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## ATTITUDES TOWARDS JUVENILE OFFENDERS IN SERBIA – AN EXPLORATORY STUDY\*

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*In this study, we explored the attitudes of the general public towards juvenile offenders. Participants (N=1264), aged 18-87 (M=34), responded to a 17-item scale created based on public comments to news about juvenile offending on news portals and social media. Socio-demographic characteristics were also collected. The analysis revealed three interpretable factors: Fatalistic view, Accountability, and Family factors. The highest scores were obtained on the Accountability and the lowest on the Fatalistic view factor. Older participants, participants who are married, those who are parents, men, lower educated, and participants from rural areas hold harsher attitudes towards juvenile offenders. Those who have not had contact with juvenile offenders tend to attribute more responsibility to family factors. Of those who have been in contact with juvenile offenders, those who have higher scores on Fatalistic view and Accountability describe the contact as more negative.*

*KEY WORDS: juvenile offenders / delinquency / punishment / family factors*

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## INTRODUCTION

The Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles<sup>1</sup> (further in text: the Law) in Serbia was passed in 2005, and its implementation began in 2006. At the time of passing, the Law was rather progressive, as it provisioned several diversion orders and alternative sanctions for juveniles, as well as the active participation of a juvenile in the court proceedings, restrictive detention measures, humanity, and flexibility (Škulić, 2011). The principles on which the Law is based are the following: the best interest of the child, urgency of the proceedings, obligatory specialization of all representatives involved in the proceedings, protection from stigmatization, and protection of dignity, privacy, and integrity of a juvenile. These are, among others, embodied in the system of diversion measures and sensibility of criminal and alternative sanctions and security measures (Karić et al., 2021).

This shift in both public attitudes and policy from an emphasis on public safety and the best interest of society (Hess et al., 2012) to less punitive and more treatment-oriented responses to delinquency happened worldwide within the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Scott et al., 2006). All considered, the approach provisioned in the Law is rehabilitation rather than punishment of juvenile offenders. The support for a different treatment of juveniles compared to adult offenders comes from psychosocial, cognitive, and neurobiological studies that demonstrated that juveniles think and act in a qualitatively different manner than adults due to their developmental stages (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2012). For example, adolescents are more impulsive, have lower self-control, do not adequately foresee the long-term consequences, and engage in more risky behaviours than adults (Feld, 1999). Also, neuroscience suggests there are significant differences between juveniles and adults in brain development and intellectual functioning (e.g., Allen et al., 2012; Cohen & Casey, 2013), indicating that different manners of adolescents' decision-making and behavioural control are a developmental thing, and they should not be punished as adults. As Feld (2004) argues, “if juveniles as a class typically make worse decisions than adults, then sentencing policies should protect them from the full consequence of their bad decisions” (p. 23).

For a policy to be successfully implemented, the support of the public is particularly important. Given that the treatment of juvenile offenders is community-oriented, i.e., it emphasizes prevention, rehabilitation and integration into society, the attitudes of the public towards juvenile offender policies and adolescent offenders themselves are of great importance. They help understand social responses to delinquency (Baker et al., 2016). The studies exploring these aspects are not numerous, although there are a number of opinion polls used for adjusting policies

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<sup>1</sup> Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, No. 85/05

in accordance with public opinion. However, to our best knowledge, no studies in Serbia have explored the attitudes of the public towards juvenile offenders. That being said, the main aim of this study was to fill this knowledge gap.

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS JUVENILE OFFENDERS AND OFFENDING

Research about attitudes towards juvenile offenders mostly aimed to explore the perceptions or attitudes of the public towards the severity of punishment for juvenile offenders, death penalty, or sentence to life without parole (e.g., Greene & Evelo, 2013), but are also often directed towards only one group of offenders, for example, juvenile sex offenders (e.g., Campregher & Jeglic, 2016). In addition, the largest number of these studies has been conducted in the United States. For example, Allen and colleagues (2012) studied how perceptions of youth responsibility for their actions influence preferences for the severity of punishment. They found that participants who considered adolescents responsible for their actions at a younger age, as well as those who considered the ability of adolescents to control their impulses and understand the consequences of their actions less important, supported more severe responses of the justice system. Also, if participants believed more in the potential for rehabilitation of juvenile offenders, they expressed preferences for less severe responses of the justice system. The authors also explored the effects of certain environmental factors on the severity of punishment and revealed that the awareness of the experience of prior abuse of an adolescent decreases support for severe punishment. On the other hand, peer pressure was not found to be an important factor in attitudes towards punishment. In another study, the perception of developmental immaturity emerged as an important factor in attributing responsibility for criminal acts to juveniles, and the public was more prone to a different treatment of juveniles compared to adult offenders (Scott et al., 2006).

