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Published online: 08 Nov 2022.

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Laypersons' recognition of and attribution of blame in situations involving domestic minor sex trafficking

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ABSTRACT

Successful identification of domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) remains challenging. Laypersons could play a significant role in identifying victims, but only if laypersons recognize trafficking situations as such and do not incorrectly attribute responsibility to victims. In the current study, we examined laypersons' perceptions of situations highly suggestive of DMST. Participants ($N = 320$), recruited from an internet-based crowd-sourcing platform, read a vignette describing a highly suspicious situation involving a minor and adult in a hotel room with cash on the minor's person. Participants answered questions about what they thought was happening and about their general knowledge of trafficking. The vignette systematically varied the age (13, 15, 17 years) and gender (boy, girl) of the victim to include the most common ages and genders of known DMST victims. Overall, just over half (61%) of participants recognized that a crime occurred, more often with younger (70%) than older (55%) minors. Participants tended to place some responsibility on older minors for their situation, as did participants who exhibited lower levels of general knowledge of trafficking. Overall, the results reveal substantial limitations in laypersons' understanding of DMST, including who is responsible, highlighting the need for targeted educational campaigns to improve that understanding.

Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (DMST), or the recruitment, harboring, transportation, or receipt of persons under 18 years of age for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, 2000), is notoriously difficult to identify. Victims are rarely forthcoming (e.g., due to mistrust of law enforcement or fear about not having their needs met if they tell; Lavoie et al., 2019). Identification instead often hinges on whether others, including professionals (e.g., social service or healthcare workers), but also the public, recognize risky situations involving youth and report those situations to authorities (e.g., to law enforcement). However, recognizing DMST is likely to be difficult, given that neither force nor coercion is required (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, 2000), and some victims might *appear* to be willing participants,

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for example, if they are engaged in 'survival sex' or believe that they are romantically involved with their trafficker (Kotrla, 2010). Any lack of awareness that these latter situations constitute trafficking could inhibit identification and reporting tendencies, especially in laypersons, who are unlikely to have had training or education on trafficking (Miller et al., 2021).

In recent years, considerable attention has been devoted to documenting how well professionals recognize situations involving DMST, the results of which have led to targeted trainings designed to enhance professionals' knowledge of the most common forms of trafficking and victim characteristics (Beck et al., 2015; Havig & Mahapatra, 2020). Far less attention has been devoted to documenting laypersons' recognition of situations involving DMST. Laypersons' perceptions, however, likely affect how they respond to suspected DMST, including whether they report victimization, and who (e.g. the victim or perpetrator) they view as responsible for the sexual activity. We directed attention toward these very issues in the present study. We specifically assessed whether laypersons recognize situations highly suggestive of trafficking and whether they believe the victims are responsible. We further evaluated whether laypersons' perceptions vary as a function of the victim's age and gender, given evidence from related research on perceptions of adolescent sex abuse victims that suggests both may be important to consider (e.g. Bottoms & Goodman, 1994; Quas et al., 2002).

Laypersons' knowledge and perceptions of trafficking

As mentioned, research concerning perceptions of DMST has largely examined what professionals, such as law enforcement or other groups (e.g. medical first responders), believe or know about victims. The types of knowledge assessed include risk factors for victimization, the types of relationships between victims and perpetrators, and difficulties removing victims from trafficking situations (Halter, 2010; Titchen et al., 2017). Laypersons' knowledge, however, may be vastly different, given that most people in the public likely lack training in trafficking as well as adolescent development, risk, and vulnerability, all topics relevant to identifying DMST victims (Lavoie et al., 2019). Yet, laypersons may encounter victims on the streets; while traveling; or in restaurants, bars, or other public spaces. Laypersons may also serve as jurors in criminal cases against defendants accused of sex trafficking of minors. How well laypersons are able to recognize and evaluate potential DMST situations, therefore, has significant potential to affect their reactions, reporting tendencies, and even perceptions of responsibility and guilt.

Studies that have examined laypersons' perceptions about DMST have largely focused on laypersons' general beliefs about trafficking rather than how laypersons perceive or interpret specific trafficking situations. For instance, surveys of laypersons' knowledge have asked participants to rate their level of agreement with true and false statements about human trafficking (e.g., 'If a child solicits sex from an adult in exchange for money, food, or shelter, he or she is not a victim', 'Human trafficking must include elements of physical force, restraint, bondage, and/or violence;' Cunningham & Cromer, 2016; see also Bouché et al., 2018; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Litam & Lam, 2021). Although many laypersons recognize that trafficking does occur, even in the United States (e.g., by correctly disagreeing with the statement, 'Human trafficking only occurs in undeveloped countries;' Cunningham & Cromer, 2016), many also incorrectly believe that only

situations involving sexual activity combined with force or movement against a person's will (i.e. kidnaping) constitutes trafficking (Strohacker et al., 2021). Another common error among laypersons is incorrectly believing that someone who knowingly solicits commercial sex cannot be a victim of trafficking (Bouché et al., 2018).

