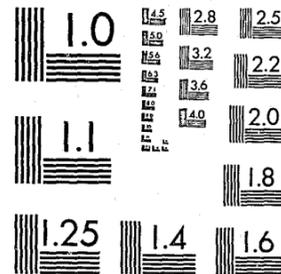


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Rex: *Sociology in Britain*

Steffensmeier: *Sex Differences in Crime*

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AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

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Fear of Victimization: A Look at the Proximate Causes*

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Abstract

Research on fear of victimization continues to overlook the proximate causes of fear, relying instead on tacit and untested assumptions about those causes. For example, it is widely accepted that Americans are most afraid of violent or personal crimes, as if the perceived seriousness of offenses were the only determinant of fear. Were that true, fear would almost certainly be immutable (how does one reduce the perceived seriousness of crimes?). Data from a 1981 mail survey of Seattle residents indicate that, among types of offenses, fear of victimization is a multiplicative function of perceived risk and perceived seriousness, these two factors carry virtually identical weight (i.e., they may precisely offset each other), and fear is not necessarily highest for violent crimes.

One of the more disappointing features of the literature on fear of victimization is the absence of research on the proximate causes of fear.¹ Since the advent of systematic research on fear of victimization in the late 1960s, investigators have been largely content to unearth general correlates of fear (e.g., age, sex, race), and attempts to develop causal models of fear have emphasized the more distant causes, including physical, social, and demographic characteristics of neighborhoods and media crime coverage (e.g., Clemente and Kleiman; Fishman; Henig and Maxfield; Lewis and Maxfield; Liska et al.). While intriguing, these latter studies typically rest on tacit and/or untested assumptions about the proximate causes of fear.

The absence of research on the proximate causes of fear, while lamentable, seems understandable. After all, the proximate cause of fear seems too obvious to merit discussion: one becomes afraid when confronted with the apparent likelihood that victimization will occur. Yet that

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reasoning obscures more than it illuminates. To illustrate, consider this question: Which offense do Americans fear most, murder or larceny (e.g., having valuables stolen from their car)? Given its higher perceived seriousness, and overwhelming agreement among researchers that "crimes of violence . . . are the focus of most people's fears" (McIntyre, 37), murder seems the likely candidate. Yet Americans seem well aware that the relative risk of violent or personal offenses (including murder) is substantially lower than the risk of property offenses (including larceny) (see Warr, a, b). But does risk enter into the cognitive equation of fear? And assuming it does, how are the two factors (perceived risk and perceived seriousness) weighted? The question is scarcely pedantic; it has profound policy implications. For example, if fear of victimization for various offenses were solely a function of the perceived seriousness of those offenses, then fear would almost certainly be immutable. Thus, it would be astonishing if fear of armed robbery in a particular community could be reduced by convincing residents that armed robbery was not a serious crime (to say nothing of the ethics of such a program). But to the degree, and *only* to the degree, that fear is determined by perceived risk, fear could be reduced by altering the objective and/or perceived risk (see Warr, b).

Obvious though they may seem, the foregoing questions and issues cannot be addressed—let alone resolved—under current research practices, because investigators have steadfastly declined to measure the perceived risk of victimization independently of fear (or, in some cases, even recognized the distinction); and have insisted on using so-called "global" measures of fear (e.g., "Is there anywhere within a mile of your home where you are afraid to walk at night?") rather than offense-specific measures, with the result that the particular offense(s) which respondents fear (and, consequently, the perceived risk and seriousness of those offenses) remains unknown (see Yin). The purpose of this paper is to examine the degree of fear evoked by a variety of offenses, and to develop and test a model of the proximate causes of fear of victimization.

A MODEL OF FEAR

We begin with the simple assertion that fear of victimization for a particular offense is a function of the perceived seriousness and perceived risk associated with that offense.² How do these two factors produce fear? Imagine a set of offenses constituting the possible forms of victimization confronting an individual or group on a particular day. Our question then becomes: How do the perceived risk and seriousness of these offenses act to order the offenses on a continuum of fear? A model positing simple additive (independent) effects of perceived risk and seriousness seems implausible. Why should someone fear a crime—even a serious crime—if it seems a remote possibility? Or fear a truly petty offense, even if seems inevitable?