There is another interesting finding regarding the severity of punishment and sentencing preferences. Ghetti and Redlich (2001) argue that these preferences are influenced by internal attributions of criminal acts committed by juveniles, i.e., by their “criminal disposition”. The authors explain this internal attribution tendency as the need to feel some control over incomprehensible events and reduce their sense of personal vulnerability to the risk (p. 277). Moreover, the support for the dispositional explanation is found in a study by Greene and Avelo (2013), who found that people who favour “adult time for adult crime” are more prone to attribute the criminal acts of juveniles to their delinquent disposition. This belief can pose an important challenge to rehabilitation: the public could doubt the rehabilitation programs and interventions and reduce their support for them, although these programs are proven effective in reducing recidivism (e.g., Howells & Day, 1999).

## WHY ARE PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS JUVENILE OFFENDING IMPORTANT?

The integration of juvenile offenders into society is beneficial for them: there is the reduction of stigma, and with it related prejudice and discrimination, and it leads to more successful rehabilitation. There are a lot of evidence that community-based programs help (not only) juveniles to escape criminality, but they are also more caring and kinder, have a restorative impact on incarceration experiences, and provide mechanisms for support (Brown, 2014). Hostile attitudes towards ex-offenders facilitate the stigmatization and disadvantage of both offenders and their families (Braman, 2007). In return, stigmatization influences exclusion from employment (Denver et al., 2017), social and economic opportunities of offenders, and consequently their life course trajectory (Sampson & Laub, 1997). Societal punishment can encourage individuals to turn towards deviant groups (Bernburg et al., 2006), which is to a certain extent a paradox – thinking of people as irreparable offenders can increase their offending.

Another reason why social attitudes towards (ex)offenders are important is the prevention of reoffending. Recidivism impacts both the public and the juveniles themselves in the context of their quality of life (Cuervo & Villanueva, 2015). One of the indicators of a juvenile justice policy success is the recidivism rate, and decreasing this rate is considered one of the biggest challenges for policymaking (Bradshaw et al., 2006). Punishment itself does not reduce criminal behaviour (e.g., Cullen et al., 2002). Resocialization or social rehabilitation of juvenile offenders is one of the key elements towards which the work of the system should be directed, especially to reduce the main criminogenic needs: anti-social cognition, anti-social peers, anti-social personality, and family factors (Andrews & Bonta, 2006). On the other hand, working only with a juvenile may not be enough to decrease criminogenic behaviour. The social context can contribute greatly to the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders, with a supportive community helping reintegration and, consequently, reducing recidivism. An offending individual interacts with their environment, and thus this dynamic context needs to be accounted for in understanding offending behaviour, as well as in rehabilitation and prevention of future offending. Since the Law prefers diversion or alternative measures to punishment, the majority of juvenile offenders does not end up punished by exclusion from society, but rather remains *within* the community. Therefore, the perceptions of the community may be important for providing support for successful rehabilitation.

Although there are studies about the attitudes towards sanctions, there is a lack of research regarding the perceptions of offenders by communities (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010). In this study, the main research question is *what the structure of attitudes of the public in Serbia towards juvenile offenders is*. The other question is *whether the attitudes are related to different socio-demographic variables and how*.

## METHOD

### Sample

The sample consisted of 1264 respondents from the territory of Serbia. The majority were women (59.5%), and the mean age was  $M = 34.22$  ( $SD = 17.71$ , range 18-87). The socio-demographic structure is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Socio-demographic structure of the sample

| Variable                        | <i>n</i> | %    |
|---------------------------------|----------|------|
| Education                       |          |      |
| Elementary school               | 25       | 2.0  |
| Secondary school                | 433      | 34.3 |
| Higher education                | 491      | 38.9 |
| Magister or PhD degree          | 53       | 4.2  |
| Student                         | 261      | 20.7 |
| Residence                       |          |      |
| Rural (village)                 | 228      | 18.1 |
| Smaller town                    | 178      | 14.1 |
| Bigger town/city                | 856      | 67.8 |
| Marital status                  |          |      |
| Married                         | 452      | 35.8 |
| Single                          | 667      | 52.9 |
| Common-law marriage             | 45       | 3.6  |
| Divorced                        | 66       | 5.2  |
| Widowed                         | 32       | 2.5  |
| Having children                 |          |      |
| Yes                             | 522      | 41.8 |
| No                              | 727      | 58.2 |
| Contact with juvenile offenders |          |      |
| Yes                             | 620      | 49.4 |
| No                              | 634      | 50.6 |

Those who have had contact with juvenile offenders describe it mostly as neutral ( $M = -.35$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ , on a scale ranging from -3 = extremely negative to 3 = extremely positive).