Laypersons' incorrect assumptions about DMST may be fueled by a lack of understanding about common characteristics of trafficked victims, which can make victims appear more like delinquent youth (e.g., trying drugs, alcohol, sexual activities) or as autonomous agents making their own conscious choices (Braams et al., 2015) rather than as victims per se. That is, many minor victims have a history of engaging in delinquent or high-risk behavior (e.g., drug or alcohol use) and in fact often come into contact with law enforcement as a result of that behavior (Halter, 2010; Newman, 2006). Victims may react with hostility toward law enforcement (Nogalska et al., 2021), both because of how they have been treated (e.g., as suspects) and/or because they do not see themselves as victims (Bromfield, 2015; Busch-Armendariz et al., 2011). Moreover, labeling victims as prostitutes instead of as victims of trafficking, which at times occurs by both professionals (e.g., law enforcement or service providers) and laypersons, serves to minimize the seriousness and criminal nature of DMST (e.g., Goddard et al., 2005; Mitchell et al., 2010; O'Brien, 2019). Even some research on DMST has described trafficked minors as being 'in the sex trade' or as 'prostituting themselves' (Franklin & Menaker, 2015). Such labels could lead to victim blaming or to a conflating of DMST with campaigns to decriminalize sex work in adults (Raphael et al., 2017). Minors, however, are not legally able to consent to such activities.

In summary, although studies of laypersons' knowledge of trafficking are limited, findings suggest that many people do not have a clear sense of common characteristics of victims, which could lead to incorrect attributions of the victims as troubled youth who are agentic in their trafficking situation. Whether such a possibility actually occurs, though, is unknown. Also unknown is how laypersons' general knowledge relates to their perceptions of specific situations of likely trafficking, particularly the types of situations common among DMST victims. Clearer insight into laypersons' ability to recognize DMST could be gleaned via systematic assessments of their perceptions of actual trafficking situations.

Age and gender as moderating factors of laypersons' perceptions

Any investigation of laypersons' perceptions of situations involving likely DMST needs to consider the age and gender of the victim, both of which may affect whether laypersons recognize trafficking and who they hold responsible for it. With regard to age, minor victims of trafficking are generally considered less blameworthy than adult victims. For instance, Bouché et al. (2018) asked laypersons about their perceptions of a child or adult victim of sex trafficking described in a mock newspaper article. As might be expected, laypersons were more sympathetic toward and reported being more likely to intervene with the child rather than adult victim. The article, though, explicitly labeled the child and adult as 'victims of trafficking', which may have heightened laypersons' sensitivity to risk and vulnerability, leading to generally high levels of concern. Moreover, the age of the child was not specified, and laypersons may have been thinking of a younger child victim (e.g., 8–10-year-old) rather than an adolescent minor (e.g., 15–17-year-old),

despite the latter age group being far more typical of most DMST victims (Lavoie et al., 2019). Given laypersons' tendencies toward greater skepticism about adolescent than child sexual abuse victims' credibility (Bottoms & Goodman, 1994; McCauley & Parker, 2001; Rogers et al., 2007) and laypersons' tendencies to attribute more blame to adolescent victims (Rogers et al., 2016; Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018), it is possible that laypersons would see adolescent victims of trafficking as at least partly responsible, especially when they also appear to be engaged in delinquent or other troubling behaviors (e.g., Halter, 2010; Newman, 2006).

Turning to victim gender, studies of laypersons' perceptions of trafficking have typically only included girl victims or left victim gender ambiguous (e.g., Cunningham & Cromer, 2016; Franklin & Menaker, 2015). The emphasis on girls is understandable, given that most identified victims of trafficking are female. In 2017–2018, for example, of over 2000 identified victims, 90% were described as female. However, small but important percentages were not, with 9% described as boys, and 1% described as transgender (Polaris, 2020; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020), highlighting the need to consider how laypersons perceive of victims spanning different genders. Traditional and masculine gender biases (e.g., which can shape recognition of child abuse in boys; Scholes et al., 2014) could play a role, reducing laypersons' understanding that boys (and perhaps victims with other gender identities) can be sexually exploited. This possibility is consistent with studies of laypersons' perceptions of child sexual abuse victims that have found that laypersons, especially males, tend to see adolescent boy victims as less believable and more blame-worthy than adolescent girl victims (Broussard & Wagner, 1988; Davies et al., 2009; Quas et al., 2002; Sommer et al., 2016). Bouché et al. (2018), however, found the opposite pattern in the aforementioned study of laypersons' perceptions of the child versus adult trafficking victim who had been described in a mock newspaper article. Victim gender was dichotomized to compare perceptions of child versus adult and male versus female victims. Laypersons expressed slightly more concern for male (boy/adult male) rather than female (girl/adult female) victims. Again however, because victim status was explicitly stated and because the younger victim was described simply as a 'child', findings may not generalize to adolescent minors involved in high-risk situations indicative of but not explicitly labeled as trafficking. Such needs to be examined directly.

Present study

In the present study, we evaluated laypersons' ability to recognize DMST. Specifically, participants read a vignette involving a situation that met the legal definition of DMST (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Prevention Act, 2000) but did not actually state that trafficking was occurring. Participants then answered questions about their perceptions of the situation and about who might be to blame. Finally, participants completed a questionnaire about their general knowledge of trafficking. The vignettes systematically varied the age and gender of the minor, conforming to a 3 (minor age: 13, 15, 17) by 2 (minor gender: girl, boy) between-subjects design. Given that 99% of documented victims identify as girls or boys (e.g., Polaris, 2020; Roe-Sepowitz, 2019; Quas et al., 2022), laypersons are most likely to encounter male and female victims. We thus elected to focus first on these two genders, acknowledging that, in the future, it will be

important to consider how laypersons' perceptions vary when other genders are considered.

