Original Research Article

Perceptions of White-Collar Crime Seriousness: Unpacking and Translating Attitudes into Policy Preferences

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Abstract

Objectives: Test the role of individual and crime characteristics on public opinions of white-collar crime seriousness and support for crime reduction policy; consider the relationship between perceptions of crime seriousness and

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support for public policies to reduce white-collar crime. *Methods:* Data from a nationally-representative survey. Respondents ($n = 2,050$) rated ten white-collar crimes, relative to a street crime (burglary) and also indicated their relative support (i.e., willingness to pay) for 16 policies to reduce various types of white-collar crime. Models incorporate respondent-level random effects to account for multiple ratings per respondent. *Results:* Crimes committed by organizations are perceived more seriously than those committed by individuals. Perceptions of a white-collar crime as more serious than burglary increase the likelihood of supporting prevention programs. Race and political party are related to both perceptions of crime seriousness and support for prevention policy. *Conclusions:* There may be less consensus around perceptions of white-collar crime seriousness than for other crime types. Perceptions of crime seriousness are a function of both individual and crime characteristics that structure assessments of risk, harmfulness, and wrongfulness. Group differences may be related to differences in awareness of the scope, harms, and perceived victimization risk associated with particular crime types.

The study of public attitudes toward crime and punishment has a long empirical tradition in sociology and criminology beginning with early attempts to create crime seriousness scales (Clark, 1922; Gorsuch, 1938). Sellin and Wolfgang's innovative work (1964) set the modern standard for assessments of seriousness by developing "a subjective measuring stick for assessing the severity of delinquent acts based on the judgments of juvenile court judges, police officers and college students" (Figlio, 1975: 189; see also Stylianou, 2002: 38). Contemporary research seeks to calibrate a common metric of criminality by examining how specific characteristics of criminal acts and their consequences influence evaluator perceptions of seriousness (Rossi, Waite, Bose, and Berk, 1974; Sweeten, 2012).

Similarly, studies of punishment also focus on the specific dimensions of criminal acts or criminal characteristics that foster greater public punitiveness, such as fear of crime, act harm, offender blameworthiness, and whether empirical findings support a conflict or consensus theoretical framework (Jacoby and Cullen, 1998). A related literature examines public attitudes regarding what constitutes a "just" punishment for offenders (Jasso,

1998) or attitudes toward particular criminal justice interventions or prac-
tices such as plea-bargaining (see Herzog, 2003/2004), parole (Cohen,
Rust, Steen, 2003), and correctional rehabilitation for juveniles (Nagin,
Piquero, Scott, and Steinberg, 2006). Importantly, these concepts are inti-
mately entangled: seriousness is sometimes understood as a cause of puni-
tiveness and sometimes as its effect. One of our research goals is to clarify
this relationship through a broader policy option lens.

Generally, most research on public perceptions of crime seriousness scru-
tinize conventional crime leaving other offense types (such as white-collar
crime) relatively unexamined. However, white-collar crime is not missing
entirely from the conversation. Some studies examine the relative ranking
of white-collar and conventional offenses over time to assess whether rank-
ings have changed, especially whether there is a trend toward greater per-
ceived white-collar offense seriousness (Wolfgang, 1985; Cullen, Link,
and Polanzi, 1982; Rossi and Berk, 1997). Others examine the degree of
consensus regarding seriousness rankings (Piquero, Carmichael, and
Piquero, 2008; Michel, 2016). Results reveal inconsistencies as to which
white-collar offenses are rated as serious by the public and how they rank
vis-à-vis conventional crimes (for a review of these studies, see Cullen,
Chouhy, and Jonson, 2019). It is unclear whether the observed inconsisten-
cies are methodological artifacts of how scales are constructed, the crime
types described and kinds of comparisons made (Miethe, 1982; Cullen,
Link, Travis, Wozniak, 1985; Kwan, Chiu, Ip, Kwan, 2002; Sweeten,
2012; Michel, 2016) or if results reflect meaningful differences within and
between evaluators (Michel, 2017). Further, although research suggests
that traditionally observed relationships between group membership and
perceptions of seriousness might be different for white-collar crime,
studies have yet to fully explore the ways in which individual differences
shape white-collar crime perceptions,

The perception of white-collar crime seriousness has important implica-
tions for public policy, such as the extent of public support for certain types
of punishment. For instance, what factors increase punitive preferences
when comparing street with white-collar crimes (Michel, 2016)? In addition,
other research investigates whether governmental authorities pay enough
attention to and are given enough resources to combat and control the white-
collar crime problem (see, e.g., Holtfreter, Van Slyke, Bratton, Gertz, 2008;
Huff, Desilets, and Kane, 2010). Yet, in general, research on policy prefer-
ences has been limited to support for criminal punishments without contex-
tualizing this support within a broader policy landscape that might also
include preventative and restitutive elements (for exceptions, see Cohen,

2015 and Michel, 2016). That is to say, respondents might support policies that increase punishment, but do they support criminal penalties *over and above* an alternative strategy that produces similar reductions in crime? Absent this context, a stated preference for harsh or enhanced punishment might in fact merely reflect a desire for less crime.

Given these gaps and inconsistencies in the literature, the central goals of our study are twofold: to add additional clarity to the questions of white-collar crime seriousness *and* public support for its prevention and control. To that end, we examine ten types of white-collar crimes by comparing perceptions of seriousness against those for a similar conventional crime – burglary (Cohen, 2015; Huff, Desilets, and Kane, 2010). In addition, we assess whether certain elements of white-collar crime – such as whether the offender is an individual or an organization, or the social response to the violation – affect perceptions of crime seriousness. We then investigate the relationship between perceptions of crime seriousness and preferences for public policy using stated willingness to pay for crime control/prevention to assess policy preferences (see also, Piquero, Cohen, and Piquero, 2011; Cohen, 2015). By offering respondents choices between punitive, preventative, and restitutitive policies, we are able to determine whether the observed relationship between perceptions of crime seriousness and public punitiveness is real or an artifact of constrained choices. In the next section, we provide a more fulsome description of the relevant literature and how our research fits within it. We also highlight the theoretical framework guiding our study, developing several research hypotheses that we test using survey data.

Dimensions of Crime Seriousness

After decades of research, there is general agreement that perceptions of crime seriousness are organized around two dimensions (Warr, 1989; Stylianou, 2002): the perceived wrongfulness of the act and its consequences (physical and economic harm). Although overlapping and strongly correlated (Needleman, 1975), harm and wrongfulness can tap into distinct considerations (Warr, 1989). However, the fact that the two dimensions are highly correlated suggests that there also may be underlying factors common to both. White-collar crimes often are considerably more complicated than traditional crimes, including multiple parties, layers of responsibility that may or may not align with the specific harmful act, direct versus indirect victimization, and so on (e.g., Wheeler and Rothman, 1982). Such complexity can make it difficult to

unpack harm and blameworthiness. Further, the punishment of white-collar crime usually takes place out of public view, preventing the public from developing nuanced understandings of important dimensions of white-collar crime (Sutherland, 1949; Diamantis, 2016). Yet white-collar offenses vary widely in terms of their consequences (harm) and moral gravity (wrongfulness), thus we expect there to be observable differences in perceived seriousness across the specific offenses and between categories of white-collar offenses.[1] We also expect that this complexity and unfamiliarity with the many forms of white-collar law violation will engender the use of cognitive shorthand strategies among evaluators, specifically, categorization. Cognitive categorization occurs when individuals rely on "types, categories, stereotypes, and schemas" to inform understanding rather than on detailed assessments of individual circumstances (Weick, 2010: 541). These ideas form the basis of our theoretical framework, described in more detail below.