### Instruments

*Attitudes towards juvenile offenders' scale* consists of 17 items with a Likert response scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The scale was developed based on comments in social media and news portals to the news and articles about juvenile offenders. These included both specific cases covered in the media and articles providing information about certain projects and programs that included the involvement of juvenile offenders. A variety of attitudes expressed in comments was included. The factor structure of the scale is presented in the Results section.

### Procedure

The data were collected in a pen-and-paper form, with the help of Psychology students of the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, attending the Social Psychology courses. The students were asked to recruit at least 10 participants in the study by approaching acquaintances, friends, and family members. They were asked to include people of different age and gender, as well as educational background, whenever possible. As psychology students come from different parts of Serbia, they were asked to collect the data primarily in their place of origin, during the semester. The collected responses were entered in a pre-defined matrix. Participants had to provide informed consent to take part in the study. Responses were recorded anonymously, and no private information was asked from them. The matrices were then merged, cleaned, and checked for missing data.

### Data analysis

After confirming that the data were missing at random, the missing values were replaced with mean values. The analyses are conducted in IBM SPSS 23.0. First, the factor structure of the attitudes questionnaire was explored. Factor scores were saved as variables and, as such, included in further analyses. For testing differences regarding socio-demographic variables, t-tests and ANOVAs were performed, in accordance with the number of variable levels.

## RESULTS

### Factor structure of the Attitudes towards juvenile offenders' scale

Exploratory factor analysis by the maximum likelihood method and with Promax rotation was applied to explore the factor structure of the scale. KMO measure of sampling adequacy was .796, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity indicated that the factor analysis is useful on the data ( $\chi^2(136) = 4702.66, p < .001$ ). The initial solution yielded four factors with Eigenvalues higher than 1 (Appendix A). However, the fourth factor's correlation with the first factor was  $r = .623$ . Therefore, we decided to fix the number of factors to be extracted to three. These three factors account for 46.22% of the variance. The goodness of fit test indicates that the model has a good fit ( $\chi^2(88) = 536.19, p < .001$ ). The pattern matrix is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Pattern matrix of the Attitudes towards juvenile offenders’ scale

| Item   | 1 <sup>st</sup><br>factor | 2 <sup>nd</sup><br>factor | 3 <sup>rd</sup><br>factor |
|--|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| There is no point in working with juvenile offenders, they just need to be removed from society.   | .750                      |                           |                           |
| Raising such children is a pointless job.  | .741                      |                           |                           |
| Juvenile offenders do not deserve the care of society.   | .640                      |                           |                           |
| Juvenile offenders should be removed from society forever.   | .571                      |                           |                           |
| If someone is destined to be an offender, there is no prevention that can avert him from doing so. | .636                      |                           |                           |
| Correctional facility is a mild punishment for juvenile offenders.                                 | .425                      |                           |                           |
| Delinquency is a product of genetics.  | .445                      |                           |                           |
| If they had more functional families, they would not be prone to crime.                            |                           | .755                      |                           |
| If the child had favourable conditions for growing up, he would not have become an offender.       |                           | .585                      |                           |
| It's not the children's fault, it's their parents' fault.  |                           | .582                      |                           |
| Their parents are responsible for juvenile offenders.  |                           | .544                      |                           |
| If there were better measures to protect these children, they would not grow into offenders.       |                           | .441                      |                           |
| Juvenile offenders are not a danger to society.  |                           |                           | .552*                     |
| It is inhumane to legally punish minors.   |                           |                           | .585*                     |
| Anyone who is able to commit a crime should be held accountable.                                   |                           |                           | .500                      |
| A child cannot be guilty of whatever he has done.  |                           |                           | .494*                     |
| There is no justification for the crime, regardless of the age of the perpetrator.                 |                           |                           | .416                      |
| % of explained variance  | 20.20                     | 14.72                     | 11.30                     |

Note: Only factor loadings above 0.3 are presented. Items with \* are reverse-scored.

