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Judging justice-involved individuals: support for job offer rescindment, character evaluations and norm violations across transgression types

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Two within-subjects experimental studies examined support for rescinding job offers and evaluations of character and social appropriateness for applicants with justice-involvement or other transgressions, manipulated using vignettes. Participants were primarily Australian adults recruited via a university research participation platform and social media. In Study 1 ($N = 194$; 149 female, 40 male, three non-binary, 40 missing; M age = 34.40, $SD = 12.10$), an applicant with an unspecified justice-involved history received greater support for offer rescindment than applicants with drug or alcohol use histories and was evaluated more negatively overall. In Study 2 ($N = 125$; 99 female, 22 male, three non-binary, one missing; M age = 29.66, $SD = 13.21$), an applicant with a sexual offending history was judged most harshly across all measures compared to violent and drug offending applicants. Overall, findings indicate that justice-involved applicants – particularly those with sexual offences – face elevated stigma and greater reintegration challenges.

Keywords: justice-involved; criminal history; offence; transgressor; discrimination; societal violation; reintegration; employment.

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Employment is widely recognised as a key factor in supporting criminal desistance, offering economic stability, psychological benefits (e.g. increased self-worth) and social integration (Bushway & Sweeten, 2007; Fagan & Freeman, 1999; Flake, 2015; Laub et al., 2017; Uggen, 2000). Yet, individuals with criminal records often face significant barriers to employment (Aukerman, 2005; Baur et al., 2018; Schmitt & Warner, 2011; Visher et al., 2005).

These barriers arise both from legal restrictions and employer discretion. In many jurisdictions, people with criminal histories are prohibited from working with vulnerable populations (e.g. children, older adults), or in sectors such as government, finance and security (Grossi, 2017; Henry & Jacobs, 2007; Periman,

2007). Even where no legal ban exists, employers exhibit reluctance to hire justice-involved individuals – often preferring to employ those with long-term unemployment or welfare histories instead (Graffam et al., 2008; Holzer et al., 2004). Stigmatisation may be fuelled by fears of workplace misconduct, liability concerns, or negative publicity (Aukerman, 2005; Lam & Harcourt, 2003; Young & Powell, 2015).

Such reluctance is likely tied to negative stereotypes. Justice-involved individuals are often perceived as untrustworthy, irresponsible, or dangerous (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010; MacLin & Herrera, 2006; Porter et al., 2023). More broadly, they are viewed as belonging to a marginalised underclass and as

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less deserving of societal reintegration (Henry & Jacobs, 2007; Uggen et al., 2006). These stigmas may lead to social exclusion and discriminatory hiring practices.

Stereotypes and perceived transgressions

Stereotype theory suggests that individuals are often evaluated based on group-based assumptions that simplify social perception (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Kunda & Thagard, 1996). These cognitive shortcuts include beliefs about physical traits, behaviours and character, and are frequently used to justify social hierarchies and reinforce bias (Cox & Devine, 2015). Stereotypes – whether accurate or not – can strongly influence attitudes towards stigmatised groups (Crandall et al., 2011), including those with justice-involved histories.

Stereotyping may also affect perceptions of individuals with other types of stigmatised behaviours, such as drinking or gambling. Although legal in many contexts, these behaviours are often morally judged when viewed as excessive or irresponsible (Horch & Hodgins, 2013; Schomerus et al., 2014). Such individuals may be seen as impulsive, irrational, or socially deviant – though perhaps less so than those labelled as ‘criminal’.

Given these distinctions, it is useful to examine how justice-involved individuals are evaluated compared to other transgressors. Criminal labels are likely to activate negative stereotypes tied to character and behaviour, which may influence judgements about employability, trustworthiness and social norm violations.

The present research

Prior research has examined the impact of criminal records on employment outcomes (e.g. Pager, 2003; Porter et al., 2023) but less is known about how individuals with justice-involvement are judged in relation to others with socially stigmatised, but non-criminal, histories. The current research addresses this gap by assessing support for job offer

rescindment and perceptions of character and social violations across different transgressor types.

Using systematically varied vignettes, participants evaluated hypothetical job applicants with different backgrounds (e.g. justice-involvement, substance use, gambling).

Vignette-based designs are widely used to examine evaluative judgements in applied social contexts because they allow systematic manipulation of socially meaningful information while maintaining experimental control. More specifically, vignette-based designs are well-suited for isolating stereotype-driven hiring judgements while maintaining experimental control (Baguley et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2015; Porter et al., 2023; Porter et al., 2025).

Based on the preceding review, it was anticipated that a justice-involved history would elicit stronger support for job offer rescindment, greater negative character evaluations and higher perceived social norm violations compared to other transgression types. These perceptions were expected to vary based on the specific justice-involved or transgressor behaviour described.

Study 1

Study 1 tested whether an applicant with a non-specified justice-involved history would be judged more harshly than applicants with histories of illicit substance use or alcohol use.

Hypotheses

H1a: Support for job offer rescindment will be highest for the justice-involved applicant, followed by the drug use applicant, and lowest for the drinking applicant.

H1b: The justice-involved applicant will receive the strongest negative character evaluations, followed by the drug use applicant, and then the drinking applicant.

H1c: The justice-involved applicant will be perceived as violating social norms most severely followed by the drug use applicant and then the drinking applicant.