Our design allowed us to test several hypotheses. First, we expected participants to be more likely to recognize that a sex crime occurred and less likely to rate the minor as responsible when the minor was younger (i.e., 13-year-old) rather than older (i.e., 17-year-old). Second, consistent with a large body of work on the effects of participants' gender and perceptions of victims of sexual abuse (Golding et al., 2020), we anticipated that women would see the minor as less responsible than would men. Third, we expected laypersons to rate the male victim as more responsible than the female victim, as is also uncovered at times in literature on perceptions of victims of sexual abuse. And fourth, we explored whether greater accuracy in knowledge of DMST was associated with greater likelihood of recognizing trafficking and lower likelihood of holding victims responsible.

Method

Participants

The final sample included 320 participants, recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) Prime, an internet-based research tool that allows for crowdsourcing of research participants for social and behavioral studies. This platform offers a more diverse and representative sample than university undergraduate samples (Casler et al., 2013), which could be important for considering how laypersons in general interpret the range of situations they encounter that might be demonstrative of trafficking. Inclusion criteria consisted of participants being age 18 years or older, a U.S. resident, and able to read and write in English. Individuals who sign up for MTurk receive announcements about studies and surveys that they can complete. MTurk conducts initial screenings based on studies' specified eligibility and places surveys (listed by title, time, and amount paid) in individuals' queues. Individuals then decide which surveys they would like to complete.

Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 70 years ($M = 37.29$, $SD = 11.16$); 50% identified as women, 49.9% identified as male, and one as other (based on their open-ended response); and a majority identified as White (78%). The remaining identified as Black (11%), Asian (3%), Latinx (3%), multi-racial (3%), or other (2%). Education varied: 16% completed some college, 52% a 4-year degree, 17% an advanced degree, 7% an apprenticeship/technical school, and 7% high school. 63% of participants reported being a parent, and 31% said they currently work with children. Sixty-eight additional participants (18%) completed the survey but were eliminated for failing at least one of three attention check items. A priori power analysis indicated that $N = 320$ was sufficient to detect medium-sized interactions, power = .80, alpha = .05.

Materials and procedures

All materials and procedures were approved by the University of California, Irvine Institutional Review Board. Following consent, participants completed an anonymous survey configured in Qualtrics. The order was pre-set, and participants were not allowed to return to sections that they already completed. Participants first saw a brief vignette, based on a criminal case in California, describing a situation in which an adult

man was found with a minor in a hotel room. The vignette was highly suggestive of but did not explicitly state that trafficking had occurred. There was cash on the minor's person (with no other belongings or identification), the adult and minor were said to have had sexual intercourse, and the minor's cell phone contained a suspicious message about meeting someone afterward. The race and ethnicity of the minor and adult were intentionally unspecified, and names were chosen in an effort to be racially and ethnically neutral. The minor's age and gender were experimentally manipulated to create six versions. Pilot testing ($n = 108$) of the vignette with a 15-year-old revealed variability in responses when asked what was happening (e.g. consensual sex, sexual abuse, etc.). Thus, the scenario was sufficiently ambiguous to warrant our investigation of predictors of that variability.

After reading the vignette, participants completed three attention check items. These were followed by two open-ended questions about what was happening (i.e., 'What was Mia/Brandon, 13-years-old, doing?' and 'What was David, 35-years-old, doing?'), followed by a yes/no question about whether a crime had been committed. Participants who answered yes were asked via an open-ended question what the crime(s) was/were and who should be charged. Next were questions about how responsible the minor and adult were for the situation (e.g., 'How responsible was [Mia/Brandon the 13-year-old] [David, the 35-year-old], for what happened?'), both on a 100-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 100 = *definitely*). Each question stated the name and age of the minor and adult to remind participants to whom each one referred.

Finally, participants completed a trafficking beliefs questionnaire and basic demographic questions. The beliefs questionnaire contained seven statements about what constitutes sex trafficking of minors, taken from prior surveys of trafficking knowledge (e.g., Beck et al., 2015). Participants indicated their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*) with each. Both true and false statements about DMST were included (e.g., 'Legally, trafficking must involve travel, transfer, or movement of youth across state or national borders'; Titchen et al., 2017). Responses were summed (false items reversed) to create an overall beliefs score. Higher scores indicated more accurate knowledge of trafficking. Three participants skipped one question; and their mean scores for the other items were substituted. Demographic questions asked about participants' age and gender (open-ended), race/ethnicity, education, political affiliation, parental status, and whether they currently work with children (all indicated via relevant drop-down response options). Upon completion of the survey, participants were thanked and compensated $1 through the MTurk Prime platform.

