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"Fear of Crime" in the Polls: What they do and do not tell us

REACTIONS TO CRIME PROJECT

CENTER FOR URBAN AFFAIRS

by

Terry Baumer

&

Fred DuBow

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY
2040 Sheridan Road
Evanston, Illinois 60201

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Terry Baumer

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Fred DuBow

Northwestern University

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Since the middle sixties, this country has experienced a high level of concern about crime. This concern led to increases in funds available particularly from federal sources for "fighting crime," the development of a new and remarkably homogeneous political rhetoric of crime, and recent attempts to mobilize large numbers of citizens to become involved in a variety of crime programs. Two common indicators of the extent of the crime problem over the decade have been the almost continual increases in reported crime rates and the large number of national, state, and urban polls that report increasing or high levels of "fear." In the past year, however, both the crime rates and reported levels of fear have either leveled off or actually declined. It is often assumed that the present high level of fear has also led to a whole series of behavioral reactions which negatively affect the quality of life in the society. In this paper we will consider the meaning and implications of the high rates of fear reported in major polls. Too often commentators present data on the fear of crime as if it spoke for itself when the implications of the reported findings are problematic. We begin from the position that citizen fears and the changes in behaviors that may accompany them are as salient public policy considerations as the actual incidence of crime. Achieving declines in crime rates without reductions in fear levels may be winning only half the battle. (Maltz, 1972) We will first raise questions about the adequacy of the standard public opinion questions for describing the content of fear and then we

will consider problems in interpreting the effects of reported rates of fear.

Over the past 12 years the major pollsters have asked relatively few fear items. Each company developed a core set of questions and has continued to ask it with only minor wording changes. Louis Harris and Associates have asked two basic questions which they classify under the heading of "fear of crime." The most frequently asked and directly relevant item is:

> "Compared to a year ago, do you personally feel more afraid and uneasy on the streets today, less uneasy, or not much different from the way you felt a few years ago?" (1970 Survey)

Wording differences have changed the adjectives used to describe the respondents feelings. These include variations such as:

> ". . . are you personally more worried about violence and safety in the streets . . ." (1971 Survey) or,
>
> ". . . do you personally feel more uneasy on the streets . . ." (1973 Survey)

on the original "afraid and uneasy" wording. Throughout, Harris has maintained the comparative focus of the previous year in these items. When responses to these are compared, we obtain some interesting results. The levels of fear (those who report that they are "more uneasy" than they were a year ago) tend to be higher than with other measures but they have shown a decrease since their highest point in 1970. (Table I) By 1977 the percentage reporting feeling more uneasy has returned to the 1966 level.

The second question asked more than once by Harris is:

> "In the past year do you feel the crime rate in your area has been increasing, decreasing, or has it remained the same as it was before?"

Table I

Some Comparative Poll Measures of Fear

Years	% Feeling More Uneasy than a Year Ago[1] (Harris)	% Feeling that Crime is Increasing Over the Previous Year[1] (Harris)	% Reporting More Crime in Area than 1 Year Ago (Gallup)	% Not Feeling Safe & Secure at Home (Gallup)	% Afraid to Walk at Night (Gallup = G) (NORC = N)
1965					34.0(G)
1966	49				
1967		46			31.2(G)[2]
1968	53				31.0(G)
1969	55				
1970	65	62			
1971	55				
1972			51	17	41.0(N)
1973	51	48			41.0(N)
1974					45.0(N)
1975	55	70	50	20	45.0(G)
1976					44.0(N)
1977	49	58			

[1] Harris, 1977

[2] Adams and Smith, 1975

This item is probably the most frequently asked question about crime of any to be considered. Harris has included it regularly since 1967; Gallup also asks it regularly; and it has been included in almost every victimization survey conducted since the President's Commission Surveys were fielded in 1966. The problem with this item is that it doesn't measure fear of crime at all. It is simply an estimate of residents perceptions of the changing crime rate. Given the constant media emphasis of crime combined with the condensation of our world created by mass communication, it is surprising that only about 50% say that crime is increasing (Harris, 1973; Gallup, 1975, 1973). The apparently high levels of fear indicated in this question may be accounted for by the comparative focus of the question. Crime surveys have consistently shown that, regardless of the crime rate, people tend to think crime is getting worse. The rise and decline of fear levels cannot be explained by changes in crime rates and like recent declines in crime rates no compelling explanation of the changes on a national level is yet available.

