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Fear of Crime and Fear Reduction Strategies

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This Trends and Issues on fear of crime, and its reduction in Australia, represents an outstanding illustration of the contribution which criminological research can make to public policy. Various surveys in recent years have identified a number of factors consistently associated with fear of crime. These are gender (females tend to be more fearful than males) and the presence of disorder and incivility in one's neighbourhood. These research findings point towards specific policy approaches which governments may take to reduce fear of crime and to improve the quality of life in Australian communities.

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Fear of crime has become an important issue of public concern: a problem which detracts from the quality of life, and which adversely affects social and economic well-being. While the fear of crime expressed by some citizens is well-founded, other individuals are at less personal risk than they might believe. Their fear, however, is no less real. As Figure 1 indicates, levels of fear of crime in Australian neighbourhoods are about average for western industrial democracies.

Fear of crime can be addressed by public policy. Governments may not be able to eliminate crime completely, but they can contribute to its reduction. They can also take steps to reduce public perceptions of insecurity.

This paper reviews what we know about fear of crime in Australia. Generalisations are based on the work of Kelley (1992), Queensland (1994) and Carcach et al. (forthcoming). A number of strategies are suggested for the reduction of fear which appear to have met with some success, either in Australia or overseas, and whose wider application in Australia may be worth considering.

What is Fear of Crime?

Statements about fear of crime often fail to distinguish between perception of general risk, fear of personal victimisation, concern about crime as a public policy issue, and anxiety about life in general. Fear of crime is complex, in that some people may be afraid of particular types of crime, but not of other kinds of

Figure 1.
Fear of street crime

	%
Total	31.1
Europe	30.3
England (91)	33
Netherlands (91)	21.1
Belgium (91)	19.6
Finland (91)	17.9
Sweden (91)	13.5
Italy (91)	35.1
USA (91)	41
Canada (91)	20
Australia (91)	31.1
New Zealand (91)	38.2
Poland (91)	45.4
Czechoslovakia (91)	43.6

% of the Public feeling a bit/very unsafe out alone after dark
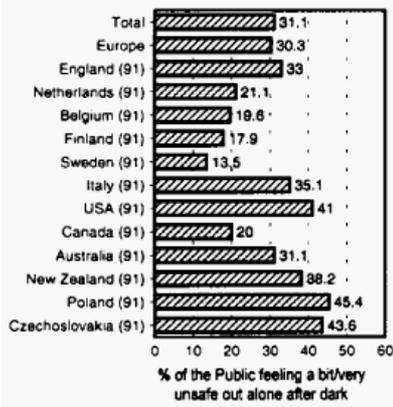
offence. Moreover, some individuals may be fearful of crime in the home, but not in public.

Generalisations about fear of crime, or comparisons of levels of fear over time or across jurisdictions may fail to take these differences into consideration. On the other hand, consistent findings relating to correlates of fear which persist despite these differences are, by definition, more robust.

Explaining Fear of Crime in Australia

A number of factors have been associated with fear of crime, in Australia and elsewhere. Relationships which are observed, however, should always be interpreted with caution.

Gender

One of the factors most consistently and strongly associated with fear of crime is gender. Almost everywhere, females in general tend to be more fearful of crime than are men. Australia is no exception. Women are much more fearful of being alone in their own homes, and of walking in their neighbourhood at night, than are men, even taking into account general anxiety and a number of other possible alternative factors. Recent research confirms that women report significantly greater perceived risk

and fear of crime than men, regardless of how fear of crime is measured.

Females tend to report greater levels of fear, but males tend to be at greater risk of victimisation. This apparent paradox may be explained in part by the fact that those offences committed predominantly against women, such as sexual assault and violence in the family, are particularly likely to induce fear. One might also add that for a variety of reasons, many relating to the perceived efficacy and appropriateness of the criminal justice system, these very offences have been much less likely to be called to the attention of police.

It might also be suggested that traditional sex roles in Australia have been learned in a manner which imparts in females a lesser degree of self-confidence and perceived autonomy than those roles learned by men.

Females' experience with harassment of various kinds can contribute to fear of crime. The greater fear of crime expressed by some women may reflect their perceived risk of abuse by spouses or family members, as much as by strangers. In Australia, fear of crime is strongly associated with one's having received harassing, obscene, or threatening telephone calls.

Age

It is generally assumed that the decline in physical resiliency which accompanies the ageing process would lead one to be more fearful of crime as one becomes older. Older Australians tend to be significantly more fearful of crime in their own homes than are younger people. However, relationship between age and fear is more complex. One recent study found that younger Australians are more fearful of violence in general than are the elderly, presumably because their lifestyle places them at relatively greater risk (Kelley 1992).

