

The Pennsylvania State University

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**IT'S THE HARMFULNESS, STUPID: IMAGES OF GOD AND THE ROLE OF CRIME**

**PERCEPTIONS IN PERCEIVED CRIME SERIOUSNESS AND**

**RECOMMENDED SENTENCING**

A Thesis in

Crime, Law and Justice

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Perceived crime harmfulness and wrongfulness are used to predict perceived crime seriousness and recommended sentencing. Additionally, the impact of religiosity, biblical literalism, and images of God are examined. Findings suggest that the public uses both perceived harmfulness and wrongfulness in constructing seriousness; however crime seriousness is only predictive of recommended sentencing when crimes result in personal harm to the victim. A loving image of God is associated with increased wrongfulness and harmfulness ratings, while an authoritative image of God and biblical literalism only affect perceived harmfulness.

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

Which is more serious, rape or attempted murder? Auto theft or financial embezzlement? The public's perception of crime seriousness has been of interest within the criminology literature for the better part of 50 years, beginning with Sellin and Wolfgang's (1964) investigation of juvenile delinquency. Two decades later the interest spread to the realm of policymaking. In 1985, the U.S. Department of Justice sponsored the National Survey of Crime Severity (Wolfgang et al.) in an effort to identify how the general public ranks the seriousness of crimes. These type of accurate measures of seriousness help ensure lawmakers of the appropriateness of sentencing practices. This is particularly important in the face of General Social Survey reports indicating that over a 22 year period (1972-94), 80% of respondents felt courts are too lenient in dealing with criminals (Rossi and Berk 1997). As discussed in a reflection of establishing Pennsylvania's sentencing guidelines (Kramer and Ulmer 2009), determining appropriate sentencing severity and meeting public approval were some of the crucial first steps. As of 2006, twenty-four sentencing commissions have been formed domestically; 22 state sentencing commissions, the District of Columbia advisory commission, and the U.S. Sentencing Commission. All of this means that, for policymakers, there exists a need to know and continually gauge the public's sentiment on crime seriousness and sentencing.

There are several known factors that contribute to or influence the public's suggested sentencing. The first of those is perceived crime seriousness. As perceived seriousness of the offense increases, so does the punitiveness of the sentence. However, literature suggests that perceived seriousness is a product of the crime's perceived harmfulness and perceived



wrongfulness<sup>1</sup> (Warr 1989; Rosenmerkel 2001; O'Connell & Whelan 1996; Hansel 1987). For some offenses, individuals rely more heavily on the moral gravity of the crime in determining seriousness. Yet for other offenses, the amount of harm created is more important. Moreover, the types of crimes studied to date are limited to mainly violent and property offenses. If seriousness dictates sentencing, we must understand why some crimes are considered more serious than others, and why some crimes are determined by their morality and others by their harm.

A second set of factors that influence recommended sentencing (and wrongfulness of the offense) is one's religiosity (Vogel & Meeker 2001; Herzog 2003; Bader & Johnson unpublished; Warr 1989) and image of God (Bader & Johnson unpublished; Unnever et al 2005; Unnever et al 2006). In general, religious fundamentalists and biblical literalists (often considered one and the same) are more punitive in their punishment, support harsher court sentences, and back the death penalty. Likewise, those individuals who see God as being authoritative or punitive support more punitive sentences than those who see God as a loving entity. Barring Warr (1989) and Curry's (1996) studies, religion's influence on perceived seriousness, has been mostly skipped over. How images of God affect perceived seriousness has also been overlooked. If we wish to explain peoples' views about sentencing, we need to understand how these measures are influenced by the constructs of seriousness and religion.

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<sup>1</sup> The concepts of perceived crime harmfulness, perceived crime wrongfulness, and perceived crime seriousness are distinct from other concepts within the sentencing literature, such as the offender's blameworthiness. Also identified as culpability, intent, or motivation, the idea of offender blame is separate from the harm produced by the offense or the moral wrongness of the act (see Mitchell et al. 2008; White & Julian 1985; Hoffman & Hardyman 1986; Mitchell 1998; Weiss 1989; and MacMartin & Wood 2005).

This study examines the effects of one's religiosity, image of God, and view of the Bible on perceived crime seriousness and recommended sentencing. Additionally, I include the two prominent components of perceived seriousness, perceived wrongfulness and perceived harmfulness. Using structural equation modeling, I am able to further test the relationship between religious views, perceived crime harmfulness, wrongfulness, and seriousness, and recommended sentencing. Twenty crime vignettes have been used, which comprise five different categories of crime: violent, property, alcohol/drug, white-collar, and computer. By performing a path model for the 20 different crimes separately I can compare offense categories on perceived seriousness, wrongfulness, harmfulness and recommended sentencing. This also allows me to examine the influence of religious variables on different types of offenses.

## **Chapter 2 – Literature Review**

### *Theory*

The biggest criticism of the seriousness and sentencing literature has been its lack of connection to sociological theory. Rossi and Henry (1980) expressed their concern for the “distressing lack of theoretical base for crime seriousness” in the first 20 years of the scholarship. In a similar review two decades later, Stylianou (2003) again expressed concern for the apparent lack of sociological theory in the literature. A central concern of the sociology of law is whether or not the official guidelines on punishment match the societal norms on how offenders should be punished (Rossi & Berk 1997). In practical terms, if the public desires very harsh sentences then the official practices would be justified in handing out very punitive punishments. Likewise, if the consensus of the public is that offenders should be treated lightly

and rehabilitated then we would expect the policy to swing to that side of the spectrum. It has been argued though, that the way in which policy makers decide to actually punish people is only loosely, if at all, based upon the public's opinion (Payne et al 2004). Regardless, there are theoretical implications. According to Emile Durkheim's work on the sociology of law and the role of crime and punishment in society, "the function of punishment is to reinforce the community's belief in the rule that has been broken and thereby challenged," (Vogt 1993 76). The function of punishment then, is to demonstrate that society deems a certain behavior as inappropriate or wrong, as opposed to Beccaria's view that punishment is in place to deter future crime (Payne et al 2004). Crime and more specifically the reaction to crime, punishment, maintain social cohesion. Official punishment is not in place for the criminal but rather for the rest of society as a means of communication. If this is the case, we need to assure that the message is clear. If punishments are random in severity, one time very harsh and the next time very light, society cannot send a clear message about the "gravity of the offense," (Vogt 1993 77). On the same note, if society views a crime as deserving of a harsh punishment, but it is receiving a lenient punishment, the message is not clear. The punishments received should be in line with the normative consensus.

Additionally, perceived crime seriousness and recommended sentencing can also be tied to normative philosophical principles (Stylianou 2003). Stylianou (2002) outlines three general perspectives for use of the law – libertarianism, liberalism/paternalism, and moralism. The libertarian approach (Mill 1859) allows for the freedom of the individual until it conflicts with the well-being of other individuals (your right to swing your fist stops at your neighbor's chin). In a legal framework, laws and punishment should be applied only when one's actions infringe

upon another. Similarly, the liberalism/paternalism ideology (Rawls 1971) focuses on the promotion of both personal and social welfare. A paternalistic framework on law and punishment would enact laws and punish those acts that inflict harm on society as well as acts that inflict harm on oneself. When we ask respondents to give a harmfulness rating, we are examining this idea. How much harm has been produced by the crime; how has the crime conflicted with the well-being of society; and how should it be punished? Alternatively, perceived crime wrongfulness can be viewed as a measure of moralism. The moralistic ideology supports laws and punishment for all acts covered by libertarianism and liberalism/paternalism, but it also acts to prevent moral decay. To put forth a measure of wrongfulness, we have stated to what extent the offense has crossed the moral line. By uncovering how these two constructs (harm and morality) shape perceived seriousness and recommended sentencing, we are illustrating something at a deeper meaning: under which perspective do the respondents justify the use of laws.

