

Background

Although the vast majority of child sexual abuse cases are not reported or prosecuted, false accusations of child sexual abuse are a **persistent and highly destructive occurrence in the Canadian legal system.**

In Canada, the incidence of deliberate fabrication or lying in unfounded cases can range from 3-30%.¹ This suggests that **thousands of factually innocent Canadians per year endure the trauma and stigma of a police investigation.**

A false criminal accusation can:

- Damage the accused's standing in the community²
- Lead to labelling and vilification³
- Result in avoidance from friends & harassment from strangers⁴
- Cause depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal ideation⁵

There is very little research investigating the uniquely stigmatizing nature of child sexual abuse, particularly in the context of a false accusation.

Purpose of Study

Purpose:

- 1) Investigate the stigma associated with false accusations of child sexual abuse
- 2) Understand the role of offence stigma in the presumption of innocence

H1: Child sexual abuse will be the most heavily stigmatized across all measures (offence stigma, presumed guilt, accused credibility, social stigma, social distance, social comfort, perceived risk).

H2: Participants who hold more stigmatizing beliefs toward the offence itself will view the accused as less credibly innocent and view him with more social stigma.

Methods

Participants

323 adult participants recruited from Prolific Academic

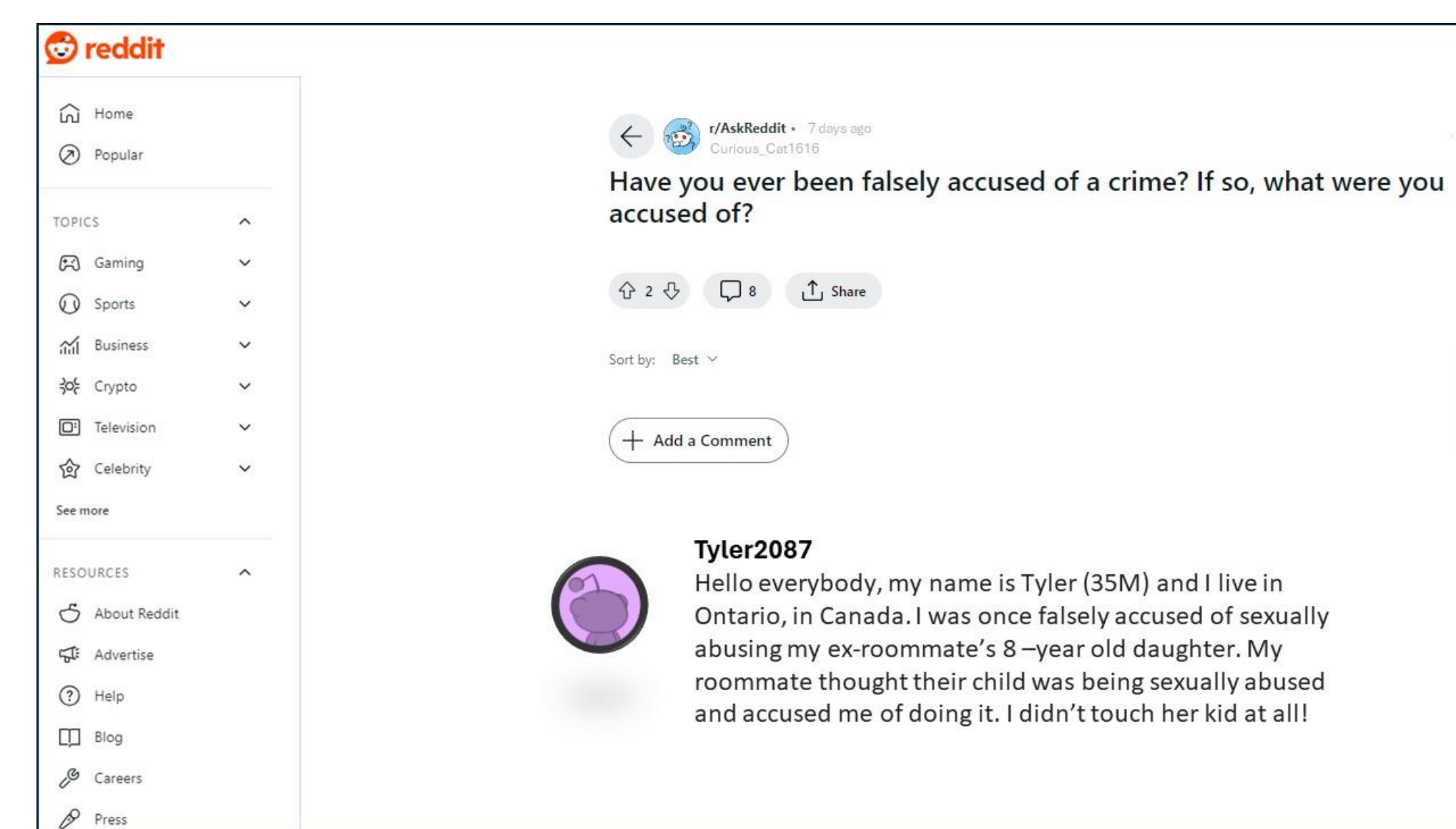
Materials

- Participants were presented with one of seven Reddit-style posts
- A man states he has been falsely accused of one of several different crimes (child sexual abuse, rape, drug dealing, theft, child physical abuse, assault, control [no accusation]).
- Measures: offence stigma, presumed guilt, accused credibility, social stigma, social distance, social comfort, perceived risk
- Survey completed online via Qualtrics

Analyses

- One-way ANOVAs and pairwise contrasts
- Hierarchical regressions

Figure 1: Example of Condition (Reddit Post)



Results

Figure 2: Offence Stigma by Condition (Offence Type)