Method

Participants

Three hundred and twelve university students and members were recruited via a research sign-up system and social media (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn) for an online study on ‘attitudes that influence decision making’. Undergraduate participants received course credit; non-student participants were not compensated. After removing 118 cases to failed attention or comprehension checks and Qualtrics fraud/security flags (e.g. bot detection, duplicate responses), the final sample comprised 194¹ participants (144 Australian-born, remainder primarily from Singapore, China, England; 149 female, 40 male, three non-binary, two undisclosed), aged 17–67 ($M = 34.40$, $SD = 12.10$; 40 missing). Education levels: 68 not yet completed undergraduate, 64 with undergraduate degree, 62 with postgraduate degree. All but 13 reported English as their first language.

Design

A one-way within-subjects experimental design was employed, with transgressor history as the independent variable with three levels: (1) justice-involved history; (2) illicit substance history; and (3) drinking history. The dependent variables (DV) were: (1) job offer rescindment evaluations; (2) character evaluations; and (3) societal violation evaluations.

Materials and procedure

Participants were provided with an online link to the materials hosted on Qualtrics.

After reading an information page and providing consent, participants viewed three randomly ordered vignettes. Each described a hypothetical applicant whose job offer was rescinded due to one of three backgrounds. Vignettes differed only in terms of the background history of the applicant.

The applicant never got to start the new job. The offer of employment was rescinded after the employer found evidence of a criminal history/illicit substance use history/drinking history.

After each vignette, participants responded to a binary item: ‘*Do you agree or disagree with the non-hire decision?*’ A comprehension check followed: ‘*The applicant was denied employment for which of the following reasons? Criminal; illicit substance; psychiatric; gambling; drinking (history).*’ Participants then completed a set of three randomly ordered measures (described below)² for each applicant type before proceeding to the next vignette. Demographic questions were presented at the end, followed by a debriefing page.

The hypothetical job was intentionally unspecified to isolate responses to applicant background rather than job-specific risk considerations (e.g. working with vulnerable populations, or specific environments). Gender was unspecified to prevent gender-based stereotypes from confounding evaluations of offence type.

Job offer rescindment evaluation

Participants rated agreement with 12 statements regarding the offer rescindment (e.g. the decision was ‘correct, acceptable, legitimate, valid, appropriate, justified, deserved, logical, rational, fair, tolerant, objective’) using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated greater support for employment rescindment (Average $\alpha = .97$).

Character Evaluation index

Responding to six items (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) participants rated the extent they thought the applicant was ‘threatening, immoral, disgusting, aggressive, problematic, erratic’. Higher scores indicated increasingly negative views of the applicant (Average $\alpha = .94$).

Societal violations index

Three items (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) were used to rate perceptions the applicant had violated societal expectations, ‘deviated from appropriate conduct, violated important values, violated social norms’. Higher scores indicated increasing perceptions of inappropriate social conduct (Average $\alpha = .90$).

Demographic items

Demographic items included age (open-ended), gender (male, female, non-binary, prefer not to say), first language (English: yes/no), education level (four response options) and country of birth (open-ended).

All procedures were approved by the James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee (H8918). Participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Principal Components Analyses

To validate the structure of the three DV³ indices – job offer rescindment, character evaluation and societal violations evaluation – separate Principal Components Analyses

(PCA) were conducted for each measure across all three applicant types. Direct-oblimin rotation was selected. In all cases, a single component solution emerged with eigenvalues > 1. Bartlett’s tests of sphericity were significant ($ps < .001$). KMO values ranged from good to excellent (>.70). All item and component loadings exceeded acceptable thresholds (>.40 and >.50, respectively). Parallel analysis (10,000 samples) confirmed that only one eigenvalue for each index exceeded the 95th percentile of the parallel analysis generated dataset distributions.⁴ See Table 1 for PCA outcomes.

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2. Across all measures, the justice-involved applicant received the highest negative evaluations. Perceptions were least negative towards the drinking history applicant, with means consistently near or below the scale midpoint.

Bivariate correlations between all outcome measures were positive and statistically significant, with one exception. Correlations ranged from .13 to .82, indicating consistency in participants evaluative responses across applicant types and domains (See Table 3).

Cochran’s Q-test

Participant agreement with the rescindment decision differed across applicant types (see

Table 1. Principal components analysis outcomes for each measure.

Applicant type and measure	KMO	Bartlett’s χ^2	Comp var%	Loadings min	Loadings max
Justice-Involved					
Rescindment Evaluation	.96	2523.04	74.63	.75	.91
Character Evaluation	.90	878.62	73.68	.77	.90
Societal Violations Evaluation	.74	343.48	82.49	.89	.92
Illicit Substance					
Rescindment Evaluation	.96	2947.56	79.17	.78	.93
Character Evaluation	.90	1096.77	78.61	.86	.92
Societal Violations Evaluation	.73	353.22	82.70	.89	.93
Drinking					
Rescindment Evaluation	.97	3189.41	82.13	.85	.94
Character Evaluation	.91	1110.51	79.32	.85	.92
Societal Violations Evaluation	.76	438.33	86.83	.93	.94

Note. $N = 194$; All Bartlett’s Test Values $p < .001$.

Table 4). Agreement was highest for the justice-involved applicant, followed by the illicit substance user, and lowest for the drinking applicant.

A Cochran's Q-test confirmed there were statistically significant differences, $Q(2) = 83.15, p < .001$. McNemar post-hoc tests on each pair of applicant types revealed a significant difference between the proportions responding agree and disagree for the justice-involved applicant and the illicit substance use applicant, $\chi^2 = 16.17, p < .001$. There were significant agreement differences between the

justice-involved applicant and drinking history applicant, $\chi^2 = 62.65, p < .001$; and between the illicit substance user applicant and drinking history applicant, $\chi^2 = 30.42, p < .001$.

