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Being Afraid

It is ironic that criminologists seem to have paid so little attention to the role that is played by human emotions in crime and justice processes. After all, much of what concerns the student of crime has emotional content (Karstedt, 2002). We have always argued that anger is an important crime motivator, and recently we have become more and more interested in the role that “hate” or “rage” plays in crime commission. Increasingly, the justice system concerns itself with the proper role that offender shame or remorse might play in the judicial or rehabilitative process (Braithewaite, 1989). Various victim movements have encouraged the view that the pain and suffering of victims and their families are issues to which more attention needs to be paid by policy makers (Weed, 1995). In court, impact statements are thought by many to allow for a cathartic release of anger experienced by many victims. In a different way, many have come to recognize that the socialization of criminal justice professionals must be attentive to the kinds of “emotional work” that police, prosecutors, and others are required to routinely undertake (Goodrum & Stafford, 2003). As compared to other social scientists, criminologists have been content to make assumptions about, rather than to probe, the emotional character of the processes they are interested in studying (Burkitt, 1997; De Haan & Loader, 2002; Katz, 1999; Thoits, 1989).

There is, however, an important exception in this regard. For the past several decades, criminologists have been keenly interested in the study of the distribution, causes, and consequences of public fear of crime (Lee, 2001). Who is fearful of becoming criminally victimized and why? How does that fear affect the ways in which we live our lives? What is the larger social significance of fear? What is the most useful way in which we should try to think about fear for research purposes? Is fear a problem, and if so, what should we do about it? Since the 1960s, a large body of research has been accumulating that allows us to speak to these questions. Of course, the research is less consistent in some respects than we would like it to be. It is also less methodologically varied than

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we might like. Still, it is immensely useful in any attempt to make sense out of how fear structures reactions to crime.

The present chapter focuses on these kinds of issues as we investigate the role fear plays in the development and maintenance of crime waves. Of particular importance, though, is the way in which rising crime rates (or a perception of rising crime rates) increase public anxiety. This is not a peripheral matter. For the overwhelming majority of people who are not themselves directly victimized, it is through such an emotional response that crime waves are personally experienced. As we will see, however, these issues are complicated. While we might expect rising crime to create fear, it can also be argued that fear can cause crime levels to rise. Added to this mix are political pronouncements about proposed actions that it is claimed will quell widespread anxiety. Proponents advocate all manner of programs (often punitive) that they say the public demand. These programs suggest important questions about the relationships involving rising crime, fear, and public action that require our attention.

We begin with a discussion of what is meant by “public fear of crime” as a research concept. Next we address the way in which fear is socially distributed in society. Most especially, we want to know if levels of public fear are related to rising crime levels and to the media habits most likely to expose people to information about rising crime levels. We then consider some of the wider implications of public fear in the context of crime waves. The most important of these relate to the use of fear for political purposes and to what some have argued are the consequences fear can have for the subsequent crime rate increases. The chapter ends with a discussion of some episodes in which fear levels become so extreme that experts in collective behavior often refer to them as cases of mass hysteria.

The Meaning of Fear

What is the “fear of crime”? Despite the ease with which newspaper editorials and angry political speeches speak about fear, it may be surprising to learn that there really is no simple answer to this question. Fear can be understood in a variety of ways both within criminology and across the wide array of disciplines that comprise the social sciences.

Most of us tend to think about fear in terms of its physiological dimensions. Being afraid—in the face of some immediate danger, such as an impending attack by an animal or a human predator, in a car that is spiraling out of control, or in a plane that seems to be experiencing serious difficulty—is associated with quite distinct and easily recognizable changes to our bodily functions (Kovacs, 1990). These physical adaptations to threatening conditions

are to some degree part of our physiological hard wiring and reflect our very long evolutionary past (Dozier, 1998).

From a physiological perspective, being afraid implies a series of complex changes to the endocrine system that alert us to danger and that allow us to react. These reactions, when the threat is immediate, typically involve “fight or flight” (Silberman, 1978). The heart rate increases rapidly and the systolic blood pressure goes up. Our faces blanch as blood flows to the brain and to the large muscle groups where it is most needed. The perception that everything is happening in slow motion provides a better opportunity to receive situational cues and react more carefully.

Most of what criminologists have had to say about the problem of fear has had little to do with these physical manifestations. The reason for this is quite obvious. Typically, researchers do not have access to people when they are actually afraid (and thus reacting physiologically). Instead, criminologists have focused on anticipated rather than actual fear. They have thus tended to think about fear more as an attitude or a perception than as a physical response. Most of this research has been conducted in the context of large standardized surveys in which hundreds, or sometimes thousands of people have been asked about their beliefs, feelings, or routine reactions regarding the threat of crime (Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987). In the context of social science, fear of crime is recognized as a “multidimensional concept” (Rountree, 1998). If one looks at the way in which fear has been defined for research for research purposes, it becomes clear that there are essentially three dimensions of the phenomenon in which investigators have been most interested.

COGNITIVE DIMENSIONS

Questions that focus on the cognitive dimension of fear of crime probe respondents’ beliefs regarding crime and victimization. Survey items might therefore ask respondents to estimate subjectively the likelihood of being victimized (Forde, 1993; Rountree & Land, 1996). Or, respondents might be asked whether they think their neighborhoods have more crime or less crime than other neighborhoods in the city in which they live. In a manner that relates very directly to the study of crime waves, they might also be asked whether they think crime rates are going up or going down.

Measures that focus on the cognitive dimensions of fear have at least one very clear advantage over other types of measures. Because they ask about beliefs or judgments regarding empirical realities, it is reasonable to speak about such perceptions as being “correct” or “incorrect.” In other words, if people say that crime rates are going up, when our various measures of the crime rate say that they are not, we are able to describe the public perception as essentially incorrect.