While they have also asked victimization and ranking of social problem questions, the Gallup surveys have relied heavily on two basic questions. Unlike the Harris items, the wording for these has remained the same. The first to be discussed was initially asked in December of 1972 and then repeated again in June of 1975. It asked the respondents:

"How about at home at night--do you feel safe and secure or not?"

Results of this item seem to be fairly stable. In 1972, 83% of the sample responded affirmatively while 80% did so in 1975 (Table I).

This would seem to be a reasonably good measure of fear in that if residents don't feel safe in their own homes we might infer that there is some minimal amount of fear involved.

By far, the most widely asked question in the public opinion polls and the one which we wish to discuss at some length is:

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

This item has been asked by Gallup and more recently by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at least 10 times in the past twelve years. Another question used on the Census Bureau's National Crime Panel Surveys and many other evaluation surveys:

> "How safe do you feel or would you feel being alone in your neighborhood after dark?"

attempts to measure a closely related set of experiences. Both items attempt to measure the fear of "street crime." Fear of personal attack by strangers on the street appears to be the single most salient dimension for most people in evaluating an areas safety. This interpretation is supported by findings from a recent survey conducted by one of the authors. Students were asked to rank 9 cities in terms of how safe they thought they would be in each of them. When the average rankings for these cities are compared with crime statistics derived from victimization surveys (see Table II) we infer that the students' images of these cities' safety is determined primarily by their estimation of the chances of being the victim of the most typical street crime - a robbery - in each city. The student's rankings are strongly but negatively related to overall victimization rates (including all index crimes but murder)

Table II

Student ranks of the cities*	Overall Victimization Rates (index crimes)+
1. Detroit (9.8)	1. Boston (362)
2. New York (9.2)	2. Portland (349)
3. Chicago (6.4)	3. San Francisco (326)
4. Los Angeles (5.9)	4. Detroit (325)
5. Philadelphia (5.7)	5. Atlanta (319)
6. Atlanta (4.6)	6. Los Angeles (316)
7. Boston (4.5)	7. Philadelphia (274)
8. San Francisco (4.5)	8. Chicago (245)
9. Portland, Ore. (2.2)	9. New York (189)

Robbery Victimization Rates
1. Detroit (35)
2. New York (34)
3. Boston (34)
4. San Francisco (33)
5. Philadelphia (32)
6. Chicago (26)
7. Atlanta (23)
8. Portland (18)
9. Los Angeles (17)

*Students ranked from 1-10. The numbers in parantheses are the average scores received by each city. A tenth city, Evanston, Illinois was also included. It ranked tenth with a score of 1.8, but was omitted from the table because no comparable victimization data is available.

+In all, the Census Bureau has surveyed 26 cities between 1972 and 1974). These data are derived from Boland, 1976, p. 32. The number in parantheses are crimes per 1,000 population per year. Thus, Boston had 362 part I victimizations for every 1,000 persons per year.

for these cities, (Spearman rank order correlation -.68) but is moderately related to the rank order for robbery victimizations. (Spearman .40) Rankings for other individual crimes such as burglary show no similar association with the student images. This inference is further strengthened by a follow-up question which asked the students to report the criteria they used for ranking the cities. Robbery and muggings were the most frequently mentioned crime criteria with 64 percent of the students mentioning it first and 78 percent mentioning it at some point. The Gallup/NORC item has shown a slow but steady rise in the percentage of people reporting that they were afraid. In 1965 only around 35% of the national sample said there was someplace around their residence where they would be afraid to walk. By 1972 this value had increased to 41% and has remained around 45% since 1974 (see Table I). Adams and Smith analyzed these results as a time series and found that the number of affirmative responses has been rising at an annual rate of 1.2% per year (1975: 1). However, their data ended with 1974. More recent results indicate that this increase may be leveling off somewhat. (Gallup, 1975; NORC, 1976).

One of the strengths of this measure is its apparent reliability. It was included in the national surveys in March of 1972, again in December of that year, and then in March of 1973. The percentages of affirmative answers for these three points was 41%, 42%, and 41%. Unlike the measure employed by Harris, this item yields reasonably consistent results when asked at relatively close points in time. However, there are also several obvious problems with this measure.