Finally, accurate measures and understanding of perceived crime seriousness have implications in other realms as well. Social disorganization and social cohesion explanations of crime incorporate measures of fear of criminal victimization. Warr and Stafford (1983) found fear to be a function of the perceived risk of becoming a victim and the perceived seriousness of that crime. If, for example, men perceive crimes as more serious, they will have a greater level of fear of the crime. In the victimization literature, the seriousness of the offense is an incident-specific correlate to whether or not a crime is reported (Zhuo, Messner & Zhang 2008). Gottfredson and Hindelang (1979) argued that the perceived seriousness of the offense affects the investigative effort put forth by the police. Finally, public perception of crime seriousness

and sentencing plays a role in the legal system. Crow and Gertz (2008) argued that judges, in particular, must remain responsive to public sentiment since many judges face popular election. Others have also argued that the judicial branch relies on public support for legitimacy (Caldeira 1986, Overby et al. 2004).

### *Crime Seriousness*

Beginning with Sellin and Wolfgang's (1964) study of the seriousness of juvenile delinquency, public perception of crime has taken a prominent position within the criminological and criminal justice literature. The seriousness scale established by Sellin and Wolfgang has been replicated many times (Cullen et al 1982; McCleary et al 1981; Rossi et al 1974). With over 40 years of research, several substantive findings have emerged. The first substantive finding is the considerable amount of consensus about the seriousness of crimes. As outlined in Stylianou's (2003) review of crime seriousness, we find persistent relative consensus in literature findings. Groups do not often agree in absolute terms; older individuals are more likely to rate crimes higher than younger individuals. However, they often agree in relative terms, for example, that murder is more serious than robbery. This pattern of consensus can be found cross-culturally and is especially true for more serious crimes while weakened among victimless crimes (Figlio 1975; O'Connell & Whelan 1996).

The second substantive finding is that perceived seriousness seems to be a function of both perceived consequences (harmfulness) and perceived wrongfulness. One of the major criticisms of early studies is the lack of a consistent definition of seriousness by researchers. Rossi et al (1974) argued that what constitutes a serious crime is understood in the same

manner by all individuals. This assumption turned out to be false. Hansel (1987) uncovered that there may be more to crime perception than just seriousness as the level of violence and property harm, among other things, influenced crime perceptions. Violent offenses are generally rated the most serious, as a result of their perceived consequences (bodily harm). Property crimes, with property destruction, are consistently rated less serious (Cullen, Link, Polanzi 1982; Wolfgang et al 1985). While Rosenmerkel (2001) found white-collar crime to fall in-between violent and property crimes on the seriousness spectrum, others (Holtfreter et al. 2008; Piquero, Carmichael & Piquero 2008) have found some white-collar crimes to be rated as more serious or deserving of harsher sentencing than street crimes. Cullen et al. (1982) and Schragger and Short (1980) found that the perceived seriousness of white-collar crimes relied on the type of harm; white-collar crimes resulting in physical harm were more serious than crimes with economical consequences. Victimless crimes generally rate as the least serious, though a moral element was discovered by Abrams & Della-Fave (1976).

Warr's (1989) study of Dallas residents presented the idea that perceived seriousness is also a function of perceived wrongfulness. Roughly 25% of his respondents were "nondiscriminators." These individuals marked all crimes as wrong and expressed their disagreement that the morality of crimes can vary. Because they found all crimes completely wrong, these "nondiscriminators" relied solely on the harmfulness of the offense in determining crime seriousness. The rest of the sample, the "discriminators," found some crimes more wrong than harmful and other crimes more harmful than wrong. These respondents were not using a mixture of harmfulness and wrongfulness, but choosing one or the other. Whichever was the predominant construct dictated the seriousness of the crime. Due to the

comments in the margin of the questionnaire, Warr postulated that these nondiscriminators were highly religious. A follow up by Curry (1996) revealed that these nondiscriminators tended to be conservative Protestants.

Without a doubt, the public uses crime harmfulness and wrongfulness to conceptualize seriousness. What is not clear is why or when they rely on one construct over the other or if they use some combination of the two. In addition to the general ranking of violent crimes being the most serious and victimless the least, some other patterns have arisen. For instance, violent crimes against persons are more defined by wrongfulness than harmfulness unless the offender knows the victim or there is not a clear criminal intent. Likewise, the seriousness of property crimes is generally defined by their wrongfulness while white-collar offenses' seriousness is defined by the crime harmfulness (Warr 1989; Rosenmerkel 2001). However, these studies have been limited to mainly violent and property crime. Drug offenses and white-collar crime have been under-studied and computer crime has yet to be included. Can we expect these offenses to follow similar patterns? Both the morality of the crime and harm produced, economical or otherwise, shape how serious the crime is in the eyes of the public. Further research is needed to understand which crimes are determined by their morality and which ones by their harm produced.

The third substantive finding over the past 40 years is the correlation between demographics and perceived seriousness. These factors include gender, age, education, urban/rural, race, SES and occupation within the criminal justice system (Stylianou 2003). That said, demographics generally only explain a small amount of perceived seriousness and have produced mixed results. Gender and age have shown inconsistent results. Education has tended

to have a negative effect on seriousness; the more education one has the less serious one ranks crimes. Race and SES have also produced mixed findings.

The fourth and final substantive finding is the influence of attitudinal correlates. Foreshadowed by the discussion of Warr's (1989) findings, religion has been correlated with perceived seriousness. In a follow up of Warr's findings, conservative religious views, characterized by a literal interpretation of the bible, were associated with greater perceptions of crime wrongfulness (Curry 1996). Evans and Scott (1984) found moral offenses were rated as being more serious in Kuwait than the US, explaining the difference with religion. Herzog (2003) found relative consensus between varying religiosity levels of Muslims and Jews, though the absolute consensus varied. However, religiosity had different effects on specific types of crimes.

A second attitudinal variable is that of authoritarianism, "an orientation [that favors] subjection to the control and hegemony of powerful social and legal institutions and is opposed to individual autonomy and normative diversity," (Mentor & Dorne 1998 p 77). Feather (1996) and Mentor and Dorne (1998) found a positive relationship between authoritarianism and perceived seriousness. Unfortunately, our knowledge of these attitudinal variables is limited. To what extent does biblical literalism affect crime seriousness perceptions? Can behavioral religiosity be used to explain crime perceptions? How can we theoretically tie authoritarianism to religion?

### *Sentencing*

For both practical and theoretical reasons, one of the most important reasons for knowing how serious the public finds crime is the legal reaction to crime: sentencing. Dating as



far back as Gallup polls in the 1930s, researchers have tried to gauge the agreement between sentences given out in practice and the public's desired sentences. One of the earliest criminological studies of sentencing is Rossi & Berk's (1977) study in which respondents were asked to provide appropriate sentences for crimes commonly found in the state courts. They found a consensus among the criminal justice system and the public in general, but this was less so as respondents were given details of the crime. Rossi and colleagues' 1985 study found that the harmfulness of the crime, along with criminal record, were influential in shaping recommended sentencing. Jacoby and Cullen's (1994) nationally representative study of almost 2,000 respondents found a moderate correlation between the seriousness of the crime and the recommended sentencing. However, there was also significant disparity in terms of the sentences imposed.

