

FEAR OF VICTIMIZATION

By Mark Warr

Each year, federal and state agencies in the United States expend tens of millions of dollars in an effort to measure the frequency of crime in our society. The estimates they generate—especially those that come from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (UCR)—are eagerly awaited by journalists, public officials, social scientists, and others who hope to discern the nature and course of crime in our society.

As important as these estimates may be, however, they provide only a limited portrait of crime. Although they may tell us how many crimes have occurred, they say little about the social and economic *consequences* of those crimes. It is one thing, for example, to know that a city experienced 2,500 criminal offenses during the previous year. It is another to learn that 5% of the city's population has subsequently moved away, that adults are afraid to leave their homes at night or travel unaccompanied, or that the tourist industry on which the city has relied has been irreparably damaged.

One of the social reactions to crime that most interests criminologists is public fear of victimization. Though less tangible than some reactions to crime, fear of crime exemplifies the enormous multiplier effect that attaches to criminal victimization. Whereas a single serious crime in a neighborhood (e.g., a rape) may have but one direct victim, news of the crime may provoke fear among hundreds if not thousands of persons who learn of the event through social networks or the mass media.¹ In fact, only a small proportion of Americans will actually become victims of serious crime each year, but the number who experience fear of victimization is by no means so small. These *indirect* victims of crime are too often overlooked.

How Prevalent is Fear?

Nationwide survey data on fear of crime are scarce, but one question has routinely appeared in exactly the same form in surveys by the Gallup Organization and the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey (GSS):

Is there any area around here—that is, within a mile—where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?

In 1993, 43% of respondents in the GSS answered yes to this question. As Figure 1 shows, that percentage has remained quite stable since the early 1970s. Though it may be more than coincidental, it is noteworthy that the violent crime rate as measured by the NCVS has also remained quite stable during this period.² If we assume that the crimes that people fear outside the home (as stipulated in the Gallup/GSS question) are offenses against the person, then there appears to be no major discrepancy between trends in fear and trends in violent crime as measured by the NCVS.

As a fear-of-crime measure, the Gallup/GSS item is not ideal. It is hypothetical ("would you be afraid") and specifies a rather restricted context (nighttime, alone, outside the home but nearby). A more direct and general question appears in two Yankelovich surveys:

Is being a victim of a crime something you personally worry about, or not?

In 1993, 55% of respondents answered yes, as did 57% of respondents in 1989. Although the time-span is short, the stability in responses is again noteworthy. The somewhat higher prevalence of fear captured by the Yankelovich question probably stems from its greater generality.

Despite the differences between the Gallup/GSS and Yankelovich questions, responses to both demonstrate that fear of victimization is prevalent in the United States. If we treat the two estimates as upper and lower limits, then roughly 40 to 55% of Americans are today afraid for their safety.

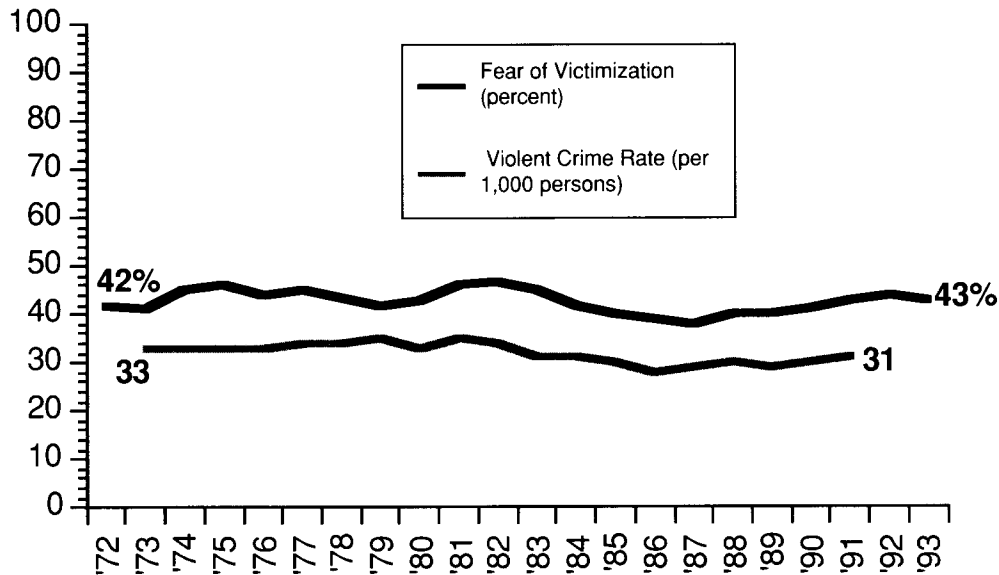
What Does the Public Fear?

