Perceptions of Safety & Fear of Crime Research Report

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1. INTRODUCTION

Our understanding of people's perceptions of safety are generally informed by surveys that seek to ascertain people's perceived fear of crime and risk of victimisation. Internationally, studies have identified 'widespread' fear of crime and low perceptions of safety, confirming the view that fear of crime is common and is 'a problem in its own right, separate from crime itself' (Gray et al 2008:363). Yet analysis of the literature reiterates that risk perception is a 'cognitive assessment that may or may not be related to feelings of safety' (Dichter and Gelles 2012:48).

In fact research would suggest that fear of crime is often not 'a reflection of actual risk' (Delbosc & Currie 2012:302), and is influenced by a range of factors, including gender, age, ethnicity and socio-economic status (Grabosky 1995; Lupton 1999; Pantazis 2000; Delbosc & Currie 2012). Research consistently concludes that people from social groups who are 'less powerful' tend to 'rate their concern about specific risks more highly' (Lupton 1999:23).

One issue that needs to be flagged about fear of crime and perception of risk is that, to some degree, 'worry is a good thing', a 'socially beneficial activity' that prompts us to care for ourselves, our children and others (Jackson et al 2009:12). Perception of risk is important, as it can be 'an accurate predictor of future victimisation' and it prompts us to adopt 'protective or risk-avoidant behaviours' (Brewer et al 2007 in Dichter and Gelles 2012:45). Accordingly, strategies to improve perceptions of safety should not be 'aimed naively at eliminating fear of crime', but at 'synchronizing fear with actual levels of crime'. (Cordner 2010:5).

2. ABOUT 'FEAR OF CRIME'

There is significant 'confusion' in the literature about the meaning of 'fear of crime' (Pantazis 2000: 417) and the means by which we measure it (Pantazis 2000; Farrall 2002; Lee 2009; Jackson et al 2009). There is general consensus that quantitative surveys 'over-emphasize the extent and nature of fear of crime' (Farrall et al 1997 in Pantazis 2000:417) and that qualitative research methodologies allow 'more in-depth insights into how people construct their fear of crime as *situated* everyday experience (Tulloch et al 1998:2 - emphasis in original).

The concept of 'fear of crime' was first 'problematised' when American victim surveys expanded their focus in 1967 to include scenario questions that sought to ascertain anxieties about crime (Lee 2009:32). Since this time, surveys that seek to understand experiences of victimisation as well as perceptions of safety have been adopted internationally, including Australia, through the Australian Bureau of Statistics (former) *Crime and Safety Survey*, now the *Crime Victimisation Survey* (Australian Bureau of Statistics accessed 2014). While insight into perceptions of safety is often drawn from victimisation studies, local councils, academics and other authorities also conduct targeted surveys seeking to ascertain local perceptions of safety.

There is no clear or agreed understanding of what 'fear of crime' actually is, but agreement that it is not one 'coherent' thing, but is 'an experience, or set of experiences, that are intensely individual' (Lee 2009:33). There is a body of research that concludes that fear of crime is intertwined with a broader set of modern anxieties, 'a diffuse psychological construct affected by a number of aspects of urban life' (Skogan 1976 in Lee 2009:33). Skogan suggests that fear of crime is 'a social and political fact', a 'quality of life issue' that 'undermines informal and organised efforts by the community to control crime and delinquency' and reduces property value (Skogan 2006:255 in Cordner 2010:1).

The absence of a clear and consistent understanding of fear of crime is no doubt a factor in the ongoing debate about the means by which we develop our understanding of people's perceptions of fear and safety. There have been numerous studies that question the appropriateness of safety surveys designed to ascertain perceptions of safety and whether survey findings are indicative of actual perceptions of fear and/or safety (Farrall 2004; Lee 2009; Gray et al 2008; Jackson et al 2009; Yang and Wyckoff 2010). There is also little evidence of strategies that have succeeded in positively influencing community perceptions of safety. It should be noted that the questionable accuracy of baseline data related to perceptions of safety brings into question the appropriateness of strategies developed to influence those perceptions. Lee observed '…if surveys overestimated crime fear – we are trying to reduce a phantom figure' (Lee 2009:38).

Research has in fact highlighted that there has been a considerable drop in research into fear of crime, with many academics, policy-makers and practitioners accepting that fear of crime is something we are 'well and truly stuck with' (Jackson et al 2009). Similarly, there are arguments against highlighting or targeting fear of crime. In some instances this is due to the 'vague' or 'intangible' nature of fear of crime, others suggest that politicians and police use fear as a tool to manipulate anxiety about crime for their own purposes, while others maintain that fear encourages responsible behaviour, and efforts to reduce it may increase risk in the community (Cordner 2010:4-5). Some policy makers argue that we need to focus on addressing actual crime rates in order to impact perceptions of safety.

