

Predictors of Fear of Crime and the Relationship of Crime Rates and Fear of Crime

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ABSTRACT: Research has shown that demographic characteristics, media exposure, perceived risk to crime, and victimization are associated with a person's perception of crime. Also, many times a person's perception of crime does not coincide with the actual crime rates. Using data from a survey of 315 college students, this study examined the effects of the aforementioned factors on a person's perception of crime, as well as compared these perceptions with actual crime rates. Results indicate that females, minorities, and people who frequently viewed local television news all reported a higher fear of crime, which is consistent with literature. The respondents' perceptions of murder and rape crime rates were much higher than the actual crime rates, which is consistent with research; however, with all other crimes the respondents' perceptions were much lower, in contrast with research.

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INTRODUCTION

People have mixed views on crime in the United States, and their views can be influenced by reasons that they can and cannot control. In addition, perceptions of the occurrence of crime can sometimes be exaggerated. Results from research show that perceptions of crime do not coincide with the actual rates of crime; consequently when crime rates are dropping, public fear of crime is rising (Ackerman et al., 2001). Correspondingly, research on the relationship of a person's age, race/ethnicity, social class, media exposure, perceived risk to crime, and victimization to their perception of crime has shown that all are associated with feelings about crime. These factors can affect a person's perception of crime both positively and negatively. Perceived risk to crime has been shown to be the largest predictor of perception of crime (May & Dunaway, 2000; Lane & Meeker, 2003). However, results vary from sample to sample as to what the best predictor of perception of crime will be. This current study examined the effects of gender, age, race, social class, media exposure, perceived risk, and prior victimization on a person's perception of crime. Also, the current study compared perceptions of crime with the actual crime rates. Specifically, it considered if fear of crime was greater than crime occurrence.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Demographic predictors of fear and crime

Studies show that many demographic features affect perceptions of crime both negatively and positively. Concerning age, research has varied results. Some research shows that older people tend to have less fear of crime when compared to younger people (Chadee & Ditton, 2003; Ferraro & LaGrange, 1992; Rountree, 1998; Ziegler & Mitchell, 2003), whereas other research states the opposite, that older adults report greater fear of crime (Baker et al., 1983; Weinrath & Gartell, 1996). People who are more affluent and belong to a higher social class have less fear of crime (Rountree, 1998). In addition, women report a higher fear of crime than men (Haynie, 1998; LaGrange & Ferrano, 1989). When considering race, minorities (particularly African Americans) fear crime more than whites (Parker, 2001; LaGrange & Ferrano, 1989). And, lastly, viewing local television news relates to a heightened fear of crime (Romer, Jamison, & Aday, 2003; Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000). This heightened fear of crime may result from the fact that most news sources use crime, particularly violent crime, for major news stories, and, because of this, media reports contain more violence than the real world (Heath & Gilbert, 1996).

Effects of perceived risk and prior victimization in fear and crime

Previous or current life experiences also affect a person's fear of crime. In particular, a higher perceived risk or vulnerability to crime and prior victimization increases a person's fear of crime. In fact, a strong predictor of fear of crime has been whether a person perceives their neighborhood to be dangerous (May & Dunaway, 2000). If a person perceives his/her neighborhood as dangerous, he/she is more likely to feel at risk to crime, and a higher perceived vulnerability or risk to crime increases one's fear of crime (Baumer, 1985; Lane & Meeker, 2003; Rountree, 1998). When considering crime victimization, results from research have shown that previous victimization will be a key predictor of fear of crime (Arthur, 1992; Rountree & Land, 1996; Rountree, 1998). And ordinarily, it is found that the greater the victimization, the greater the fear of crime (Smith & Hill, 1991; Rountree, 1998).

Do perceptions of crime correspond to actual crime rates?

Certain factors have been shown to increase a person's fear of crime. Yet researchers have found that people's perceptions of crime are greater than the actual occurrence of crime. In fact, participants in one study reported 6 to 10% higher gun deaths than the actual gun deaths (Heath, Kavanagh, & Thompson, 2001). Despite a general decrease in crime rates, surveys suggest that people still feel crime is worse in their area than the year before (Ackerman et al., 2001). A possible explanation for this is what Felson (1994) calls the "dramatic fallacy." Dramatic fallacy refers to perceptions of crime being higher than crime rates due to the influence of media and police (Felson, 1994). Studies have found that the public believes that violent crimes dominate when in actuality crimes such as burglary, robbery, and drug-related crimes are far more common (Ackerman et al., 2001).

