

# Violent Street Crime Versus Harmful White-Collar Crime: A Comparison of Perceived Seriousness and Punitiveness

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Published online: 21 August 2015  
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**Abstract** Recent studies have challenged traditional wisdom regarding public apathy about white-collar crime by revealing equal or greater perceived seriousness of these offenses among respondents relative to traditional crime. Nevertheless, subjects in those studies were generally asked to contrast white-collar crime scenarios with a non-violent street crime baseline vignette. Perhaps a violent street crime would have invited lower perceived seriousness for the white-collar offenses. Participants in the present study were asked to (1) read vignettes describing violent street crimes and physically harmful white-collar crimes, (2) compare their seriousness, and (3) determine appropriate sanctions. Subjects perceived the violent crime scenarios presented to them to be more serious than the harmful white-collar crime vignettes. Further, they were less punitive toward white-collar offenders compared with street criminals. Implications of these findings are discussed.

## Introduction

The literature on perceptions of crime severity generally reveals high levels of consensus among the American public (Grabosky et al. 1987; Hauber et al. 1988; Newman 1976; Rossi et al. 1974; Scott and Al-Thakeb 1977; Thomas et al. 1976; Warr 1989; Wolfgang et al. 1985). Phrased differently, widespread agreement seems to exist among all members of society about perceived seriousness of, and response to, crime. Such consensus is particularly evident regarding those offenses for which victims incur physical injury or death (Blumstein and Cohen 1980; Carlson and Williams 1993; Cullen et al. 1985c; Heller and McEwen 1975; Levi and Jones 1985; O’Connell and Whelan 1996; Roth 1978). It is not certain, however, whether physical harm alone is sufficient in eliciting universal

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condemnation or if the type of offense (i.e., street crime vs. white-collar crime) has a determining influence on public perceptions. For example, a conservative estimate places at 300,000 the number of people who die every year as a result of white-collar offenses. This figure includes employees injured in the workplace or affected by toxic chemicals due to the company's lack of safety compliance, civilians exposed to toxic waste and deadly pollutants, and consumers victims of faulty products, addictive substances, or subpar medical services (Herbert and Landrigan 2000; Kramer 1984; Lynch and Michalowski 2006; Reiman 1998; Reiman and Leighton 2010; Starfield 2000). By comparison, criminal homicide claims about 14,000 lives annually (UCR 2011). This staggering difference should naturally translate into greater perceived seriousness of, and punitiveness toward, white-collar crime. Yet, while public opinion about upper-world criminality has undoubtedly become more negative in the last 40 years, there is little evidence of a disproportionately higher concern about crimes of the powerful relative to street crime.

### Public Attitudes About White-Collar Crime

In their review of empirical research on Americans' attitudes about white-collar crime, Cullen et al. (2009) identified a three-pronged evolution of public sentiments: (1) relative inattention to the problem during the first half of the twentieth century (Ross 1907; Sutherland 1949), (2) rising attention from the late 1970s to the early 2000s after infamous cases such as the Watergate scandal or the Savings and Loan debacle (Cullen et al. 1982, 1983, 1985a, b; Evans et al. 1993; Frank et al. 1989; Goff and Nason-Clark 1989; Grabosky et al. 1987; Hans and Ermann 1989; Meier and Short 1985; Rossi and Berk 1997; Schragr and Short 1980), and (3) transformed attention in the last 15 years undoubtedly heightened by the Enron and WorldCom fiascos and Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme (Holtfreter et al. 2008; Huff et al. 2010; Kane and Wall 2006; Levi 2006, 2009; Piquero et al. 2008; Rebovich et al. 2000; Schoepfer et al. 2007; Unnever et al. 2008, etc.). Far from downplaying the importance of elite offenses, subjects in more recent studies often considered them to be as serious as street crimes. Further, they were generally inclined to support tough punishments against their perpetrators.

These findings have important implications as they signal a hardening of public attitudes toward white-collar criminals, whom are still significantly more likely to avoid criminal prosecution and incarceration compared with street offenders (Calavita et al. 1997; Friedrichs 2010; Maddan et al. 2012; Tillman and Pontell 1992). Nevertheless, the conclusion that Americans are now disposed to condone sanctions of equal or even greater severity against white-collar crimes relative to traditional offenses may be premature. In fact, the results found in several of these studies could have been biased by methodological choices that favored the comparison of white-collar offense scenarios with street crime vignettes describing a relatively low level of harm.