When we look at the content of the first factor, we can note that it covers extreme attitudes about both causes of delinquent behaviour and the ways juvenile offenders should be treated. These attitudes support the dispositional thesis, that delinquent behaviour is innate or a part of the personality and cannot be changed by punishment, but these children should rather be excluded from society. We named this factor the *Fatalistic view*.

The second factor contains items that externalise the reasons for delinquent behaviour to family/parents and lack of protection. There seems to be more understanding of their behaviour. We named this factor *Family factors*.

The third factor’s content concentrates mostly on that juvenile offenders should be held accountable and for their misdeeds and punished accordingly. We named this factor *Accountability*.

The correlations between the three factors are presented in Table 3. As expected, the fatalistic view of juvenile delinquency is positively related to the attitudes that juvenile should be held accountable for their misdeeds. On the other hand, those externalizing the roots of delinquency to family think that juveniles should be held less accountable for their antisocial behaviour.

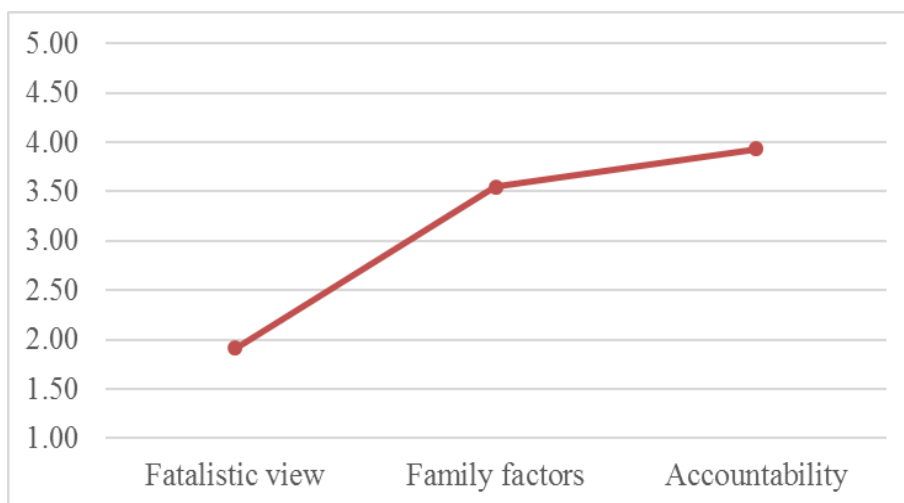
Table 3: Correlations between extracted factors

| Factor          | Family factors | Accountability |
|-----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Fatalistic view | -.005          | .165**         |
| Family factors  |                | -.111**        |

\*\* $p < .01$

We calculated mean scores for sets of items in each factor to compare between them and see what set of attitudes is the most pronounced in our sample. Repeated measures ANOVA was applied. Mauchly’s test indicated that sphericity was violated ( $\chi^2(2) = 60.401, p < .001$ ), therefore Huynh-Feldt correction is used ( $\epsilon = .957$ ), given that Greenhouse-Geisser correction was higher than .75 ( $\epsilon = .955$ ; Howell, 2002). ANOVA indicates that means of different factors differ significantly ( $F(2,2526) = 3164.712, p < .001$ ), and differences are significant among all three sets of attitudes. Respondents were least prone to the fatalistic view of delinquency, and Accountability has the highest mean score (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Mean scores across factors



### Socio-demographic differences

To test whether there are significant differences in factor scores with regard to socio-demographic data, we conducted a series of t-tests and ANOVAs. The results are presented in Table 4. If we look at gender differences, they are significant in all three scores, such that men tend to hold a more expressed fatalistic view and attribute more accountability to the juveniles, while women tend more to explain delinquent behaviour with family factors. When it comes to marital status, those who have a partner (married or in a common-law marriage) tend to hold more fatalistic views, but also consider family factors as responsible more.

Table 4: Results of testing differences in factor scores regarding independent variables