Main analyses

Job offer rescindment evaluations

A one-way repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a significant omnibus effect on support for job offer rescindment, $F(1.61, 310.91) = 51.37, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .21$ (Greenhouse-Geisser correction applied due to sphericity violation (Mauchly's $W = .76, p < .001$)).

All pairwise comparisons for Study 1 were conducted using Bonferroni-adjusted criteria to control the familywise type 1 error rate. Rescindment support was greater for the justice-involved applicant ($M = 4.36$) than the illicit substance history applicant ($M = 3.93$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.65].⁵ Rescindment support was greater for the justice-involved

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for all applicant types.

Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Rescindment Evaluation		
Justice-involved applicant	4.36	1.45
Illicit substance applicant	3.93	1.54
Drinking applicant	3.45	1.50
Character Evaluation		
Justice-involved applicant	3.59	1.22
Illicit substance applicant	3.38	1.29
Drinking applicant	3.10	1.23
Societal Violations Evaluation		
Justice-involved applicant	5.09	1.28
Illicit substance applicant	4.53	1.37
Drinking applicant	3.74	1.47

Note. $N = 194$. 7-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

Table 4. Percentage agreement/disagreement with job offer rescindment for each applicant type.

Application type	Agreement %	Disagreement %
Justice-involved	63.40	36.60
Illicit substance	47.90	52.10
Drinking	27.30	72.70

Table 3. Bivariate correlations for main measures.

ApplicantType:Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. JIA: Rescindment Evaluation	—	.66**	.63**	.62**	.43**	.33**	.52**	.31**	.18*
2. JIA: Character Evaluation		—	.54**	.44**	.61**	.25**	.32**	.48**	.13
3. JIA: Societal Violations Evaluation			—	.41**	.32**	.44**	.29**	.18*	.24**
4. ISA: Rescindment Evaluation				—	.71**	.69**	.82**	.56**	.54**
5. ISA: Character Evaluation					—	.64**	.62**	.80**	.50**
6. ISA: Societal Violations Evaluation						—	.57**	.50**	.71**
7. DA: Rescindment Evaluation							—	.69**	.69**
8. DA: Character Evaluation								—	.57**
9. DA: Societal Violations Evaluation									—

Note. $N = 194$; JIA = Justice-Involved Applicant; ISA = Illicit Substance Applicant; DA = Drinking Applicant; $p < .05^*, p < .01^{**}$.

applicant than the drinking history applicant ($M=3.45$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.65, 1.16]). Rescindment support was greater for the illicit substance use history applicant than the drinking history applicant ($p < .001$, 95% CI [0.32, 0.64]) (see Figure 1).

Character evaluations

Applicant type significantly influenced negative character evaluations, $F(1.63, 314.55) = 21.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .10$ (Greenhouse-Geisser correction applied due to sphericity violation, Mauchly's $W = .77$, $p < .001$). The justice-involved applicant ($M=3.60$) was more characterologically suspect than the illicit substance history applicant ($M=3.39$, $p = .028$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.40]). The justice-involved applicant was more characterologically suspect than the drinking history applicant ($M=3.10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.72]). The illicit substance history applicant was more characterologically suspect than the drinking history applicant ($p < .001$, 95% CI [0.15, 0.43]) (see Figure 2).

Societal violations

A significant effect of applicant type was also observed on perceived societal violations, $F(1.61, 310.08) = 88.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .32$ (Greenhouse-Geisser correction applied due to sphericity violation, (Mauchly's $W = .76$, $p < .001$). The justice-involved applicant ($M=5.09$) more seriously violated societal values than the illicit substance history applicant ($M=4.53$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.31, 0.80]). The justice-involved applicant more seriously violated societal values than the drinking history applicant ($M=3.74$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.06, 1.64]). The illicit substance use applicant more seriously violated societal values than the drinking history applicant ($p < .001$, 95% CI [0.61, 0.98]). See Figure 3.

Discussion

All hypotheses were supported. Participants showed greater support for rescinding the job offer of the justice-involved applicant than the illicit substance use applicant, and greater support for offer rescindment of the substance use

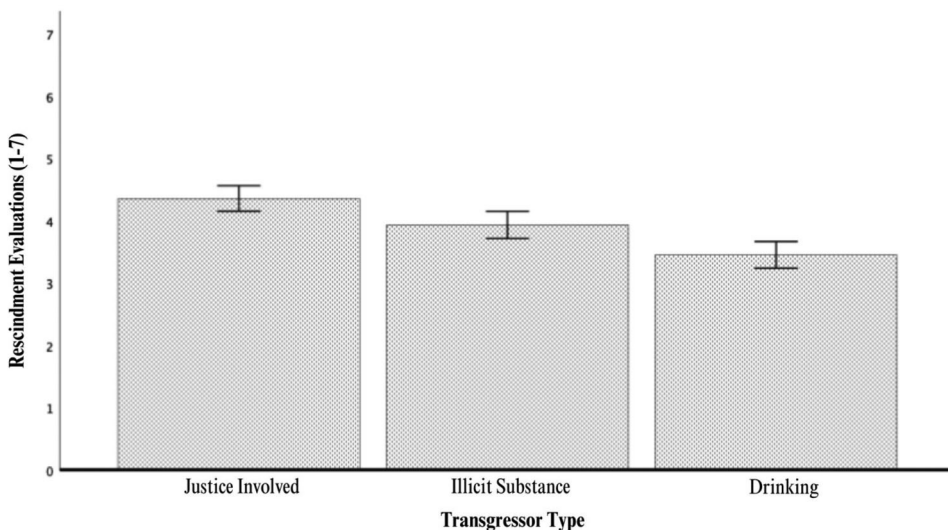


Figure 1. Cell means for job offer rescindment evaluations.

