

An Eye for an Eye in the Electronic Age: Gauging Public Attitude Toward White Collar Crime and Punishment*

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Abstract

Recent revelations regarding the indiscretions of corporate leaders in the United States has forced new attention on white collar crime, how it is treated by the criminal justice system and how it is perceived by the American public. Past conventional wisdom has held that the general public considers white collar crime, especially fraud, as fairly innocuous, especially in comparison with crimes of physical violence. This article presents results of a national public survey of 1,169 households throughout the U.S. that challenge some of these beliefs of public apathy towards white collar crime.

Results demonstrate that many now believe that fraud can be as serious or more serious than certain types of street crimes. The level of moral condemnation of non-violent white collar crime proved to be higher than anticipated, particularly when the crimes involved corruption of public trust. Results also underscored a serious “confidence gap” between public demands for “just deserts” for white collar crime and the perception of the criminal justice system’s ability and willingness to administer adequate punishments to white collar criminals. Surprisingly, fraud victimization of respondents in the sample was found to not be a factor influencing attitudes of punishment for white collar crime transgressions, except in cases in which the offenses had the potential for far-reaching financial impact. The authors offer thoughts on how the media coverage of white collar crime may affect public perceptions on the seriousness of white collar crime

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and what bearing present public attitudes on white collar crime seriousness can have on future sentencing structures.

Introduction

As today's consumers embrace the exponential advances in 21st Century technology, concern has risen over the new opportunities to commit fraud, embezzlement, and other forms of computer-related crime. The movement to effectively counteract the commission of these offenses has been slow because of the public's lack of information regarding the prevalence and threat of white collar crime and because new legislation must be constructed to tackle these issues.

While estimates vary, economic crime has a multi-billion dollar financial impact, claiming victims from all strata of society¹. Despite the high risk of becoming a target, the public seems virtually unaware of the dangers, continually engaging in behaviors that may expose them to victimization. Recent national opinion surveys of Internet users reveal that while half of those polled reported making purchases online with a credit card, only twenty percent expressed a high level of confidence regarding the security of that credit card number.² In addition, a majority of individuals report engaging in certain high-risk behaviors that could make them susceptible to victimization.³

Despite a widespread belief that there lacks a strong sentiment against white collar crime, research efforts dating back to the 1960's have shown that, in many instances, the public views this type of behavior as more costly and problematic than 'traditional' or 'street' crime.⁴ And although the same studies pointed to a desire for increased sanctioning of various white-collar criminals, official statistics to this day reveal a disparity between sentencing for white collar and traditional offenses.⁵

Using data from the National Public Survey on White Collar Crime, this paper revisits the study of individual attitudes towards white collar and economic crime, an area of research that has lay dormant for over a decade despite the widespread adoption of technology and the subsequent evolution of crime itself. Utilizing information about prior victimization experiences, risk behavior, and demographic indicators will help us understand what drives the public's current perceptions on such important issues as white collar crime seriousness, the sentencing associated with such crimes, and the level of fear individuals have of being victimized. This in turn should help us to identify what future

direction can be taken to address the following fundamental question: Do current legislative efforts reflect the interests of the general public? The insight provided by these results would enable decision-makers to rethink crime and justice issues as we head into the twenty-first century.

Gauging Public Opinion On White Collar Crime

As far back as 1907, there is evidence of researchers' frustration with the insufficient public awareness of the harm generated by white collar crime. At that time, E. A. Ross lamented the public's reaction to business violations and the lack of concern about these "new varieties of sins."⁶ Over thirty years later, Edwin Sutherland expressed this same sentiment when he complained, "The general public was, sadly, simply not aroused by white collar crime."⁷ And continuing this trend, findings from the 1968 President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice concluded, "The public tends to be indifferent to business crime or even to sympathize with the offenders who have been caught."⁸ A commonly offered reason for this "indifference" is that there is more distance between legal proscription and enforcement than in other areas of criminal law. The theory being that the public perceives the handling of *Mala in se* crimes, crimes that are inherently evil such as murder and rape, as clearly the responsibility of the criminal justice system. Committing these types of crimes "equals" punishment by the legal system.