While there is debate about the meaning of 'fear of crime' and the means and outcomes of perceptions of safety surveys, analysis of a body of international and Australian research into fear of crime does identify a number of common themes. Most important is the understanding that 'fear of crime is not one 'thing'' (Jackson et al 2009:12) – different people experience fear in different ways, in different circumstances and at different times, and fear different types of crime. Research indicates that fear of crime is sometimes, but not always warranted, can in some instances be construed as a positive thing in that it encourages risk-averse behaviour, and that in many instances fear is tied up with a range of other anxieties about modern life (Grabosky 1995; Lupton 1999; Pantazis 2000; Jackson et al 2012).

Ceccato (2012) classifies three 'types' of fear of crime – 'individual', which is often associated with personal experience of crime, 'neighbourhood' which is a result of what you experience where you live, and 'social macro', described as a 'social phenomenon' shaped by media and forming part of broader anxiety about global and social change (Ceccato 2012:10). The concept of fear of crime being embedded in the broader issue of modern anxiety is reiterated across the literature, with Taylor suggesting fear of crime could be 'a metaphor for… cultural and social changes… a way of talking about unfolding tensions of race and opportunity in a society with little job growth and a declining economic base' (Taylor 1995:1568 in Pantazis 2000:417). Sandercock (2005) concluded that 'expressions of fear of crime are actually expressions of fear of difference' (Sandercock 2005 in Ceccato 2012:10).

Despite the questions regarding our actual understanding of fear of crime, there is commonality across the findings of a number of studies of perceptions of safety that suggests there are some factors that are consistently correlated with fear of crime. While we should be circumspect in our consideration of this, we can improve our understanding of some of the key factors associated with perceptions of safety.

3. THE FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH LOWER PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY

Analysis of the literature identifies a number of factors associated with fear of crime and perceptions of safety.

Gender is identified as the key factor that influences fear of crime, with women consistently reporting greater levels of fear, despite the fact that men are (statistically) at greater risk of victimisation (Grabosky 1995; Harris and Jensen 1998; Tulloch et al 1998; Pantazis 2000). Research recognises that women are predominantly the victims of unreported crimes such as sexual assault and violence from partners and family in the home, and are also subject to sexual harassment, factors that are likely to influence their perceptions of safety (Grabosky 1995; Tulloch et al 1998; Pantazis 2000; Ceccato

2012; Dichter and Gelles 2012). The significant under-reporting of these offences against women suggests that many women have experienced prior victimisation, another factor that is detrimental to perceptions of safety (see below – *Prior Victimisation*).

Age influences perceptions of safety, with Australian research finding that older people are much more fearful of being victimised in their homes. Other studies emphasise that fear at home has 'the greatest impact on life satisfaction' (Harris and Jensen 1998:9). Young people however are more fearful of violence in the public domain, but research suggests this may be warranted as 'their lifestyle places them at greater risk' (Kelley 1992 in Grabosky 1995:2). Women also fear crime in the public domain.

Socio-economic status is another factor associated with fear of crime, with poverty identified as heightening fear of crime. People who live in poverty report feeling less safe in their own street and in their own home after dark (Pantazis 2000). In some instances, this fear is warranted, when people with low income have no choice but to reside in unsafe neighbourhoods. Higher crime rates have been reported around transport stops in low income, high-density neighbourhoods (Delbosc and Currie 2012). However, variations to the British Crime Survey to include questions related to 'non-criminal worries', resulted in the finding that fear of crime is intertwined with fears related to job loss, debt and mortgage repossession (Pantazis 2000:415). Australian research also concluded that people with higher levels of education and income tended to be less fearful, suggesting this may be because they can afford better security (Grabosky 1995). Hale suggests that people living in poverty may experience a heightened sense of fear of crime due to 'lack of material and social resources… and at a community level lack (of) the contacts, organisational ability and political networks available to higher status neighbourhoods' (Hale 1996 in Pantazis 2000).

Prior victimisation, both directly or indirectly through the experience of family and friends, can have 'long lasting impacts on the victims and those close to them', heightens awareness of the risk of crime and is strongly associated with fear (Grabosky 1995; Harris & Jensen 1998; Tulloch et al 1998). The *International Crime Victims Survey* found previous victims of crime in Australia, and elsewhere, avoided certain locations at night, and those with repeat experience of victimisation reported 'stronger feelings of unsafeness' (Grabosky 1995:2). However, victims of assault were no more fearful of being alone at home than non-victims, while victims of burglary, mugging, car theft and obscene phone calls reported much higher levels of fear (Grabosky 1995:2). Another Australian study also found that people are most afraid of being burgled (Harris and Jensen 1998). Research exploring women's perceptions of safety following police intervention for domestic violence found that particular forms of intimate partner violence, including assault, death threats and sexual violence, were associated with feelings of unsafeness and perception of risk of future violence (Dichter and Gelles 2012).