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Research has documented, for instance, a tendency for people to overestimate both the amount of crime and the amount of crime that is violent (Kappeler, Blumberg, & Potter, 2000). It is also typically the case that people believe their own neighborhoods to have less crime than other places (even when this is not true). Given such errors in judgment, it is perhaps reasonable to think about the steps we might take to correct the misperception. This is not to say that the members of the public never get the facts right. Research by Mark Warr suggests that members of the general public can, for instance, accurately estimate the relative occurrence of criminal offenses. The principle that people use in this respect, according to Warr (1980), is the seriousness of crimes. In other words, they reason that more serious crimes occur less frequently than less serious crimes and thus that murders are less common than robberies and robberies are less common than shoplifting.

The problem with questions that focus on the cognitive dimension, however, is that they seem to have relatively little to do with our commonsense understanding of fear (Rountree & Land, 1996; Sparks & Ogles, 1990). The emphasis instead is on the actuarial calculations that people make of crime levels and personal risks. Indeed, these kinds of cognitive judgments do not dictate how people feel about the threats crime might pose to them. For many people, the sense that crime is going up may not have very much to do with being afraid. The individual who relishes danger, for instance, could view situations of enhanced risk as exciting rather than frightening.

AFFECTIVE DIMENSIONS

Researchers whose work focuses on the affective dimension of fear tend to be interested, explicitly, in the feelings people have about crime (Williams & Akers, 2000). In many surveys, respondents have been asked about how safe they might feel walking alone in their neighborhoods at night. Alternatively, they might be asked how much they worry about crime in general or about the possibility of being the victim of any of a number of specific crimes (Williams & Akers, 2000). Other surveys have asked about feelings of satisfaction with personal safety (Sacco & Nakhaie, 2001). In all cases, the intent is to get at something more like an emotional reaction than like a cognitive assessment.

An examination of the kinds of questions that researchers use to assess the affective dimensions of fear reveals that they approximate our everyday understanding of the concept. Unlike cognitive measures, however, there is no way we can really talk about which perceptions are correct or incorrect. Unlike an estimate of the probability of being victimized, our feelings about being victimized are not really right or wrong.

Interesting in this respect, though, is the widespread tendency of fear of crime researchers to talk about the rationality or irrationality of fear. The

argument in this regard is that, given the real-world risks that some groups (like the elderly) actually face, they are behaving irrationally if they express high levels of fear. Of course, such reasoning is highly problematic. To charge that some given level of fear or anxiety is irrational is to argue, at least implicitly, that people are more afraid than they should be.

With respect to affectivity, it can be noted that personal fear (however it is defined) is not the only kind of feeling that people express about crime, although it is really the only one that has been thoroughly investigated. Some investigators have distinguished fear from concern (Furstenberg, 1971). Whereas the former relates to personal anxieties, the latter concept involves feelings about the significance of crime as a social problem. Clearly one can be concerned about crime, as a relatively abstract problem affecting society, without being personally worried about being a victim of crime.

In addition, one might be afraid of crime without being personally fearful. In this respect, it is possible to speak about what Mark Warr (1992) has identified as "altruistic fear." This refers to the fear that each of us might have for others. The father whose daughter is away at university may feel anxiety or worry when she informs him that she is going to a concert featuring a musical artist whose shows in the past have involved lethal violence. In a similar way, adults might fear for the safety of their elderly parents, or spouses might fear for the safety of each other.

In a very different way, Jason Ditton and his colleagues (Ditton, Bannister, Gilchrist, & Farrall, 1999) have written about how our almost exclusive attention to feelings of fear or anxiety has neglected other kinds of powerful feelings, most notably anger. Their research shows that when people are asked about their feelings of fear *and* their feelings of anger in the same survey, they are more likely to report the latter rather than the former type of emotion. Unfortunately, to date, very little research has been done on the subject of anger about crime or about related feelings like rage or the desire for retaliation (Craig, 1999).

BEHAVIORAL DIMENSIONS

It is possible to think about crime in terms of what people do rather than in terms of what people say (Sacco & Nakhaie, 2001). So, for example, when asked what they do in response to crime, people might say that they stay home at night rather than go out, that they carry a weapon to protect themselves, or that they refuse to make use of public transportation. We might interpret such responses as measures of fearful behavior.

If actions do speak louder than words, it might be argued that such reports give us a more rigorous assessment of who is afraid and who is not. After all, we are not dealing merely with "feelings" but with more

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consequential behavior. On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that what we are usually dealing with is not really what we see people do but what they tell us they do. Dishonesty, bad memory, and a desire to gain the approval of the interviewer can all create a gap between actions and reports of actions.

How these three aspects of fear connect together is as much a theoretical problem as an empirical one. On the one hand, we can think about each of these dimensions as providing an alternative measure of the kind of underlying phenomenon in which we are interested. Alternatively, some researchers have argued that we can think about these dimensions as being related to each other in some kind of causal process (Warr & Stafford, 1983). In this way of thinking, for instance, our cognitive perceptions of the world around us influence our feelings and these feelings lead us to behave in certain ways. Or, we might want to try to argue that the routine crime precautions we take serve to reduce our feelings of crime anxiety so that the causal relationship runs in the opposite direction. This would suggest that taking precautions should make people feel safer. Of course, in the context of cross-sectional research (in which measures of perceptions, feelings, and behaviors are gathered at a single point in time), questions about the relative value of these interpretations are answered only with great difficulty—if at all.

What Are We Afraid Of?

Criminologists interested in fear have tended to focus on a relatively narrow range of crimes. Either implicitly or explicitly, they have emphasized anxieties relating to acts of physical and property victimization, which typically involve strangers and that often occur in public places. We know considerably less about how much people fear intimate violence or corporate victimization. Critics charge this narrow preoccupation with stereotypical street crimes reproduces the very “law and order” mentality it claims to investigate (Johnson & Wasielewski, 1982). In other words, our starting point for what kinds of fear need investigation is not the perspective of those who answer our surveys but our own sense of what they are probably afraid of. In this way, the actual experiences of members of the population and their lived sense of who victimizes them can easily fall between the cracks.

A more fundamental issue here relates to the socially constructed character of what it is that frightens us. Our tendency to think about fear as an emotion can lead us to assume that there is something unalterable or preprogrammed about what or whom we see as dangerous. This is not the case. Our view of what threatens us is mediated by the cultural and historical context (Tudor, 2003). This is nicely illustrated in Sally Engle Merry’s (1981) very insightful investigation of fear and danger in a Philadelphia public housing

project. Merry's investigation revealed that the various ethnic groups that lived in the project had quite different understandings of whom to avoid and what sorts of places and situations threatened danger. In short, fearing crime is a social and cultural process.