Income

Generally, Australians with higher levels of education and income tend to be less fearful than poor people. These findings are consistent with overseas research. Wealthier persons are able to afford better security, and are less likely to associate with individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, who tend to be at greater risk of offending.

Previous Victimisation

Previous experience as a crime victim, either directly, or vicariously, through the experience of relatives, friends, or acquaintances, is often associated with fear of crime. The 1989 International Crime Victims Survey found that victims in Australia and most other places surveyed reported a greater tendency to avoid certain places after nightfall than non-victims, and that respondents who had experienced multiple victimisations tended to express "stronger feelings of unsafeness".

In Australia not all crimes have the same impact on their victims. Perhaps surprisingly, victims of assault appear no more fearful of being alone in one's home than do non-victims. On the other hand, persons who have been the victim of burglary, mugging, car theft, and particularly, obscene telephone calls tend to be significantly more fearful.

Media Exposure

The Australian public appears to take an interest in crime news, and the supply of such news is abundant. Frequent exposure to news coverage of crime may lead one to overestimate the probability of personal victimisation, especially since the risk of becoming a victim of crime tends to be unequally distributed across Australian society.

Overseas researchers have concluded that the effect of newspaper coverage is complex, with some forms of coverage increasing fear and other forms of coverage decreasing fear. The effect of official crime rates on

fear is also mediated through the newspaper coverage of crime. In Britain, readers of tabloid newspapers which have more sensational crime coverage reported higher levels of fear than readers of broadsheet newspapers, whose crime coverage is less predominant and less dramatic.

Environmental Considerations

Various physical and social aspects of one's neighbourhood tend to be related to fear of crime. Lack of neighbourhood cohesion, as represented by the feeling that neighbours tend not to help each other, is an important factor associated with fear of crime. The presence of sociable neighbours can help reduce fear. Persons living outside of metropolitan areas tend to report less fear of crime than do city dwellers.

Other factors related to fear of crime may be collectively described as "incivilities". These may take the form of litter, graffiti, vandalism, or other aspects of the built environment which reflect a general state of disrepair. In addition, these factors may include the frequent presence of drunks, vagrants, or unruly gatherings of young males. These characteristics, individually but especially in combination, seem to suggest that the location in question is "out of control". The message which these characteristics convey induces fear of crime in some, and is an invitation to crime by others (Skogan 1990).

Fear of crime is very much higher in those Australian neighbourhoods where it is common for unruly young people to congregate.

Fear of crime can also be related to exterior site features of a location. Fear tends to be highest in areas with refuge for potential offenders and low prospect of escape for potential victims. Thus, the mere design of public places can contribute to feelings of security or fear.

Neighbourhood Change

Fear of crime has also been found to be high in neighbourhoods undergoing change. Communities with rapidly changing populations and related economic changes experience heightened fear of crime, even where there may be no apparent increase in criminal activity. It stands to reason that the uncertainty which accompanies change may be reflected in fear of crime. The reassurance and peace of mind which accompanies a predictable and stable social setting can be jolted by the unexpected.

The factors listed above are not necessarily exhaustive. Moreover, they may interact with each other or with other factors, in a manner which may serve to enhance or to mitigate fear of crime. For example, it has been suggested that confidence in the police can be a mediating factor in the fear of crime.

We turn now to a discussion of some of the strategies for the reduction of fear which the above research suggests.

Solutions

Policy makers should proceed with caution, as there is no single "magic bullet" for crime prevention and fear reduction. Indeed, some crime prevention initiatives may actually create crime, and generate more fear.

Reducing Incivility and Disorder

To some extent, incivility may be in the eye of the beholder; one person's incivility is another's fun. But despite this element of subjectivity, the association between fear of crime and perceived concentration of rowdy youth in one's neighbourhood is one of the more consistent and striking findings to emerge from recent research on the fear of crime. This has profound policy implications.

Freedom of movement and freedom of association are important values in Australian society. When exercised to an extreme, however, these freedoms may conflict with what many Australians might regard as no less a fundamental freedom—the right to feel secure in one's own home, or in a public place.

The range of policy instruments which might be used to control street-level incivility ranges from the draconian to the creative and benign. Whilst a more repressive society might use such methods as curfews, quarantine areas, or corporal punishment, more moderate interventions may achieve significant fear reduction benefits in a less coercive fashion.

The concept of alcohol-free public places is one example. The designation of certain locations as dry areas will create places where drinkers are less likely to congregate, and, given the disinhibiting effect of alcohol, to express uncontrolled exuberance. Conversely, such designation will make a location more attractive to families and those averse to excessive forms of expression.