| Independent variable             | Fatalistic view<br>M (SD)  | Family factors<br>M (SD)          | Accountability<br>M (SD)           |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Gender                           | $t(1261) = 4.310^{***}$    | $t(1261) = -2.636^{**}$           | $t(1261) = 1.951$<br>( $p = .05$ ) |
| Male                             | .14 (1.08)                 | -.09 (1.01)                       | .07 (1.02)                         |
| Female                           | -.10 (.93)                 | .06 (1.00)                        | -.04 (.98)                         |
| Having children                  | $t(1247) = -2.681^*$       | $t(1247) = -5.591^{***}$          | $t(1247) = -3.841^{***}$           |
| No                               | -.08 (1.00)                | -.13 (1.00)                       | .10 (.98)                          |
| Yes                              | .08 (.98)                  | .19 (.98)                         | -.12 (1.00)                        |
| Contact with a juvenile offender | $t(1252) = .517$           | $t(1252) = 2.158^*$               | $t(1252) = -.479$                  |
| No                               | .01 (.97)                  | .06 (1.00)                        | -.02(.96)                          |
| Yes                              | -.01 (1.04)                | -.06 (1.00)                       | .01 (1.04)                         |
| Marital status                   | $t(1260) = 4.153^{***}$    | $t(1260) = 2.210^*$               | $t(1260) = -1.875$                 |
| With partner                     | .14 (1.05)                 | .08 (.99)                         | -.06 (1.00)                        |
| Without partner                  | -.09 (.95)                 | -.05 (1.01)                       | .04 (1.00)                         |
| Residence                        | $F(2,1259) = 13.419^{***}$ | $F(2,1259) = 2.900$<br>$p = .055$ | $F(2,1259) = .799$                 |
| Rural (village)                  | .30 (1.15)                 | .13 (.92)                         | .01 (1.07)                         |
| Smaller town                     | .01 (.93)                  | -.10 (.94)                        | .08 (.96)                          |
| Bigger town/city                 | -.09 (.95)                 | -.01 (1.03)                       | -.02 (.99)                         |
| Education                        | $F(2,1235) = 7.434^{**}$   | $F(2,1235) = .909$                | $F(2,1235) = 7.037^{**}$           |
| Secondary school                 | .13 (1.02)                 | .05 (1.01)                        | -.02(.97)                          |
| Faculty or higher                | -.10 (.93)                 | .01 (.99)                         | -.05 (1.03)                        |
| Students                         | -.08 (1.02)                | -.13 (.97)                        | .14 (.96)                          |

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

The education level differences are also significant in the *Fatalistic view* (elementary school participants were excluded from the analysis due to  $N = 25$ ), such that participants with a high school degree differ significantly from both other groups: they hold more fatalistic attitudes towards juvenile offenders. Differences are also significant in *Accountability*, such that students attribute significantly more accountability to juvenile offenders than the other two education groups, indicated by the Scheffé post-hoc tests.

Respondents from rural areas tend to have significantly more fatalistic view than those from cities and towns, as indicated by the Scheffé post-hoc analysis. When it comes to contact with juvenile offenders, those who have not had any contact tend to attribute delinquent behaviour to family factors more. Also, participants who have children score higher on the *Fatalistic view* and *Family factors* and hold juvenile offenders less accountable for their behaviour.

Correlation coefficients were calculated to check for potential significant relationships between the three factors, age, and the quality of experience with juvenile offenders (for those who were in contact with them). The results are presented in Table 5. Older respondents tend to hold a more fatalistic view of juvenile offenders, but this correlation is rather low. They also attribute delinquent

behaviour more to family factor and hold offenders less accountable for their behaviour than younger respondents. As expected, those who score higher on *Fatalistic view* and *Responsibility* report having more negative contact with juvenile offenders.

Table 5: Pearson’s correlation coefficients for extracted factors, age, and quality of contact

| Variable        | Age     | Quality of contact |
|-----------------|---------|--------------------|
| Fatalistic view | .088**  | -.178**            |
| Family factors  | .180**  | -.038              |
| Accountability  | -.135** | -.220**            |

\*\* $p < .01$

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we wanted to explore the structure of attitudes towards juvenile offenders in Serbia. To do this, we created a scale based on attitudes found in comments to news about juvenile offenders or programs for working with them, made by the general public. We included 17 items in the scale. Maximum likelihood exploratory factor analysis revealed that three interpretable factors are identified, which were named *Fatalistic view*, *Accountability*, and *Family factors*.

The first identified factor, *Fatalistic view*, contains items that express a dispositional view of delinquency, i.e., juvenile offenders are innate delinquents, predestined to be antisocial, and they, or their behaviour, cannot be changed. Therefore, the only way to deal with them is to lock them away, remove them from society. *Fatalistic view* correlates positively with the third factor, *Accountability*. The content of this factor refers to attitudes that juvenile offenders should be held accountable for their behaviour. They also pose a threat to society and should be punished as a response to their antisocial behaviour. The second factor emphasizes the role of the family in developing delinquent behaviour. Family, especially parents, are seen as the most important influence and the lack of their involvement leads to delinquent behaviour. The lack of timely reaction and protection with the aim of prevention is considered important, also. This attitude also gives room to beliefs that juvenile offenders can be helped to change their behaviour if they are provided with support and guidance.