Who Is Afraid?

Much research on the fear of crime elaborates what might be called the epidemiology of fear. Since the earliest studies it has been obvious that the tendency to worry about one's safety or to overestimate the risks of criminal victimization is not evenly spread in the population. Instead, some people seem much more likely than others to experience fear as a problem. Of course, the research literature is very broad and not always consistent, especially given the wide variety of ways in which fear has been defined for research purposes. Still, a judicious use of this literature supports some broad generalizations regarding the kinds of factors that seem to discriminate between those who are more and those who are less fearful.

GENDER

At the individual level, there is a strong research consensus that supports the view that women are much more likely than men to express concern about personal safety (LaGrange & Ferraro, 1989; Ortega & Myles, 1987; Pain, 1995). This appears not to be just a result of some tendency on the part of men to be stoic in interview sessions. Rather, the consistency of the findings indicates that there really is something quite different about the ways in which men and women think about their personal safety (Gordon & Riger, 1989).

There is no single explanation as to why these differences exist. In part, they reflect the simple biological truth that on average men tend to be stronger and bigger than women. When woman, as compared to men, contemplate the typical (male) offender, they contemplate someone who is likely to be bigger and more physically intimidating. A second factor has to do with the uniqueness of rape (or other forms of sexual assault) as a threatening crime. This is a form of victimization that almost exclusively affects women. Even if men and women feared other crimes equally, the addition of rape to the female fear equation would create an imbalance (Warr, 1985). Even more generally, we can recognize that processes of female and male socialization differ markedly in the lessons that are taught regarding sexual vulnerability. In short, the sexual socialization of adolescent females, much more than the sexual socialization of adolescent males, stresses the potential for physical danger of many types (Hamner & Saunders, 1984; Sacco, 1990).

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The unique vulnerability of women to violence generally and sexual violence specifically was pointedly illustrated by press reports of the escalating levels of fear among Iraqi women as “major hostilities” concluded in 2003. According to a report in the *Boston Globe*, women in Iraq were staying indoors, avoiding schools, and donning veils in response to widespread reports of kidnappings and rapes (Milligan, 2003). The degree of change in actual levels of predatory crimes targeting women is of course not easily documented under the kinds of conditions that prevailed in Iraq at the time of the report.

AGE

It is commonly believed that “the elderly” comprise one of the most fearful groups in the population (Clarke, 1984; Yin, 1980, 1982). Indeed several fear-of-crime surveys of the general population have shown that when the responses of older Americans are compared with those of younger Americans on standardized questions, older people tend to give more fearful responses. Many gerontologists have been quick to point out why this might be the case. Older people may feel less physically capable, may be less trusting, and may have much greater fear of the consequences that can emerge out of what others might consider a relatively minor victimization.

Some critics, however, have suggested that the matter is much more complicated (McCoy, Wooldredge, Cullen, Dubeck, & Browning, 1996). They contend that the tendency to find higher levels of fear among older Americans is a product of the kinds of questions that are used in such surveys (LaGrange & Ferraro, 1987). As stated, fear is often measured by asking respondents how safe they feel walking alone in their neighborhoods after dark. Yet for a variety of reasons (many of which are unrelated to crime) older people tend to make only infrequent use of city streets at night. This means that questions that use city streets after dark as the reference point may not yield a terribly accurate picture of how older people really feel. The suggestion that ageing brings with it a generalized fear of the world, a diminished sense of capacity, and irrational fears may themselves reflect an ageist understanding of the relationship between age and perceptions of safety (Pain, 1997).

RACE AND INCOME

Indicators of membership in an economic or ethnic minority group are associated with higher levels of fear of crime (Parker, Smith, & Murty, 1993; Will & McGrath, 1995). The differences involving minority status are not as strong as those involving sex and age, however (Skogan, 1995). Among those with lower incomes and among African Americans, for instance, the concerns

for personal safety and for the safety of property emerge as more significant problems. In part, minority group membership can be read as an indicator of lower levels of access to the kinds of resources other people can use to make themselves feel safe. Those without substantial disposable income may, for instance, be more reliant on public transportation and less able to purchase the locks or lights that might provide a greater sense of security. As well, income and race can be read as indicators of residence. The high degree of economic and racial segregation in American cities and differential distribution of crime problems across neighborhoods can mean that minority group membership brings with it a higher likelihood of residence in an area where the threats to person and property may indeed be more substantial (Taylor & Covington, 1993).

COMMUNITY OF RESIDENCE

Fear of crime varies across physical locations as well as across categories of people (Akers, La Greca, Sellers, & Cochran, 1987; Bankston, Jenkins, Thayer-Doyle, & Thompson, 1987). At the most micro level, we can recognize “hot spots of fear” (Nasar & Jones, 1993). These could include places that are poorly lit, where individuals might feel trapped, or where the environment offers many opportunities for a potential offender to hide. The movie cliché of a cluttered dark alley located off a deserted city street clearly illustrates what such a hot spot might look like. In general, the fear of crime is higher in more urban places (Belyea & Zingraff, 1988; Fischer, 1984). Cities tend to have higher rates of crime than small towns or rural regions. In addition, city life, by its nature, involves life in a world of strangers (Merry, 1981). In the public spaces of cities we typically encounter people who are strangers to us in two distinct ways. On the one hand, they are strangers in a personal sense in that we lack any sort of detailed biographical information about them. But often they are strangers in a cultural sense as well. This means that they are people whose public demeanor, style of dress, language, or ethnic membership may differ dramatically from our own (Lane & Meeker, 2000). Claude Fischer (1984), the famous urban sociologist, has argued that because strangers are less predictable than those about whom we have more knowledge, the public realm of the city quite naturally increases our apprehension about safety.

