

# Freshman perceptions on child sexual abuse

Maegan Harrison, Charles Kraemer, Stephanie M. S. Thomas  
Department of Psychological Science, LaGrange College



## Abstract

This study evaluates freshman perceptions of child sexual abuse (CSA) in relation to causes, outcomes, and believability of the child. A questionnaire of myths and facts about CSA was developed and distributed to three freshman core classes at LaGrange College. Results showed few significant differences, suggesting the freshman students surveyed are not good at discriminating facts and myths in regards to CSA.

## Introduction

Child sexual abuse has been a major topic in the scientific community for quite some time.

- The GA Constitution (n.d.) defines CSA as “any act committed by the defendant against the plaintiff which occurred when the plaintiff was under 18 years of age...”
- The CDC (2017) defines sexual violence as “any sexual act committed against someone without freely given consent”
- The U.S. DOJ (n.d.) details 1.8 million adolescents have been victims of SA in the U.S.
- Approximately 1 in 6 boys and 1 in 4 girls are sexually abused before turning 18; many still go unreported (U.S. D.O.J., n.d.)
- 60% of those who experience CSA exhibit serious and long-standing symptoms (U.S. D.O.J., n.d.)
- CSA is more often perpetrated by someone the child knows (Hestick & Perrino, 2009)
- 60% of perpetrators are known by the child, 30% of them are family members (U.S. D.O.J., n.d.)

Many factors in the field of CSA are studied by researchers to understand their impact on perception. Gender of the respondent has contradictory literature.

- Hestick and Perrino (2009) and Davies, Rogers, and Hood (2009) found a significant difference between male and female respondents for blame attribution and expected trauma of victim
- Reynolds and Birkimer (2002) failed to find a significant difference between male and female respondents for blame attribution and expected trauma of victim
- Giglio, Wolfteich, Gabrenya, and Sohn (2011) failed to find a significant difference between male and female respondents for blame attributed to victim

Victim believability is another important factor.

- Davies and Rogers (2009) found that younger children are seen as more believable than older children

I hypothesize that there will be a significant difference between myth agreement and fact agreement such that participants will show more agreement with the facts than with the myths.

## Materials & Methods

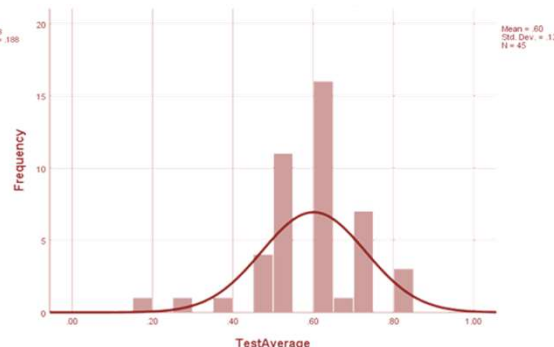
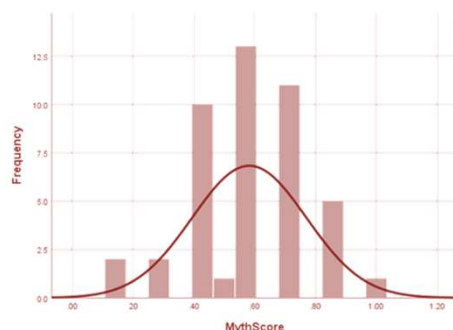
### Participants

- 26 freshman males and 19 freshman females participated in this study. 1 person refused participation.
- 38 identified as Christians, 1 labeled no religious affiliation, and 3 chose not to answer.
- 15 indicated no average daily contact with children, 17 chose less than three hours of contact, and 10 chose more than three hours of contact.

### Methods

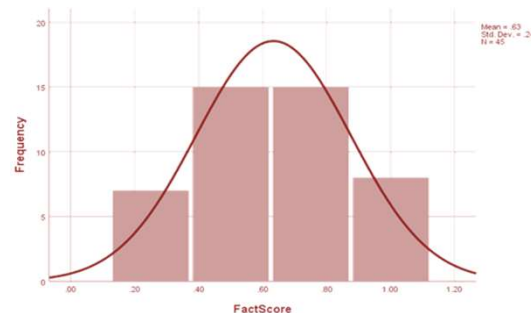
I went to each selected course during normal class time to collect data.

- I gave background for the questionnaire's development as part of a senior research course and asserted that participation was voluntary.
- I read the study instructions aloud to the participants explaining the process of filling out the informed consent and retrieving a survey to be completed.
- After signing, each participant returned the informed consent to me before being handed a survey to fill out.
- Upon completing the perception and demographic questions, surveys were brought back and placed in the manila envelope by the student to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.
- I debriefed the students and resumed authority to the instructor after all surveys were returned.



## Results

- Participants agreed more with myths than facts or neutral statements;  $t(43) = 2.397, p = .021$  and  $t(43) = 2.396, p = .021$ . No significant difference was found between facts and neutral statements,  $p = .729$ .
- There were no significant correlations found between...
  - myths and facts,  $r = .27, p = .078$
  - myths and neutral statements,  $r = .01, p = .971$
  - facts and neutral statements,  $r = .04, p = .802$
- There was no significant difference between males and females in how well they were able to identify...
  - facts;  $t(42) = 0.350, p = .728$
  - myths;  $t(42) = -0.806, p = .434$
- No significant difference between performance when calculated as test scores for any demographics



## Conclusion

This survey research has failed to support my original hypothesis and has added to the mounting evidence indicating no difference between males and females in responding to questions related to CSA. This could be because there are many more similarities between males and females than differences. Another reason could be the increased egalitarian mindsets in younger generations. Data indicates that the students surveyed tend to agree more with myths. This explains the perseverance of myths despite accessible information.

### Limitations

- Small sample, may not be generalizable
- Only freshman
- Private school in Georgia - potential regional differences
- Previous knowledge of CSA not measured
- Failed attempt to use other demographics
- Not enough breakdown in religious demographic
- Correlational not causal

### Future Research

- Measuring CSA knowledge.
- Using vignettes depicting scenarios not typically represented as CSA.
- Gender comparisons could be made for every vignette to determine if differences exist.
- Educational materials could be developed addressing myths with high levels of acceptance then used to teach students before giving them a follow-up questionnaire to determine changes in beliefs.

## References

- Ga. Const. O.C.G.A § 9-3-33.1
- Giglio, J. J., Wolfteich, P. M., Gabrenya, W. K., & Sohn, M. L. (2011). Differences in perceptions of child sexual abuse based on perpetrator age and respondent gender. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 20*(4), 396–412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2011.593255>
- Hestick, H., & Perrino, C. S. (2009). African-American undergraduates' perceptions and attributions of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 18*(1), 61–77.
- Reynolds, L. L., & Birkimer, J. C. (2002). Perceptions of child sexual abuse: Victim and perpetrator characteristics, treatment efficacy, and lay vs. legal opinions of abuse. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 11*(1), 53.
- U.S. Department of Justice. *Facts and Statistics: Raising Awareness about Sexual Abuse*. Retrieved from <https://www.nsopw.gov/en/education/factsstatistics/>

