

RESEARCH NOTE

The Frequency of the Fear of Crime

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Research exploring the emotional responses to crime experienced by the citizens of several major European and North American countries, including the UK, has suggested that a significant proportion of the residents of these countries 'fear' crime. However, few researchers have explored the frequency with which citizens feel fearful. This brief research note reports on a study that explored the frequency and intensity of such feelings. The research suggests that few people fear crime frequently.

The fear of crime should need almost no introduction to readers of this journal. Some of the initial findings on fear were aired in this journal, and the journal continues to act as a repository of knowledge on this subject. Those unfamiliar with work in this area should consult Hale (1996) for a thorough review of the literature in this field and for more recent contributions to this journal since then (e.g. Pantazis 2000; Killias and Clerici 2000; Semmens *et al.* 2002).

In sum, this body of work suggests that the fear of crime is widespread amongst members of many contemporary westernized societies. For example, the 1994 British Crime Survey reported that a quarter of the population were 'very worried' about burglary and rape (Hough 1995: 9). The same report suggested that of a range of contemporary life worries, burglary and rape headed the list (1995: 15), out-stripping job loss, road accidents, illnesses and debt. Later sweeps of the BCS suggested that the 1994 figures represent something of a 'blip', and that for the period between 1984 and 2000 around 20 per cent of the population were 'very worried' about burglary (Kershaw *et al.* 2000: 45). The same survey reported that the proportion of respondents feeling 'very worried' about street crimes (muggings and robberies) similarly hovered around the 20 per cent mark. Crime surveys of rural areas (see Koffman 1996: 89–95) have suggested similar rates of fear of crime. The Aberystwyth Crime Survey (Koffman 1996) found that a quarter of the sample reported feeling 'a bit/very unsafe' (1996: 98). It would appear that we are fearful of victimization at almost every turn. Questions relating to the fear of crime were one of the only consistent elements of the 1982–94 BCS sweeps (Mayhew 1996: 48).

Several studies undertaken in the USA, Australia and in mainland Europe also testify to these rates of anxiety. For example, studies in Holland (Van der Wurff *et al.* 1989), Slovenia (Mesko and Farrall 2000), Switzerland (Killias and Clerici 2000: 439–40) as well as those studies undertaken in the UK (referred to above) have frequently demonstrated the fear of crime to be a common experience amongst those surveyed. In the USA, the

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spiritual home of the crime survey (Block 1993: 183), numerous studies dating back to the surveys organized following 1965 Presidential Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (Biderman *et al.* 1967; Ennis 1967; Reiss 1967) have suggested that a significant proportion of the population experiences crime-related fears on a regular basis. (See Hale 1996, and Ditton and Farrall 2000 for reviews of this literature).

The Current Contribution

Despite this vast literature, few researchers have examined the frequency with which people feel fearful. The purpose of this paper therefore is to assess not only the amount of fear (its intensity) but also the number of times people feel fearful (its frequency). The frequency of fear is an important consideration because whilst it is troubling that some people fear crime intensely, it is necessary to gauge the extent to which such emotions are regularly encountered amongst the population at large. In order that respondents provide uniform estimations of the frequency of their feelings, we directed respondents to give answers for only their last year.¹

In order to assess both frequency and intensity, the following questioning structure was employed in an omnibus survey:

Q1: 'In the past year, have you ever felt fearful about the possibility of becoming a victim of crime?' [yes, no, can't remember].

Q2: [if YES at Q1] 'How frequently have you felt like this in the last year?' [N of times recorded].

Q3: [if YES at Q1] 'On the last occasion, how fearful did you feel?' [not very fearful, a little bit fearful, quite fearful, very fearful, cannot remember].

These questions were asked of 977 respondents in an Omnibus survey run by Taylor-Nelson SOFRES in autumn 2002. In addition, TNS provided data pertaining to each respondent's age, gender, social class, household size, the number of children in the household and the region of the UK in which the interviews were conducted.²

Results

Respondents gave the following answers to our first question: 'In the past year, have you ever felt fearful about becoming a victim of crime?' Around one third of the sample said that they had felt fearful in the previous year (Table 1). Respondents who said 'yes' were then asked how many times they had felt fearful in the last year (Table 2). The data are presented in both raw and recoded forms (Tables 2 and 3). As can be seen from the above, almost half of the respondents (49 per cent) have felt fearful between one and four times (so no more than once a quarter).

¹ As Farrall and Ditton (1999) have shown, unless respondents are directed to specific time periods they are liable to give answers for a range of time periods making estimations of frequency unreliable.