One can also design public places in a manner likely to discourage unruly gatherings. Youth, for example, are less likely to gather in any location in which classical music is audible. Planning and zoning restrictions may also be used to control behavioural manifestations of disorder. Areas or enterprises such as licensed premises or venues relating to the sex industry, which may attract a clientele with potential for incivility, may be kept segregated from public places suitable for family entertainment.

Street Policing

Until about two decades ago, it was common in Australia for minor breaches of public decorum to attract the criminal sanction. Public drunkenness, vagrancy, prostitution, offensive language, and a variety of other minor misdemeanours were met with arrest. The traditional law enforcement response to unruly

gatherings entailed selectively enforced prohibitions on loitering, or vesting police with the power to disperse people. From the mid-1970s Australian jurisdictions, for reasons of cost, ideology, or benevolent intent, began to regard incivility as a matter more appropriate for health or welfare authorities. Public drunkenness in particular came to be regarded as no longer appropriate to be dealt with by the criminal justice system.

Although the use of the criminal sanction to maintain civility has fallen from favour, there are those who have suggested that police control of vagrants, drunks, and rowdy youth can reduce fear of crime.

Aside from the potential to generate ill feelings on the part of those on the receiving end of police directions, such powers may be resisted by civil liberties and human rights advocates, not least because they tend to be used most visibly against disadvan-
taged minorities. For this reason, coercive street-level powers would seem most appropriately employed not indiscriminately as a general strategy, but in those extreme circumstances which a wide cross-section of the community would regard as appropriate.

Moreover, although situationally effective, these "prohibitory instruments", designed to drive away incivility, may achieve little more than displacing loutishness from one location to another. A more positive approach could entail the creation of recreational settings and opportunities which would invite and permit a more constructive expression of youthful energy. Alternative locations identifiable and attractive as recreational areas for youth may be designed expressly for that purpose.

In other circumstances, where unseemly congregations include drug users, the homeless, or the mentally ill, appropriate health, housing, or other support facilities might be made available.

Many indicia of disorder, from graffiti, to vandalism, to a general ambience of disrepair are amenable to public policy interventions requiring little imagination. Suffice it to say with regard to any incident of vandalism or graffiti that the sooner it is rectified, the better. Graffiti tends to attract more graffiti, and possibly worse. So does vandalism. Immediate rectification can contribute to the reduction of fear, and crime. Other solutions include design considerations, as well as the use of damage-resistant materials. Locations could also be set aside for "street art" where the creative energies of potential graffitists may be channelled more constructively.

Police Community Relations

The conventional response to the problem of fear of crime is to increase the presence of police. Aside from being very costly, this approach may overlook the fact that fear of crime is not distribu-
ted evenly across people and places. Furthermore, the mere presence of additional police is by no means certain to reduce crime or fear although it may increase public confidence in the police.

There appears to be merit in two alternative approaches: one would target police in areas characterised by disproportionate crime or fear; the other would seek to "leverage" community resources to complement traditional law enforcement presence.

A number of strategies are employed by police agencies to reduce fear of crime. Increased foot patrol reduces citizens' fears. Some other effective measures include a police community newsletter designed to give accurate crime information to citizens, a citizen contact program, and a police community contact centre. These strategies lead to closer contact between citizens and police officers which tends to reduce fear.

It should be noted, however, that these innovations based primarily on enhancing direct police contact with

the public, have not proven to be universally and consistently successful. In 1983-84, the Houston Texas Police Department tested five strategies designed to reduce fear among citizens: crime victim recontact, newsletters, citizen contact patrol, police community stations, and community organising. Neither victim recontact nor the newletter appeared to have any fear reduction effects. There was, however, some good news. The citizen contact patrol, the police community station, and the community organising response team were all related to lower levels of fear of personal victim-
isation, reduced perceptions of crime and social disorder in the neighbourhood, and improved evaluation of police service (Pate et al. 1986).

The Baltimore Police Depart-
ment implemented two com-
munity policing strategies for one year: foot patrol and "ombuds-
man policing," in which officers worked with community resi-
dents on identifying the most serious crime problems in the area and devising means of addressing those problems. A rigorous evaluation indicated that ombudsman policing, when practised with a full-time staff, produced highly significant improvements in public evalu-
ations of police effectiveness and behaviour, reduced perceptions of disorder and awareness of victimisation in the areas, and increased feelings of safety (Pate & Annan 1989).

In Australia, programs like Home Secure and Safety Audit in Queensland and Home Assist in South Australia target vulnerable locations, or particular groups who may be unusually fearful, with advice and reassurance, as appropriate. A police citizen con-
tact program called "Country Town Policing" is being piloted in the Australian Capital Territory and is currently undergoing evaluation.

