

Fear of crime and perceptions of safety

Introduction

Exposure to crime is one of the hazards of life. Many people will be victims of some form of property or violent crime at some point in their lives; almost all of us will know someone who at some point has been the victim of a crime. These experiences of crime can have long-lasting impacts on the victims and those close to them (see Norris, Kaniasty and Thompson 1997). Moreover, we are exposed indirectly to a wide range of crime and its impacts on victims through the media. As a result, crime and safety (particularly people's subjective perceptions of their own safety) are important factors in any assessment of social well being and individual 'quality of life'.

This article uses survey data to examine how the fear of crime affects people, including what sorts of crimes they fear most, and how these fears affect their lives. We examine how fearful of crime Australians are; who is prone to being frightened; and what types of crimes they fear. We also assess the extent to which people's perception of their safety, and that of their immediate family, affects their own satisfaction with life.

Our data are on perceptions of crime, derived from over two thousand responses to surveys conducted by International Social Science Surveys/Australia 1996/1997 (details of this survey are on page 18).

How much do people fear crime?

We asked:

Most of us worry at some time or other about being the victim of a crime ... All-in-all, how worried are you about crime?

18% Extremely worried? [100 points]

14% Very worried? [75 points]

32% Fairly worried? [50 points]

31% Not very worried? [25 points]

5% Not worried at all? [0 points]

—
100% (2112 cases)

[Mean = 52 points]

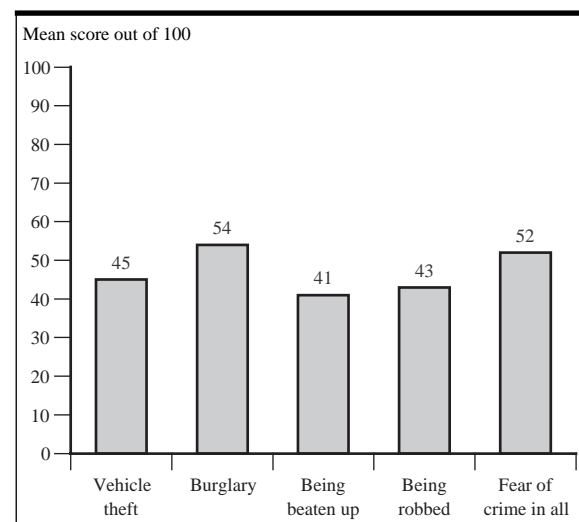
Scoring each of the 18 per cent of respondents who answered 'Extremely worried' as 100; each of the 14

per cent of respondents who answered 'Very worried' as 75; each of the 32% of respondents who answered 'Fairly worried' as 50; each of the 31% of respondents who answered 'Not very worried' as 25; and a score of 0 for each of the 5 per cent of respondents who answered 'Not worried at all', we obtain a mean (average) fear of crime score of 52, just above the 'Fairly worried' category.

Which crimes do people fear?

Comparing fear of specific crimes, we find people are most afraid of being burgled (Figure 1). Respondents were asked how worried they are about specific crimes. Again, scoring responses out of 100, a mean score of 54 for *burglary* places the average of responses above the fairly worried category; a score of 45 (just below fairly worried) was found for *fear of vehicle theft*; a score of 43 for *fear of being robbed*; while only a mean score of 41 was found for a *fear of being beaten up*. As having one's home broken into is the 'single biggest fear' (above *fear of crime all in all* which obtained a mean score of 52) it will be explored in greater detail later.

Figure 1
Fear of crime



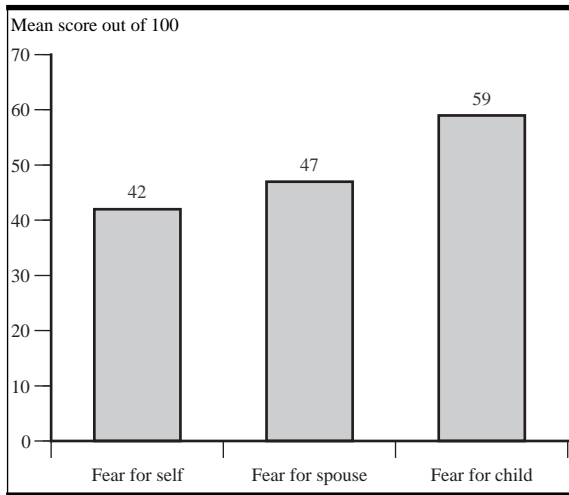
Fear in your neighbourhood

We also asked about people's perceptions of their immediate neighbourhood. We asked:

Is there any area right around here—say within a kilometre or two—where you would be afraid to walk at night?