Ethnicity has been identified in international studies as a factor that influences perceptions of safety, with people from cultural minorities expressing more fear about crime (Ceccato 2012:11). This may be due to the fact that what is deemed a risk or danger in one culture may not be considered as such in another, which has implications for our understanding of how risk is constructed (Lupton 1999). Research shows that people born overseas have higher levels of fear of crime in certain circumstances, such as on public transport (Delbosc and Currie 2012). Recent high-profile cases of 'hate crime' involving violence against people of different cultures and religion no doubt exacerbate perceptions of safety for people born overseas. Studies exploring risk have found that white men, with higher levels of education, higher income and who were politically conservative were most likely to rate risks as less serious (Lupton 1999:23-24).

4. OTHER FACTORS THAT IMPACT PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY

Media is consistently identified as having a role in shaping people's perceptions of safety. Frequent exposure to media coverage of crime may lead individuals to overestimate the risk of personal victimisation (Grabosky 1995:2), with studies finding that readers of English tabloid newspapers reported twice the level of fear of crime as readers of broadsheet newspapers (Ceccato 2012). Australian research found that media is acknowledged as providing necessary information about crime while also exacerbating fear of crime (Tulloch et al 1998). Similarly, international research concluded that some forms of media coverage about crime increase fear while other forms decrease fear (Grabosky 1995:2). Reality crime shows have also been identified through research as increasing fear of crime, while many people reported feeling that media could not be trusted to present 'facts' about

crime accurately (Tulloch 1998:4). Research confirmed that incidents that attract a high-level of media attention trigger more concern, 'even if they are relatively rare occurrences', and that people are 'more likely to calculate that risk is likely to occur if information related to it is available and easily recalled' (Lupton 1999:20).

Neighbourhood factors also influence people's perceptions of safety, and in some circumstances do increase the risk of victimisation. Research identifies a range of 'incivilities' that make people feel unsafe, including litter, graffiti, vandalism, poor lighting and environmental disrepair (Grabosky 1995; Cordner 2010; Ceccato 2012). While there is now widespread recognition of the influence of design on perceptions of safety, American research that explored the impact of neighbourhood and housing conditions on perceptions found that the factors associated with perceptions of safety were maintenance and upkeep of housing and the neighbourhood, rather than the design. The study proved that the worse the neighbourhood conditions, the lower the perceived level of safety was (Austen et al 2002). Some people perceive the visibility of drunkenness and 'unruly' young males as an indicator that their neighbourhood is 'out of control' (Grabosky 1995:3). People who perceive their neighbourhood has high levels of disorder are inclined to be 'more anxious about crime, fearful and mistrustful of their neighbours' (Delbosc and Currie 2012:303). Research also found that people are 'more likely to be concerned about risks they see as being close to them' (Lupton 1999:20),

Lack of neighbourhood cohesion is a recurring them across the literature, with research identifying fear associated with changing populations and the presence of new social groups (Grabosky 1995; Jackson et al 2009). The visibility of difference, or behaviour that is perceived as changing social norms is seen by some to signal 'social disorder' (Ceccato 2012:11) or 'neighbourhood breakdown' (Jackson et al 2009:12). Research has found that Australians perceive contemporary society as 'less civil' and that community spirit has diminished (Tulloch et al 1998:3). Less cohesive neighbourhoods, where people are disconnected, show higher levels of fear (Borooah and Carcach 1997; Ceccato 2012:11).

Specific locations trigger a higher degree of fear in different people in the community. Generally, the home is considered 'a place of greater security and control' while people are more afraid when moving among strangers in public spaces, with densely populated urban areas perceived as posing the greatest threat (Tulloch et al 1998:3). Young people in particular are perceived as threatening in public space, even by other young people, who have 'little choice' but to move in public space to access leisure and recreation facilities (Tulloch et al 1998). There is an extensive body of international and Australian research demonstrating that some people experience high levels of fear on and around public transport. Again, teenagers were found to have the greatest fear of crime on and around public transport, while their parents also conveyed fear about their children travelling on transport at night (Tulloch et al 1998). Research also found that people from high socio-economic neighbourhoods had lower feelings of safety on public transport, possibly because they ordinarily feel 'buffered' by their safe neighbourhoods and perceived public transport as 'a conduit to dangerous situations' (Delbosc and Currie 2012:308). However, some studies exploring transport safety have found that people feel less safe travelling to bus and train stops than actually riding the transport, suggesting that neighbourhood characteristics are a key factor in perceptions of safety related to transport (Delbosc and Currie 2012:303). This is supported by research that identifies significant actual and perceived crime risks associated with bus and train stations (Eck et al 2007).