### Methodological Issues

Every 5 years since 1999, the National White-Collar Crime Center—a congressionally funded non-profit organization—has been surveying Americans' attitudes about the seriousness and impact of white-collar crime. The first iteration (Rebovich et al. 2000) asked participants to compare a series of scenarios that described a traditional property crime (i.e., theft) and white-collar financial crimes (i.e., fraud, embezzlement, bribery, unnecessary repair, and false claim), as well as a violent street crime (i.e., armed robbery) and physically harmful white-collar offenses (i.e., selling tainted meat, neglecting to recall a

potentially dangerous vehicle, etc.). In almost all cases, participants deemed the white-collar crime vignettes to be as serious or more serious than the types of street crime presented to them. A majority even considered allowing tainted meat to be sold and making someone ill as a result to be more serious than armed robbery. The problem is that the violent street crime scenario only mentioned that the victim suffered “serious injury”. Perhaps a street crime scenario describing homicide would have invited greater leniency toward the offenders described in the white-collar crime vignettes. This limitation points to the necessity of controlling for various levels of harm intensity.

The same criticism can be made regarding the second effort by the National White-Collar Crime Center (Kane and Wall 2006). This time, participants were presented with twelve scenarios that depicted (1) white-collar offenses (i.e., auction fraud, false earning report, omission of safety report, insurance overcharge, embezzlement, database hack, insurance fraud, and toxic waste) and (2) more traditional types of crime (i.e., burglary, robbery, assault, and car jacking/murder). Respondents were then asked to compare the seriousness of these offenses against a baseline street crime scenario that described motor-vehicle theft. A majority considered the various instances of white-collar crime to be more serious than the base crime, particularly those that caused physical harm. Once again, however, perceived seriousness of elite offenses may have been artificially heightened by the researchers’ choice of car theft (i.e., a non-violent crime) for comparison purposes. In fact, carjacking/murder was considered to be the most serious offense on the list (relative to car theft), way above any white-collar crime vignette.

A similar problem emerged in the third and latest iteration (Huff et al. 2010). Researchers developed a series of short scenarios involving two street crimes (i.e., burglary and assault), and nine different types of white-collar crime (i.e., embezzlement, identity theft, false charges, hacking, falsely advertising as safe an anti-depressant drug, espionage, market rigging, insurance overcharge, and counterfeit sales). Once again, participants were asked to compare the seriousness of each offense described in these scenarios with a base crime depicting car theft. Not surprisingly, survey results indicated that respondents considered white-collar crime to be more serious than traditional crime. More specifically, crimes that involved direct physical harm (e.g., distributing an anti-depressant drug that caused random violent acts and deaths) were perceived to be more serious than the crimes that only resulted in monetary loss. As previously mentioned, however, perhaps the choice of car theft (i.e., a non-violent property crime) for comparison purposes can explain these results.

## Rationale for the Present Study

Research suggests that public support for “tough-on-crime” policies stems from fear of crime (Dowler 2003). Evidently, crimes that elicit the greatest fear are those for which victims incur the most harm (e.g., physical injury, illness, or death). It should come as no surprise that the National White-Collar Crime Center survey’s subjects would find espionage (especially in post-9/11 America) or distributing a dangerous medication to be more serious than car theft. It is unclear, however, whether similar results would have continued to emerge after a direct comparison of white-collar offenses—even physically harmful ones—with a violent street crime such as first-degree murder.

One reason to expect a pattern reversal could be the negative label generally associated with street crime (Hagan 1994). The seriousness construct involves not only harm but also blameworthiness. Phrased differently, two offenses may cause the same amount of harm without necessarily eliciting equally universal condemnation. The conventional construction

of crime assigns two distinct motives to the violent street offender and the corporate criminal: one of malevolence for the former, and one of reckless disregard for the latter. According to this assignment, rapists and murderers are perceived to injure and kill purposely whereas harmfulness is rather considered a means to an end for business executives (e.g., the Ford Pinto case). This double standard might find its origin in the primary source of public knowledge about crime: the news media (Dowler 2003; Roberts and Doob 1990; Surette 1998). As a result of corporate allegiance, TV news outlets tend to place more emphasis on street crime (Barak 1994; Barlow and Barlow 2010; Ericson et al. 1991; Lynch and Michalowski 2006; Lynch et al. 1989, 2000). Further, even when corporate crime makes the headlines (e.g., Enron's meltdown, Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme, etc.), the focus is usually on non-violent cases (Barlow and Barlow 2010), which incorrectly implies that upper class offenders are less dangerous. Courts and academics alike have also justified this double standard by focusing disproportionately on street criminals and relegating white-collar offenses to the rank of victimless crimes (Croall 2007; Gustafson 2007; Wheeler et al. 1988). Consequently, even if we can expect the public to recognize that white-collar criminals are sometimes capable of calculated endangerment for profit, they might still evoke the image of "kinder and gentler" offenders (Perri 2011) compared with the perpetrators of violent street crime.