These factors correspond broadly to what has been identified in the previous literature. There are both positive and negative stereotypes found to be widely accessible when it comes to perceiving offenders (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010). Some studies revealed that the general public holds rather negative attitudes about juvenile offenders, for example, that they are incurable and a danger to society (note that this study explored attitudes towards juvenile sex offenders; Chaffin et al., 2002). Others have discovered that people, in general, support rehabilitation practices for juvenile offenders, *although* they also support getting tough with them (e.g., Moon et al., 2000). Holding them accountable for their misdeeds does not necessarily mean that severe punishment should be imposed. Individuals in our sample consider accountability related to the fatalistic view only to a small extent (a low positive correlation). However, the results show a clear, distinct fatalistic view of

juvenile delinquency, and it accounts for the largest percentage of the variance. If the public were most prone to this view, that would pose a huge challenge for the integration of juvenile offenders in society, a step much needed to prevent recidivism, reduce their antisocial, and promote prosocial behaviour in general. If they were stigmatized as being predisposed to be delinquent, that would impede their future social and economic opportunities (Sampson & Laub, 1997) and could push them closer to deviant groups (Bernburg et al., 2006).

Naming family as an important factor in juvenile offending speaks in favour of the environmental hypothesis for the development of delinquent behaviour. It is encouraging that respondents' scores are the highest on this and the lowest on the fatalistic view factor, precisely because that indicates that the public believes antisocial behaviour can be prevented, given that it is environmental factors that influence its development. In previous studies, some more specific experiences were identified as extenuating circumstances in judging juvenile delinquent behaviour, for example, the experience of prior abuse (Allen et al., 2012). In the same study, the authors also found that peer pressure is not considered an important factor for developing juvenile offending. It seems that the nuclear family is perceived as one of the most important environmental sources of influence, also identified by Andrews and Bonta (2006) as one of “the Central Eight” predictors of recidivism. As it can be a risk factor, it can also be a protective factor in cases when there are positive family circumstances (Cuervo & Villanueva, 2015). As Menon and Cheung (2018) note, it is demonstrated in research so far that a “healthy environment will promote healthy minds as an internal asset” (p. 474).

Women in our sample expressed a less fatalistic view of juvenile offenders and tended to attribute less accountability to them than men. They also perceived family factors as more important for delinquent behaviour than did men. Female respondents were found less prone to severe punishment attitudes in previous studies (Allen et al., 2012; Mears et al., 2007). A more punitive stance of men is often explained by the socialization process, that is, women are socialized to be more empathic and nurturing (Wu, 2000), while men are socialized to be more rational and even emphasize an absolute sense of justice (Gilligan, 1982).

In our sample, those who are married (or in a common-law marriage) tend to hold stronger fatalistic views of juvenile offenders, but also to ascribe more responsibility for developing delinquent behaviour to their families. Single individuals, compared to the married, supported less severe punishment for juvenile offenders (Allen et al., 2012; Mears, 2001). There is an explanation in the literature that could help clarify this link. Married people tend to adhere stronger to conventional social values (e.g., Kingston & Finkel, 1987), which could contribute to their perception of juvenile offenders as young adults, thus leading to taking a more punitive, less rehabilitative stance (Mears, 2001).

Older participants score higher on the Fatalistic view and Family factors and lower on the Accountability. This finding could be explained by the notion that the older are more socially conservative (e.g., Truett, 1993; Saribay & Yilmaz, 2017), stricter in their views and attitudes, and therefore could tend to adopt more deterministic

attitudes on the one hand, and to attribute responsibility to the family on the other. The same explanation may be applied to the result that those from rural areas had higher scores on the Fatalistic view. Better educated were less supportive of judging juveniles as adults (Mears, 2001). Yet, in other studies, it was found that the less educated participants supported the harsher treatment of juveniles. This trend is also partly confirmed in our study – those with the lowest educational level hold the strongest fatalistic explanation of juvenile delinquency. The explanation for this may be in the level of information that more educated individuals possess and use to make judgments, for example, they may know more or be better informed about the juvenile justice system or crime issues (Wu, 2000).

