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**Jumping to Conclusions?  
Inferences About the Causes of  
Sexual Offending**


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**Introduction**

- Research is the foundation of effective assessment, intervention, and policy aimed at reducing sexual offending
- However, studies vary in how informative and conclusive they are, and there are differences of opinion about standards for interpreting evidence




**Goal and Research Question**

- Examine the validity of inferences drawn by people who have conducted research on sexual offenders
- Do the strength of inferences correspond to the strength of methodology?




**Recruitment**

- Participants were recruited through emails sent to the authors of published studies in
  - Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment (SA:JRT);
  - Journal of Sexual Aggression (JSA); and
  - Sexual Offender Treatment (SOT)



**Participants (N = 35)**

- 91.4% do research on sexual offenders
- 48.6% employed as researchers
- Median 11-20 days/month spent on research
- Median 11-15 years doing research
- 80% did (or are doing) a quantitative study for graduate degree
- Median 4 first-author quantitative articles published in peer-review journals
- 53% female
- Median age = 36-40 years old



**Online Survey**

- What is an important factor that may lead a person to sexually offend?
- Please provide reference information for one research study that presents results supporting a relationship between this factor and sexual offending

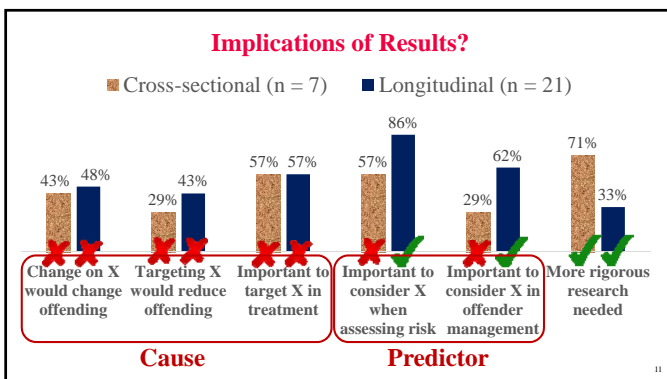
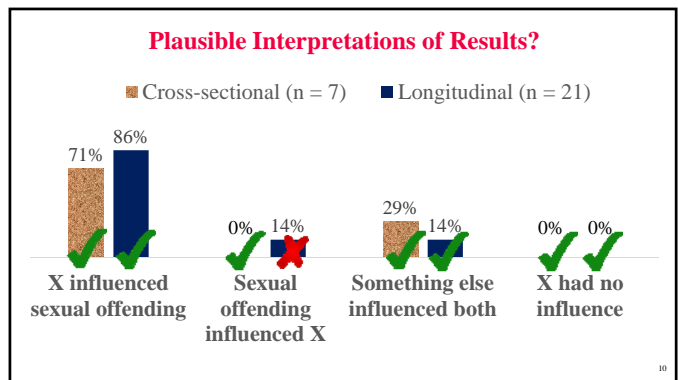
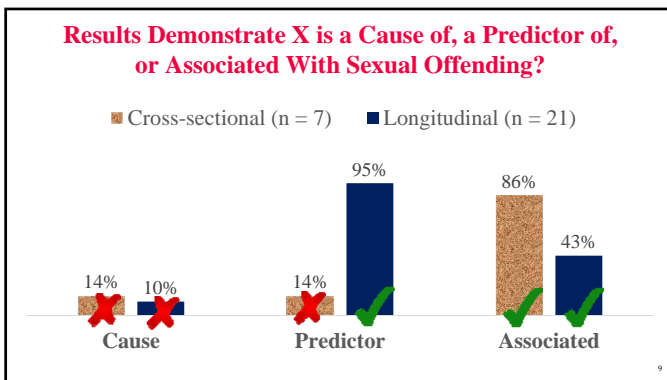
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- Which of the following is **demonstrated** by the results of the study you noted above with regard to the factor you noted?
- Which of the following is the most **plausible interpretation** of the results of the study you noted above with regard to the factor you noted?
- What are the **implications** of the results of the study you noted above with regard to the factor you noted?

### Coding of Methodology Used to Test the Relationship Between the Factor and Sexual Offending

- Description of a case or sample, but no **relevant** comparison group and no association actually examined between relevant variables ( $n = 2$ )
- Cross-sectional/retrospective correlational/observational ( $n = 7$ )
- Single-wave longitudinal correlational/observational ( $n = 21$ )
- Multi-wave longitudinal correlational/observational ( $n = 1$ )
- Randomized experiment ( $n = 0$ )
- No relevant original empirical results ( $n = 4$ )
- Kappa = .88 (16 cases)




### Discussion

- The good news:
  - Generally appropriate conclusions when asked directly about association, prediction, and causality
- The bad news:
  - Failure to recognize/acknowledge plausible alternative interpretations
  - Endorsement of invalid conclusions regarding implications

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**Limitations**


- Small sample
- Low response rate

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**Some Ways to Minimize the Plausibility of Alternative Interpretations**


- Better measures (construct validity)
- More rigorous designs
- Measure and statistically control for plausible alternative causal variables

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**Strength of Inferences Should Match Strength of Evidence**

- Speculation and past research are important, valuable, and useful
- But, sensitivity to the limits methodology places on inferences is important for the sake of accuracy and to stimulate more informative research (e.g., Harris & Rice, 2015)

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- Increasing awareness and respect for methodology in the research community through better training and standards will advance scientific knowledge about the causes of sexual offending, and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of practice and policy

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**Thank You!**

- Maia Christopher and Sarah Gorter
- ACBR Lab
- Survey respondents

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**Suggested Readings**

- Harris, G. T., & Rice, M. E. (2015). Progress in violence risk assessment and communication: Hypothesis versus evidence. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, 33, 128-145.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.
- Kazdin, A. E. (2003). *Research design in clinical psychology* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Shadish, W. R., Cook, T. D., & Campbell, D. T. (2002). *Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for generalized causal inference*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

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