

Public perceptions of white-collar crime and punishment

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Abstract

Although financial losses from white-collar crime continue to exceed those of street crime, the criminal justice system has traditionally focused on the latter. Past research suggested that citizens are more likely to support punitive sanctions for street offenders than white-collar offenders. Recent corporate scandals have increased public awareness of white-collar crime, but whether public attitudes have been altered remains to be determined. Using a 2005 national sample of 402 telephone survey participants, the current study examined citizen perceptions of white-collar and street crime, as well as attitudes regarding apprehension and punishment. This research extended prior studies by also considering the influence of sociodemographic characteristics as well as perceptions of white-collar crime and punishment on the public's support for increasing resource allocation. Implications for future research and development of more effective white-collar crime control policy are discussed.

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Introduction

Recent statistics indicate that offenses collectively referred to as “white-collar crime” result in annual losses to victims in excess of \$250 billion, compared to estimates of \$17.6 billion for losses accrued due to personal and household crimes (Rosoff, Pontell, & Tillman, 2004, p. 27). Although these differences have persisted over several decades, the focus of criminal justice authorities and many criminologists has been on explaining, preventing, and responding to personal and household crimes. Recent evidence indicates that white-collar crime remains a “low priority” compared to violent crime and threats to national security, such as terrorism (United States Department of Justice, 2005).

Critics have noted that public perception and perceived risk of violent victimization in the streets has disproportionately fueled the attention of researchers and criminal justice agencies (Cullen, Clark, Mathers, & Cullen, 1983; Cullen, Link, & Polanzi, 1982; Friedrichs, 2007; Holtfreter, 2005; Sutherland, 1940; Vaughan, 1980). Historically, a commonly held view is that the American public perceives white-collar crime to be relatively harmless compared to violent crime. One consequence associated with

citizen perceived risk of victimization is punitive attitudes and support for harsher sanctions (Ouimet & Coyle, 1991; Sims, 2003; Sprott & Doob, 1997). Although there has been a considerable amount of research on the public's attitudes toward violent crime, little is known about current American perceptions of white-collar crime. Recent, well-publicized scandals in major corporations, such as Enron and WorldCom, have raised public awareness of the economic, societal, and personal harm resulting from “crime in the suites” (Holtfreter, Van Slyke, & Blomberg, 2005; Krantz, 2003; O'Donnell & Willing, 2003). A recent public opinion poll found that over 75 percent of those surveyed believed ex-WorldCom CEO Bernard Ebbers' twenty-five year sentence for his role in this extensive corporate fraud was fair or not harsh enough (Wall Street Journal Opinion Poll, 2005). What remains to be determined is whether public perception of white-collar crime has changed, and the extent to which this perception translates into support for harsher punishments. Prior research questioned whether concordance between public opinion and punishment outcomes is indeed desirable (Rossi & Berk, 1985), and reported that it was in fact generally the case (Rossi & Berk, 1997). Resolving that larger, philosophical debate was beyond the scope of the present research. Recent public opinion research has provided insight into white-collar crime policy at the state level (Holtfreter, Reisig, & Blomberg, 2006). The understanding of current public opinion at the national level, particularly whether populous views of crime and punishment translate into support for

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governmental resource allocation, represents an important, albeit understudied area of research that can assist policymakers.

Using data from a 2005 national telephone survey of 402 adults, this study examined public perception regarding white-collar and street crime. The analyses addressed the following questions: (1) What is the extent of perceived victimization risk for white-collar and violent crime? (2) Where does public opinion lie with regard to the punishment of white-collar and street offenders, and is there a difference between perceived sanctions and normative sanctions? (3) Should the federal government devote equal or additional resources toward control and prevention of white-collar crime? In doing so, the current study moved beyond basic identification of crime and punishment correlates to also consider the influence of public opinion on governmental resource allocation as a specific aspect of punishment policy.

First, this article provides an overview of the federal government's recent and past expenditures for white-collar and violent crime. The article continues with a review of the extant public opinion literature on white-collar crime, and then proceeds to a description of the data and methodology, followed by presentation and interpretation of the univariate, bivariate, and multivariate results. In conclusion, the implications of the findings are discussed in light of previous research and with regard to current punishment and crime control policy.

Federal crime control expenditures

Prior research documented a common sentiment that federal expenditures for white-collar crime are, at best, insufficient, especially in light of public opinion on white-collar crime seriousness (Carlson & Williams, 1993; Cullen et al., 1982; Grabowsky, Braithwaite, & Wilson, 1987; Grindstaff, 1974; Levi, 1987; Miller, Rossi, & Simpson, 1991; Newman, 1957; Rebovich & Jiandani, 2000; Rebovich & Kane, 2002; Retting & Pasamanick, 1959; Rossi, Simpson, & Miller, 1985; Walker, 1978). Additionally, the rate of federal white-collar crime prosecutions has declined considerably since the Clinton administration, which some have argued suggests that the current Bush administration has fallen short in curbing corporate abuses (McClean & Elkind, 2003; Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, 2006).