The present study therefore proposes to address a possible limitation inherent in the literature on public attitudes about white-collar crime by comparing perceived seriousness of, and punitiveness toward, physically harmful white-collar crimes with violent street crimes (i.e., that cause physical injury, illness, or death). Importantly, instead of asking subjects to rank the seriousness of these offenses individually or relative to a mid-level, non-violent baseline crime (e.g., car theft), white-collar crime and street crime will be compared against one another. If public attitudes have indeed evolved in the direction suggested by the National White-Collar Crime Center, no significant differences should emerge. Phrased differently, subjects should rate white-collar and street crime as equally serious. After adjusting for harm intensity, however, we may expect dissensus in perceived crime severity. That is, violent street crimes committed by disreputable individuals might elicit more negative attitudes than physically harmful white-collar offenses. The following hypotheses are tested:

**Hypothesis 1** Subjects should evince lesser perceived seriousness of harmful white-collar crimes compared with violent street crimes.

**Hypothesis 2** Subjects should evince lesser punitiveness toward the perpetrators of harmful white-collar offenses compared with violent street crime offenders.

## Method

### Sample Selection

Subjects in this study were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk, an online crowd-sourcing platform that coordinates the supply and demand of human intelligence tasks (HITS). A HIT is a relatively short assignment (e.g., a social science survey) that "Turkers" (i.e., anyone over the age of 18 with an Amazon.com account) choose to complete on the Mechanical Turk website based on monetary compensation and time allotted for completion. This innovative data collection method has recently become

increasingly popular in the social sciences (see, e.g., Filone et al. 2014; Martire et al. 2013; Mathieu et al. 2013; Michel et al. 2014; Nadler and McDonnell 2011) because of its low cost, convenience, acceptable response rate, sample representativeness, and reliability. An empirical assessment by Paolacci et al. (2010) concluded that, although limited by their non-probability nature, Mechanical Turk samples were qualitatively comparable to traditional college and Internet samples commonly used in social science research.

## Data Collection Procedure

The survey was made available on Mechanical Turk on April 1st 2013. The Institutional Review Board at the author's former university approved the questionnaire, and every effort was made to protect subjects' anonymity. The target sample size was set at 500 participants, a figure successfully reached in previous research (see, e.g., Buhrmester et al.

**Table 1** Sentiments about white-collar and street crime ( $N = 408$ )

Variables	Coding/range	Mean	SD
Perceived seriousness of white-collar crime and street crime	5 scenarios; 4-point ordinal scale (1 = not very serious; 4 = very serious)		
Consumer safety violations (toy)		3.43	.76
Murder		3.91	.36
Toxic dumping		3.51	.64
Rape		3.94	.24
Asbestos exposure		3.71	.52
Punitiveness			
Prosecutorial process	3-point ordinal scale (1 = by some non-legal means 2 = in a civil court 3 = In a criminal court)		
Consumer safety violations		2.74	.47
Murder		3.0	0
Toxic dumping		2.69	.51
Rape		2.99	.09
Asbestos exposure		2.71	.50
Fine	5-point ordinal scale (0 = no fine; 4 = above \$1,000,000.00)		
Consumer safety violations		1.83	1.72
Murder		.35	.98
Toxic dumping		2.25	1.75
Rape		.35	.96
Asbestos exposure		1.78	1.81
Prison sentence	7-point ordinal scale (0 = no prison; 6 = 41 years-life)		
Consumer safety violations		.84	1.18
Murder		4.68	1.63
Toxic dumping		.94	1.32
Rape		3.26	1.57
Asbestos exposure		1.35	1.79

2011). While financial compensation for completed HITs can sometimes be as low as \$0.10 (Paolacci et al. 2010), a payment of \$2.00 per completed survey was offered to motivate prospective subjects. This strategy paid off, as the sample size goal of 500 was reached within only 3 h. Incomplete surveys and those completed too quickly (pilot testing suggested a minimum completion time of about 10 min) were discarded. The final sample comprised 408 participants. Forty-nine point 8 % of them were women, 83.6 % described themselves as Whites, 8.8 % as Blacks, 5 % as Asians, 0.5 % as Middle Easterners, 0.5 % as American Indians or Alaskan Natives, and 0.2 % as Native Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders. Six point 9 % identified themselves as Hispanics. College graduates (Bachelor's degree or higher) represented almost 50 % of the total sample. Those who reported belonging to no religion accounted for 43.6 % of all subjects. On average, respondents were politically liberal, 46 % identified themselves as Democrats, and over 80 % reported using Internet as their main source of information.

## Measures

The purpose of the present study is to compare sentiments about physically harmful white-collar crimes with violent street crimes. The measures included (1) subjects' perceived seriousness of these offenses, and (2) their punitiveness toward their respective perpetrators. Table 1 presents these variables and the coding system used to measure them.

Every measure of crime seriousness is in some way inspired by the primary index scale developed by Sellin and Wolfgang (1964), which included several criminal descriptions in the form of short crime scenarios, along with a Likert type scale to help respondents attribute a particular degree of seriousness. A similar methodology was used in the present study. More specifically, participants were asked to read five vignettes inspired by Kennedy's ethics scenarios (2010), some of which described violent street crimes and others harmful white-collar crimes. Violent street crime scenarios included the following:

- a. Homicide: "Someone attempts to rob a couple while they are walking back to their car at night. The husband tries to disarm the attacker, but is shot by him. He later dies of his injuries."
- b. Forcible rape: "Someone breaks into a dorm at night and forcibly rapes a female student."

