

Criminal Victimization Experiences, Fear of Crime, Perceptions of Risk,
and Opinion of Criminal Justice Agents among a Sample of Kentucky Residents

Kentucky Justice Cabinet

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SUMMARY

In this study, we used telephone interviews with a sample of Kentucky residents to collect data relating to four major outcome variables of interest. These variables included: (1) fear of criminal victimization; (2) perceived risk of criminal victimization; (3) opinions of criminal justice agents; and (4) self-reported victimization experiences for various offenses organized by property crime, violent crime, and sexual crime categories.

In an effort to make the sample as representative of the state as possible, we used quotas according to race, gender, and geographic location (rural, suburban, and urban). Despite the fact that the survey response rate was 26.15 percent (N=1,991), comparisons of the demographic profile of respondents with the state profile revealed many similarities. Nevertheless, the sample was not perfectly representative for education and income (the sample contained greater proportions of persons with higher educations and incomes) and age (the sample also contained a lower proportion of persons aged 18-24 years as well as a lower proportion of those 66 years and over). Although we feel we made every effort to make the sample representative of the state, we believe caution is still warranted in generalizing the findings of this study to the state as a whole. The findings can be generalized to the state population only to the extent that survey respondents display characteristics similar to those of the population.

In general, the majority of respondents were either somewhat or very satisfied with the various criminal justice agencies included in the survey, and overall, expressed greater satisfaction with the police than with other agencies. Over half of the respondents thought that crime levels in their communities had not changed over the past year, but nearly one in four indicated that there was an area within one mile of their homes where they would be afraid to walk alone at night. More respondents were fearful of property crime than violent crime

although relatively few respondents (under 20 percent) indicated that fear of crime had kept them from doing things they wanted to do. The activities the respondents most commonly avoided due to fear of victimization included walking/running/riding a bike at night and going places alone. On the other hand, a majority of respondents said they had engaged in defensive activities to guard against victimization. The most common of these were installing outside security lights and door bolts. Over one in four respondents had obtained firearms during the past year due to fear of crime. Most respondents did not rate their perceived risk of criminal victimization as being high. In general, the highest levels of perceived risk were associated with the crimes of theft and burglary, but even for those crimes, the average risk ratings were under 4 on a 10-point risk scale.

For every crime type included on the survey, the vast majority of respondents said they had not been victimized during the past year. Respondents were far more likely to have been victimized by property crime than violent crime in the past 12 months. The most commonly reported types of victimization included vandalism, breaking and entering (or an attempt at such), and theft. When respondents were asked about their lifetime victimization experiences with sexual assault, over 13 percent (including over 18 percent of female respondents) indicated that someone had forced or attempted to force them into some kind of unwanted sexual activity. Furthermore, over 11 percent (including almost 22 percent of female respondents) indicated that someone had forced or attempted to force them to have sex. For every type of crime included in the survey, some persons had been victimized multiple times.

For each crime type, a substantial minority (and, in some instances, a majority) of those who had been victimized did not report all their victimizations to the police. Crimes most commonly reported included attacks with a weapon, motor vehicle theft, robbery, burglary, and

vandalism. For other crimes, less than half of those who had been victimized reported their victimizations to the police. The most common reasons for not reporting victimizations to the police included beliefs that the police should not be bothered with minor victimizations and beliefs that the police either would not, or could not, do anything to help.

In the case of simple and aggravated assaults, persons who reported having been victimized most often said that the offender was a stranger. However, for the other crimes, the offender was more likely to be a family member, someone well known to the victim, and/or a casual acquaintance.

