

FEAR OF CRIME

THE JOHN HOWARD SOCIETY OF ALBERTA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fear of crime is a very prevalent issue today. Many people in today's society express anxiety and fear about crime, and about being victimized.

The level of fear that a person holds depends on many factors, including gender, age, any past experiences with crime that a person may have, where one lives, and one's ethnicity. All of these factors have an impact on fear levels.

People react to fear in different ways. Some people try to avoid crime, others try to protect themselves, and still others try to prevent victimization by not possessing anything for which they can be victimized.

Both the government and the police have launched attempts to reduce the public's fear of crime. Police services have created numerous programs including education of victimization risks and of protective behaviours, Neighbourhood Watch, Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, and foot patrol. The government has implemented new legislation, such as amendments to the administration of youth justice, Bill C-36, Bill C-45, Bill C-55 and community notification.

The media play a substantial role in determining the amount of fear of crime that people hold. This comes from the fact that the media extensively and disproportionately cover crime stories. This leads people to believe that there is more crime than there actually is, and believing that a great amount of crime exists in society leads people to fear.

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INTRODUCTION

Fear of crime as an issue has gained momentum over the past twenty to thirty years. When this issue first came about, researchers became interested in it as a source of discovering the "dark figure" of crime, that is, the crime that goes unreported. Fear of crime was theorized to be related to experiences of victimization, but this assumption was soon to be disputed. Researchers realized that numerous other factors played a role in the fear of crime, and thus research turned to discovering what these factors were.

Fear, in this paper, is defined as an anticipation of victimization, rather than fear of an actual victimization. This type of fear relates to how vulnerable a person feels. It is an "emotional reaction characterized by a sense of danger and anxiety produced by the threat of physical harm...elicited by perceived cues in the environment that relate to some aspect of crime" (Church Council, 1995, p. 7).

STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

A substantial proportion of the Canadian population can relate to having a fear of crime. The majority of Canadians report feeling "very" or "somewhat" safe when walking alone in their neighbourhoods after dark, but there is a significant percentage of the population who do express some feelings that are the opposite to this. These expressions of insecurity come from a fear of crime and of being victimized. In the 1993 General Social Survey, respondents were asked how safe they feel walking alone in their neighbourhood at night. One in four Canadians 15 years of age or older answered that they did not feel safe. This figure represents four times as many women as men, and twice as many people aged 65 and over as those aged 15 to 24 (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (CCJS), March 1995, p. 1). In 1997, Borooah and Carcach found that women in Britain were six times more likely than men to feel unsafe when walking alone at night (p. 645).

The Angus Reid Report, completed in July and August of 1997, reports that fear is slightly more prevalent in today's society than it was in 1990. In 1997 in Canada, 23% of respondents reported no fear, 56% reported a little fear, 16% reported a fair amount of fear, and 5% reported a great deal of fear (p. 52). In 1990, however, 27% of respondents reported no fear, 53% reported a little fear, 13% reported a fair amount, and 6% reported a great deal of fear (p. 52). While fear among Canadians is increasing, the actual crime rate is decreasing. The crime rate has continued to decrease since 1991, and in 1996, the crime rate fell to a rate of 9,620 federal charges per 100,000 population, which is the approximate level it was ten years ago (CCJS, July 1997, p. 15). The levels of fear that are prevalent in today's society surpass what one would expect given decreasing crime rates.

WHO FEARS?

Characteristics exist in people that prompt them to fear. In many cases, the level of fear does not correlate with the risk of victimization. Some of these attributes play a more substantial role than others in determining one's level of fear.

Gender

Gender has been found to be the strongest predictor of fear. Women have a much greater fear of crime than men, but are victimized less than men. Women's fear comes mostly from their vulnerability to sexual aggression: women are ten times more likely to be sexually assaulted than are men (Crowell & Burgess, 1996). This fear of sexual assault and rape transposes itself onto other types of crimes (Ferraro, 1996). Women do not simply become aware of this fear one day, nor are they born with it; women are socialized into thinking that they are vulnerable to attack if they, for example, go out alone at night. Parents, peers and media emphasize and reinforce this fear, and women are expected to succumb to it.