Offense Harmfulness and Wrongfulness

The objective harms resulting from offending have long been shown to affect perceptions of seriousness. For instance, Sellin and Wolfgang (1964) emphasize the magnitude and type of harm – e.g., bodily injury, property loss, property damage – as a key dimension of seriousness (see also Miller, Rossi, and Simpson 1991). Some scholars suggest that perceptions of lower harmfulness are to blame for perceptions of white-collar crime as less serious relative to comparable street crimes (Rosenmerkel, 2001; Schrager and Short, 1978). However, unlike street crime, the extent and consequences of white-collar victimization is largely unknown. Victimization can be indirect (and therefore less salient) to the public. As noted by Croall (2015: 542), many white-collar crimes "lack immediately identifiable bleeding victims and …. involve largely secondary or tertiary victims." Consequently, the public may not be fully cognizant of white-collar crimes (Michel et al., 2016). This does not imply that white-collar crimes are inconsequential, but rather the harms are harder for the public to visualize and process. In addition, depending on the offense type, victims can experience fewer or greater financial, physical, and emotional/psychological consequences which likely trigger different levels of emotional intensity. For these important reasons, Michel (2016) suggests that studies of crime seriousness should compare similar kinds of offenses (e.g., violent with violent; nonviolent with nonviolent) in order to accurately capture relative seriousness.

The Role of Organizations

One important difference between white-collar and traditional street crime that may capture some element of complexity and also convey harmfulness/wrongfulness is the role of legitimate organizational actors (Schrager and Short, 1978) – most typically businesses – as offenders and victims. The organizational dimension is an important one because it can convey unspecified information regarding the nature of the offense, including potential scope, act consequences, and the illegal actor's power to influence law and justice processing. It can also signify intent, blameworthiness, victim vulnerability and degree of harm. Describing organizations as offenders and victims can also (imperfectly) differentiate status and prestige—factors that may affect the perceived dispositional attributions of offenders (Hurwitz and Peffley, 1997; Unnever, Benson, and Cullen, 2008; Michel, 2017).

Evidence regarding the organizational dimension on perceptions of seriousness is mixed. In an early study, Miller, Rossi, and Simpson (1991) found survey respondents viewed crimes by large national corporations to be more serious than those by smaller firms. Respondents were also more punitive toward corporations that engaged in white-collar crimes for profit than toward individuals who committed comparable "financial" crimes. In their national household survey of environmental crime, Shelley, Chiricos, and Gertz (2011) contrasted scenarios in which offenses were committed by a large factory versus those involving local (i.e., smaller) businesses and individuals. Crimes committed by large factories were rated as more serious than the other two but the authors were unable to determine whether that assessment was due to the power and size of the organization or because the factory scenario included a more harmful outcome (see also, Huff, Desilets, and Kane, 2010).

Fewer studies have explored the role of organizational (versus individual) victims on perceptions. Levi and Jones (1985:242) indirectly addressed this question in a crime seriousness survey conducted in the UK. Respondents rated a £1,000 mail-order fraud involving individual victims more seriously than a £2,000 fraud perpetrated upon a large manufacturer – potentially suggesting that the victim characteristics rather than the absolute financial cost distinguished respondents' evaluations. The difference may reveal an underlying attitude that organizations, given their presumed levels of collective resources, can better "afford" victimization (Cullen, et al., 1982) – a position that, in effect, neutralizes victimhood (see Hollinger, 1991) and therefore the act is perceived as less morally wrong. Conversely, Miller, Rossi, and

Simpson (1991) found that respondents expressed *more* punitive views when the victim was an organization, but this finding may have been affected by the fact that the crime in question (trespass) had no financial consequences. Although the literature is mixed, we expect that organizations will be viewed as capable of perpetrating greater harms than individual perpetrators but also that organizational status will neutralize victimhood, reducing evaluations of offense seriousness. Given these considerations, we hypothesize:

H1a: Acts in which organizations are offenders will be rated as more serious than the same act in which an individual is involved.

H1b: Acts in which organizations are victims will be rated as less serious than the same act in which an individual is victimized.

The Role of Legal Mechanisms

The creation and activation of law plays an important role in signifying that something is right or wrong (Robinson and Darley, 2007: 30). Criminal processing of cases serves a societal boundary maintenance function by reifying what is acceptable behavior and what is not in a society (Erikson, 1966), as do less formal processes of social shaming and status degradation (Garfinkel, 1956; Goffman, 1963). Thus, descriptions of justice processes used to control harm-generating activities convey information about wrongfulness and should inform, at least in part, perceptions of crime seriousness (Bowles, Faure, and Garoupa, 2008). Importantly, not all types of law carry the same messages and they have different purposes (Reiss, 1984). Some types of law are understood to be punitive and stigmatic (e.g., criminal), while others carry less moral authority (e.g., regulatory and civil) and can be discredited or politically delegitimized in the eyes of the public (e.g., the regulation vs deregulation debate; corporate capture of regulation). Because many types of white-collar offending, particularly those involving corporate malfeasance, are pursued outside of the criminal justice system (Sutherland, 1949; Frank and Lombness, 1988; Simpson, 2019), we expect that public perceptions of wrongfulness (and thus seriousness) will be influenced by information regarding legal system response. Thus:

H2: Depictions of white-collar crimes as violations of criminal law will be perceived as more serious than those described as violations of civil or administrative law.

Preferences for Crime Prevention

As mentioned, assessments of seriousness and preferences for responses to crime are intertwined both theoretically and empirically. Some studies use punitive attitudes toward crime to *infer* seriousness, such as the willingness to impose a prison sentence, the degree of a hypothetical fine given, or broad support for "stricter penalties" for a given type of offense (see, Cohen, Rust, Steen, 2003; Holtfreter, Van Slyke, Bratton, and Gertz, 2008; Unnever et al., 2008). Indeed, seriousness appears to be an important component of punitiveness (O'Connell and Whelan, 1996). Prior research on white-collar crime suggests that punitive attitudes are more likely when individuals believe that white-collar crime is serious and results in *physical* consequences (Michel et al., 2014). Fear of victimization is also related to punitive reactions, possibly through inflated assessments of crime seriousness or moral wrongfulness when the victim is no longer abstract. As summarized by Holtfreter, Van Slyke, Bratton, and Gertz (2008:52), "there appears to be moderate strong consensus among research findings that perceived victimization risk is an important determinant of punitive public attitudes toward crime and criminals."

Yet, it is important that these concepts are not conflated. The relationship between crime seriousness and punitiveness varies depending on the penological philosophy espoused, such as whether a person subscribes to a retributivist vs. a consequentialist approach. The latter punishment theory more closely links to the specific harm (seriousness) of an offense, while the former includes elements of individual blameworthiness and culpability in addition to the objective harm (see a discussion of these issues in Tonry, 2018 and von Hirsch, 1992). Thus, when scholars conflate measures of seriousness with public punitiveness, it can engender a misleading estimate of public support for more serious punishment policies, which might then be enacted with considerable human and fiscal cost.

