



From reducing fear to improving community confidence – a change of emphasis for practitioners

Abstract

Although the 'fear of crime' has generated significant academic interest, the lack of clarity concerning definition, prevalence and concentration has generated difficulties for community safety practitioners when implementing operational initiatives. This article explores the experience of the Norfolk Constabulary, and shows how the positive concept of 'improving public confidence' allowed the organisation to more effectively design and implement community safety initiatives, to change public perception.

Key words

Fear of crime, public confidence in the police, reassurance policing.

STUART KIRBY

Lecturer, Department of Applied Social Science, Lancaster University

IAN MCPHERSON

Chief Constable, Norfolk Constabulary Police

Introduction

In recent years, policy-makers and community safety professionals have become concerned with the question of how safe members of the community feel, as well as how safe they actually are. As such the 'fear of crime', discussed in the US since the 1960s and the UK from the 1970s, has generated significant studies, with Hale, as long ago as 1996, estimating that over 200 articles, monographs or books had been devoted to this topic, reflecting a growing policy and academic interest. Since that time, the number of studies has increased significantly and, although some have dispute that the fear of crime is a positive emotion as it makes people become more careful and reduces the risk of victimisation, many others see it as a problem in its own right. These commentators argue that the fear of being victimised makes people change their habits, and forces them to stay at home or otherwise avoid people or places that they perceive as dangerous (Skogan, 1987). Dolan and Peasgood (2007) estimate that the fear of anticipating crime would equate to £52.65 per capita per year, which would mean an overall cost of £776.5 million for England and Wales. Due to this increased focus in academic and political circles, the 'fear of crime' performance indicator has grown in importance, especially as an Ipsos MORI report (Duffy et al, 2007) found that while overall crime has fallen significantly during the lifetime of this government (-32%), only one in five of the population accept

this, with 55% seeing crime and violence as one of the most worrying issues. In fact, crime and violence have consistently been a higher priority for the British public than the US and many other European countries since 1997.

This presents a considerable challenge, as the findings infer that current initiatives are generally ineffective at reducing the fear of crime. It was this concern that caused the Norfolk Constabulary to research the issue from a practitioner's perspective. What they found was a considerable amount of ambiguity and dissent between researchers in agreeing what should be measured, how it should be measured and what the results show. The Constabulary argument, set out within this article, is that as a result of this uncertainty, there are benefits in changing the emphasis of community safety initiatives to improve the confidence of the community rather than reduce their fear of crime. This more positive approach will be simpler to design and implement, while providing the desired solution of changing citizen perception.

Is it 'fear' that should be measured?

From the outset, practitioners researching the fear of crime literature will find academics arguing whether the 'fear of crime' is the appropriate concept to be measured. Hale (1996: 92) highlighted concerns by stating:

'... fear of crime relates to the (negative) emotional reaction generated by crime or symbols. It is conceptually distinct from either risks (judgements) or concerns (values). Of course, fear is both an effect of, and caused by, judgements of risk but to confound the two is to confuse the relationship.'

The British Crime Survey (BCS) 1994 (White & Malbon, 1995) changed its approach to measure worry about crime rather than fear, whereas Ditton and Farrall (2000) and Ditton *et al* (1999) discussed that anger is a more commonly felt emotion than fear, for both genders and all age groups.

Even if the term was to be agreed, there would be further argument about its prevalence. Overall,

studies support the notion that the fear of crime is widespread in Western societies (Farrall & Gadd, 2004). However, although the 1994 BCS (White & Malbon, 1995) describes a quarter of the population as 'very worried' about burglary and rape, other BCS reports between 1984 and 2000 have shown this figure to be 20%. A separate study by Farrall and Gadd (2004) sampled 977 respondents and found that 33% reported being fearful within the last 12 months; however, when the intensity of fear was examined only eight per cent stated that they frequently experienced high levels of fear. The commentators, therefore, assert that fear of crime is overestimated as a phenomenon.

Jackson *et al* (2007) provide a further perspective. First, that fear of crime is relatively rare in England and Wales as fear is both an (infrequent) everyday experience and a (more widespread) diffuse anxiety compared to anxiety about crime, everyday worry has a greater impact on quality of life and is more closely connected to crime and victimisation experience. Second, people do not separate out the issue of crime from issues of cohesion, collective efficacy, social change and tension. As such, they explain that the fear of crime, rather than describing an irrational (and narrow) perception, relates to wider conceptions of neighbourhood breakdown and stability. Others agree with this complexity, notably Moore and Shepherd (2007) who believe that the fear of crime is complex and should not be viewed as a monolithic entity, but divided into two elements: the fear of personal harm and the fear of personal loss. They felt that this was more accurate when looking at particular variables such as gender and age.