Data analysis plan

Two sets of preliminary analyzes were conducted. First, analyses of variance (ANOVAs) and $\chi2$ analyses tested whether participant characteristics differed across the 3 (minor age) by 2 (minor gender) conditions. Characteristics of interest included participant age, education (4-point ordinal scale: high school diploma, some college/trade school, college degree/trade school, post college/advanced degree), race/ethnicity (recoded as non-Hispanic White/person of color), political affiliation (liberal, moderate, conservative), whether participants were parents (yes/no), worked with children (yes/no), and their overall trafficking belief scores. Second, ANOVAs and $\chi2$ analyses tested whether participant

age, parental status, and working with children were related to whether they thought a crime occurred (yes/no) and how responsible the minor and adult were for the situation (100-point scales).

Analyses testing our main hypotheses included descriptive statistics, binary logistic regressions, and linear regressions. Descriptive statistics concerned basic information on participants' yes/no responses when asked if a crime occurred, and, for those who said yes, what crime they reported. Next a binary logistic regression conducted in the R *lme4* package using the *glm* function (Bates et al., 2015) examined participants' yes/no responses about whether a crime occurred. Predictors included minor age, minor gender, participant gender, participant age, participant trafficking beliefs score, participant parent status, and participant's experience working with children. Linear regressions, also conducted in the R *lme4 package* using the *lm* function (Bates et al., 2015), followed. These evaluated predictors of participants' ratings of the minors' and adults' responsibility. Predictors were identical to those in the binary logistic regression with the addition of a variable reflecting whether participants said a crime occurred (1) or not (0), since such perceptions could affect how responsible participants thought the minor and adult were. Model fit for both types of regressions was determined by the Akaike Information Criteria (AIC) using the *step* and *drop1* functions in the *R stats* package (R Core Team, 2013). For minor age, pairwise comparisons with adjusted means were computed using the *emmeans* function in the R package *emmeans* (Lenth, 2020). The most parsimonious models were interpreted and predictors and interactions that did not account for additional variance were eliminated, allowing us to test our hypotheses and conduct exploratory analyses.

For each analysis below, we report all predictors included in the final model, followed by a description of which predictors were significant and their interpretation. For ease in interpretation of effects involving minor and participant gender, minors are heretofore referred to as girls/boys, and participants as women/men.

Results

Preliminary analyses

The first set of preliminary ANOVAs and *χ2* analyses did not uncover any differences in participant characteristics across the conditions. Next, with regard to background characteristics and the three main study outcomes, being older and working with children were associated with greater likelihood of indicating a crime occurred ($p \leq .003$). Being a parent and working with children were related to lower ratings of minor responsibility and being older and working with children were related to higher ratings of adult responsibility ($p \leq .02$). Given these associations, participant age, being a parent, and working with children were included in subsequent analyses.

Did a crime occur?

When asked if a crime occurred, a little over half of the participants ($n = 190, 61\%$) said yes. When these 190 participants were asked 'What was the crime and who should be charged?' 60% of them said the crime was sexual abuse of a minor, 21% said prostitution,

and 5% said trafficking. In regard to who should be charged, 62% said the adult, 10% said the minor and adult, and 4% said solely the minor. The remaining responses listed irrelevant 'crimes' or had uninterpretable responses (e.g. homosexual acts, robbery, or direct repetition of the prompt).

What predicts whether participants thought a crime occurred?

When we examined predictors of whether participants thought a crime occurred, the binary logistic regression's best fit model included minor age, minor gender, participant age, participant gender, trafficking beliefs, participant currently working with children, and three interactions: (1) minor age by participant gender, (2) minor age by trafficking beliefs, and (3) working with children by trafficking beliefs. Significant main effects were found for minor age, participant gender, participant age, and working with children. All except participant age interacted with other characteristics, most notably trafficking beliefs, to predict whether participants said a crime occurred or not (see Table 1 for a breakdown by victim age and gender).

First and briefly, with regard to participant age, consistent with the preliminary analyses, as age increased, so did the likelihood of participants affirming that a crime occurred [$B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, $Z = 2.20$, $p = .03$, OR = 1.03, CI 97.5% (1.00, 1.06)]. Second, and of greater interest were the effects of minor age. Overall, as minor age increased, the likelihood of saying a crime occurred decreased [$B = 3.68$, $SE = 1.57$, $Z = 2.35$, $p = 0.02$]. However, the effect of minor age further varied as a function of participants' gender and trafficking beliefs, as discussed next.

The minor age by participant gender interaction revealed that men's but not women's perceptions differed based on minor age [$B = -1.75$, $S.E. = 0.66$, $Z = -2.65$, $p = 0.01$; see Table 2]. More men said a crime occurred when the minor was 13 compared to 17 years of age, with no difference in crime occurrence when the minor was 15. Women were equally likely to say a crime occurred regardless of minor age. Women's rates also did not significantly differ from those of men when the minor was 15 or 17, but fewer women than men said a crime occurred when the victim was 13-years-old. The minor age by trafficking beliefs interaction revealed that increases in the accuracy of participants' beliefs about trafficking were associated with an increased likelihood of them saying that a crime occurred when the minor was 13 [$B = -0.15$, $SE = 0.06$, $Z = -2.30$], but not 15 or 17-years-old.

Table 1. Participants' perceptions of crime occurrence by victim age and accuracy of participants' trafficking beliefs.