Instead, greater perceived crime seriousness may also simply reflect a desire for policy that does *something*, rather than specifically advocating a retributive response. More serious crimes might also be associated with a greater desire for crime prevention programs and restitution. Indeed, prior research has demonstrated broad public support for restitution programs for white-collar crimes, especially where individuals fear their own victimization (Galvin et al., 2018). Restricting policy preferences only to punitiveness fails to consider the full range of public options and "may contribute to the diffusion of criminal justice policies that are inconsistent with the

public's true preferences" (McGuire and Johnson, 2015:504). Nagin, Piquero, Scott, and Steinberg (2006) explored public preferences for responses to juvenile crime, reporting that the public supported rehabilitative policies at least as much as punitive policies and also expressed broad support for prevention programs. Prevention and restitution are likely to be substantial motivating factors when fear of victimization is high and the consequences are perceived to be great. Policy preferences are inherently multidimensional, affected potentially by specific issues, certain types of offenders, or linked to justice institutions (Maguire and Johnson, 2015: 522). Like Herzog (2003/2004), we anticipate that heterogeneity in public perceptions of crime seriousness will be associated with heterogeneity in public support for different crime intervention strategies, not only those that are punitive in nature (see also Jasso, 1998). Specifically:

> **H3a:** Perceptions of seriousness will be positively associated with willingness to pay for crime prevention policies.

> **H3b:** Perceptions of seriousness will *not* be associated with a preference for deterrence relative to other policy options.

Framing Perceptions of Seriousness and Policy Preferences

As previously mentioned, extensive research over the past 60 years suggests widespread public agreement and relative consistency regarding *the relative rank ordering* of offenses by seriousness (Wolfgang et al., 1985) and a general "intuitive" normative consensus that offenders who engage in serious wrongdoing should be punished (Robinson and Darley, 2007). Such findings suggest that the population generally shares similar attitudes about crime and that these norms are unrelated to group membership. However, group membership retains importance in some instances, especially as related to *objective* measures of seriousness across groups. Piquero, Carmichael, and Piquero (2008) suggest that higher perceptions of white collar crime seriousness in some sociodemographic groups (for females and older responders) may reflect relative anticipatory risks based on certain group membership. However, the demographic variables in their study were inconsistent predictors across crime comparisons. Research has found that a group's greater rate of crime victimization is associated with heightened fears about crime and concerns about physical safety (Ghandnoosh, 2014). Membership in a group seen as particularly vulnerable to certain offenses can increase "risk sensitivity" and, relatedly, the

perceived harmfulness of the offense (Rosenmerkel, 2001; Piquero, Carmichael, and Piquero, 2008; Shelley, Chiricos, and Gertz, 2011).

Further, assessments are often influenced by shared collective understandings based on group membership above and beyond anticipatory risk (Tonry, 2004: 70) – i.e., cognitive frames. Cognitive frames suggest a shared worldview or "sensibility" that provide "interpretative frameworks" for understanding an information environment "to give it form and meaning" (Walsh, 1995:281). Cognitive frames organize and make sense of the world while reducing complexity and ambiguity; they serve as functional heuristics to generate judgements (Hurwitz and Peffley, 1997). Drawing from cognitive frames and attribution theory (see, Heider, 1958; Unnever, Benson, and Cullen, 2008; Michel, 2016), we suggest that perceptions of crime seriousness and crime prevention/control policies, in addition to being affected by the objective characteristics of an illegal act, are also understood in the context of a racialized society and criminal justice system.

Race is a key dimension of an individuals' lived reality, likely affected by observations and experiences of perceived systemic injustices. Hagan, Shedd, and Payne (2005) emphasize the salience of negative experiences with the criminal justice system among people of color in shaping mental maps of injustice (Shedd and Hagan, 2006). A recent study conducted by Pew researchers (Gramlich, 2019) revealed that almost 9 out of 10 Black respondents believed that Blacks (as a group) were treated less fairly in the criminal justice than Whites (as a group) whereas only 6/10 whites agreed (Horowitz, Brown, and Cox, 2019). Relatedly, Unnever et al. (2008) argue that because attitudes toward crime and crime control are socially constructed in line with class and race relations, Blacks and Whites have different cognitive frames when it comes to views of crime and crime control (see also, Hagan, 2010; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1997). Black respondents, compared to those who are White, tend to perceive street crime as less serious because they attribute it to situational circumstances and conditions, i.e., less morally "wrong" (Miller, Rossi and Simpson, 1986). They also are more mistrustful of the criminal justice system than are Whites, with mistrust translating into reduced punitiveness (Peffley and Hurwitz, 2010).

Thus, individuals who are Black generally share a more socio-political "liberal" attitude toward crime than do their White counterparts. Whites, on the other hand, are more apt to adopt a "conservative" framework – seeing criminals as "pernicious and incorrigible" (Unnever, et al., 2008:167). From this cognitive lens, offenders are attributed criminal dispositions and thus are deserving of harsh punishment. Whites also tend to have

more faith in the criminal justice system than do persons of color who view it as racialized and unfair (Peffley and Hurwitz, 2010). Such differences are associated with the "racial gap" in punitiveness, a gap in which Whites support harsher punishments such as the death penalty, three strikes laws, and trying juveniles as adults by significant margins over Blacks (Ghandnoosh, 2014).

White-collar crimes, however, disturb these cognitive landscapes in several ways. Offense complexity and unfamiliarity can generate the use of cognitive shorthand strategies to make sense of the typical white-collar criminal rather than relying on detailed assessments of individual circumstances (Weick, 2010: 541). Racial typifications that typically guide cultural understandings about "who is the criminal" are upended. As noted by Harris (1977:12), "it is strongly type-scripted that in American society street crimes represent the preserve of [B]lacks and the poor." However, Blacks and the poor do not fit the typescript for white-collar crimes, which are typified as White crimes (Unnever et al., 2008). Social messaging through media and political discourse (Foreman, Arteaga, and Collins, 2016) strongly suggest that street crimes (and criminals) are to be feared and punished but the messaging about white-collar crimes is much less consistent, waxing and waning with infamous scandals, political ideology, and academic attention (Katz, 1980). Hagan (2010) argues that in the United States, concurrent with the beginning of the Reagan era (approximately the mid-1970s), political ideology and criminal justice responses promoted fear of street crime and criminals while taking the spotlight off of white-collar crime—a condition where "fearing the streets…. freed the suites" (161). While the typification of street crime has emphasized Black offenders and the need to "protect" society from those dispositionally disposed toward crime (e.g., super predators, Dilulio, 1995) through retribution and harsh punishment (Michel, 2017), white-collar offenders benefitted from their presumed whiteness and the ability to develop and sell narratives that shift blame away from personal responsibility toward situational factors (Benson, 1985) and intra-organizational socialization (Sutherland, 1949). Such attributions should result in greater willingness to pay for white-collar crime prevention policies for Blacks and politically liberal respondents, relative to Whites and conservatives. Additionally, Blacks and liberal respondents may prefer punitive policies relative to restitutive or prevention-based policies (Michel, 2017), but this outcome is likely a function of the kinds of white-collar offenses under consideration.