Nonetheless, the belief that the public has a neutral attitude toward white collar crime is possibly more a myth than reality. While there have been few studies of perceptions of white collar crime seriousness, the ones that have been conducted have demonstrated that the public expresses a bit more concern than was previously believed, particularly in cases in which physical harm/injury is the end result. After a review of international studies on public perception of white collar crime, including studies by Rossi, Cullen, and Wolfgang, Grabosky et al state, "The public perceives many forms of white-collar crime as more serious, and deserving more severe punishment, than most forms of common crime."⁹

In response to a growing interest in white collar crime, Francis T. Cullen replicated Rossi et al's 1972 survey "*Seriousness: A measure for all purposes*,"¹⁰ in order to investigate any possible changes in public attitude towards white collar crime.

Cullen et al's findings did indicate that white collar crime had increased in seriousness more than any other offense category although it was still viewed as less serious than most other forms of illegality.¹¹ However, when the category of white collar crime was divided into six sub-categories there were discrepancies in the seriousness attributed to the different types. Increases in seriousness rating were pronounced in only two categories (Violent, Corporate Price-Fixing). This is supported by Wolfgang et al who reported their respondents rated white-collar crimes which caused injury to persons as extremely serious. Bribery offenses were also considered fairly serious, but tax evasion was rated very low.¹²

Virtually no research on public perceptions of white collar crime had been conducted in the 1990s. Consequently, many questions about possible changes in public attitudes on this topic remained unanswered. Yet answers to such questions can prove to be of great use in the development of responsible sentencing structures. A primary objective of the development of sentencing guidelines is the prescribing of "just sentences." One interpretation of just punishment is that popular consensus defines it. Setting some correspondence between popular opinion and guideline development, of course, cannot be accomplished without accurately gauging current sentiment. The following information gleaned from the National Public Survey on White Collar Crime brings us closer to understanding not only how serious the public presently views these offenses but also explores the degree to which these feelings are connected to victimization, vulnerability to victimization, perceptions of white collar crime control and common demographics (e.g., age, sex, income level).

The Survey

The aim of the National Public Survey on White Collar Crime was to add broader and more current information to the rich insights furnished by prior surveys. Rather than limiting our focus to any one aspect, we decided to touch upon several perception dimensions to present a comprehensive picture of what the average American thinks about white collar crime. We were interested in obtaining answers to questions such as: How serious do you believe white collar crime is; How safe do you feel from white collar crime; Have you been victimized by white collar crime; Did you report the victimization; What type of person do you believe the average white collar crime victim is. We also

asked questions about participation in risk behaviors associated with white collar crime victimization, perceptions of the control of white collar crime, and opinions on workplace theft. For the purposes of the study, we defined white collar crime as “planned crimes that involve cheating or lying that usually occur in the course of employment.”

Respondents were told that white collar offenses included crimes like fraud, embezzlement, and crimes against public health and safety.

Data for this study were collected through a telephone survey of U.S. citizens. The survey was administered by trained interviewers over a twelve-week period beginning in late January 1999. The sample was stratified by county to afford each county a selection probability proportionate to the share of telephone households within the county.¹³ Random numbers were created by systematically randomizing the last two digits affixed to the area code, prefix, and block portions of each telephone number. Of the 1,582 cases in which eligible respondents were contacted, 1,169 (74%) completed interviews. Within each household, an individual was randomly selected to serve as the survey respondent. We employed recognized methods of randomized selection in an effort to achieve satisfactory representation of the total population of the U.S. on such factors as age and sex.¹⁴ The data were weighted on age, sex, education, and region to transform the sample into proportions representative of the parameters of the larger population. The amount of weighting required was minimal.