Everyone seems to have a different opinion when it comes to crime; however, those opinions tend to be influenced by similar factors. The results from research consistently agree that gender, age, race/ethnicity, social class, media exposure, perceived risk, and prior victimization all are associated with one's perception of crime. Though the results vary from sample to sample as to what the strongest predictor is, most find that gender (females), age, and high perception of risk tend to be better predictors than most. Furthermore, the public's view of crime does not often coincide with the rates of

crime. In fact, it seems that fear of crime rises as crime rates drop (Ackerman et al., 2001). Researchers try to explain this through looking at external forces influencing a person's perception of crime. The end result is the public's view of crime being influenced by many social factors, which outweigh the occurrence of crime, and results in a greater level of fear of crime despite lower crime rates.

The current study examined whether a person's fear of crime is related to their gender, age, race/ethnicity, social class, media exposure, perceived risk, and victimization. In addition, it also considered if people's perceptions of crime are related to the actual occurrence of crime. Hypothesis 1: Older and more affluent people will report lower fear of crime. Hypothesis 2: Women, minorities, and people who are more exposed to the media will report a higher fear of crime. A higher perceived risk to crime and prior victimization will increase a person's fear of crime. Hypothesis 3: People's perceptions of crime will be greater than the actual occurrence of crime.

METHODOLOGY

Variables

The independent variables were gender, age, race/ethnicity, media exposure, victimization, and perceived risk of danger to crime. The dependent variable was fear of crime.

Race/ethnicity was considered as the race/ethnic category a person identifies with. This was measured by inquiring, "Which racial/ethnic category do you identify with: White/Caucasian, African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, American Indian, or other?" Social class was considered as the social class with which a person identifies. It was measured by asking, "Which social class do you identify with: Wealthy, Upper middle class, Middle class, Working class, or Poor?" Media exposure was defined as how frequently one uses news sources, such as television news, radio news, news related magazines, newspapers, and/or Internet sources. Respondents were asked to rate how frequently they used the following as a source of news: national television news, local television news, radio news programs, news magazines, daily local newspapers, national daily newspapers, and news-based websites. They rated on a scale of 0 to 4: never, rarely, sometimes, often, or every day (Part of this scale was taken from Romer, Jamison, & Aday [2003]). It was modified by adding a fifth response category (every day) and Internet news as a source. *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, conservative talk radio, and

Christian broadcasting were all left out as news sources. Fear of crime was simply the amount of fear the respondent expressed of certain crimes. Respondents were asked, "On a scale of one to ten, with one being not at all fearful and ten being very fearful, how much would you say you fear having your car stolen? Having someone break into your home while you are away? Having someone break into your home while you are there? Being robbed or mugged on the street? Being raped or sexually assaulted? Being a victim of domestic violence? Being murdered?" Part of this scale was taken from Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz (2000), and was modified by adding the domestic violence question. Victimization was considered whether or not a person had been a victim of a crime. This was measured by asking, "Have you ever been a victim of a crime?" If the respondent answered "yes," they were then asked to specify whether it was a property crime, violent crime, or both (property and violent crime were defined on the survey). Also, an open-ended question was included, "What was the crime?" Perception of crime was measured as how often a person believes that certain crimes occur. Respondents were asked, "On a scale of zero to ten, with zero being never occurring and ten being occurring almost every day, please rate how often you think the following crimes occur in Orlando: murder, rape, domestic violence, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson." This measure was also used as a respondent's perceived risk to crime if a respondent feels a crime occurs frequently, he/she is more likely to feel at risk of that crime. The actual occurrence of crime was determined by how often specific crimes in Orlando, Florida occur. This was measured by using Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Uniform Crime Reports and statistics from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

Data Collection Method

The present study used quantitative data and conducted surveys. The surveys were self-administered and contained questions on demographic characteristics, fear of crime, prior victimization, and attitudes toward crime occurrence. The surveys were obtained by going into classrooms and asking students to participate. Surveys were handed out in two lower division and two upper division courses during the Spring 2004 semester.

Sample

The sample was a non-probability, haphazard/convenience sample. The sample consisted solely of University of Central Florida students. All participants were 18 years

of age or older. A total of 330 surveys were handed out, 318 were collected, and 315 could be used for analysis for a response rate of 95.5%.

Research Ethics

Before the surveys were administered, the study was given approval by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Central Florida. The surveys were anonymous. When the surveys were given, it was repeated that a name was not to be put on the survey, in order for it to remain anonymous. Attached to the front of the survey was a consent form informing the participants that the survey was voluntary, detailing the contents of the survey, and explaining that participants were not to answer any questions that they were uncomfortable with. The consent form was signed by the participants and turned in separate from the survey. Both the surveys and consent forms remained in two separate envelopes; therefore, they could never be matched up. The survey asked a sensitive question concerning victimization. Because of this, respondents were provided with a victim services telephone number on the consent form.