Fear of crime also varies across neighborhoods within cities (Akers et al., 1987; Austin, Furr, & Spine, 2002; Moeller, 1989). We tend to find more fear where we find more crime. However, crime is not the only environmental condition that has been linked to fear. Several researchers have argued that a whole range of conditions called “incivilities” or “disorders” also tend to increase feelings of anxiety (Kanan & Pruitt, 2002; LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1992; Taylor & Hale, 1986; Skogan, 1990). Such conditions include abandoned

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houses, public drug use, aggressive panhandling, graffiti, and loud music. In particular, gangs and gang crime represent especially troubling forms of disorder for the residents of many neighborhoods that already suffer from a variety of social and physical ills (Lane, 2002). According to one interpretation, such conditions are read by residents as signaling that no one really cares about these places and no one is in charge. It is this perceived lack of order and a widespread sense that there are few limits on what the environment will tolerate that make people feel more insecure.

VICTIM STATUS

It might be assumed that being a victim of crime is a major factor explaining the distribution of fear in the population. Once again, however, the effects are somewhat more complicated by both the meaning of victimization and by the research methods used to investigate such effects (Miethe, 1995; Sacco & Macmillan, 2001). Most important, much of what we count as victimizations in any of our tallies tends to be at the less serious end of the seriousness continuum. Simply put, theft is common, and murder is rare. There really is no reason why we should expect relatively minor crimes against property to have important implications for how we feel walking alone in neighborhood streets at night. Yet, as we would expect when we look at the effects of serious predatory crimes such as assaults, rapes, or robberies on fear, more significant effects of victim experience on feelings of fear do emerge.

Yet, direct experiences with (serious) victimization do not take us very far in explaining fear of crime in society. This is because there are many more people who are likely to report being afraid than who report being a recent victim of serious predatory violence. For statistical reasons this condition places limits on the possible size of the correlation between these variables.

ACCESS TO CRIME NEWS

As discussed in the previous chapter, it is popularly believed that the mass media are the major determinants of fear of crime, even though researchers have had a very difficult time documenting any clear and obvious relationship in this regard (Heath & Gilbert, 1996; Sacco, 1995). It appears that, overall, how much television people watch or how many newspapers they read doesn't have much to do with their levels of worry about crime. There are good reasons for this. A major one has to do with the essential irrelevance of much media content to the personal concerns of the average media consumer. In other words, reading about major gang crimes in Los Angeles may have little to do with the assessment of personal safety made by the reader living in, for instance, Middlebury, Vermont.

In contrast, as we have seen, much of the information that flows through our interpersonal networks may strike much closer to home. Hearing about the victimization of neighbors, friends, or family members cannot be easily dismissed as something that happens to some anonymous victim living in some distant place (Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). This is not to say that the effects of media on fear are irrelevant. It is just that they are more specific and more conditional than many glib observations have suggested (Heath & Gilbert, 1996). When media coverage, for instance, focuses on randomly occurring violent crimes that occur locally, media consumers are likely to express higher levels of concern about their personal safety (Liska & Baccaglini, 1990).

Do Rising Crime Levels Cause Fear?

So much of the research on the fear of crime conceptualizes fear as a kind of characteristic that some people have and others do not. In psychological terms, fear is treated more like a trait than a state (Gabriel & Greve, 2003). This tendency to view fear as a kind of enduring psychological characteristic that some people have and others do not simplifies a much more complex reality. More realistically, we might think about fear in situational terms (Charles, 1983). In other words, there are some circumstances in which we feel more afraid and others in which we feel less afraid. The point is perhaps most obviously made by comparing fear to other kinds of emotions. We probably all know people who always seem to be happy and others who never seem to be happy, although most of the people we know are happy in some circumstances but not in others. The same is probably true with respect to fear (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). Mark Warr (1990) has shown that both the novelty of a situation and the level of darkness can be potent signs of danger, and in combination they can have a powerful effect on fear. The presence of others, however, can be frightening or reassuring depending on who these others are. Those who are perceived as dangerous others and thus whose presence promotes fear rather than feelings of security are more likely to be young males—especially young males of minority status.

An important situational contingency in which we are especially interested involves the context of escalating crime rates. How are levels of public anxiety about crime affected when the levels of crime rise? Once again, the relationship is not as straightforward as we might expect. While some studies do in fact suggest that rising crime rates are associated with rising levels of fear (Baker, Nienstedt, Everett, & McCleary, 1983), other studies do not (Forde, 1993; Miethe 1995). A common problem, in this respect, relates to the finding that people always tend to think crime rates are going up—even when they are not. For instance, 38% of people interviewed as part of the British Crime

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Survey in 2001 reported a belief that crime had risen “a lot” in the previous 2 years. A further third of the population thought that it had gone up a little, and only about 4% expressed the “correct” view that crime had fallen (“Britain: Fear Itself, Crime,” 2003).

Upon closer examination, we might not be all that surprised by such a finding. This is because any attempt to understand the relationship between crime levels and fear levels needs to consider the nature of the mechanisms that mediate any effects the former might have upon the latter. Crime levels, of course, do not affect feelings directly but do so only through some sort of channel that spreads the word that crime is on the rise.

The most obvious such mechanisms, as we have seen, are the mass media. The relationships involving rising crime levels, media coverage of crime, and fear levels are quite complicated, however. Overall, it appears that the processes that drive the crime level are quite independent from whatever processes drive media coverage of crime (Lowry, Nio, & Leitner, 2003). One is not merely a reflection of the other. Mark Fishman’s (1978) study of a crime wave against the elderly in New York City, for instance, showed that intensified media coverage of such crimes in a number of newspapers and television newscasts was not inspired by any actual increase in the rate at which such crimes occurred. Overall, we do not really expect there to be much of a relationship between the amount of measured crime (as indicated, for instance, by the UCR) and the amount of crime we find in the news.

As we have seen, crime news coverage can have profound effects on fear—under particular conditions. Variations in coverage reflect news production dynamics, and not the dynamics that move the crime levels. Dennis Lowry and his colleagues (2003) studied the relative effect of network news variables and “objective” crime rates on perceptions of crime as the most important problem facing America. Their overall finding was that network television news variables accounted for almost four times as much variance in perception as did actual crime rates. They conclude that crime scares can have more to do with the ways in which crime is being covered than with shifts in crime levels.