Global insecurity has been identified as a key factor in levels of anxiety that are often linked with low perceptions of safety. Social control and governance are underpinned by theories of risk management and risk control, creating an expectation that we identify future risks and implement strategies to reduce those risks. Crime prevention is a perfect example of this, where we identify social and environmental factors that may be 'predictors of crime' and then implement strategies that aim to reduce the risk of those factors leading to criminal incidents. Unpredictable risks, such as terrorism and natural disasters, that don't enable 'precise probabilistic forecasting', create a general sense of anxiety in the modern risk-averse world (O'Malley 2011:327). English studies have identified a correlation between global insecurity and increased levels of fear of crime.

5. Our understanding of perceptions of safety

As stated, there is wide debate about the appropriateness of surveys designed to elicit people's perceptions of safety, and as such, the accuracy of our understanding of those perceptions is also contested.

Farrall suggests that emotional responses to crime have been 'exaggerated by the inappropriate use of the survey as a measurement tool' (Farrall 2004:157), blaming this on the reliance on 'quantitative tools to do tasks that they are ill-equipped to do' (Farrall 2004:166). The way that survey questions are framed, the order that questions are placed in and the language and scenarios used have been proven to have significant influence on the responses provided in surveys exploring perceptions of safety.

With the British Crime Survey having identified significant levels of fear of crime since introducing questions about participants 'worry' about crime in 1982, new questions were added to the survey in 2003-04 to explore the frequency and severity of people's experiences of fear about crime (Gray et al 2008). The additional 'filter' questions time-framed questions to the last twelve months to give survey participants a specific reference period, resulting in very different survey results. For example, while more than a third of survey respondents (35%) had reported being worried about being robbed, when the question was reframed to ask 'When, in the past twelve months have you actually worried about being robbed?', only 16% of respondents reported having been worried (Gray et al 2008:369). When asked how often they had been worried, more than one third of the respondents who had reported being worried indicated they had only experienced worry between one and three times in that year (Gray et al 2008:369).

In another English study by Farrall et al (2004), 90% of 150 residents in Glasgow who participated in a 'fear of crime' survey agreed to participate in a follow-up interview several weeks later. Participants were selected to ensure even representation from people across age, gender and levels of self-reported fear of crime. Many participants gave different answers over a matter of weeks in response to questions about their fears or perception of risk (Farrall 2004:159). Analysis of the results disclosed different associations with the concept of fear, and these varied from fear or anxiety about crime, caution or awareness of the possibility of crime, to anger or annoyance at the thought of being victimised. Analysis of the responses found that almost twice as many respondents reported feelings of anger about the prospect of assault or vandalism than those who reported fear (Farrall 2004:161). The research also found that respondents reported feelings of anger only if and when they thought about crime happening to them, and that in many instances anger was towards the 'injustice' of crime or police or other authorities perceived as being responsible for preventing crime (Farrall 2004:163). When participants were prompted, it appeared that the very act of surveying either created or exaggerated their feelings, or at least made them consider their feelings about crime, and that people 'appeared to report the most serious extent of their fears rather than the most common or typical' (Farrall 2004:165).

Context seems to have a significant impact on the responses we attract to fear of crime surveys. Much of our knowledge about perceptions of safety is based upon information solicited through crime victimisation surveys. An American study, which tested the effects of question order in surveys about perceptions of safety, found that 'priming' surveys with victimisation questions first sensitised women and non-victims of crime and affected their perceptions of safety (Yang & Wyckoff 2010). It concluded victimisation questions may have led to people thinking about the possibility of them being victimised, leading them to report lower levels of safety (Yang & Wyckoff 2010).

With research frequently identifying fear of crime as intertwined in a broader set of anxieties about modern life, an English study drew from data in the 1994 British Crime Survey that included questions related to 'non-criminal worries' (Pantazis 2000:415). This paper, which focused on understanding the fear of crime experienced by vulnerable and poor people, concluded that fear of crime 'should not be seen in isolation from other insecurities such as job loss, debts and mortgage repossession…' (Pantazis 2000:414).