Other suggestions have been made as to why women are more fearful. These include: irrationality; fewer coping skills in relation to being a victim; a great concern for their children which fuels their fear; and less control over public and private spaces than men (Gilchrist, et al., 1998). There is no one reason why women are more fearful than men; it is likely that numerous reasons exist which play a role.

Age

Age is also a powerful predictor of fear but, unlike gender, with age the fear varies from crime to crime. When it comes to age, it is customary to assume that the elderly are the most afraid, and for many crimes, this assumption holds true, such as in mugging cases and break and enters. When it comes to crimes like rape, sexual assault and stranger attacks, it has been found that younger people tend to be more fearful (Evans, 1995). Elderly people have a high fear level in relation to many crimes because they feel vulnerable. This vulnerability stems from the physical and social limitations that elderly people have which renders them unable to defend themselves or to seek support and help.

When it comes to fear of crime victimization, 18% of those aged 18 to 34, 21% of those 35 to 54, and 26% of those 55 and over express a great or fair amount of fear (Angus Reid, 1997, p. 51). In examining the trends in criminal victimization, the rates of victimization for those over 65 are "too small to be meaningful" (CCJS, December 1994). Elderly people are not the specific targets of most crimes, but their level of fear exceeds their risk of victimization.

Past Experiences with Crime

Many studies have examined whether or not past experiences with crime and criminals have any effect on the level of fear that a person holds, but findings have not been unanimous. Some studies have found no real differences between victims and non-victims, but other studies have documented a difference. In studying the effects of crime on college students, Dull and Wint (1997) found that those students who had been victims of crime had less fear of personal crime, but more fear of property crime, than those not victimized. The Angus Reid Report (1997) found that while 19% of non-victims express a great or fair amount of fear of being a victim of crime, 30% of victims express this fear (p. 54).

Certain crimes generate more fear for victims than others. Being a victim of a robbery, for example, generates a high level of fear because it contains elements that cause a greater amount of fear to be instilled in its victims. Robbery usually involves a stranger, weapons, physical assaults and the loss of a fair amount of money (Skogan & Klecka, 1997). Burglary, because of its invasion of privacy and substantial amount of loss, generates a high level of fear. The victims who express the most fear of walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark are victims of sexual assault, followed by victims of robbery, break and enter, assault, vandalism, motor vehicle theft, household theft and personal theft (CCJS, March 1995). Victimization can have differing impacts on fear, depending on the type of crime.

Geography

Fear of crime also varies according to where one lives. People who live in cities tend to hold higher levels of fear because cities and other urban areas tend to have higher crime rates than rural areas. In 1993, in relation to household victimizations alone, the rates were 222 per 1,000 urban households and 133 per 1,000 rural households (CCJS, 1996, p. 175). Furthermore, twice as many people (60% versus 30%) in large cities as compared to small towns fear walking alone at night (Horton, 1988, p. 26).

Ethnicity and Culture

Studies have found that fear levels vary according to ethnic background. While white respondents tend to show the least amount of fear, the question of who has the most fear has not been unanimously agreed upon. A 1994 British Crime Survey found that in relation to crimes of harassment, burglary, rape and mugging, the 'Asian' group expressed the most fear. The 'Black' group showed the next highest fear level in relation to these crimes, while the 'White' group showed the least amount of fear. This survey also found that for the crime of theft from car, the 'Black' group showed a slightly higher level of fear than the 'Asian' group, and the 'White' group once again had the lowest level of fear. In relation to simply feeling unsafe, the 'Asian' group was the highest, and the 'White' group had only a slightly higher level of fear than the 'Black' group (Hough, 1995).

Walker (1994) also found that Asian groups had the most fear, followed by black groups, and then white groups. Other studies have found that Black respondents were the most fearful (Evans, 1995; Silverman & Kennedy, 1983). Although studies do not agree upon which group has the greatest amount of fear, it is generally agreed upon that the 'White' group has the least amount of fear in relation to almost every crime.

Other Variables

There are several other variables which have been examined in order to see if they have an effect on fear of crime. These variables are not as prominent as the ones listed above, but their effects are still worth noting. Factors such as low income levels (Evans, 1995; Silverman & Kennedy, 1983), and low educational levels (Evans, 1995) tend to increase levels of fear.