The first section of the questionnaire was dedicated to perceptions of white collar crime seriousness. We asked respondents to compare the seriousness of a series of white collar crime events to “street crime” events. We included white collar crimes that have both direct and indirect impacts on the public. Respondents were asked to compare four different pairs of scenarios and choose which scenario they felt was more serious. Following this section, respondents were asked three questions on the perceived likelihood of a white collar crime offender being arrested and punished. We then sought to measure attitudes and behavior on reporting occurrences of white collar crime. We asked respondents if they would report white collar victimizations and if so, to whom. The next section concentrated on participation in risk behaviors. These questions were posed in order to determine if specific behaviors increased one’s likelihood of becoming victimized by fraud, and if respondents were cognizant of behaviors that may be risky.

Most of these questions centered on everyday occurrences that may unknowingly put a person at risk.

All eight victimization questions were included because they represented some of today's most commonly occurring frauds (e.g., financial planning fraud, unauthorized credit card use, Internet fraud, stolen PIN numbers). Interviewers first described the fraud and then asked the respondents if they or others in their household had been victimized in this way in the last twelve months. Following each victimization question, we asked if the crime had been reported, to whom it had been reported, and the outcome. In addition, we asked the respondents how safe they felt from future victimization.

The victimization section was followed by questions on respondents' perceptions of characteristics of the average victim of consumer fraud. We chose to use the term "consumer fraud" instead of "white collar crime" because we believed it represented crimes that the average American could more easily relate to and crimes for which the general public would have developed a clearer picture of victimization. Through the responses to these questions, we sought to compare perceived characteristics with actual characteristics derived from past victimization studies.

Results

Data was imported into SPSSx (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for statistical analysis. Although the large majority of our data presentation is descriptive in nature, we did employ nonparametric and multivariate methods as well. These included chi-square and logistic regression analyses to examine important categorical differences.

Seriousness

How serious does the general public view white collar crime? This was a central question that the survey was designed to answer. Results demonstrated that many now believe that white collar crime can be *as serious* or *more serious* than certain types of street crimes. When respondents were presented hypothetical scenarios in which white collar offenses resulting in injury were compared with street crimes resulting in injury, the responses were consistent with results of earlier surveys mentioned above. The majority of respondents found the white collar crimes causing injury to be either as

serious or more serious than the street crimes. This difference was somewhat more pronounced when the extent of criminal intent, for the white collar offenses, was more apparent (e.g., knowingly selling dangerous goods).

Unlike prior surveys on perceptions of white collar crime, present survey results showed *white collar crimes need not result in physical injury for the public to view the crimes as serious*. Results illustrate that many now believe that these types of white collar crimes can be as serious or more serious than certain street crimes. Respondents were presented with a series of hypothetical scenarios, comparing white collar crimes and street crimes. When asked to compare a “street theft” (stealing \$100 on the street) with a fraud (a contractor defrauding someone of \$100), slightly more respondents believed the fraud to be more serious (44%) than did those who found the robbery to be more serious (38%). The remaining respondents, (18%) viewed the crimes as equally serious. Changing the white collar offense to embezzlement and the offender to a bank teller resulted in over twice as many respondents indicating the white collar crime as more serious (56%) than those believing the robbery more serious (27%).

Results from additional scenarios underscored the importance that the status or authority of white collar crime plays in the public’s perception of white collar crime seriousness. Data on bribery present how perceptions of the offense seriousness can change depending on the professional position of the offender and the level of trust associated with that position. Forty five per cent believed a public official accepting a bribe is more serious than a corporation bribing a public official compared to 36% believing the reverse. In another scenario, 74% indicated that a public official accepting a bribe was more serious than a private citizen bribing a public official, with only 12% believing that the private citizen’s act was more serious. Findings on the perceived seriousness of health care fraud show that the criminal actions of health insurance companies and physicians are generally viewed as more serious than similar actions conducted by individual patients (Sixty seven per cent believed a doctor lying on a claim to collect more money was more serious than a patient filing a false insurance claim while only 12% believed the patient’s false claim to be more serious).

The element of harm/injury was also injected into the equation for some scenarios. Respondents were presented with one situation in which an individual is the victim of an armed robbery and suffers a serious injury as a result of the robbery. The

seriousness of this incident was to be compared with the seriousness of an auto maker failing to recall a vehicle with a defective part, resulting in the serious injury of one person. The results demonstrated that 6% more of the respondents thought that the robbery was the more serious offense. In a second scenario the armed robbery example remained constant but was compared to a situation in which a storeowner discovers a shipment of meat to be spoiled yet sells it to the public resulting in the serious illness of one person. Forty-two per cent of the respondents believed the white collar crime was more serious as compared to 39% believing the robbery was more serious with the rest stating the offenses were equally serious.