Note. Figure shows applicant history cell means for rescindment evaluations; 95% confidence intervals for the means are depicted by error bars.

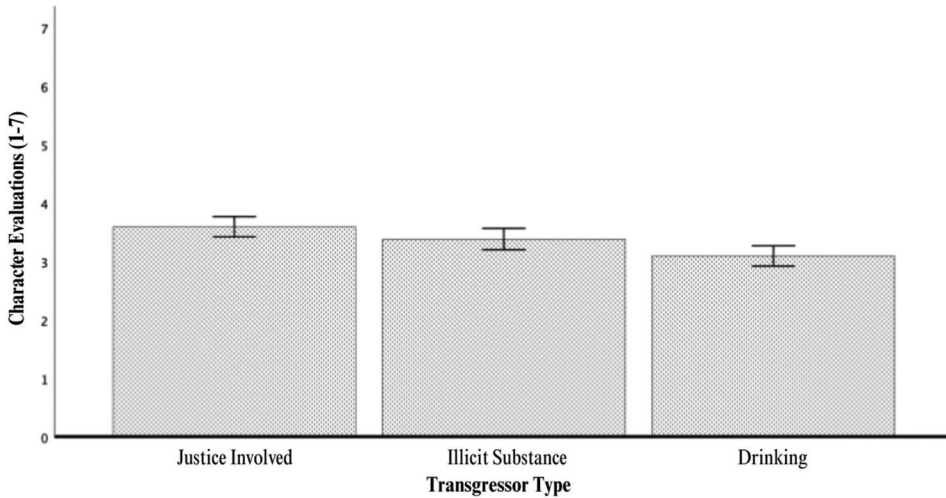


Figure 2. Cell means for character evaluations.

Note. The figure shows applicant history cell means for Character Evaluations; 95% confidence intervals for the means are depicted by error bars.

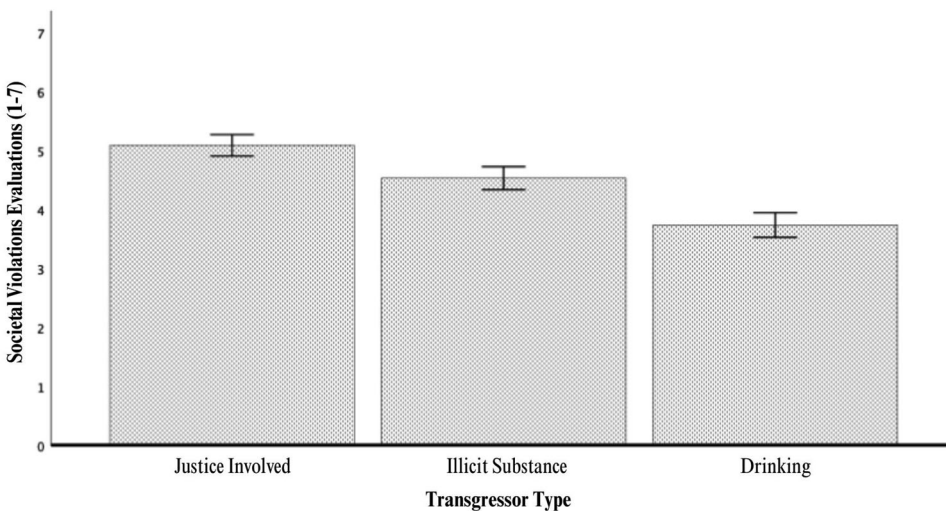


Figure 3. Cell means for societal violation evaluations.

Note. The figure shows applicant history cell means for Societal Violation Evaluations; 95% confidence intervals for the means are depicted by error bars.

applicant than the drinking history applicant. A similar pattern was observed across evaluations of character and societal violations, suggesting a consistent hierarchy of perceived transgression severity.

These findings indicate that justice-involvement – regardless of specific offence mentioned – is perceived as more serious and morally suspect than substance-related transgressions. Importantly, illicit substance use

was judged more negatively than drinking, suggesting that despite both being legally or socially contentious in some contexts, drinking is viewed as more culturally normative and acceptable (Heath, 2000).

The results align with stereotype theory (Baur et al., 2018; Cox & Devine, 2015), which posits that individuals are evaluated based on generalised beliefs about their social group. Justice-involved individuals may be perceived as especially threatening or morally deviant, leading to harsher judgements of character and social norm adherence (e.g. Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010; Rade et al., 2018). These stereotypes likely informed participants' evaluations, contributing to greater perceived legitimacy of employment rescindment for this group.

The findings also support the notion that stigma is stratified. Not all transgressions are judged equally: While justice involvement elicits substantial moral condemnation, substance use – especially alcohol – appears more forgivable. This reflects broader societal values around risk, responsibility and moral failure.

Study 2

Study 2 extended the findings from Study 1 by examining whether the type of justice-involved history influences evaluations of applicants. While Study 1 compared justice-involved individuals to other transgressor types (e.g. alcohol or substance use), Study 2 focused exclusively on justice-involved applicants, to assess how offence severity and stigma shape public responses.

