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Examining the multifaceted harms of corporate and white-collar crime

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Corporate and white-collar crimes result in a wide range of harms that extend beyond individual victimization, disrupting social structures, ecosystems, and economic stability. These harms are often diffuse, systemic, and challenging to quantify, yet their impacts are profound and long-lasting (Croall, 2007). A comprehensive account of the victimization and harm of corporate and white-collar crime, requires considering various types of harm (physical, emotional, financial), various potentially affected organisms (humans, fauna, flora) and systems (ecological, financial, legal), and multiple ways in which harm is inflicted (direct-indirect, individual-collective). Therefore, just as there are different levels of explanation for these crimes and harms (individual, organizational, societal), their victims and harms are varied too (Croall, 2007; Dodge, 2020).

Environmental harms committed by companies, for example, can take the form of ecological destruction and public health impact, which disproportionately affect vulnerable populations (Bisschop & Vande Walle, 2013; Hall, 2013; Jarrell & Ozymy, 2016; White, 2014). Oil spills, deforestation, and toxic waste dumping, not only destroy ecosystems, but also threaten the livelihoods of communities that depend on natural resources (Gibbs & Boratto, 2017). Many of these behaviors exemplify the intersection between corporate misconduct and global inequality, with low-income nations and vulnerable communities often suffering the brunt of the consequences (Gould et al., 2015; Pellow, 2007; White, 2014). Next to environmental and public health impacts, corporate and white-collar crime can have considerable financial impacts, potentially undermining national economies and eroding trust in public and

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private institutions (Friedrichs, 2009). Sutherland (1983, p. 9) already posited that the financial impact of white-collar crime likely far exceeds that of traditional forms of crime. As an illustration, instances of corporate fraud, tax evasion, and corruption — highlighted during financial crises such as 2008 — demonstrate the far-reaching consequences for national economies, small businesses, and individuals (Dodge, 2020; Pontell & Geis, 2007). Furthermore, regulatory breaches in sectors like pharmaceuticals and consumer goods can lead to unsafe products, triggering widespread health crises (Braithwaite, 2013; Lord et al., 2022). The harms of white-collar and corporate crime thus extend far beyond direct impacts on societies, communities, and individuals, infiltrating social structures, exacerbating inequality, undermining governance, and eroding public trust and institutional legitimacy. For example, regulatory loopholes, inadequate enforcement, and, at times, state complicity in enabling corporate misconduct undermine the rule of law (Tombs & Whyte, 2020). This fosters a perception of impunity for the powerful, often at the expense of the disadvantaged (Box, 2002). Such dynamics perpetuate cycles of harm as prevention and enforcement fail to address systemic issues effectively.

Although much of the scientific and societal interest in corporate and white-collar crime - some of it over a century old - originated from increased attention to the societal consequences of corporate and elite behavior (Bonger, 1916; Sutherland, 1945), much of the research focused on explanations for and responses to this phenomenon. For a long time, the multifaceted harms and diverse types of victimization of corporate and white-collar crime remained under-explored, and ‘failed, in some respects, to recognize and address the physical, emotional and financial damages suffered by white-collar crime victims, which may place the potential serious nature of victimization in the background’ (Dodge, 2020, p.24). Both scientific and societal attention to the harms and the victimization of corporate and white-collar crime has increased in recent years (van Wingerde & Bisschop, 2023). Studies have, for instance, focused on the emotional harms such as fear, stress, anger, loss of trust, and revictimization following corporate crimes (Tombs & Whyte, 2020; Visconti 2018). The direct and indirect financial consequences of corruption, money laundering, and tax evasion and avoidance are increasingly under public and scientific scrutiny (Winter & Vozza, 2022). Also, the - sometimes invisible - physical harms from dangerous working conditions, unsafe products, or environmental pollution are increasingly studied and recognized as ‘corporate violence’ (Benson & Simpson, 2015; Tombs & Whyte, 2007). The diverse environmental harms, in turn, have been the focus of green criminology since the 1990s (South & Brisman, 2020).

This collection, ´Examining the Multifaceted Harms of Corporate and White-Collar Crime´, continues this line of research on the harms of corporate and elite behavior. We present a range of research that explores the nature, mechanisms, and short- and long-term consequences of these crimes. The contributions to this thematic collection combine empirical studies, theoretical analyses, and critical commentaries, providing a robust understanding of the multifaceted harms of corporate and white-collar crime.