Physically harmful white-collar crime scenarios included the following:

1. Consumer safety violations endangering children: "Because of cost reductions, the materials used by a company to build a popular toy will present a potential hazard to the product's users. The company decides to manufacture and distribute the toy regardless of the risks."
2. Illegal toxic waste disposal: "In order to increase profits and meet production goals, a manufacturing company uses production processes that allow for the release of pollutants into the water and air that exceed legal limits. Several people become seriously ill as a result."
3. Denial of risk and peril by failing to enforce safety measures on the workplace and to take responsibility for employees' toxic contamination ("A mining company fails to ensure safety measures such as proper ventilation and the use of masks, goggles and gloves among its workers, and covers up evidence regarding the link between asbestos exposure and lung cancer deaths.")

For each scenario, the respondents were asked to (a) rate the seriousness of the offense (1 = Not very serious, 2 = Somewhat serious, 3 = Serious, and 4 = Very serious), decide how the case should be handled (1 = By some non-legal means, 2 = In a non-criminal court, 3 = In a criminal court), and (b) determine the proper societal response (i.e., punishment) to them. Response options included fine and/or imprisonment. Finally, subjects were also asked to choose specific dollar amounts for monetary sanctions via a 5-point ordinal scale (0 = No fine, 1 = Under \$100,000, 2 = \$100,000–\$499,000, 3 = \$500,000–\$999,999, 4 = Above \$1,000,000), as well as the number of years for incarceration via a seven-point ordinal scale (0 = No prison, 1 = 1–5 years, 2 = 6–10 years, 3 = 11–20 years, 4 = 21–30 years, 5 = 31–40 years, 6 = 41 years-life).

## Results

### Perceived Seriousness

Contrary to the National White-Collar Crime Center's survey, comparisons in the present study were not based on one single reference crime. Rather, paired samples *t* tests were used to allow for comparing mean differences in perceived seriousness and punitiveness between all five scenarios. Table 2 presents the results of paired samples *t* tests to compare mean perceived seriousness of scenarios describing both physically injurious white-collar crimes (i.e., knowingly manufacturing a potentially dangerous toy, releasing deadly pollutants in a river, and knowingly exposing workers to asbestos) and violent street crimes (i.e., murder and forcible rape). All scenarios have a mean above 3.00, which is the score meant to represent "serious" offenses. As could be expected, homicide ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ) and forcible rape ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 0.24$ ) were perceived to be more serious than the white-collar crimes described. More precisely, the mean for the murder scenario was statistically higher than those for the defective toy vignette ( $t = 12.10$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.60$ ), the deadly pollutants scenario ( $t = 11.50$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.57$ ), and the asbestos exposure scenario ( $t = 6.68$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.33$ ).

Similarly, rape was statistically perceived to be more serious than consumer safety violation ( $t = 13.12$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.65$ ), toxic dumping ( $t = 12.89$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.64$ ), and reckless endangerment of employees ( $t = 8.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.40$ ). In all cases, Cohen's effect sizes suggested small to moderate practical significance. Conversely, the

**Table 2** Results of paired samples *t* tests to compare mean perceived seriousness of white-collar crime and street crime ( $N = 408$ )

Baseline	Mean (SD)	Toy	Murder	Pollutants	Rape
Toy	3.43 (0.76)	–	–	–	–
Murder	3.91 (0.36)	<b>–12.10**</b>	–	–	–
Pollutants	3.51 (0.64)	<b>–1.98*</b>	<b>11.50**</b>	–	–
Rape	3.94 (0.24)	<b>–13.12**</b>	–1.67	<b>–12.89**</b>	–
Asbestos	3.72 (0.52)	<b>–7.76**</b>	<b>6.68**</b>	<b>–7.07**</b>	<b>8.13**</b>

A mean of 1 = Not very serious, 2 = Somewhat serious, 3 = Serious, and 4 = Very serious

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

means for the two street crime scenarios were the only ones to not statistically differ from one another.

Of the three harmful white-collar crime scenarios, the one describing the deliberate manufacturing of a defective toy ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) was considered less serious than the toxic dumping scenario ( $M = 3.51$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ,  $t = -1.98$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = -0.10$ ) and the asbestos exposure scenario ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ,  $t = -7.76$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -0.38$ ). However, Cohen's effect sizes were this time smaller. Similarly, releasing deadly pollutants was considered less serious than the reckless endangerment of employees ( $t = -7.07$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -0.35$ ).

In summation, it appears that subjects in this study considered both types of violent street crime to be (1) of equal seriousness, and (2) more serious than all three instances of physically harmful white-collar offenses, which brings support to the first hypothesis under investigation. What remains to be seen is whether similar differences exist in regard to punitiveness toward the offenders described in these scenarios.