Self
 10% Very afraid [100 points]
 28% Afraid [66 points]
 40% Not afraid [33 points]
 22% Definitely not afraid [0 points]
 —
 100% (2079 cases)
 [Mean = 42 points]

Figure 2
Fear in your neighbourhood



The mean score for fear for one’s self is 42, somewhat below the half way point (Figure 2). We also asked about fears for the safety of other family members. People are about 5 points more fearful for the safety of their spouse walking (47), and higher still for their children (59). This suggests fear of crime is conveyed primarily through a fear for members of ones’ family rather than a fear for oneself.

Fear in your own home

We asked:

How safe do you usually feel when you are alone in your home during the day and during the night?

| Day | Night | |
|------|-------|--------------------------|
| 40% | 22% | Entirely safe [0 points] |
| 36% | 35% | Very safe [25 points] |
| 23% | 35% | Fairly safe [50 points] |
| 1% | 7% | A bit unsafe [75 points] |
| 0% | 1% | Very unsafe [100 points] |
| — | — | |
| 100% | 100% | (cases 2031, 2035) |
| [22 | 33 | Means] |

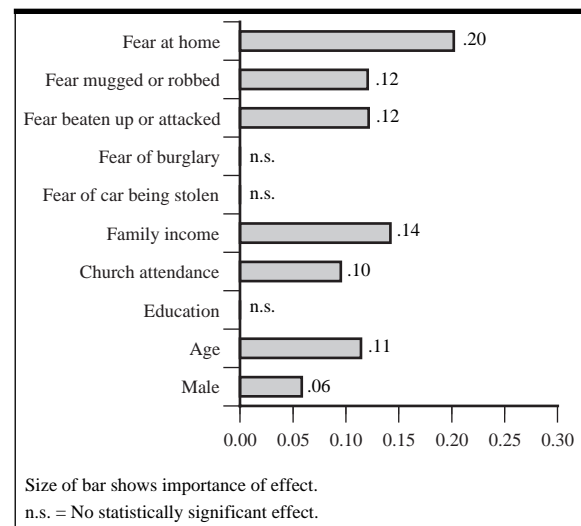
The mean response for feeling fearful during the day is 22, which increases to 33 at night. This was obtained by scoring each of the respondents who answered ‘Entirely safe’ as 0; each of the respondents who answered ‘Very safe’ as 25; each of the respondents who answered ‘Fairly safe’ as 50; each of the respondents who answered ‘A bit unsafe’ as 75; and a score of 100 for each of the respondents who answered ‘Very unsafe’. A lower level of fear than in previous questions highlights the importance of the home when dealing with issues of fear. That is, even though there is a 50 per cent increase in the mean response to fear at home during the night relative to during the day, people feel safer at home than they do elsewhere. In the next section, we will explore the impact of feelings of safety at home on overall life satisfaction.

Does fear matter?

We use regression analysis to determine the relative importance of the fear of crime in people’s well being compared to characteristics such as gender; age; family income; education; and frequency of church going. We also added measures assessing fear of various crimes including fear of your car being stolen; fear of burglary; fear of being beaten up or attacked with a weapon; fear of being mugged or robbed; and fear in the home (an average of fear at home during the day and fear at home during the night).

The importance of fear in the home is most easily gauged in relation to both other crimes and with other socio-economic measures. Fear at home has the greatest impact on life satisfaction, as shown by its large standardised coefficient (0.20) followed by family income (0.14), age (0.11), frequency of attendance of