The design of this study also allowed a number of demographic comparisons. Compared to men, women were more fearful of crime, more likely to perceived themselves at risk of victimization, more likely to believe crime had increased in the last year, and more likely to be victims of sex crimes. Compared to non-whites, whites expressed more positive attitudes toward criminal justice agencies, as did respondents from urban or suburban areas. Respondents from rural areas were more likely to believe that crime had increased over the past year. When compared with non-graduates, college graduates expressed less fear of crime, were less likely to see themselves at risk of victimization, displayed higher opinions of criminal justice agents, and were less likely to be victimized by sex crimes across their lifetimes. In comparison to unmarried respondents, those who were married were less fearful of walking alone at night and less likely to be victimized by all crimes, except for lifetime sexual victimization. People with lower incomes (i.e., below \$40,000 annually) were more fearful of crime, displayed higher perceptions of risk, evidenced lower perceptions of criminal justice, were more likely to think crime had increased, and were more likely to be the victims of both violent and sex crimes. Compared to non-victims, respondents who had been victimized by crime were more fearful of

crime, saw themselves at higher risk of victimization, and had lower perceptions of criminal justice agents. Victims of a particular crime category were more likely to be victims of other categories as well. Respondents who reported liberal political ideologies expressed greater fear of crime and lower perceptions of criminal justice, compared to those having more conservative ideologies. Finally, this study yielded some counterintuitive findings with regard to age. Consistent with what one would expect based on prior research, younger respondents were less likely to think crime had increased and were more likely to be victims of property, violent, and sex crimes. However, persons aged 36-50 were more fearful of crime than those over 50, perceived themselves as being at greater risk than those 18-35, and were more likely to have experienced sexual victimization in their lifetimes.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, a substantial body of literature has developed in the United States and other nations on the subject of criminal victimization. Broadly construed, this literature includes surveys of self-reported incidents of victimization for various crime categories as well as surveys of fear of crime, perceptions of victimization risk, and perceptions of criminal justice agents among the public. With national research suggesting that only about one-third of all crime is reported to the police via official arrest and crime data, such surveys have become an important component of the information used by criminal justice agencies and lawmakers in developing policy and determining funding priorities. The present research incorporates these topics into a survey of a sample of Kentucky residents.

In 1999, the Kentucky Criminal Justice Council collaborated with a regional university to conduct a baseline statewide victimization mail survey. The survey consisted of questions in three areas: (1) attitudes regarding the criminal justice system, (2) fear of crime, and (3) victimization within the past year. Self-administered surveys were sent to a random sample of 18,000 Kentucky residents, and approximately 4000 surveys were returned. Following the issuance of a final report by the primary university researcher in December 1999, Council staff conducted additional analyses of the data that compared results to national findings and highlighted policy implications.

In 2003, the Kentucky Criminal Justice Council, in collaboration with the State Statistical Analysis Center (SAC) and the Public University Research Consortium (PURC), submitted a research announcement for academic researchers in the PURC network to assist in telephone survey development and data collection for another statewide crime victimization study. On June 17, 2003, the Center for Criminal Justice Education and Research (CCJER) located within

the College of Justice and Safety at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) submitted a proposal and was shortly thereafter awarded the contract.

The initial research announcement stated that once all telephone interviews were completed, the database would be forwarded to the SAC for data analysis and report preparation. When the SAC Research Coordinator position was vacated during the data collection phase, the contract with EKU was amended to allow the CCJER to analyze the data and submit a written report.

SUMMARY OF PRIOR LITERATURE

Fear of Crime and Victimization in the United States

Even though the crime rate has declined dramatically since 1992 as measured by both police (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1993; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2003) and victimization data (United States Department of Justice 2003), many citizens remain wary, perhaps fearful, of violent crime. In the United States, many people argue that crime, and fear associated with crime, represent two of society's greatest problems.

From its inception, the General Social Survey (GSS), a national survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, has asked respondents the following question: "Is there any area right around here--that is, within a mile--where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?" In 2002, 32 percent of respondents answered yes, a smaller percentage responding affirmatively than in any year since 1972 (Maguire and Pastore 2003: 132-133). Nevertheless, one in three Americans still remain fearful of walking alone in their neighborhood at night, despite dramatic reductions in violent crime.

This concern about crime often has a striking effect in the lives of people. In fact, some scholars argue that fear of crime is a more severe problem than crime itself (Clemente and Kleiman 1976). Fearful individuals may not travel at night, may avoid certain areas that they consider "dangerous," and may engage in myriad other avoidance behaviors and adaptive strategies. Further, they may develop anger, hostility, and stereotypes toward the perceived source of their fears.