First, it will be remembered that the respondents were asked if there is any area within a mile of there home where they would be afraid to walk at night. However useful this wording might be in producing 'good' marginals, it is doubtful whether it is a meaningful reference unit for the respondents. Urban sociologists have for many years found that citizens tend to define their neighborhood as an area within a few blocks of their own house. For many urban residents, areas a mile away are likely to be unfamiliar or at least considered outside of the neighborhood. Further, a number of surveys report that residents tend to perceive their own neighborhood as relatively safer than the surrounding areas regardless of what the objective risks, as inferred from crime statistics, might be. Therefore, a question which asks citizens to report fear of walking within a mile may obscure the fact that the respondents do not feel afraid walking in their own neighborhoods as they would define them. Such a finding would pick up a "displacement of fear" effect that may contribute to an overblown picture of urban fears.

Because of these problems, we suggest that the form of the item used by the Census Bureau in which the neighborhood is used as a reference point is a stronger item. Even though respondents differ in their conception of neighborhood, they are more likely to be grounding their responses in terms of a geographic unit that has meaning for them.

A second criticism of the Gallup/NORC can also be derived from previous research. Several studies have concluded that fear of crime is basically one's perceptions of risk. Probably the best known of these

was Furstenberg's analysis in which he distinguished between fear of crime and concern about crime as a social problem. The former of these was conceptualized largely as perception of risk (1971). Fowler and Mangione (1974) further distinguish the perception of risk and worry about crime. It is possible that the Gallup/NORC item involves reports of worries without involving a specific estimate of risk. Given the large area covered by the question many respondents may simply assume that there must be somewhere within a mile of there home where they would be afraid to walk even though they have never been there or would have no reason to do so in the future. Thus, if we differentiate between their reported 'fear' as measured by this item and their estimate of risk there may indeed be a large discrepancy. Once again the wording of the Census Bureau's item is superior because it elicits estimates of risk that are likely to be closer to what the respondents experience.

In a recent attempt to test the validity of the above conceptual distinctions one of the authors factor analyzed twenty items originally designed to measure three of the four conceptual clusters identified by Fowler and Mangione (Baumer, 1977). These items included estimates of risk of victimization for five crimes including robbery, assault, and burglary; reported extent of worry about victimization; and the respondents' perceptions of the extent of various neighborhood problems ranging from teenagers hanging out on street corners to robbery, assault, and burglary. This analysis resulted in a final four-factor solution replicated at two points in time. Two factors were identified as

focusing on neighborhood problems. The first involved questions concerning the moral order of the community; these were items about teenagers hanging out, drunks on the street, prostitution and drug use. The second dimension involved those items asking about serious crime problems in the neighborhood - robberies, assaults, burglaries, holdups, and auto thefts. The remaining two clusters involved items thought most closely to measure fear of crime. One of these factors involved items about risk of assault, robbery, and breaking and entering while at home (sort of a Charlie Manson question), and two "worry" questions about assault or robbery. The final dimension included only items asking the respondents about their risk of burglary and their amount of worry involved.

The above study is relevant to the Gallup question in three respects. First, it tends to support the data presented earlier on the salience of fear of street attack as an independent identifiable factor. Second, it supports the work of Furstenberg (1971) and Fowler and Mangione (1974) in suggesting that fear of crime is basically perception of risk, i.e., if people think their risk of victimization is high, they will be worried about it - the two are empirically indistinct. Finally, there appears to be more to the question of fear than simply being afraid of somewhere within a mile of your home. People also perceive neighborhood problems and, one would suspect, use these as indicators of their chances of victimization. On the positive side, Gallup's question about security in the home may be tapping the fear of burglary dimension identified above (Baumer, 1977).

To summarize our critique thus far, the available evidence on the Gallup approach seems to be fairly mixed but on the positive side. These two items appear to yield consistent results, have face validity and focus on a real concern of citizens - fear of personal violence, and separately, fear of burglary. One the negative side the "street safety" item apparently focuses on an arbitrarily large area. However, much more serious questions can be generated if we focus on the various interpretations and uses of these items.

Fear of Crime and Individual Behavioral Reactions

The ways in which the fear of crime is discussed and the manner in which it is sometimes measured suggest connections to behaviors. Fear of crime is often portrayed as a significant cause of people restricting their behavior either by limiting where and when they will go places in the city or by fortifying their homes. It has also been argued that the fear of crime increases suspicion and leads to limits on social interaction to the detriment of neighborhood or community solidarity (Conklin, 1975).