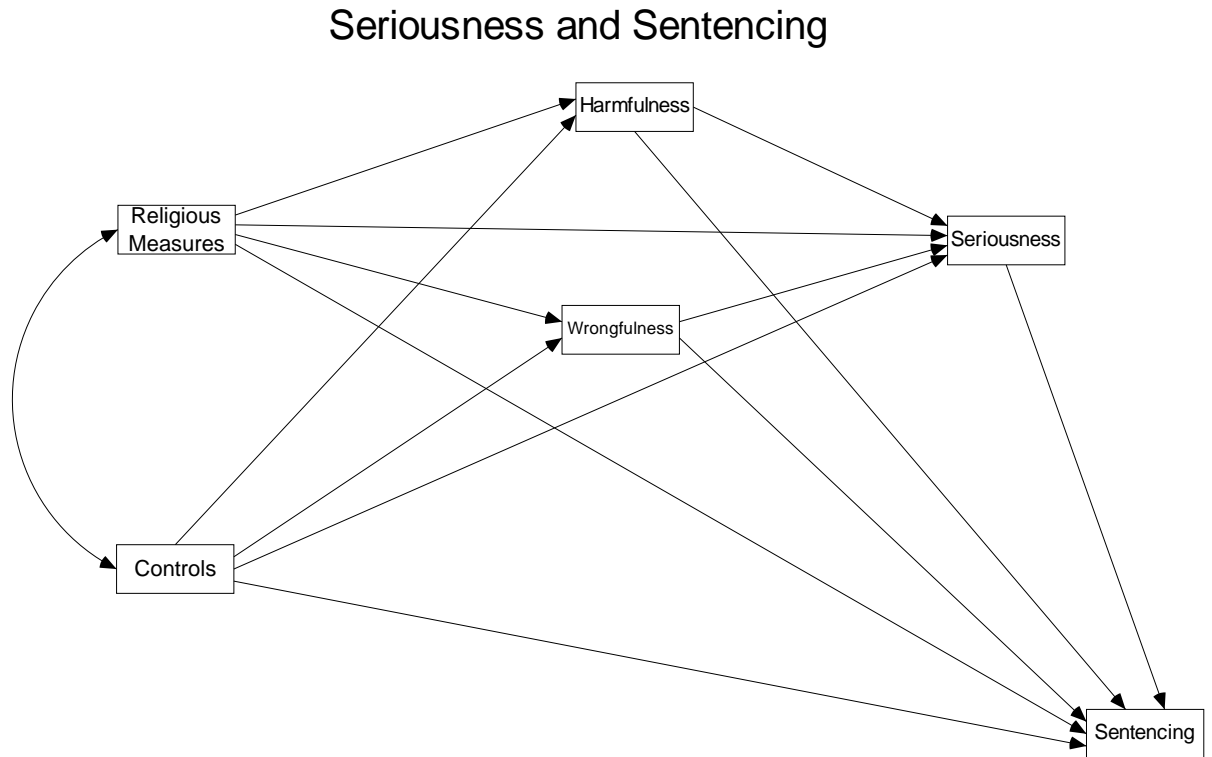
Unlike perceptions of crime seriousness, there is much literature on the influence of religion on crime sentencing. Unfortunately, most of this literature has been limited to fundamentalists' support for the death penalty and punitive sentences in general (see Unnever, Cullen & Bartkowski 2006; Evans and Adams 2003). Biblical literalism, an oft used marker of fundamentalism, is also associated with higher support for the death penalty and harsher sentences (Unnever and Cullen 2006; Unnever, Cullen & Applegate 2005; Grasmick, Bursik, & Blackwell 1993; Grasmick et al 1993). Likewise, research has shown the image of God that one holds greatly affects one's view on punishment and the death penalty. Those with a punitive image of God have greater support for the death penalty and harsher sentences (Grasmick, Bursik & Blackwell 1993). Gracious and loving images of God lead to the opposite stance – less support for the death penalty and harsher sentences (Unnever, Cullen, Applegate 2005;

Applegate et al 2000). Bader and Johnson's (unpublished) Authoritative God measure accounted for the greatest amount of punitive sentences, arguably a substitute measure for punitive God images.

### *Current Study*

The current study goes beyond previous work in several ways. **Figure 1** presents a conceptual path model, which is useful to visualize the causal pathways. This model is an extension of the 'seriousness as a construct of harmfulness and wrongfulness' literature. Previous literature has examined how these three variables interact and vary for violent, property, drug, and white-collar crimes (see Warr 1989; O'Connell & Whelan 1996; Rosenmerkel 2001), yet no studies have examined how those variables may change in the context of computer crime. Furthermore, only Rosenmerkel (2001) examined white-collar crime. Holtfreter et al. (2008) and Piquero, Carmichael & Piquero (2008) recently examined perceptions of white-collar crime, but not in the context of harmfulness and wrongfulness. Additionally, drug offenses have seemingly been treated as an after-thought, despite the enormous percentage of the U.S. prison population being locked up for drug offenses. I include all categories of crime.

**Figure 1:** Conceptual Path Model



Secondly, I move past previous research by merging the seriousness/harmfulness/wrongfulness literature with publics' recommended sentencing. The seriousness of the offense has been included in explaining suggested punishment, particularly for homicide, (Mitchell 1998). Likewise, Rossi et al. (1985) examined "just sentences," finding the harm caused was a significant factor in sentencing. Jacoby & Cullen (1994) also examined offense seriousness and sentence. Yet no one has attempted to include all three aspects of the offense – harmfulness, wrongfulness, and seriousness – in predicting attitudes toward sentencing. Also, since this will be evaluated separately for each crime category, the effects of the variables can be compared between groups.

Third, despite the breadth of the sentencing-religiosity literature, few have tried to combine this with the crime seriousness literature. Images of God have not been used to

predict crime seriousness nor has religious fundamentalism or biblical literalism. I include religiosity, biblical literalism, and images of God measures that advance the literature. In general, studies have shown that religious affiliation has little to no effect on correctional attitudes. The only traditional religiosity measure that has continued to be a significant variable is fundamentalism. My religiosity variable is a scale of salience (behavioral and attitudinal) and biblical literalism, both components of "Christian fundamentalism" (Applegate et al 2000). Biblical literalism has also been shown to increase support for the death penalty but has not been applied to all crimes as I do (Grasmick et al 1993, Applegate et al 2000, Bader & Johnson unpublished).

Conversely, research in the past two decades has illustrated the importance of how individuals perceive their God. Those who view their God as loving and forgiving are more likely to be against the death penalty and suggest less punitive punishments. Likewise, those who view God as punitive and unforgiving are in favor of harsher sentences. A third image of God that has been shown to influence people's views is how active they view God. Is he involved in the everyday workings of society or a more abstract, hands off deity (Unnever et al 2006; Applegate et al 2000; Evans & Adams 2003; Unnever et al 2005; Bader & Johnson unpublished) Applegate et al (2000) also used forgiveness and Punitive God measures to identify fundamentalism. I have three separate measures of Images of God – Active God, Loving God, and Authoritative God. This is consistent with the literature and will move past by testing the effect on all crimes in addition to trying to mediate these effects with harmfulness, wrongfulness, and seriousness of the offense. As mentioned before, the literature is unclear as to whether fundamentalists view all crimes more seriously.

The hypotheses are as follows.

*H<sub>1</sub>. White-collar, computer, and drug/alcohol offenses will follow patterns similar to those found for violent and property crimes. The greater the personal harm, the more serious the crime is perceived to be. Likewise, crimes resulting in physical harm will be perceived as more harmful than crimes resulting in economic harm.*

*H<sub>2</sub> Violent crimes will be rated, on average, as the most serious and property offenses the least serious. White-collar, computer, and drugs/alcohol crimes will fall in between violent and property crimes, but the specific order is not known.*

*H<sub>3</sub> The perceived harmfulness and wrongfulness will positively affect the perceived seriousness. In turn, perceived crime seriousness will be positively associated with a longer recommended minimum sentence.*

*H<sub>4</sub> The rank order hypothesized in H<sub>2</sub> will be seen in recommended sentencing.*

*H<sub>5</sub> Religiosity and biblical literalism will be positively and significantly associated with perceived crime harmfulness, wrongfulness, seriousness, and recommended sentencing.*

*H<sub>6</sub> The image of God variables will have a significant effect on perceived seriousness, wrongfulness, harmfulness and recommended sentencing.*

### **Chapter 3 – Data and Methodology**

The data for this study were obtained through a survey of undergraduate students at Pennsylvania State University during the fall of 2008. Five large, introductory courses and one upper-level course within the sociology department were surveyed. This sample allowed for the distinction between Crime, Law and Justice Majors (29.8%) versus other majors, as well as those planning on careers in the criminal justice system (39.8%) versus those not planning on careers in the criminal justice system. Prior research has found an association between being a criminal justice major and holding more punitive views. However, these results have been mixed (see Courtright, Mackey, & Packard 2005; Lambert et al. 2008; Farnworth, Longmire, & West 1998). The sample (N=617) closely resembles the demographics of the University as a

whole, which is 55% male and 80% white. As can be seen in **Table 1** the analytical sample is about 51% male, 80% white, and about 96% were between the ages of 17 and 22.

