

Do Criminal Attitudes Cause Criminal Behaviour? Different Research Designs Can Yield Different Results

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BACKGROUND

There is usually a trade-off between different research designs (Shadish et al., 2002). For example, compared to correlational designs, randomized experiments usually have higher internal validity but lower construct validity.

We tested the relationship between criminal attitudes and criminal behaviour using three different research designs:

1. Correlation between measured variables
2. Quasi-experiment
3. Randomized experiment

METHOD

Participants

- 288 undergraduate students (73.3% women)

Measures

- Criminal attitudes: Measures of Criminal Attitudes and Associates (MCAA; Mills et al., 2002)
- Criminal behaviour: Current Criminal Behaviour Scale-2023 (CCBS-2023; created for current study)

Procedure

Online study. Participants randomly assigned to one of the following three conditions:

- Anti-criminal attitudes message ($n = 71$)
 - Text and photos designed to reduce criminal attitudes
- Control condition message ($n = 79$)
 - Text and photos about the Grand Canyon
- Condition in which they could choose whether to receive the anti-criminal attitudes message ($n = 92$) or get no message ($n = 46$).

Correlation Between Measures

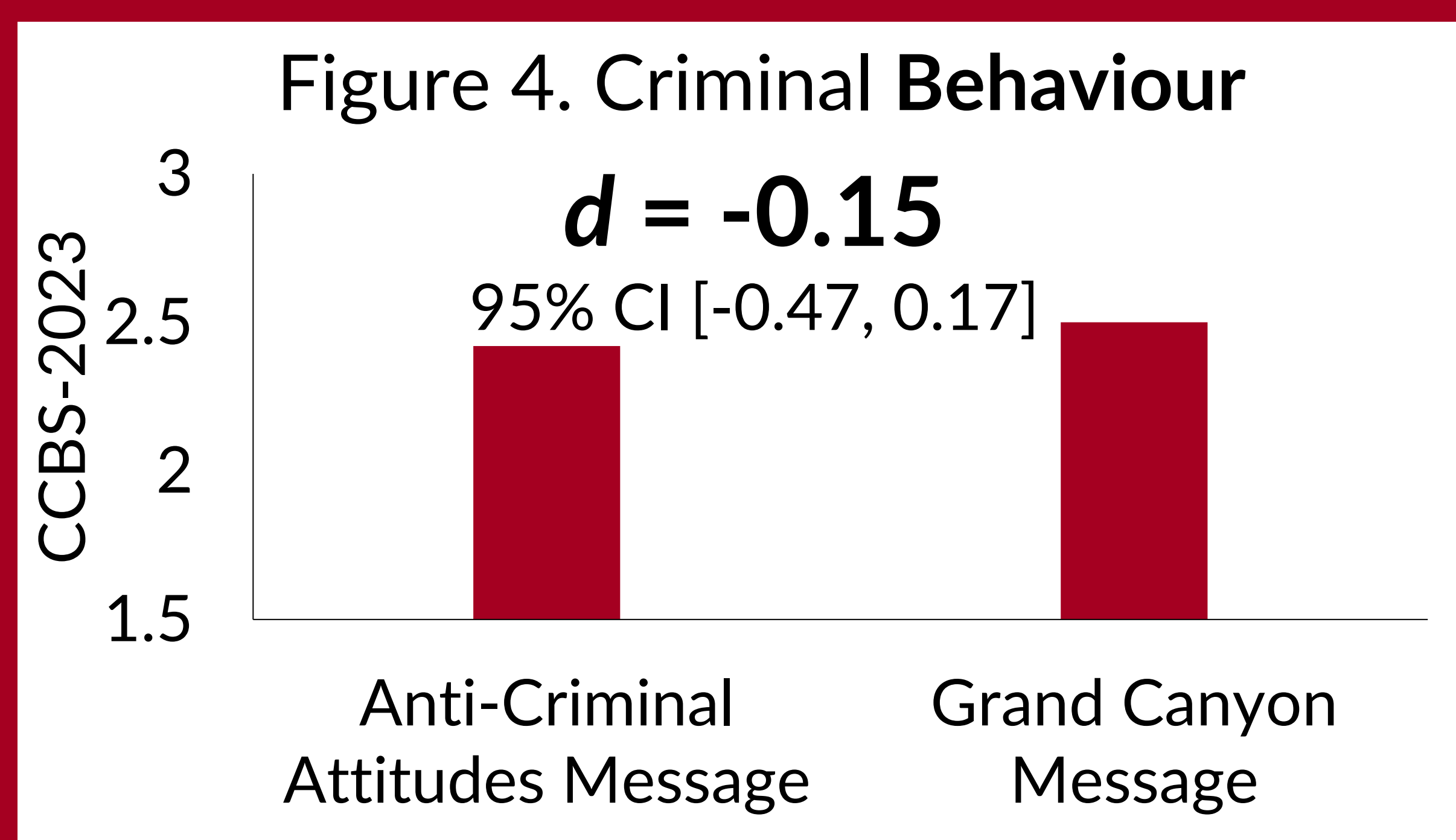