Three specific justice-involved histories were examined: Sexual offending, violent offending and drug offending. These categories were selected based on their varying degrees of perceived moral deviance, dangerousness and rehabilitativeness. Stereotype theory suggests that individuals are judged based on socially constructed categories and the attributes associated with them (Cox & Devine, 2015). Previous research indicates

that sexual offenders are often viewed as the most deviant and morally reprehensible subgroup of offenders, even among other justice-involved individuals (Brown et al., 2008; Grossi, 2017; Kim et al., 2016). In contrast, drug offenders may be perceived as less threatening and more amenable to rehabilitation.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses were proposed:

- **H2a:** Support for rescinding a job offer will be highest for the applicant with a sexual offending history, followed by the violent offending applicant, and lowest for the drug offending applicant.
- **H2b:** The sexual offending applicant will receive the most severe negative character evaluations, followed by the violent offender, with the drug offender receiving the least unfavourable character ratings.
- **H2c:** Perceived societal violations will be highest for the sexual offending applicant, followed by the violent offender, and lowest for the drug offender.

Method

Participants

A total of 214 individuals were recruited via a university research participation platform and social media (independently of Study 1) for a study on 'perceptions of employability'. Participants included undergraduate students (compensated with course credit) and other university-affiliated individuals (uncompensated). Data from 89 'participants' were excluded for failing Qualtrics security checks or comprehension/attention checks. The final sample comprised 125 participants (85 Australian-born, the remainder primarily from England and Europe; 99 female, 22 male, three non-binary, one undisclosed), aged between 17 and 71 ($M = 29.66$, $SD = 13.21$; seven missing age data). Sixty participants had not yet completed an undergraduate degree, 45 had an undergraduate degree and 20 had a postgraduate qualification.

Design

A one-way within-subjects experimental design was used, with applicant offence type as the independent variable with three levels: (1) sexual offence; (2) violent offence; and (3) drug-offence. The DVs, consistent with Study 1, were: (1) job offer rescindment evaluations; (2) character evaluations; and (3) societal violation evaluations.

Materials and procedure

Participants accessed the study via Qualtrics. After reading an information page and consenting to participate, participants were presented with three randomly ordered vignettes. Each vignette described a hypothetical job applicant whose employment offer was rescinded due to one of three backgrounds. Text was identical except for background history of the applicant:

The applicant never got to start the new job. The offer of employment was rescinded after the employer found evidence of a history of a sexual offence/violent offence/drug-related offence.

After each vignette, participants answered a binary item: ‘Do you agree or disagree with the non-hire decision?’. This was followed by two attention and comprehension checks:

(1) ‘Was the applicant denied the employment offer?’ Yes/No; and (2) ‘The applicant was denied employment for which of the following reasons?’ Violent, theft, sexual, property damage, drug-related (offence).

Next, participants completed the three dependent variables described in Study 1: Job offer rescindment evaluation index (Average $\alpha = .98$), character evaluations index (Average $\alpha = .91$), societal violations index (Average $\alpha = .90$). The process was repeated for each of the three vignettes. Demographic items as per Study 1 were presented. Finally, participants were debriefed in writing.

The hypothetical job was intentionally unspecified to isolate responses to applicant background rather than job-specific risk considerations (e.g. working with vulnerable populations, or specific environments). Gender was unspecified to prevent gender-based stereotypes from confounding evaluations of offence type.

All procedures were approved by the James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee (H8918). Participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Descriptive statistics for all DVs are presented in Table 5. Mean scores generally hovered around the midpoint of the 7-point scale, with notable exceptions. The highest mean was observed on the societal violations index for the applicant with a sexual offending history ($M = 6.35$, $SD = 0.90$), indicating strong perceptions of societal norm and value violations. The lowest mean was on the character evaluation index for the drug offence applicant ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.24$), suggesting

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for all applicant types.

Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Rescindment Evaluation		
Sexual Offender	5.29	1.16
Violent Offender	4.74	1.21
Drug Offender	3.92	1.44
Character Evaluation		
Sexual Offender	4.84	1.27
Violent Offender	4.61	1.09
Drug Offender	3.55	1.24
Societal Violation Evaluation		
Sexual Offender	6.35	0.90
Violent Offender	5.67	1.07
Drug Offender	4.69	1.16

Note. Measures used a 7-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

comparatively weaker attribution of negative character traits.

Bivariate correlations among the nine outcome variables were positive and mostly statistically significant (see Table 6). Correlations ranged from small to large in magnitude ($r = .18$ to $.73$), indicating moderate to strong associations across measures within and between applicant types.

Cochran’s Q-test

Frequencies of agreement with the job offer rescindment decision varied across applicant types (see Table 7). Agreement was highest for the sexual offender applicant, followed by the violent offender, and then the drug offender.

Cochran’s Q test confirmed significant differences in agreement rates across the conditions existed, $Q(2) = 73.77$, $p < .001$. McNemar post hoc tests revealed significant pairwise differences in agreement proportions for all comparisons (all $ps < .001$).

Main analyses

Job offer rescindment evaluations

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant omnibus effect of applicant type on rescindment evaluations. The assumption of sphericity was violated (Mauchly’s $W = .89$, $p < .001$), therefore, the

Greenhouse-Geisser df adjustment was used, $F(1.81,223.88) = 89.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .42$.