In essence, although fear of crime is seen as a debilitating issue, there is little consensus on the correct term, measurement criteria or frequency of what has been labelled 'fear of crime'. As we can now see, methodological approaches have always been subject to criticism in the academic literature.

Methodological issues

Many researchers have highlighted the inadequate methodology used to understand the fear of crime within the population. Newburn (2007) summarises

many of these points when referring to the British Crime Survey, which asked respondents how safe they felt walking alone in a particular area after dark, or how they thought they would feel. He says:

- ♦ the question doesn't actually ask about crime
- ♦ it isn't specific about a time or a place
- ♦ feelings may have nothing to do with the actual risks of victimisation
- ♦ the answers may relate to previous experiences or other fears
- ♦ the responses may not actually relate to fear at all.

Indeed, commentators have continued to find vulnerabilities in the approaches used. For example, Sutton and Farrall (2005) looked at the veracity of answers in relation to male fear levels and found them to be inversely related to scores on a 'lie scale'. It seems that males are more likely to provide socially desirable, rather than totally candid, responses.

All these studies have culminated in Farrall *et al* (1997: 662) arguing that our understanding of the fear of crime is a product of the way it has been researched, rather than the way it is. In a review of studies they consider that the methodologies collectively:

'... ignore the meaning of events for respondents; turn processes into events; neglect that the fear of crime can be a multifaceted phenomenon; poorly conceptualise the fear of crime; ignore important contextual variables (such as time and space); greatly influence the reported incidence of the fear of crime and rely too heavily on respondents recall.'

In a study that looked at qualitative and quantitative methodology, they found that each methodology produced different findings. Assessing the potential reasons for the mismatch they discuss: the different epistemological focus of the interviews; the measurement of 'formless' or 'concrete' (specific) fears; the nature of open and closed questions; a genuine change in fear level; the term 'worry' being interpreted in different ways; the interpretation of the question; memory decay; 'careless' replies; and concealment by the respondent. They conclude

that fear of crime is not easily measurable even when a variety of methodologies are used, however for the purpose of thoroughness, this paper will highlight some of the findings that these 'contested' methodologies have found.

Who is the most fearful?

Although there are those who argue that the elderly exhibit the greatest fear of crime, this has also been contested. LaGrange and Ferraro (1989: 372) carried out analysis of the literature and concluded that the elderly do not fear crime more than other age groups. They state that *'the amount of fear experienced in the everyday lives of older persons has been overstated'*. Skogan (1987) contests that looking at one particular variable misses the point and by joining the gender and age variables explains that while females are more fearful than men in every age group, the gender–fear gap narrows as people grow older. Females are reported as being more likely than males to worry about violent crime and burglary, but not car crime. Similarly, women were at least twice as likely to worry about violent crime as men and this was especially pronounced in younger age groups (Newburn, 2007).

Moore and Shepherd (2007) found that the fear of personal harm was greatest in the 16–25 year age range (maximum around 23 years) and then decreased with age, which closely reflects the known age risk profile for this type of crime. In contrast fear of personal loss was greatest around 40–60 years (maximum 45 years lowest 16–25 years), and they discuss that this may reflect the varying importance that material wealth has in relation to this particular age group. They contest that there would be a gender difference in fear of personal loss and fear of personal harm; the latter being more significant in females. Others argued that greater household income was associated with lower levels of fear of personal harm, although not levels of personal loss. It is felt that this may reflect the routine activities of more affluent people who have less exposure to aggression (Moore & Shepherd, 2007). People from non-white groups, overall, were more than twice as likely to have high levels of worry about violence, burglary and car crime (Newburn, 2007).

However, a number of studies have focused on the environmental issues in local neighbourhoods. Skogan (1987) discovered that people who have been victimised in the past believe that there is more crime around than there actually is, and are also more worried about being a victim. However, Box *et al* (1988) disagreed, saying that those who are victimised take more precautions and, therefore reduce their fear, or that their fear reduces as time passes. They do say, however, that this is not the case in areas where a high level of incivilities exists such as decaying inner-city neighbourhoods, where the effect of victimisation is to increase fear (see environmental factors below). In a more recent study, Chadee *et al* (2007), consider that correlating the issue of risk and fear of crime is a more complex area than first thought. They state that changes in perceived personal risk cannot be shown to have significant effects on personal levels of fear. Again this creates problems in terms of how the police would respond to this issue.