In examining who is afraid of crime and why, virtually every study has come up with the conclusion that women and the elderly fear crime the most, and this fear is not justified by their victimization rate.

REACTIONS TO THE FEAR OF CRIME

Citizen Reaction

Due to their fear of crime, people try to reduce their risk of victimization in three ways: avoidance behaviours, protective behaviours, and insurance behaviours (Garofalo, 1981). Avoidance behaviours are restrictive, involving avoiding unsafe areas at night or certain locations altogether, or reducing social interaction and movements outside of the home. One in ten Canadians restrict themselves because their fear of crime (Lorex Safety and Security, 1995, p. 30). Protective behaviours include obtaining security systems and watch dogs, joining self-defence courses, and/or participating in community programs such as Neighbourhood Watch. Insurance behaviours aim at reducing one's risk through the minimization of victimization costs, leaving the person feeling that they do not have anything of value to be victimized for, and therefore will not be victimized.

Since these fear-reducing measures do not completely reduce the fear of crime, there are cries for the police services and the government to take action.

THE POLICE AND GOVERNMENT REACTION

Police and politicians alike hoped that by providing the fearful with accurate and true information on victimization risks, crime rates, crime in their neighbourhoods, and proper ways to protect themselves, people would have no reason to fear, and fear would be reduced. Educating people about

crime is a simple and inexpensive method of reducing fear compared to other methods such as increasing the number of police officers or changing legislation. This method though does not guarantee decreased levels of fear.

The Police Reaction

Neighbourhood Watch was started as a way to reduce crime and fear by involving citizens in crime prevention, urging them to come together to talk about what is going on in their neighbourhood, and to formulate plans and methods to alleviate crime such as neighbourhood surveillance and crime-reporting activities. This allows residents some control over what goes on in their area and a say in solving problems that may be occurring. The residents know what makes them feel safe, and what will reduce their fear. This program is capable of reducing fear but not crime (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1990), and when people have the opportunity to join the program, the majority choose not to do so (Rosenbaum, 1987).

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) is another program implemented by police services to alleviate fear of crime and reduce crime levels. The intention of CPTED is to alter the physical environment to deter offenders from committing crimes, making these places safer for people to go, and reducing fear of crime. Examples of this include improving lighting in dark alleyways and streets, and building homes to overlook pathways susceptible to loitering and crime. Nair et al. (1993) examined the effectiveness of improving the environment in order to reduce fear, and found that fear can be decreased, but this may not happen in every circumstance.

Foot patrol is a method of policing aimed to reduce crime and fear of crime. Foot patrol puts officers in the community to interact with the residents. By having the officers walking their beats, making themselves seen, and getting to know the people of the area, it is assumed people will not commit crimes knowing the officers are roaming about. Recognizing the fact that officers are around if needed leaves people less fearful. Foot patrol officers are part of the community: they attend meetings, identify community problems and come up with long term solutions, organize citizen initiatives, make referrals to appropriate social service agencies, and engage residents in crime prevention (Rosenbaum & Lurigio, 1994; Dent & Hackler, 1992).

The Edmonton Police Service found that fear was lower in those areas patrolled by foot patrol than those areas patrolled by motor patrol (Hornick, et al., 1989). In Newark, New Jersey, and in the Hewark-Houston project, the number of foot patrol officers was increased, resulting in a significant reduction in levels of fear by the residents (Rosenbaum & Lurigio, 1994). Flint, Michigan also found reduced levels of fear, with 70% of those surveyed saying that they felt safer than they did before the foot patrol program was implemented (Bennett, 1991, p. 2). Foot patrol programs have been used in thousands of cities and towns across North America, and these programs have been found to have a lessening impact on fear levels.

Government Reaction Through Policy Change

Since the government is accountable to and elected by the public, the government must respond when change is demanded. The government reaction to the public's concern about, and fear of, crime is often one of changing correctional legislation. Recent changes that have taken place to correctional policy include the youth justice strategy, changes restricting conditional release (C-36 and C-45), dangerous offender legislation (C-55), and community notification.

The youth justice strategy.