Limited data on precise federal budget allocations were available, which made it difficult to compare white-collar crime resource allocation to street crime (Center for Corporate Policy, 2005; Rebovich & Jiandani, 2000). For example, the Department of Justice fiscal year 2006 budget request did not specifically mention "white-collar crime" (United States Department of Justice, 2005). Justice Department priorities for 2006 were ranked as follows: prevent terrorism and promote the nation's security; enforce federal laws and represent the rights and interests of the American people; assist state, local, and tribal efforts to prevent or reduce crime and violence related to drugs, terrorism, DNA technology, and homeland security; and ensure the fair and efficient operation of the federal justice system (United States Department of Justice, 2005). The White House 2006 federal budget request to Congress included the

prosecution of corporate fraud (and other criminal and civil legal activities) as one of its five major programs (United States Department of Justice, 2005). This request proposed an allocation of \$1.6 million for the United States Attorney, but failed to stipulate which crimes these resources should be directed toward (Center for Corporate Policy, 2005).

The lack of resources to investigate and prosecute white-collar crime has also been a concern of practitioners at the state and federal levels (Calavita, Pontell, & Tillman, 1997). Levi (1987) argued that this lack of resources results from four factors: the amount of time it takes to clear a fraud case, the historical tendency for police to fight street crime, perceived lack of public concern over white-collar crime, and the lack of strong public objections to the relative dearth of resources allotted to white-collar crime. The relevance of the latter two factors is explored in more detail below.

Public opinion research on white-collar crime

Although a significant amount of literature has addressed public perceptions of street crimes, studies examining public views of white-collar crime have been relatively scant. One focus has been on whether perceived risk of victimization influences public attitudes (Cavendar & Mulcahy, 1998; Cullen et al., 1982; Rebovich & Kane, 2002). There is sufficient documentation that perceived risk influences public opinion (Rebovich & Kane, 2002). Recent studies found that general perceived victimization risk (e.g., not specific to white-collar offenses) significantly increases punitive attitudes. For example, fear of victimization was a strong predictor of punitive orientations in American and foreign samples (Costello, Chiricos, Burianek, Gertz, & Maier-Katkin, 2002). This study also demonstrated that perceived risk of victimization consistently predicted public support for more punitive sanctions.

Research focused more precisely on white-collar crime compared public views to street crime (Rebovich & Jiandani, 2000; Rebovich & Kane, 2002). Contrary to earlier studies, more recent research has suggested that Americans not only perceive white-collar crime to be serious, but in some cases, even more serious than street crime (Rebovich & Kane, 2002). The public also desires equally harsh punishments for white-collar and street offenders, equal amounts of the crime control budget to be devoted to both types of crime, but still expects common offenders to be sentenced more harshly. The same national study demonstrated that feelings of safety from white-collar crime victimization were a significant predictor of punishment severity (Rebovich & Kane, 2002). Subsequent outcomes of these views, particularly those addressing implications for crime control policy (e.g., support for increased governmental resource allocation) have not been considered at the national level.

In contrast, prior research has not revealed a significant influence of perceived victimization risk on punitive attitudes, or that the effect varied by sample demographic characteristics. For example, one study (Cullen, Clark, Cullen, & Mathers, 1985) found no effect of perceived victimization risk on support for punitive responses to offenders. Similarly, additional

research found that a fear of crime measure was only significant under certain circumstances (Cohn, Barkan, & Halteman, 1991). Another study comparing public opinion on different types of crime revealed greater perceived risk of white-collar crime victimization than street crime, natural hazard, and nuisance crime victimization (Meier & Short, 1985). On the other hand, offenses that caused greater personal injury or property damage were perceived to be the most serious.

In sum, there appears to be moderately strong consensus among research findings that perceived victimization risk is an important determinant of punitive public attitudes toward crime and criminals. There is clearly some evidence that the influence of perceived victimization risk on both punitive attitudes and support for increased governmental resource allocation may also vary by sample characteristics.

Who supports punishment for white-collar offenders?

A large body of research has shown that punishment orientations vary by demographic and background characteristics. The diverse set of characteristics considered in past studies included gender, race, age, education, income, marital status, political ideology, and religion. Many of these variables have been linked to crime seriousness ratings and judgments of appropriate sentences, but the strength and direction of the relationships has varied.

For example, some studies had found that men were more likely to support punitive sanctions (Cullen, Clark, & Wozniak, 1985; Keil & Vito, 1991), while others concluded that women were more punitive (Cohn et al., 1991; Miller et al., 1991; Rossi, Waite, Bose, & Berk, 1974), and still others found no gender effect (Costello et al., 2002; Rebovich & Jiandani, 2000; Rebovich & Kane, 2002). Some research has suggested that this relationship depends on the type of crime (Blumstein & Cohen, 1980; Grabowsky et al., 1987; Herzog, 2003; O'Connell & Whelan, 1996; Walker, 1978), and other studies identified interactive effects (Blumstein & Cohen, 1980; Miethe, 1984; Miller, Rossi, & Simpson, 1986; Walker, 1978).