White Collar Crime Control and Punishment

Besides perceptions of white collar crime seriousness, the NW3C was interested in discovering the most prevalent views on the social control of white collar crime. Primary questions focused on perceptions of the likelihood of apprehension of fraudsters, how they are sanctioned if convicted, how they *should* be sanctioned and the level of resources respondents are willing to support to ensure tighter control of white collar crime.

Respondents were presented with a scenario comparing the chances of apprehension of someone stealing \$1,000 in a robbery with someone obtaining \$1,000 through a fraudulent action. Less than one quarter (22%) of the sample believed the fraudster had a greater likelihood of apprehension. An even lower percentage (16%) believed that the convicted fraudster would be punished more severely by the criminal justice system.

A comparison of these results with respondents' beliefs of who *should* be punished more severely reveals a marked difference. Only slightly more than 30% believe that the robber should be punished more severely, while higher percentages believe the fraudster deserved greater punishment (31%) and that both should be punished with equal severity (38%). While there was some variation in opinions on desired punishment, according to social views (i.e., liberal, moderate, conservative), the variation was not remarkable.

Respondents were asked if they believed the government should allocate more resources to controlling white collar crime or street crime. Overall, 35% believed more

resources should be devoted to white collar crime control, with 35% indicating that more resources should go towards street crime control. Thirty percent believed funding should be equal.

In our analysis, we explored the possibilities that these perceptions on white collar crime control resource allocations could be associated with feelings of safety, perception of crime seriousness, and social views. Results indicated that those who believed white collar crime to be more serious and those who felt unsafe from white collar crime were more likely to support increased resources for white collar crime control. The results of the relationship between perceptions on white collar crime resource allocation and social views indicated that liberals and moderates were somewhat more likely to support increased white collar crime allocations than were conservatives.

Extent of Victimization and Reporting

In addition to public perceptions of seriousness, this study also measured the extent to which households had been victimized by whiter collar crime. Previous surveys have provided some insight into the frequency of white collar crime victimization. Harris and Associates' survey found that close to one in three Americans have, at some point, been defrauded in some manner.¹⁵ Fewer than one third reported the incidents, and nearly two thirds reported not knowing to whom they should report the crimes. A study published in 1995, found that 15% of those surveyed nationally had been defrauded during a one year period prior to the survey administration. Only 15% of the victimizations were reported—the majority (62%) to law enforcement agencies.¹⁶

To determine the extent of victimization in our sample, survey respondents were asked questions on different economic crime offense areas. Respondents were queried on whether anyone in their household had been defrauded in the twelve months prior to the survey by financial planners/stockbrokers, auto repairmen, or merchants (i.e., product pricing fraud). Respondents were also asked if they or others in their household had fallen victims to fraud through Internet transactions, unauthorized use of their credit cards, use of 800 or 900 telephone numbers, or unauthorized use of a personal identification number (PIN). Finally, respondents were asked if anyone in the household had responded to an offer for a free prize or vacation that turned out not to be free or a free product sample that turned out not to be free. *Results indicated that more than one*

in three households (36%) in the study had been victimized by at least one of these offenses.

Victims were asked if they reported the crime to law enforcement agencies (i.e., police or related law enforcement, district attorney, state attorney general), consumer protection agencies (including Better Business Bureaus), or other entities (i.e., personal lawyer, credit card company, telephone company, the company or individual initiating the offense). Only 41% were found to have reported the crimes to one of the above.

