

Public corruption by officials may not be as rampant as reported

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The phrase "public corruption" invokes images of former Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich or disgraced Virginia Governor Robert McDonnell. Often shaped by sensational media coverage of high officials, the public's general perception of corruption in the U.S. is that it is on the rise. Jeffrey Milyo, a professor of economics at the University of Missouri, examined thousands of corruption cases from 1986 to 2014 and found that corruption convictions are not increasing as fast as the public may think and mostly involve low-ranking officials.

The Executive Office of U.S. Attorneys defines official corruption as criminal prosecution of public employees "for misconduct in, or misuse of office." Examples of public corruption include bribery, conspiracy, embezzlement, false statements and theft.

"In the past, most research on public corruption relied on survey data that is of dubious quality," said Milyo, a researcher in the MU College of Arts and Science. "In nearly all previous studies, the data used by scholars have been taken from reports made to Congress by the Public Integrity Section (PIN) of the Department of Justice. This data is compiled from retrospective surveys of federal prosecutors rather than directly from [administrative records](#). Consequently, there are inconsistencies in reporting over time and across prosecutors in different parts of the country."

Milyo and Adriana Cordis, an assistant professor of accounting at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, S.C., used a dataset compiled from

administrative records to piece together a more accurate picture of public corruption. Using electronic records of actual court case filings and up-to-date government records accessed through the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), Milyo and Cordis were able to better assess the state of public corruption in the U.S.

"We examined records of more than 16,000 corruption cases from 1986 onward," Milyo said. "This provides an objective picture of public corruption, in contrast to public perceptions that are colored by sensational media coverage of a few outlier cases. We found that overall corruption convictions are, in fact, declining from year to year and that only about 2 percent of those cases involved elected or high-ranking officials."

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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