All pairwise comparisons for Study 2 were conducted using Bonferroni-adjusted criteria to control the familywise Type I error rate. Participants were significantly more supportive of rescinding the job offer for the sexual offender ($M = 5.29$) than the violent offender ($M = 4.74$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[0.34, 0.75]$). Rescindment support was higher for the sexual offender than the drug offender ($M = 3.92$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[1.09, 1.64]$). Rescindment support was higher for the violent offender than the drug offender ($p < .001$, 95% CI $[0.55, 1.08]$). See Figure 4.

Character evaluations

Repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant omnibus effect of applicant type on character evaluations, $F(2,248) = 94.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .43$. The sexual offender

Table 7. Percentage of Agreement/Disagreement with rescindment decision for each applicant type.

Applicant Type	Agreement %	Disagreement %
Sexual Offender	87.20	12.80
Violent Offender	73.60	26.40
Drug Offender	44.00	56.00

Table 6. Bivariate correlations for main measures.

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. SO: Rescindment Evaluation	–	.67**	.52**	.69**	.49**	.24**	.55**	.41**	.38**
2. SO: Character Evaluation		–	.47**	.46**	.55**	.18*	.49**	.56**	.34**
3. SO: Societal Violation Evaluation			–	.28**	.25**	.58**	.14	.15	.33**
4. VO: Rescindment Evaluation				–	.73**	.41**	.60**	.46**	.41**
5. VO: Character Evaluation					–	.38**	.49**	.61**	.37**
6. VO: Societal Violation Evaluation						–	.14	.10	.37**
7. DO: Rescindment Evaluation							–	.70**	.58**
8. DO: Character Evaluation								–	.56**
9. DO: Societal Violation Evaluation									–

Note. $N = 125$; SO = Sexual Offender; VO = Violent Offender; DO = Drug Offender; $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$.

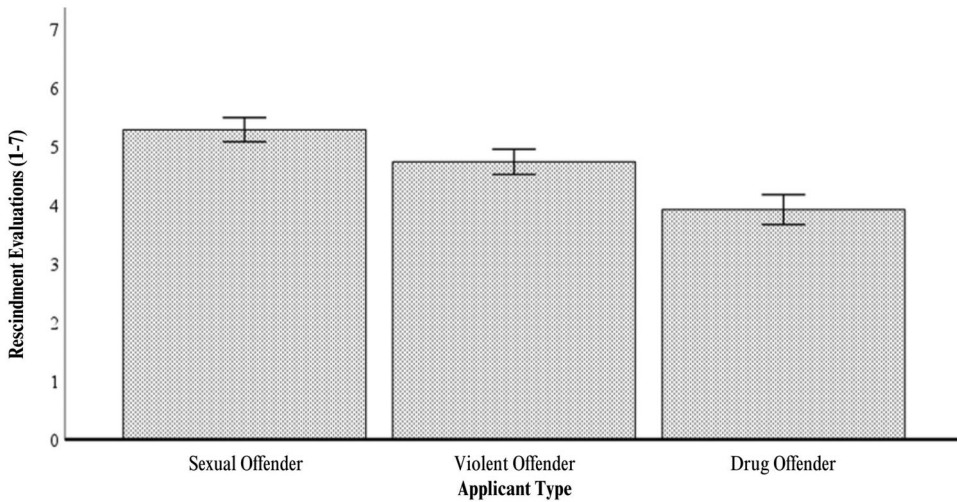


Figure 4. Cell means for rescindment evaluations.

Note. Figure shows applicant history cell means for Rescindment Evaluations; 95% confidence intervals for means are depicted by error bars.

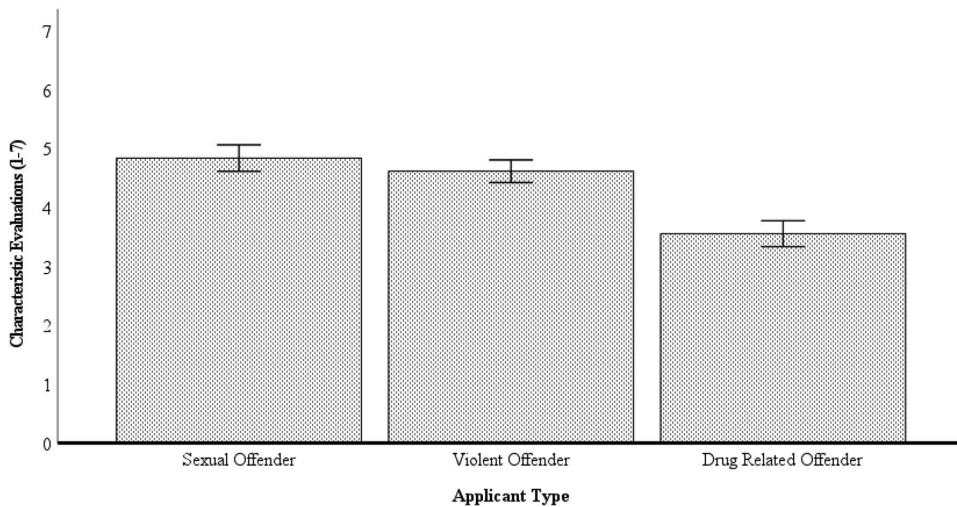


Figure 5. Cell means for character evaluations.

Note. Figure shows applicant history cell means for Character Evaluations; 95% confidence intervals for means are depicted by error bars.

($M = 4.84$) was rated as having *marginally* significant worse character than the violent offender ($M = 4.61$, $p = .086$, 95% CI $[-0.02, 0.47]$). The sexual offender was rated as having worse character than the drug offender

($M = 3.55$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[1.03, 1.54]$). The violent offender was rated as being more characterologically suspect than the drug offender ($p < .001$, 95% CI $[0.84, 1.29]$). See [Figure 5](#).