Based on these conceptual arguments and the fact that our study captures white-collar offenses of a financial and not physical nature, we expect that

the general trend of greater perceived crime seriousness among Whites relative to Blacks and political conservatives relative to liberals will "switch" when white-collar crimes are under consideration. We expect that White respondents will adopt more of a situational stance when assessing white-collar offenses while Black respondents will view these offenses and offenders as yet another way in which whites unfairly dominate the racial/class hierarchy. Whites will perceive white-collar crime as less serious; they will be more mistrustful of the justice systems handling white-collar crime; and more equivocal in their policy preferences compared with individuals who are Black.[2] As for other racial/ethnic groups, Hagan, Shedd, and Payne (2005) predict that Hispanic respondents will fall somewhere between respondents who are White and Black in their perceptions of injustice and consequently in their attitudes toward crime policy. Some traditional crime data support this assertion. For instance, a summary study of racial differencers of punitiveness reported varied levels of support, by race, for the death penalty: 63% of Whites, 40% of Hispanics, and 35% of Blacks supported the death penalty for persons convicted of murder (Ghandnoosh,2014). However, other studies of white-collar crime seriousness suggest that specific offense types may disrupt these general expectations (Gordon, Bindrim, McNicholas, and Walden, 1988) in which case we may find important race/ethnic differences across white-collar offense categories. Additionally, any potential differences in seriousness should lead to differences in support for any policy, rather than punitive policies exclusively. We thus expect racial group and political orientation differences in our outcomes of interest such that:

H4a: Black respondents, as compared with Whites and Latinos, are more likely to perceive white-collar crimes as serious, net of individual differences.

H4b: Liberal political ideology will be associated with higher ratings of white-collar crime seriousness relative to burglary, net of individual differences.

H5a: Black respondents, as compared with Whites and Latinos, are more likely to support white-collar crime prevention policy, net of individual differences in perceived seriousness.

H5b: Liberal political ideology will be associated with a greater likelihood of support for white-collar crime prevention policy, net of individual differences in perceived seriousness.

Methods and Sample

Data were collected via an online survey administered to a KnowledgePanel® through an agreement with GfK, a professional research group. The Knowledge Panel sample consists of individuals recruited and maintained by GfK for participation in a variety of focus group and survey projects.[3] The KnowledgePanel® is designed to be statistically representative of the U.S. population and has been utilized in numerous academic and peer-reviewed studies including (among others) research on victimization; gun ownership, use, and storage; and mental health consequences of exposure to traumatic events (e.g., Shadel, Pak, and Sauer, 2014; Taylor and Mumford, 2016; Kleck, 2018; Wolfson, Azrael, and Miller, 2018; Taylor, Mumford, and Liu; 2016; Liu, Mumford, and Taylor, 2017; Karras, Stokes, Warfield, Barth, and Bossarte, 2019; and Tynes, Willis, Stewart, and Hamilton, 2019). Eligible respondents for our study were those who could complete the survey in either English or Spanish, were aged 18 or older, and were a resident of the United States. The final survey data[4] were solicited and collected between May 28 and June 14, 2015. Individuals who did not respond to the initial survey invitation were reminded on the third, seventh, ninth, fourteenth, and sixteenth day to encourage maximum response. Of the contacted sample of 3,675, 2,050 completed the survey, producing a response rate of 56%.[5]

The sample largely mirrors the United States population, with a couple deviations. Slightly more than half of the respondents were female. Non-Hispanic Whites accounted for 62% of the sample, while 7% were non-Hispanic black, and 24% Hispanic.[6] On average, respondents were 49 years old and less than half (44%) had a high school education or less. Our sample is generally consistent with the general population of the US regarding gender and race.[7] However, our respondents are less educated and trend older.[8] Descriptive statistics for the panel and for the U.S. adult population in 2015 are included in the supplemental information (B).

Variables and Measures

Crime Seriousness

We asked respondents to rate the seriousness of different scenarios describing specific examples of identity theft, financial, and consumer frauds.[9] We assessed crime seriousness using a five-point referential severity scale in which participants were asked to indicate whether the crime described

was (1) much less serious, (2) somewhat less serious, (3) about as serious, (4) somewhat more serious or (5) much more serious than a burglary in which $10,000 of jewelry was stolen from a temporarily unoccupied residence. We designed scenarios to be consistent with the most recent version of the National White-collar Crime Center's survey (Huff et al. 2010).[10] The National White-collar Crime Center's data and methods have been used in other studies comparing white-collar crime with traditional crime (see, e.g., Schoepfer, Carmichael, and Piquero, 2007; Cohen, 2015). The use of referential seriousness, rather than direct rankings, is consistent with findings that while there is general agreement on *relative* ordering of seriousness across individuals, individuals vary substantially in their perceptions of seriousness on objective scales (Wolfgang et al., 1985). Such an approach serves to anchor each respondent within their own scale of seriousness perceptions. Further, research on white-collar seriousness is inherently referential – does the public view white-collar crimes *as more serious than traditional crimes*, and if so, under what conditions (Cullen, Chouhy, and Jonson, 2019)? Our interest is less, then, in the objective seriousness ratings of each of these vignettes (which represent but a small selection of white-collar crimes) but in the characteristics associated with greater relative severity.

Our choice of burglary as a reference point (instead of car theft which was used in Huff et al., 2010) is based on several factors. First, burglary allowed us to specify an instance in which an individual would not directly encounter the perpetrator and thus would not endure the threat of physical harm from victimization. By eliminating physical harm from the equation, all crimes in the study involve the taking of money or valuables. Further, direct monetary victim loss for each crime where a dollar amount was specified was standardized at $10,000. This allows us to compare white-collar crime to a more traditional street crime with similar dollar amounts lost. Beyond financial harms, both burglary and white-collar victimization may produce similar feelings of anxiety following a victimization experience, particularly to the extent that the individual feels a sense of violated trust, or contamination of a "safe" space (Button et al., 2014; Copes et al., 2010; Dodge, 2020, Ganzini et al., 1990; Kempa, 2010). Also, by limiting ourselves to nonviolent white-collar crimes and burglary, we are able to reduce significantly the number of dimensions of harm that might skew any findings. Finally, we note that prior literature finds that the public's perceived harm from burglary is similar to that of many other white-collar crimes. For example, Cohen (2015) finds that the public's willingness-to-pay to reduce one burglary ($19,000; 95% CI $15,000-$23,000) is only slightly higher than that of one

financial fraud ($12,000; 95% CI $9,500-$14,000). In contrast, the willingness-to-pay to reduce a rape was an order of magnitude higher ($300,000; 95% CI $260,000-$340,000), while that of murder another order of magnitude ($6.5 million; 95% CI $5.4-$7.5 million). Burglary thus provides a reasonable conceptual reference point for respondents and also allows our willingness to pay estimates to be comparable to Cohen's (2015).

We conducted a total of eleven comparisons. These included four examples of financial fraud (a Ponzi scheme, the bundling and selling of toxic mortgages, sale of subprime mortgages to consumers, overbilling for insurance); four examples of consumer or business fraud (billing consumer or business for services not received, sale of counterfeit goods, payment for unnecessary repairs); two acts of identity theft; and one instance of computer hacking (which is not used in the subsequent analyses due to its lack of quantifiable harm). Some scenarios included information about the magnitude of financial loss or illicit gain associated with the offense; in each case, the total was set to $10,000 to be comparable to the reference crime, though the number of victims varied. The full instrument is available from the authors; we report the exact wording of questions related to crime seriousness in Appendix A.

Given the relational construction of the instrument, it is not possible for us to present a single ordinal construct of crime seriousness on which burglary and the various forms of white-collar crimes are rank ordered. However, we can generate a metric that demonstrates, among the crimes presented, the relative seriousness of these offenses, i.e., whether the white-collar crime in a given scenario was *more serious than burglary*. Thus, we collapsed our five-category response into a dichotomous indicator of perceptions that the given scenario was considered more serious than burglary (capturing both "somewhat more serious" and "much more serious"), relative to those who did not think the scenario was more serious than burglary (including those who thought it was "about as serious"). This metric is particularly interesting given the long-standing but mostly debunked argument that the public does not consider white-collar crime to be as serious as street crime (Cullen et al. 2019; Healy and McGrath, 2019). Further, given that white-collar crime is an amorphous construct and the public has been shown to vary in their assessment of offenses' "white-collarness" (Galvin et al., 2021), our approach allows us to ask not only *if* white-collar crimes are considered more serious than a comparable traditional crime but also *under what conditions*? And what is the relationship between perceptions of seriousness and support for crime reduction?