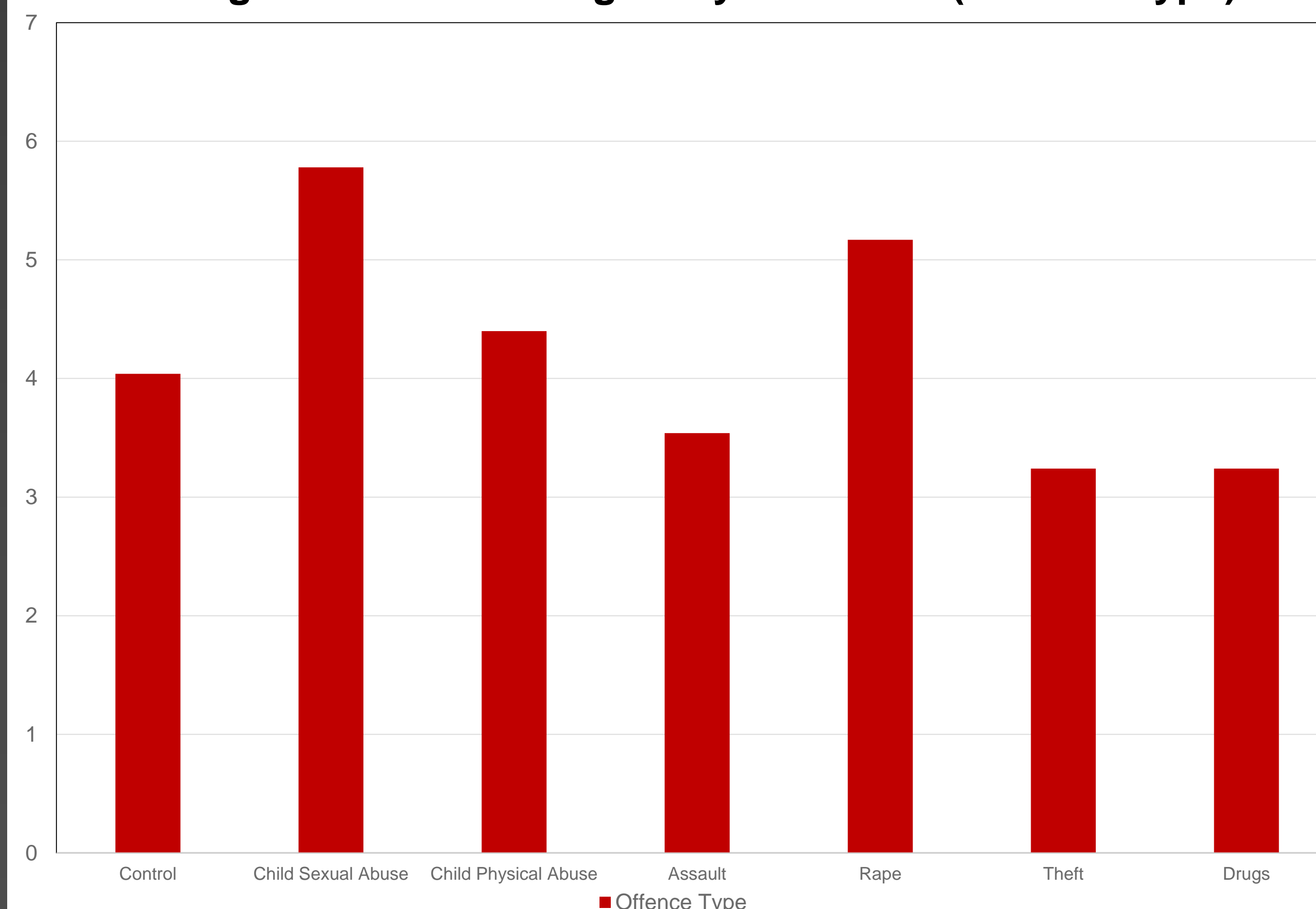


Table 1: One Way ANOVA Results by Offence Type

	F	p-value	η^2
Offence Stigma	35.38	0.00	0.40
Presumed Guilt	2.40	0.02	0.04
Accused Credibility	5.39	0.00	0.09
Social Stigma	8.50	0.00	0.13
Social Comfort	6.88	0.00	0.11
Social Distance	1.45	0.19	0.02
Perceived Risk	8.47	0.00	0.13

Results

- The omnibus ANOVAs were significant for all dependent measures *except* social distance
- Pairwise comparisons confirm **child sexual abuse was higher than all other offences (and control) for offence stigma, presumed guilt, social stigma, preferred social distance, and perceived risk; and lower for social comfort levels**
- For each DV, inclusion of offence stigma at the final stage of the hierarchical regression significantly improved the model, revealing offence stigma as the strongest predictor of attitudes, above and beyond all other features of the case.
- Offence stigma was more strongly predictive of guilt and stigma ratings in the child sexual abuse cases relative to other offences.

Discussion

- Child sexual abuse is indeed associated with the highest offence stigma, presumed guilt, personal stigma, largest preferred social distance, and lowest social comfort when compared to all other crime types.
- These attitudes are driven by offence-related stigma that is unique to allegations of child sexual abuse.

Implications: The presumption of innocence may be influenced by a form of jury bias that originates from offence-related stigma, with implications for judicial instructions to juries and the need for anonymity during proceedings.

Limitations: Use of vignettes; participants had little case information to go on

References:

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3. Chinn, Jeffrey & Ratliff, Ashley (2009) "I Was Put Out the Door With Nothing"-- Addressing the Needs of the Exonerated Under a Refugee Model," *California Western Law Review*: Vol. 45 (2), Article 4. <https://scholarlycommons.law.cwsl.edu/cwlr/vol45/iss2/4>
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