The current study's review of research examining the effect of perceived victimization risk on punitive orientations identified age, gender, race, education, income, political ideology, religion, community factors, and marital status may be important factors in understanding the exact nature of the association. With respect to age, the bulk of the evidence suggested that age is positively and significantly related to both perceived victimization risk and punitive orientations (Cohn et al., 1991; Costello et al., 2002; Keil & Vito, 1991; Sprott & Doob, 1997). One study also found that, among those with more education, younger age was significantly associated with punitive orientations among Americans (Costello et al., 2002). In addition, research demonstrated that older Blacks were significantly more likely to support punitive measures (Cohn et al., 1991). The findings were also somewhat mixed for gender, race, and income, with a slight majority of studies concluding that the attitudes of White males tend to be more punitive (Cohn et al., 1991; Cullen, Clark, Cullen, et al., 1985; Keil & Vito, 1991; Rossi et al., 1985). The studies have been

equally divided with respect to income, finding that higher income respondents are generally more supportive of punishment (Keil & Vito, 1991), while those with lower incomes judge white-collar crime more harshly (Rebovich & Jiandani, 2000; Rebovich & Kane, 2002). There is less disagreement regarding the remaining variables. For example, married conservatives from smaller communities with less religious involvement appear to hold more punitive views toward crime (Costello et al., 2002).

The contradictory findings revealed in the literature underscores the need for further exploratory research. With few exceptions, most existing public opinion research on white-collar crime and punishment orientation has suffered from one of two weaknesses: it was limited to a regional sample, or it failed to adequately address the policy implications stemming from public opinion. Very little research has specifically focused on the relationship between perceived victimization risk and attitudes within the context of white-collar crime. As a result, prior findings have somewhat limited generalizability to the United States population as a whole. Given the current policy context and widespread media coverage of white-collar crime scandals, it is important to gauge public opinion at the national level.

This study addressed gaps in the research literature by examining Americans' perceived risks of white-collar and violent crime victimization, as well as their attitudes toward punishment, in a national sample. In addition, citizens' views regarding current justice system handling of white-collar offenders, and whether public opinion coincided with normative views, were examined. Respondents were also queried about their support for increasing governmental resources to combat white-collar crime. This is an important research extension, given that policymakers often justify increasing expenditures based on public opinion. By exploring these issues, this study contributed to the literature on punishment perceptions, and also provides direction for policymakers in the development of crime control strategies for white-collar offenders.

Methods

Survey and sample characteristics

Data for this study came from a national telephone study. The survey instrument was developed based on prior literature.¹ The first portion of the survey focused on respondents' perceptions of the criminal justice system's *actual* response to white-collar and street crime, their normative attitudes toward punishment, and support for governmental resource allocation. The second portion of the survey solicited information on respondents' demographics. Over a two-month span beginning in March of 2005, 402 randomly selected households nationwide were interviewed by trained volunteers using donated space at a commercial surveying company. Respondents were limited to adults over the age of eighteen. Only one member of each household was interviewed. Typically, it was the first person who answered the phone; if a juvenile answered, the caller asked for an adult to continue to interview. The Random Digit Dialing (RDD) sample was drawn using a two-stage

modified Mitofsky-Waksberg method.² A five-callback rule was utilized before replacement. The response rate was 57 percent, with 98 percent of those beginning the survey completing it. Based on recent research, this response rate was above average (Kaplowitz, Haddock, & Levine, 2004). The completion rate for those beginning the survey was substantially higher than the 60 percent average for national telephone interviews (Weisberg, Krosnick, & Bowen, 1996).

The racial distribution of the sample was 82.6 percent Caucasian, 8.2 percent African-American, 4.7 percent Hispanic, 3.2 percent other race, .7 percent Asian, and .5 percent Native American. For this analysis, race was dichotomized (i.e., 0 = non-minority and 1 = minority).³ The average age of respondents was approximately forty-eight, with ages ranging from eighteen to ninety-two. The gender distribution was 54 percent female and 46 percent male. Compared to the 2000 United States census, this sample slightly overrepresented females and the elderly, while slightly underrepresenting minorities.⁴ This slight response bias was not unusual for telephone survey research (Lavarkas, 1987; Weisberg et al., 1996).

Variables

Dependent variables

Variation in two sets of outcomes was examined: punishment orientation for white-collar and street crime, and support for governmental resource allocation. Following previous research, the current study employed offense-based definitions of white-collar crime and street crime.⁵ To measure perceptions of criminal justice system practices regarding white-collar and street offenders, two items were used. Respondents were asked “Who do you think is more likely to be caught by the authorities, someone who commits a street crime like robbery and steals \$1,000, or someone who commits a white-collar crime like fraud and steals \$1,000?”⁶ In reference to the aforementioned hypothetical scenario, respondents were then asked about their perceptions of *apprehension*, “If they are both caught and convicted, who do you think *will* likely receive the more severe punishment, the person who commits the fraud, the person who commits the robbery, or an equal likelihood of apprehension?” In comparison, *normative perceptions* were examined by asking: “Who do you think *should* be punished more severely, the person who commits the robbery, the person who commits the fraud, or they should receive equal punishment?” The final dependent variable, support for resource allocation, was measured with the following question: “Do you believe the government should devote more resources to combating street crimes like robbery, white-collar crimes like fraud, or an equal amount of resources for white-collar and street crimes?” For all dependent variables, the responses “white-collar offender” and “equal” were combined for a comparison of respondents who felt white-collar crime was equally or more serious than street crime.

Independent variables

Punitive orientation and support for enforcement resource allocation were measured across a set of eight sociodemo-

graphic variables, and across two supplementary variables: perceived risk of victimization for white-collar crime and street crime. For ease of comparison, the initial analyses present all of the independent variables as dichotomies. The majority of the comparisons are on demographic characteristics regularly identified in prior research on public perceptions of white-collar and street crime (e.g., see Rebovich & Kane, 2002). Attitudes and support levels were compared for high and low perceived victimization by white-collar crime, high and low perceived victimization by street crime, men and women, minorities and non-minorities, higher and lower income earners (more than \$50,000 = higher), college graduates and non-graduates, marital status (1 = married), the elderly (age sixty and above) and non-elderly, urban and rural dwellers, homeowners and renters, the religious and nonreligious, and political ideology (1 = moderate or conservative).