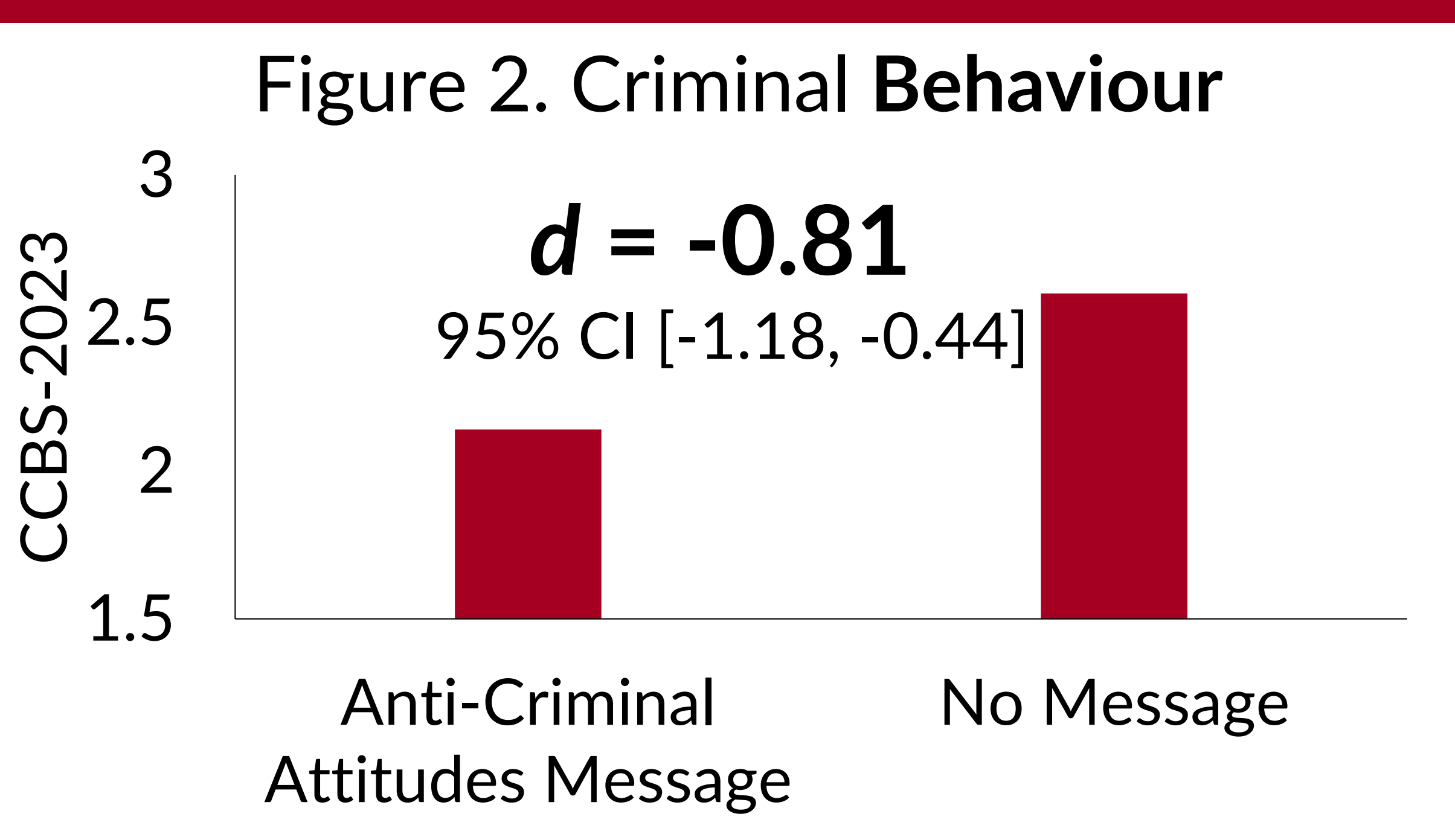
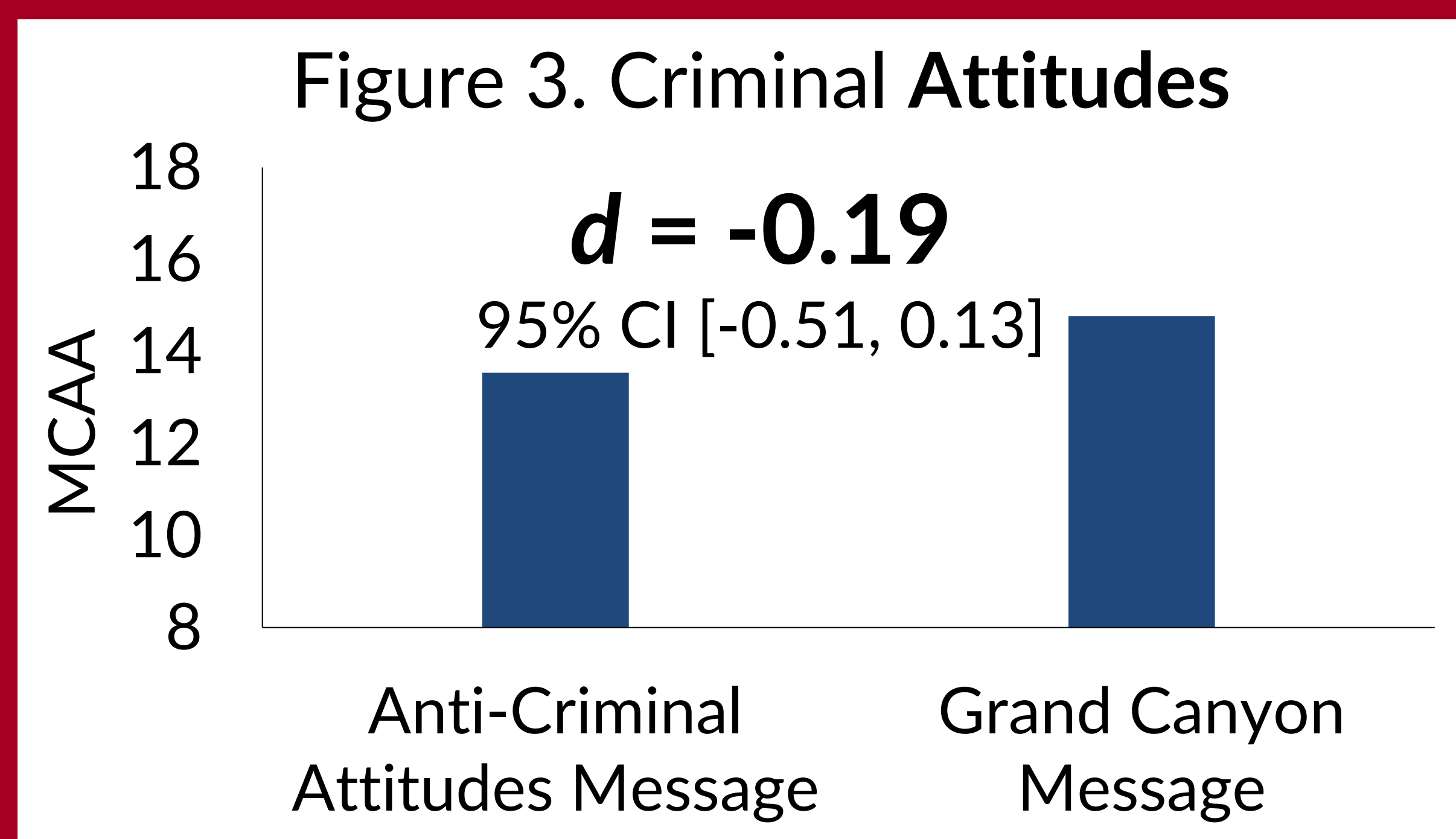
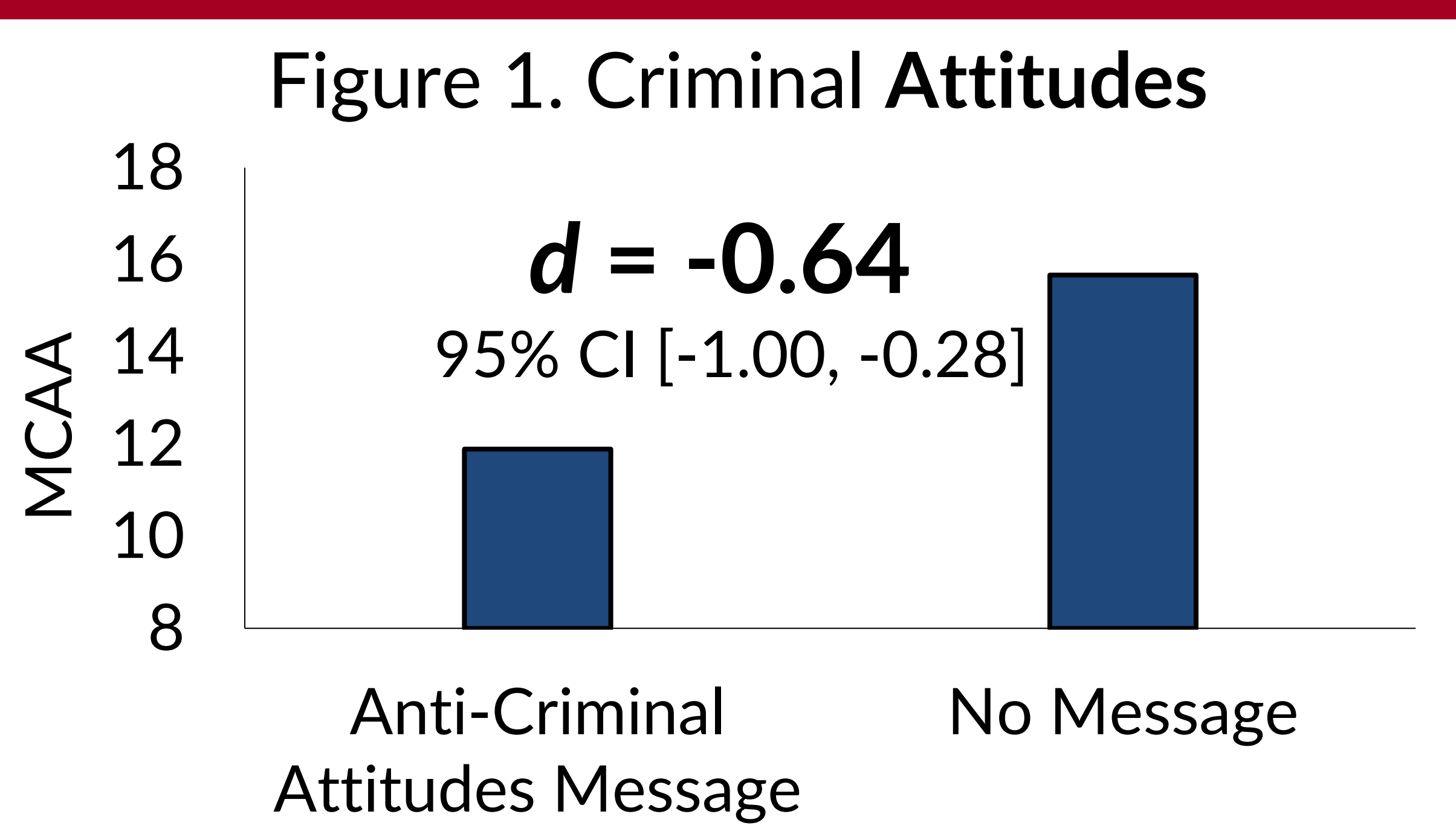
- More criminal attitudes (MCAA; $M = 13.69$, $SD = 6.37$) were associated with more criminal behaviour (CCBS-2023; $M = 2.38$, $SD = 0.60$)
- $r = .65$, 95% CI [.58, .72]

Quasi-Experiment

- Participants chose to receive the anti-criminal attitudes message vs. chose to skip the message (Figures 1 and 2)

Randomized Experiment

- Participants were randomly assigned to receive the anti-criminal attitudes message vs. the control message (Figures 3 and 4)



DISCUSSION

Correlational and quasi-experimental findings

- Consistent with the possibility that criminal attitudes cause criminal behaviour and that our message is effective at reducing criminal attitudes and behaviour.
- However, do not demonstrate causal effects because they are open to other interpretations (e.g., reverse causality, third variable).

Randomized experimental findings

- Demonstrate that our message was not effective at reducing criminal attitudes (low construct validity).

Different research designs have complementary strengths and weaknesses and can yield contradictory results.



Scan here to see the reference list, CCBS-2023, messages, and poster reference.

Note. The first 13 authors contributed equally and are ordered alphabetically.