### Punitiveness

The second attitude measured was subjects' level of punitiveness toward the offenders described in the abovementioned harmful white-collar crime scenarios compared with the two violent street crimes. Again, measures of punitiveness included (1) choice of prosecution process (i.e., by some non-legal means, in a non-criminal court, or in a criminal court), (2) punishment for their perpetrators (i.e., fine and/or prison) and (3) sentence severity (i.e., in dollar amounts and/or number of years in prison).

#### Prosecutorial Process

Table 3 presents the results of paired samples  $t$  tests to compare subjects' choice of prosecutorial process for white-collar crime and street crime. First of all, no subject chose the non-legal means alternative for any of the five scenarios. Conversely, homicide was the only scenario for which every participant recommended the perpetrator be tried in a criminal court ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.00$ ).

In fact, the murder scenario was the only one to be statistically different from all other instances of crime described, including white-collar offenses such as consumer safety violation ( $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ,  $t = -11.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.55$ ), toxic dumping ( $M = 2.70$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ,  $t = 11.90$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.59$ ), and asbestos exposure ( $M = 2.71$ ,

**Table 3** Results of paired samples  $t$  tests to compare subjects' choice of prosecutorial process for white-collar crime and street crime ( $N = 408$ )

Baseline	Mean (SD)	Toy	Murder	Pollutants	Rape
Toy	2.74 (0.47)	–	–	–	–
Murder	3.00 (0.00)	<b>-11.13**</b>	–	–	–
Pollutants	2.70 (0.51)	1.45	<b>11.90**</b>	–	–
Rape	2.99 (0.99)	<b>-10.37**</b>	<b>2.01*</b>	<b>-11.39**</b>	–
Asbestos	2.71 (0.50)	1.12	<b>11.75**</b>	-0.47	<b>11.34**</b>

A mean of 1 = Non-legal means, 2 = Civil court, and 3 = Criminal court

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$



SD = 0.50,  $t = 11.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.58$ ), but also—although to a lesser degree—forcible rape ( $M = 2.99$ , SD = 0.99,  $t = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 0.10$ ). Further, subjects were statistically more likely to recommend a harsher prosecution process for the rapist than they were for white-collar offenders in the toy scenario ( $t = 10.37$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.51$ ), the deadly pollutants scenario ( $t = 11.39$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.56$ ), and the asbestos exposure scenario ( $t = 11.34$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.56$ ). Nevertheless, there was no statistical difference between subjects' choice of prosecutorial process for these three white-collar crimes. More precisely, participants were more inclined to select a non-criminal court for the perpetrators of white-collar offenses, which they perceived to be less serious than murder and forcible rape.

### Monetary Sanction

Similar differences emerged when asking subjects how much, if any, of a fine should be imposed to the offenders in each scenario. Table 4 presents the results of paired samples  $t$  tests to compare subjects' choice of fine amount for white-collar crime and street crime. Once again, murder ( $M = 2.25$ , SD = 1.75) and rape ( $M = 0.35$ , SD = 0.96) did not statistically differ from one another. While means for both street crimes are well under 1.00—i.e., the score meant to represent a fine under \$100,000—white-collar offenses such as selling customers a hazardous product ( $M = 1.83$ , SD = 1.72), dumping toxic waste above the legal limit ( $M = 2.25$ , SD = 1.75), or being negligent in implementing proper safety measures in the workplace and denying risk and peril ( $M = 1.78$ , SD = 1.82) elicited average fine amounts ranging between \$100,000 and \$499,000.

Large and statistically significant differences were found between the murder scenario and those that described the defective toy ( $t = -16.99$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -0.84$ ), deadly pollutants ( $t = -21.51$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -1.06$ ), and asbestos exposure ( $t = -15.77$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -0.78$ ). Similar differences were found between rape and consumer safety violation ( $t = -17.44$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -0.86$ ), toxic dumping ( $t = -21.68$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -1.07$ ), and the reckless endangerment of employees ( $t = -16.99$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -0.84$ ). While the defective toy scenario slightly differed from the deadly pollutants one ( $t = -5.21$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -0.26$ ), it was not statistically different from the asbestos vignette. Conversely, the work-related disease scenario elicited a smaller fine amount compared with the toxic dumping scenario ( $t = -5.53$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -0.27$ ). In short, it seems that subjects were more inclined to choose a higher fine amount against white-collar

**Table 4** Results of paired samples  $t$  tests to compare subjects' choice of fine amount for white-collar crime and street crime ( $N = 408$ )

Baseline	Mean (SD)	Toy	Murder	Pollutants	Rape
Toy	1.83 (1.72)	–	–	–	–
Murder	0.35 (0.98)	<b>16.99**</b>	–	–	–
Pollutants	2.25 (1.75)	<b>-5.21**</b>	<b>-21.51**</b>	–	–
Rape	0.35 (0.96)	<b>17.44**</b>	0.22	<b>21.68**</b>	–
Asbestos	1.78 (1.82)	0.65	<b>-15.77**</b>	<b>5.53**</b>	<b>-16.99**</b>

A mean of 0 = No fine, 1 = Under \$100,000, 2 = \$100,000–499,000, 3 = \$500,000–1,000,000, and 4 = Above \$1,000,000

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

offenders (particularly the company responsible for polluting over the legal limit) than they were against the murderer and rapist.