Additionally, two supplementary variables were included. *Perceived risk of white-collar crime victimization* was assessed with one item asking respondents to rate on a four-item scale (4 = very unsafe and 1 = very safe) how safe they felt from being victimized by “a white-collar crime like fraud.” *Perceived risk of violent crime victimization* was assessed with the same item, referring instead to victimization by “a violent crime like robbery.” For both forms of perceived victimization risk, responses of “very safe and somewhat safe” were combined into “low risk,” and “somewhat unsafe and very unsafe” were summed to create the category “high risk.” Variable coding and distributions for all of the variables of interest are provided in Table 1.

Analysis and results

As Table 1 shows, the majority of participants (62.9 percent) felt that violent offenders were more likely to be apprehended and more likely to receive harsher punishment (66.4 percent). Additionally, perceptions of normative justice were similar to perceptions of *actual* justice, in that 65.4 percent of the sample felt violent offenders *should* receive harsher punishments. In terms of support for enforcement resources, public opinion did not necessarily reflect perceptions of actual and normative justice. Nearly two-thirds of the sample (60.9 percent) felt that the federal government should devote equal or more resources to enforcing and preventing white-collar crime. As Table 2 demonstrates, perceptions varied across categories of the independent variables.

Bivariate results

The second step in the analysis began by examining the bivariate associations between the variables used in the multivariate analyses. In a series of simple cross-tabulations, chi-square tests were used to identify whether differences existed between each independent variable grouping in the distribution of the dependent variables. The chi-square test allowed for assessment differences in the observed and expected frequency distributions. Some interesting patterns emerged, with only those findings achieving statistical significance reported in Table 2.

Female respondents were significantly more likely to perceive white-collar offenders as having an equal or greater chance of being caught ($\chi^2 = 7.91$; 1 *df*), as well as receiving harsher punishment if caught and convicted ($\chi^2 = 4.60$; 1 *df*). It should be noted that the magnitude of these associations was fairly weak ($\Phi = .14$ and $\Phi = .11$, respectively). There were no gender differences in perceptions of normative sanctions. Regarding enforcement resources, females were significantly less likely to support equal or greater allocation of funding for white-collar crime ($\chi^2 = 6.32$; 1 *df*), but the strength of this relationship was also weak ($\Phi = -.14$).

The results revealed similar trends in the perceptions of respondents with household incomes over \$50,000 and those with college degrees. Those with incomes over \$50,000 were significantly less likely to perceive white-collar offenders getting caught or getting punished. The direction of these relationships ran parallel for college-educated respondents. A significantly lower percentage of this group expressed the view that white-collar offenders would get caught or punished. There were no significant differences by income or education in perceptions of normative sanctions or in support for enforcement resources. Put differently, those with higher incomes and those with college degrees believed that the criminal justice system falls short in apprehending and sanctioning white-collar offenders.

Table 1
Variable coding and descriptive statistics (N = 402)

Variable	Categories	Values	n	%
<i>Dependent</i>				
Likelihood of apprehension	White-collar offender	1	105	26.1
	Violent offender or equal	0	297	73.9
Perceived sanctions	White-collar offender	1	90	22.4
	Violent offender or equal	0	312	77.6
Normative sanctions	White-collar offender	1	64	15.9
	Violent offender or equal	0	338	84.1
Enforcement resources	Equal or white-collar crime	1	245	60.9
	Violent crime	0	157	39.1
<i>Independent</i>				
Race	White	1	332	82.6
	Non-White	0	70	17.4
Gender	Female	1	217	54.0
	Male	0	185	46.0
Household income	≥ \$50,000	1	205	51.0
	≤ \$49,000	0	197	49.0
Education	College degree	1	161	40.0
	Non-college degree	0	241	60.0
Political ideology	Moderate or conservative	1	307	76.4
	Liberal	0	95	23.6
Age	≥ 60 years	1	99	24.6
	≤ 59 years	0	303	75.4
Marital status	Married	1	221	55.0
	Other	0	181	45.0
Region	Urban	1	158	39.3
	Rural	0	244	60.7
Housing	Own	1	158	39.3
	Rent	0	244	60.7
White-collar risk	High	1	155	38.0
	Low	0	247	61.4
Violent risk	High	1	84	20.9
	Low	0	318	79.1

Significant differences in perceptions between groups were uncovered for several remaining sociodemographic and supplementary variables. Those who described themselves as moderate or conservative politically were significantly more likely than their liberal counterparts to feel that white-collar offenders had an equal or greater chance of punishment ($\chi^2 = 3.86$; 1 *df*), but the strength of this relationship was somewhat weak ($\Phi = .09$). Additionally, respondents who lived in urban areas were significantly less likely to express normative views regarding sanctioning of white-collar offenders ($\chi^2 = 5.21$; 1 *df*), and the strength of the association between these variables was weak ($\Phi = .11$). Compared to renters, a significantly greater percentage of homeowners felt white-collar offenders should be sanctioned equally to or harsher than violent offenders ($\chi^2 = 7.27$; 1 *df*), and the strength of this relationship was weak ($\Phi = .13$). The nonsignificant findings for the sociodemographic categories (not shown) were also of interest. For example, chi-square tests suggested that Whites and minorities had similar opinions on all of the dependent variables, a finding in contrast to earlier research suggesting that minorities were more likely to perceive unjust treatment (e.g., see Hagan & Albonetti, 1982). Additionally, no significant between-group differences in public opinion by age group, marital status, or religion were found.