Crime Types and Scenario Characteristics

Scenarios were categorized by offense type (consumer fraud, financial fraud, identity theft), the type of offender and victim (organizational vs. individual). A description of each scenario's classification is available in the supplemental information (C).

Prior Victimization and Anticipated Risk

Extant literature highlights the potential relevance of victimization experiences on seriousness assessments and policy preferences (Rosenmerkel, 2001; Holtfreter et al., 2008). Survey respondents reported whether they or anyone in their households had been the victim of financial or consumer fraud, identity theft, or burglary. They were also asked how likely they were to be affected in the future by these crimes. While anticipated victimization was reported on a five-point Likert scale, we focus on those who report themselves as having a somewhat or much higher likelihood of victimization for each of the crime types.

Group Membership and Political Attitudes

Sociodemographic characteristics (race, sex,) were provided by GfK. Respondents self-reported political ideology (collapsed to "conservative", "moderate", and "liberal"). Although findings from previous studies are inconsistent regarding the relationship between other demographic indicators and crime seriousness and policy preferences, we initially included age, education, and income as potential controls in preliminary analyses. Ultimately, they were excluded from the final models based on model fit statistics as described below.

Legal Responses

Respondents received randomized supplemental information for some of the offenses. For five of the consumer and financial frauds in which companies were involved, scenarios were randomly assigned information about whether there was an official justice system response (civil, criminal, or regulatory/administrative) to the offense. These three "punishment frames," as we refer to them, were presented to approximately one quarter of the respondents per offense. The rest of the respondents received no information about official response and sanctions.

Policy Preferences

Another portion of the survey asked respondents to estimate their household's willingness to pay (WTP; also known as contingent valuation) for certain crime reduction programs that included various combinations of deterrence, victim education, and victim compensation. Nagin et al. (2006) use a similar methodology to determine support for specific policies (see also Galvin et al., 2018; Picasso and Cohen, 2018; Carson and Louviere, 2017; Piquero, Cohen, and Piquero, 2011). Instructions specified that the money paid to support programs would be in the form of increased taxes for individuals or cuts to other government services (ex-ante correction).

Respondents received four WTP scenarios, one relating to each offense type – financial fraud, consumer fraud, identity theft, and burglary. For each crime, we provided respondents with a brief description of the crime and information about its annual incidence and average dollar loss from a victimization.[11] Six programs were considered for each crime type.[12] The programs vary in their dedication of funds towards particular policies (victim compensation, offender punishment, and prevention programing) and in how much crime reduction was achieved by the program. Respondents were then directed to indicate the maximum amount that they would be willing to pay annually on behalf of their households for each of four program packages if that option was adopted (zero was an option). In this article, we use reported WTP as a *relative* (rather than absolute) measure of policy preferences, consistent with Kahneman and Ritov (1994).[13] Specifically, because prior research has suggested that many individuals support not only deterrent but also restitutive measures for white-collar crime (Galvin, Loughran, Simpson, and Cohen, 2018), we are interested in the expression of policy preference as a non-zero dollar response to a WTP questions.[14]

Analytic Strategy

In the first stage of analysis, we present models predicting the likelihood that respondents rate a white-collar crime as more serious than a burglary. This treatment thus moves beyond prior literature by asking not, "Do people view white-collar crime as more serious than street crime," but rather, "Under what circumstances is white-collar crime considered more serious than burglary?" Each individual appears in the data multiple times, once for each of ten crime seriousness scenarios[15]; i.e., scenarios are nested in respondents.

Because we are interested in both within-respondent characteristics (e.g., type of crime, organizational involvement) and between-respondent (group) differences, we use a multilevel logistic regression model. The final models presented were selected based on substantive value, fit statistics (AIC, BIC), explained variance, and likelihood ratio tests (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal, 2012). Because predictor and outcome variables are categorical or dichotomous, we did not center variables, meaning that coefficients and average marginal effects reflect the differences between individuals who have the characteristic and those that do not.

In the second stage of analysis, we are interested in whether perceptions of crime seriousness affect preferences for crime reduction policies. We calculate within-respondent measures of crime-type seriousness, specifically, whether the respondent identifies all of the representative scenarios as "more serious" than burglary. We then use this between-respondent variation to predict WTP for white-collar crime reduction programs. Each respondent provided four WTP estimates for each crime type. In this analysis we are primarily concerned with WTP for white-collar crime policies; each respondent thus provided up to 12 WTP estimates. Consequently, we also use a multilevel logistic regression with respondents as level-two units. To determine whether respondents who view crimes as more serious are more likely to support policies with additional punishment relative to other policies, we limit our sample to only those estimates where the respondent indicated that the crime type was more serious than burglary and focus on the effect of additional punishment in the policy package.[16]

Results

Crime Seriousness

Table 1 reports the average marginal effects from multilevel random intercept logistic regression predicting whether a crime scenario would be seen as more serious than burglary. Average marginal effects (AMEs) can be understood as the average absolute percentage change in the likelihood of the outcome. The null, or unconditional model, estimates the amount of variance in seriousness ratings that can be attributable to between-respondent differences. Model 1 incorporates both between and within-respondent characteristics informed by hypotheses and model selection criteria using all scenarios in the sample, while Model 2 uses only a subset of those scenarios in which a punishment frame was provided.

Table 1. Results from Multilevel Logistic Regression Model Predicting Rating White-Collar Crime Categories as More Serious Than Burglary.

	Null	Model 1			Model 2		
		AME	SE	Sig.	AME	SE	Sig.
Scenario Characteristics							
Crime Type	Consumer Fraud	−0.262	0.008	***	−0.217	0.014	***
	Financial Fraud	−0.060	0.007	***	−0.062	0.01	***
	Identity Theft		(reference)			(reference)	
Victim	Organization	−0.084	0.010	***	−0.068	0.015	***
	Individual		(reference)			(reference)	
Offender	Organization	0.079	0.006	***	0.044	0.009	***
	Individual		(reference)			(reference)	
Punishment	Civil	-	-		0.029	0.014	*
	Criminal	-	-		−0.003	0.014	
	Administrative					(reference)	
Respondent Characteristics							
Sex	Male	−0.032	0.016	*	−0.12	0.02	***
	Female		(reference)			(reference)	
Race	Black	0.051	0.032		0.132	0.03	***
	Hispanic	−0.041	0.019	*	0.136	0.022	***
	Other Race	0.081	0.042	*	0.117	0.031	***
	White		(reference)			(reference)	
Political Beliefs	Conservative	−0.035	0.018	*	0.001	0.021	
	Liberal	−0.005	0.021		−0.015	0.025	
	Moderate		(reference)			(reference)	

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	Null			Model 1				Model 2		
			AME	SE	Sig.		AME	SE	Sig.
Previous Victimization	Yes			−0.001	0.012			0.019	0.017	***
	No				(reference)				(reference)	
Anticipated Victimization	Yes			0.049	0.014	***		0.067	0.021	***
	No				(reference)				(reference)	
N		19,004			19,004				4,843	
Pearson R²		-			0.50				0.75	
ICC		0.62			0.69				0.93	

* p < .05, two-tailed.
** p < .01, two-tailed.
*** p < .005, two-tailed.
AME = Average Marginal Effect.
SE = Standard Error.
ICC = Inter-Class Correlation.