**Table 1: Sample Descriptive Statistics**

	Number	Percentage
Gender	(615)	
Male	315	51.2
Female	300	48.8
Race	(615)	
White	489	79.5
Black	44	7.2
Hispanic	38	6.2
Asian	29	4.7
Other	15	2.4
Age	(616)	
18-	85	13.8
19	166	26.9
20	178	28.9
21	117	19
22	45	7.3
23+	25	4.1

Based on prior research, I controlled for sex, race, age, and SES. Sex was coded dichotomously, male as 0. Race was dummy coded and includes White (omitted), Black, Asian, Hispanic, and Other. Age was coded in years. Lastly, SES was a scale, comprised of the z-scores of mother’s highest education level, father’s highest education level, and parents’ combined annual income. A significant amount (19%) of the sample did not know their parents’ annual income. I used race, mother’s education, and father’s education to estimate the missing values on parents’ annual income. To measure parent’s income the respondents were asked, “In the household in which you were raised, what is your parents’ combined annual income for the previous year?” – “Under \$20,000,” “\$20,000-\$34,999,” “\$35,000-\$49,999,” “\$50,000-\$64,999,” “\$65,000-\$79,999,” “Over \$80,000,” coded 1 to 6 respectively. To measure parents’

education, respondents were asked to report the highest earned degree of each parent – “In the household in which you were raised, what is the highest level of education completed by your father/step-father?” The response categories, Less than High School, High School Diploma/GED, Some College, Bachelors Degree, and Beyond Bachelors Degree were coded 1 to 5, respectively. The question was then repeated for mother/step-mother. I also included a measure of political ideology. The respondents were asked to indicate their ideology on a 5-point scale from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative.”

I used three images of God variables: Active God, Loving God, and Judgmental God, which come from Bader and Johnson (unpublished). “God’s level of engagement in the world” (Active God) was an additive index of eight items measuring respondent’s belief about God’s level of interest and involvement in the world. Six of those items were based on agreement with the following descriptions of God: “removed from worldly affairs,” “removed from my personal affairs,” “concerned with the well-being of the world,” “concerned with my personal well-being,” “directly involved in worldly affairs,” and “directly involved in my affairs.” The response categories are “completely disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” “neither agree/disagree,” “somewhat agree,” “completely agree.” Two additional items asked respondents how well the adjectives “Distant” and “Ever-present” describe God: “not at all,” “not very well,” “undecided,” “somewhat well,” or “very well.” Items were recoded as necessary such that higher scores equal higher levels of perceived engagement. The active God measure had an alpha of .88.

God's perceived forgiving/loving characteristics (Loving God) was measured using an additive scale of four items. Using the same response categories as above (“not at all” to “very

well”), respondents were asked how the adjectives “forgiving,” “friendly,” “kind,” and “loving” applied to God. The loving God measures had a high reliability with an alpha of .92. Finally, God’s perceived level of judgment (Authoritative God) was measured by summing six items. Respondents were asked if they agreed that God is “angered by human sins,” and “angered by my sins.” They were also asked how well the adjectives “critical,” “punishing,” “severe,” and “wrathful,” described God. Authoritative God also produced high reliability coefficients with an alpha of .82. “It should be noted that measures of God as loving and judgmental are not simply opposites of one another. Those who view God in the mold of a ‘strict parent’ may perceive God as being judgmental *because* of “His” love (Lakoff 2002),” (Bader & Johnson, unpublished).

I also included a measure of religiosity and biblical literalism to ensure that the images of God measures were not simply alternative religiousness measures. The religious measures are split into behavior and attitudinal measures. For behavioral measures, the respondents were asked how often they went to religious services, how often they took part in other activities besides service at a place of worship, and how often they prayed. There were five response categories, which ranged from 0 (never) to 4 (two or more times a week). For attitudes, the respondents were asked the importance of religious or spiritual beliefs as a source of meaning in respondents’ lives and the importance of religious or spiritual beliefs for what they did every day. These were coded 0 (not at all important), 1 (a little important), 2 (fairly important), and 3 (very important) (Strawbridge et al 1998, Applegate et al 2000, Cochran et al 1994, Mason & Windle 2001). The five measures of religiosity were added to form one variable (Religiosity) with a reliability alpha of .86



One additional attitudinal measure was included, Biblical literalism. Respondents were asked “about their view of the Bible by selecting from the categories “The Bible is an ancient book of history and legends,” “the Bible contains some human error,” “The Bible is perfectly true, but it should not be taken literally, word-for-word. We must interpret its meaning,” and “The Bible means exactly what it says. It should be taken literally, word-for-word, on all subjects.” I treated this item as a continuous measure of literalism, since higher scores indicate increasingly literal views of the Bible, (Strawbridge et al 1998, Bader & Johnson forthcoming, Cochran et al 1994, Mason & Windle 2001).

Each respondent was asked to rate the perceived harmfulness, wrongfulness, and seriousness of 20 crimes. The crimes were presented in a vignette form, and fell into five categories of offenses: violent, property, drug & alcohol, white-collar, and computer crime. Each of these offenses has an Offense Gravity Score (OGS) according to the Pennsylvania Commission on Sentencing (PCS), an official seriousness rating. Some crime vignettes come from previous research (Warr 1989; Rosenmerkel 2001) in an attempt to retain consistent measures. However, the rest were chosen to get a systematic spread of offense gravity scores. For example, the five violent crimes have offense gravity scores of 3, 6, 9, 12, and 12 respectively, on a 1-15 scale. The white-collar crimes receive OGS’s of 3, 6, 8, and 10. **Figure 2** presents the crime vignettes, offense listing, statutory class, OGS, and recommended sentence according to the guidelines.

**Figure 2 – Crimes with Guidelines**

<i>Offense Listing</i>	<i>Statutory Class</i>	<i>Offense Gravity Score</i>	<i>Sentence</i>	
2701	M2	3	RS-1 +/-3	<b>Violent Crime</b> A man hits his wife during an argument
2702 (a)(3)	F2	6	3-12 +/-6	A woman attacks a police officer with a bat
2901	18 Pa.C.S. 905	9	12-24 +/-12	A couple attempts to kidnap a child from the park
3121 (a)	F1	12	48-66 +/-12	A woman is raped walking home from work
				<b>Property Crime</b>
3309	M1	3	RS-1 +/-3	Teens vandalize a corn crop, resulting in \$2,000 worth of damages
3502	F1	6	3-12 +/-6	A man is caught breaking into a store while the owner is inside
3702	F1	9	12-24 +/-12	A woman steals an unlocked car
3701 (a)(1)(i)	F1	12	48-66 +/-12	An elderly man is robbed on the street, resulting in serious bodily injury
				<b>White-Collar Crime</b>
2705	M2	3	RS +/-3	A manager refuses to repair machinery, resulting in employee injury
2504	M1	6	RS-1 +/-3	Knowingly selling bad food that results in death
3921	F3	8	RS-9 +/-3	A CEO embezzling \$125,000 worth of company funds
30	F	10	22-36 +/-12	A doctor illegal prescribes hundreds of pills of Oxycodone to patients
				<b>Drugs/Alcohol Crime</b>
3802 (b)	M	1	RS +/-3	An elderly woman is arrested for Driving Under the Influence of alcohol (B.A.C level of 0.16
37	M	4	RS-3 +/- 3	A health trainer is found in possession of steroids
30	F	7	6-14 +/-6	A man is caught with several grams (5) of cocaine, for more than just personal consumption
30	F	10	22-36 +/-12	A couple is arrested for growing a crop of marijuana behind their barn, roughly 6,000 plants
				<b>Computer Crime</b>
7624 (1)	M3	1	RS +/-3	Trading sexual images of children online
4210 (C)(1)(I)	M1	3	RS-1 +/-3	Using a stolen ID to apply for a \$1,500 loan online
3933	F3	5	RS-9 +/-3	Hacking into a police database and compromising intelligence
7616	F3	7	6-14 +/-6	Distributing a computer virus