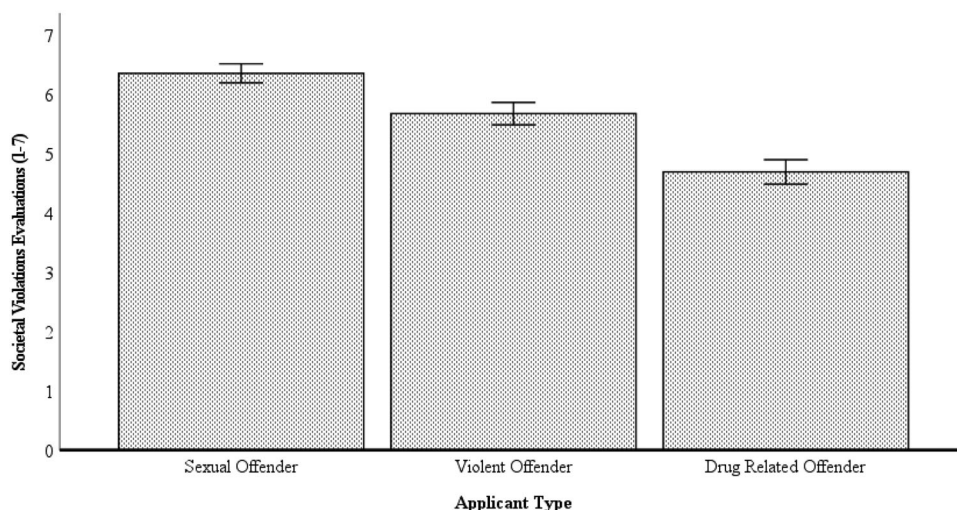


Figure 6. Cell means for societal violation evaluations.

Note. Figure shows applicant history cell means for Societal Violation Evaluations; 95% confidence intervals for means are depicted by error bars.

Societal violations

Repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant omnibus effect of applicant type on perceptions of societal violations. Mauchly's test indicated a violation of sphericity (Mauchly's $W = .87$, $p < .001$), therefore, Greenhouse-Geisser df adjustments were applied, $F(1.78, 220.12) = 134.37$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .52$. The sexual offender ($M = 6.36$) was rated as having more seriously socially violated than the violent offender ($M = 5.68$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.48, 0.88]). Social violations were higher for the sexual offender than the drug offender ($M = 4.69$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.40, 1.93]). Social violations were higher for the violent offender than drug offender ($p < .001$, 95% CI [0.71, 1.25]). See Figure 6.

Discussion

Study 2 extended the findings from Study 1 by examining how variations within justice-involved histories – specifically sexual, violent and drug-related offences – influenced hiring-related judgements. Hypotheses were supported in the main. Participants expressed the strongest support for rescinding the job offer

when the applicant had a sexual offence history, followed by violent and then drug offences. This same ordering emerged for perceptions of societal valuations, however, character assessments of the sexual offender and violent offender approached significance in the anticipated direction. The findings though reflect the predictions drawn from stereotype theory, which posits that people categorise individuals based on group-level associations, forming generalised beliefs that drive social judgements and behaviours (Baur et al., 2018; Cox & Devine, 2015). In the current context, the offence-type labels likely activated specific stereotype content that varied in perceived dangerousness, moral deviance and irredeemability. The sexual offending label appears to trigger especially entrenched and stigmatising stereotypes in relation to socially deviant behaviour – consistent with past work showing that sex offenders are viewed as uniquely deviant, morally contaminated and incapable of rehabilitation (Kim et al., 2016; Willis et al., 2010).

The introduction posited that public attitudes towards different offence types are not uniform, and this was borne out in these data.

Violent offenders, while still viewed negatively, were subject to less extreme judgements, perhaps because their actions are interpreted as impulsive or situational rather than morally depraved (Manza et al., 2004). Drug offenders were evaluated most leniently, aligning with contemporary discourse that increasingly frames substance use as a public health issue rather than a moral failing.

Importantly, these findings not only reinforce the central tenets of stereotype theory but also extend them by demonstrating how offence-specific labels operate hierarchically within the broader 'justice-involved' category. That is, even among stigmatised groups, further differentiation occurs based on the specific content of stereotypes.

These offence-based stereotypes carry real-world implications, particularly in employment contexts. If employers (or the public) apply moral judgements when evaluating job candidates with criminal records, it may result in discrimination that varies not only by criminal status generally but by offence type specifically. This highlights the importance of nuanced anti-discrimination initiatives that recognise the complexity of stigma and its basis in cognitive categorisation processes.

General discussion

This research investigated how stereotypes influence attitudes towards applicants with transgressor histories, particularly those with justice-involved backgrounds. Grounded in stereotype theory (e.g. Cox & Devine, 2015; Judd & Park, 1993) and literature on offender stigma (e.g. Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010; MacLin & Herrera, 2006), the studies tested whether individuals with justice-involved histories would be perceived more negatively in terms of employability, character and societal value violations compared to other transgressors – and whether different histories would elicit varying levels of stigma.

Study 1 demonstrated that justice-involved applicants were rated significantly more negatively than those with histories of illicit substance use or drinking. These differences held across job offer rescindment agreement, character suspicion and perceived violation of societal norms and values, consistent with the proposition that criminal offending activates more severe stereotypes. Moreover, substance users were viewed more negatively than drinkers, indicating that even among non-criminal transgressions, a hierarchy of perceived deviance exists.

