

Study shows public wants researchers held accountable for data fraud

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A new study by School of Criminal Justice researchers suggest the justice system is out of sync with the American public when it comes to prosecuting cases of research fraud. Credit: University at Albany

Whether it is falsification, fabrication or selective reporting, the general public views these research practices as immoral and believes scientists should be held accountable, according to a new study by researchers at the University at Albany.

The study, by School of Criminal Justice Assistant Professor Justin Pickett and graduate researcher Sean Patrick Roche, found that there is an extraordinary consensus among survey respondents that both falsifying or fabricating data and selective reporting are morally

unacceptable.

"More than 90 percent of participants believe that scientists caught falsifying or fabricating data should be fired and banned from receiving [government funding](#)," said Pickett. "However, most participants also believe that selective reporting deserves these same sanctions."

The majority of respondents agreed that data fraud should be a criminal offense, while well over a third of participants hold the same view of selective reporting.

The paper, "Questionable, Objectionable or Criminal? Public Opinion on Data Fraud and Selective Reporting in Science," was published in the March 2017 edition of *Science and Engineering Ethics*. Pickett and Roche conducted two surveys to collect data, comprising 1,750 responses.

The findings suggest the justice system is out of sync with the American public when it comes to prosecuting cases of [research fraud](#) – where [criminal sanctions](#) are exceedingly rare. In fact, it wasn't until [the 2006 case of Eric Poehlman](#), a researcher in the field of obesity and aging, that a scientist in the United States was actually sentenced to jail time for academic fraud.

For Pickett and Roche, their findings suggest that although selective reporting is perceived as less egregious than falsifying or fabricating data, the public believes all of these behaviors are deserving of punishment.

"For instance, participants absolutely do not view selective reporting as a 'questionable research practice'; rather, the vast majority of laypersons in our sample believe this common behavior is morally reprehensible," said Pickett. "In fact, the results indicate that slightly over half of all Americans would prefer both to criminalize data fraud and to sentence

fraudsters to a period of incarceration."

Understanding the broader implications of falsifying data remains a concern given the length of time from when a case is first reported to when a retraction is submitted. In the case of Poehlman, it took six years from the time objections were first raised and the scientist admitted to research [fraud](#).

More information: Justin T. Pickett et al. Questionable, Objectionable or Criminal? Public Opinion on Data Fraud and Selective Reporting in Science, *Science and Engineering Ethics* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s11948-017-9886-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-017-9886-2)

Provided by University at Albany

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