Those who have children are more prone to the fatalistic view and attributing responsibility to offenders' families, and less to hold them accountable for their delinquent behaviour. These results are in contrast with previous studies. Having children was found to be related to support for juvenile justice, i.e. keeping the juveniles at juvenile courts rather than transferring them to adult courts (Mears et al., 2007). On the one hand, our respondents recognize the responsibility of parents for developing delinquent behaviour in juveniles, especially since they become familiar with the effects their parenting has on their children. Family factors are considered a risk factor in many studies, especially the lack of parental monitoring, conflict, hostility and abuse, inadequate discipline strategies, lack of cohesion etc. (e.g., Tarolla et al., 2002). On the other hand, they are more prone to think that juveniles should be removed from society if they express delinquent behaviour since that is a dispositional trait. These two attitudes seem to be in contrast – parents believe more than non-parents that nothing can be done to prevent a juvenile offender from becoming one and that family is responsible for the development of delinquency. This finding requires further analysis involving other variables that could affect these relationships and were not considered in this study, such as own children with delinquent behaviour, family circumstances, parental self-efficacy etc.

As an explanation for delinquent behaviour, Family factors are more pronounced in those who have had previous contact with a juvenile offender. There is no relationship between contact and Fatalistic view, nor Accountability. Although the evidence is limited, some studies are indicating that those who have personal contacts with (ex)offenders tend to hold less negative attitudes towards them because they recognize their complexity and diversity (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010). The correlations between the quality of contact and the fatalistic view and accountability speak in favour of this hypothesis. Those who perceive the contact with juvenile offenders more positive are less prone to explaining their behaviour in a dispositional manner. They also perceive juveniles as less accountable for their behaviour. Cross-sectional studies do not allow for a causal interpretation. Therefore, the question remains whether a more benevolent perception of juvenile offenders helps people who are in contact with them to express less prejudice and perceive them in a more positive light, or the experience of contact helps them reduce their fatalistic views of delinquency. This remains a question for further studies to answer.

Being a member of society is important for juveniles due to the roles they are expected to take in the future (Menon & Cheung, 2018). Moreover, being involved in society and reintegration programs can lead to a sense of empowerment and increased readiness to be accepted into society, thus decreasing the potential for future offending (Kim & Gerber, 2012). However, the empowerment can only come through healthy support by the community, as opposed to discrimination and injustice that juvenile offenders “navigate through” (Menon & Cheung, 2018). They need to be given time and chance to gain experiences that allow them to learn the consequence of their antisocial behaviour, without putting a mortgage on their future (Zimring, 2000).

There are several important limitations of the study that could be overcome in the future. First, the attitudinal sentences were harvested from comments to Facebook post reporting on cases of juvenile offending and the comment section on news portals. Given that juvenile offenders are guaranteed by law to have data protection during the process, i.e. that the information about the case cannot be made publicly available, the only information that makes way to the media are about severe cases, that is, serious crimes. The lack of publicly available information about the context of the criminal act or any other information about the minor who committed the act paves the way for projections of different attitudes and beliefs. The partial availability of information and sensational media reporting of high-profile cases can lead to reinforcement of wrong stereotypes about offenders that include the appeal for a tough sentence for the crime and increased certainty that the juveniles will re-offend (Allen et al., 2012; Kuran & Sunstein, 1999; Lowenstein, 2010). This may be the reason why some other explanations of juvenile offending behaviour are missing, or more benevolent attitudes – the reaction of the public to the crimes present in the media is harsh. Future studies should consider this and include more benevolent attitudes measures.

Second, studies have shown that there are differences in the perception and preference for punishment for juveniles depending on the type of crime committed. For example, harsher punishment, including adult-like punishment, is preferred for the youth that committed violent crimes or was selling illegal drugs (e.g., Calley, 2012; Mears, 2001). Therefore, offence type should be considered, i.e. making a distinction between violent and non-violent offences. The same argument goes for the age of the juvenile offender. Previous findings indicated that harsher punishment was preferred for older juveniles (Greene & Avelo, 2013; Salerno et al., 2010), but also for younger victims (Campregher & Jeglic, 2016). Third, the convenient sample does not allow for an overall generalization of the results. Therefore, all findings should be considered with caution, and a more representative sample could be included in future studies.

Social integration of juvenile offenders is important for the prevention of recidivism, which impacts both society and the offender. Furthermore, it is important for improving the quality of life of a juvenile and paving the way for a better, more prosocial future for him/her. Therefore, understanding the attitudes of society about juvenile offenders is of crucial importance. The Law has set the stage for alternative and diversion measures that also have the same aims as described above. Now,

attention has to be shifted to promoting community rehabilitation of juvenile offenders, creating conditions for their integration and advancement, but keeping their protection at the highest possible level.