An interesting aspect of the survey findings above is the wide gap between how the public thinks they *will* react if victimized by a white collar crime and how they actually *do* react. Prior to being asked questions on actual victimizations, respondents were asked if they would report a white collar offense if it was committed against them. Nearly all in the sample (95%) indicated that they would report the offense, yet less than half were found to actually have done so. Of those crimes reported, few were reported to crime control agencies (13%) or consumer protection agencies (8%). The percentage of reports made to crime control agencies was fairly evenly split between police/law enforcement agencies and district attorney/ attorney general offices. In over 8 in 10 cases (82%) in which a white collar crime was reported, the entity receiving the report was something other than a crime control or consumer protection agency (e.g., personal attorney, credit card company, telephone company, business involved in the crime). Looking at the broader picture of *all* white collar crime victimizations uncovered through the survey (reported and not reported) *over 9 in 10 (93%) never made it into the files of crime control or consumer protection agencies.*

High Risk Behaviors and Household Victimization

Those surveyed were asked about their engagement in certain behaviors that could make them susceptible to white collar crime victimization. Respondents were asked if they had ever responded to unsolicited mailings in order to become eligible for free prizes. Respondents were also asked if they: had given their PIN or ATM codes to others; neglected to perform background checks on contractors; neglected to destroy credit card solicitations; gave their credit card numbers over cordless telephones; carried five or more credit cards; or had difficulty in resisting sales pitches. One important objective of the survey was to identify any particular demographic group or groups more

likely to participate in behavior that would put them at risk for white collar crime victimization.

To facilitate the understanding of the relationship between participating in risk behaviors and demographic groups, we combined the responses of the seven questions for each participant into one new variable (RISK). The overall sample median score on RISK was 2, which translates into the average respondent having participated in 2 of the risk behaviors asked about in our survey. Results indicated that a decline in risk behavior seems to be associated with aging. Adults (ages 18–39) were somewhat more likely to engage in risk behaviors than mature adults (ages 40–59), and significantly more likely to participate in risk behaviors than seniors (ages 60+). Mature adults were found to be significantly more likely to engage in risky behaviors than seniors.¹⁷

Logistic regression analysis was performed to determine what demographic factors (i.e., age, sex, social view, education, race) would have any impact in predicting risk behavior. Females were significantly more likely than males to engage in risk behavior; however, age seems to be the strongest predictor of risk behavior, eclipsing all other demographic measures. In effect, younger age groups and females proved to be the strongest predictors of risk of fraud victimization.¹⁸

Relationships Between Perceptions of Seriousness, Punishment Severity and Victimization

Some of the most useful results that emerged from the survey were those which help us understand factors related to perceptions of punishment severity and white collar crime. Although our measure of punishment is limited (‘who should be punished more severely, a person who commits robbery and steal \$1000 or someone who commits fraud and steals \$1000’), the data points to trends in public opinion that open the door to further analyses on these issues. Some of the more pertinent findings are presented below. (Note: Strength of association scores, such as gamma, are in parenthesis. All associations presented are significant at the .05 level or less).

Do perceptions of the seriousness of white-collar crime correspond with perceptions of the severity of white collar crime punishment? As Table 1 illustrates, there is a moderate-strength, positive relationship (.416) between those who believe white-collar crime to be a more serious problem than ‘traditional’ crime and the tendency to

feel the fraudster should be punished more severely than the robber. This affirms the notion in the minds of many individuals that the ‘punishment should fit the crime’.

In addition to perceptions of seriousness, the results indicate that there was no statistically significant relationship between who the respondent felt was more likely to be caught, and who should receive more punishment. This may be due in part to the fact that although the public may have a higher level of appreciation for the seriousness of white-collar offenses than in the past, they also acknowledge that these offenders are more difficult to pursue on a number of different levels. As such, regardless of feelings of punishment, most respondents felt a robber would be more likely to be apprehended by authorities. However, as shown in Table 1, there was a weak positive relationship (.203) between who will likely receive a more severe punishment from the courts and who should receive a more severe punishment. Simply put, perceptions of outcome go hand-in-hand with what people want to happen.