In summation, respondents in this study were more prone to recommend higher financial sanctions against those responsible in the white-collar crime vignettes. While supporting greater economic sanctions against white-collar crime than street crime seems logical, what remains to be seen is whether respondents chose to punish white-collar offenders and street offenders with equally long prison sentences.

### Prison Sentence

Table 5 presents the results of paired samples *t* tests to compare mean prison sentence severity for white-collar crime and street crime. In other words, does the nature of the crime described in each scenario (i.e., white-collar or traditional offense) influence subjects' decision regarding how much, if any, prison time the perpetrators should serve? Although not originally given as a response option, capital punishment is nonetheless included here since a few subjects were punitive enough to require a death sentence for murder ( $M = 4.68$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ), corporate negligence and denial of risk and peril in the case of asbestos exposure ( $M = 1.35$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ), and rape ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ). Such recommendation belies a lack of knowledge about the criminal justice system since sexual assault is no longer punishable by death.

Both street crimes elicited longer prison sentence lengths ranging between 11 and 30 years than did white-collar crimes for which the average prison sentence did not exceed 5 years. Compared with homicide, a majority of respondents did not perceive incarceration to be the most appropriate punishment for the offenses involving the defective toy ( $M = 0.84$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ,  $t = -40.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -1.99$ ), illegal toxic dumping ( $M = 0.94$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ,  $t = -38.32$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -1.90$ ), and even lying about the link between unprotected asbestos exposure and lung cancer ( $t = -29.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -1.46$ ). Further, Cohen's effect sizes suggested large practical significance.

Mean prison sentence severity was also statistically higher in the murder scenario than in the rape vignette ( $t = 16.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.83$ ), although the difference is less pronounced than with white-collar offenses. Rape invited higher prison sentence severity than did consumer safety violation ( $t = 26.39$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 1.31$ ), toxic dumping ( $t = 24.79$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 1.23$ ), and the reckless endangerment of employees ( $t = 18.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = 0.90$ ). Further differences emerged between the three instances of white-collar crime,

**Table 5** Results of paired samples *t* tests to compare mean prison sentence severity for white-collar crime and street crime ( $N = 408$ )

Baseline	Mean (SD)	Toy	Murder	Pollutants	Rape
Toy	0.84 (1.18)	–	–	–	–
Murder	4.68 (1.63)	<b>-40.20**</b>	–	–	–
Pollutants	0.94 (1.32)	-1.56	<b>38.32**</b>	–	–
Rape	3.26 (1.57)	<b>-26.39**</b>	<b>16.75**</b>	<b>-24.79**</b>	–
Asbestos	1.35 (1.79)	<b>-5.90**</b>	<b>29.45**</b>	<b>-5.48**</b>	<b>18.13**</b>

A mean of 0 = No prison, 1 = 1–5 years, 2 = 6–10 years, 3 = 11–20 years, 4 = 21–30 years, 5 = 31–40 years, 6 = 41–Life, and 7 = Death

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

with the defective toy scenario eliciting less prison severity than the asbestos exposure vignette ( $t = -5.90$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -0.29$ ), but not statistically differing from the deadly pollutants scenario. Conversely, toxic dumping invited a shorter prison sentence than did the reckless endangerment of employees ( $t = -5.48$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $d = -0.27$ ).

In summation, respondents were overall less punitive toward the white-collar crime offenders described in these scenarios compared with violent street crime criminals, which also brings support to the second hypothesis under investigation.

## Discussion

The present study sought to address a limitation commonly observed in several recent national surveys of public sentiments about white-collar crime. More precisely, those studies (e.g., Huff et al. 2010; Kane and Wall 2006; Rebovich et al. 2000) disputed the notion of public indifference about white-collar offenses after subjects evinced equal or greater perceived seriousness of, and punitiveness toward, them compared with street crime. Nevertheless, these results may have been obtained partly because of methodological choices that focused on non-violent examples of traditional crime for comparison purposes. As the present study reveals, using vignettes that depicted violent forms of street crime (i.e., forcible rape and robbery/homicide) led the participants to display less negative attitudes toward white-collar offenses, even physically harmful activities that caused injury, illness, or death. Phrased differently, both hypotheses that subjects should evince (1) lesser perceived seriousness of harmful white-collar crimes compared with violent street crimes, and (2) lesser punitiveness toward the perpetrators of harmful white-collar offenses compared with violent street offenders, were supported.

