

Encyclopedia of Crime and Punishment

Fear of Crime

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Fear of crime is a complex phenomenon. It is also an important one, because how people feel about and react to crime is a major influence on how they lead their lives and how society deals with crime. Fear of crime involves a variety of emotional and judgmental responses to crime, and it includes one's fear of being a victim; fear that a family member, neighbor, or friend will be a victim; fear of property loss or damage; and one's assessment of the risk faced by oneself, significant others, or one's property. The general topic also includes a range of subjective states, from irrational responses to vague threats and media-driven anxiety to personal evaluations of the level of perceived threat or risk. During the past three decades, social scientists have done extensive research on assessing the fear of crime. Studying such a complex topic and the emotional reactions of people is a difficult task, and social scientists continue to debate the definition and conceptualization of fear of crime and struggle with how best to measure fear of crime in individuals and communities.

Measurement of Fear of Crime

The most common measurement of fear of crime used by researchers, especially in the early years of fear of crime research, uses national data sets or regional equivalents. Researchers adopt a single item question from either the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) or the General Social Survey (GSS) to measure fear of crime. The NCVS asks people, "How safe do you feel or would you feel being out alone in your neighborhood at night? During the day?" The GSS asks people, "Is there any area right around here—that is, within a mile or so—where you would be afraid to walk at night?" Both questions are very similar in style and intent and try to capture a generalized fear of crime in the person being interviewed.

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Several researchers criticized this reliance on single-question data for its limited scope and its exclusion of a broader range of crimes. Although crimes that take place at night in public places (i.e., street crime) do provoke high levels of fear, many other situations that may occur during the day or at home or outside the neighborhood are overlooked. These limited questions lead to imprecision and potentially inaccurate conclusions,

because general measures tend to mask variation in fear of crime across offenses, as well as possibly overestimating the level of fear in the general public.

More sophisticated approaches to measuring fear of crime focus on specific fears and the fear of harm caused by personal violence. This approach has greatly expanded the understanding that fear of crime is not universally distributed in response to different crimes. Further clarification was offered by identifying trust as an underlying factor in fear of crime. The work of Kenneth Ferraro (1995) and others reconceptualized fear of crime by differentiating fear from perceived risk and recognizing that risk is not a sufficient explanation in and of itself, but a necessary factor in the fear of crime equation. Relying primarily on a national sample, Ferraro explores the significance of both objective and perceived risk on fear of crime, suggesting that the fear of crime is mostly mediated through perceived risk of crime. and since people rely on local conditions, such as those in their neighborhood, to make judgments about personal risk, it follows that some social groups will perceive higher risks, and fear of crime will vary according to individual and situational factors.

Individual Factors

The intensity and type of crime fears vary based on gender, age, race, and income. Prior victimization experience also plays a role in people's level of fear.

Gender

A wealth of research strongly suggests that women fear crime more than men do, even though women are at less risk overall of becoming crime victims than men. This seeming paradox is explained by fear of rape as a “master offense” that heightens women's fear of all crimes. It is also explained by the fact that women are at greater risk because they have less physical strength than men and may have been raised to be passive and dependent, adding to their feelings of vulnerability. Also, women may report more fear in research studies because, when surveyed, they are more open and revealing in expressing their feelings of fear than are men.

Age

Age is another significant predictor of fear of crime. Some researchers note that the elderly are more fearful than younger people, because they are physically weaker and often more socially isolated. Their higher levels of fear may also reflect an evaluation of risk based on their environment or victimization experiences. Moreover, a disproportionately high number of the elderly are women, and therefore some of the high level of fear among the elderly reflects the higher level of fear among women in general. Other researchers suggest that both older and younger people express high levels of fear. Studies that confirm this pattern often suggest that younger people are fearful because of lifestyle choices and routine activities that place them in dangerous settings, increasing their perception of risk.

Race

According to some social scientists, African Americans in the United States express higher levels of fear than do white people. This pattern is in line with African Americans' experiences as victims of or witnesses to crime. Most researchers ascribe the link between race and fear of crime to crime-related conditions in areas where a high proportion of nonwhites reside. This can be seen in many discussions of crime in ethnographic studies (e.g., Ida Susser's *Norman Street*) that focus on whites and their fears of blacks. This suggests that fear of crime and racial distrust may be intertwined. Some studies report that part of the explanation for high levels of fear by whites toward black men, primarily those who are young and associate in small groups, is related to racial stereotyping and racial prejudice. Likewise, Elijah Anderson (1990: 206) notes, "The public awareness is color-coded: white skin denotes civility, law-abidingness, and trustworthiness, while black skin is strongly associated with poverty, crime, incivility, and distrust." Anderson argues because law-abiding people are taught to fear young male black strangers, perceived risk and fear is higher for whites. The evidence suggests that both whites and blacks exhibit fear in response to crimelated concerns, and that race and ethnicity are important in shaping the way danger is interpreted.