**NOTE:**

*Offense Listing:* The indentifying number for location within the guidelines

*Statutory Class:* Misdemeanor (M) or Felony (F). Scaled 1-3, 1 being higher

*Offense Gravity Score:* The official “seriousness” score of the PCS

*Sentence:* Recommended sentence with mitigating/aggravating circumstances (+/-)

*RS:* “Restorative Sanctions,” i.e. repayment of damages done.

Research has shown variables such as the victim’s and perpetrator’s prior history, race, age, and gender can influence crime and sentence severity. In the instance that these factors are not defined, respondents will often give the offender these traits. In order to reduce the

influence of victim or perpetrator characteristics, respondents were told the perpetrator was a middle-aged, Caucasian male unless otherwise noted in the vignette.

To determine the components of perceived seriousness, the respondents were first asked to identify the wrongfulness of the offense. The respondents were then asked to identify the harmfulness of the offenses. Thirdly, I asked the respondents to indicate how serious they perceived the crime to be. The three prompts, which used similar wording to that of Rossi et al. (1974) and Warr (1989), follows:

**Wrongfulness** – There are many different kinds of crimes. Some are considered to be very wrong, others not so wrong. Below is a list of different types of crime. **Thinking in terms of crime in general**, please indicate **how morally wrong** you think it is for a person to commit each crime below. If you think it is not morally wrong at all, then circle the number 1 beside the crime. If you think committing the crime is very morally wrong, then circle the number 15 beside the crime. If your judgment is somewhere in between, then circle the number between 1 and 15 that best describes how morally wrong you think it is to commit the crime. If no victim is identified, the “victim” is society. *(In each scenario, the perpetrator is Caucasian. Unless otherwise noted, the perpetrator is a middle-aged male.)*

**Harmfulness** – We would also like to know how much you think each of the following crimes **harms or damages the victim**. If you think that the crime is not harmful or damaging to the victim at all, circle the number 1 beside the crime. If you think the crime is very harmful or damaging to the victim, then circle the number 15 beside the crime. If your judgment is somewhere in between, then circle the number between 1 and 15 that best shows how harmful or damaging you think the crime is to the victim. If no victim is identified, the “victim” is society. *(In each scenario, the perpetrator is Caucasian. Unless otherwise noted, the perpetrator is a middle-aged male.)*

**Seriousness** – We are also interested in your opinion about **how serious each crime is**. Thinking in terms of crime in general, if you think it is among the least serious, then circle the number 1 beside the crime. If you think it is among the most serious, then circle the number 15 beside the crime. If you think the crime falls somewhere between the least serious and most serious of crime in general, then circle the number between 1 and 15 that best indicates how serious you think the crime is. If no victim is identified, the “victim” is society. *(In each scenario, the perpetrator is Caucasian. Unless otherwise noted, the perpetrator is a middle-aged male.)*

The list of 20 offenses appeared under each prompt, with 14-point scales<sup>2</sup> beside each offense.

The words “least wrong” and “most wrong” were printed above 1 and 14, respectively, in the

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<sup>2</sup> Offenses were rated on 14-point scales for comparison to the Pennsylvania Commission on Sentencing Offense Gravity Scores (OGS). The OGS is an official “seriousness” score and allows for comparison between official and unofficial ratings. The comparison is part of an analysis in a forthcoming paper.

wrongfulness questions. The same format applied to the harmfulness and wrongfulness questions.

The final variable is recommended sentencing. Each one of the 20 crimes has a recommended minimum sentence according to the Pennsylvania Sentencing Commission. To measure recommended sentencing, I have mimicked and slightly modified Rossi and Burk's (1997) measures. As can be seen below, each crime can be sentenced in one of five ways: No punishment, probation, incarceration of less than one year, incarceration of more than one year, or a life sentence. If a sentence of incarceration is chosen, respondents were asked to write in how long the sentence should be. Also included within the prompt was a reminder that the sentence recommended is the minimum sentence to be served. Many times a sentence can be reduced, for things like good behavior. One could foresee this to be a problem when measuring recommended sentences. Does a sentence of 5 years mean 5 years or is the respondent considering that the offender may be released early? Therefore, emphasis has been placed to remind the respondent that this is the minimum sentence to be served. The prompt and one sentence measure is below:

Last, we would like to know how you feel the crimes **should be punished**. Please consider that the crime is committed by a **first-time offender** in each scenario. Following each crime is a scale for sentencing; please indicate the **minimum** sentence you feel is appropriate for the crime. This should be the sentence you feel **the offender should actually serve**. If you feel that probation is warranted, please circle the corresponding response. If incarceration is necessary, please distinguish between sentences shorter than a year from sentences longer than a year. If the sentence is one year or less, **please indicate the appropriate number of months**. Likewise, if the crime demands more than a year of incarceration, **please indicate how many years**. Lastly, if a life sentence (with or without parole) is necessary, please indicate so.

A man hits his wife during an argument:

No Punishment	Probation	Incarceration	Incarceration	Life
	No time in Prison	(Less than 1 year) # of Months _____	(1 Year or more) # of Years _____	

## Chapter 5 – Results

I used AMOS to construct my path model and test the hypothesized relationships. This analysis involved a two-step process. First, I looked at the overall path model. To do so, I combined the wrongfulness ratings for all 20 offenses into one wrongfulness rating. I did this same procedure for perceived harmfulness, seriousness, and sentencing. Theoretically, combining these scores makes sense, as respondents tend to have the same views on crimes across the board. Statistically, the alpha for each of these is very high: .93 for wrongfulness, .92 for harmfulness, .92 for seriousness, and .83 for recommended sentencing. Presented below in **Table 2** are the means for these four variables.