The Young Offenders Act (YOA) has been amended three times since its implementation in 1984, and again the YOA is being scrutinized in 1998. When the YOA was amended in the past, aspects of it became harsher. For example, the 1986 amendments focussed on technical and procedural changes such the allowance of a judge to reveal the identity of a youth who poses a danger to the public, and the 1989 amendments dealt with court related issues including the extension of the maximum disposition to five years less a day. The youth justice strategy that is coming about in 1998 has taken a harsh view towards youth crime by allowing for the transfer of violent youths 14 and over to adult court, and allowing the names of all those transferred to adult court to be published. Calls for harsher measures against young offenders are coming from the public, the government, correctional agencies, and policing agencies.

The majority of the public gets the perception that youth crime is an immense problem from the media. The media report mostly sensational and terrible crimes. This creates fear in the public and this fear transposes itself into calls for harsher laws and penalties.

Numerous discussion groups have formed, petitions have been created, and rallies have been held, all in the name of convincing the government to toughen up the YOA (Barrett, 1994; Dolik, 1998). The government proposes changes be made largely in response to these forceful calls from the public who perceive youth crime to be on the rise (Journal News Services, 1994; Ovenden, 1998). For example, in 1994, the Tory party released recommendations which were said to "reflect the wishes of Albertans," who are calling for the "protection of society" (Gold, 1994).

These calls are not entirely justified: "the public's demand for harsher penalties in order to discourage offenders is rooted in misconceptions about what the YOA does, and what any piece of legislation is able to do" (Faulder, 1998). From 1992-1993 to 1995-1996, youth crime decreased by 6.5% (CCJS, July 1997, p. 1), and is still decreasing to date. Harsher penalties and laws are not needed. Continuing cries for harsher penalties, and sporadic changes to young offender legislation demonstrate that even though legislation is made tougher, people continue to fear youth crime.

Bill C-36.

Bill C-36, enacted in 1992, contained provisions that relate to detention to warrant expiry. Detention to warrant expiry means that offenders are held in custody until the end of their sentence. Society is afraid of particular offenders being released into society. The Solicitor General of Canada (1991) stated that "public safety is an important issue to Canadians, who have sent a strong message to the government that they are concerned about how Canada's corrections system deals with certain kinds of criminals" (p. 1). In response to this public concern, Bill C-36 was developed to force certain offenders to remain in prison for their entire sentence rather than being released at their two-thirds date on statutory release.

By keeping these offenders incarcerated longer, society is not assisting the offender in community reintegration. Normally when an inmate is released, the offender will be ordered to stay at a halfway house or report to a parole officer. When an inmate serves their whole sentence, they are simply released back into society with no further control, support, or aid from the correctional services. This leaves the responsibility of reintegration on society, and society is unwilling to take on such a task because of their fear of these offenders.

Knowing that these offenders have no control or support upon release may instill even more fear in society. This legislation does not promote public safety: the offender does not receive the programs or services that aid reintegration, which inmates released on statutory release receive (Pemberton, 1995). The inmates do not leave prison having found work and having made other support connections.

Bill C-45.

Bill C-45, an Act introduced in 1994, was another attempt to respond to the public's concern about high-risk offenders. The public's fear of high-risk offenders was growing at the time and in an effort to reduce this fear, the Canadian government introduced this legislation. The government intended to restore public confidence and increase public safety as well. The Solicitor General of Canada (1994) stated that the Canadian government does "share Canadians' concerns that more must be done to better protect society from repeat sex offenders" (p. 1).

Bill C-45 introduced provisions that made it more difficult for high-risk offenders to be released into society. In essence, Bill C-45 delays the release of high-risk offenders into society, alleviating some of the fear the public holds about high-risk offenders being released back into the community.

With this bill though, the release of these offenders was only delayed, not prevented. The impact of C-45 was that more offenders were released at warrant expiry with no control or support, causing a public panic about the system's inability to control these offenders after release. Society's fear of these offenders was not eliminated, it was only postponed, leaving many people with a new fear of high-risk offenders at-large in their community. Fears about high-risk offenders persist and so do the calls that demand changes to high-risk offender legislation.

Bill C-55.

The government continued to listen to ongoing complaints and demands regarding high-risk offenders. Bill C-55 was enacted as a governmental effort to reduce citizens' anxieties and fears about high-risk offenders, particularly sex offenders, and achieve long-term protection of society. Justice Minister Allan Rock stated that Bill C-55 is "an important tool in trying to make ourselves safer" (Canadian Press Newswire, 1998).