Until very recently, fear of crime was most often measured with a single item indicator. Ferraro and LaGrange (1987) determined that more than 40 percent of the studies they reviewed used a single item indicator of fear of crime. They argued, however, that fear of crime cannot be accurately measured in this manner. One measure commonly used in fear of crime research is the GSS question listed above. Ferraro (1995) and Ferraro and LaGrange (1987) suggest that there are at least two problems with this measure: (1) the question is a single-item indicator and the reliability of the indicator is unknown; (2) the question does not specify "fear of what," which may cause the question to measure something other than fear of crime.

Due to the aforementioned criticism levied at research that used single item indicators to measure fear of crime, other fear of crime researchers have incorporated questions asking about specific crimes to measure fear. These questions often ask respondents how "afraid" they are of situations such as "having someone break into your home while you are away," "being raped or sexually assaulted," and "being murdered" (LaGrange et al., 1992: 330) and often combine these measures into fear of criminal victimization indexes. In the vast majority of studies using these strategies, the fear of criminal victimization indices had reliability coefficients of .70 or above, indicating that they were reliable measures of fear (May 2001).

Criticisms notwithstanding, then, the most well accepted measurement of fear of crime appears to be multi-item indices assessing respondent fears of specific crimes, using words such as "fear" and "afraid."

In general, researchers using the aforementioned measurement techniques determine that: (1) females are more fearful of criminal victimization than males; (2) Blacks are more fearful of criminal victimization than Whites; (3) individuals with lower levels of education and income have higher levels of fear of criminal victimization than their counterparts with higher levels of education and income; (4) individuals who have been victimized by crime are more fearful of criminal victimization than those who have not; and (5) as age increases, fear of criminal victimization typically increases (see May, 2001 for review).

Perceived Risk versus Fear of Crime

Another recent critique of research in the area of fear of crime concerns inattention to the distinction between an individual's fear of criminal victimization and that same individual's perceived risk of victimization. Investigation into the distinction between perceived risk and fear of criminal victimization resulted from the persistent finding that women and the elderly are more fearful of criminal victimization than their younger and male counterparts, despite the fact that the elderly and women are much less likely to be victimized by crime (LaGrange and Ferraro 1989; Warr 1984).

Ferraro and LaGrange (1987) and Ferraro (1995) demonstrate that measures of risk of criminal victimization are often mistaken for measures of fear of crime. They argue that questions such as that used by the GSS to measure fear or "How safe do you feel or would you feel being out alone in your neighborhood at night?" (the question used by the National Crime Survey (NCVS) to measure fear) are asking people to appraise their victimization risk, not their

actual fear of crime. Furthermore, just because someone doubts that they will be victimized by crime does not mean that they are unafraid of crime. In the same manner, an elevated sense of perceived risk does not automatically lead to heightened levels of fear (LaGrange and Ferraro 1987).

Ferraro (1995) argued that many researchers confound fear and risk in their research and attempted to explicate the distinction between the two phenomena. He argued that fear is an emotional response, while risk involves a cognitive judgment. Thus, these phenomena are not interchangeable and must be measured individually. Ferraro argued that many researchers not only fail to make the distinction between fear of crime and perceived risk, they also fail to measure risk of criminal victimization at all. He cited several studies that have measured risk and argued that there are two basic approaches to measuring risk. One is to examine official crime statistics to provide an official or "objective" risk assessment (Janson and Ryder 1983). Another is to ask respondents to evaluate their own risk of victimization. Ferraro called this method "perceived risk" and cited several studies that have used it (LaGrange and Ferraro 1989; Warr and Stafford 1983).

The Gallup organization annually queries the American public regarding how likely they think they are to be victimized by crime (arguably, a measure of individual perceptions of risk of victimization). Americans were most likely to feel that they would: (1) have their home burglarized when they were not there and (2) have their cars stolen or broken into. Less than one in five were at least occasionally concerned that they would be raped or murdered (Maguire and Pastore 2003).