If it is important to know how many Americans are afraid, it is equally important to know what they are afraid of. Which crimes are feared most in our society? The answer to that question has important policy implications, and it also sheds light on the proximate causes of fear.

Table 1 displays offense-specific fear of victimization data from a 1983 Seattle survey.³ The order in which the crimes are feared will surprise many. The most feared crime is residential burglary ("having someone break into your home while you're away"), a property crime that carries little risk of personal injury. By contrast, the most serious offense—murder—ranks tenth on the list. Why? The answer lies in the factors that generate fear. A decade ago, Warr and Stafford (who collected these data) demonstrated that the degree to which crimes are feared is dependent on two distinct factors—the perceived seriousness of the offense, and its perceived risk (the subjective probability that it will occur).⁴ In order to generate high fear, an offense must be viewed as both serious *and* likely to occur. A serious crime will not be highly feared if it is viewed as unlikely, nor will a seemingly inevitable offense be highly feared if it is not perceived to be serious. Consequently, murder is not highly feared because, despite its seriousness, it is viewed as an unlikely event. Residential burglary, on the other hand, is perceived to be moderately serious and very likely to occur.

Figure 1

Question: Is there any area around here—that is, within a mile—where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?



Note: Fear data are taken from surveys by NORC and by the Gallup Organization. The data shown are the NORC askings, except the following years: '72, '75, '81, '83, and '92. Crime rate data are from the US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization in the United States* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, latest that of 1992).

Recent national data strongly corroborate the findings from the Seattle survey. Table 2 shows offense-specific data on fear from a 1993 Gallup survey.⁵ Although the offense descriptions differ somewhat from those in the Seattle study, the order in which the offenses are feared is strikingly similar.

Who is Afraid?

Fear of crime, like criminal victimization itself, is not randomly distributed in our population. Two groups that consistently exhibit the greatest fear of victimization are women and the elderly. In the 1993 GSS, for example, 55% of women reported that they are afraid to walk alone at night, versus 26% of men. Similarly, 54% of respondents aged 60 and above reported such fear, compared to 38% of those under 30.

These age and sex differences in fear initially perplexed criminologists because the two groups that display the greatest fear—women and the elderly—are the groups that have the lowest objective risk of victimization for most forms of crime.⁶ Subsequent research, however, has clarified this anomaly. That is, females and

the elderly exhibit greater *sensitivity* to risk than males and the young, meaning that identical levels of risk produce significantly different levels of fear among men and women, and young and old.⁷ Thus, a 10% chance of being robbed is likely to produce a much different reaction in a 19-year-old male and a 50-year-old female. This differential sensitivity to risk in turn stems from differences in the way that women and the elderly seem to perceive crime. Among women and older persons, different crimes are subjectively linked in a way that is not true for males and the young. For example, fear of burglary and fear of murder are more strongly correlated among women than men, implying that women are more likely than men to view burglary as an event that may result in death. These sorts of subjective linkages among crimes suggest that situations or events that would be viewed as relatively safe by males or young persons are likely to be viewed as much more dangerous by females and the elderly.