Contributions to the thematic collection

This thematic collection brings together several papers presented at a seminar organized by the American Society of Criminology's Division of White-Collar and Corporate Crime (DWCC) and the European Working Group on Organizational Crime (EUROC). On 20–21 April 2023, DWCC and EUROC organized their first joint virtual seminar that included researchers from around the world to critically address harm as a central concept in understanding corporate and white-collar crime. A committee with members of both groups organized the seminar: Emily Homer (Association of Certified Fraud Examiners, USA), Marieke Kluin (Leiden University, the Netherlands), Vincenzo Ruggiero (Middlesex University London, UK), Diana Bociga Gelvez (University of Manchester, UK), Lieselot Bisschop (Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands), and Wim Huisman (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands). The seminar attracted over 30 submissions of paper proposals and over 80 attendees. The topics included harms produced in regulatory and corporate interactions, harms and crime in professional sports, harms of state crime, regulatory policies and harm, multi-media representations of corporate harm, harms of corruption as well as anti-corruption policies, harm experiences of victims and citizens, and harms emerging from new economies (Huisman, 2023). Presentations were followed by Q&A's and debates, moderated by past DWCC and EUROC chairs who acted as discussants. The seminar showcased corporate and white-collar crime research built on various (inter)national contexts and cases, as well as diverse research approaches. Together, the keynotes, paper presentations, and lighting talks (re)confirmed the need for continued critical research on the multifaceted harms of corporate and white-collar crime. Four seminar organizers - Emily Homer, Marieke Kluin, Diane Bociga Gelvez, and Lieselot Bisschop - collaborated to bring forth this thematic collection in *Crime*, *Law & Social Change* based on the seminar. Four keynotes and six paper presentations of the symposium were developed into research articles and commentaries, now published in this thematic collection.

The thematic collection begins with a commentary, *Fields of victimization: When crime generates Crime*, written by Vincenzo Ruggiero, who helped us organize the seminar, inspired us with his keynote speech, yet unfortunately passed away during the production of this collection. As editors, we would like to dedicate this collection to Vincenzo, in honor of his critical contribution to the study of organized and white-collar crime. As you read his commentary, we hope you are reminded of his passion for criminological theory and his continued pursuit of social justice. Vincenzo Ruggiero's commentary situates corporate crime within broader global power dynamics, illustrating how corporate harm operates within spaces that transcend individual impacts, embedding harm within systemic and structural inequalities. He critiques the intensification of poverty and political disempowerment caused by corporate practices. His analysis shows the disproportionate effects of corporate crime on marginalized and economically disadvantaged groups around the world. It challenges conventional interpretations of victimization by pointing out that corporate strategies perpetuate global disparities, normalizing structural violence and systemic harm through economic deprivation and political disempowerment.

Additionally, Mary Dodge's *Commentary on gender and victimization in white-collar crime* critically examines the gender dimensions of white-collar crime, focusing on the exploitation of women by the pharmaceutical and medical industries. She highlights how corporate greed prioritizes profit over women's safety, resulting in victimization through unsafe medical products and manipulative marketing strategies. Dodge highlights the systemic regulatory failures that enable these harms and calls for stronger safeguards to protect women. Her analysis argues for addressing these structural deficiencies and raising awareness of the intersection between gender, reproductive health, and white-collar crime, advocating for systemic changes that reduce harm.

Annika Van Baar's article, *Corporate involvement in atrocity crimes - Trends and patterns in regulation*, explores the role of regulation and accountability, focusing on corporate involvement in atrocity crimes, including genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Tracing the historical evolution of regulation, the paper identifies four key trends: the absence of effective oversight, attempts at accountability through international criminal justice, civil society efforts to label and address corporate complicity, and the institutionalization of norms through frameworks like the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Taken together, these trends reveal a persistent pattern of limited success, often constrained by the mutual economic and political interests of states and companies. Van Baar's central argument is that while these trends illustrate efforts to address corporate complicity in atrocity crimes, they also reveal persistent deficiencies in the normative landscape, rooted in state-corporate power dynamics and the prioritization of profit over accountability. The article argues for a deeper understanding of these underlying patterns to inform more effective approaches to regulation and governance.