Given the research documenting the relationship between perceived risk of victimization and attitudes, respondents' perceptions based on categories of perceived victimization risk for white-collar and violent crime were also compared. Regarding violent crime, the authors found that a significantly lower percentage of respondents in the high-risk group perceived white-collar offenders would be caught ($\chi^2 = 5.07$; 1 *df*) or punished ($\chi^2 = 7.88$; 1 *df*). Consistent with past research, the high-risk violent group overwhelmingly perceived the criminal justice system as being tougher on violent crime. Although previous literature documents a relationship between global risk of victimization, and violent crime specifically, this pattern was not found for white-collar crime. It should be noted that the statistical procedures used in the above analysis did not account for the potential confounding effects of respondents' demographic characteristics. A more robust, multivariate statistical procedure is needed to confirm the findings observed thus far.

Logistic regression equations

To determine whether the bivariate associations reported above persisted while controlling for additional variables, logistic regression was selected as the primary modeling technique (see Hosmer & Lemsho, 1989). This method built upon the chi-square analysis by including additional prediction variables in the predictive equation, and also by controlling for all of the remaining variables in the model. This statistical procedure permitted inclusion of additional variables to predict outcome, and determined the relative importance of each factor while considering the effects of others.⁷ To address the possible threat of multicollinearity among the independent variables, several collinearity diagnostic tests were performed, and the results confirmed there were no problems.⁸ Table 3 presents

Table 2
Bivariate relationships

	Likelihood of apprehension		Perceived sanctions		Normative sanctions		Enforcement resources	
	Yes	Otherwise	Yes	Otherwise	Yes	Otherwise	Yes	Otherwise
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<i>Gender</i>								
Female	23.4	30.6	20.6	33.3	37.1	16.9	29.9	24.1
Male	13.7	32.3	12.9	33.2	28.4	17.6	31.1	14.9
$\chi^2 =$		7.91**		4.60*		2.19		6.32**
<i>Household income</i>								
≥\$50,000	14.7	34.3	11.4	37.6	31.8	17.2	30.8	18.2
≤\$49,000	22.4	28.6	22.1	28.9	33.6	17.4	20.9	30.1
$\chi^2 =$		8.39**		18.13**		0.03		0.65
<i>Education</i>								
College degree	11.9	28.2	10.4	29.6	26.4	13.7	24.9	15.2
Non-college degree	25.1	34.8	23.2	36.8	39.1	20.8	36.0	23.9
$\chi^2 =$		5.43**		6.76**		0.02		0.15
<i>Political ideology</i>								
Conservative	28.6	47.8	27.6	48.7	49.5	26.9	44.7	31.6
Liberal	8.5	15.1	6.0	17.7	15.9	7.7	16.2	7.5
$\chi^2 =$		0.09		3.86*		0.21		2.92
<i>Region</i>								
Urban	15.7	23.6	12.7	26.6	28.4	10.9	23.9	15.4
Rural	21.4	39.3	20.9	39.8	37.1	23.6	37.1	23.6
$\chi^2 =$		0.88		0.20		5.21*		0.01
<i>Housing</i>								
Own	26.9	50.0	26.6	50.2	53.0	23.9	48.0	28.9
Rent	10.2	12.9	7.0	16.2	12.4	10.7	12.9	10.2
$\chi^2 =$		2.56		0.66		7.27**		1.29
<i>Violent risk</i>								
High	10.0	10.9	9.7	11.2	14.4	6.5	11.9	9.0
Low	27.1	52.0	23.9	55.2	51.0	28.1	49.0	30.1
$\chi^2 =$		5.07*		7.88**		0.62		0.65

* $p \leq .05$.** $p \leq .01$.

four model specifications. Models 1 through 4 present the unstandardized logistic regression coefficients, standard errors, and odds ratios for the four dependent variables: perceived apprehension, perceived sanctions, normative sanctions, and resource allocation, respectively. Each model is discussed in detail below.

The first analysis assessed the impact of the sociodemographic characteristics and perceived risk of white-collar and violent victimization on the likelihood of perceived apprehension. As the results show, the model provided a good fit to these data (Model $\chi^2 = 29.89$; 12 *df*), indicating that the combination of independent variables explains 10 percent of the variation in the dependent variable. The results demonstrate that three variables are significant predictors of perceived apprehension: gender, education, and perceived violent victimization risk. The results in Table 3 indicate that the odds of perceiving that a white-collar offender has an equal or greater chance of apprehension, compared to a violent offender are 75 percent

greater for females. With regards to education, the odds ratio shows that respondents with college degrees are approximately 20 percent less likely to perceive that the chance of apprehension for white-collar offenders is equal or greater than violent offenders. Finally, those who report higher perceived risk of violent victimization have 74 percent greater odds of perceiving a white-collar offender to have an equal or greater chance of apprehension than a violent offender.