Co-production of Safety

Another general strategy for fear reduction may entail augmenting police resources with those residing within the community. Ideally, organising neighbour-hood residents in programs such as Neighbourhood Watch, can increase neighbourhood cohesiveness and provide reassurance to individuals who may be fearful of crime.

However, programs along the lines of Neighbourhood Watch are not universally effective in preventing crime and reducing fear. Unfortunately, mobilisation of community resources tends to be easiest in those communities which are already cohesive, and more difficult in those neighbour-hoods, characterised by anon-ymity and high residential mobility, where they are most sorely needed. In addition, in some Neighbourhood Watch settings, social interactions at meetings may increase rather than decrease fear.

Other means of enlisting citizen support for crime prevention have shown some promise. The Netherlands appears to have met with some success in recruiting citizens to provide surveillance on public transport and in residential neighbourhoods. Specially designated wardens, primarily recruited from the ranks of the young unemployed, serve as safety, information and control officers in the public transport system. Although preliminary evaluation suggests no significant reduction of fear on the part of passengers, a noticeable decline in fare evasion was achieved.

Telecommunications Technology

One of the factors most closely associated with fear of crime is having been subject to threaten-ing, offensive or obscene tele-phone calls. Whilst years ago, such calls may have been officially dismissed as relatively inconsequential or trivial, their relationship to fear of crime is such that they deserve serious consideration as a matter of public policy. Technologies now exist to discourage intrusive tele-phone calls. Caller ID, which indicates the telephone number of an incoming call, enables the recipient to identify the source of an intrusive call, and removes the cloak of anonymity previously enjoyed by a harassing caller. The availability of caller ID in New Jersey was associated with a significant decrease in the reported incidence of nuisance calls.

Environmental Design

Since the advent over two decades ago of crime prevention through environmental design, there have been numerous attempts at crime prevention and fear reduction by modifying certain aspects of the built environment. Perhaps the most common of these is enhanced street lighting.

Improved lighting of public places can reduce fear of crime, but this is not the only aspect of environmental design which can contribute to fear reduction. An examination of crime and disorder in indoor shopping centres in four European countries concluded that social interaction within the building, and the standard by which it is managed were key factors in crime and disorder problems (Poole 1991). The physical human presence of authority was the biggest factor in eliminating or lessening fear of crime. Also important were closed-circuit television systems, access to telephones, and psychological cues giving the impression of regular maintenance, such as the presence of fresh flowers. The study suggested that entrance doors be designed on a human scale, and that window design in retail units permit easy visibility both into and out of stores.

Conclusion

Reducing the fear of crime, and crime itself, is a challenge faced by all Australians. The nature of crime is sufficiently complex that no one agency of government can assume sole responsibility for it. While some of the examples of promising strategies for fear reduction noted above are essentially police activities, others were related to the basic functions of local government, community welfare agencies, and tele-communications authorities. Effective implementation of fear reduction programs will depend essentially on collaboration between a variety of relevant institutions.

Nevertheless, Australia's police services will remain the area of government which citizens who are fearful of and concerned about crime will look to first. Among the challenges faced by Australian police today is to develop crime prevention and fear reduction programs, and to evaluate these programs rigorously and objectively. By discarding those programs which do not succeed, and by refining and expanding those which do, Australian police services can make an important contribution to crime prevention and fear reduction.

But as we have seen, many factors relating to crime prevention lie beyond the immediate purview of police. The greater degree of fear expressed by women can in time be reduced by broader public policies which provide them with equal economic opportunities, take violence against women seriously, and reduce women's vulnerability to harassment.

Physical manifestations of the quality of neighbourhood life can be enhanced by concerted efforts by government, especially local government. Here, such basic considerations as litter control, repair of vandalism, improved lighting and design of public space can make significant contributions.

Governments may foster the restoration of civility by financial

incentives and inducements. Economic instruments which provide incentives for neighbourhood improvement may well pay for themselves in crime prevention savings. Low cost finance for the restoration of abandoned or dilapidated premises, or of run-down areas can be worth the investment, when traditional market forces operate to produce neighbourhood decline

Nor indeed can the task be left to governments alone. Individual Australians must bear significant responsibility for taking basic crime prevention precautions, including looking after their neighbours, and caring for their neighbourhoods.

A final note: Programs for fear reduction should be carefully designed and implemented, and subjected to rigorous evaluation, to ensure that they in fact serve their purpose. Scientific surveys, such as those used regularly by a number of Australian police agencies as part of their community policing and performance measurement activities, are ideally suited for this task. Carefully refined measures of fear and sophistcated analysis of survey data, will allow policy makers to move beyond the use of rhetoric to improve the quality of life in Australia.

Note: An expanded version of this essay, with full notes and references, is available from the author.

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