More specifically it would follow that patterns of individual behavior could be explained, in part, by the types of attitudes and fears expressed on polls and surveys. While it may be significant in and of itself that a high percentage of people believe crime rates are rising or report that they are afraid to walk in their neighborhoods at night, it would be even more significant if these perceptions and fears led to changes in behavior. A number of writers on the crime issue have suggested such a connection. The most common image is that of the elderly who avoid going out because of their fear of being victimized. However, the relationship between fear of crime and its consequences is neither simple nor obvious (Furstenberg, 1972). We know relatively little about how people interpret the problem of crime and even less about the consequences of that interpretation in terms of behavior. The data relating individual perceptions and fears to individual behaviors is inconsistent, but generally points to the need for greater specification and for great caution about inferential leaps.

One indication that the relationship between fears and individual behaviors may not be close is the surprisingly low level of behavioral change found in populations reporting high rates of fear or perceived risk. Furstenberg (1972:13) reports that nearly two-thirds of the respondents in a survey of Baltimore in 1969 had taken no measures to make their houses more secure in the previous five years even though those same years were marked by a reported rise in public concern about crime. Garafalo (1976) found that a majority of the respondents in the eight LEAA impact cities report no change in their own activities due to crime even though they perceive their neighbors and particularly people in general to be changing their behavior much more frequently.

Findings on specific relationships between perceived risk or fear and individual protective behaviors are contradictory. Ennis (1967) reported that high anxiety over crime was significantly related to the use of security measures while Biderman (1967) found no such relationship. More recently, Garafalo found that the reported sense of safety when out at night in the neighborhood is significantly associated with reports of changing or limiting activities because of crime - gammas = .55 (1976:39). He also found fairly strong relationship for perceived chances of victimization with this variable. But when more specific behaviors are examined the relationship to fear of crime is weaker. He finds that crime is not a major factor in determining why people go out less for entertainment than they had a year or two earlier. For most people money, family responsibilities, and pressures from other activities and health all are of greater importance. Similarly, crime was

not found to be a major motivating factor in the decision to move (1976:46). A national longitudinal survey reports that individual perceptions of crime have, at best, a small effect on residential mobility and that fear of crime does not appear to result in a residential mobility and that fear of crime does not appear to result in a residential relocation (Droettboem, et al, 1971). For most households, the decision to move is motivated by a desire for different types of dwellings or with more convenient geographic locations. For a number of these behavioral responses such as residential mobility, limits on resources or other necessities may provide the most powerful explanations. For example, urban blacks report higher rates of fear than whites, but they have fewer resources and more barriers to move if they wanted to. Similarly, many home security measures require outlays of funds that may be beyond the means of many of the urban poor who are among the most fearful. Persons who must walk to get to a job at night may not sense an option of refraining from going out even if they were afraid. Furstenberg (1972) notes that the failure to obtain clear relationships between perceptions and specific individual behaviors may be due to a lack of conceptual clarity. He dealt with specific types of fear and distinguishes two types of behavioral responses - the results were inconsistent. Fear of burglary was not related to taking precautions to secure one's home, but fear of the streets was associated with "avoidance" behaviors aimed at reducing exposure to street crimes. An ongoing analysis of the correlates of fear using factor scales constructed from the factor analysis cited

above (Baumer, 1977), has thus far yielded an inconsistent pattern of association among the dimensions of fear and a wide array of behavioral measures (Kim, 1976).

Fear of Crime and Collective Responses

One of the issues faced by criminal justice policymakers and community organizers alike is under what conditions local residents will be motivated to participate in collective activities which are intended to reduce or otherwise alleviate local crime problems. Strategies of mobilization particularly those used by police departments often assume that citizens lack the necessary information about crime and the possible precautions that one may take to reduce vulnerability. They seek to achieve heightened awareness which will, it is hoped, lead to more involvement in crime programs and more cooperation with the police. A possible outcome of such efforts may, however, increase citizen fears about crime. If the fears lead to greater involvement then creating such a situation may be justified, but there is a substantial body of research that points to the immobilizing effects of fear. While we are presently engaged in a longitudinal study of collective crime responses at the local level, we cannot at this point address this issue directly. However, we do have some survey data that bears indirectly on the issue and adds further caveats to an inference that fear and other crime perceptions effect individual participation in crime programs.