Another interesting area to examine is whether prior household white collar crime victimization in general may affect perceptions of punishment severity for white collar crime offenders. The argument would be those who have experienced victimization, even if not directly, would be knowledgeable of the losses the victim takes, and thus be likely to punish a white collar offender more severely than a ‘traditional’ offender. The relationship between victimization and perceptions of punishment was measured in two ways. First, we wanted to see if perceptions of punishment were correlated with household victimization in the last twelve months of at least one of the eight fraud offenses listed in the survey. Second, we were interested in if punishment severity was more strongly related to specific types of fraud victimization. The reasoning behind the latter analysis is that certain types of victimizations might be more relevant to the punishment example in our survey (e.g. since the question asks about a fraudster who steals \$100, perhaps only victimizations involving direct cash loss, such as inappropriate CC or bank card use, would be relevant).

The results indicate that being victimized by a consumer fraud in general is not related in any way to perceptions of punishment severity. However, when different types of white collar victimization were analyzed, there was a moderate-strength, positive relationship (.379) in those instances where credit card or bank account numbers were taken and the individual’s tendency to report that a fraudster should receive a more severe

punishment than a robber should. One reason for this may be that the average credit or bankcard victimization has a more far-reaching financial impact than do other types of victimization, such as falling prey to a repair or sweepstakes fraud.

With regard to participation in 'risky' behavior that might make one more likely to become the victim of a white-collar offense (sharing bank card information for example), there is a weak, negative relationship (-.103) between those with higher levels of risky behavior and the likelihood to agree that a fraudster should receive a more severe punishment than a robber. The reasoning for this may be that those who engage in these behaviors do not see white collar crime as being particularly problematic, and thus would be less likely to sanction a white collar offender more severely than a 'street' offender.

Related to participation in 'risky' behavior is how safe respondents feel from being victimized by various types of consumer fraud in the future. The results indicate a weak, negative relationship (-.099) between feelings of safety and the perceptions that a white collar offender should be punished more severely than a robber. As indicated above, those who feel less threatened by these types of crimes are also more prone to not view white collar crime as serious an issue, and thus not feel the white collar offender should be punished as severely as a traditional offender.

One of the surprising findings in the survey was that the majority of demographic factors, such as race, educational level, marital status, or social ideology, do not influence an individual's perceptions of punishment severity for white collar crime offenders. This challenges the notion that we can draw conclusions about the perceptions of white-collar crime from an individual's background alone. In addition, there was no relationship between the experience of having sat on a jury dealing with a fraud case and perceptions of punishment severity. However, there was a weak, negative relationship between income and perceptions of punishment (-.214) that indicates those with higher levels of income feel the white collar offender should not be as severely sanctioned as the 'street' offender, raising the question of whether there is some degree of identification with the offenders.

Table 1: Testing the Strength of Association Between WCC Punishment Severity and Key Variables

Variable	Gamma*	Significance
WCC seriousness	.416	.000***
The WCC offender is more likely to be caught	.011	.844
The WCC offender is more likely to receive a severe punishment	.203	.002***
Victimization: Fraud in general	-.006	.927
Victimization: Had credit card or bank account numbers taken	.379	.011**
Level of risk behavior	-.103	.004***
Feelings of safety from being victimized by WCC	-.099	.014**
Race	.091	.667
Educational Level	-.045	.227
Marital Status	.108	.359
Social Ideology	.052	.336
Sat on a trial jury dealing with a fraud case	.211	.166
Income	-.214	.002***

* In those instances where the variable was ordinal, the gamma tests were run. In those instances where the variable was nominal (such as race) both a Phi and a Cramers V test were performed

** $p < .05$

*** $p < .01$

Summary

The results of The National Public Survey on White Collar Crime supply us with insights into the general public's experience with white collar crime, how serious the crimes are perceived to be and thoughts on white collar crime control. A number of findings proved to be confirmations of results of similar surveys conducted over 20 years ago, (e.g., seriousness relative to "street" thefts, seriousness level enhancement according to perceived status of offender) while others were unexpected (e.g., non-injury white

