

Perpetrator Gender and Crime Severity on Decision to Report Witnessed Crime

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Siearah M. Robles

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Report Submitted to:

Dr. Jeanine Skorinko, Advisor

Dr. Angela Rodriguez, Co-Advisor

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### Abstract

This study investigated gender bias and the effect of stress on the decision to report a witnessed crime. Participants watched a video under the guise of testing a video coding software, during which a theft of either high or low severity was witnessed. Participants were given multiple opportunities to report the witnessed theft. The gender of the perpetrator was manipulated to be either male or female and participant stress was measured through the use of a perceived stress scale. We predicted that people will be more willing to report against a male thief committing a high severity crime and that stress will be highest in those conditions. We found the data to be going in the expected direction, however the only significant result was between crime severity and stress.

*Keywords:* Crime, Snitch, Gender, Severity, Stress, Witness

### Perpetrator Gender and Crime Severity on Decision to Report Witnessed Crime

The “snitch” is a complicated role for someone to play. In some aspects, they can be seen as the hero for bringing something into light and playing a role in serving justice, and in other ways, the snitch is the bad guy, the rat, or the traitor (Akerstrom 2017). The stigma against being a snitch, and even fear of retaliation, “snitches get stitches,” can discourage people from coming forward with valuable information and instead feel the need to “mind their own business” (Woldoff & Weiss, 2010). So how, why, and when do people decide to report a crime?

Snitching is no simple task. There are many factors that go into how one reports a crime and whether they decide to snitch at all. Especially in communities where there is a very strict no-snitch culture, one needs to have a very good reason to do so or else there will likely be retaliation. One such circumstance that may legitimize snitching is the severity of the witnessed crime. If a crime is of high enough severity, snitching is seen as more appropriate and acceptable because it is seen as an action to protect something or someone, such as a victim, but snitching on a less severe crime can be seen as an action intended just to get the other person in trouble, which is then unacceptable according to the “code of the street” (Rosenfeld, Jacobs, & Wright, 2003).

Witnessing a crime can be a very stressful event (Deffenbacher, Bornstein, Penrod, & McGorty, 2004). Studies have also found that physiological stress is heightened when a significant experience is not confided and kept secret (Pennebaker, Hughes, O’Heeron, 1987). Therefore the act of confession is associated with a decrease in stress. Similarly, the act of reporting may decrease the amount of stress occurred by witnessing a crime. Perhaps the stress one feels in response to becoming a witness to the event impacts the decision made on whether or not to report the crime.

Gender has also been known to influence crime reporting. When a crime is witnessed, women are more likely than men to report it, however, men are more likely to physically intervene to stop it (Nicksa, 2014). Not only do men and women differ in their response to crime, they also differ in their participation. Historically and in the present day, the stereotypical image of a criminal is often male and it is easy to see why. With the exception of prostitution, men offend at greater rates than women for all categories of crime (Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). This gender gap in criminal behavior is greatest for more serious or violent crimes. Women are also sometimes shown leniency in criminal sentencing. Females receive shorter sentences for violent crimes and also benefit in criminal sentencing for non-violent offenses (Fernando Rodriguez, Curry, & Lee, 2006). Other crimes that are often considered more traditional for female offenders are domestic crimes such as infanticide, child abuse, and neglect, and more minor offenses like fraud or shop-lifting (Nagel & Hagan 1983).

Given this established stereotype that crime is more generally masculine, we are interested in how people perceive a female offender and whether any gender biases influence the decision to report the crime committed. We also know severity of the crime is an important deciding factor. With these things in mind, this study sets out to answer whether perpetrator gender and crime severity affect the likelihood to report a crime and the amount of stress experienced. We predict that having a male perpetrator and/or a high severity crime, there will be a greater likelihood of it being reported and a higher amount of perceived stress for the witness. The expectation is to see the least reporting for low severity, female perpetrated crime, and that witnesses will be less stressed in such a condition.