These findings suggest that prior studies' conclusions regarding a reversal of public opinions about white-collar crime may have been too optimistic. While Americans are undoubtedly sensitive about crimes of the powerful and consider these activities to be dangerous and deserving of stiff punishments—which should come as no surprise after a decade of high-scale corporate scandals (Cullen et al. 2009)—violent street offenses still seem to elicit a more pronounced societal response.

The exact parameters of this difference remain obscure. For example, it is unclear whether perceived crime seriousness was necessarily due to the physical harmfulness of the crimes described in these vignettes. As expected, white-collar crime scenarios for which victims incurred the most harm were deemed the most serious. Consider the defective toy scenario, which only alluded to a potential risk. Unsurprisingly, it was deemed less serious than the toxic dumping vignette, which referred to people falling “seriously ill”, or the asbestos exposure scenario, in which the words “cancer” and “deaths” were mentioned. Nevertheless, the forcible rape scenario was judged more negatively than all three examples of white-collar crime, including the asbestos exposure vignette in which employees were said to have died from a lethal disease contracted in the workplace. This is surprising since, despite the violent nature of sexual assault, no mention of death was made. It is possible that contextual details influenced respondents' attitudes. The fictional rape victim was assaulted in her own bedroom, which might have made the crime appear even more frightening. Delayed victimization is a common characteristic of white-collar crime (Albanese 1995; Friedrichs 2010; Weisburd and Schlegel 1992). For example, work-related diseases may take years before being diagnosed and attributed to one's professional activity. Consequently, they may not elicit the same amount of shock and fear as street

crime, which might in turn explain this study sample's lower level of perceived seriousness of such offenses.

Alternatively, it could be that the offender's status outranked harmfulness in inviting negative attitudes among the respondents. Subjects were more likely to perceive murder and forcible rape as offenses of greater seriousness to be prosecuted in a criminal court and punished with longer prison terms compared with three examples of corporate crime. Such findings persisted even after controlling for harm intensity. Again, the scenario that described a corporation failing to protect its workers from dangerous toxic contamination and denying its responsibility when they developed and died from fatal diseases contracted in the workplace met with less popular disapproval than did sexual assault, regardless of the fact that no mention was made of the rape victim dying. Perhaps public opprobrium is more likely to be triggered by the disreputable label usually attached to lower-class offenders (Hagan 1994). Conversely, white-collar criminals' occupational prestige (i.e., high educational achievements, positions of power, and desirable salaries) might command admiration and, in turn, serve to attenuate their perceived blameworthiness.

Racial and social class bias may account for this double standard. The literature on fear of crime is replete with studies that identified a relationship between racism and overestimated risks of personal victimization (e.g., Chiricos et al. 1997; Sibley 1995; Skogan 1995; Unnever et al. 2008). It is possible that prejudiced Americans trivialize the threat of corporate violence (i.e., the calculated endangerment of employees, civilians, and customers) because those are more commonly committed by affluent white men. Historically, not only has this particular socio-demographic group held the reins of political power, it has arbitrarily decreed the nature of violent crime (i.e., assault, rape, robbery and homicide<sup>1</sup>) and virulently prosecuted its perpetrators disproportionately comprised of minorities. Unnever et al. (2008) found their African American participants to be more likely than their white counterparts to support punitive policies against corporate swindlers. Further, in a previous iteration of the present study (Michel et al. 2014), Hispanics were more lenient with the street offenders described in the homicide and forcible rape scenarios. Similarly, relatively recent studies have suggested that those with low incomes tend to judge white-collar crime more harshly (Rebovich and Jiandani 2000; Rebovich and Kane 2002). These attitudinal gaps could belie contestatory positions among lower-class minorities against crimes generally committed by the very same individuals whom they consider their oppressors.

The negative label associated with street crime and its perpetrators could also explain why subjects were more inclined to recommend a prison sentence against the murderer and the rapist, and mainly supported monetary sanctions against white-collar criminals. While incapacitating dangerous lower-class felons and imposing a fine on high-status executives perceived to be physically harmless seems logical, it should be noted that no scenario describing white-collar crimes generated mean financial penalties even close to the maximum amount range (i.e., \$1,000,000 and above). It is unclear whether subjects felt that severe monetary punishments would hurt workers more than the managers (e.g., through restructuring and termination of employment) or, alternatively, if they perceived such action to be detrimental to business. Phrased differently, one could explain respondents' leniency in terms of blame attribution (Heider 1958) to either dispositional factors (e.g., corporate offenders should be punished but they are shielded by their employees) or situational ones (e.g., corporations have to make sacrifices, too much regulation will stifle

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<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that the FBI's UCR still relies on these four indicators of violent crime and continues to exclude corporate violence.

entrepreneurship, etc.). Future research may want to tease out the respective effects of blame attribution on differences in sanctions against street crime and white-collar crime.