	13-years-old			15-years-old			17-years-old			Overall sample
	Boy	Girl	Total	Boy	Girl	Total	Boy	Girl	Total	
Ns	47	46	93	55	53	108	62	57	119	320
% Who said a crime was committed	68%	72%	70%[a]	53%	66%	59%[a]	50%	61%	55%[a]	61%
Mean rating of minor responsibility (100-point scale)	43[b]	44	44	49[b]	48	48	55[b]	50	53	49
Mean rating of adult responsibility (100-point scale)	83	81	82	81	80	81	74	76	75	79

[a]$p = .02$, [b]$p = .03$.

Table 2. Interaction of minor age by participant gender predicting crime occurrence.

Minor age	% Who said a crime was committed M% (SE)		
	Men	Women	Total
13-years-old	81% (6.60)[a, c]	60% (9.25)[c]	71% (6.27)[b]
15-years-old	57% (8.44)	59% (8.44)	58% (6.00)[b]
17-years-old	41% (7.03)[a]	59% (7.38)	50% (5.54)[b]

[a]$p = .01$, [b]$p = .02$, [c]$p = .05$.

Finally, participants' beliefs about trafficking interacted with whether they said they work with children [$B = 0.14$, $SE = 0.06$, $Z = 2.42$, $p = 0.02$]. In general, as trafficking beliefs became more accurate, the likelihood of saying a crime occurred increased. However, the magnitude of this increase was substantially larger among participants who worked with children than among participants who did not.

What predicts participants' perceptions of who is responsible?

The minor's responsibility

When participants' ratings of the minor's responsibility were entered into a linear regression, the best fit model included main effects for minor age, minor gender, participant gender, trafficking beliefs, whether participants work with children, whether participants are a parent, participants' perceptions about whether a crime was committed, and interactions involving the minor age by crime committed, minor gender by working with children, participant gender by trafficking beliefs, and crime committed by working with children. Significant main effects emerged for minor gender, trafficking beliefs, and whether participants were parents, and significant interactions emerged for minor age by crime committed, minor gender by working with children, participant gender by trafficking beliefs, and crime committed by working with children (see Table 1 and Table 3).

First, a significant minor age by crime committed interaction revealed that minor age shaped participants' perceptions, but only among participants who said a crime was committed [$B = 26.11$, $SE = 7.26$, $t = 3.60$, $p < .001$]. Among these participants, the 17-year-old was rated as more responsible than the 13-year-old. Ratings of the 15-year-old's

Table 3. Interactions predicting minor responsibility.

Minor age	Mean rating of minor responsibility M 100-point scale (SE)		
	Crime occurred	Crime did not occur	Total
13-years-old	40 (3.31)[a,b]	58 (4.79)[b]	49 (2.95)
15-years-old	48 (3.26)	56 (3.84)	52 (2.53)
17-years-old	56 (3.18)[a]	48 (3.52)	52 (2.41)
Working with children	Crime occurred	Crime did not occur	Total
Worked with children	42 (2.15)[c]	55 (3.02)	49 (1.80)
Did not work with children	54 (3.79)[c]	52 (3.77)	53 (2.86)
Working with children	Boy	Girl	Total
Worked with children	47 (2.36)	51 (2.52)	49 (1.80)
Did not work with children	59 (3.77)[d]	48 (3.80)[d]	53 (2.86)

[a]$p < .001$, [b]$p = .002$, [c]$p = .02$, [d]$p = .01$.

responsibility fell in between and did not significantly differ from ratings for the other two age groups. Ratings of the minor's responsibility among participants who indicated no crime occurred did not significantly differ as a function of victim age, although the trend was in the same direction. Comparisons of responsibility within each minor age group between participants who said a crime occurred and those who did not revealed that those who did not say a crime occurred rated the 13-year-old as more responsible than those who said a crime occurred [$B = 17.74$, $SE = 5.76$, $t = 3.08$, $p = .002$]. However, when the minor was 15 and 17 years old, ratings did not differ based on participants' perceptions regarding a crime occurring.

Second, stating a crime occurred interacted with working with children [$B = -14.21$, $SE = 6.16$, $t = -2.31$, $p = 0.02$] to predict ratings of victim responsibility. Among participants who said a crime occurred, those who did not work with children indicated the minor was more responsible than those who work with children. Among participants who did not say a crime occurred, working with children was unrelated to ratings of minor responsibility.

Third, participants viewed the boy as more responsible than the girl [$B = 10.99$, $SE = 4.95$, $t = 2.22$, $p = .03$]. However, minor gender also interacted with working with children, a pattern being driven by participants who did not work with children. These participants rated the boy as significantly more responsible than the girl [$B = -15.63$, $SE = 5.99$, $t = -2.61$, $p = 0.01$]. Ratings of participants who work with children did not differ between boys and girls.