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## APPENDIX A

Table S1: Initial exploratory factor analysis of the Attitudes towards juvenile offenders scale results

| Factor | Initial Eigenvalues | % of Variance | Cumulative % |
|--------|---------------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1      | 3.433               | 20.197        | 20.197       |
| 2      | 2.503               | 14.722        | 34.919       |
| 3      | 1.921               | 11.300        | 46.219       |
| 4      | 1.031               | 6.062         | 52.281       |
| 5      | .990                | 5.826         | 58.107       |
| 6      | .856                | 5.033         | 63.140       |
| 7      | .757                | 4.454         | 67.595       |
| 8      | .698                | 4.108         | 71.703       |
| 9      | .661                | 3.889         | 75.592       |
| 10     | .627                | 3.690         | 79.282       |

Table S2: Pattern matrix of the Attitudes towards juvenile offenders' scale

| Item   | 1 <sup>st</sup><br>factor | 2 <sup>nd</sup><br>factor | 3 <sup>rd</sup><br>factor | 4 <sup>th</sup><br>factor |
|--|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Juvenile offenders do not deserve the care of society.   | .830                      |                           |                           |                           |
| Juvenile offenders should be removed from society forever.   | .681                      |                           |                           |                           |
| There is no point in working with juvenile offenders, they just need to be removed from society.   | .676                      |                           |                           |                           |
| Raising such children is a pointless job.  | .491                      |                           |                           | .303                      |
| Correctional facility is a mild punishment for juvenile offenders.                                 | .377                      |                           |                           |                           |
| If they had more functional families, they would not be prone to crime.                            |                           | .765                      |                           |                           |
| If the child had favourable conditions for growing up, he would not have become an offender.       |                           | .576                      |                           |                           |
| It's not the children's fault, it's their parents' fault.  |                           | .572                      |                           |                           |
| Their parents are responsible for juvenile offenders.  |                           | .543                      |                           |                           |
| If there were better measures to protect these children, they would not grow into offenders.       |                           | .444                      |                           |                           |
| It is inhumane to legally punish minors.   |                           |                           | .561                      |                           |
| Anyone who is able to commit a crime should be held accountable.                                   |                           |                           | -.532                     |                           |
| Juvenile offenders are not a danger to society.  |                           |                           | .530                      |                           |
| A child cannot be guilty of whatever he has done.  |                           |                           | .507                      |                           |
| There is no justification for the crime, regardless of the age of the perpetrator.                 |                           |                           | -.439                     |                           |
| If someone is destined to be an offender, there is no prevention that can avert him from doing so. |                           |                           |                           | .710                      |
| Delinquency is a product of genetics.  |                           |                           |                           | .598                      |

Table S3: Correlations between extracted factors

| Factor | 2     | 3     | 4     |
|--------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1      | -.064 | -.224 | .624  |
| 2      |       | .134  | .058  |
| 3      |       |       | -.058 |

## STAVOVI PREMA MALOLETNICIMA U SUKOBU SA ZAKONOM U SRBIJI – EKSPLOATIVNA STUDIJA

*U ovoj studiji smo istražili stavove opšte populacije prema maloletnicima u sukobu sa zakonom. Učesnici (N=1264), uzrasta 18-87 godina (M=34 godine), odgovorili su na skalu od 17 stavki, kreiranu na osnovu komentara javnosti na vesti o maloletnicima u sukobu sa zakonom na portalima sa vestima i društvenim mrežama. Prikupljene su i socio-demografske karakteristike. Analiza je pokazala da se mogu izdvojiti tri interpretabilna faktora: Fatalističko viđenje, Odgovornost i Porodični faktori. Najviši skorovi postignuti su na Odgovornost, a najniži na faktoru Fatalističko viđenje. Stariji, ispitanici koji imaju partnera, roditelji, muškarci, ispitanici nižeg obrazovanja i oni iz ruralnih sredina iskazali su strože stavove prema maloletnicima u sukobu sa zakonom. Oni koji nisu imali kontakt sa maloletnikom u sukobu sa zakonom pripisuju više odgovornosti porodičnim faktorima. Od onih koji sa ovom grupom dece jesu bili u kontaktu, oni koji imaju više skorove na Fatalističkom viđenju i Odgovornosti opisuju kontakt kao negativniji.*

*KLJUČNE REČI: maloletnici u sukobu sa zakonom / delinkvencija / kazna / porodični faktori*