

# Untangling the fear of crime

Jonathan Jackson, Emily Gray and Stephen Farrall explore recent approaches to the fear of crime.

*The fear of crime is something that we – academics, policy makers and practitioners (not to mention the public) – are well and truly stuck with. Many academics have come to regret the fear of crime becoming one of the key organising concepts of research (Lee, 2008). Some have even called for it to be abandoned as a body of inquiry (and since the heady days of the 1980s and 1990s, academic research into the fear of crime in the UK has waned considerably). Policy makers also find the topic an irritant: it raises the emotional temperature of debates about criminal justice policies; and all too often, it leads to increasingly punitive but no more effective policies. For practitioners the fear of crime draws attention away from the very tangible reductions in crime which the UK has enjoyed since the mid to late 1990s and appears at once both a pressing concern and almost impossible to do very much about.*

But when we talk of ‘fear’, when we ask people about ‘worry’, when we discuss ‘insecurities’ or ‘safety,’ what exactly are we talking about? For some academics, the fear of crime is a metaphor for other changes in society (loss of respect, influx of new social groups, decline of manufacturing and of the UK’s global status); for other scholars, worry about crime emerges out of the sense of neighbourhood breakdown and stability, as well as broader anxieties that shape how we make sense of our environment; still others believe ‘it’ is related to victimisation and the threats associated with everyday crimes and anti-social behaviours. Nevertheless, psychologists remind

us – worry is a good thing: we worry about the safety of our children crossing the road and teach them safe practices; we worry about our elderly neighbours and take the time to check that they are okay. In this respect worry is a socially beneficial activity, warding off demons and encouraging us to act in ways which (we hope) will minimise risk.

Perhaps, then, this ‘thing’ we call the fear of crime is not one ‘thing’ at all. Perhaps we should approach ‘it’ in a rather more eclectic and all-embracing fashion. Think of fear of crime not as *one* thing but of *several*, and think of it not as a negative, but also, sometimes, a positive.

It was with these thoughts that we approached the fear of crime through a recent Economic and Social Research Council funded project. In sum (see Farrall et al., 2009 for an expanded discussion) we have approached the fear of crime as being all of the following:

- A short-lived and thankfully rare event in many people’s lives; an episode, which no matter how frightening and no matter how much it resonates with and informs subsequent events, is isolated in time; ‘I felt frightened walking home that night’.
- A more diffuse anxiety – a generalised sense of risk and responsibility, a convenient metaphor regarding various social insecurities. This is an anxiety that does not ‘erupt’ into concrete emotional episodes – something that Hough (2004) captures nicely when he describes unease and concern as mental states rather than mental events.
- A problem solving activity; a way

of making sure that we ward off harm and protect ourselves, our loved ones and our cherished possessions.

These starting points have ramifications for the measurement of the fear of crime. First, we used a new series of questions to measure the episodic nature of *worry about crime*. ‘Worry’ here refers to those short-lived, rare and sometimes disturbing moments. Second, to measure the more ‘diffuse’ manifestation of *anxiety about crime* we rely on a combination of ‘standard’ fear of crime questions (as used by the British Crime Survey (BCS)) and new frequency questions. Finally, in order to approach the fear of crime as a social good (‘functional fear’) we rely on questions which assess the extent to which respondents feel that their crime precautions have had a detrimental or positive impact on their lives. Our data comes from the 2003–2004 BCS and local crime surveys conducted in London (the Safer Neighbourhoods Survey, funded by the London Metropolitan Police Service) and the North-East of England. For a more expansive explanation of these measures see Jackson (2004), Gray et al. (2008), Jackson and Gray (2008) and Farrall et al. (2009).

Analysing the 2003–2004 BCS data, we found that fear of crime manifested in two principal ‘streams’ of experience, consistent with the distinction made above, between those rare emotional events of worry and a more widespread and generalised anxiety. Among those who lived in high crime areas, who had extensive direct/indirect experience of victimisation and who were especially concerned about local neighbourhood breakdown, fear tended to present itself as ‘episodes’ of worry. And yet, for those who lived in more protected areas (akin perhaps to ‘middle England’ or ‘middle America’), who had less experience of crime, who were less concerned about local incivilities or neighbourhood stability, ‘fear’ was more often a diffuse anxiety. This more generalised attitude seemed more akin to an awareness and management of risk.

We found that standard measures of 'diffuse' anxiety of crime did not neatly map onto the new experiential time-focused accounts of crime-fears. In fact, fear of crime – defined more specifically as episodes of worry – was remarkably low. Politicians and social commentators often treat fear of crime as a serious social ill. But we show that previous estimates may have exaggerated the frequency with which the public actually worry about crime.

We also found that lying behind public perceptions of crime are symbolic concerns about group values, normative consensus and moral standards. Trust knits us together; trust allows us to go about our daily lives in a seemingly secure manner. Public concerns about crime emerge when we see others in our environment as lacking the shared norms and values, when we lose interpersonal trust and a broader sense of trust in the local structures of formal and informal social control. Crucially, these relational concerns flow through our assessments of neighbourhood cohesion and disorder, as well as the broader topics of decline and community fragmentation. In some sense therefore, crime is not some abstract category that emerges from nowhere. It is something that people project into a given environment, elaborate with a face (the potential criminal) and a context (the place it might take place), rooted and situated in the everyday (Jackson, 2008). Perceptions of the risk of crime thus disclose a host of subtle evaluations of and responses to the social world. Fear of crime emerges as a compound of perceptions and anxieties, part of a broader conception of quality of life.

So where next? A recent and related study has examined whether 'fear of crime' might be carved up in a slightly different way. Addressing the under-researched issue of whether some level of emotion can be positive, Jackson and Gray (2008)

found that around one-quarter of those individuals who said they were worried about crime, later reported that they took precautions which made them feel less at risk, and that their quality of life was not negatively affected by these feelings or precautionary actions. In such circumstances 'fear' might be best seen as risk management rather than a damaging retreat into a victim's role.

In summary, this emerging empirical work, which seeks to differentiate public insecurities about crime, suggests that fear of crime is best approached as a Janus-faced creature:

- For some people, typically those living in less desirable neighbourhoods, we find the fear of crime is the quite understandable response to high levels of crime and disorder (echoing left realist insights).
- For others, those living in more protected areas with less crime, fear of crime is a way of expressing anxieties which are not just about crime, but also about other social changes and economic uncertainties.
- Notwithstanding the above, worry about crime is for some people an activity that leads to positive outcomes; they take precautions and feel safer for having done so.

There is still much work to be done on these topics. Making sense of the fear of crime is now simultaneously *easier* than it used to be (we now have a long archive of times-series of data) and *harder* than it used to be (since our notions of what the fear of crime 'is' have developed and diversified over time). But for us, a particularly pressing question is why people make such strong links between crime, the threat of crime and so many aspects of social and political life. Why has crime and 'fear of crime' come to shape and structure how we make sense of our

social world and how we experience many aspects of our social world? Why do people link issues of local cohesion, informal social control and neighbourhood disorder to crime and feelings of safety – as opposed to a discourse concerning poverty, education or social inequality? A number of high profile scholars have been addressing these questions for some time now. Our research has added some much-needed empirical meat to the bones. And for these reasons, we believe fear of crime remains a potent topic for academic exploration – as well as a challenge for policy makers, practitioners and, of course, the public. ■

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