We may find that gender disparities in the criminal justice system exist before ever being brought into the system, affecting whether a criminal even gets caught or is treated seriously for

their offense. This information can be used to inform people in and out of the justice system of potential biases. The study may also provide some insight into how human emotions and stress may impact legal outcomes and the decisions we make.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

To clean the data, 30 participants who were believed to be bots, had little, or nonsense data were removed. Some participants with incomplete data were kept in the data set because they still had valuable data for some of the most crucial questions, such as whether or not they reported the crime, or had useful responses in some open ended questions. However, due to the missing data, many of these individuals were unable to be included in some of the analyses.

After data cleaning, we had a total of 202 participants, 106 males and 93 females. One remaining participant chose “other” when asked to indicate their gender identity. We recruited participants through SONA Systems, the social science participant pool software used by our private institution located in New-England, and through Amazon Mechanical Turk. The participants received either course credit if participating through the institution, or paid for their time if participating through MTurk. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 69, with the average age being 33.5 years old. The majority of participants were white (77.8%), and the rest were Asian (9.4%), black (5.4%), multi-racial (3.4%), LatinX (3%), or American Indian/Native Alaskan (0.5%). All participants provided informed consent prior to participating.

### **Design**

This experiment used a 2 (Confederate Gender: Male or Female) by 2 (Crime Severity: High or Low) between participant design. Participants watched a video in which a theft occurred. The video will be pre-recorded for each of the four conditions: 1. Male Thief & High Severity

(high value item stolen), 2. Male Thief & Low Severity (low value item stolen), 3. Female Thief & High Severity (high value item stolen), 4. Female Thief & Low Severity (low value item stolen).

### **Materials**

#### *Videos.*

In all of the videos, an experimenter enters a lab with a research participant. All of the individuals in the videos were actors for the study and not real participants. While the video does not have any audio, it is clear that the experimenter was providing instructions to the participant. After providing the instructions, the experimenter left the room for the participant to complete the task of building a Jenga tower. While the experimenter was gone, a theft occurred. As the participant was building the Jenga tower, the blocks fell over. At that time, they found an item (either a laptop or a mousepad), placed it into their backpack, and then returned to their task. Afterwards, the experimenter returned to the room and conversed with the participant before leaving the lab together as the video ends.

#### *Gender.*

There are four conditions, 1 and 3 will have male confederates and 2 and 4 will have female confederates. This only applies to the thief in all conditions. Other than gender, the selected confederates were visually similar to each other in age, race, and body shape to keep things as consistent as possible between conditions.

#### *Severity.*

The severity of the crime was manipulated by the value of the item stolen from the lab. In half of the conditions, conditions 1 and 2, a minor theft is witnessed and in conditions 3 and 4, a severe theft is witnessed. To decide on what items to use for the theft, we pre-tested possible

materials for their perceived value. Then a second pre-test was conducted with video of the items being stolen. Based on the responses we received, we chose a laptop for the high severity condition, and a mousepad for the low severity condition. The two items chosen were easily seen in footage and were rated as very high and low in severity respectively.

### ***Perceived Stress Scale.***

Stress of the participants were measured using a modified version of the perceived stress scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1994). The scale was reworded so that it asked about current feelings of stress rather than how often stress was experienced over a stated period of time. To reflect this, the scale was also changed to be from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” rather than from never to very often.

### ***Video Coding.***

A slider question will be given to participants where they can indicate how many times they see the confederate in the video exhibiting open or closed body language. Examples of open body language are uncrossed legs and/or arms, nodding of the head, holding head high, leaning forward, or an overall relaxed posture. Closed body language includes crossing of the arms or legs, shaking of the head, head down, leaning back or away, and a tensed posture. This makes participants pay attention to all movement made by the confederate and lessens the chance of them missing the theft.

### ***Manipulation Checks and Demographics.***

Questions include inquiries into the participant’s race/ethnic background, gender, age, what they thought the study was about, and if anything odd or unusual happened. They were also asked about the body language they observed in the video. They were then asked if they noticed that a theft occurred, and if they did/did not report it.