By itself, then, neither high perceived risk nor high perceived seriousness seems capable of producing fear. Our conjecture is that high perceived risk and seriousness are both necessary conditions for fear, meaning that fear is high only if perceived risk and seriousness are *both* high, and is low if *either* perceived risk or seriousness is low. Thus, despite its high perceived seriousness, fear of armed robbery should be low if the perceived risk of that offense is low, and fear of a substantially less serious offense may be higher if the perceived risk of that offense is sufficiently high.³ Accordingly, we anticipate that, among types of offenses, fear is a multiplicative function of perceived risk and seriousness, i.e., $F = aR^bS^{b2}$, where F =fear, R =perceived risk and S =perceived seriousness. (For a discussion of multiplicative models in the social sciences, see Blalock).

Data and Measures

To test our model, data on the perceived risk of victimization, fear of victimization, and perceived seriousness of 16 offenses (see Table 1) were obtained in a 1981 mail survey of Seattle residents. The mail survey was chosen not only because it is relatively inexpensive, but also because fear of victimization appears to be a primary cause of non-response in urban surveys using personal interviews (Fischer). That is, surveys using personal interviews tend to undersample fearful individuals, a finding that is borne out by the fact that 18 percent of our respondents reported that they have refused to answer their doors due to fear of victimization.

The survey was designed in accordance with Dillman's methods for mail surveys. Respondents were chosen randomly from the Seattle telephone directory, and, to minimize the sometimes enormous attrition of such listings over time, the survey was timed to coincide with the publication of the 1971 telephone directory. One week after the initial mailing, all respondents received a reminder postcard. A letter and replacement questionnaire were mailed to non-respondents 3 weeks, and, if necessary, 7 weeks after the initial mailing. Of the 500 respondents to whom questionnaires were mailed, 3 percent (15) were lost due to migration, mortality, nondeliverable addresses, lost mail, or impairments which prevented completion (e.g., glaucoma). Of the remaining respondents, 71 percent (346) returned questionnaires, of which 98 percent (339) were useable.

Respondents' fear of victimization for each offense was measured using the following question:

At one time or another, most of us have experienced fear about becoming the victim of a crime. Below is a list of different types of crime. We are interested in how *afraid* you are about becoming the victim of each type of crime in your everyday life. If you are not afraid *at all*, then circle the number 0 beside the crime. If you are *very*

Table 1. MEAN FEAR, PERCEIVED RISK, AND PERCEIVED SERIOUSNESS OF 16 OFFENSES AMONG SEATTLE RESPONDENTS

Offense Descriptions	Fear		Perceived Risk		Perceived Seriousness	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
1. Having someone break into your home while you're away	5.86	1	4.50	2	7.20	8
2. Being raped*	5.62	2	2.51	11	9.33	2
3. Being hit by a drunken driver while driving your car	5.11	3	3.57	6	7.66	5
4. Having someone break into your home while you're home	4.49	4	2.72	8	7.72	4
5. Having something taken from you by force	4.05	5	2.61	9	7.48	7
6. Having strangers loiter near your home late at night	4.02	6	3.83	5	4.35	13
7. Being threatened with a knife, club, or gun	4.00	7	2.57	10	8.25	3
8. Having a group of juveniles disturb the peace near your home	3.80	8	4.25	3	4.30	14
9. Being beaten up by a stranger	3.59	9	2.12	14	7.63	6
10. Being murdered	3.39	10	1.29	15	9.66	1
11. Having your car stolen	3.35	11	2.72	8	5.77	10
12. Being cheated or conned out of your money	2.50	12	2.16	13	5.55	11
13. Being approached by people begging for money	2.19	13	6.73	1	2.15	16
14. Receiving an obscene phone call	2.07	14	3.87	4	3.18	15
15. Being sold contaminated food	1.96	15	2.24	12	5.53	12
16. Being beaten up by someone you know	1.04	16	.83	16	6.17	9

Fitted Equation: $\ln F = \ln(a) + b_1(\ln R) + b_2(\ln S)$

Estimated parameters:	$\ln(a)$	b_1	SE	b_2	SE	β_1	β_2	R	R ²
	-1.86	.94	.08	1.18	.10	1.02	1.05	.96	.93

*Female respondents only.

afraid, then circle the number 10 beside the crime. If your fear falls somewhere *in between*, then circle the number between 0 and 10 which best describes your fear about that crime.