collar crime seriousness perceptions relative to perceptions of white collar crimes resulting in injury). It is clear that the general public views white collar crime to be a serious problem, deserving close attention by the criminal justice system. Although not a bona fide sentencing study, the national survey does furnish information that can serve as a helpful reference to guideline architects as they craft structures for “just” sentences. Those in the field of sentencing research have advocated the accounting of public perceptions, if possible, in the development of sentencing guidelines.¹⁹ How vigorously developers should strive to link public perception with newly fashioned guidelines, though, is open to question. Berk and Rossi stress that public views are not and should not be the major criterion in constructing a sentencing system. The public’s views are relevant but not determinative. Still, scholars like Berk and Rossi agree that there should be some concordance between public opinion and sentencing rules; a positive correlation between what the public believes to be appropriate sentences for the crimes in question and the schedules of punishments.²⁰ A heightened awareness of how the public experiences the crimes, their perceptions and the factors that shape those perceptions can bring us closer to a sentencing system that achieves such a correlation.

Upon assessing survey results, we find that the American public is becoming well acquainted with white collar crime (as its victims) and tends to view the commission of such crime with an increasingly jaundiced eye. We found that over 1 out of 3 households in the U.S. had been victimized by white collar crime in a one-year time period. This level of victimization is high when compared to earlier studies on white collar crime victimization, even after taking into account definitional differences of victimization. Victims were found to rarely report these offenses to appropriate control agencies. Less than 1 in 10 victimizations described by survey respondents ever made it to the files of law enforcement or consumer protection agencies. There is some evidence that victims are less inclined to report the offenses if the victim has played a more active role in enabling the offender to successfully commit the criminal act (e.g., ‘free prize’ frauds). Qualitative data on reasons for non-reporting revealed the most prominent as being uncertainty of the identification of the appropriate agency to receive the reports and a belief that control authorities would underplay the seriousness of the offenses.

The survey’s findings on perceptions of white collar crime seriousness and control offer some interesting food for thought. Like earlier studies, the public expressed

a deep concern with white collar crime, further debunking the myth of public ambivalence in this area. Past studies on perceptions of white collar crime seriousness, however, found a marked difference in the high degree of seriousness attached to white collar crimes resulting in physical harm and the lower degree of seriousness associated with white collar crimes not resulting in such harm. Our findings suggest that there may now be less of a difference in perceptions of seriousness between these two categories. The level of moral condemnation of non-violent white collar crimes was higher than expected, particularly when the crimes involve both monetary loss and the corruption of public trust. Results on sanctioning and financial support of control programs demonstrate that the public is far from being apprehensive about advocating a 'get tough' approach with white collar offenders. Within this context, the single finding on crime control perceptions that stands out is the discovery of a serious confidence gap between public demands for 'just desserts' for white collar offenders and the perception of the criminal justice system's ability, or willingness, to administer adequate punishment.

Although the data sheds some light on the factors that influence perceptions of seriousness and punishment, additional questions are raised that require further analysis. Since perceptions of punishment severity for white collar criminals are not rooted in past experience with victimization or standard demographic variables, from where are people drawing their beliefs? Certainly media efforts to spotlight the growing problems of economic and high technology crimes have contributed to a societal awareness of the problems. By focusing attention on late 1990s cases of malicious, hacker-driven computer attacks against corporations, as opposed to the more mundane but equally serious instances of consumer fraud, the media has effectively shown that members in all strata of society can fall victim to white collar crime. With the media's more recent comprehensive coverage of corporate misconduct at corporations like Enron, Worldcom, Adelphia and Imclone Systems and the widespread societal impact of the offenses, we can reasonably expect that public sentiment against white collar crimes committed by large corporations will be heightened and remain so for some time.

Commitments to white collar crime control training and enforcement at the local, state, and federal levels of the criminal justice system send a message to the public that these types of offenses will not be tolerated. However, awareness is still hindered by the disparity in sentencing for white collar and 'street' offenders. In addition to the deterrent

effects of punishment, sanctions often act as a red flag to identify those crimes that are most egregious to society. While tougher drug laws went hand-in-hand with public perceptions of drug seriousness during the 1980s, official response to the current white collar crime epidemic has not kept pace with an increased demand for action by citizens. Increasing the severity of punishment might not only increase public awareness, but could result in the increased reporting of such crimes, as individuals look to judicial outcomes as viable solutions to their victimization.