In *State-corporate legal symbiosis and social harm: The case of the steel factory "Ilva" in Taranto*, *Italy*, Carlo Nicoli Aldini's analysis illustrates how legal frameworks can become instruments for sustaining corporate harms. Through a detailed examination of seven years of legal decisions, Aldini shows how the Italian state enabled harmful industrial practices under the guise of economic necessity. Despite evidence linking Ilva's operations to severe public health crises, the state consistently prioritized industrial productivity over public safety. By labeling Ilva as a "factory of strategic interest for the nation," the government facilitated harmful corporate practices through legislative changes that weakened environmental protections, delayed compliance measures, and granted immunity from prosecution to corporate actors. This case shows the complicity of state mechanisms in perpetuating harm, exacerbating social inequalities, and compromising the well-being of vulnerable communities—a theme that resonates throughout the issue.

The focus on systemic state complicity resonates with José Atiles' examination of state-corporate crime in Puerto Rico, where colonial legacies intertwine with economic frameworks to perpetuate harm. His article, *Funding the colonial tax haven: Unpacking the role of the paycheck protection program in Puerto Rico's State-Corporate Crimes*, shows how the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), ostensibly designed as a relief measure during the COVID-19 pandemic, became a vehicle for sustaining a colonial tax haven. By exposing the structural entanglements that enabled the diversion of public funds to financial and legal entities, this paper highlights how governance systems, shaped by historical inequalities, embed and amplify harm, reinforcing exploitative dynamics under the guise of economic recovery.

Environmental harm is a key theme throughout several contributions in this special issue. Abby Onencan, Lieselot Bisschop, and Yogi Hendlin provide critical insights into the lived experiences of communities impacted by PFAS pollution, emphasizing the psychological, social, and economic dimensions of harm. In their article, *Experiences of living within PFAS-polluted environs: A systematic review*, they introduce a five-phase harm adaptation framework, which captures the evolving responses of affected populations as they navigate the consequences of corporate environmental crimes. These phases—pre-discovery, discovery, lifestyle change, living with PFAS, and restitution—detail the progression from initial unawareness of contamination to efforts toward accountability and environmental remediation. The framework highlights the profound impacts of PFAS contamination, from loss of institutional trust and socio-economic tensions to long-term psychological effects and the reshaping of daily life. Their framework of harm adaptation offers a valuable lens for understanding the resilience and challenges of populations suffering the harms of corporate environmental crimes.

In *On bad intentions and harmful consequences: Understanding public perceptions of environmental crime seriousness*, Marieke Kluin, Lisa Ansems, and Jelle Brands explore public perceptions of the seriousness of environmental crimes, focusing on two key factors: intentionality and harm. Through a vignette survey of Dutch citizens, the study finds that crimes are viewed as more serious when committed intentionally or result in significant harm. However, the influence of intentionality on perceptions decreases when significant harm is present, and the influence of harm decreases when the crime is intentional. These findings demonstrate the complexities of public attitudes towards environmental accountability, particularly in contexts where harm is widespread but normalized. The study highlights the difficulty of ensuring that laws and enforcement practices adequately address public concerns about environmental crimes.

Kenneth Sebastian León, Ivy Ken, and Theo Martin, in their article *Capture*, *commodify*, *kill: Legitimized harms and industrial meatpacking in the United States*, introduce a framework to analyze systemic harms in the U.S. industrial meatpacking industry. Their framework outlines how the industry ‘captures’ resources (land, labor, and animals) through exploitative practices, ‘commodifies’ them into marketable products without regard for ethical or ecological impacts, and ultimately ‘kills,’ not only through the mass slaughter of animals but also by degrading ecosystems and endangering workers’ well-being. By linking these processes, the authors show how state-corporate collaboration normalizes interconnected economic, social, and environmental harms, advocating for systemic reforms to address these structural injustices.