Figure 3
Effects of variables upon life satisfaction. Standardised coefficients



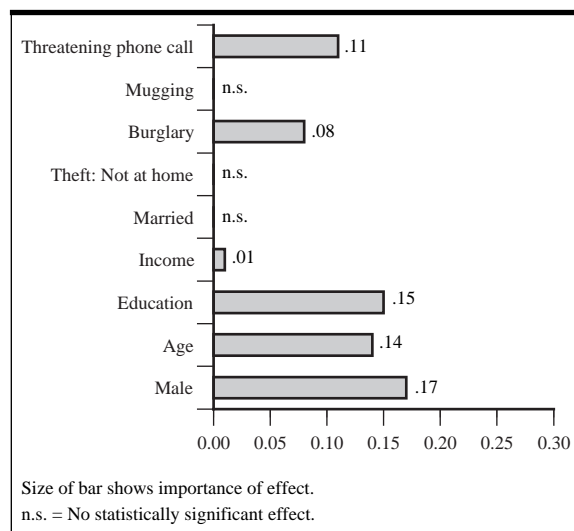
religious service (0.09) and gender (0.06). (See Figure 3.) The importance of fear at home in people's lives is clearly evident and leads to the question of for which people is fear at home an important issue.

Who is fearful at home?

To assess social differences in fears for safety in one's own home we use regression analysis. This allows us to assess the independent contribution of many traits and experiences (Figure 4). Women are more fearful than men of crime within the home. The elderly are more fearful of crime, while better educated people are less fearful. Prosperous people are less fearful.

Muggings have a minimal impact upon levels of fear. Similarly, thefts outside of the home are not related to levels of fear within the home. In contrast, individuals who had been burgled are more fearful in the home, yet the effect of burglary upon this fear is not as large as receiving a threatening phone call.

Figure 4
Who is fearful



The impact of threatening phone calls is incongruent with its relatively minor legal penalty. This raises the point of what factors should be considered when determining legal penalties. Should they reflect the impact of the crime upon the life satisfaction of the victim? Moreover, does the impact of crime upon life satisfaction affect social perception regarding crime? For example, is the social perception concerning burglary worse than that concerning muggings if the impact of burglary upon fear in the home is greater?

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Technical notes: Distinct aspects of fear

We have taken three aspects of crime and safety—fear of crime, fear of your own neighbourhood at night, and feeling of safety at home—and treated them as reasonably distinct from each other. Is there any justification for doing so?

Factor analysis shows that fear of various crimes can be divided into three distinct factors; a general fear of theft and victimisation (factor one); a fear of walking around their neighbourhood at night, whether it concerns themselves, their spouses, or their children (factor two); and a fear at home, whether during the day or during the night. Figures shown in Table 1 are the correlation that each variable has to each factor. We are thereby able to determine that there is much less connection *between* these grouped factors: for example, feelings of safety at home are not especially connected to fear of being a victim of crime more generally. What this means is that we can distinguish between three groups of fear and safety issues, and analyse each of those grouped factors as a single issue: firstly, **fear of crime**, secondly, **fear in your neighbourhood**, and finally **fear in your own home**.

The impact of fear of crime upon life satisfaction enables greater analysis of the impact of different types of crime relevant to each other and other socio-economic measures.

These results adjust statistically for differences in a variety of demographic and background variables and therefore give persuasive evidence of the influence of each variable. A variable with no bar is one that was included in the regression but had no statistically significant effect.

Table 1
Aspects of crime/fear: Factor loadings, varimax rotation

| | Factor | | |
|--|--------|------|------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Fear of crime: | | | |
| Overall | .84 | .18 | -.18 |
| Car being stolen | .83 | .13 | -.12 |
| Being attacked or beaten | .90 | .15 | -.16 |
| Being mugged or robbed | .90 | .15 | -.15 |
| Home being burgled | .87 | .15 | -.14 |
| Afraid to walk at night in your neighbourhood: | | | |
| Afraid for yourself | .20 | .79 | -.28 |
| Afraid for your spouse | .16 | .89 | -.11 |
| Afraid for your children | .15 | .89 | -.11 |
| Safety at home: | | | |
| During the day? | -.22 | -.16 | .89 |
| How safe at home at night? | -.20 | -.23 | .88 |

References

- Kelley, J. and M. Evans (1992), *The 1990 National Crime Victimization Survey*, Canberra: Report to the Australian Institute of Criminology and the Standing Committee of the Attorneys-General.
- Norris, F., K. Kaniasty and M. Thompson (1997), 'The Psychological consequences of crime: Findings from a longitudinal population-based study', in Davis, R.C. et al. (eds.), *Victims of Crime*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, Ca.