

## ***Perp Walk / White-Collar Crime / Copy-Cat Crimes***

The term ***perp walk*** is an American slang expression, short for “perpetrator walk”, which describes the intentional public display of a person in police custody; this assumed perpetrator of a crime is led through a public place in handcuffs while the media can watch, record, and report on the event. It is also referred to as “frog march” or “walk of shame”. Often such a perp walk takes place when an arrested suspect is paraded by police officers on the way to court.

The police slang term “perp” has been used for at least five decades by the New York police, and some images of early perp walks were captured even long before photography was invented: French aristocrats were guided to the guillotine through the crowd.

In the almost symbolic act of perp walking the delinquent is depicted to the media as a serious criminal – before he is judged guilty. The handcuffs serve as a visible sign of the severity of the committed crime. This does not mean, however, that the perp walk is only carried out with perpetrators of physical crimes. In times of financial crises, credit crunches and corrupt managers, a perp walk is very popular to denounce suspects of so-called ***white-collar crime*** committed at a desk or on a computer. Perp walks give the opportunity for (tabloid) photographers to take a guilty-looking photo of the formerly respected man, who is usually wearing a white shirt, suit, and tie. Women are subjected to the perp walk too, most notably in recent years the elegant entrepreneur Martha Stewart.

The aim of the police or the prosecutors is to show that all people are equal under the law and that everyone will receive the punishment (s)he deserves. Especially if the delinquent is a celebrity or a powerful person, it is in the interest of the government to communicate this message to the general public in order to prevent people from thinking that prominent perpetrators enjoy exclusive rights. Furthermore, this public shame and harsh treatment by the executive authority is presumably effective in discouraging similar wrongdoing or ***copycat crimes*** by other white-collar managers.

Perp walks are controversial. Transportation of suspects, for example to a court, often unavoidably requires passing through public places. But the defendant should be presumed innocent until his/her guilt is proven. The procedure of the perp walk is

often seen as humiliation and violation of the suspect's rights. The defendant is accompanied, often rather roughly, by the police, handcuffed and in full view of the media even before judgement is given in a court of law.

Since white-collar crime is increasing, however, the perp walk has started to be seen from a different angle. People feel that cash-hungry and unscrupulous politicians and businessmen, who have been treated mildly in the past, deserve this public punishment. Watching a fallen manager in handcuffs does not compensate for financial loss or other damages. But aren't they the ones playing with our money, aren't they the ones responsible for our jobs, aren't they the ones telling us to trust them? The way they have betrayed the faith of the public and pulled us all into the current economic mess is – according to general public opinion – egotistic and inexcusable. What is televised humiliation compared to the people's unemployment, financial ruin or a stolen future?



Former Enron CEO Ken Lay is escorted in handcuffs by an FBI agent into the Federal Courthouse in Houston, Texas.

(for a “grass-roots” satirical song about politicians and the perp walk, click here:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqMOvVUH4HU>)