Fourth, regarding participants' trafficking beliefs, a significant main effect revealed that, as accuracy of beliefs improved, ratings of the minor's responsibility decreased [$B = -2.31$, $SE = 0.31$, $t = -7.37$, $p < .001$]. Such beliefs further interacted with participant gender [$B = 1.13$, $SE = 0.44$, $t = 2.54$, $p = 0.01$], which, in combination suggested the negative association between beliefs and responsibility ratings was stronger for women than men (Figure 1). Fifth, and finally, parents ($M = 49$, $SE = 2.68$) viewed the minor as less responsible than did non-parents ($M = 54$, $SE = 1.81$) [$B = -6.20$, $SE = 3.10$, $t = -2.00$, $p = .046$].
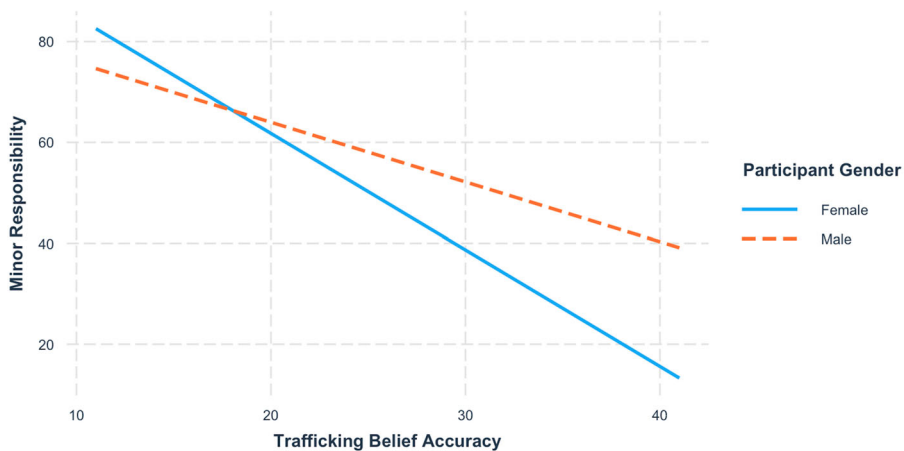

Figure 1. Participants' belief accuracy and participant gender predicting perceptions of the minor's responsibility (100-point scale, higher scores = more responsibility).

The adult's responsibility

When participants' ratings of the adult's responsibility were entered, the best fit model included minor age, minor gender, participant gender, trafficking beliefs, crime committed, and a trafficking beliefs by crime committed interaction. Only the interaction, though, was statistically significant [$B = 1.28$, $SE = 0.43$, $t = 2.98$, $p = .003$]. As shown in Figure 2, among participants who said a crime occurred, more accurate trafficking beliefs were associated with higher ratings of adult responsibility. Among participants who did not say a crime occurred, trafficking beliefs were marginally associated with lower ratings of adult responsibility.

Discussion

The goal of our study was to provide much-needed insight into how laypersons interpret individual situations they might encounter involving DMST. Of importance, we did not explicitly label situations as trafficking, even though the activities described met the federal and most states' legal definitions of DMST (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Prevention Act, 2000). This is in contrast to prior work, which has largely focused on laypersons' general knowledge and perceptions. Our goal was to document whether laypersons actually recognized DMST, and to whom they attributed responsibility for its occurrence. Our results are significant in revealing that, although a majority (61%) of laypersons recognized that sexual activity with a minor is illegal, very few explicitly labeled that activity trafficking (5%). Moreover, many participants placed some responsibility on the minor, both when they thought a crime occurred and when they did not, the latter of whom included well over a third of our participants (39%).

Several factors may be contributing to participants' low recognition. Some participants may have simply lacked the correct terminology. Because the term 'trafficking', was not included in the description, participants may not have thought to label the situation as such when asked about the crime. That is, they referred to the minor as a prostitute even though they recognized that the adult (and not the minor) committed a crime. The term, 'prostitution' or 'prostitute' may have acted as a semantic placeholder for these laypersons
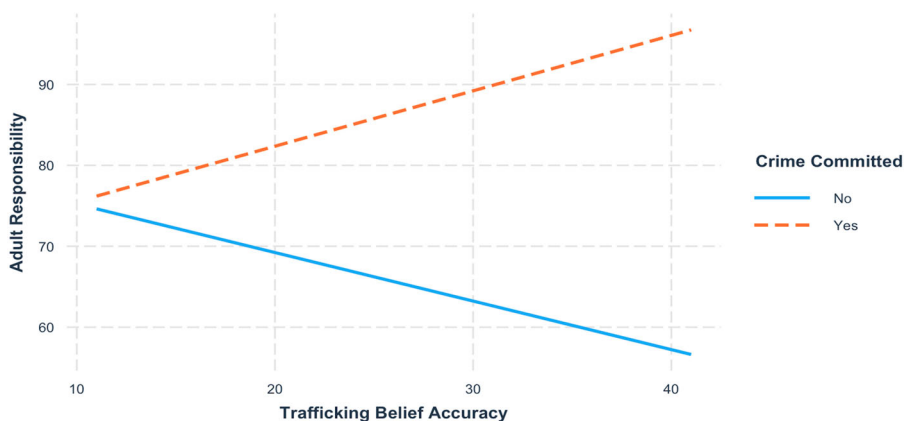

Figure 2. Interaction between participants' belief accuracy and whether participants believe a crime was committed on perceptions of the adult's responsibility.

in the same way that these labels sometimes do for professionals who encounter trafficking situations involving adolescent victims (Farrell et al., 2015). Yet, labeling the minor as a prostitute is not without consequences. The term can be interpreted negatively, but also may imply choice and influence how laypersons perceive these youth (e.g., Long & Dowdell, 2018). Furthermore, if used with victims directly, the term could shape how they see themselves and potentially undermine their own recovery. Clearer explanations of terminology in public service messaging could be particularly valuable here.