**Table 2:** Endogenous Variables, All Offenses

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
harm	207.7950	82.00	280.00
wrong	221.9701	89.00	280.00
serious	210.1438	77.00	280.00
sentence	98.8669	1.17	1000.00

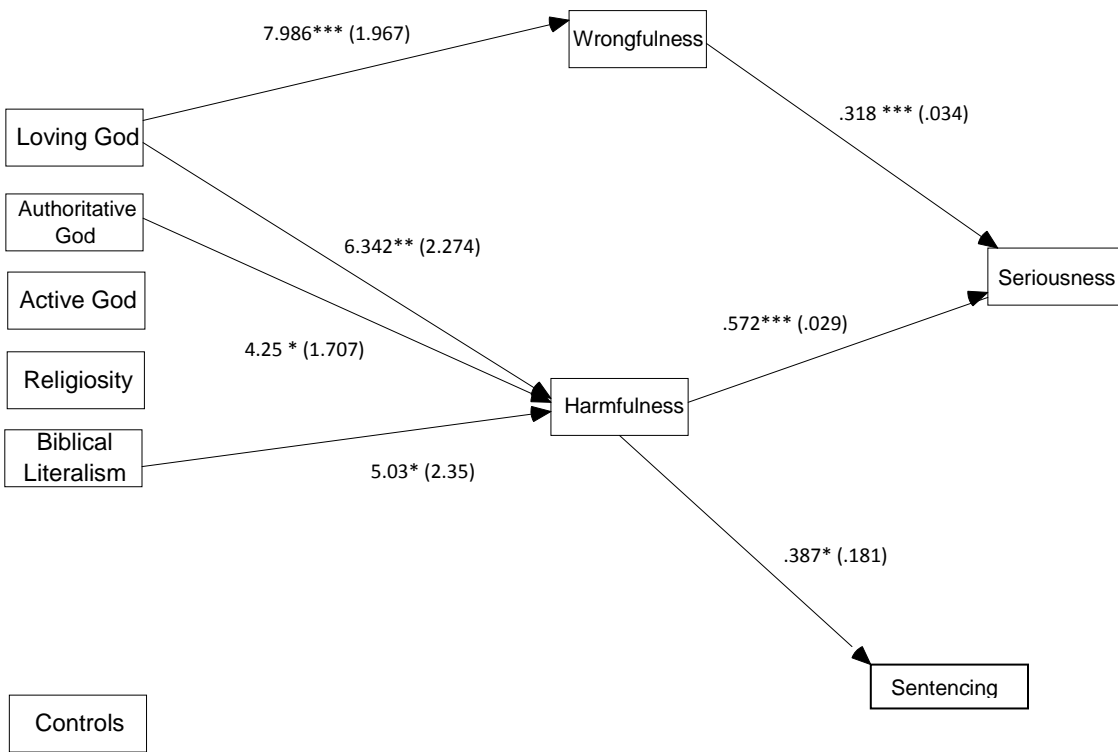
**Figure 3** presents the structural equation model<sup>3</sup>. The control variables and any non-significant paths have been omitted. As predicted, both harmfulness and wrongfulness are positively associated with perceived seriousness. The effect of harmfulness on seriousness is almost 80% greater than the effect of wrongfulness on seriousness. However, harmfulness, above and beyond its effect on seriousness, has a positive effect on recommended sentencing. Interestingly, seriousness does not have a significant path to recommended sentencing. Substantively, the more wrongful or harmful one perceives the crime, the more serious the crime is perceived to be. How wrong or serious the crime is does not influence the

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<sup>3</sup> The correlation matrix for this model, without the controls, has been included in the appendix.

recommended sentence; the more harmful the crime is the greater the recommended sentence.

**Figure 3:** Unstandardized Path Model Coefficients of Images of God, Offense Perceptions, and Recommended Sentencing



\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001 (two-tailed test). Standard Errors in parenthesis.

Two of my three Images of God measures were significant, Loving God and Authoritative God. While neither a loving nor authoritative image has direct paths to serious or sentencing, a loving image of God has an indirect path to serious through wrongfulness and harmfulness and to sentencing through harmfulness. An authoritative image of God also affects seriousness and sentencing through harmfulness. Loving God was the only path to perceived wrongfulness, and it was the strongest coefficient in the model. The third independent variable with significance is biblical literalism, which was positively associated with harmfulness. Religiosity was not

significant, most likely because of the inclusion of Images of God and biblical literalism measures.

Step two was to run the model for each crime individually. I have theoretical reason to believe that different paths may become significant for different types of crimes. **Table 3** and **Table 4** present the means for each offense and the means of offense categories.

**Table 3: Means for each Offense**

Offense	Seriousness	Wrongfulness	Harmfulness	Type of Sentence	Sentence
<b>Argument</b>	11.68	12.40	12.18	2.67	1.16
<b>Attack</b>	11.37	11.70	11.26	2.99	1.38
<b>Kidnap</b>	13.09	13.37	12.89	3.87	9.56
<b>Rape</b>	13.59	13.70	13.67	4.28	25.41
<b>Vandalize</b>	8.14	9.29	8.54	2.24	0.22
<b>Break/Enter</b>	9.06	10.32	8.55	2.94	0.74
<b>Car Theft</b>	9.25	10.74	8.60	3.11	1.11
<b>Robbery</b>	12.16	12.39	12.44	3.75	5.53
<b>Negligence</b>	11.11	10.62	11.80	3.07	2.75
<b>Embezzle</b>	12.75	12.78	13.37	3.65	5.34
<b>Bad Food</b>	10.26	11.44	9.10	3.94	1.01
<b>Oxy</b>	10.64	11.69	10.28	3.51	0.38
<b>DUI</b>	10.19	10.36	10.25	2.67	3.36
<b>Steroids</b>	7.42	8.13	7.58	2.18	1.90
<b>Cocaine</b>	9.24	9.54	8.87	3.22	1.85
<b>Marijuana</b>	7.28	7.67	6.66	2.77	5.24
<b>Kid Porn</b>	12.64	12.97	12.08	3.94	15.05
<b>False ID</b>	10.07	11.19	9.71	3.14	16.17
<b>Hacking</b>	11.03	11.47	10.29	3.43	4.66
<b>Virus</b>	9.09	10.02	9.29	2.67	1.76

NOTE: Means for Seriousness, wrongfulness, and harmfulness are on scale from 1-15; Types of Sentencing: 1=none; 2=probation; 3=incarceration <1 yr; 4=incarceration >1yr; 5=life; Sentence is in years.

As we can see there is considerable variation in the means between different offenses. Attempted kidnapping, for example, has a mean seriousness of 13.09 while possession of anabolic steroids has a mean seriousness of only 7.24. Similar variety is seen across the perceived wrongfulness and harmfulness. **Table 3** also presents the average sentence given (no

sentence to life sentence) as well as the average length sentencing. Most of the offenses average a sentence between probation and less than a year of incarceration. While rape is the only offense to average a sentence of incarceration of over one year, trading child pornography and selling bad food that results in death are at that mark (3.94) for practical purposes. While 17 of the offenses are given recommended minimum sentences between zero and ten years of imprisonment, three offenses are given substantially larger minimums on average. Trading pornographic images of children and applying for an online loan with a fake ID are recommended 15.05 and 16.17 years minimum sentence, respectively. Rape is even greater, with an average minimum sentence of almost 25 ½ years.

We can see in **Table 4** that there are differences between offense categories. Violent crimes are rated the highest in all three categories, followed by white-collar, computer, property crimes and finally drugs/alcohol. There are substantial differences in ratings of crimes with different outcomes. Those crimes that result in personal harm to the victim have, on average, higher seriousness, wrongfulness, and harmfulness ratings. **Table 4** also presents the mean recommended sentence for each offense category. Surprisingly, computer crime had the highest mean minimum sentence at 9.41 years. Violent crime is second (8.61), followed by drugs/alcohol (3.09), white-collar (2.37), and then property offenses (0.69).

**Table 4:** Mean Rating for each Category of Offense

<b>Offense Category</b>	<b>Seriousness</b>	<b>Wrongfulness</b>	<b>Harmfulness</b>	<b>Sentencing</b>	
Violent	12.38	12.71	12.49	(1)	8.61 (2)
Property	8.82	10.12	8.56	(4)	0.69 (5)
White-Collar	11.19	11.63	11.14	(2)	2.37 (4)
Drugs/Alcohol	8.53	8.93	8.34	(5)	3.09 (3)
Computer	10.71	11.41	10.34	(3)	9.41 (1)
Personal Harm	11.94	12.25	12.03		6.95
No Personal Harm	9.33	10.14	9.02		3.82

*NOTE: Relative ranks are in parenthesis*



**Table 5** presents the coefficients for the endogenous variables in the model for each of the 20 individual crime models. Mimicking the overall model, perceived crime harmfulness and wrongfulness are positively and significantly associated with perceived crime seriousness. For the most part, the effects of wrongfulness and harmfulness are between .330 and .500. In three quarters of the offenses, the harmfulness coefficient is greater than the wrongfulness coefficient. The only peculiar offense is rape with a harmfulness effect of .684 and wrongfulness effect of only .138. Wrongfulness had a significant effect on sentencing in only a few select offenses, though no pattern appears. Unlike the overall model, harmfulness only affects sentencing one quarter of the offenses. The effects on sentencing must be strong enough in those five offenses to show up in the overall model of all 20 crimes. The opposite is at work when we look at the significant effects of seriousness on sentencing. Not found but expected in the overall model, nine of the 20 individual models have positive, significant effects of seriousness on sentencing. Eight of these nine offenses are characterized by physical or psychological harm to the victim.