**Procedure**

Participants reviewed an informed consent agreement and after giving consent, participants learned that the study is investigating how people make attributions about non-verbal behaviors. The participant is then told that they will be watching a video and that their task is to code non-verbal body language of a person shown in the video. The participant was informed that they should be looking for open and closed body language and given examples of what is meant by open and closed. The participant is also given a coding slider under the videos to use to keep track of their observations.

On screen they saw a person playing Jenga on their own. As the participant was looking for the behaviors described above, they should notice that a theft was committed by the person on screen. The item stolen was either a laptop (high severity theft) or a mousepad (low-severity theft). The participant had the opportunity to report the theft in at least 5 questions asked throughout the study. Opportunities were given in the form of open ended questions. Some of these opportunities included asking if the participant had any comments, questions, or concerns about the activity, what specific open or closed behavior did they notice, if they had any other comments, if anything odd or unusual occurred in the study, and finally if there was anything else they thought experimenters should know. The questions were vague enough that it would not cause suspicion in the participants. Other questions included demographic information and observations made during the coding activity.

The participant was led to believe that we were testing a video coding software and that we were interested in how people and computers differ in coding human behavior. Due to the deception in this study, participants were also given a data release form allowing researchers to use the data we collected. All participants were fully briefed after participation in the study and



thanked for their time. The participant was made aware that the video was not live, and that all people shown were actors for this study. They were also told that a theft had occurred at some point during the video. Finally, they were told the purpose of the study and were made aware of all the manipulations and conditions used. Participants were asked not to tell others about the study so that it will not influence future participants.

### **Results**

To assess the potential relationships between crime severity, stress, gender, and crime reporting, Chi-Square tests of independence and an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were conducted.

#### **Does Perpetrator Gender Predict Likelihood to Snitch?**

We predicted that there would be a greater amount of crime reporting for the conditions with a male thief. Although this did occur, a chi-square analysis on perpetrator gender and whether the crime was reported or not revealed that the likelihood to snitch did not differ significantly by the perpetrator's gender,  $\chi^2(1, N = 153) = 3.24, p = .072$ .

#### **Does Crime Severity Predict Likelihood to Snitch?**

We had expected that high severity crimes will have been snitched on more than low severity crime. Once again, our data went in the expected direction, however the chi-square analysis on the item stolen and whether the crime was snitched on was not significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 153) = 0.04, p = .838$ .

Although the results are not significant for neither gender nor severity, in Figure 1 we can see that the male confederate was reported most in the mousepad/low severity condition and for the female confederate the opposite was true where they were reported most for the laptop/high severity condition. Within the severity condition, the low severity theft seems to show the

greatest difference in reporting by gender, indicating the possibility that gender effects reporting most in low severity conditions and that for high severity crimes, gender is less of a factor.

### **Is Perpetrator Gender or Crime Severity a Factor in Witness Stress?**

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the relationship between gender, crime severity, and stress. We found that the relationship between gender and stress was not significant,  $F(1, 197) = 86.59, p = .354, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .004$ , but for the item stolen (severity) and stress it was significant,  $F(1, 197) = 481.77, p = .029, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .024$ . The interaction between perpetrator gender, item stolen, and perceived stress however was also not significant,  $F(1, 197) = 301.51, p = .084, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .015$ .

In figure 2, we can see that although insignificant, there is a greater difference in stress for witnessing males committing high and low severity crimes than there is for females. Figure 3 shows this same difference for participants more generally regardless of gender. Here the average amount of stress was higher for the high crime severity condition than it is for the low severity condition, however insignificant.

### **Discussion**

Through this study we strived to find relationships between the variables of gender and severity on witness stress and crime reporting. Although there may be some directional trends, there are however no significant conclusions that can be made other than for severity and stress. The data suggests that the severity of the crime witnessed may be related to greater amounts of stress. This supports the first half of the hypothesis that the high severity crimes and male perpetrators will have a positive increase effect on stress.

