

# THE 'FACTS' OF FEAR

## Women's fear of crime: Just what are we measuring and what are we missing?

Ask women what concerns them most about the areas where they live, work and shop and 'fear of crime' is sure to figure prominently in the replies. Given the lack of precision over what this 'catch all' phrase means, it is unsurprising that how to measure it is a contentious issue. Nonetheless, successive crime surveys claim that women fear all types of crime more than men and they restrict their lifestyles because of it. For example, the 1992 British Crime Survey found that half the women (49%) fear for their personal safety after dark, and 1 in 3 women reported they are 'very worried' about being raped. In addition, almost two thirds of women avoid going out, after dark, simply as a precaution against crime.

These so called 'facts' of fear are held to contrast markedly with reality. The same crime surveys are at pains to stress that women's subjective fears of crime are out of all proportion to risk. Moreover, women's generalised fear of crime cannot be explained by the frequency of rape or sexual assault. The 1982, 1984 and 1988 British Crime Surveys found, respectively, only one attempted rape in 11,000 households; only 19 sexual offences among 6,000 women and merely 15 sexual offences among 5,500 women.

The apparent anomaly of women's high fear and low risk, defined as the 'fear of crime problem', has been explained in a variety of ways. Women's fears are seen variously as a knee-jerk reaction to media coverage of crime; a consequence of their physical and social vulnerability; a generalised response to an underlying, illogical, dread of rape and sexual assault; or conversely, a rational reflection of the abuse they experience in the privacy of the home.

## Women do not fear 'crime'. They fear men.

It is generally recognised, that for a variety of reasons, a crime survey is not the most reliable means of investigating women's experience of crime. On the one hand, violent domestic crimes are less likely to be reported to interviewers because of fear and embarrassment. Besides, these women are unlikely to open their doors to interviewers. Thus, the twin problems of non-response and under-reporting, means that women's experience of crime is vastly underestimated. So, what the crime survey does is measure a subjective

state of 'fear' while simultaneously overlooking the objective reality of risk.

In addition, crime surveys only ask about women's experience of crime over the previous twelve months. Yet, a series of feminist works reveals that women's experience and fear of violence is widespread and built up over a lifetime. Thus, a crime survey may find objectively that a woman has not been victimised in the previous twelve months, that she reports a high level of concern about the possibility of victimisation, and then conclude that her fears are irrational. What happens at this point is that, once again, a survey will measure fear and, at the same time, disregard women's actual experience of crime because it does not fall within the allotted twelve month time frame.

But just what are we measuring? Fear of crime is an obscure, multi-dimensional, subjective concept and it is not easily gauged. The usual crime survey questions attempt to approach the problem indirectly by reference to perceptions of risk, concerns for personal safety when out alone after dark (a hypothetical situation for most women) and worries about specific perpetration of criminal offences. Given that the perpetration of criminal offences is primarily a male preserve; that women are not afraid to walk the streets because of the threat posed by other women, and that what women fear most is the risk of physical and sexual assault, it seems reasonable to conjecture that women do not fear 'crime'. They fear men.

And, within the context of answering the type of questions asked in a crime survey, a specific fear of men is likely to show up as a generalised 'crime concern' response.

The picture is even more blurred when those old fashioned concepts, social class and inequality, enter the frame. It is not often remarked upon, but the British Crime Surveys over the past decade have coincided with a period of intense social upheaval and economic insecurity. During the 1980s unemployment and poverty have increased; education and housing provision has been cut back; youth services and social services are all but decimated, the National Health Service is being systematically dismantled. And who bears the burden of all this pressure which impinges on the family? Women; especially those in social classes CDE. Again, within the context of a crime survey it is more likely that economic insecurity and



David Kidd-Hewitt

social vulnerability, within this group of women, will elicit a 'fear of crime' response.

To test this proposition, I constructed a four item problem scale as the first question on a survey to evaluate the impact of street lighting on crime and fear. The survey was carried out on two working class estates in Dudley, West Midlands 1991-1992. The objective was to compare worries about the possibility of crime with worries about income, health and housing. On all four items women were significantly more worried than men. They were most worried about the quality of housing, followed by the possibility of victimisation, then income and health.

There was a positive correlation between women's worries about crime and concern about health. The findings are difficult to interpret and could mean one of three things. First, that fear of crime causes stress and affects subjective feelings of health. Second, fear of crime causes women to walk less in their neighbourhood, which itself worsens health. It is well established that there is a link between regular exercise, particularly walking, and good health. Third, those in poor health worry more about the possibility of crime because of their physical vulnerability.

Although the evidence is far from clear, this question does highlight the problem of operationalising the concept of fear of crime among women. It may well be that the constant, invoking reply 'fear of crime', within the context of a crime survey, reflects women's social and physical vulnerability as a consequence of patriarchal social relations and economic inequality. According to consecutive crime surveys over the past fifteen years women appear to worry a lot; even too much. But then, as two decades of feminist research has demonstrated, they have most to worry about.

*Kate Painter is a PhD student at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge.*