Another complication concerns the fact that changing fear levels over time may be related to shifts in other kinds of conditions that might be related to but are in fact quite separable from changing crime levels (Skogan, 1986, 1990; Taylor & Covington, 1993). So, for example, over time as social disorder increases, people are more likely to become worried about their safety and the safety of others. As abandoned buildings, public drug use, panhandling, and other forms of physical and social incivility increase, they can steadily undermine the confidence people have in the local social order. Of course, levels of social disorder and levels of more serious crime are related both in space and over time, though they represent separate forms of community problems.

Even more broadly, the fear of crime may increase over time as a result of more diffuse kinds of social change (Bankston et al., 1987; Krannich, Berry, & Greider, 1989). In particular, as neighborhoods become more socially heterogeneous, anxieties about safety in public might be aggravated. In this respect, some writers have discussed the ways in which increases in levels of ethnic or racial heterogeneity contribute to a sense of discomfort on the part of neighborhood residents who feel that their neighborhood is undergoing a decline. Dramatic increases in the numbers of "strangers" make the environment seem less familiar and perhaps more threatening. Once again, we might expect these changes to correlate with changes in the crime level, but the correlation is far from perfect. The implication is that these more diffuse changes may themselves exaggerate problems of personal security.

Some analysts have suggested that, to a considerable degree, the fear-of-crime discourse in contemporary society is discourse about race and a fear of racial change (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). Thus, while it may be "politically incorrect" to express racist attitudes openly, expressions of anxiety about crime and criminals are usually regarded as perfectly appropriate forms of public discussion. What troubles critics, though, is the extent to which these fears and the political legitimacy that is attached to them are code words for anti-minority sentiment. Not surprisingly, much of this research has focused on the ways in which white neighborhood residents respond to the presence of and the crimes committed by members of minorities. There is strong evidence to support the conclusion that white encounters with black citizens provoke a strong fear of victimization (Anderson, 1999; Lane & Meeker, 2000; St. John & Heald-Moore, 1996). Several studies show that the presence of racial minorities in neighborhoods is associated with higher levels of fear among white residents (Moeller, 1989; St. Johns & Heald-Moore, 1996; Skogan, 1995). In her study of perceptions of and reactions to crime in a Philadelphia public housing project, Sally Merry (1981) found that concerns about safety were to a considerable degree rooted in the misunderstanding and distrust that characterized relations among the large number of ethnic groups that inhabited the project. The documentation of such patterns raises much larger questions about the historical tendency of media and culture more generally to associate particular ethnic identities with criminal stereotypes (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993).

Does Fear Cause Rising Crime Levels?

There is a less conventional way of understanding the relationship between rising crime levels and fear. While the traditional view emphasizes how increasing crime can contribute to increasing fear, another form of the

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argument directs our attention to the reciprocal process (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Skogan, 1986). In other words, how might fear actually contribute to crime levels?

One version of this argument emphasizes an understanding of how crime causes crime (Conklin, 1975; Goodstein & Shotland, 1982). In such a model, fear is conceptualized as the mechanism that intervenes over time between lower crime rates at one stage and higher crime rates at a later point. The process could be said to have several distinct phases. At stage one we observe an initial increase in crime levels, attributable to any of a number of demographic or cultural factors. At a second stage, news about the increased crime levels or details about the character of some kind of “new” crime circulate via mass media or word of mouth. At stage three we observe that a general escalation in fear occurs as people learn about the new threats in their environments. As they grow more afraid, they withdraw from their communities. Perhaps they become less trusting of others and less willing to speak to strangers. They stay home at night rather than go out. In general, they are less likely to make use of the numerous social and cultural opportunities their communities make available to them. At the next stage, we note that as people withdraw from the social life of their communities, the delicate social ties that bind community residents to each other are disrupted. This has severe consequences for the informal social controls that routinely regulate behavior—especially public behavior. As streets become deserted, for instance, they are less likely to be subject to informal community control. As the levels of social control decline, the opportunities for crime become more abundant. Less control thus allows more crime to take place, which further aggravates the sense of fear and worry. Thus, as the cycle repeats itself, crime levels can be expected to rise.

The so-called broken windows argument involves a similar kind of logic, except that the kinds of acts that precipitate the cycle seem more innocuous (Kelling & Coles, 1998; Skogan, 1990; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). When the various kinds of disorder that we have already discussed—like public drinking, panhandling, noisy neighbors, or graffiti—go unchecked, a message is sent to the lawful as well as the lawless that no one really cares about the need to maintain public order (Skogan, 1990). The law-abiding will find the situation threatening and as they become more and more afraid, they will seek to avoid the kinds of public environments in which disorder is pervasive. Those who are inclined to engage in lawbreaking will, however, view the disorder differently. To them it is a sign that the local social order seems most willing to tolerate widespread disobedience of traditional norms of urban civility. It might also communicate that any environment that tolerates widespread disorder will also tolerate more serious breaches of the criminal law. For the potential offender, then, declining social order signals greater opportunity to do whatever one wants to do, irrespective of what the law or traditional public morality might seem to require.

Thus, problems of disorder become more serious crime problems through the intervening processes of crime and withdrawal from city life. It is in this way that one broken window in an abandoned building becomes many broken windows (Wilson & Kelling, 1982).

How might such spirals, once set in motion, come to an end? One answer to this question has been provided by Alan Liska and Barbara Warner (1991). Their starting point is routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979). In a very general way, they argue, routine activities theory maintains that social patterns that separate people from their property and that keep them away from family and friends create greater opportunity for predatory crime. Liska and Warner agree that public reactions to crimes like robbery may be that people avoid going out. Worry about the danger of the public sphere may lead people to seek out those environments (especially the home) in which they are more like to feel at ease. Of course, when people do this in large numbers, the cumulative effect is to undermine community and to exacerbate the problems that characterize public space. At the same time, however, the cumulative effect of such actions is to increase the levels of guardianship that household members exert over their property (and over each other). The consequence may thus be an increase in social control and a probable stabilization of crime rates. The process is an ironic one. As the levels of some kinds of crime (like robbery) rise, so does fear. The effect, however, may be to stabilize or lower the rate of robbery as well as other kinds of crime.