**Table 5:** Unstandardized Path Model Coefficients for Individual Offenses

	wrong --> serious	harm --> serious	wrong --> sentence	harm --> sentence	serious --> sentence
<b>Argument</b>	.398*	.585*	0.230	-0.003	.252*
<b>Attack</b>	.328*	.488*	.175*	0.097	.194*
<b>Rape</b>	.138*	.684*	4.410*	-0.082	1.159
<b>Kidnap</b>	.367*	.362*	0.051	.892*	1.546*
<b>Vandalize</b>	.449*	.422*	0.046	0.044	-0.010
<b>Break/Enter</b>	.335*	.468*	0.022	0.026	.110*
<b>Car Theft</b>	.374*	.474*	0.086	0.073	0.086
<b>Robbery</b>	.378*	.379*	.611*	0.499	.659*
<b>Negligence</b>	.330*	.510*	0.218	0.186	.454*
<b>Embezzle</b>	.434*	.336*	0.222	.351*	0.263
<b>Bad Food</b>	.437*	.542*	1.249*	-0.321	2.298*
<b>Oxy</b>	.391*	.406*	0.413	.425*	0.329
<b>DUI</b>	.318*	.485*	.256*	0.101	-0.092
<b>Steroids</b>	.377*	.435*	-0.128*	.174*	-0.060
<b>Cocaine</b>	.426*	.392*	0.047	0.169	0.166
<b>Marijuana</b>	.395*	.514*	-0.063	0.165	.307*
<b>Kid Porn</b>	.406*	.357*	-0.088	0.563	2.092*
<b>False ID</b>	.341*	.480*	0.034	0.135	0.107
<b>Hacking</b>	.361*	.417*	.509*	.396*	0.336
<b>Virus</b>	.372*	.495*	0.142	0.209	0.042

\*p < .05 (two-tailed test).

## Chapter 5 – Summary of Findings

This study set out to examine how individuals use perceived measures of crime (harmfulness, wrongfulness, and seriousness) in suggesting a recommended minimum sentence for 20 offenses. The effects of religiosity, biblical literalism, and one’s image of God were also tested. Additionally, I was able to observe variations in the conceptual path model across different categories of crime.

My first hypothesis stated that white-collar, computer, and drug/alcohol offenses will follow patterns similar to those found for violent and property crimes (Stylianou 2003; Warr 1989; O’Connell & Whelan 1996). The greater the personal harm, the more serious the crime is

perceived to be. Likewise, crimes resulting in physical harm will be perceived as more harmful than crimes resulting in economic harm. This hypothesis was generally supported. Among alcohol/drug, white-collar, and computer crimes, the greater the harm or consequences (either physical or monetary), the greater the seriousness ratings. For example, trading pornographic images of children has a greater consequence on the children than distributing a computer virus does on the general public. Similarly, a DUI is seen as having a greater consequence than possessing steroids, which is reflected in the perceived seriousness scores (10.19 versus 7.42). This pattern is not so clear among white-collar crimes. Embezzling \$125,000 is rated the most serious, followed by negligence leading to employee injury, illegally prescribing oxycodone for profit, and lastly selling bad food that results in death. Arguably, the offense of greatest consequence is selling food that results in death, however it is rated the least serious among white-collar crimes. As hypothesized, the crimes resulting in physical harm to the victim are rated more harmful than crimes resulting in monetary harm.

Second, I hypothesized that violent crimes will be rated, on average, as the most serious and property offenses the least serious (Stylianou 2003). White-collar, computer, and drugs/alcohol crimes will fall in between violent and property crimes, but the specific order is not known. The results partially support this expectation. Violent crimes were rated the most serious (12.38), followed by white-collar (11.19) and computer (10.71). However drug/alcohol offenses were rated the least serious (8.53) while property crimes were rated just slightly more serious (8.82). Third, I also expected recommended sentence lengths to follow the same hypothesized pattern as perceived seriousness, violent crimes receiving the longest sentences down to property crimes receiving the shortest sentences (Blumstein & Cohen 1980). This

pattern was also only partially observed. Property crimes (.69) received the shortest sentences with white-collar and drug offenses receiving the third and fourth longest sentences, 2.37 and 3.09 years, respectively. Unexpectedly, computer crimes received the longest average sentence (9.41) with violent crimes receiving the second longest (8.61).

Fourth, similarly to the works by Warr (1989) and Rosenmerkel (2001), I expected the perceived harmfulness and wrongfulness to positively affect the perceived seriousness. In turn, perceived crime seriousness would be positively associated with a longer recommended minimum sentence. In the general model, this was partially supported. Perceived wrongfulness and perceived harmfulness were both positively and significantly associated with perceived seriousness. The path between perceived seriousness and recommended sentencing was not significant. This suggests that, generally, perceived harmfulness and wrongfulness influence an individual's perception of the crime seriousness. Surprisingly, the perceived crime seriousness does not affect the recommended sentence. At the individual offense level, perceived harmfulness and wrongfulness significantly affected perceived seriousness for all 20 offenses. The path from perceived seriousness to recommended sentencing was significant and positive for nine of the individual offenses, eight of which were offenses resulting in personal harm. Not detected at the aggregate level, offenses that result in personal harm to a victim invoke individuals to use perceived seriousness in determining a recommended sentence. This finding, that harmfulness is used as a determinant of sentence severity, suggests that harmfulness may play a bigger role than previously suggested (see Alter, Kernochan, and Darley 2007).

The fifth hypothesis was that religiosity and biblical literalism would be positively and significantly associated with perceived crime harmfulness, wrongfulness, seriousness, and

recommended sentencing. While previous research has only predicted sentencing severity with these measures (see Grasmick et al. 1993; Applegate et al. 2000; Unnever & Cullen 2006), I expected that they would also be associated with the way in which an individual perceives an offense. At the aggregate level, religiosity was not significantly associated with any of the four variables. Biblical literalism was only significant in its path to perceived harmfulness. At the individual offense level, the path coefficient for religiosity was only significant seven times out of a possible 80. Biblical literalism had no significant effect on perceived wrongfulness, perceived seriousness, or recommended sentencing. Biblical literalism's path to harmfulness was significant in five of the 20 models, a strong enough affect to show up in the aggregate model.

Finally, I expected all three images of God variables to have a significant effect on perceived seriousness, wrongfulness, harmfulness and recommended sentencing. Again, previous literature has focused on the effects of images of God on sentencing attitudes (see Unnever, Cullen & Bartkowski 2006; Evans & Adams 2003; Bader and Johnson unpublished; Unnever, Cullen, & Applegate 2005) while I anticipate these views to also influence perceptions of crime. My analysis offers mixed support. On the one hand, none of the images are significant predictors of perceived seriousness or sentencing and the Active God measure has no significant paths to any of the dependent variables. On the other hand, Loving God and authoritative God are both significant in the model. A loving image of God increases both one's perceived wrongfulness and harmfulness; an authoritative image of God increase's perceived harmfulness. Among individual offenses, the same general trend appeared. Loving God was the most common image to be significant and was most likely to have a significant effect on all of

the dependent variables. Authoritative God was the second most common variable and an Active image of God only found significance occasionally.