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Income

Lower-income individuals experience higher levels of fear of crime than do wealthier people. Income has not been as carefully studied as have other factors, but the relationship to fear of crime is explained as a product of a feeling of social vulnerability, primarily due to limited resources. People living in poverty are more fearful and express higher levels of vulnerability than do better-off respondents. Feelings of vulnerability are an important factor in explaining fear of crime in relation to gender, age, race and income. As with race, some researchers explain the tie between income and fear of crime by citing the reality that low-income people are more likely to be confronted with crime and disorder in their daily lives than are wealthier people.

Victimization Experience

It is not clear whether the experience of being a crime victim is related to one's fear of crime. It may be that fear of crime is related only to specific types of victimization. For example, according to Skogan and Klecka (1977), robbery is the only victimization experience that has a clear attitudinal effect on fear of crime. In fact, victims of other types of crime were found to be less fearful. In addition to direct personal experience with crime, indirect victimization (i.e., in which a family member, close friend or neighbor was victimized recently) or vicarious victimization can also be a powerful predictor of fear of crime. Individuals develop a wide variety of perceptions about crime as a consequence of their ties to neighbors and friends and their exposure to local knowledge, including gossip. Exposure to the mass media and news reports may also inform these perceptions. Research shows that the effect of media coverage on fear of crime depends on the type of media source, the focus of the news report, the crime rate in the neighborhood, sociodemographic characteristics, feelings of vulnerability, personal victimization experiences and resonance, and affinity with victims reported in the media.

Situational Factors

People perceive certain times and places as safe and others as dangerous—in their perception, risks are concentrated in time and space. For example, fear of personal victimization is stronger at night than during the day. Not surprisingly, during the day residents feel more secure, as activities are under closer watch and are therefore subject to more control. Generally, people are most likely to fear personal attacks by strangers at night and to believe that attacks are more likely to occur on the streets or in other public places. People perceive public spaces as being unsafe or dangerous, according to social scientist Sally Merry (1981), based on seven factors: territory, ethnic hostility, presence of hostile teenagers, familiarity, availability of friends, design of space (e.g., low visibility), and incidence of crime.

The public realm can be divided into interior and exterior public places. As regards interior public space, establishments such as bars, stores, and banks are perceived as less dangerous and intimidating. However, in Oscar Newman's (1972, 1973: 27) detailed discussion of urban design, he highlights the importance of interior spaces that are outside the view and surveillance of residents or people on the street, which opens up the potential for lingering strangers: "But unlike the well-peopled and continuously surveyed public streets, these interior areas are spatially used and impossible to survey; they become a nether world of fear and crime." City streets and squares make up the exterior public places. The streets of a city or neighborhood are crucial to the safety and security felt by its residents. As Jane Jacobs argues in her influential *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, "If a city's streets are safe from barbarism and fear, the city is thereby tolerably safe from barbarism and fear" (1961: 29–30).

Years of research show clearly that fear of crime is much higher in cities, so much so that fear of crime is sometimes classified as a primarily urban problem. However, the relationship may not be so simple, as some research suggests that it is not the fact of living in the city that causes residents to be fearful, but rather the nature of the neighborhood that leads to higher levels of fear. People living in neighborhoods plagued by high crime rates experience higher levels of fear than do those in low crime areas.

Skogan (1990) and Wilson and Kelling (1982) argue that areas characterized by high levels of disorder will be plagued by high levels of crime. According to Skogan, disorder factors associated with fear of crime are either physical or social. Physical disorder includes visual conditions and signs of neglect such as abandoned cars or buildings, rundown buildings, poor lighting, overgrown shrubs and trees, trash, and empty lots. Social disorder includes behaviors or activities such as public drinking, public drug use, public drug sales, vandalism or graffiti, prostitution, panhandling or begging, [p. 682 ↓] loitering, truancy, and transients or homeless people sleeping on the street. Both types of disorder are considered “signs of crime” indicating that the social control mechanisms within the neighborhood have broken down, making residents feel more vulnerable to crime. According to Wilson and Kelling (1982), “broken windows” or incivilities that create disorder also elevate feelings of anxiety and lead to more fear. This “incivility” approach suggests that these conditions have adverse effects on the individuals within the neighborhood, the community as a whole, and the entire city.