In addition, it has become fashionable to argue that it is possible to undertake deliberate policy interventions directed toward the breaking of these fear-crime spirals. Some of the implications of and problems with these policy approaches are discussed in Chapter 7.

While these arguments are certainly interesting, they are problematic in some important respects. Perhaps most important, they lack a sufficient degree of empirical support (Harcourt, 2001; Taylor, 2001). In a very important examination of the broken windows argument, Robert Sampson and Stephen Raudenbush (1999) found little supporting evidence. Their analysis of data gathered from Chicago neighborhoods revealed that it was not possible to conclude that disorder leads to more serious crime problems in a manner consistent with the kind of model just described. Instead, both disorder and more serious crime have the same kinds of common causes—most notably structural poverty and the lack of a strong sense of community efficacy.

The (Ir)Rationality of Fear

Researchers who study the fear of crime, as well as many policy makers, tend to think about the fear of crime as some sort of pathology. In other words, they

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emphasize how the fear of crime lowers the quality of life. There are two major ways in which this approach is apparent.

The first concerns the focus that researchers place on the negative outcomes that fear has for social life. A large number of studies have investigated the relationships that link fear to decreases in trust, in fondness for the community, and in levels of community activity (Conklin, 1975; Hartnagel, 1979). Fear is thus seen to undermine the stability and cohesion of social life.

There are a couple of problems with this approach, however. The first, as we have seen, is a tendency toward hyperbole on the part of many who have written about the consequences that the fear of crime has for social life. The stereotypical image of the urban dweller, beset by powerful anxieties that make communal living next to impossible, lacks any real generalizability (Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978). To be sure, there are people who are affected in this way, but for most people the adaptations that fear requires are more subtle. Overall, it seems, the effects of fear have more to do with the ways in which people do things, than what it is they do (Miethe, 1995). So, for example, fear is less likely to stop people from going out at night than it is to affect where they go or whether they go with others instead of by themselves.

Another problem concerns the lack of attention paid to what might be considered the positive aspects of fear. The definition of fear as a problem neglects a consideration of its potential benefits. After all, in a world that objectively threatens us, a certain degree of fear is useful. Fearfulness might be problematic, but so might be an absence of fear. The opposite of fearfulness may not be fearlessness, but recklessness. To the degree that fear keeps us safe, it must be seen to be somewhat adaptive.

A second major way in which researchers and others have tended to focus on the pathological character of fear concerns the attention paid to questions of rationality and irrationality. These questions concern the apparent gap between measured levels of fear and measured levels of victimization for certain demographic categories, particularly for the elderly and for women. In each case, it has been argued, fear seems to outstrip actual experiences with crime and as a result older Americans and women are actually "more afraid than they should be," given the real threats they face. Ideologically speaking, arguments about the irrationality of the fears expressed by the elderly and women come dangerously close to ageism and sexism. The argument seems to be that the fears of older people and women have more to do with an unfounded hysteria than with real-world experiences. How these groups end up being described in this literature is uncomfortably reminiscent of traditional descriptions by, for instance, many health care specialists who have complained about the unfounded concerns of women and older people.

These arguments about irrationality are highly problematic. In large part, this is because such arguments seem to suggest that we know how fearful

people *should* be. Realistically, there seems to be no reasonable way in which such a judgment can be made. How afraid should I be if I face a very low risk of a victimization incident that has very severe consequences? How about if I face a very high risk of an incident with somewhat less serious consequences? Both the risk and the seriousness of the outcomes are very relevant to how frightened people feel (Warr & Stafford, 1983).

The difficulties involved in any attempt to assess the rationality of fear are illustrated in the notorious case of the Washington, D.C.,-area sniper killings. In October of 2002, two individuals later identified as Lee Boyd Malvo and John Allen Muhammad were responsible for the murder of 10 people and the wounding of three others in a series of commando-style shootings. The randomness of the shootings combined with the fact that the victims were typically going about the performance of everyday tasks like shopping or filling their gas tanks created considerable fear in the population. Not surprisingly, the media coverage was almost hysterical. Halloween festivities were cancelled, schools went into "code blue lockdowns," and many people stopped doing anything that would expose them to a potential sniper in a public place. Were people behaving rationally or irrationally?

There is no simple answer to this question ("United States: The Logic of Irrational Fear," 2002). The murders took place in five counties with a total population of 3.1 million people. Over the period during which the sniper was active, there was one chance in 310,000 of becoming a victim. While the risks appear slim, they would have (had the sniper remained active) resulted in an annualized murder rate more than twice the rate of these Washington-area counties. Moreover, it is important to ask how people assess the risk of being killed by a sniper. There are several problems involved in any effort to make such an assessment. For one thing, the sniper was a novel threat, and people really had no basis for evaluating the risks of their own victimization. For another, one of the victims was a child and there is a tendency for people to overestimate the risks of uncommon threats involving children. Finally, there did not really appear to be any way to mitigate the risks of victimization. Routine precautions (not talking to strangers, locking car doors, etc.) provided no protection. Clearly, the issue of the rationality of fear is quite complex.

Another problem with these irrationality arguments is that the gaps that are assumed to exist between victimization levels and fear levels may be more illusory than actual (Donovan, 2004). In the case of the elderly, it is true that according to the best empirical evidence, older Americans, in the aggregate, have the lowest victimization rates of any group in the population (Cook & Skogan, 1990). As well, with respect to fear, we have already discussed how efforts to research fear among the elderly are characterized by some serious measurement problems. Yet when fear is measured in ways that employ terms

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of reference relevant to the lives of older people, the levels of elderly fear are much less extreme. As a result, the paradox involving victimization and fear among the elderly becomes much less paradoxical (Fattah & Sacco, 1989).