The results from the null model suggested strong support for a multilevel analysis; more than 60% of variation in perceptions of seriousness are attributable to the individual respondent providing the response, as shown by the intra-class correlation (Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal, 2012). Model 1 adds both scenario and respondent characteristics. Crime type was significantly related to perceptions of seriousness; consumer fraud scenarios were substantially less likely to be considered more serious than burglary, relative to identity theft. In other words, the probability of a scenario being rated as more serious than burglary was 0.262 lower for consumer frauds than for identity theft (SE = 0.008). Financial frauds were also less likely to be rated as more serious than burglary, but by a much smaller margin (AME = −0.060; SE = 0.007). Together, respondents were mostly likely to say identity theft was more serious than burglary, followed by financial fraud, and then consumer fraud.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that crimes with greater harmfulness would be rated more seriously. Our measures of harmfulness, organizational versus individual offenders/victims, were related to perceived seriousness as expected. Scenarios with organizational offenders were more likely to be rated as more serious than burglary (AME = 0.079, SE = 0.006), relative to those crimes with individual offenders. Further, the probability that crimes committed against organizational *victims* would be rated as more serious than burglary was 0.084 lower, consistent with a perception that crimes against businesses are less harmful or morally wrong than crimes against individuals.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that assessments of crime seriousness would be affected by the way in which the crime is punished. Model 2 presents regression results for a subset of cases in which punishment information was provided to respondents. Contrary to expectations, scenarios in which respondents randomly received information that the offense was criminally punished were not more likely to rate the offense as more serious than burglary compared to those who received information that the offense was administratively punished. However, respondents were more likely to rate the offense as more serious if they saw information that the offense was punished *civilly*. Other models (not shown) also failed to find an effect of receiving any punishment information relative to those who received no punishment information.

We find mixed evidence for our expectations of the relationships between group membership and perceptions of crime seriousness. Hypothesis 4 predicted that Black respondents would rate white-collar offenses as more serious than would Whites. Surprisingly, in the full model, Black

respondents did not statistically differ in their likelihood of rating white-collar crime as serious relative to white respondents. Also counter to expectations, Hispanic respondents were *less* likely to rate white-collar crime as more serious than burglary, relative to whites. It is worth noting, however, that the relationship between race and reported seriousness is different in Model 2 compared with Model 1. In the more reduced set of scenarios analyzed in Model 2, both Hispanic and black respondents are more likely than whites to view white-collar crimes as more serious than burglary. One explanation could be that race differences are triggered by additional justice processing information. The mention of different justice frames may serve as a reminder to members of these groups that white-collar offenders are treated differently than street offenders. Under these circumstances, racial group membership appears to trump political ideology, which is not statistically significant in Model 2. However, we did find a relationship between political ideology and perceptions of crime seriousness in the Model 1 with the full sample (Hypothesis 5). The probability of rating a crime as more serious than burglary was 0.035 lower for conservative respondents, relative to moderates (SE = 0.018). We did not observe any significant differences in perceived seriousness between political liberals and moderates. Finally, consistent with other studies (Holtfreter et al., 2008; Dodge et al., 2013), we note that men were less likely than women to consider white-collar crimes as more serious than burglary (AME = −0.032, SE = 0.016).

Support for Crime Reduction

The next set of analyses turn to the role that crime seriousness perceptions have in preferences for crime reduction policies as expressed through willingness to pay. Table 2 reports the results of multilevel models predicting any willingness to pay for the described crime program, controlling for policy package information and individual characteristics. As shown by the intra-class correlation of the null model, 41% of variation in willingness to pay is attributable to between respondent differences. In the full model (Model 3), 43% of the residual variation – after accounting for the within- and between- respondent characteristics in the model – is attributable to respondent differences.

Consistent with Hypothesis 3a, individuals who rated all represented instances of a white-collar crime type as more serious than burglary (e.g., all consumer frauds; all financial frauds, all identity theft frauds) were more likely to be willing to pay for crime reduction programs (AME =

Table 2. Results from Multilevel Logistic Regression Predicting Willingness to pay for White-Collar Crime Prevention and Control Policies.

	Null	Model 3			Model 4		
		AME	SE	Sig.	AME	SE	Sig.
Scenario Characteristics							
Crime Type							
Consumer Fraud		−0.012	0.005	*	−0.005	0.010	
Financial Fraud		−0.002	0.006		0.006	0.014	
Identity Theft		(reference)			(reference)		
Policies Included							
Restitution		0.053	0.004	***	0.065	0.008	***
Victim Education		−0.169	0.005	***	−0.129	0.010	***
Police and Punishment		−0.167	0.005	***	−0.141	0.010	***
Respondent Characteristics							
Perceptions of Crime Seriousness							
All more Serious		0.020	0.007	***	-	-	
Not all more serious		(reference)			(reference)		
Sex							
Male		0.036	0.012	***	0.033	0.017	
Female		(reference)			(reference)		
Race							
Black		0.045	0.024		0.044	0.033	
Hispanic		0.031	0.015	*	0.029	0.023	
Other Race		0.037	0.024		0.068	0.031	*
White		(reference)			(reference)		
Political Beliefs							
Conservative		−0.014	0.014		−0.036	0.020	
Liberal		0.033	0.016	*	0.006	0.023	
Moderate		(reference)			(reference)		

(continued)

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Table 2. (continued)

		Null	Model 3			Model 4		
			AME	SE	Sig.	AME	SE	Sig.
Previous Victimization	Yes		−0.046	0.010	***	−0.038	0.020	
	No			(reference)			(reference)	
Anticipated Victimization	Yes		0.026	0.012	*	0.041	0.021	*
	No			(reference)			(reference)	
N		33,060	33,060			9,696		
Pearson R^2		-	0.30			0.26		
ICC		0.41	0.43			0.43		

* $p < .05$, two-tailed.
** $p < .01$, two-tailed.
*** $p < .005$, two-tailed.
AME = Average Marginal Effect.
SE = Standard Error.
ICC = Inter-Class Correlation.

0.02, SE = 0.007). The models also offer mixed support for the cognitive framing hypotheses (5a and 5b): Hispanic respondents were 3.1% more likely to pay for crime reduction policies compared to white respondents, which may be related to the fact that Spanish-speaking communities specifically have been targeted by fraudsters (Federal Trade Commission, 2004). However, black respondents were no more or less likely to support crime reduction policies, net of other factors. Respondents with liberal ideologies were more likely to support crime reduction programs than were moderates (AME = 0.033, SE = 0.017).

As with perceptions of crime seriousness, we observed strong differences in willingness to pay cross crime type: respondents are less willing to pay for consumer fraud reduction programs than for identity theft programs, consistent with the earlier finding that consumer fraud is less likely to be perceived as more serious than burglary relative to identity theft. Interestingly, restitution is the only component of crime reduction packages associated with an increase in willingness to pay (AME = 0.053, SE = 0.004); respondents are 5% more likely to be willing to pay for policy packages that include restitution than for those that do not. Net of crime seriousness perceptions, the likelihood that a respondent would pay for crime reduction policies was 0.036 higher for male respondents than for women (SE = 0.012).

Interestingly, respondents who perceived a high risk of future victimization by a particular crime type were 2.6% more likely to be willing to pay for crime reduction programs. However, respondents were *less* likely to be willing to pay for policies that reduced crime types of which respondents had previously been victims (AME = −0.046, SE = 0.010). Thus, potential victimization generated more willingness to pay than past experience with white-collar crime. Some types of white-collar crime (such as credit card fraud) may involve relatively little financial loss and hassle if victims are made whole (quickly and completely) by credit card companies.[17] Thus, actual victimization may lead respondents to perceive relatively few negative outcomes compared to frauds they have not experienced but can only imagine.