² In order to assess whether the results reported herein were the result of being included in an omnibus survey, a similar survey employing a standard fear of crime measure was undertaken. This additional survey found fear levels identical to those reported in most crime surveys. See Farrall and Gadd (in preparation) and Farrall (2003).

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TABLE 1 *In the past year, have you ever felt fearful about becoming a victim of crime?*

	N	%
Yes	365	37
No	602	62
Don't know	10	1
Total	977	100

TABLE 2 *Raw values for 'How frequently have you felt like this in the past year?'**

No. of times	N	%
1	70	19
2	61	17
3	27	7
4	20	6
5	17	5
6	28	8
7	1	-
9	1	-
10	20	6
12	9	3
15	4	1
20	12	3
24	1	-
25	1	-
30	1	-
50	8	2
52	8	2
60	1	-
100	8	2
150	2	-
156	1	-
180	1	-
200	4	1
300	4	1
356	1	-
365	12	3
Don't know	42	12
Total	365	100

* Asked only of those who reported feeling fearful in the past year.

TABLE 3 *How frequently have you felt like this in the past year?'**

	N	Raw %	Cumulative %
Once	70	19	19
Twice	61	17	36
Three times	27	7	43
Four times	20	6	49
Over five times	145	39	88
Don't know	42	12	100
Total	365	100	

* Asked only of those who reported feeling fearful in the past year.

TABLE 4 *Fear levels in the past year (Q1 and Q3 combined)*

	N	%
Not fearful last year	602	62
Not very fearful	23	2
A little bit fearful	180	18
<i>Subtotal low or not fearful</i>	805	82
Quite fearful	110	11
Very fearful	51	5
<i>Subtotal fearful</i>	161	16
Can't remember how fearful	1	–
Can't remember if fearful	10	1
<i>Total</i>	977	100

TABLE 5 *The infrequency of intensely fearful experiences in the past year (Q1, Q2 and Q3 combined)*

	Not fearful	Low fear ^a	High fear ^b	Total
Never in past year	602 (65%)	–	–	602 (65%)
Once	–	38 (4%)	32 (3%)	70 (8%)
Twice	–	43 (5%)	18 (2%)	61 (7%)
Three times	–	19 (2%)	8 (1%)	27 (3%)
Four times	–	11 (1%)	9 (1%)	20 (2%)
Five and more times	–	72 (8%)	73 (8%)	145 (16%)
Total	602 (65%)	183 (20%)	140 (15%)	925 (100%)

Total N=925 as the 52 respondents who replied 'Don't know' to one or more of the questions have been excluded from the analyses. All percentages are of totals of sample size.

^a Includes those respondents who said that they felt 'not very fearful' or a 'little bit fearful'.

^b Includes those respondents who said that they felt 'quite' or 'very' fearful.

If we take the commonly used dichotomy of 'quite' or 'very' as indicating high levels of fear, we find that 15 per cent of the sample experienced some 'heightened' level of fear on the last occasion upon which they had felt fearful (Table 4). We come now to the final table, and in many respects, the crux of the issue. Table 5 demonstrates the relative infrequency of intensely fearful experiences. It would appear, that only around 8 per cent of the total population who had experienced more than five fearful episodes had felt 'quite' or 'very' fearful on the last occasion. Of course, we do not know how they had felt on previous occasions, they may have felt less fearful. However, if we assume that, in aggregate, the most recent fearful episodes are representative of all fearful events, Table 5 suggests that only a small proportion of the population felt a high level of fear in the past year (15 per cent) and that for only around half of these people (8 per cent of the total population) was a high level of fear encountered more than once a quarter. Given the lack of variance in the object of our enquiries (the frequency of fear), it was deemed unnecessary to undertake further explorations with demographic data. (Farrall and Gadd (in preparation) and Farral (2003) explore variations by gender, age and social class).

Discussion and Conclusion

It would appear therefore, that the *incidence* of the fear of crime is quite low (only a third of the sample had experienced any fear provoking episodes in the past year

(Table 1). Furthermore, half of the sample who had felt fearful in the past year had only felt fearful on between one and four occasions (Tables 2 and 3). When the *intensity* of fear was examined (Table 4) we found that only around 15 per cent of the sample had felt a high level of fear. However, when an attempt was made to assess the *intensity* of fear *and* the *frequency* of fear (Table 5), we found evidence to suggest that less than one in ten people (8 per cent) frequently experienced high levels of fear.

Once these findings have been replicated by others, they will have important and interesting effects on future academic and policy work in this field. In the UK, the fear of crime has become an important indicator of performance for crime reduction partnerships and the police. These findings suggest that, for the UK as a whole, that regular exposure to heightened levels of fear is not that common.

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