Turning to the second model, assessing perceived sanctions, education is a significant predictor, and the direction of the relationship is consistent with that reported in Model 1. The odds of perceiving that a white-collar offender will receive an equal or more severe punishment than a violent offender are approximately 28 percent lower for those with college degrees, all else held constant. Additionally, household income significantly predicts the dependent variable, indicating that the odds of responding in the affirmative are 25 percent lower for those with incomes above \$50,000. Perceived violent crime

Table 3
Logistic regression models

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Likelihood of apprehension			Perceived sanctions			Normative sanctions			Resource allocation		
	<i>b</i>	SE	Odds ratio	<i>b</i>	SE	Odds ratio	<i>b</i>	SE	Odds ratio	<i>b</i>	SE	Odds ratio
Race	-.53	.31	.59	-.39	.32	.68	-.41	.30	.67	.01	.31	1.01
Gender	.56**	.22	1.75	.40	.23	1.49	.34	.22	1.40	-.56**	.23	.57
Household income	-.18	.11	.83	-.28**	.12	.75	-.01	.11	1.00	.08	.12	1.08
Education	-.23*	.11	.80	-.29**	.25	.72	-.01	.11	1.00	.03	.11	1.03
Political ideology	.04	.26	1.04	.39	.28	1.47	-.15	.27	.86	.38	.27	.69
Age	.01	.01	1.00	-.02	.01	1.00	.01	.27	1.01	.01	.01	1.01
Marital status	.28	.24	1.32	.47	.25	1.59	-.09	.24	.91	-.15	.24	.86
Religion	-.28	.26	.76	-.27	.27	.77	-.04	.26	.96	-.49	.28	.62
Urban	.29	.23	1.08	.06	.24	1.07	.61**	.23	1.84	-.17	.23	.84
Homeowner	-.30	.28	.74	.37	.31	1.45	.65**	.28	1.91	.03	.29	1.03
White-Collar risk	-.14	.23	.87	-.16	.24	.85	.12	.29	1.10	.25	.24	1.30
Violent risk	.55*	.28	1.74	.80**	.28	2.22	.28	.30	1.32	-.15	.25	.86
Apprehension	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.15	.24	.86
Perceived sanctions	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.27	.25	.76
Normative sanctions	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1.08**	.23	2.94
Nagelkerke R ²	.10			.13			.08			.14		
Model χ^2 (<i>df</i>)	29.89 ₍₁₂₎ **			40.04 ₍₁₂₎ **			23.25 ₍₁₂₎ *			44.22** ₍₁₅₎		

Note: Entries are unstandardized logistic regression coefficients.

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed test).

victimization risk is also significant, indicating that the odds of perceiving that a white-collar offender will receive an equal or more severe punishment than a violent offender are 2.2 times greater for those reporting higher risk. Compared to Model 1, the set of independent variables provided a better fit to the data, as evidenced by the Model χ^2 of 40.04. Additionally, a greater amount of variance is explained, 13 percent.

Model 3 examined the effect of the independent variables on respondents' normative perceptions regarding white-collar crime. Although the fit of this model was statistically significant (Model $\chi^2 = 29.89$; $p \leq .05$), only 8 percent of the variance was explained by these factors. What is more, none of the demographic characteristics were significant predictors of the view that white-collar offenders *should* be punished equally or more severely than violent offenders. In this model, living in an urban area and owning a home were the only variables that significantly influenced normative perceptions. The odds of reporting that white-collar offenders *should* be punished equally or more severely are 84 percent greater for those living in urban than rural areas, and 91 percent greater for homeowners. Unlike the previous models, perceived victimization (violent or white-collar) did not influence normative perceptions.

Predicting support for resource allocation

In Model 4, the larger policy issue of governmental priorities was examined by assessing respondents' support for resource allocation. The analyses presented in Models 1 through 3 underscore the need for further exploration of these variables of interest. Understanding support for resource

allocation was a key goal in the final logistic regression model presented in Model 4. In a reduced model (not shown) containing all of the independent variables from Models 1 through 3, respondents' support for resource allocation was assessed. In this model, gender was the only significant predictor, indicating that females' odds of supporting equal or greater allocation for white-collar crime were approximately 38 percent lower than males. Taken with the findings from Model 1, this suggested that lower support for resource allocation among females might be tied to their view that white-collar offenders have a greater chance of being apprehended.

Model 4 improved upon the reduced model by adding perceived apprehension, perceived sanctions, and normative perceptions to the full model predicting support for resource allocation. This permitted an examination of the effects of these additional variables on the outcome, and also allowed for statistical control of these perceptions. Compared to the reduced model (not shown), over twice the variation was explained (from 6 percent to 14 percent), and the change in model fit (χ^2 change = 24.63; 3 *df*) was statistically significant. Even while controlling for perceived apprehension, perceived sanctions, and normative sanctions, the effect of gender found in the reduced model persisted: females had 43 percent lower odds of supporting white-collar crime resource allocation. An additional finding was that greater normative sanctions significantly influenced support for enforcement resources. Respondents who felt white-collar offenders should be treated equally or harsher than violent offenders were nearly 200 percent more likely to support increases in resource allocation. This relationship was in the

expected direction. The implications of these results for research and policy are discussed in more detail below.