The survey information should be of great value to those responsible for preventing and controlling white collar crime. From one perspective, the results should prove encouraging to professionals working in the fields of white collar investigation and prosecution. The public's sensitivity to the threat of white collar crime and the call for strict sanctioning of offenders is strong empirical evidence for the support crime control professionals can expect to receive for effective programs. Such evidence can be potent ammunition to help sustain organizational and financial support for existing white collar crime control programs and for the enhancement of such programs in the future as offenders' methods become more sophisticated. The results should also send a clear message that the hardening of public sentiment on the punishment of white collar criminals may require more stringent judicial scrutiny of those convicted of white collar offenses.

NOTES



¹ S. Traub, "Battling Employee Crime: A Review of Corporate Strategies and Programs," *Crime and Delinquency* 42 (1996): 244-246. U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the Judiciary. "white-Collar Crime," 99th Congress, 2nd Session, Part 1, February 27, 1986. Traub estimates the cost of employee theft alone at \$90 billion per year, while Congress placed the financial impact of white collar crime at \$250 billion annually during the latter half of the 1980's.

² Gallup Poll, "Computers and the Internet," February 20-21, 2000.

³ D. Rebovich and J. Lane, *The National Public Survey on White Collar Crime*. Morgantown, WV: National White Collar Crime Center, 2000.

⁴ G. Green, *Occupational Crime*, 2nd Edition. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers. 1997

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- ⁸ President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice. *Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968.
- ⁹ P.N. Grabowsky, J.B. Braithwaite and P.R. Wilson. *The Myth of Community Tolerance Toward White-Collar Crime*. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 20 (1987): 33-44.
- ¹⁰ P.H. Rossi, E. Waite, C.E. Bose, and R.E. Berk. *The Seriousness of Crime: Normative Structure and Individual Differences*. *American Sociological Review*, 39 (1974): 224-237.
- ¹¹ F.T. Cullen, B.G. Link and C.W. Polanzi. *The Seriousness of Crime Revisited: Have Attitudes Toward White-Collar Crime Changed?* *Criminology*, 20 (1982): 83-102.
- ¹² M.E. Wolfgang, R.M. Figlio, P.E. Tracy and S.I. Singer. *The National Survey of Crime Severity*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985.
- ¹³ The sample was drawn from a universe of all persons living in households with a telephone in the U.S. persons who were not U.S. citizens, those under the age of 18, persons in custodial institutions or other group quarters, and persons living in households without telephones were ineligible and excluded from the sampling universe.
- ¹⁴ Selection tables were designed using a combination of sex, age and number of household members as factors for respondent selection. Eight types of selection tables were randomly assigned to interviewers to ensure even use across the sample.
- ¹⁵ R. Bass and L. Hoeffler. *Telephone Based Fraud: A Survey of the American Public*. New York: Louis Harris and Associates Inc., 1992.
- ¹⁶ R. Titus, F. Heinzelmann and J. M. Boyle. *Victimization of Persons by Fraud*. *Crime and Delinquency*, 41 (1995): 54-72.
- ¹⁷ Statistical analyses compared adults with mature adults and seniors ($\phi = .07$, $p < .10$ and $\phi = .19$, $p < .001$, respectively). Mature adults participated in significantly more risk behaviors than did the seniors ($\phi = .13$, $p < .05$).
- ¹⁸ Logistic regression models predicting risk behavior examined respondents' age, race, schooling, sex, and social views (income was not included because it was measured on household level, not respondent).

*Logistic Regression Predicting Risk Behavior
From Demographic Variables (n=543)*

Variable	β	Wald χ^2	Odds
Age	.4413	15.04**	1.55
Sex	-.4625	7.62*	.63 (1.59)
Social View	.1194	1.00	1.13
Education	.1279	.90	1.14
Race	.0581	.08	1.06
* p<.01			
** p<.0001			

¹⁹ P. Rossi and R. Berk. Public Opinion on Sentencing Federal Crimes. Washington DC: US Sentencing Commission, 1985.

²⁰ Berk and Rossi, op. cit.

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