RESULTS

Univariate Analyses

The sample was 57.1% female. The mean age was 19.53 and the range was from 18 to 31. There were 71.9% white, 7% African American, 12.5% Hispanic/Latino, 2.6% Asian, and 6.1% other (which included biracial categories) respondents. Due to the fact that the majority of the sample was white, and a comparison was needed only for fear of crime among whites and minorities, this variable was reduced into a dichotomous variable white and nonwhite. This resulted in 71.9% white and 28.1% nonwhite. For socioeconomic class, the sample included 2.5% wealthy, 31.7% upper middle class, 49.5% middle class, 13% working class, and 3.2% poor. These sample characteristics are all presented in Table 1.

On a scale of 0 to 4 (never to every day) the sample reported using national TV news, local TV news, local newspapers and the Internet a mean of about 2 or “sometimes.” On the same scale, the sample reported using radio news, news magazines, and national newspapers a mean of about 1 or “rarely.” These previous media variables were combined into one variable, called MEDIA, to look at the overall media use. For MEDIA, the scale was from 0 to 24. The sample reported using media as a whole a mean of 12.6, which is equivalent to “sometimes.” These results are presented in Table 2.

The seven items (on a scale of 1 to 10) for how fearful a respondent was of certain crimes were combined into one composite variable, FEAR. The mean was 28.26 and the range was from 7 to 70 (see Table 2). This mean is equivalent to about a “slightly fearful” attitude as a whole. There were 41.7% respondents who were victims of a crime (see Table 2). Of those victims, 24.8% had been victim of a property-only crime, 10.5% had been victim of a violent-only crime, and 6.1% had been victim of both property and violent crimes (see Table 2).

For the perceptions of crime variables, the original scales were from 0 to 10 (never occurs to occurs every day). However, for analysis purpose, these variables were recoded into a scale ranging from 0 to 7 to represent the number of days per week a crime occurs. The sample reported that murder and arson occur about 4 days a week, and rape occurs about 5 days a week (see Table 2). The sample reported that domestic violence, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, and car theft occur about 6 days of the week (see Table 2). These previous perceptions of crime occurrence variables were combined into one composite variable, PERCEPTION, for perception of crime as a whole. The mean for this variable was 65.7 and the range was from 4 to 90. This mean is equivalent to an opinion that crime occurs about 5 days out of the week.

For the actual crime rate in Orlando, FL (considered Lake, Orange, Osceola, and Seminole Counties), all crimes except for domestic violence and arson were taken from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports. Domestic violence and arson crime rates were taken from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. For arson, the only available data was for total offenses for Florida. The numbers were calculated by dividing total offenses by 365 days (offenses per day), then multiplying by 7 to obtain offenses per week. For murder, the offenses were 0.287 per week (see Table 2). For rape, the offenses were 2.324 per week (see Table 2). For domestic violence, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson the offenses were all at least 7 times per week, but were actually much more (see Table 2). Because the majority of the crimes occur more than just once per day, for analysis purposes, the offenses per week were considered 7 for all of these crimes.

Bivariate Analyses

A Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between the respondents' age and fear of crime. As shown in Table 3, a weak correlation that was

not significant was found ($r = -.012, p > .05$). Age is not related to fear of crime.

The respondents' fear of crime was compared by their social class using a one-way ANOVA. As shown in Table 3, no significant difference was found ($F(4,310) = 2.123, p > .05$). The respondents' different social classes did not differ significantly when reporting fear of crime.

An independent t-test comparing the mean scores of fear of crime of males to the mean score of fear of crime of females found a significant difference between the means of the two groups ($t(309.479) = -8.488, p < .05$). As shown in Table 3, the mean fear of crime of females was significantly higher (Mean 33.84, SD = 14.83) than the mean fear of crime of males (Mean 20.82, SD = 12.36).

An independent t-test was conducted comparing the mean scores of fear of crime of whites to the mean score of fear of crime of nonwhites found a significant difference between the means of the two groups ($t(135.02) = -2.537, p < .05$). As shown in Table 3, the mean fear of crime of nonwhites was significantly higher (Mean 32.02, SD = 17.25) than the mean fear of crime of whites (Mean 26.78, SD = 14.13).

