United States Sentencing Commission
One Columbus Circle, NE
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Washington, DC 20002-8002

March 14, 1997

MEMORANDUM

FROM: Richard P. Conaboy
Chairman

SUBJECT: Public Opinion on Sentencing Federal Crimes

The Sentencing Commission is pleased to release this national sample survey of public opinions on sentences for federal crimes. Pursuant to our enabling statute, the Commission continues to assess the sentencing guidelines to reflect, to the extent practicable, advancement in the knowledge of human behavior as it relates to the criminal justice process.

The attached research study addresses the Commission's obligation to "develop means of measuring the degree to which the sentencing, penal, and correctional practices are effective in meeting the purposes of sentencing," including the purpose of providing "just punishment for the offense" (28 U.S.C. §991(b)(2)). Two of the seven factors the statute directs the Commission to consider in developing guideline offense categories are the community view of the gravity of the offense and the public concern generated by the offense. This study will prove helpful in our efforts to improve the guideline system.

The Commission contracted with Dr. Peter H. Rossi of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and Dr. Richard A. Berk of the University of California at Los Angeles to prepare a general report summarizing the survey data. We thank them for their contributions in improving the federal sentencing system. While the Commission accepted their final report as fulfilling the terms of the contract, the report is the work product of these independent contractors and does not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Sentencing Commission.

Attachment

A National Sample Survey

Public Opinion on Sentencing Federal Crimes

Completed under contracts with:
Peter H. Rossi, University of Massachusetts at Amherst
Richard A. Berk, University of California at Los Angeles
and
Response Analysis Corporation

UNITED STATES SENTENCING COMMISSION

October 1995

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many persons contributed to the study reported in this monograph. Members of the staff of the U. S. Sentencing Commission participated in making many of the critical decisions on the design of the study, especially Ms. Phyllis Newton. Dr. Linda Drazga Maxfield served as contract manager. We are especially indebted to Dr. Linda Drazga Maxfield, Mrs. Christine Kitchens, and Ms. Ronnie M. Scotkin, for mapping guidelines sentences on to the variables used in this study.

The sample design and data collection for this study was carried out by the Response Analysis Corporation of Princeton, New Jersey: Staff members, Dr. Lynne Firester and Dr. Andrew Kulley, managed those tasks with great skill and devotion.

At the University of California at Los Angeles, Alec Campbell served as research assistant, producing many of the tables and graphs that are the foundation of Chapters 5 through 9.

Americans' willingness to answer questions posed by strangers make surveys like this one possible. More than 1,700 patiently answered our questions in sessions lasting almost an hour each. Our interviewers thanked each person interviewed, a gesture that is not enough. We hope that this report and the knowledge derived from their patient attention to our questions adds to their rewards for cooperation.

We are grateful for all the help we received and are certain that these efforts have measurably improved the quality of this monograph. Whatever faults this report may have arise out of our inability to take maximum advantage of this help.

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