An interesting finding in this study, although not supported statistically, is it seems that gender only made a difference when the crime was less severe. One possible explanation for this

is that when a crime is more severe, people are more focused on the action rather than the person. Women charged with the same crime as men are not found innocent at a higher rate than men, but rather they are benefitted by a shorter sentence or in being released on recognizance (Fernando Rodriguez, Curry, & Lee, 2006). What this suggests is that both men and women are equally viewed as guilty, but women have the upper hand in having a more lenient sentence. Perhaps for the theft of low severity, the female confederate was “let of the hook” as the offense did not matter that much, but when the theft was more severe, that advantage lessened.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

One limitation to the study is that we were limited to what crimes we could stage in a believable manner. Although the theft worked fine logistically, it is also known that there is a stereotype associating women with shop-lifting (Dabney, Dugan, Topalli, Hollinger, 2006). It is possible that this affects the perception of the female confederate, the perception of guilt, and whether or not to report on a stereotypical crime. The way that people perceive the actors in the study is important. Although similar in many ways, there may have been other differences that could have potentially influenced results. One such example is that the two actors in this study differed in race. The female confederate was white, and the male was of mixed Hispanic/South Asian descent. However neither had very distinctive features or differences within the video as both wore the same clothing, sweat pants and a hooded sweater, and were not in close-up view to the camera. The female confederate in our study also seemed more expressive and angry in her take compared to the male. To help correct for this, questions about the perceptions of the person on film were asked.

Another limitation is that since this study relies on self-reported data, there is a chance that some participants are inaccurate. In particular, when it comes to the perceived stress scale, a

participant may not want to report how stressed they are really feeling. In addition, the timing of this experiment coincided with the COVID-19 global pandemic. It is already a time of heightened stress for many, and may have influenced how stress was reported in this study.

Finally, another limitation to the study is race. The majority of participants in this study were white, but according to research, race and culture are also very important aspects of the perception of snitching and when it is acceptable (Woldoff & Weiss, 2010). People of different backgrounds, social-economic status, and life experience may respond differently to witnessing crime.

Further research may be conducted with a change in crime, confederate or participant characteristics, and stress measurement. It would be of interest to investigate a series of thefts of varying severities. In the present study, the use of a mousepad for the lowest point was justified through pre-testing data, however there was a potential believability issue as it is not often one would think to steal such an item. By testing more than just low and high severity, perhaps including medium, we can observe at what point is an item so low in severity, people do not care that it is stolen, and at what point is something so severe it needs to be reported? It would also be helpful to see what the results would be with items realistically stolen from other places such as a store or home. Further different crimes can also be studied. Instead of severity within one type of crime, what about between crimes? Such an idea could be vandalism vs theft, or white-collar crime vs blue-collar crime.

We may also be able to further manipulate the confederate in other ways besides gender such as race or class based on clothing. With this, we can also bring in the factor of stereotypical crimes and its effect on snitching. The study may also be conducted with a more diverse sample to see how snitching rates vary depending on background. The study could also potentially be in-

person with a live staged crime to better relate to external validity as it is more common to be an in-person witness rather than virtually through a video.

The final suggestion for a future study is changing the way we measure stress. To eliminate self-report bias, we can take a psychophysiological measurement of stress such as through salivary cortisol sampling. This way, we will also have a better idea of how stress levels change throughout the study. We would then be able to see if the act of reporting a crime lowers the initial stress response from witnessing it.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the lack of significant results, there are still interesting trends that may need to be followed up on before being ruled out completely. Although women are not as often involved in the criminal justice system as men, the number of female offenders is rising (Gavrilova & Campaniello, 2015). Therefore, continuing research on how women are treated in the legal setting is important as it will impact how a defendant is viewed, judged, and sentenced. That is if they are ever caught.

It is also important to conduct research on stress and how it affects witnesses of crime. We have been able to support that when crimes are more severe, a witness will have a higher level of stress. We know that stress affects eye-witness testimony among many other areas of legal processes (Deffenbacher, Bornstein, Penrod, & McGorty, 2004). By understanding how stress and other biases affect our own decision making, we can better improve legal processes and policies.