A Pearson's correlation was calculated to examine the relationship between the respondents' usage of a particular media source and their fear of crime. As shown in Table 3, there were no significant relationships between national TV news, radio news, news magazines, local newspapers, national newspapers, and Internet exposure and fear of crime ($p > .05$).

A Pearson's correlation was calculated to examine the relationship between the respondents' total media exposure and fear of crime. As shown in Table 3, a statistically significant, but weak positive correlation was found ($r = .157, p < .05$). Media exposure very slightly increases one's fear of crime. A Pearson correlation was also calculated to examine the relationship between the respondents' local TV news exposure and fear of crime. A statistically significant, slightly moderate correlation was found ($r = .273, p < .05$). As shown by Table 3, people who watch more local TV news tend to report a higher fear of crime. Finally, a Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to examine the relationship between the respondents' fear of crime and perception of crime (perceived risk). As shown by Table 3, a statistically significant, but weak positive correlation was found ($r =$

.174, $p < .05$). When a person has a higher perceived risk to crime, they will report a slightly higher fear of crime.

An independent t-test was conducted comparing previous victims' fear of crime to non-victims' fear of crime. As shown by Table 3, no significant difference was found ($t(312) = .357, p > .05$). The mean fear of crime of victims (Mean = 27.85, SD = 14.77) was not significantly different from the mean fear of crime of non-victims (Mean = 28.47, SD = 15.59).

A one-sample t-test was conducted comparing the actual murder (.287) and rape (2.324) crime rate per week to the respondents' perception of murder (Mean = 3.81) and rape (Mean 7.73) occurrence per week. As shown by Table 4, there was a significant difference in mean scores for both murder ($t = 31.11, p < .05$) and rape ($t = 23.92, p < .05$). The mean of the respondents was significantly higher than the test value in both cases.

A one-sample t-test was conducted comparing the actual domestic violence, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, car theft, and arson crime rate per week (which were all 7.00) to the respondents' perception of those crimes occurrence per week. As presented in Table 4, there was a significant difference in all of the mean scores. However, unlike murder and rape, the mean of the respondents was significantly lower than the test value.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to examine factors that were related to fear of crime. According to the literature, results varied as to whether older or younger adults feared crime more (Baker et al., 1983; Chadee & Ditton, 2003; Ferraro & LaGrange, 1992; Rountree, 1998; Weinrath & Gartell, 1996; Ziegler & Mitchell, 2003). The hypothesis was that older participants would report a lower fear of crime. However, the current study revealed that a person's age did not affect a person's fear of crime. The results of the present study are most likely not significant because the age range of the sample was small. Social class also did not have an effect on a person's fear of crime. The literature stated that people who were of higher socioeconomic status reported lower fear of crime (Rountree, 1998). Perhaps the results were not significant because the effects of socioeconomic status are not as abundant among college students as they are within the "real" world population. Females reported a significantly higher fear of crime than males. This supports the hypothesis and is consistent with the literature (Haynie, 1998; LaGrange & Ferrano, 1989). Minorities did, in fact, report a higher

fear of crime. The literature had also found that minorities fear crime more than whites (Parker, 2001; LaGrange & Ferrano, 1989).

Media as a whole did not have a significant impact on increasing a person's fear of crime. However, when specifically looking at local TV news, this did increase a person's fear of crime. The more local TV news a person watched, the higher his/her reported fear of crime was. The literature agrees with this exact impact of local TV news (Romer, Jamison, & Aday, 2003; Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000).

The literature suggested that people who felt they were at a greater risk to crime also reported a high fear of crime (Baumer, 1985; Lane & Meeker, 2003; Rountree, 1998). However, the results of this research did not support this relationship. A person's perceived risk to crime had little to no effect on their fear of crime. Perhaps these results would have been more accurate if a different scale for perceived risk was used, instead of using the same scale that was used for measuring perception of crime or crime occurrence.

Prior victimization was not found to increase a person's fear of crime. This is in contrast to both the literature and my hypothesis (Arthur, 1992; Rountree & Land, 1996; Rountree, 1998). Maybe this is the case because the sample (college students) are more educated on how to deal with victimization and possibly have more access to services, such as University of Central Florida Victim Services. However, it could also be that the majority of victims (24.8%) were only victims of property crime, and property crimes tend to not have as much of an effect on a person's psyche as violent crimes.