There does appear consensus among researchers that areas experiencing a high degree of negative environmental stimulus in terms of neighbourhood incivilities (noisy parties, loud music, itinerants or drunks in public spaces, youths on street corners, graffiti and litter), generate constant reminders of crime and, therefore, the fear of crime. Robinson *et al* (2003) found a causal link between litter, other environmental factors and fear, while Moore and Shepherd (2004) reported a positive association with graffiti and damage with the fear of personal harm (but not personal loss). This level of reported fear was reduced in people who lived in accommodation that was in a poor physical condition.

There are further issues: studies by Baker *et al* (1983), Garofalo (1981) and Heath (1984) state that when the media portray crime as affecting a random choice of victims, normlessness accompanying criminal behaviour, or the dramatisation of events and victim risks, then this contributes to fear. Duffy *et al* (2007) deemed that the media's coverage of crime is biased to the negative, while Heath (1984) also found that different crimes had different affects in different areas. Williams and Dickinson (1993), looking at UK newspapers, also found that fear of crime was higher in those who read tabloids rather than broadsheets, with explicit reporting raising fear more so than subtle reporting.

Finally, there are other commentators who make the distinction of geography in terms of the fear of crime. Walklate and Mythen (2008) discuss that fear of crime is not considered in a wide enough arena, which takes into account the local and global vistas of fear. This fits into other studies that explore the issue that people indicate less fear when asked specifically about their local environment than when asked in more general terms about their fear of crime. Continuing this theme, Duffy *et al* (2007), utilising MORI polls, consider that the public's definition of crime is wider than the government's and incorporates issues such as terrorism, gun and knife crime, and antisocial behaviour. This, coupled with the fact that these high profile or 'signal crimes' have a greater impact on community consciousness and (in contrast to some other crimes) are not decreasing, make the public feel that crime is increasing.

To summarise the debate so far, it does seem apparent that crime does concern the public and the aim to reduce this concern is laudable. However, there is little consensus among researchers on how this concern should be defined or measured, or even the frequency of the phenomenon. This presents considerable difficulties to police and wider community safety practitioners who face accountability in using finite resources effectively. Subsequently, the ability to separate the variables that cause the fear of crime and measure the effect of any intervention appears fraught with technical difficulties. The Home Office Crime Reduction toolkit on the subject states,

'When it comes to fear of crime, it can be difficult to set targets that can be measured, because there are a variety of different questions to ask, and fear of crime can often be confused with other personal safety issues, such as terrorist attacks or a natural disaster.' (Home Office, 2006)

Changing the operational perspective – improving the confidence of the public

It appears that the academic debate being pursued in relation to the fear of crime is having little impact

in an applied setting. As reported crime continues to fall, this phenomenon appears unable to penetrate the community psyche as individuals generally fail to accept that crime is falling and continue to highlight it as one of their most worrying concerns.

Duffy *et al* (2007) believe that the reasons for the perceptual gap between reported and perceived levels of crime are due to the following issues.

- ◆ A bias in both the media and 'hometown favouritism'. This means that citizens view their own area more favourably and feel that less crime is committed there than the country as a whole. Fifty-seven per cent of the 2,000 people surveyed in the Ipsos MORI study reported that their high crime perception came from what they saw on television and 48% by what they read in the newspapers. The survey also showed a general level of mistrust in government communication on this issue.
- ◆ The public's definition of crime is wider than the government's, as it includes high profile and signal crimes (such as terrorism, antisocial behaviour, firearms and knife crime), which have risen while other types of crime have reduced.
- ◆ Other drivers of views include: demographic factors, political views, communications by the media/government/opposition, views about the leniency of sentencing and prisons.

Skogan (1987) had found that those who had confidence in the police had a lower finding of fear than similar respondents who did not. In fact, Duffy *et al* (2007) contend that the police are highly trusted (especially when compared to other groups within the criminal justice system), although this confidence reduces after contact. As such, the police appear in an excellent position to communicate information to the public on a wider range of issues if this can be delivered effectively. The police service has been aware for many years that confidence in the police reduces after contact and a number of national initiatives are in place to improve this situation. Skogan (2006) has shown that the impact of a negative experience with the police is between four to 14 times greater in impact than a positive one, therefore police/public encounters are critical to community satisfaction.

