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## **Public Perception of Juvenile Offenders in India: The Role of Offender Age, Offence Type, and Family Background**

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### **Abstract**

Public perception of juvenile offenders plays a significant role in shaping juvenile justice policy and legislation. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, which permits juveniles aged 16 to 18 to be tried as adults for heinous offences, was itself precipitated by public sentiment regarding juvenile crime in India. Understanding which characteristics of a juvenile offender drive public judgment is therefore of direct relevance to the Indian legal context. This study investigated how offender age, family background, and type of offence individually and collectively influence public perceptions of juvenile offenders among a sample of 123 Indian participants drawn from school, college, and working-adult communities. Five situational vignettes were created and systematically varied across offender age (12 versus 17 years), family environment (warm and structured versus chaotic and unsupervised), and offence type (theft versus assault), with participants rating each vignette on six outcome measures: responsibility, sympathy, dangerousness, likelihood to reoffend, and support for punitive and rehabilitative responses. Results indicated that offence type produced the largest effects of any single factor; assault vignettes elicited significantly higher ratings of dangerousness, responsibility, and punitive support compared to theft vignettes, which elicited significantly more sympathy and rehabilitative support. Offender age significantly shifted perceptions of responsibility and sympathy even when the crime and circumstances were held constant, with older offenders judged more harshly. Family background influenced sympathy and perceived dangerousness but produced no significant differences in punitive or rehabilitative preferences. The cumulative presence of all three aggravating factors produced the largest effect sizes observed in the study. These findings have direct implications for juvenile justice policy and practice in India.

**Keywords:** juvenile delinquency, juvenile offenders, perception, justice system, policy