In *The horror of corporate harms: Purdue Pharma and the opioid epidemic*, Penny Crofts and Honni van Rijswijk identify systemic failures within regulatory and legal frameworks as central to the perpetuation of corporate harms, such as those caused by pharmaceutical companies and specifically Purdue Pharma in the opioid epidemic. The authors argue that existing legal categories are ill-equipped to address the excessive, widespread, and insidious nature of corporate wrongdoing, which they conceptualize as “routine horror.” Their framework highlights how banal, everyday corporate practices—enabled by complicit institutions, flawed regulatory oversight, and a legal system biased towards individual culpability—betray public trust and exacerbate harm. This perspective challenges conventional understandings of accountability and calls for a deeper examination of the societal and legal mechanisms that enable such harms.

In, *Trust as a weapon in war: Fighting corruption and corporate crime in Ukraine*, Anna Markovska, Oleksii Serdiuk, and Iryna Soldantenko analyze how political elites exploit social trust in emergency situations. They study how the Ukrainian society has reacted to the war with Russia and, in particular, how this has impacted trust in state institutions. Using open-source information, the authors study the implications of increased trust in institutions for anti-corruption reforms.

Key themes of the collection

With the ‘multifaceted harms of corporate and white-collar crime’ as an organizing theme for the DWCC-EUROC seminar and our thematic collection that resulted from it, we intended to contribute to criminological scholarship on the various types of harm and victimization that characterize corporate and white-collar crime. Two central themes emerged from the papers that were published in this collection. First, the theme of state-corporate complicity emerged, referring to the pervasive complicity of state mechanisms in enabling and perpetuating corporate harms. Several contributions show how weak enforcement of regulations, the absence of robust oversight mechanisms, and the prioritization of economic interests over public interests allow corporate misconduct to thrive. States sometimes enact or modify laws that explicitly favor corporate interests, creating legal loopholes or granting immunity to corporate actors. In some cases, the state not only fails to protect vulnerable populations but also actively contributes to recurring cycles of harm. Aldini’s examination of the Ilva steel factory in Taranto, Italy, illustrates how legislative changes and political priorities can shield harmful industrial practices under the guise of economic necessity. Croft and van Rijswijck argue that routine systems of regulation enable corporate harms through everyday consumer products. Similarly, Dodge’s commentary explores how corporate greed and regulatory failure together explain reproductive injustices. Van Baar’s contribution analyses persuasive and counteracting trends in the regulation of corporate involvement in atrocity crimes since the 1600s, uncovering recurring patterns that hold lessons for future prevention and control. Together, these papers call for a re-examination of the relationship between state mechanisms and corporate accountability to address systemic injustices.

A second recurring theme is the far-reaching and interconnected nature of corporate environmental harms. Several contributions reveal the profound ecological, social, and psychological harms of environmental degradation. For instance, the study on PFAS pollution by Onencan, Bisschop, and Hendlin presents a nuanced understanding of how corporate environmental crimes evolve, affecting communities’ livelihoods, mental health, and trust in institutions. Ruggiero’s commentary further contextualizes these harms within global inequalities, showing how corporate activities disproportionately impact the Global South, exacerbating socio-economic disparities. Meanwhile, Kluin, Ansems, and Brands offer insights into the complexities of public perceptions of environmental crime, highlighting the challenges of achieving accountability when harm is normalized or perceived as unintentional. This theme not only emphasizes the scale and complexity of environmental crimes but also demonstrates the interconnectedness of ecological destruction, social inequality, and institutional failures. In this way, it also resonates with the commentary by Vincenzo Ruggiero as environmental harms are closely intertwined with the socio-political 'fields or spaces of victimization' in which they are embedded. Addressing such harms requires a holistic approach that integrates environmental remediation, social justice, and systemic reform.

The contributions in this thematic collection are an important step in understanding the multifaceted harms of white-collar and corporate crime. With critical themes such as state-corporate complicity and systemic environmental harm, it is often more difficult to define behavior as crime, specifically because it originates at the intersection of economic and political interests (in case of state-corporate complicity) or the intersection of private and public interests (in case of systemic environmental harm). By focusing on harm and victimization, direct and indirect harms and victims come into focus beyond those traditionally in focus in the criminal justice system. Further research is needed to explore other significant areas of harm and victimization, including the consequences of corruption, bribery, and fraud, as well as new and emerging topics of corporate and white-collar crime research. Expanding these discussions will deepen our understanding of the broader impacts of white-collar and corporate crime, which we hope can inspire corporate crime scholars for many decades more.

Declaration

Competing interests The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interests.

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