

Does Knowledge of Coercive Plea Offers Reduce the Tendency to Infer Guilt from a Guilty Plea?

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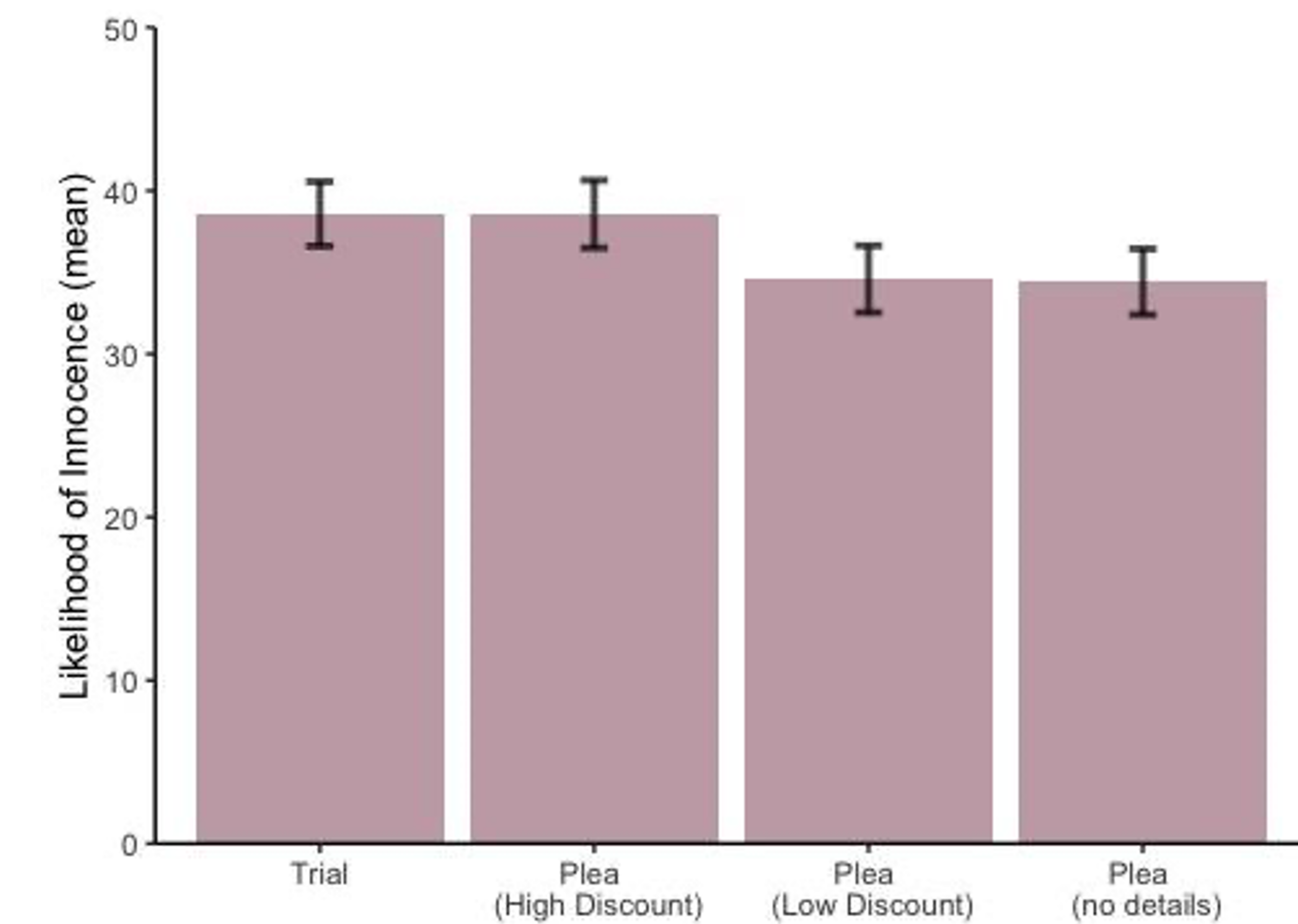
INTRO

- Over 97% of federal cases in the United States are resolved via guilty pleas and plea bargaining^{1, 2}
- 1 in 5 exonerations involved a false guilty plea³
- Individuals who plead guilty are perceived as less likely to be factually innocent than those who are convicted at trial⁴
- This may be due to the invisibility problem in the correspondence bias, where people may not recognize the coercive nature of plea deals or their potential to induce guilty pleas from innocent individuals⁵
- Guilty pleas are viewed as a variant of confessions⁶
- Evaluators are more likely to make situational attributions for confessions when the confession was obtained in high- versus low-pressure conditions⁷
- The current study measures perceptions of defendants who plead guilty when evaluators are presented with parameters of the plea deal

Evaluators are able to recognize the coercive nature of plea deals and adjust their perceptions of defendants who plead guilty accordingly.



Judgments of Wrongful Conviction Potential



METHOD

- Participants (N = 309) read eight crime vignettes, ending with one of the following case dispositions:
 1. Convicted at trial, high severity, no details about sentencing
 2. Convicted at trial, low severity, no details about sentencing
 3. Convicted via plea, high severity, no details about sentencing
 4. Convicted via plea, low severity, no details about sentencing
 5. Convicted via plea, high severity, large sentencing discount (15 yrs. trial; 18 mos. plea)
 6. Convicted via plea, low severity, large sentencing discount (5 yrs. trial; 6 mos. plea)
 7. Convicted via plea, high severity, small sentencing discount (15 yrs. trial; 12 yrs. plea)
 8. Convicted via plea, low severity, small sentencing discount (5 yrs. trial; 1 yr. plea)
- Participants rated the likelihood that each defendant was actually innocent of the crime
- Participants were also asked directly about the likelihood of wrongful convictions in plea and trial convictions

RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS

- Outcomes were collapsed between the high severity and low severity conditions
- Outcome type was a significant predictor of judgments of innocence ($F(3, 2160) = 6.80, p = .0001$)
- There was no significant difference in participants' rating of trial convictions ($M = 38.58, SD = 25.01$) and plea convictions with a large discount ($M = 38.57, SD = 26.30$)
- Additionally, there was no significant difference in participants' rating of plea convictions when no details were provided ($M = 34.42, SD = 25.58$) and plea convictions with a small discount ($M = 34.48, SD = 25.95$)
- All other comparisons between outcome types were statistically significant at $p < .05$
- These results indicate that the results from our previous study may be due to the correspondence bias -- more specifically, the invisibility problem -- where evaluators are not aware of the coercive nature of most plea offers
- Future research should explore the impact of providing details from plea offers on evaluators' support for post-conviction relief for defendants who plead guilty