With respect to women's fear, the paradox requires a somewhat different resolution. Unlike in the case of the elderly, the problem does not seem to involve the ways in which fear is measured since findings about the higher levels of crime-related anxiety among women are pretty robust. Instead, the problem involves the ways in which traditional counts of female victimization have been tallied (Sacco, 1990). In short, the estimates of female victimization that have been used in the construction of arguments about the irrationality of women's fear have tended to underestimate victimization levels (Stanko, 1985). As many critics have noted, traditional victimization survey methodologies are not terribly good at counting crimes that involve intimate offenders or crimes that occur in private places. Of course, these are two very common features of crimes—such as domestic assault and much sexual assault—that rather uniquely victimize women. In addition, there is a whole range of fear-inducing events that, again, tend to disproportionately victimize women and that have not typically been asked about in the context of traditional victim surveys (Hamner & Saunders, 1984). Such events include, for instance, the encounter with the obscene telephone caller or the exhibitionist. When women's victimization experiences are measured more accurately, levels of victimization rise and the paradox is made less puzzling.

Indeed, the point about the irrationality of fear is more generally problematic. Efforts to map the social location of fear and the social location of victimization risk, "objectively measured" suggest several points of correspondence. Fear tends to be more of a problem for racial minorities and for the poor (for whom victimization risks are also higher). Fear tends to be higher in more urban places, where crime rates of most types tend to be higher. It is also more of a problem among victims of serious crime and within settings where levels of uncivil behavior are more common. All such relationships suggest the rationality of fear.

When Fear Goes Wild

Despite the rational character of much fear, episodes do occur in which fear appears to be out of control. Sometimes it is fed by the occurrence of real-world events, when for instance a serial killer or other type of predatory offender seems to strike at will and to defy apprehension. The public reaction to Jack the Ripper in 19th-century London (Curtis, 2001), to the Mad Butcher of Kingsbury Run in Cleveland of the 1930s (Badak, 2001), or to the Atlanta child killings in the 1980s (Headley, 1998) provide vivid examples of how

community life can be fundamentally altered, at least for brief periods of time, by an ominous criminal threat.

In other cases, however, fear levels dramatically escalate in response to threats that by all empirical indicators simply do not exist. Such incidents have been described as “collective delusions” (Bartholomew, 2001). These delusions typically involve the rapid, spontaneous, and temporary spread of some false belief within a population. The term *delusion* in this context does not imply any kind of psychological pathology on the part of those who are involved in this process. Rather it refers to the socially constructed character of the delusion. Among the best known cases of collective delusions are those involving the “phantom anesthetist of Mattoon” (Johnson, 1945; Rosnow & Fine, 1976) and the “monkey man of New Delhi.”

The episode of the phantom anesthetist or phantom prowler of Mattoon began on a late August night in 1944 in Mattoon, Illinois. At around midnight, a Mattoon resident had her neighbor phone the police to report that a prowler had opened her bedroom window and sprayed her and her daughter with a paralyzing gas. The police, however, upon investigation were unable to find any sign of an intruder. A couple of hours later, the woman’s husband returned home and notified the police that he had just seen a man running from the vicinity of their bedroom window. A second investigation by the police revealed nothing. The news coverage the next day was sensationalist and referred to the woman and her daughter as the “first victims” and warned of an “Anesthetic Prowler on the Loose.” No doubt the phrase “first victims” established a strong set of expectations and over the course of the following week, several reports of victimization by a phantom gasser were made to the police. The symptoms usually included temporary paralysis, eye and mouth irritation, dizziness, and nausea. In a few cases it was even claimed that the family dog had obviously been gassed since the pet had not barked at the intruder. Some residents, armed, silently waited for the offender to strike again. Others reported that they had seen him in the act of victimizing others.

As the number of reports increased, the state police were invited into the case in the hope that their advanced technology and greater investigatory experience might facilitate its resolution. Worried servicemen from Mattoon who were stationed overseas as part of the war effort, wrote letters home to inquire about the safety of their families. Within a week, “the city was in a state of fright” (Bartholomew, 2001) and vigilantes and volunteers began to patrol city streets. The episode reached its peak on the weekend of September 8 and 9 “as the gasser was seemingly everywhere” (Bartholomew, 2001, p. 101).

Within a couple of weeks, the episode came to a rather unsatisfactory conclusion. No prowler was caught and the number of cases being reported rapidly declined. It became increasingly apparent to almost all observers that there had never been a prowler. Several aspects of the case seemed curious

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(Rosnow & Fine, 1976). First, the symptoms of the victims resembled what have widely been reported in the psychological literature as the classic symptoms of hysteria. These include nausea and vomiting, sudden and temporary paralysis, palpitations, and dryness of the mouth. In addition, the police investigation was unable to find any physical evidence of the prowler. Finally, the anesthetic would have to have had some quite contradictory properties. On the one hand, it must have been potent and stable enough to act quickly and yet so unstable that it produced dramatic differences in its toxic effects. It was powerful enough to produce paralysis and vomiting and yet left no visible trace.

While it is difficult to determine with precise accuracy exactly why the episode occurred, several explanatory factors might be suggested, including widespread war-related tension and a general malaise and fear of the future. More specifically, the incident coincided with a wave of anxiety about the use of poison gas during World War II, a search for some escaped Nazis, and a local increase in burglaries (Bartholomew & Radford, 2003). It seems clear that following the sensationalist coverage of the initial incident, a number of people began to reinterpret more routine occurrences such as nighttime shadows, common illnesses, and unusual odors as evidence of the presence of the mad gasser (Bartholomew & Goode, 2000).

How can we explain the observation that almost all of the gasser's victims were women? A partial answer may involve the recognition that the women of Mattoon were acutely worried about the safety of husbands, sons, and brothers involved in the war effort. In addition, it may be that the representation of women was inaccurately portrayed by the researcher who investigated the incident. A subsequent analysis of the episode suggests that the extent to which men may have succumbed to the delusion was minimized by a research assumption that it is women much more than men who were likely to exhibit hysterical symptoms.

