

Interrogations can lead to false confessions by juveniles, study finds

October 17 2013, by Ayleen Barbel Fattal



Credit: krystian_o

Juveniles may be particularly vulnerable to falsely admitting guilt, according to a study led by Florida International University psychologist Lindsay C. Malloy. The findings were published this week in the American Psychological Association's journal *Law and Human Behavior*.

The study sheds light on the interrogations, confessions and guilty pleas of adolescents incarcerated in the United States, a largely under-studied area in the U.S. legal system.

More than one third of the study's participants claimed to have made a false admission to legal authorities. Most false admissions reportedly were made to protect someone else or to lessen punishment. According to the study, long interrogations and being questioned in the presence of a friend increased the risk for [false confessions](#).

"People need to understand that juvenile suspects are especially vulnerable in the [interrogation](#) room," Malloy said. "The ways in which we question youth can have potentially devastating consequences in some cases."

Funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, the study examined true and false admissions of guilt among 193 serious male offenders between the ages of 14 and 17 and focused on admissions with potentially serious legal consequences – those made to police officers and judges. It also looked at the adolescents' interrogation experiences and the techniques associated with false admissions.

"Interrogations, confessions and pleas are aspects of the legal system that generally occur behind closed doors," Malloy said. "It is important to hear from youth directly about their experiences, especially in the U.S. where police are largely allowed to question juveniles in the same manner as adults."

Malloy's research indicates a critical need for reform in the procedures used for questioning juveniles.

A majority of the participants in Malloy's study reported experiencing high-pressure techniques when questioned by police officers, including

some that might render a confession inadmissible in court. Some described experiencing threats and use of force. Others reported being refused a lawyer, a phone call or a chance to speak to a parent. Sixty-five percent of participants reported interrogations lasting two hours or more.

The study recommends specialized training for law enforcement and that interrogations be video recorded. The researchers also recommend exploring alternatives to lengthy interrogations and refusal of counsel or other requests because these techniques do not appear to improve the chances of obtaining a true admission of guilt.

"Our results highlight the need for reform in policies regarding young suspects, Malloy said. "We hope that these findings will inform and motivate those who make decisions about interrogating youth."

As director of the Development, Context, and Communication Lab, Malloy leads a team of researchers studying children's cognitive and social development at FIU. Their work helps advance scientific understanding of child development and provides information and tools for teachers, social workers and legal professionals who conduct important work with children and adolescents.

More information: psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2013-35907-001/

Provided by Florida International University

Citation: Interrogations can lead to false confessions by juveniles, study finds (2013, October 17) retrieved 21 November 2023 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-10-interrogations-false-juveniles.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.