Reassurance policing

Reassurance policing is seen as a relatively new term to describe a local approach to services, that has placed an emphasis on citizen priorities. An indication as to the benefit of a reassurance approach was provided as far back as Bennett (1991). He reported on a police initiative to reduce the fear of crime in areas of the West Midlands. In hindsight, the initiative could be described as a 'neighbourhood policing initiative', where the police visited local residents, asked them about local problems, and tailored responses to those specific concerns. Bennett reported that there was no evidence of the programme achieving its major outcome goal of directly reducing the fear of crime (further supporting the argument developed in this article). There was evidence, however, that the programme achieved its secondary goals and improved some aspects of the quality of life in the programme areas. There were also significant improvements of the respondents' involvement with crime prevention, as well as contact and satisfaction with the police. The results also showed significant improvements in at least one of the programme areas with responses of satisfaction concerning the area, sense of community, and informal control of crime.

In more recent years, there has been a concerted effort to embed this type of approach. Evaluating the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS), Skogan (1987) showed that significant benefits could be gained if local policing involved itself within wider public policy and included a partnership approach. The UK National Reassurance Policing Project followed, which ran between 2003 and April 2005. In essence, it brought the police closer to the public in understanding their quality of life experiences. A later evaluation reported that,

'the programme overall had a positive impact on crime, perceptions of crime, and antisocial behaviour, feelings of safety and public confidence in the police' (Tuffin *et al*, 2006: ix).

The methodology was also innovative in that it used a quantitative approach to identify previously unquantifiable signal crimes (utilising environmental

visual audits) and a qualitative approach to identify the impact of interventions through the KIN model (key informant network), which engaged significant people in the community to articulate any observed changes. As such, the police could be clear on the impact of their interventions.

Moreover, Fielding and Innes (2006) go further when they say:

'... where RP (reassurance policing) innovates in relation to its predecessors relates to how the emphasis upon signal events and signalling processes inculcates an awareness of the salience of expression management in the delivery of social control'.

In terms of delivery and practice, reassurance policing recognises the significance of what Ditton and Innes (2005) label the logic of 'perceptual intervention' – that is, if it is accepted that policing should undertake to not only make people 'objectively' safer, but also improve their 'subjective' feelings of security, then all policing interventions need to reflect this and attend to the impact on public perceptions that they may have.

Conclusion

It is always a challenge for public agencies working within an operational arena to put theoretical concepts into practice. As Rosenbaum *et al* (1986) reported, community safety initiatives often fail either because they are not properly thought out (theory failure), not properly managed (implementation failure), or have insufficient criteria in place to assess their success (measurement failure). This review by the Norfolk Constabulary has explored that any initiative to reduce the 'fear of crime' (as measured by the BCS), has the potential to fail on all three areas as there is limited consensus among academics on how the concept should be defined, measured, how prevalent it is, and which section of the community is most adversely affected. Although acknowledging the debilitating aspect of this phenomenon, the uncertainty in terms of definition and methodology provides community safety agencies with a precarious

basis to devise interventions that can deliver the changes in perception to directly reduce the fear of crime.

The conclusion that the Norfolk Constabulary came to was to look at a different way to achieve the goal in terms of making people feel safer. The studies mentioned in this paper show that there is an alternative route to improving the perception of safety, which means that rather than looking to reduce the fear of crime, the police (and wider partners), should concentrate on reassuring the community and improving their confidence in the services provided. Tactically this would mean:

- ♦ an acknowledgement of signal crimes (as well as other crimes highlighted by the crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP) or constabulary control strategy)
- ♦ heightened and systematic engagement with the public in line with the CAPS/NRPP models
- ♦ a proactive approach to targeting particular groups with particular information
- ♦ a systematic approach to linking consultation to action
- ♦ improving agency interaction at all stages of citizen contact.

Such an approach has the potential to achieve multiple objectives including the increased reassurance of the public, an enhanced feeling of safety, as well as improving their confidence and satisfaction with the police. As the recent green paper, *From the Neighbourhood to the National: Policing our communities together* (Home Office, 2008: 5) states, '*... effective policing is incredibly important to the daily lives of every citizen of our country, allowing them to live their lives in safety, confident that they are protected from crime and its effects'.*

References

- Baker MH, Nienstedt BC, Everett RS & McClery R (1983) The impact of crime waves: perception, fear and confidence in the police. *Law and Society Review* **17** (2) 319–335.
- Bennet T (1991) The effectiveness of a police-initiated fear-reducing strategy. *British Journal of Criminology* **31** (1) 1–14.
- Box S, Hale C & Andrews G (1988) Explaining fear of crime. *British Journal of Criminology* **28** (3) 340–356.

