social intervention prevention	up to 5 years	3.65	.44	
	5 to 10 years	3.85	.58	
	10 to 15 years	3.91	.39	
	over 15 years	3.86	.41	
	Total	3.83	.45	
ACSt				
Assistance vs. punishment	up to 5 years	3.58	.40	
	5 to 10 years	3.69	.57	
	10 to 15 years	3.93*	.44	
	over 15 years	3.78	.41	
	Total	3.76	.46	

* = $p < .05$ ** = $p < .005$

There was a statistically significant difference in the ACSp *Coercive Prevention* subscale and the ACSt *Assistance vs. Punishment* subscale based on years of experience ($F(18, 285) = 1.83, p < .05$; Pillai's $\Lambda = 0.311, \eta^2 = .69$). Years of experience in the job had a statistically significant effect on attitudes toward the prevention of crime ($F(3, 98) = 5.03, p < .005, \eta^2 = .13$) and on attitudes toward the treatment of crime ($F(3, 98) = 2.70; p < .05; \eta^2$

= .08). This tells us that the longer children's reporters are in the job and the most experience they accrue, the less support the use of coercive measures in the prevention of crime and the more favour the use of social assistance and support in the treatment of crime. Post hoc comparisons revealed that there were statistically significant differences; Children's reporters with 5 or less years of experience in the job are more inclined to support the coercive prevention of crime than those with over 15 years of experience ($MD = .56, p < .01$). Furthermore, children's reporters with 5 or less years of experience in the job are more inclined to support the use of punitive measures in the treatment of crime than those with 10 to 15 years' experienced who tend to support assistance and social intervention as the treatment for crime ($MD = .34, p < .05$).

Hypothesis 3

To investigate the independence and significant contribution of the five individual characteristics of gender, age, entry qualification, years of experience in the job and location of work to the differences found within each group, Pearson's correlations between the ACSp *Coercive Prevention* subscale and the predictor variables were established. Table 5 summarises the participants' scores on gender, age, qualification, experience, location and the ACSp *coercive prevention subscale*.

Table 5

Descriptive statistics for gender, age, qualification, experience, location, and the ACSp coercive prevention subscale.

	Mean	SD
Gender	1.76	.43
Age	2.07	.86
Qualification	1.28	.45
Experience	2.64	1.12
Location	1.47	.75
ACSp coercive prevention	1.77	.55

Preliminary correlational analyses were performed to assess if there were significant correlations between the criterion and the predictor variables as well as intercorrelations between the predictor variables. Analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between

coercive prevention and gender, and significant negative correlations between coercive prevention and age, qualification, and experience (see Table 6).

Table 6

Correlations between the ACSp coercive prevention subscale on to gender, age, qualification, experience, location

	Gender	Age	Qualification	Experience	Location
ACSp Coercive Prevention	.20*	-.26**	-.24*	-.35**	-.09
Gender		-.28**	-.16	-.18	-.08
Age			-.13	.64**	.09
Qualification				.96	.50
Experience					.27**

* = $p < .01$ ** = $p < .001$

A standard multiple regression analysis revealed that years of experience in the job was the only significant predictor of coercive prevention attitudes with a significant negative association ($\beta = -.28$, $t = 2.36$, $p < .05$) suggesting that more years of experience in the job predicts less favourable attitudes toward the coercive prevention of crime. The significant model explained 17% of the variance (adjusted R^2 suggested it was only 14%; see Table 7).

Table 7

Standard Multiple Regression of the ACSp coercive prevention subscale on to gender, age, qualification, experience, location

Variables	β	t	Sig	R^2	Adj R2
Gender	.11	1.17	.647		
Age	-.03	.23	.608		
Qualification	-.17	1.82	.005		
Experience	-.29	2.36	< .001	.17	.14
ANOVA: $F(4, 97) = 5.05$, $p = .001$					

Discussion

The research aimed to explore children's reporters' attitudes toward young offenders and whether they hold classical views toward the causes, prevention and treatment of crime. The results of the present study have confirmed the hypotheses that children's reporters' attitudes toward young offenders and crime differ in relation to their entry qualification into the profession and in relation to the years of experience in the job. However, the hypothesis that children's reporters' attitudes would differ relation to the individual characteristics of gender, age, entry qualification, years of experience in the job and location of work, has only been partially confirmed, with the variable, years of experience in the job, being the only significant predictor.

Three major findings emerged from the study. Firstly, results suggest that children's reporters with a law qualification are more likely to support the use of coercive measures in the prevention of crime than their colleagues with qualifications in the social sciences. This is congruent with a number of previous studies which found that the professional roles of the participants determined their attitudes towards offenders (Chui & Chan, 2012; Moak & Wallace, 2000; Mohr & Luscri, 1995; Ollenburger, 1986). For example, Ortet-Fabregat and Pérez (1992) found in their research on attitudes towards crime and the development of their assessment tool, the *Attitudes towards Crime* scale (ACS), that the more positive attitudes towards offenders and crime found amongst the social workers and professionals involved in the rehabilitation of offenders are coherent with their professional training and background. However, although in contrast, Moak and Wallace (2000) found that the training and background of practitioners involved with the juvenile justice system does not exert a sustained impact on positive attitudes towards juvenile offenders or a stronger support for less punitive practices.