One crime that figures prominently in the fears of women, but not men, is rape. Rape is feared more than any other crime among younger women, who view rape as approximately equal in seriousness to murder, and as the violent crime

most likely to happen to them. Fear of rape is also strongly associated with fear of other crimes (e.g., homicide), and is linked to a number of precautionary or avoidance behaviors among women (e.g., staying home after dark, avoiding going out alone).⁸

The Consequences of Fear

Fear of crime has numerous social consequences, ranging from subtle changes in personal habits to precautionary and avoidance behaviors so restrictive and ubiquitous that they affect the character and quality of American life.⁹

Among the most common responses to fear of crime is spatial avoidance, meaning that individuals avoid areas that are thought to be dangerous. Those areas can include the downtown district of a city, certain parks or shopping areas, areas with large minority populations, or places with a reputation for gang or drug problems. A large majority of Americans report some form of spatial avoidance in their everyday activities, and areas that come to be defined, rightly or wrongly, as dangerous places can find it all but impossible to attract or retain local businesses and customers.

The foregoing precautions pertain to activities outside the home, but although Americans consistently report that they feel safest in their own home or neighborhood, they nevertheless take numerous precautions to protect their home, property, and loved ones. Each year billions of dollars are spent on such physical precautions as burglar alarms, locks, lighting, firearms, and watchdogs; and nearly all households report such everyday precautions as locking doors, leaving lights on, asking neighbors to watch the house, stopping mail delivery during vacations, and identifying persons before letting them in.

Reactions to fear take collective as well as individual forms. Community crime watches have become an increasingly common form of collective protection in American neighborhoods since the 1980s, and many Americans also partici-

pate in such activities as escort programs, citizen patrols, property-marking projects, and other community-based programs. Ironically, fear of crime can actually *increase* social contact and cohesion among neighbors in communities that join together for their common safety.

Is the Level of Fear Justified?

There can be little argument that fear of crime is prevalent in the United States, but some question whether the level of fear is entirely justified. Critics argue that public fear of crime is exacerbated by the mass media, who, they contend, present an exaggerated image of crime to the public.

Certainly the modern mass media function as a powerful amplifying device. Crimes that would have achieved only local attention a few decades ago today

become known to tens of millions of people merely hours after they occur. It is the manner in which the mass media report crimes, however, that angers critics. For example, although violent crime is the least common form of crime in our society, it is the most frequently reported type of crime in newspaper and television news coverage. Further, the amount of news coverage devoted to crime in comparison to other topics (e.g., the economy, government) can be startling.¹⁰ Crime stories are sometimes emphasized to increase circulation or viewership by appealing to a certain kind of audience, and crime stories may be used as filler material when other news is slow.¹¹ If news coverage of crime is constrained by at least some effort toward objectivity, however, the same cannot be said of television crime dramas and other entertainment media. Crime and "cop" shows, for example, have long been a staple of American tele-

Table 1
Relative Fear of Various Crimes, 1983

Question: At one time or another, most of us have experienced fear about becoming the victim of a crime. Below is a list of different types of crime. We are interested in how *afraid* you are about becoming the victim of each type of crime in your everyday life.

	Mean
Having someone break into your home while you're away	5.9
Being raped.*	5.6
Being hit by a drunken driver while driving your car.	5.1
Having someone break into your home while you're home.	4.5
Having something taken from you by force.	4.1
Having strangers loiter near your home late at night.	4.0
Being threatened with a knife, club, or gun.	4.0
Having a group of juveniles disturb the peace near your home.	3.8
Being beaten up by a stranger.	3.6
Being murdered.	3.4
Having your car stolen.	3.4
Being cheated or conned out of your money.	2.5
Being approached by people begging for money.	2.2
Receiving an obscene phone call.	2.1
Being sold contaminated food.	2.0
Being beaten up by someone you know.	1.0

*Female respondents only.

Note: Sample of Seattle residents only. Response categories ranged from zero (not afraid at all) to 10 (very afraid).

Source: Survey by Warr & Stafford, 1983.

Table 2
Relative Fear of Various Crimes, 1993

Question: How often do you, yourself, worry about the following things...very frequently, pretty frequently, pretty seldom, or very seldom? [Percentages are those responding "very/pretty frequently."]