### *Discussion*

This study has added to the literature on perceived seriousness, recommended sentencing, and religious affects, and, in doing so has made several noteworthy contributions. First, as suggested by prior literature, perceived crime harmfulness and wrongfulness have significant, positive effects on perceived crime seriousness. In the general model, and in all 20 individual models, harmfulness and wrongfulness are significant predictors of seriousness. There does not, however, appear to be any distinct pattern for different categories of crime. Rather, in 15 of 20 crime vignettes, respondents relied more heavily on harmfulness than wrongfulness in determining seriousness. This compliments then findings of Rosenmerkel (2001) and suggests that while individuals consider both concepts, harmfulness plays a more important role.

Second, seriousness is not significantly predictive of sentencing in the general model. Instead, perceived crime seriousness only affects recommended sentencing when the offense has negative personal harm consequences. This is the most unexpected and interesting finding. Why is it that perceived crime serious only influences recommended sentences when the offense leads to personal harm of the victim? The comparison of means reinforces that personal harm leads to longer, more punitive sentences. Previous work has established the relationship between personal harm and seriousness (Stylianou 2003), this work extends that relationship to sentencing. Additionally, perceived harmfulness is significantly predictive of

recommended sentencing. To my knowledge, Alter, Kernochan, and Darley (2007) are the only ones to have used perceived harmfulness or wrongfulness to predict sentencing. While they found harmfulness to be only weakly predictive of sentencing (versus wrongfulness or both harmfulness and wrongfulness), I have found the opposite. Substantively, individuals are generally using the amount of harm created by an offense as the baseline to determine both seriousness and sentencing.

Third, white-collar and computer crime have surprising sentencing recommendations, relative to their general perceptions. Holtfreter et al. (2008) found that respondents supported greater punishments for violent offenders than white-collar offenders. Schoepfer, Carmichael, and Piquero (2007) found respondents' had equal feelings on the punishment of fraud and robbery. In my sample, white-collar crime is the second-highest category in terms of harmfulness, wrongfulness, and seriousness behind only violent crimes. However, the average recommended minimum sentence for these offenses is fourth, approximately 25% the length of violent crimes. This is consistent with other recent evaluations of white-collar sentencing. Interestingly, computer crimes, ranked third in seriousness, harmfulness, and wrongfulness jump to the highest average recommended sentence, about 9% longer than violent crimes. These have very interesting implications. Computer crimes are seen as less serious than both violent and white-collar offenses, yet they demand the most punitive sentence. This could be explained a number of ways. Perhaps the recent onslaught of online fraud and other computer-related crime by the media has led to an increased attention to its punishment. A second explanation is that the sample, more computer-savvy than the general population, finds these crimes more familiar and therefore more deserving of punishment. What about white-collar

crime? Recognized as the second most serious category, recommended sentencing plummets below alcohol/drugs. A sample-specific explanation is not likely to work here. Generally, youthful samples are more lenient on drug and alcohol offenses. In this instance, white-collar crimes are actually given even lower sentences. If media coverage has increased computer crime sentencing, why has it not increased white-collar? Perhaps the notable scandals of the early 2000's have been overshadowed or forgotten?

Lastly, religion has almost no effect on perceived seriousness or sentencing while biblical literalism did have an effect on harmfulness. Literal interpretation of the bible is a key characteristic of Protestant fundamentalism. This could be explained by the work of Warr (1989) and Curry (1996), who found that Protestant conservatives failed to distinguish on the morality of crime. These individuals find all crime as morally wrong and therefore only judge crimes on the harm produced. In this instance, those with an increasing literal view of the bible rely solely or mostly on the perceived harm of the crime. The lack of an effect from religion could simply be that biblical literalism is accounting for the same views, as the two measures were moderately correlated ( $r=.556$ ). Alternatively, the Image of God variables could be acting as a more precise measure of one's religiosity. As discussed in Bader and Froese (unpublished), "God's character proves a straightforward way to describe religious differences and an efficient means to demonstrate how religion impacts the world," (p 2). This leads into the final significant finding.

A loving image of God and an authoritative image of God both had positive and significant effects on harmfulness; a loving image also predicted wrongfulness. Theoretically, I expected these to be significant but to work in opposite directions. A loving image of God



would make you more forgiving and loving yourself, whereas as an angry and authoritative image would make you more authoritative and harsher. It turns out, the stronger your view, regardless which one, the more harmful the crime is perceived. I can best explain this in analogous terms. Much like Hirschi (1969) claimed it does not matter to whom you are bonded, only whether one is bonded, it does not matter if you view God as loving and forgiving or angry and authoritative, having a view predicts perceived harmfulness. Why the active image is not significant is more difficult to explain. My best explanation is that like religiosity, the high correlation with biblical literalism negates its own influence. Similarly, why is a LG significant with wrongfulness while AuG is not? This could be explained along with biblical literalism. Those with strong authoritative images find all crimes to be wrong, and therefore only use harmfulness in constructing perceived seriousness.

### *Limitations*

There are a couple limitations to my study. The first and most problematic is the sample. Despite the fact that many articles published in respected journals use college students as survey respondents, there is an inability to generalize to a greater population. Some types of crimes (drug/alcohol) received lower seriousness and sentencing than we would expect from a more general sample. I have done my best to get around this by choosing students whose opinion may matter more than the general student body's – those entering the criminal justice field. Second, I did not have enough space to focus on other relevant variables. While it allows me to address several goals at once, it does not allow me to get at some of the finer points. For example, I have held the race, gender, age, and criminal history within the crime vignettes

constant for all offenses. In a bigger or more specific study I would be able to change those variables and test their effect. This study gives me base, off of which I can work more specifically in the future.

### *Direction for Future Research*

There are several areas for future research to build. First, there is a need for a generalizable sample. If some of the findings are influenced by a younger sample, a nationally-representative sample would flush that out. Alternatively, it would be interesting to test these relationships among judges. While they are given sentencing recommendations, it is conceivable that personal beliefs (i.e. image of God) or incident characteristics (personal harm) could influence sentencing decisions. Second, a greater variety of offenses would be useful. Despite the fact that I tried to mimic previous surveys and use a systematic sample of offenses, I used only a handful of crimes for each offense category, which could possible skew my findings. Additionally, a factorial survey would allow for greater depiction of how consequences influence perceived wrongfulness, harmfulness, and seriousness of crimes. If we could present the same offense (i.e. embezzlement) with varying consequences (different amounts), we would be able to distinguish the effects of changing consequences. Additionally, we could measure which changes in consequences have the greater impact on crime perceptions. For example, how does the effect of moving the consequences of a DUI from no harm to vehicular homicide change crime perceptions in relation to changing the consequences of rape from serious bodily harm to accidental death?

**APPENDIX**  
**CORRELATION MATRIX**

## Correlation Matrix for Overall Model

	loving~d	authgod	active~d	religi~y	biblit~l	wrong	harm	serious	sentence
<b>lovinggod</b>	1.0000								
<b>authgod</b>	-0.0979	1.0000							
<b>activegod</b>	0.7017	0.0017	1.0000						
<b>religiosity</b>	0.5587	0.0154	0.6966	1.0000					
<b>bibliteral</b>	0.5063	0.0523	0.5596	0.5550	1.0000				
<b>wrong</b>	0.2379	-0.0140	0.1648	0.1935	0.2005	1.0000			
<b>harm</b>	0.2203	0.0623	0.2113	0.2253	0.2579	0.6705	1.0000		
<b>serious</b>	0.2265	0.0585	0.2244	0.2270	0.2339	0.7252	0.8394	1.0000	
<b>sentence</b>	-0.0800	0.0083	-0.0573	-0.0230	-0.0165	0.1970	0.2308	0.2192	1.0000

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