6. ADDRESSING PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY

Not surprisingly, research suggests that efforts to understand and address perceptions of safety should be underpinned by the same problem-analysis that underpins evidence-based crime prevention. We need to 'identify demographic groups that are most affected, neighborhoods where fear is the highest, and other trends and patterns... also identify anomalies, such as neighborhoods where crime is low but fear is high' (Cordner 2010:x).

This emphasises the importance of well-structured surveys and consultations, that:
- are targeted to a good cross-section of the community ensuring representation of different ages, gender, socio-economic status, culture and geographic location
- design question that encourage respondents to identify the type of fear they feel, the level of fear they feel, the frequency with which they experience those fears within a specific timeframe (e.g. the last twelve months)
- identify the specific neighbourhoods where participants live and the specific locations where people experience fear as well as the factors associated with that fear
- ask 'non-criminal worry' questions that explore the impact of employment, income, housing status and community connectedness on levels of anxiety
- do not position survey questions in a 'victim' framework so as to minimise the exaggeration of perceived risk from survey participants
- are analysed to identify perceptions for different groups within the community in different circumstances, allowing the identification of risk factors that can be addressed, those circumstances where a degree of fear may be warranted or may encourage risk-averse behaviour, and those factors that are beyond the sphere of influence of council.

Other forms of community intelligence, such as community network meetings and individual contacts, should also be considered as indicators of perceptions of safety (Cordner 2010).

A thorough analysis of data will not only enable a strategic response to local perceptions of safety, but will enable findings to be considered against key research findings outlined above, which may aid understanding of the true nature of the fears reported and more realistic expectations as to the potential for council and other agencies to address those fears.

Once the factors that influence lower perceptions of safety have been identified, consideration can be given to appropriate responses, which could include:
- environmental audits of public spaces that are commonly identified as unsafe, followed by community generated programs to improve neighbourhood appearance (Grabosky 1995; Borooah and Carcach 1997; Cordner 2010)
- neighbourhood cohesion strategies to enhance community connectedness (Borooah and Carcach 1997; Ceccato 2012)
- community justice initiatives that promote responsibility for behaviour in offenders and enhance victim satisfaction with justice (Borooah and Carcach 1997)
- negotiation with human services to develop strategies to address public behaviors that are perceived by others as threatening (Grabosky 1995)
- utilising 'alcohol free zones' and other strategies to discourage behaviour that triggers fear (Grabosky 1995; Borooah and Carcach 1997)
- strategies that encourage women to report violence and harassment and access support services (Dichter and Gelles 2012).
- high visibility 'personalised' police beat patrols (Grabosky 1995; Cordner 2010).

Research also suggests that, given fear is based on perception, it is essential that the public are made aware of any improvements to crime rates or to risk factors associated with fear of crime. Police in particular need to become 'more sophisticated purveyors of reassurance as an antidote to the inevitable messages of mayhem and fear that predominate in politics and the media' (Cordner 2010:x).

7. ANALYSIS

Consideration of the literature supports the suggestion by Jackson et al that researchers have moved away from the subject of 'fear of crime', suggesting this may be because it is an 'emotional' subject, that is 'almost impossible to do very much about', and because discussion leads to increasingly punitive, but ineffective responses (Jackson et al 2009). It also detracts from the good news, which is that rates in most crime categories have now steadily declined for more than a decade.

The literature does however highlight that fear is not one thing, and that 'the risk of becoming a victim of crime tends to be unequally distributed across Australian society' (Grabosky 1995:2). It tells us that in some circumstances, fear of crime is warranted, as some people live or move in neighbourhoods where crime is more likely to occur. It also highlights some of the environmental and social factors associated with lower perceptions of safety that can be addressed.

International research demonstrates that, if we structure, target and analyse surveys about perceptions of safety appropriately, we can ascertain specifically who experiences fear, where and why, as well as identifying when that fear is associated with broader social anxieties. This enables us to identify where we may be able to improve perceptions through community building, neighbourhood renewal, social controls or policing strategies. It will also help us to understand where fear may be positive, in that it prompts community members to adopt safe, risk-averse behaviour. If we frame fear in terms of individual, neighbourhood and 'global fear, it helps us to be realistic about those circumstances in which we may be able to improve perceptions of safety and those circumstances that are beyond our sphere of influence.

We can also promote an understanding of the challenges in identifying and reducing 'fear of crime' so that elected bodies, community members, local business and service providers have more realistic expectations about what we can do about it. In some regards there are benefits to not making 'fear of crime' a policy issue, as it seems that our understanding of it, and our capacity to influence it are limited. When we do seek to address fear of crime, we should adopt the same evidence-based approach that we apply to the reduction of crime itself.

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