Finally, turning to Model 4, we see that by limiting the sample to only those scenarios in which the individual views the crime as more serious than burglary, the primary differences in willingness to pay for crime programs derive from the policies included in the crime reduction package, rather than differences between respondents. Specifically, consistent with Hypothesis 3b, we see that even when individuals consider a white-collar crime as more serious than burglary, they are less – rather than more – likely to support crime reduction programs that include a punitive focus

on enhanced policing and sentencing (AME = −0.141, SE = 0.010). Instead, respondents continue to support restitutive policy packages more than those without them (AME = 0.064, SE = 0.008).

Discussion and Conclusion

Over the past 50 years, research has shown a narrowing of the public attitude gap in terms of perceived seriousness of street and white-collar offenses (see Cullen et al., 2019, for review). The important question, then, is not *if* but *under what conditions* does the public to see white-collar crime as more serious? Further, do perceptions of crime seriousness translate into broad support for public policies that reduce crime? Or is crime seriousness innately tied to preferences for *punitive* policy responses? In this study, we test these questions using unique nationally representative survey data. Results were consistent with our expectations that offense harmfulness drives the relative perceptions of white-collar crime seriousness (Stylianou, 2002). Crimes in which powerful offenders (i.e., organizations) are seen as taking advantage of the public are more likely to be rated as serious when compared with burglary even when the absolute financial loss associated with individual offenders is the same. Contrarily, crimes *against* organizations are seen as less serious. This may be because the public does not consider themselves "personally" to be at risk for these types of offenses and thus they are less fearful of becoming a victim and/ or because organizations are perceived as less vulnerable to the consequences of victimization.

We did not find support for the notion that acts pursued criminally (relative to other judicial processing) would be associated with greater perceptions of seriousness. It may be that punishment information is most informative about wrongfulness when the morality of such behavior is in question (e.g., drug use, victimless crimes). If respondents already recognize the behavior as wrong, such information might have limited effect on perceptions of wrongfulness. Further, the potential stigmatic effect of criminal justice processing may be more salient for traditional crime than it is for white-collar offending. Although there are notable cases of white-collar criminal "perp" walks (most recently Roger Stone), most images of police arrests involve traditional criminals. Thus, the punishment frames may not have generated the stigmatic and punitive images we had hoped among respondents. However, it is worth noting that *civil* penalties were associated with higher ratings of seriousness and, as white-collar scholars have noted, civil penalties—especially those punitive in nature can be much more

financially costly for offending firms than criminal or regulatory sanctions (Mann, 1992). More focused research is needed to unpack citizen perceptions of the different legal systems employed to tackle white-collar/corporate offenders and how those perceptions relate to evaluations of offense seriousness.

We similarly failed to find support for our hypothesis that Black and Hispanic individuals would be more likely to view white-collar crimes as more serious than burglary. Unnever et al. (2008) argued that, because white-collar crimes are typified as "White" crimes (compared to the "Black" typification of street crimes), Black and Hispanic individuals would be more likely than Whites to view white-collar crimes as serious. It is worth noting that we observed some support for our hypotheses in Model 2 – i.e., using a select subset of organizational white-collar offenses which were randomized to receive punishment frames. We conducted posthoc tests to determine the extent to one or more of the vignettes may have contributed to the null finding. Removing the scenarios involving data theft caused the coefficient for Black respondents to become significant at $p < .05$, one-tailed (consistent with our hypothesis). Altogether, this speaks to the challenges of using the label "white-collar crime" to refer to what are ultimately incredibly varied behaviors (Galvin, 2020; Rorie et al., 2017). However, it is also possible that, as with the label "white-collar crime," the hypothesized relationship between race and perceived crime seriousness (and support for crime reduction policies) is overly simplistic. It may be, for example, that the lack of a difference between Black and White respondents reflects a downward shift in seriousness perceptions for White respondents – i.e., eliminating the general tendency for Whites to view crimes as more serious (Miller, Rossi and Simpson, 1986) – without reducing it so much as to produce a statistically significant difference from Black and Hispanic respondents. We similarly found limited support for the notion that race provided a consistent, meaningful, cognitive framing element for policy preferences, net of perceived seriousness and victimization risk; we did not find differences between Black and White respondents but Hispanic respondents were more likely to support policy interventions. This suggests that the role of race as a cognitive frame may be via its association with particular social circumstances or types of offenses (such those involving complex organizations), rather than via perceptions of the justice system more abstractly. Future work is needed to better unpack how race affects cognitive frames above and beyond risk exposure, as well as to determine the relative contributions of shared risk vs shared perceptions in group differences in crime seriousness and policy

preferences. Such work should ideally move beyond Black/White dichotomies by not only incorporating ethnicities and other racial categories explicitly, but also through sensitivity to the ways in which these groups comprise a variety of lived experiences that may affect the way in which they view white-collar crime seriousness.

Perhaps most interestingly, we found support for our hypothesis that perceptions of offense seriousness translated into support for public policies, above and beyond personal characteristics and anticipated victimization. This is an important finding, as prior research has generally associated perceptions of crime seriousness with punitiveness. De-coupling the notion of punitiveness and seriousness is critical not only from a theoretical perspective but also for the development of sound and reflective policy. We are currently in the midst of a mass decarceration reform effort. While much of the attention has thus far been on relatively minor offenses – such as simple possession of marijuana – some scholars argue that true change is impossible without also rethinking our approach to sentencing serious crimes (e.g., Beckett 2018). Recognizing that seriousness does not necessarily require extreme punitiveness gives politicians and sentencing commissions permission to think outside traditional crime-control platforms, and, perhaps, more humanitarianly (Mauer, 2018).

We do not know, however, which dimensions of seriousness (harm, morality, or both) are driving willingness to pay and how these relate to specific recommendations. It may well be that one dimension of seriousness, such as morality (Adriaenssen, Paoli, Karstedt, Visschers, Greenfield, and Pleysier, 2020), is driving punitive preferences while harm is driving others. Future work should attempt to distinguish not only how specific offense characteristics affect these assessments and their corresponding ties to policy support but also how individuals vary in their penological values broadly – i.e., to what extent individuals vary in their support for purely retributive vs utilitarian policies – as well as whether there is intra-individual variation in these approaches based on crime type or other factors.

These results suggest that public perceptions of crime seriousness and policy preferences vary significantly across respondents. Both appear to be propelled by fear of victimization and a desire to avoid negative consequences. Yet, recent studies by Michel et al., 2014, 2016) reveal that the public is generally unaware of the scope of white-collar offending and the degree of harm associated with these types of crimes leading potentially to falsely low estimated risks. Our survey respondents were provided information regarding the incidence, prevalence, and costs associated with the white-collar crimes when taking part in our study; but, as Michel,

Cochran, and Heide (2016) note, it remains to be investigated whether knowledge or myth adherence translates in policy preferences.