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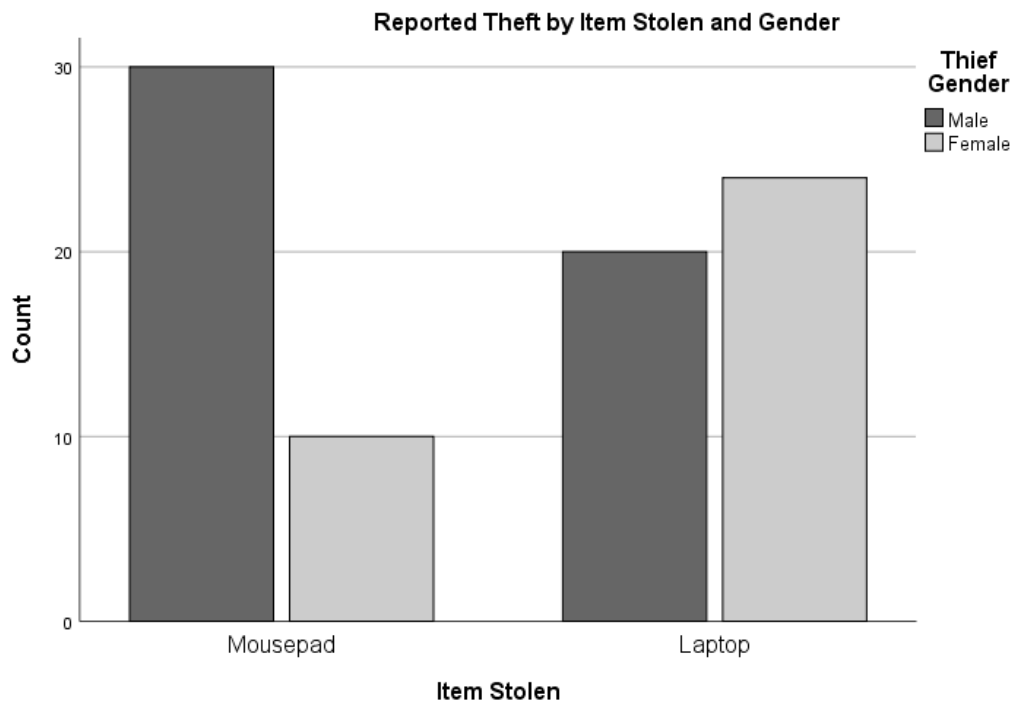
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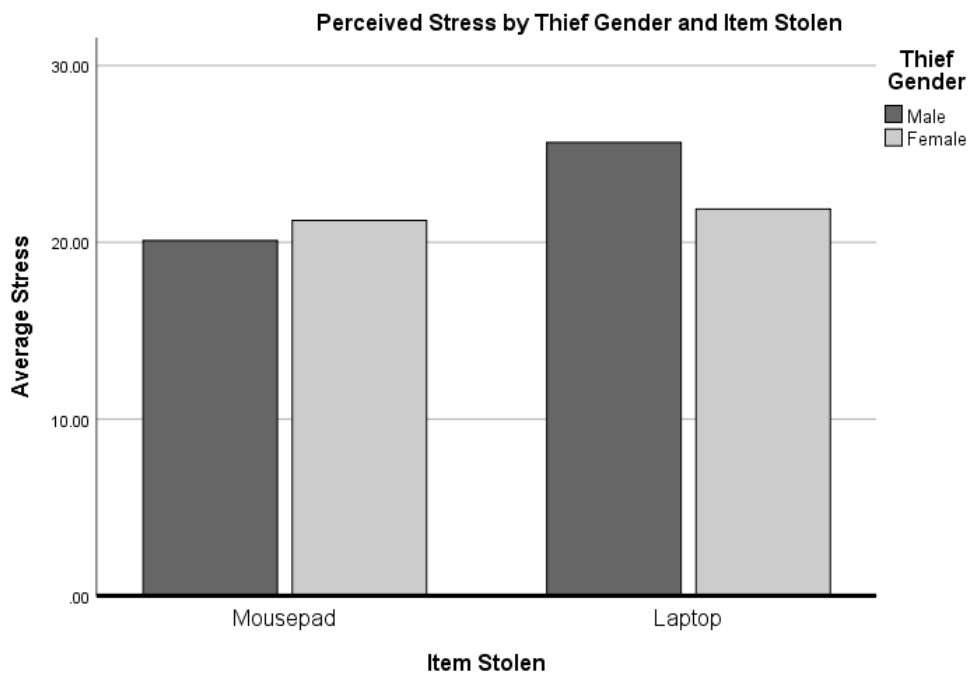
## Reported Theft by Item Stolen and Perpetrator Gender:



*Figure 1.* The number of cases in which the participant snitched on the crime as a function of gender and severity. The most snitched on combination was for the male thief stealing a mousepad, and the most lenient response was given to the offense of a female thief stealing the mousepad. The mousepad condition (low severity theft) had a greater effect by gender than the stolen laptop condition (high severity theft).



## Perceived Stress by Thief Gender and Item Stolen:



*Figure 2.* Amount of stress as a function of gender and crime severity with mousepad being low severity and laptop being high severity. The highest level of stress is found in the condition of a male thief stealing a laptop.

Perceived Stress by Crime Severity:

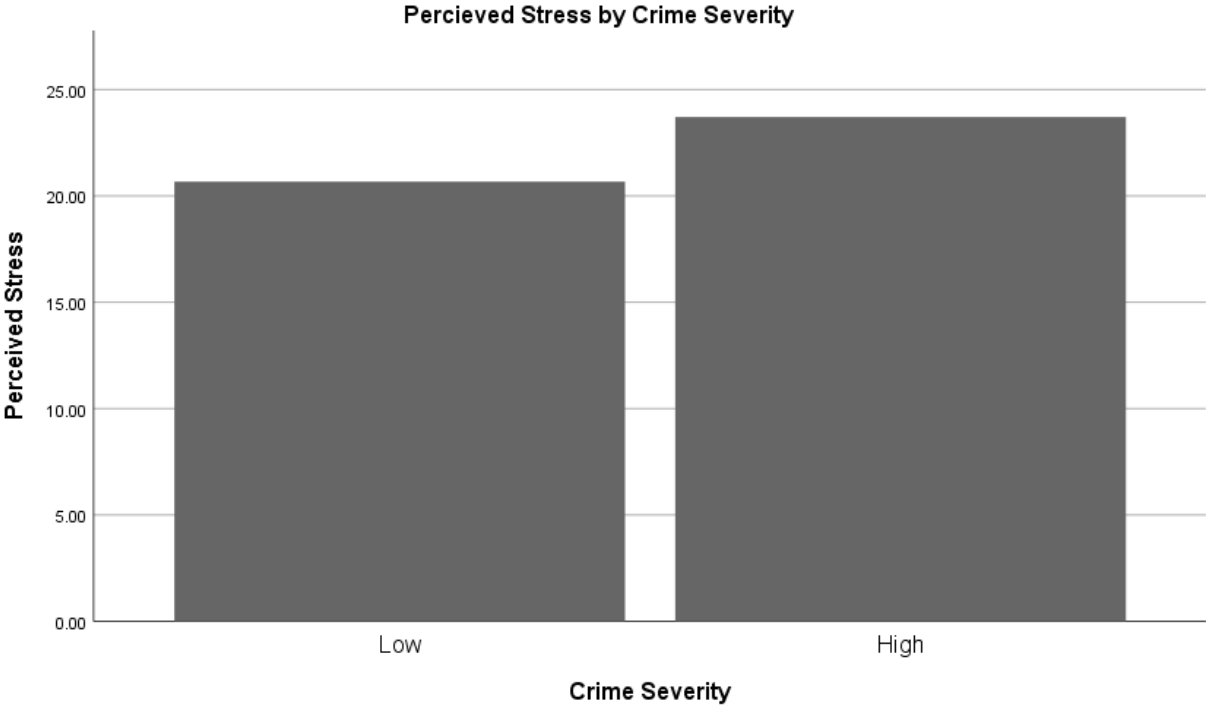


Figure 3. Amount of stress as a function of crime severity. There is more perceived stress in witnessing a high severity crime.