Consequences of Fear of Crime

Fear, depending on its intensity, is experienced as apprehension, uneasiness, uncertainty, or complete insecurity. One has the feeling that one lacks safety, a feeling of danger and impending disaster. One feels a threat to one's very existence, whether physically or psychologically (Izard 1977). As such, some individuals may change their day-to-day activities based on their fear of crime. For example, they may refuse to leave their house after dark, completely avoid speaking to strangers when they do go out, or refuse to walk alone (even in daylight).

On the other hand, there may be another group of people who, while still fearful of victimization, refuse to change their behaviors based on that fear. These individuals may adopt a proactive approach to fear by taking steps to alleviate it. A limited number of studies have attempted to examine the actions people take because of their fear of criminal victimization. These actions are generally grouped into two categories: avoidance behaviors and defensive behaviors (Ferraro 1995).

Avoidance behaviors, or limitations people put on their activity as a result of fear, are commonly referred to as "constrained behaviors" (Liska, Sanchirico, and Reed 1988; Ferraro 1995). Constrained behaviors include avoiding unsafe areas at night (the most common form of behavioral adaptation to fear or perceived risk of crime), avoiding unsafe areas during the day, and limiting or changing other daily activities (Ferraro 1995).

Whereas with constrained behavior, individuals place limitations on their conduct (e.g. avoiding unsafe areas), defensive behaviors involve an individual's rational decision to perform some type of action to allay their fear of crime. There is a wide array of defensive behaviors an

individual could possibly choose (e.g. installing security systems, buying a watchdog, purchasing a gun).

Again, the Gallup organization regularly asks Americans about the types of avoidance and defensive behaviors in which they engage. Their polls suggest that almost half (43 %) of respondents avoid going to certain places or neighborhoods because of a concern about crime, while one in three have a dog for protection, one in four have had a burglar alarm installed in their home, and one in five respondents have bought a gun for protection inside their home. One in ten have carried a gun for protection outside the home due to their concern over crime (Maguire and Pastore 2003).

Opinions of the Criminal Justice System

Most people have a great deal of confidence in the police-- data from national surveys suggest that three in five citizens (61 %) have "...a great deal/quite a lot" of confidence in police (Maguire and Pastore 2003). Almost half (47 %) have that same confidence in the United States Supreme Court. Typically, however, people react more favorably to police than courts (Roberts and Stalans 1997). While age and race significantly impact people's view of the police, these variables have little to do with people's view of the courts. Further, confidence in the criminal justice system has little to do with fear of crime, victimization history, or perceptions of crime (Roberts and Stalans 1997).

While numerous authors have examined confidence in the police and confidence in the criminal justice system in general (see Roberts and Stalans 1997 for review), scant research exists that examines confidence in local prosecutors, public defenders, jails, community corrections programs, or prisons. As such, further exploration of predictors of confidence in these agencies is needed.

Additionally, Americans have also been regularly queried regarding their opinion about changes in the rate of crime in their area. In 2002, for example, approximately one in three respondents (37 percent) to a Gallup poll concerning this topic suggested that crime in their area was going up, while approximately the same percentage (34 percent) agreed that crime was going down in their area. One in four respondents (24 percent) felt that crime had stayed about the same (Maguire and Pastore 2003).

Victimization Experiences

Annually, the Bureau of Justice Statistics conducts a household survey of approximately 50,000 households regarding their victimization experiences. This report, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) begun in 1972 to provide more detailed information on victims of crime in the United States, provides the most comprehensive data about victims available (United States Department of Justice 2003). Data from 2002 reflect the following: (1) victimization rates for both property and violent crimes were the lowest since the NCVS began in 1973; (2) approximately half of all violent crime victimizations and two in five property crime victimizations were reported to the police; and (3) the property crime victimization rate was over six times higher than the violent crime victimization rate (Rennison and Rand 2003).

Additionally, the NCVS data examine demographic traits of victims as well. The NCVS results annually determine that: (1) with the exception of victimization by rape, males are more likely to be victimized by both property and violent crime than females; (2) household income has an inverse relationship with violent victimization experience—in other words, residents of households with lower annual incomes are more likely to be victimized by violent crime than residents of households with higher annual incomes; (3) unmarried respondents are more likely to be victimized by violent crime than married respondents; (4) among adults, younger