Discussion

The results reported here extended prior research by providing insight into how the American public currently feels about white-collar crime. Similar to earlier studies, the findings revealed public concern about fraud, a common form of white-collar crime (Cullen et al., 1982; Rebovich & Kane, 2002). While the majority of respondents reported that violent criminals should be punished more severely than white-collar criminals, over one-third expressed the opposite opinion. Additionally, just under two-thirds of this sample felt that the government should devote equal or more resources toward white-collar crime control. Thus, while the public generally perceives violent street offenders as more likely to be apprehended and to receive harsher sanctions, as well as being more deserving of harsher sanctions, this did not translate to support for greater governmental resource allocation for violent crime relative to white-collar crime. Put differently, the American public desires increased formal social control of fraud, regardless of greater perceived seriousness of violent crime (e.g., robbery).

While the finding that the public perceives violent street crime to be more serious than white-collar crime could be taken simply as further support for increasing governmental expenditures to fight violent crime, this study suggests an alternative interpretation of crime seriousness perceptions. In particular, the public's perceived seriousness of street crime is not so extreme as to warrant government neglect of white-collar crime. Rather, unmeasured variables must be considered in light of these results. For example, the role of several recent well-publicized corporate scandals may have influenced public perceptions (Krantz, 2003; O'Donnell & Willing, 2003). Future research should also consider whether knowledge of respondents' *actual* victimization experiences, as well as exposure to media coverage of white-collar and violent crime, influence public opinion and support for resource allocation (Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000; Rebovich & Kane, 2002). Recent research suggested that other potentially negative outcomes, such as diminished trust and confidence in government, should also be examined within the context of white-collar crime victimization (Reisig & Holtfreter, 2007).

Further insight into the role of perceived victim harm may be critical in determining how public perceptions of crime seriousness are related to public support for government resource allocations. Although media coverage of corporate scandals has increased public awareness of the negative economic, societal, and personal consequences of corporate malfeasance, these cases are sensational examples that are less representative of the larger population of white-collar crime (Vaughan, 2001). To address this concern, the present study used \$1,000 fraud as the example of white-collar crime, which is generally a nonviolent offense with limited societal impact and personal harm. Although the example of street crime (\$1,000 robbery) was restricted to the same dollar amount lost, the

violent nature of this offense may suggest greater physical and emotional victim harm, which may have influenced perceptions of seriousness. Future research on this issue should continue to refine examples of white-collar and street crime by neutralizing the potentially influential role of perceived harm (Rosenmerkel, 2001). Consistent with this notion, researchers would also be well served to include more comprehensive measures (i.e., including several different types of offenses) that tap into the concepts of white-collar and street crime.

It is evident that public opinion is not exclusively guided by perceptions of victim harm, or perceived risk of victimization. What is less clear is the disjoint between views of normative sanctions and resource allocation. The scope of the present study precluded a detailed understanding of these contradictory views. Some potential explanatory factors were eliminated, suggesting future research directions and policy implications. First, the present study found that sociodemographic variables played a minimal role in explaining differences in perceived sanctions, normative sanctions, and support for resource allocation. While these measures should surely be controlled in future studies, commonly hypothesized effects of respondent race, income, and other socioeconomic factors on the perceived seriousness of street versus suite crime received little support here, supporting prior studies (Cullen et al., 1982; Rebovich & Kane, 2002).

Somewhat unexpectedly, the link between perceived victimization and perceptions of crime seriousness was relatively weak. The only significant association was that between perceived victimization and likelihood of apprehension and harsh sanctioning. In particular, respondents who perceived a high risk of violent crime victimization were more likely to believe that white-collar offenders will be apprehended and receive harsher sanctions. Knowledge of victimization experiences might shed light on this relationship. It is possible that high-risk respondents actually *do* have greater odds of victimization (e.g., live in neighborhoods with greater than average rates of violent crime). In this situation, perceived violent victimization risk would understandably lead one to view violent criminals as having a relatively low chance of apprehension and harsh sentencing. Conversely, if the high-risk respondents do not have greater odds of violent victimization, unmeasured variables may be responsible. One potential intervening variable is exposure to news media (Chiricos et al., 2000; Eschholz, Chiricos, & Gertz, 2003).

While some empirical issues remain unresolved, two of this study's key findings suggest important policy implications. First, a substantial proportion of the American public prefers that white-collar criminals be punished as harshly, or harsher than violent criminals. This contradicts earlier research reporting public ambivalence toward white-collar crime. Further, public support for white-collar crime control was established with the finding that the majority of Americans want the federal government to allocate more or equal resources to the control of white-collar crime. Recalling the absence of white-collar crime from the Department of Justice's 2006 list of priorities, these findings suggest that the current level of governmental intervention into white-collar crime does not reflect the public's wishes.

At best, federal budgeting priorities appear to be more reflective of pre-Watergate public opinion; at worst, there is a disjuncture between public opinion and governmental actions. If public opinion should correspond to punishment practices, then the present study has identified a problem that might be addressed by federal and state judges and sentencing commissions (Ouimet & Coyle, 1991; Rossi & Berk, 1985).

Indeed, Rossi and Berk (1997) concluded their comparison of federal sentencing guidelines and public preferences by stating that, “it is clear that there is remarkable agreement between average respondent sentences and guidelines sentences, not just overall...but in sentencing determinants...This patterning serves to underscore that the U.S. Sentencing Commission had for most crimes somehow managed to come closer to how the American public thinks about sentencing for federal crimes” (p. 149). Nevertheless, they also found greater disparity between public opinion regarding appropriate sentences for fraud offenders than robbers, such that the public favored longer sentences than provided in the guidelines.