Study 2 focused specifically on justice-involved individuals. The applicant with a sexual offending history received the most negative evaluations across all three dimensions, followed by the violent offender, with the drug offender viewed most leniently. These findings reflect established societal perceptions: Sexual offenders are often seen as dangerous, morally corrupt and irredeemable (e.g. Willis et al., 2010), while violent offenders may be judged harshly but still understood within frameworks of aggression or emotional volatility. Drug offenders, in contrast, are perceived with comparatively less stigma – suggesting a nuanced hierarchy even within the justice-involved population.

Although multiple pairwise differences reached statistical significance, the reported omnibus effect sizes indicate that these effects were generally modest to moderate in magnitude, suggesting systematic but not uniformly large differences across applicant types.

Importantly, average scores on the dependent measures often clustered around the scale midpoint, suggesting that although statistically significant differences emerged, participants were not consistently expressing extreme disapproval. A clear exception was the sexual offending condition, which drew markedly stronger societal condemnation. This pattern likely reflects entrenched moral norms regarding sexual transgressions and heightened sensitivity to perceived violations of fundamental social boundaries. The consistently elevated

societal violation ratings in this condition suggest that moral outrage over norm-breaking – rather than risk or employability considerations alone – may represent a central mechanism through which sexual offenders are stigmatised. Overall, these findings indicate that stigma is not uniform but varies by offence type, reflecting both exclusionary judgements and conditional openness to reintegration depending on the perceived nature of the transgression.

Strengths and limitations

This research has several methodological strengths. Both studies used experimental, within-subjects designs, allowing causal inferences about the impact of transgression type. Vignettes were controlled, with only transgression type varying between conditions, and counterbalancing mitigated order effects. Attention checks and comprehension items ensured participant engagement and data quality selection, and the measures demonstrated high internal consistency and psychometric distinctiveness.

A limitation is the lack of ecological validity stemming from the use of simplified vignette scenarios rather than detailed applicant CVs or real-world hiring contexts. This choice though was deliberate and grounded in the research focus: To explore stereotype-driven general judgements about transgressors, not to simulate actual hiring processes. Further to this, the intent was not to capture perceptions and stereotypes related to highly specific offences (i.e. particular sexual or violent acts). The current aim was to isolate the effects of general transgression-type on stereotype-based perceptions. Similarly, the use of a university-based volunteer sample – primarily Australian, female and well-educated – limits generalisability. The intent, however, was not to study the views of hiring managers specifically, but to assess somewhat broader lay attitudes towards transgressor stereotypes.

Finally, power calculations were based on detecting medium-sized effects in job offer rescindment – the primary behavioural

outcome – recognising that smaller effects may also be meaningful in applied employment settings, but were beyond the design scope of the present studies.

Future research directions

To build on these findings, future studies could introduce more ecologically valid stimuli – such as resumes, job interviews, or cover letters – alongside demographic manipulations (e.g. gender, ethnicity, offence specifics, or rehabilitation status). Future research should extend this work to more diverse community and professional samples to examine whether similar patterns hold in applied hiring settings. Including a non-transgressor condition would also allow for more definitive conclusions about the absolute stigma faced by offenders relative to ‘clean slate’ applicants.

The sample in both studies was predominantly female, which may have influenced responses to certain offence types, particularly those involving sexual offending (Willis et al., 2010). Although the present studies were not powered to examine such moderation effects, future research using more gender-balanced samples should assess whether offence-related stigma operates similarly across respondent groups.

Implications and conclusion

Employment plays a critical role in the reintegration of justice-involved individuals and in reducing recidivism (e.g. Bushway & Sweeten, 2007; Flake, 2015; Graffam et al., 2008). The present findings indicate that offences are not viewed equally in employment contexts, with sexual offenders remaining particularly stigmatised and subject to moral condemnation that may hinder reintegration. Addressing such biases – especially in hiring decisions – is therefore essential for fostering more equitable reintegration opportunities. This research contributes foundational insight into offence-related stereotyping and

highlights the need for future work examining how these biases might be mitigated.

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Ethical standards

Declaration of conflicts of interest

Clinton G. Knight has declared no conflicts of interest.

Savannah A. Connor has declared no conflicts of interest.

Meredith G. Bond has declared no conflicts of interest.

Ashleigh M. McMillan has declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical approval

All procedures performed were in accordance with the ethical standards of James Cook University Human Research Ethics Committee [H8918] and with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Data availability statement

Data supporting the findings of this paper are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Notes

1. A priori power analyses using the G-power calculator (power = .80, α = .05) determined that the minimum average sample size required to find medium size effects (η_p^2 = .06) in each study was 62.
2. In each study all items within the DV measures were randomly ordered. The DVs themselves were also randomly ordered. Several check-items were also embedded among scale items across the studies (e.g. 'for this item, respond with somewhat agree') to identify frivolous or non-committed responders.
3. Indices were created by the authors. In an earlier pre-test of items, a different sample responded to a pool of 33 items which were then submitted to PCA. This determined the 21 items selected for use in the current studies.
4. Although not reported in the body of the manuscript, the PCA results described in Study 1 were replicated in Study 2, thus, providing support for the stability and reliability of the component structure.
5. All in-text reported 95% confidence intervals are for the pairwise comparisons (i.e. the interval for paired differences). Figures, however, contain cell means along with the corresponding 95% confidence intervals.

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