However, other participants did not merely make a labeling error. They acknowledged that the minor and adult had sex, but either said that the minor was partially responsible and/or did not see the act as criminal. Some described it as a mutually agreed upon exchange of commercial sex, which could still be a crime, but for both. When asked who should be charged for the crime, for instance, one participant explained, 'The 35-year-old should be charged as an adult and the 17-year-old should go to juvie'. The age at which laypersons believe adolescents are capable of making a range of decisions, including about sexual intercourse, abortions, and marriage, varies considerably (Koski & Heymann, 2018; Petroni et al., 2019). Laypersons' perceptions of adolescents' ability to decide whether to have commercial sex and their responsibility for such decisions likely fall into this category.

Perhaps laypersons would feel differently if the situation included force or physical indicators of control (which are commonly recognized by laypersons as constituting trafficking; Beck et al., 2015) or if laypersons had more detail about the context that led a minor to engage in such behavior. For example, many trafficked minors have been homeless or ran away from group homes where they had been placed following maltreatment and removal from home (Middleton et al., 2018; Reid et al., 2019). They are often engaging in commercial sexual exploitation to survive. Knowing about the complexities in victims' lives could affect laypersons' perceptions, similar to trends reported by Franklin and Menaker (2015), who had college students read vignettes about 'female youth involved in the sex trade' who had been 'prostituting themselves' since age 14. Providing students with information in the vignette about the youth's victimization reduced the amount of blame they placed on her for her situation. Alternatively, victims might still be blamed, for instance, under the assumption that they still made a choice to run away or sell sex (e.g. Litam, 2019). Further research into how an individual's background and perhaps other contextual information (e.g., regarding victimization), especially information that is directly perceptible in the types of encounters laypersons may have with DMST victims (e.g., drug use), would be enormously valuable, particularly in terms of campaigns to improve awareness and identification of victims.

In the present study, we did find that one potentially recognizable victim characteristic – namely victim age – influenced participants' responses, especially in conjunction with their beliefs about trafficking and whether they thought a crime occurred. Participants were most likely to indicate a crime took place when the minor was a young adolescent and they possessed greater knowledge about DMST. Research on juror decision making has found that jurors perceive adolescent victims of sexual abuse as less credible than child victims (e.g., McCauley & Parker, 2001; Rogers et al., 2007), and perceive older juvenile offenders as more culpable for criminal behavior than younger offenders (Ghetti & Redlich, 2001). Our results suggest greater attributions of responsibility are similarly assigned to older than younger DMST victims.

Of note, we did not directly ask laypersons whether or at what age adolescents can consent to sex (e.g., Agnes, 2013; Petroni et al., 2019), including commercially. Such would be valuable as a follow-up to gain broader understanding of how laypersons interpret adolescents who engage in risky sexual behavior, particularly considering growing evidence of professional and public awareness of immaturity of judgement and risk-taking tendencies in delinquent youth (see Cauffman et al., 2018; Monahan et al., 2015, for reviews). In addition, although participants in general were less likely to indicate a crime occurred and rate the minor as more responsible when the minor was older rather than younger, participants with more accurate DMST knowledge did not follow this pattern. Regardless of minor age, virtually all participants in the upper quartile of beliefs scores (i.e., the most accurate) answered affirmatively when asked if a crime had been committed. Campaigns to enhance knowledge of trafficking, therefore, may be especially valuable in relation to perceptions of trafficking of older adolescent-age minors.

A few trends suggested that the effects of minor age varied in some ways between men and women (see also Strohacker et al., 2021). Consistent with prior work on perceptions of child sexual assault victims (e.g., Bottoms & Goodman, 1994; Hockett et al., 2016), women rated the minor as less responsible than did men. At the same time, only men changed their perceptions based on minor age. Men were less likely to think a crime occurred and correspondingly were more likely to attribute responsibility to the oldest compared to youngest minor, a trend suggestive of men seeing the older adolescent as a young adult, capable of making independent decisions about sexual activity. Yet, not all men evidenced such a trend. Men who possessed greater knowledge of trafficking rated minors as less responsible than did men who possessed lower knowledge. Given these trends, programs designed to improve DMST knowledge may be particularly beneficial in enhancing men's ability to recognize trafficking of an older adolescent and reduce their perceptions of an older victim's responsibility. Of course, such programs are likely to be most effective if they present the most common types of situations of DMST that occur. Some anti-trafficking organizations are beginning to do this (e.g. A21, 2021; Hope for Justice, 2018). For instance, A21's 'Can You See Me' campaign provides educational videos, including one of a DMST situation that could help laypersons learn more about indicators of exploitation rather than about sensationalized cases of trafficking. The value of these campaigns, especially among men, is worthwhile to explore.

