

# EXPLAINING THE GAP BETWEEN THE EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTION OF CORRUPTION

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## *Abstract*

Although the tangible substance of corruption is in principle observable, the difficulties of collecting evidence of illegal acts have resulted in perceptions of corruption being widely used as a proxy indicator. This paper marshals evidence from a nationwide survey of Russians to show that doing so is not justifiable: there is a big gap between the 86 percent who perceive most public officials as corrupt and the 23 percent who say their household has paid a bribe in the past two years. A multiple regression test of hypotheses offering explanations for this gap finds contact with public officials is the most important influence on payment of bribes, followed by the belief that bribery is acceptable and hearing that it is widespread. Perception of corruption has no significant influence on the payment of bribes, nor does high or low socio-economic status. These findings are endorsed by further analysis, which finds that neither the payment of bribes nor the number of contacts with public officials has a significant effect on the perception of corruption. Perceptions are principally influenced by the circulation of information locally and through the media and by the perceived fairness of public officials. The conclusion reports evidence that the gap between the perception of corruption as estimated by Transparency International and the public's experience of corruption occurs on every continent, albeit the size of the gap is not consistent in high or in low income countries.