	Total	Whites	Blacks
Yourself or someone in your family getting sexually assaulted or raped.	38%	37%	40%
Your home being burglarized when you're not there.	35	35	35
Being attacked while driving your car.	28	27	36
Getting mugged.	26	24	33
Getting beaten up, knifed, or shot.	23	22	25
Your home being burglarized when you are there.	21	20	25
Getting murdered.	19	18	28

Source: Survey taken nationally by the Gallup Organization for CNN and *USA Today*, October 13-18, 1993.

vision, but the depictions of crime they present are often factually incorrect.¹² Crime-related plots or themes are also heavily featured in modern fiction and motion pictures.

Defenders of the media, of course, can readily respond to such charges. Violent crime receives the most news coverage because it is the most newsworthy. The amount of attention devoted to crime in television news and dramas reflects the public's craving for information on crime and its desire to understand crime. The mass media do not create public fear; they reflect public fear.

Critics and defenders of the media will no doubt continue to disagree, but their arguments in fact rest upon a common premise. Both sides assume that the information and depictions of crime that are transmitted through the mass media are readily assimilated and accepted by the general public. That premise is far from certain, however. Although the evidence is limited, it seems that the public does not uncritically accept the information on crime that they obtain through the media, and there is evidence that public beliefs about crime are not as inaccurate as media critics often assume.¹³

Ultimately, questions about the defensibility and rationality of fear of crime cannot be conclusively settled. The fear rests as much on questions of value as on

verifiable perceptual features of crime. How important is the safety of my children and my own safety? How much do I value my possessions? How much risk is acceptable risk? Answers to such questions cannot readily be classified as right or wrong, and hence debates about the rationality of fear are largely futile.

Fear of crime is not without benefits; in the face of real danger, for example, fear can lead individuals to take necessary precautions that reduce their risk of victimization. But such benefits pale before the costs of fear, including the ability of Americans to live, work, and travel as they choose. The United States may not be a "fortress society," as some have described it, but the political freedom that we so proudly enjoy is not matched by our freedom from fear.

Endnotes:

¹W.G. Skogan and M.G. Maxfield, *Coping with Crime: Individual and Neighborhood Reactions* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1991).

²US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization in the United States: 1973-1990 Trends* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992); and *Ibid*, *Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1991* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1992).

³M. Warr and M.C. Stafford, "Fear of Victimization: A Look at the Proximate Causes," *Social Forces*, Vol. 61, 1983, pp. 1033-1043.

⁴*Ibid*.

⁵Survey by the Gallup Organization for CNN and *USA Today*, October 13-18, 1993.

⁶M.C. Stafford and O.R. Galle, "Victimization Rates, Exposure to Risk, and Fear of Crime," *Criminology*, Vol. 22, 1984, pp. 173-185.

⁷M. Warr, "Fear of Victimization: Why are Women and the Elderly More Afraid?," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 65, 1984, pp. 681-702.

⁸M. Warr, "Fear of Rape Among Urban Women," *Social Problems*, Vol. 32, 1985, pp. 238-250.

⁹M. Warr, "Public Perceptions and Reactions to Violent Offending and Victimization," in A.J. Reiss and J.A. Roth (eds.), *Understanding and Preventing Violence, Volume IV: Dimensions and Consequences of Violence* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, forthcoming 1994).

¹⁰D.A. Graber, *Crime News and the Public* (New York: Praeger, 1980); Skogan and Maxfield, *Coping with Crime: Individual and Neighborhood Reactions*; and Warr, "Public Perceptions and Reactions to Violent Offending and Victimization."

¹¹M. Gordon and L. Heath, "The News Business, Crime, and Fear," in D.A. Lewis, *Reactions to Crime* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1981), pp. 227-250.

¹²L.S. Lichter and S.R. Lichter, *Prime Time Crime* (Washington, DC: The Media Institute, 1983).

¹³D.A. Graber, *Crime News and the Public* and M. Warr, "The Accuracy of Public Beliefs about Crime," *Social Forces*, Vol. 59, 1980, pp. 456-470.

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