Bill C-55 contains changes to various acts regarding high-risk offenders, creating harsher legislation against these offenders. This bill has made it easier for offenders to be classified as dangerous or long-term. By allowing more offenders to be classified as high-risk, more offenders will receive longer sentences, receive fewer conditional releases and be subject to longer community supervision. All of these changes are aimed at reducing the likelihood that sex offenders will re-offend and providing longer periods of control over certain offenders.

This legislation is based on the assumption that intensive supervision will prevent sexual re-offending, but this approach is not based on an appropriate premise. The government should not simply supervise these offenders, but rather provide treatment for these offenders both within the institutions and in the community. Simply keeping a person in prison longer or putting them under intensive supervision will not deter re-offending: these offenders need to receive treatment.

Community Notification

Community notification was a concept introduced to protect the public and inform them of where dangerous offenders, specifically sexual offenders, were locating themselves. Community notification has been called "a boost to public safety" (Canadian Press Newswire, December 1996); a legislative move that came about as a "result of years of lobbying by police and victims' rights groups" and "society's recently found, but increasingly iron-willed, intolerance for those who prey sexually on children" (Hurst, 1997).

The public fears these offenders, and in order to prevent themselves from becoming the victim of such offenders, they demand to know who and where these people are.

"Somewhere in the process of protecting itself, the community, police, the media, and individuals in general, seemed to agree the greater public good would be better served if the suspect's presumption of innocence was, at least in part, overridden" (LeBlanc, 1997, p. 3).

The Correctional Service of Canada is required to notify the police of a federal inmate's release on an unescorted temporary absence, parole of statutory release, or upon warrant expiry, and provincial institutions must provide notification about the release of sex offenders. The police then decide to

notify the public if it is considered that the inmate poses a threat and notification is in the best interest of the public.

The public wants to know who and where these offenders are, but the public does not know what to do with the information they receive. Often times, releasing information to the public results in angry cries. When the public learns that these offenders are being released into their communities, their fear of these people leads them to fight back. The public often will try to free their communities of the offender: "it sets a person up to be hounded out of every community" (Canadian Press Newswire, July 1996), such as was the case for Roger Bourgeois, a convicted paedophile, who was forced out of Edmonton, and subsequently out of Elkford, BC. Other times, the angry calls of the public can lead to further calls for legislative changes in relation to dangerous offenders, for releasing information about an offender only brings out further fear and anger towards offenders. In reaction to the public, the offender may go underground and away from treatment.

By notifying the community of these offenders, we are not helping society, nor are we reducing recidivism rates. We are simply displacing the problem onto someone else's shoulders, and making it impossible for an offender to be successfully reintegrated: in essence, we are "setting them up to fail" (LeBlanc, 1997, p. 3).

ROLE OF THE MEDIA

People get their information about crime from a number of sources, but one major source for information is the media. The media are a powerful way of getting messages across to citizens, since up to 95% of people use the media as a prime source for all types of information (MacLatchie, 1987, p. 57). In relation to courts alone, frequent sources of information for respondents were reported as the following: 54% television news, 51% newspapers, 28% radio news, 19% television drama, 18% magazines, 18% people known in the legal profession, 6% having been a juror, 6% other personal court experiences, 9% people known who have been a juror, 10% people known with court experience, and 16% from school or library (Surette, 1992, p. 82).

Many studies have looked at the way in which the media portray crime and how their portrayals effect levels of fear. It has been found that the media tend to disproportionately represent violent accounts of crime. The media cover events which are "intense, exciting, arousing, or extreme" (MacLatchie, 1987, p. 340).

The media have not always expressed such a grand interest in crime, but they always have shown some interest in the subject. In 1922, Lipton (as cited in MacLatchie, 1987) did a study of pre-World War I papers, and found that the papers of that era gave only 6% of their space to crime and violence (p. 340). Interest in crime news has increased greatly in recent years. The Toronto Star was examined, and it was found that from 1991 to 1993, the number of articles on crime increased by

37% (MacDonald, 1995, p. 153). A study done in Canada, in 1988, which examined over 800 newspaper articles, found that over half of the stories dealt with violent crimes, and half of these violent crimes dealt with murder (Bonta & Hanson, 1994, p. 28). This is very disproportionate, considering the fact that violent crimes constitute only approximately 11% of all crimes reported in Canada, and murder constitutes less than 1% of all reported Criminal Code incidents.