A recent telephone survey of 1,206 Chicago residents (O'Neil, 1977) collected information on the characteristics of residents who

belonged to local organizations that were involved with some sort of crime program.[1] Slightly more than one-third of the respondents (35 percent had been involved with some community organizations and half of these organizations had some involvement with police or crime-related activities. When collective responses were collapsed as in Table 3 there is no relationship with either the respondents' perceptions and fears about crime or their evaluations of the police. Those involved in community organizations with crime activities did not have significantly different perceptions of their own personal risk, the crime situation in the neighborhood, or fears about walking in the neighborhood at night. However, these differences in participation were associated with demographic and behavioral differences. In general, those who participated in community crime-related activities tended to share the characteristics of the most stable members of a community. They were more likely to have resided in the neighborhood for more than five years, to be married and have children living at home, to own rather than rent, and to live in single family dwellings. Not surprisingly, those who participated in collective crime responses were also more likely to know their neighbors and to have called the police. In short, individual participation in community organizational activities-with or without a crime component-could not be predicted by any of the standard measures of fear of crime. Demographic features and measures

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[1]Our special thanks to Michael O'Neil for making this data available to us. Respondents were first asked whether they were involved with any block or community organization in their neighborhood. If they answered affirmatively, they were then asked whether the organization had ever had anything to do with the police community safety or crime prevention.

Table 3

Relationships between attitudinal, demographic, and behavioral factors and participation in community and crime-related organizations.[1]

I. Perceptions and Attitudes About Crime	Significance	Chi Square
-Fear of criminal victimization	N/S	
-Afraid to walk in the neighborhood at night	N/S	
-Fear of crime keeps R from going out	N/S	
-Assessment of neighbors' concern for the neighborhood	N/S	
-The assessment of police performance, a) generally	N/S	
b) in neighborhood	N/S	
-Satisfaction with the neighborhood	N/S	
-Estimates of Chicago crime vs other cities	N/S	
-Estimates of Chicago crime vs last few years	N/S	
-Estimates of neighborhood crime vs other Chicago neighborhoods	N/S	
-Estimates of neighborhood crime vs last few years	N/S	
II. Demographic Characteristics		
-Sex	N/S	
-Education (some college or more)	$<.001$	29.52 df=10
-Race	$<.001$	58.08 df= 2
-Age	$<.001$	40.81 df=16
-Married	$<.01$	11.70 df= 2
-Children in household	$<.001$	44.23 df= 2
III. Behavioral Characteristics		
-Own home	$<.001$	33.77 df= 2
-Single family dwelling	$<.001$	18.47 df= 2
-Number of neighbors gotten to know	$<.001$	125.70 df= 4
-Length of residence in neighborhood	$<.001$	37.26 df= 2
-Called the police	$<.001$	38.56 df= 3

[1]Degree of association with three types of participation (no participation, participation in a community organization with no crime involvement, and a community organization with crime-related activities.

of stability were both much better predictors of collective activity than were the various measures of fear.

Summary and Conclusions

We have demonstrated some ways in which the common poll questions on fear of crime provide a certain amount of information about citizen perceptions, assessments, and fears of crime. Some items are more successful than others in contributing to our knowledge of the experiences of citizens with crime. However, we have also pointed out that there are dimensions to the experience of crime that are rarely tapped by the standard items. What is particularly lacking is any attention to the way perceptions of neighborhood problems shade over into fear of crime.

Secondly, poll data do not permit us to examine how individuals deal with the threat of crime. They provide no information on how and when collective or individual solutions to crime problems emerge or even how individual decisions are influenced by neighborhood context. There is a sufficient body of research available to suggest that attitudes and fear about crime may be poor predictors of individual and collective responses.

One promising alternative mode of analysis is to examine the levels of fear reported in a locale and relate these to the behaviors of residents. Biderman (1967) found that residents of high crime neighborhood are both more fearful and alter their behavior more to deal with crime. Similarly Conklin finds that "in communities where residents feel the threat of crime greatly, defensive measures are more common" (1975:106).

When measures of fear are used to characterize the levels of

fear in localities, they may be more useful for explaining patterns of response than when individual attitudes are used to predict individual behaviors. An extensive longitudinal study of fear of crime and behavioral reaction in 11 neighborhoods in 3 cities lends support to these tentative conclusions. Where a person lives, the pattern of fear and behavior of those around him appear to provide a better explanation of his behavior than his individual attitudes.

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