From reducing fear to improving community confidence – a change of emphasis for practitioners

- Chadee D, Austen L & Ditton J (2007) The relationship between likelihood and fear of criminal victimization. *British Journal of Criminology* **47** (1) 133–153.
- Ditton J, Bannister J, Gilchrist E & Farrell S (1999) Afraid or angry? Recalibrating the 'fear' of crime. *International Review of Victimology* **6** (2) 83–99.
- Ditton J, Chadee D, Farrall S, Gilchrist E & Bannister J (2004) From imitation to intimidation: a note on the curious and changing relationship between the media, crime and fear of crime. *British Journal of Criminology* **44** (4) 595–610.
- Ditton J & Innes M (2005) The role of perceptual intervention in the management of crime fear. In: N Tilley (Ed) *Handbook of Crime Prevention and Community Safety*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.
- Ditton J & Farrall S (Eds) (2000) *The Fear of Crime*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Dolan P & Peasgood T (2007) Estimating the economic and social costs of the fear of crime. *British Journal of Criminology* **47** (1) 121–132.
- Duffy B, Wake R, Burrows T & Bremner P (2007) *Closing the Gaps – Crime and public perceptions*. London: Ipsos MORI. Available from: http://ipsos-mori.com/_assets/reports/closing-the-gaps.pdf (accessed May 2009).
- Farrall S & Gadd D (2004) The frequency of the fear of crime. *British Journal of Criminology* **44** (1) 127–134.
- Farrall S, Bannister J, Ditton J & Gilchrist E (1997) Questioning the measurement of the fear of crime. *British Journal of Criminology* **37** (4) 658–679.
- Fielding N & Innes M (2006) Reassurance policing, community policing, and measuring police performance. *Policing and Society* **16** (2) 127–145.
- Garofalo J (1981) The fear of crime: causes and consequences. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* **72** (2) 839–857.
- Hale C (1996) Fear of crime: a review of the literature. *International Review of Victimology* **4** (2) 79–152.
- Heath L (1984) Impact of newspaper crime reports on fear of crime: a multi-methodological investigation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* **47** (2) 263–276.
- Home Office (2006) *Fitting in to the Fear of Crime Matrix*. London: TSO. Available from: www.crimereduction.homeoffice.gov.uk/toolkits/fc0101.htm (accessed May 2009).
- Home Office (2008) *From the Neighbourhood to the National: Policing our communities together*. London: TSO.
- Jackson J, Farrall S & Gray E (2007) *Experience and Expression in the Fear of Crime*. Swindon: Economic and Social Research Council.
- LaGrange R & Ferraro K (1989) Assessing age and gender differences in perceived risk and fear of crime. *Criminology* **27** 697–719.
- Moore SC & Shepherd JP (2006) The cost of fear: shadow pricing the intangible costs of crime. *Applied Economics* **38** 293–300.
- Moore S & Shepherd J (2007) The elements and prevalence of fear. *British Journal of Criminology* **47** (1) 154–162.
- Newburn T (2007) *Criminology*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.
- Robinson JB, Lawton BA, Taylor RB & Perkins DD (2003) Multilevel longitudinal impacts of incivilities: fear of crime, expected safety and block satisfaction. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* **19** (3) 237–274.
- Rosenbaum DP, Lewis DA & Grant JA (1986) Neighbourhood based crime prevention: assessing the efficacy of community organising in Chicago. In: D Rosenbaum (Ed) *Community Crime Prevention: Does it work?* London: Sage.
- Skogan W (2006) Asymmetry in the impact of encounters with the police. *Policing and Society* **16** (2) 99–126.
- Skogan WG (1987) The impact of victimisation on fear. *Crime and Delinquency* **33** (1) 135–154.
- Skogan WG (2005) Citizen satisfaction with police encounters. *Police Quarterly* **8** (3) 298–321.
- Sutton R & Farrall S (2005) Gender, socially desirable responding and the fear of crime. *British Journal of Criminology* **45** (2) 212–224.
- Tuffin R, Morris J & Poole A (2006) *An Evaluation of the Impact of the National Reassurance Policing Programme*. London: Home Office.
- Walklate S & Mythen G (2008) How scared are we? *British Journal of Criminology* **48** (2) 209–225.
- White A & Malbon G (1995) *1994 British Crime Survey Technical Report*. London: Home Office.
- Williams P & Dickinson J (1993) Fear of crime: read all about it? The relationship between newspaper crime reporting and fear of crime. *British Journal of Criminology* **33** (1) 33–56.