The media around the world do the same. For example, a study done in Scotland found that 6.5% of the news reported in newspapers involved crime, and 46% of this was violent and sexual crime, even though only 2.4% of reported crimes were actually violent or sexual (Williams & Dickinson, 1993, p. 35). The same pattern was found in Birmingham, England. Smith (as cited in Evans, 1995) found that while personal crimes constituted 5.4% of officially recorded crimes, they occupied 72.7% of press reports (p. 64). This pattern of the media disproportionately portraying crime can be found in numerous other places. The media all over the world have a fixation on the topic of crime, especially violent and sexual crime.

Not only are newspapers becoming increasingly fixated on the topic of violent and sexual crime, they are also becoming more and more interested in the topic of youth crime. The Canadian Index, from 1991 to 1993, increased their coverage of youth crime by 453%, and this increase cannot be attributed to an increase in youth crime (MacDonald, 1995, p. 153).

Knowing that the media report mainly sensational crimes, research has moved on to look at whether media reports have any effect on citizen's perceptions. Results of studies that have examined the effects have been mixed. Some studies report that those who read newspapers, which report a great deal of sensational crime, have more fear (Williams & Dickinson, 1993). On the other hand, Liska and Baccaglioni (1990) state that newspaper coverage of crime lessens peoples' fear of crime, for when people read about the crime in other towns and cities, or even in other neighbourhoods, it makes them feel "safe by comparison" (p. 372).

Media reports on crime contain a number of characteristics that must be considered when examining the effects of the media on fear of crime, including: sensationalism, randomness, proportion of the news devoted to the incident, location, and whether harm is done (Heath & Gilbert, 1996). All of these factors play a role in determining the level of fear that results from the media portrayal of the crime. The media are capable of contacting many people, but whether this contact has an effect, especially in relation to crime, remains ambiguous.

CONCLUSION

Fear of crime is real and it affects people's quality of life. The John Howard Society believes, however, that the series of legislative initiatives enacted recently in reaction to fear of crime have not proven to be beneficial. Fear has not been reduced and people do not feel safer.

As long as fear persists, the public will continue to call for more of the same harsh measures. The John Howard argues that it is time we took a second look at the limited safety provided by the correctional changes we have implemented. It is time that politicians and leaders stop merely reacting to fear by proposing simplistic, short-term solutions to the complex problems of crime. Years of research have shown that the correctional practices we now have in place are not effective in creating safe communities and simply delay the problem, thereby not reducing fear in the long-term.

The public looks to others for help in reducing the fear of crime, but the people the public looks to for guidance cannot always be of help. When the public sees that the police, the government and the law are unable to assist them with their concerns, individuals will often take charge of the situation for themselves. This type of mentality can lead to vigilantism.

We suggest that a number of broad strategies be put in place to address both crime and fear of crime:

- 1) Educate the public about crime, crime prevention and what works in corrections. There are steps that can be taken to protect oneself and to reduce personal fear, but people need to have a better understanding of their risk and what measures do increase public safety.
- 2) Involve communities in both crime prevention through social development and in community-based justice programs such as Youth Justice Committees, supervision of youth doing Community Service Order work, and programs operated by agencies like Elizabeth Fry Society and John Howard Society. Direct citizen involvement in justice leads to a better informed citizenry, who then are more understanding of what impacts crime and how to change it.
- 3) Rather than establishing harsher legislative changes, the following correctional legislation recently enacted should be reversed, and alternatives should be enacted:
 - i) the repeal of the detention provisions of the CCRA,
 - ii) prohibition of public notification of release of offenders
 - iii) gradual release as an integral, statutory part of every sentence,
 - iv) focussing community supervision and treatment resources on those with the greatest need and who pose the greatest risk,
 - v) available, specialized, professionally operated and well funded community treatment and residential facilities, and
 - vi) payment for treatment services (i.e. relapse prevention) beyond warrant expiry.

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