Some limitations of the present research should be noted. Although the measures of white-collar and violent crime used here were indeed fairly basic, they were consistent with prior national level surveys (Rebovich & Kane, 2002). Future research should build upon this study by continuing to refine existing measures. Gauging the public’s support for resource allocation is important, because policymakers frequently justify such expenditures on the basis of public opinion. Along these

lines, a limitation of the current research was that an assessment of the respondent’s willingness to pay for improvements in enforcement (e.g., via sales tax increases) was not included. To better inform crime control policy, subsequent research should address this issue by further probing citizens’ willingness to pay for such reforms.

The results of this study also suggested that current public opinion might simply be misguided. As previously acknowledged, those who perceived a high risk of violent crime victimization also felt that white-collar offenders are punished more frequently and harshly than violent offenders. As a significant body of sentencing research shows, white-collar offenders are not punished as harshly as violent street offenders or even nonviolent street offenders (e.g., see Kerley & Copes, 2004). This suggests that perceived risk of violent victimization, and perhaps personal experience with violent crime victimization, invokes the erroneous perception that sentencing works in a manner completely opposite to that established by the empirical literature. Consequently, public education campaigns could do much to dispel the myth that white-collar offenders are treated more severely than street offenders.

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Appendix. Correlation matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Age	—														
2. Female	.13	—													
3. Education	.12*	-.01	—												
4. Minority	-.23**	.01	-.16**	—											
5. Married	.15**	-.02	.20**	-.15**	—										
6. Income	-.08	-.18**	.38**	-.09	.29**	—									
7. Urban	-.02	-.04	.11*	.05	.01	.09	—								
8. Homeowner	.27**	-.01	.19**	-.22**	.33**	.21**	-.11*	—							
9. Conservative	.04	-.06	-.18**	-.07	.03	-.07	-.06	.10	—						
10. White-collar risk	-.14**	-.04	.03	.08	.03	.02	.00	-.01	-.01	—					
11. Violent risk	-.08	.06	-.09	.23**	-.21**	-.22**	.09	-.14**	-.05	.27**	—				
12. Apprehension	.01	.14**	.14**	-.04	-.02	-.16**	.05	-.08	.02	-.04	.06	—			
13. Perceived sanctions	.03	.11*	-.17**	-.04	.03	-.19**	-.02	.04	.10*	-.03	.11*	.33**	—		
14. Normative sanctions	.12*	.07	.05	-.09	.04**	.01	.11*	.13**	-.02	.06	.03	.04	-.02	—	
15. Enforcement resources	.08	-.13*	.06	-.04	.00	.06	-.01	.06	-.09	.10	-.01	-.07	-.10*	.24**	—

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Notes

1. Only one national study of public opinion on white-collar crime was conducted during the past twenty-five years (Rebovich & Kane, 2002); accordingly, this study served as a guide for the development of survey measures used in the current research.

2. Specifically, the sample was drawn using a form of random digit dialing that is referred to as a Mitofsky/Waksberg design (Tourangeau, 2004; Waksberg, 1978), in which telephone numbers are chosen in two stages. This

method increases the number of completed interviews per number of calls by focusing efforts on households with known, valid, while maintaining true random digit dialing benefits. The procedure produced an equal probability two-stage cluster sample. An initial sample containing six-digit area codes and exchanges was randomly selected. A four-digit random number was then added to the original six-digits to generate random, ten-digit numbers for the primary sampling stage. The primary sample was then called to identify valid numbers. Working residential numbers were identified, and their first eight digits defined a cluster to be used in the second stage of sampling. In

the second stage of sampling, randomly generated two-digit numbers were appended to the first eight digits of each primary number. To screen for non-U.S. codes and nonresidential numbers, all calling was done with the use of the Data-Tel predictive dialer.

3. Although an analysis including each separate ethnic group would have been preferred, the low percentage of ethnic minority participants did not allow for a reliable analysis.

4. The underrepresentation of Latino households is a longstanding problem in survey research. Common barriers to interviewing this population include language issues, economic disadvantage, and historically lower rates of telephone subscription (Lewis, 1987; Marin & Marin, 1991). The current study was not conducted bilingually, which accounts for some of the underrepresentation of Hispanics in the sample.

5. Conceptual agreement on defining white-collar crime has varied. Some have argued that an offense-based definition, as opposed to an offender-based definition, is superior because it permits examination of variation in offender characteristics by the type of offense (Shapiro, 1990). The present study followed this recommendation, and selected offenses identified as reliable measures of white-collar crime (i.e., fraud) and street crime (i.e., robbery) by previous researchers (Rebovich & Kane, 2002).

6. Following Rebovich and Kane (2002 p. 7), crime seriousness was accounted for by using the same dollar amount lost (i.e., \$1,000) for each type of crime.

7. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was inappropriate because the dependent variables were dichotomous/categorical.

8. As shown in the correlation matrix (see Appendix), the strongest correlation between independent variables was .38 (for marital status and income). Examination of collinearity diagnostics revealed that there were no variance inflation factor scores greater than 3, no variance decomposition proportions greater than .49, and no condition indices exceeding 14. According to Belsley (1991), these diagnostics suggest no problems of collinearity among the independent variables.

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