## Limitations

A series of methodological shortcomings to this study must be addressed. First, relying on short, unrefined and hypothetical vignettes can only yield abstract perceptions of seriousness. Further, the verbiage used in the scenarios was admittedly vague and possibly induced the same kind of bias previously observed in research on public attitudes about white-collar crime. For example, mentioning only a “potential” instead of “known” hazard, or describing “seriously ill” civilians without naming specific diseases could have indirectly lessened the perceived severity of corporate offenses among respondents. Moreover, using the passive voice in the white-collar crime vignettes, without any indication of the signifier’s title, might have unintentionally excised the criminal actor from the narrative. Conversely, overtly identifying responsible persons in the street crime scenarios could have led readers to assign more culpability and punitiveness.

When reading a previous version of this study, a reviewer also took issue with the ambiguous description of the mining company’s actions in the last vignette. More precisely, it was unclear to him/her whether the company actually attempted to silence their own employees’ lung cancer deaths believed to be caused by occupational asbestos exposure or only covered up the potential risk of developing lung cancer. This could have resulted in lower perceived seriousness of, and punitiveness toward, white-collar crime.

In addition, the non-random Internet sample comprised in the majority of relatively young and well-educated white Internet users threatens external validity. Consequently, the present paper’s conclusions are limited in their generalizability. As noted by the aforementioned reviewer, younger, more privileged Internet users are more likely to be distanced by socio-economic status, geography, and emotional connectedness from the kinds of labor and occupational hazards associated with the industrial sector. A replication with a larger, more representative sample is therefore warranted. At the very least, future research should seek to target a wider and more affected audience, and include vignettes that describe crimes committed in other industries (e.g., automobile, airline, construction, agricultural, medical, military, etc.) so that most subjects would have an experiential reference point from which to draw. In fact, the main limitation could be a definitional one. What are the exact contours and limits of physically harmful white-collar crime? This study restricted its focus to examples of corporate violence. Subsequent replications may want to add state-corporate crime (e.g., illegal warfare and war profiteering) to their repertoire and test the labeling hypothesis by controlling for potential socio-demographic dissensus in blame attribution. Lastly, perhaps a more detailed and nuanced description of the various physical, psychological, and moral harms caused by white-collar crime and their lasting effects on the victims would invite a different societal reaction. In fact, the use of photographs with graphic details to illustrate each vignette may help concretize the somewhat abstract notion of harm.

## Implications

This study does not have the pretension to challenge the findings of the National White-Collar Crime Center, whose surveys have been invaluable in debunking the myth of public apathy toward white-collar crime. The American people are not ambivalent about this particular topic and have clearly voiced their personal disapprobation of elite offenses on

several occasions. However, the present paper's results suggest that when comparing violent street crime and harmful white-collar crime, the former emerges as the more seriously perceived offense. The reason why traditional crime elicits greater fear and punitiveness could be because white-collar crime still connotes the idea of financial rather than physical harm. As previously mentioned, differential labeling of crime fueled by class and racial prejudice might perpetuate such cliché. Further, by focusing almost exclusively on non-violent cases of white-collar crime (e.g., Martha Stewart's insider trading scandal), the media also contributes to the propagation of misconceptions about crimes of the powerful (Barlow and Barlow 2010). In fact, one common myth identified by Michel et al. (2014) among their respondents was the physical harmlessness of white-collar offenses relative to street crime, despite irrefutable evidence to the contrary (e.g., the fatal Ford Pinto crashes, the Love Canal tragedy, the Bhopal gas leak disaster, the BP oil spill, etc.).

If official media outlets (which rely on political and corporate sponsorship) are understandably reluctant to highlight the greater harm incurred by white-collar crime victims, perhaps it is criminologists' duty to reach out to the public and close the gap between apocryphal beliefs and academic knowledge. Several studies have lamented the dearth of white-collar crime courses offered in American universities despite the great popularity currently enjoyed by criminology programs (Lynch et al. 2004; McGurkin et al. 2013). A collective action is needed to inform the populace about the myriad ways in which elite crime can harm them, regardless of the aura of prestige that seems to enshrine its perpetrators. Hypothetically, sensitizing the masses about the incalculable harmfulness of state-corporate crime (e.g., unlawful warfare, environmental damage, etc.) could heighten public concern and influence significant penal reform against these offenses.

Nevertheless, two major obstacles might hinder the dissemination of such information. First, political orientation may block the acceptance of messages perceived to be antithetical with one's ideology. A similar phenomenon has been observed by Nyhan and colleagues in regard to Obama's healthcare reform (Nyhan et al. 2013), vaccine promotion (Nyhan et al. 2014), and the purported presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Second, and perhaps more importantly, public efforts such as the National White-Collar Crime Center survey are funded by Congress, the actions of which have been denounced as criminal by critical criminologists (Lynch and Michalowski 2006; Mills 1956; Simon 1999). Notwithstanding the professional integrity of their initiators, white-collar crime awareness programs might therefore be doomed to self-imposed restrictions due to the subversive nature of their subject matter.

### Compliance with Ethical Standard

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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