Secondly, results show that the longer children's reporters are in the job, and the most experience they accrue, the less they support the use of coercive measures in the prevention of crime and the more favour the use of social assistance and support in the treatment of crime. Further analysis showed the attitudes of children's reporters with fewer years of experience in the job are more inclined to support the use of punitive measures in the treatment of crime than those with who were more experienced who tend to support assistance and social intervention as the treatment for crime.

Thirdly, years of experience in the job was found to predict children's reporters' attitudes towards the prevention of crime in that the more years of experience in the job a

children's reporter have the less favourable their attitudes towards the coercive prevention of crime are. These findings appear to be consistent with previous studies on length of professional experience and development of positive attitudes towards the treatment group. Lea, Auburn and Kibblewhite (1999) found amongst practitioners working with sex offenders that the greater the level of training and experience they had the greater levels of tolerance and understanding they demonstrated towards their client group, than those with lower levels of training and experience in dealing exclusively with sex offenders. Nelson, Herlihy and Oescher (2002) found that greater training and experience, amongst other variables, were related to the development of counsellors' more positive attitudes toward sex offenders. However, not all research supports this relationship between experience and the development of positive attitudes toward offenders; for example, Jones (2013) found professionals and paraprofessionals working with young sex offenders with limited training and experience also held positive attitudes towards their client group.

The results in this study are coherent with previous research findings on the issue of criminal justice professionals and their attitudes towards offenders and crime. Nevertheless, these should be interpreted cautiously within its context and without underestimating the study's limitations. Differences in participants' response rate, diversity within the sample group, and methodology might have provided different results. In the current study, women represent over three quarters of the sample size (76.5%), and although not statically significant, female reporters were found to be more likely to support the use of coercive measures in the prevention of crime than male reporters. This is consistent with previous research on women's attitudes towards crime (Haghghi & López, 1998; Whitehead & Blankenship, 2000).

Also to be considered is the fact that the age and gender of the offender, and the type of offence committed, were variables not considered in the study. This potentially could have had an impact on the study's results, as previous research has shown that the attitudes of the general public differ in relation to the various types of offence allegedly being committed, and offenders' background variables such as age, gender, race and criminal history (Applegate, Cullen & Fisher, 2002; Bouley & Wells, 2001). Despite the limitations inherent to any research, the current study offers a first approach in examining and understanding children's reporters' attitudes toward young offenders and crime.

Implications for research and practice

The key findings of our research could have implications in SCRA's future recruitment policy in terms of attracting a more diverse workforce regarding work experience, training and educational background. Significant differences in attitudes towards the treatment of crime have been found amongst those children's reporters with a social science qualification and those with a qualification in law. Children's reporters are qualified to degree level or equivalent in social work, law or another relevant discipline such as psychology or education, with at least two years' experience working with children and families. Only 28.4% of the sample of 102 children's reporters held a social science qualification compare to the 71.6% of children's reporters who were law qualified. Although no significant differences using the ATP scale to measure children's reporters' attitudes towards young offenders were found, non-law qualified children's reporters scored higher on the ATP scale than those with a law qualification, indicating that the attitudes of those holding a social science qualification are slightly more positive.

The study took the form of a quantitative research methods design. This was deemed appropriate because of the scale of the research in terms of the number of participants and its nature, reaching reporters based on all geographical areas of Scotland. However, especially during the pilot study phase, it became apparent that there is an appetite for some sort of qualitative research being undertaken. Participants who took part in the pilot study commented on the need for this in terms of identifying different types of criminal behaviours or crimes alleged committed by a young person as this would have had a bearing on their responses. Furthermore, the age of the young offender would have been a factor influencing their responses and they would have welcome to be able to comment on values and some other elements of qualitative data.

Further research on the topic of children's reporters' attitudes toward young offenders could incorporate qualitative research methods such as specific scenarios involving children and young people committing an offence, the assessment of needs and risks carried out on received of referral and factors taking into consideration when making decisions on disposal of these referrals.

Conclusions and Future Study

Children's reporters' do differ in their attitudes toward young offenders and crime with respect to their individual and demographical characteristics. However, not all these

differences were statically significant. No significant differences were found in respect of age, gender or location of work. Only the variables of qualification and years of experience in the job demonstrated to play a significant role in regulating these attitudes. Also, significant differences were only found in relation to attitudes regarding the prevention and treatment of crime.

Overall, children's reporters' subgroups were found to hold similar attitudes in terms of the scaled variables and did tend to score on the higher end of these, which demonstrates that the majority of children's reporters do not hold classical attitudes toward young offenders and crime but hold a liberal conception of crime and positive attitudes toward young offenders. Similarly, children's reporters were found to identify environmental and social factors as the cause of criminal behaviour and, therefore, favour the rehabilitation of offenders through social intervention and assistance means, rather than the systematic use of punitive measures.

These findings are consistent with previous research being undertaken on participants' professional roles and their attitudes towards crime, in that children's reporters, as criminal justice professionals, do tend to hold more positive attitudes towards crime and demonstrate more favourable attitudes towards rehabilitation than punishment (e.g., Chui & Chan, 2012). Future research may include the use of qualitative or mixed methods research designs to further explore children's reporters' attitudes toward young offenders in relation to their statutory functions of assessment and decision-making, young offenders' backgrounds, and type, nature and severity of the crime committed.

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