It was hypothesized that people's perceptions of crime occurrence would be greater than the actual occurrence of crime. The literature conceded (Ackerman, et al., 2001). However, this was found to only hold true for murder and rape. For these two crimes, respondents' estimated rates of occurrence were much higher than the actual rate of crime. Yet, for all other crimes (domestic violence, robbery, assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicle theft, and arson) respondents' rates were much less than the actual occurrence of crime. The fact that the scale only went up to "occurs almost every day" could have affected a person's response. If the scale were higher, maybe they would have responded with higher rates. Perhaps, though, this goes back to the media's influence. The majority of criminal activity covered is violent --

murder, rape -- therefore leading people to believe that these crimes occur much more often than they really do. And media coverage tends to not hype up the "lesser" crimes, which lead the public to believe they occur much less than they do.

There is an ample amount of literature on all of these topics; however, the college student sample was not one widely used. In fact, I found no specific research relating to college students. There was also a lack of research on minorities and their fear of crime. The small amount of research I found was mainly concerning African Americans' fear of crime compared to whites. There is a plethora of information about the media's effect on fear of crime and how people's perceptions of crime are greater than the rates of crime. And there is plenty of information on females and victims' higher fear of crime. When it comes to perceptions of crime, the majority of the literature says it is due to the factors studied, such as gender, victimization, media, and so on. However, maybe there are more effects than those, such as school, professors, parents, etc. All in all, there is an abundance of literature of predictors of fear of crime and perceptions of crime. It seems to be a subject that has limitless possibilities.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

	%	N	
Gender			
Female	57.1	315	
Race/Ethnicity			
White	71.9	313	
African American	7.0		
Hispanic/Latino	12.5		
Asian	2.6		
Other	6.1		
Social Class			
Wealthy	2.5	315	
Upper Middle Class	31.7		
Middle Class	49.5		
Working Class	13.0		
Poor	6.1		
Age			
	Mean 19.53	Std. Dev. 2.18	313
Total Sample Size		315	

Table 2: Univariate Analyses (continued on next page)

Media Source			
	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Nat'l TV News	2.16	1.12	313
Local TV News	2.21	1.12	314
Radio News	1.57	1.18	313
News Magazines	1.34	0.99	313
Local Newspapers	1.91	1.07	315
Nat'l Newspapers	1.34	1.04	315
Internet	2.11	1.23	315
Media (all Media Combined)			
	12.60	4.70	310
Fear			
	28.26	15.24	315
Victimization			
Yes	41.70 %		314
Victim To What Crime			
Property Only	24.80 %		131

Violent Only	10.50 %		
Both Property & Violent	6.10 %		
N = 315	Respondent Perception of Crime		Crime Rates
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean
Murder	3.81	2.01	0.29
Rape	4.73	1.78	2.32
Domestic Violence	5.60	1.58	268.73
Robbery	5.80	1.46	19.81
Aggravated Assault	5.47	1.51	46.97
Burglary	5.75	1.50	71.12
Larceny	5.51	1.67	222.53
Motor Vehicle Theft	5.47	1.64	42.21
Arson	3.80	1.90	63.41
PERCEPTION	65.71	17.29	

Table 2: Bivariate Analyses (continued on next page)

Pearson Correlation			FEAR
Age			-0.012
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.834
Media			0.157
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.006
Nat'l Tv News			0.061
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.281
Local Tv News *			0.273
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
Radio News			0.084
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.138
News Magazines			0.15
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.064
Local Newspapers			0.031
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.583
Nat'l Newspapers			-0.009
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.881
Internet			0.074
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.188
Perception			0.174
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002
ANOVA	Mean	Std. Dev.	F
Social Class			2.123
Wealthy	33.00	16.95	0.078

Upper Middle Class	29.52	15.30		
Middle Class	26.22	13.96		
Working Class	32.83	18.22		
Poor	25.10	16.01		
T-Test	Mean	Std. Dev.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender *			-8.488	0.000
Male	20.82	12.36		
Female	33.84	14.83		
Race/Ethnicity *			-2.537	0.012
White	26.78	14.13		
Nonwhite	32.02	17.25		
Victimization			0.357	0.722
Victims	27.85	14.77		
Nonvictims	28.47	15.59		

* $p < .05$

Table 4: Perceived vs. Actual Crime Rates

	Actual Mean	Respondent Mean	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Murder *	0.29	3.81	31.113	0.000
Rape *	2.32	4.73	23.923	0.000
Domestic Violence *	7.00	5.60	-15.745	0.000
Robbery *	7.00	5.80	-14.525	0.000
Aggravated Assault *	7.00	5.47	-18.004	0.000
Burglary *	7.00	5.75	-14.830	0.000
Larceny *	7.00	5.51	-15.813	0.000
Motor Vehicle Theft *	7.00	5.47	-16.555	0.000
Arson *	7.00	3.80	-29.949	0.000

* $p < .05$