In May of 2001, CNN (<http://edition.cnn.com/2001/World/asiapcf/south/05/16/india.monkeyman>) and a large number of international media outlets began to report on a somewhat similar, but much more fanciful series of events that were occurring in East Delhi, India. The episode involved widespread reports of a "monkey man" who was attacking and generally terrorizing local residents. Over several nights, media reports indicated that dozens of people had been injured and at least two had died. In both cases, the deaths resulted from injuries sustained in falls, as in one incident a man and in another a pregnant woman attempted to flee the monkey man.

Those who claimed to have seen the attacker offered wildly varied physical descriptions. Many described him as hairy and ape-like. Others said he was an agile feline-like creature. Still others claimed that the attacker was very obviously human—an individual covered from head to toe with bandages or

wearing a helmet. He was variously described as having razor-like claws, superhuman strength, and an ability to leap across rooftops. The rapidity of reports in highly disparate locales led some to conclude that perhaps more than one person (or more than one creature) was involved in the attacks. While rank-and-file police officers may have not taken the reports all that seriously, the official response suggested otherwise. The commissioner of police told American news reporters, for instance, that officers would be posted on rooftops and that public areas would be kept well lit. As well, they had planned to fortify checkpoints at entrances to the city and to hold a series of public meetings. Such steps, it was hoped, would keep public panic under control. The police also posted a reward for information leading to the monkey man's capture and, perhaps most dramatically, they issued an order to "shoot on sight." All the while, armed vigilante groups patrolled the streets.

As in the case of the phantom gasser of Mattoon, the monkey man seems to have been the product of a collective delusion (Bartholomew & Radford, 2003). Despite the very high levels of real fear in the population, a detailed police investigation, an examination of forensic evidence, and inconsistencies in victims' statements all supported the conclusion that there really was no offender—human or otherwise—on the loose.

How then do we explain a city in the grip of fear over the threat of a non-existent monkey man? Once again several factors seem relevant. To begin with, chronic power outages and stifling heat put large numbers of people on darkened rooftops at night. In addition, the superstitions of rural immigrants combined with unrestrained media coverage to promote a climate of rumor and worry. The sight of real monkeys running free on the outskirts of urban areas (and occasionally attacking people) was not unknown and provided further grist for the rumor mill. As in the case of the Mattoon gasser, it is likely that early reports encouraged widespread reinterpretation of ambiguous stimuli like nighttime shadows, animal bites, and other injuries of unknown origin.

The cases involving the phantom gasser and the monkey man are not isolated examples of the phenomenon of collective delusions. The research literature on the sociology of collective behavior suggests numerous episodes throughout history. Surely the medieval witch craze and the satanic crime wave of the 1980s provide additional examples of widespread fear developing in response to predatory threats that did not exist. Other scares have revolved around the following:

- A Puerto Rican creature known as "El Chupacabras" that is thought to attack and prey upon farm animals (Bartholomew & Goode, 2000)
- "Spring-Heeled Jack," the scourge of early 19th-century London, whose predatory style anticipated that of the New Delhi monkey man (Polidor, 2002)
- A phantom slasher in Taiwan in 1956 who was thought to be indiscriminately attacking people with a sharp razor (Jacobs, 1965).

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- Widespread reports of mutilated cattle and sheep in the 1970s and 1980s
- (Another) mad gasser in Virginia in the 1930s (Bartholomew & Radford, 2003)

In all cases, the fear that was generated was real and tangible, although the threat to which the fear was directed was not.

Conclusion

It seems rather evident that the fear of crime is a central feature of crime waves. As people begin to develop the perception that crime is on the increase or that crime is changing in qualitative ways that suggest greater danger or greater viciousness, an increase in anxiety is likely. To a degree, of course, the term *public anxiety* or *public fear* is somewhat of a misnomer. Evidence that we have examined suggests that the burden of fear does not fall equally on the shoulders of everyone. People who live in high crime neighborhoods, the poor, ethnic minorities, women, and city-dwellers fear for their safety more than the members of other social and demographic categories and will contribute disproportionately to fear increases. Moreover, people who share several of these characteristics may find fear a particular problem.

Of particular interest to those involved in the study of the relationship between crime waves and the fear of crime are the implications that rising crime has for fear. Several models available in the literature suggest that these relationships might be more complicated than criminologists have traditionally believed. One intriguing argument focuses on the way the fear response to rising crime waves (or rising levels of disorder) becomes an unraveling thread in the social fabric, which facilitates additional increases in rates of crime and disorder. While the argument demands attention, evidence to support the view that this process might be operating in any clear and obvious way is lacking.

A broader perspective on the consequences of fear requires attention to the political uses to which it can be put. Those who favor particular social policies or legal interventions often do so in the name of public fear. Politicians portray themselves as prisoners of such fear. Their approaches to the problem of crime, they tell us, are meant to assuage a terrified public that demands punishment. The argument is of course wrong on several counts. As we have seen, rising crime levels do not necessarily even mean rising fear. In addition, however, there is no strong body of evidence to support the conclusion that fear promotes punitiveness (Beckett, 1997; Stinchcombe et al., 1980).

Finally, it is important to note that fear itself—as distinct from crime—has been defined as a policy problem. Often within the context of community policing initiatives, program planners have asked what steps can be taken to reduce fear in the population (Scheider, Rowell, & Bezdikian, 2003). Indeed,

many of the specific strategies associated with community policing are intended to calm a worried public. Foot patrols, the aggressive policing of misdemeanors in public places, and crime awareness workshops have the alleviation of fear as their objective, at least to the same degree that they have stopping crime as their objective (Scheider et al., 2003; Thurman, Zhao, & Giacomazzi, 2001). Moreover, the evaluations of such programs often demonstrate success (Williams & Pate, 1987). Overall, it seems, it is easier to reduce fear than to reduce crime. Indeed, one might cynically suggest that the relative ease with which success can be demonstrated is one of the reasons why it became a policy objective in the first place.

Critically, it should be pointed out that “fear prevention” as a social strategy seems to proceed from assumptions that may not be correct. In the first instance, it is difficult to think of any other situation in which government resources are deemed necessary to change a widespread public mood. In addition, the implicit suggestion that fear is too high assumes that we somehow know what appropriate levels of fear are (we do not). We are also asked to assume that fear is irrational (which it may not be). Otherwise, why would we seek to reduce it?