Limitations

Our study offers important insight into how individual and situational characteristics affect perceptions of white-collar crime seriousness. However, the way in which our survey was constructed – i.e., measuring perceptions of white-collar seriousness relative to burglary – places an important caveat on our findings. Namely, our conclusions regarding when white-collar crime is perceived as more serious than traditional crime might be dependent on the specific reference crime used. These findings may not extend to white-collar seriousness relative to a violent crime, or even a burglary in which the home was occupied. In using a relational – rather than objective – measurement of seriousness, our results inherently depend on how comparable our base crime is to other crimes. For example, Michel (2016) found that, on average, white-collar crimes resulting in physical harm were perceived as less serious than murder or rape using a qualitative scale (1–4). As with other studies of white-collar crime, the specific offenses we have selected both as white-collar exemplars and the "traditional" comparison crimes play a role both in our empirical findings and in the appropriate generalization of our results (Galvin, 2020). We also failed to find support for our hypothesis that Black respondents would be more likely to express financial support for crime reduction policies. While the coefficient was in the expected direction, it failed to achieve significance using a two-tailed hypothesis test.

Conclusion

A substantial line of research has focused on the "punitive public" – the apparent preference of the (largely British and American) public for increasing punishment and criminal justice intervention (e.g., Bottoms, 1995). Yet, our findings suggest that the public is not necessarily punitive even when they view crimes as serious. Instead, when financially consequential white-collar crimes are under consideration, the public expresses broad support for crime prevention policies, even if they do not have specific preferences for the *type* of policy response. Indeed, these nationally representative findings are in line with research criticizing the public punitiveness literature more generally (Burton et al., 2020; Cullen et al., 2000, 1988, Frost, 2010). While some studies suggest that this may be tied to individual beliefs of

redeemability (Maruna and King, 2009), this explanation may offer less promise in our sample of white-collar crimes, where the concept of redemption is less readily applicable to organizations. Instead, we might consider support for punitive policies as an expression of frustration and a desire for crime reduction – but not as a policy prescription. Scholars and policy-makers would do well to understand the role of survey design in constraining respondent options; support for punishment is not mutually exclusive with other policies, so long as the public can be assured that crime rates are not adversely affected.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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Notes

1. A recent Belgium population survey conducted by Adriaenssen, Paoli, Karstedt, Visschers, Greenfield, and Pleysier (2020:15) challenges the argument that both harmfulness and wrongfulness figure in assessments of crime seriousness. They find moral judgements (i.e., assessments of wrongfulness) to be substantially more important than "the 'consequentialist' components of severity and incidence" in ranking a variety of different offenses (including corporate crime).
2. Although the Unnever et al. (2008) study included Hispanic respondents, they were included with Whites for purposes of analysis. The authors tested to see if there were any observable differences between Whites and Hispanics on the two dependent variables of interest (regulating stock market and stricter penalties for corporate criminals) and found none.
3. GfK describes their sampling procedure in the following manner: "Panel members are randomly recruited through probability-based sampling, and households are provided with access to the Internet and hardware if needed. GfK recruits panel members by using address-based sampling methods

[previously GfK relied on random-digit dialing methods]. Once household members are recruited for the panel and assigned to a study sample, they are notified by email for survey taking, or panelists can visit their online member page for survey taking (instead of being contacted by telephone or postal mail)." Additional information is available at: http://www.knowledgenetworks. com/ganp/docs/KnowledgePanel(R)-Design-Summary.pdf

4. A pre-test was also administered to a select group of respondents (n=26) from April 8–10, 2015.

5. A power analysis was conducted prior to final survey administration to arrive at the final sample size of 2,050 with a focus on detecting differences in willingness to pay. Additionally, most respondents provided responses for all 10 seriousness items (average per respondent: 9.7), giving us a sample equal to 19,004. We conducted power analyses for the crime seriousness regressions; with 19,004 responses, with twelve regressors, our ability to detect a medium effect size had greater than 90% power. We are therefore confident in our ability to detect differences between groups and across scenarios. The limits of a more powerful sample primarily derive from the conflation of statistically significant differences with substantive differences. In the present case, our use of average marginal effects rather than odds ratios helps to reduce this tendency by providing absolute differences in the expected probability of specific outcomes, making substantive relationship between variables clear.

6. Only 4 % of respondents were "other" non-Hispanic and 3% reported being mixed race non-Hispanic.

7. The Census Bureau (2015) reports that females comprise 50.8% of the US population. The race/ethnic breakdown is approximately 62% non-Hispanic white, Hispanic/Latino 18%, Black 13%, Native American 1 % and Asian 6%; and more than two races 3% (estimates are rounded). Our sample over-represents Hispanics/Latinos and underrepresents non-Hispanic Blacks. The over-representation of Hispanics was by design, as it allowed us to incorporate non-native English speakers and there is evidence of higher fraud victimization among individuals whose primary language is Spanish (FTC, 2013).

8. According to the US Census (2015), 88% of the population has at least a high school diploma or GED and the median age is around 38.

9. There are two broad approaches to how white-collar crime is defined and understood. For sociologist Edwin Sutherland (1949), white-collar crime initially was characterized by the perpetrator's unique sociodemographic characteristics (high social status and respectability) and occupational location. Although this "offender-based" definition has become part of the public lexicon and discourse (Benson and Simpson, 2018), it does not include illegal behaviors that occur outside of the occupational context. A second definitional approach, espoused

particularly in the law enforcement community, emphasizes the modus-operandi of the illegal act. White-collar crimes under such a definition are any criminal acts that use nonphysical means, deceit or guile to obtain money, property, or personal or business advantage (Edelhertz, 1970). A variety of different kinds of crimes fit into this "offense-based" description, from counterfeiting and forgery to fraud and money laundering. We adopt this latter perspective while also expecting that different offenses may be seen as more or less white-collar crime by respondents.

10. While some white-collar crimes primarily result in psychological harm (fear, invasion of privacy, etc.) rather than physical harm (environmental damage, etc.), such crimes are not included in the National White-collar Crime Center's survey (Huff et al., 2010) and are thus excluded here for comparative purposes.

11. Research on public opinion regarding crime seriousness has noted the importance of including, in survey instruments, objective information about the actual harmfulness of the acts (Adriaenssen et al., 2020).

12. All respondents provided estimates for programs A and B. However, for each crime type, half of the sample was randomly assigned to answer WTP estimates for Programs C and D and the other half provided estimates for Programs E and F. Thus, each respondent only provided WTP estimates for *four* program options.

13. Criticisms of willingness to pay as an absolute measure primarily focus on the limitations of these estimates for the purposes of cost of crime estimates (e.g., Black et al., 2015).

14. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data from this study, Layana and Lee (2020) examine the effect of survey fatigue on responses. Approximately 1/6th of the respondents display symptoms of fatigue at some point in the survey. Fatigue was associated with higher WTP $ estimates. The researchers also found that fatigue, while related to demographic characteristics, did not mediate the effect of individual characteristics on WTP values. Thus, although fatigue might affect the dollar value of respondents WTP it should not affect respondent preferences for specific programs and/or the predicted relationship between race and program preferences.

15. We exclude one scenario, spam emails, as it has no direct harm associated with it (other than being a nuisance).

16. We opt to split the sample rather than include an interaction because of the joint distribution of reporting that all scenarios representing a crime type as more serious than burglary and whether the policy package included or excluded the punitive policy component. For each crime type, 50–100% of a respondent's policy packages included the punitive policy component, while 30% of

responses involved a crime type for which the respondent had rated all of the representative seriousness scenarios as all "more serious than burglary". As a result, the model was over-powered to identify any distinction between the small subgroup of scenarios with and without punitive policy elements for those rated as more serious. That the coefficient on the punitive policy element remains significant in the subsample model suggests that splitting the sample was the correct choice.

17. In preliminary focus groups held prior to survey construction, we discovered some evidence of this effect.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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