We should also address our other experimentally manipulated variable – minor gender – which unexpectedly did not emerge as a robust predictor of participants' perceptions. Boys were rated as more responsible by participants who did not work with children (compared to those who did work with children), but no other effects involving minor gender, at least as with the binary genders presented here, emerged. Stereotypes against male-to-male sexual contact (i.e., homophobia) have decreased in recent years (Ayoub & Garrison, 2017; McCormack & Anderson, 2014), perhaps leading to minor gender playing less of a role in affecting layperson perceptions than it has in the past. Of course, it is important to expand our work to consider how laypersons' perceptions may vary depending on other victim genders. We aimed to build a foundational understanding of laypersons' perceptions of the most prevalent types of victims, girls and then boys. However, further research is needed with youth victims who are transgender or non-binary, as past research has found LGBTQIA + youth to be particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation in part due to higher rates of homelessness, discrimination, and

violence (Polaris Project, 2019). Overall, it is crucial that further research addresses this and other particularly vulnerable populations of young people, and that the public are educated to notice a variety of DMST situations and gender/relationship dynamics (e.g., transgender victims, non-binary victims, female perpetrators, actual versus perceived victim gender, etc.).

Beyond the aforementioned trends were several significant exploratory findings worthy of comment and further investigation. Participants who had experience with children, both in their jobs and as parents, were better able to recognize the criminal activity. They also saw the minors as less responsible than those who did not have such experience. Interacting with children, as parents or in jobs may well contribute to adults' greater understanding of adolescents' (at times) impulsive behavior and may lead adults to feel adolescents do not yet have the capacity to make binding decisions about sexual activity. Alternatively, some adults, due to their professions, may be mandated by law to report suspected instances of abuse or neglect, increasing their sensitivity to situations involving possible abuse. Mandated reporters may have also been exposed to sexual assault or trafficking training (e.g., in sports, as volunteers in schools, etc.; Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act, 1987), increasing their awareness of youth vulnerability and exploitation. Examining these trainings in detail could be a valuable way to assess their impact on identification of DMST.

Although our findings provide much-needed insight into how adults react to a situation involving DMST, limitations need mentioning. For one, we only provided laypersons with brief descriptions and did so via a case vignette. Laypersons may encounter situations in which minimal information is available and need to draw inferences from that information about a minor's risk and need of assistance. Thus, assessing laypersons' perceptions in such situations is highly valuable. Nonetheless, laypersons may also seek additional information to help them determine how best to respond. Subsequent research might ask laypersons what they would do next or provide richer vignettes with multiple response options to assess perceptions and behaviors. Second, as mentioned, we did not explicitly label the situation in the vignette as DMST. Had we done so, laypersons' perceptions and attributions might have varied. Furthermore, we asked how responsible both the minor and adult would be, but we did not explicitly define what we meant by responsibility. Given that we asked about a crime, we assume participants interpreted responsibility as culpability. However, it is possible that some participants interpreted the term as moral responsibility, and it would be of interest in future research to explore a range of laypersons' perceptions. Finally, while cloud source recruiting is valuable in increasing the diversity of samples relative to traditional college-student samples, participants are still not representative of the general population. Additional research using multiple recruitment approaches would increase the generalizability of our findings.

Implications and conclusions

Even with these limitations, the present findings echo previous research and suggest that laypersons hold a simplified picture of DMST youth, failing to recognize the breadth of behaviors that legally constitute trafficking of minors (Musto, 2013), and at times blaming the minors for their involvement. Campaigns to educate the public about DMST

may need to be modified to improve knowledge of the types of victims most likely to be encountered and how they become immersed in exploitation. Media depictions of human trafficking, which have increased dramatically during the past several decades, tend to portray victims in ways that are uncharacteristic of the majority of domestic trafficking situations, that is as vulnerable girls kidnaped and forced into prostitution (Houston-Kolnick et al., 2020). Depictions like these are commonplace (Austin & Farrell, 2017), for instance, with images in public transportation locations showing the common media trope of young girls and women frightened and forced into submission by an unknown kidnaper, despite intimate partners and family members being more common figures of exploitation (Gerassi et al., 2018). Media portrayals may limit laypersons' ability to recognize the more common versions of trafficking (Baker, 2014), while concurrently perpetuating the myth that agency and victimization cannot co-exist (Bay-Cheng & Fava, 2014).

DMST youth have complex needs and personal histories (e.g., housing instability, vacillation between the dependency and delinquency branches of the juvenile system; Jago et al., 2011; Middleton et al., 2018). They tend to be untrusting and even uncooperative with the authorities (Henderson et al., 2021; Nogalska et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2019), which, if perceived by or described to laypersons, may further inhibit their recognition of the victims' status. Even brief trainings about victims' backgrounds and needs can correct misperceptions (Miller et al., 2021), which could then improve identification and intervention. Modifications in the language used to describe minors involved in sex trafficking may also help with misperceptions. Calling a trafficked minor a 'prostitute' might not be a harmless error (insofar as it may be associated with some negative connotations) even when traffickers or procurers are recognized as being fully to blame for exploiting the minor (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014). Education and training in more appropriate labels (such as referring to the youth by their preference and disclosure tolerance with labels like youth, victim, survivor, etc.) would be valuable so that responsibility, even if unintentional, is not placed on youth.

In closing, as evidence of laypersons' perceptions of DMST victims continues to grow, campaigns to improve inaccurate perceptions need to be empirically developed. Once tested, their widespread implementation can improve public awareness of DMST and ideally improve identification of this particularly vulnerable and often overlooked population of victims.

Disclosure statement

Funding

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings from this project are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. One would receive a de-identified copy to protect the privacy of our participants.

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