Beyond crime and disorder, the racial and ethnic composition and level of integration within the neighborhood are crucial concerns. Some research suggests that as the minority population (i.e., percent black) increases, or people perceive a changing racial composition, they will perceive risk and a corresponding fear of crime. In situations where whites perceive themselves to live in predominantly black neighborhoods, Moeller (1989) finds that they report higher levels of fear. However, according to recent work by Chiricos, Hogan, and Gertz (1997) blacks do not seem to be more fearful in predominantly black or predominantly white neighborhoods. Stinchcombe and associates (1980) found that blacks were more afraid than whites in all neighborhood types except for whites in integrated city neighborhoods, who were more afraid than whites in all-white neighborhoods.

Consequences of Fear of Crime

Research suggests that in an effort to reduce the risk of being a crime victim, people may alter their behavior and attitudes about crime. Toward these ends, people take self-defense classes, restrict their activities (avoid going out at night or alone, avoid certain areas), attend community meetings, get to know the police in their neighborhood, and carry weapons to feel safer and reduce their risk of victimization. Behavioral

modifications that are more directly tied to fear of being victimized at home include watching out for others' safety, installing a security system, owning a guard dog, installing extra locks, keeping a weapon at home, and adding outside lighting, among others. Clearly, some social groups, such as women and the elderly, may be more likely than others to take precautionary measures in response to crime concerns. Despite people's efforts to feel and be safer, research suggests that these efforts often actually make people fear being a victim of crime even more.

To alleviate their fears, people have reportedly taken action to reduce perceived risks. Furthermore, fear of crime may influence people's attitudes toward the criminal justice system and its agents. Public safety is an important political issue and one that is a regular component of the political and media discourse. Crime and fear of crime are used as issues in political campaigns in ways that readily shape perceptions of crime. Some research has addressed the link between fear of crime and attitudes about the criminal justice system. Reflecting on increasing public and political support for severe punishments, David Garland asserts, "Fear of crime can thus exhibit irrational roots and often leads to disproportionate (or 'counter-phobic') demands for punishment" (1990: 239). However, this view is questioned by Stinchcombe and his associates (1980), who report that fearful people are only slightly more punitive than less fearful people. However, it may be that those with higher levels of fear express a lack of trust and confidence in the ability of state and legal institutions to combat the problems.

Many urban and criminological studies suggest that perceptions about the police and interactions between the police and community residents differ according to certain demographic variables and neighborhood location. Residents in certain urban neighborhoods, due to class or racial characteristics, may see themselves as being ignored by local authorities. This, in turn, may alter their assessment of perceived risk and thus lead to a higher level of fear or to behavior to reduce their perceived risk of victimization. More research needs to be done to address the relationship between fear of crime and attitudes about punitiveness and the effectiveness of the police.

Collective Responses

Fear of crime may have severe consequences for both individuals and the entire community. Neighborhoods whose residents are overwhelmed by fear express ambivalence about the future of the neighborhood and its residents, and they often withdraw emotionally from contact with others. People who see their neighborhoods as having more social problems are more fearful and less committed to their neighbors than those in other neighborhoods. These people are less likely to engage in community life and collective action to combat crime-related problems, because crime has weakened the social fiber of the community. When residents do engage in collective action to strengthen [p. 683 ↓] social controls through formal and informal means, such as participating in community meetings with the police or neighborhood watch programs, it may revitalize the neighborhood and reduce the risk of crime. However, fearful residents may reap the same benefits of imposed social control without doing any of the work, and thus may remain fearful despite the actual reduction in risk.

Future Research

There seems to be a consensus among social scientists that individual and situational factors affect fear of crime. However, there is much debate about how strongly, and in what ways, these variables explain crime fears. The most consistently reported findings in research on fear of crime include the correlation between gender, age, or neighborhood conditions and the fear of crime. Female respondents, older individuals, and residents of high crime neighborhoods are more likely to report higher levels of crime fears. The significance of other sociodemographic factors and other situational contexts are less consistent, thus more research is needed to explore the dynamics of fear of crime. Concerns and anxieties about crime and disorder need to be further linked to broader concerns about social change at the global, national, and local level. Fear of crime has a significant impact on people's lives, as well as on the vitality and safety of urban areas. Consequently, reducing these fears and fostering a greater commitment to safer communities are integral to the future of American cities and the quality of public life.

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See also

- [Media](#)
- [Risk](#)
- [Security Management](#)

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