

UC research examines how white-collar criminals adjust to prison life

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This is an image of hand cuffs. Credit: Dottie Stover, U. of Cincinnati

White-collar criminals – those convicted of fraud, embezzlement, tax violation, anti-trust and other business offenses—have no more problems adjusting to prison than those in a general prison population.

In fact, when it comes to specific adjustment issues—problems with cell mates, feelings of safety and general difficulties, white-collar criminals actually report fewer problems than other [prison](#) populations, according to new research from the University of Cincinnati in the now online December 2013 issue of the journal, *Justice Quarterly*, in a paper titled "Revisiting the Special Sensitivity Hypothesis: The Prison Experience of White-Collar Inmates."

The research was conducted by UC criminal justice doctoral student William Stadler, a recent graduate of UC's doctoral program in criminal justice; Michael Benson, professor of criminal justice at UC; and Frank Cullen, distinguished professor in criminal justice at UC, which houses a nationally top-ranked criminal justice program.

The researchers wanted to test the assumption that white-collar criminals are especially sensitive to the "pain" of imprisonment, an important question due to the growing white-collar prisoner population in the U.S.

Explained Benson, "Before entering prison, most white-collar criminals are afraid for their safety and terrified about aspects of serving their sentences, but the survey data we mined shows that white-collar criminals have no greater problems adjusting to prison life than other populations. And, in some instances, white-collar criminals seem to cope better. That's likely due to the fact that these are people who have been successful in business, understand how a bureaucracy works as well as the need for rules and regulations. They also tend to have social support from families."

The data for the study come from surveys of more than 350 prisoners housed in two federal prisons—one a medium-security prison and one a low-security prison—in Terre Haute, Ind.

Although these are not the high security super max prisons that house the nation's most violent offenders, they are not country clubs, either. Both institutions place strong restrictions on the movement and freedom of prisoners, and both house a variety of offenders, including those convicted of drug offenses and violent offenses.

In addition to finding that white-collar criminals have no greater difficulty adjusting to prison than other populations, the UC researchers found that:

- White-collar prisoners were more likely to report having made friends in prison.
- White-collar criminals were less likely to report general difficulties.
- White-collar criminals were less likely to report a need for safety.
- White-collar criminals were less likely to report problems with cell mates.

For this research project, Stadler, Benson and Cullen analyzed survey data originally gathered from prison populations from 1986-88 by Patricia Van Voorhis, UC professor of [criminal justice](#). That original [survey data](#) set consisted of 366 prisoners, 78 of whom were white-collar [criminals](#).

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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