The question was followed by a list of the 16 offenses, with an 11-point (0-10) scale printed beside each offense. To enhance comprehension, the phrases "not afraid at all" and "very afraid" appeared above the numbers 0 and 10, respectively.

The perceived risk of victimization and perceived seriousness of the offenses were measured using an identical question format. A list of the 16 offenses accompanied by 11-point (0-10) scales followed each of these questions:

For each type of crime listed below, please indicate *how likely you think it is to happen to you during the next year*. If you feel certain that it will *not* happen to you, then circle the number 0 beside the crime. If you feel certain that it *will* happen to you, then circle the number 10. If you think the likelihood that it will happen to you lies *somewhere in between*, then circle the number between 0 and 10 that best indicates how likely you think it is to happen to you in the next year. No one can predict the future, of course, so your answer will only be a guess. But give us your *best* guess based on your own circumstances and experiences.

There are many different kinds of crime. Some are considered to be very serious, others not so serious. We are interested in *your* opinion about how serious each type of crime is. If you think it is among the *least* serious, then circle the number 0 beside the crime. If you think it is among the *most* serious, then circle the number 10 beside the crime. If you think the crime falls somewhere between the least serious and the most serious, then circle the number between 0 and 10 which best indicates how serious you think the crime is. Remember that the seriousness of a crime is *only* a matter of opinion, and it is *your* opinion that we want.

Respondents were again reminded of the direction and meaning of the scales by the use of phrases printed above the scales ("certain it will not happen" and "certain it will happen" in the perceived risk question; "least serious" and "most serious" in the perceived seriousness question). Both questions were placed after the fear question to avoid cueing respondents to either criterion when they reported their fear.

The 16 offenses included personal, property, and public order offenses, and were chosen with a view to covering the entire effective range (across offenses) on each of the three subjective dimensions. The offense descriptions (see Table 1) were written in the passive tense, emphasizing (along with the prologue) that the respondent was the hypothetical victim in each question.⁴ In each of the three questions, the two offenses which lay at the extremes of the scales according to pretest data (e.g., those that produced the highest and lowest fear) were placed at the beginning of the list to give respondents an immediate sense of the range of the scales and thereby minimize clumping, re-scoring, and other potential sources of

measurement error.⁵ To offset response fatigue, the remaining offenses in each list were randomly ordered.

Findings

Table 1 presents the mean fear, perceived risk and perceived seriousness of each of the 16 offenses. Even a casual inspection of those figures tends to confirm the model. For example, while murder ranks highest on perceived seriousness, it ranks only 10th on fear, and the reason is obvious: the perceived risk of murder is very low (15th rank). Indeed, respondents are more afraid of "having strangers loiter near (their) home" than being murdered, because, despite its lower perceived seriousness, this offense is viewed as much more likely. For the same reasons (and with equal irony), respondents are more afraid of having their homes burgled *while they are away* than while they are home.

Furthermore, as our model implies, neither perceived risk nor perceived seriousness is *itself* a strong predictor of fear. Figure 1 illustrates the point. The upper histogram in Figure 1 shows the distribution of the 16 offenses on (mean) fear, where the offenses have been arranged in descending order. The same ordering of offenses is retained in the remaining two histograms, but the perceived risk (center histogram) and perceived seriousness (lower histogram) of the offenses are displayed. Clearly there is no close relation between fear and either perceived risk or seriousness, and, indeed, the correlation (r^2) between fear and perceived risk is merely .03, while that between fear and perceived seriousness is .31.

FITTING THE MODEL

The multiplicative model can be estimated using an ordinary additive model by taking the natural logarithms of all three variables, i.e., $\ln F = \ln(a) + b_1(\ln R) + b_2(\ln S)$, and the fitted model is given in Table 1. The model fits well ($R^2 = .93$), and is a substantial improvement over a simple additive model ($R^2 = .76$), though the two models, of course, are not hierarchical. The regression coefficients (b 's) for both perceived risk and perceived seriousness are highly significant (note that both are more than ten times their standard errors), but the most striking fact is that they are nearly identical. The unstandardized coefficients (b 's) are quite close (and their 95 percent confidence intervals overlap substantially), while the standardized coefficients (B 's) are nearly identical (1.05 and 1.02).⁶ Thus, the two variables almost precisely offset each other; an increase in perceived seriousness (and thus an increase in fear) can be counterbalanced by an identical decrease (in standardized units) in perceived risk.

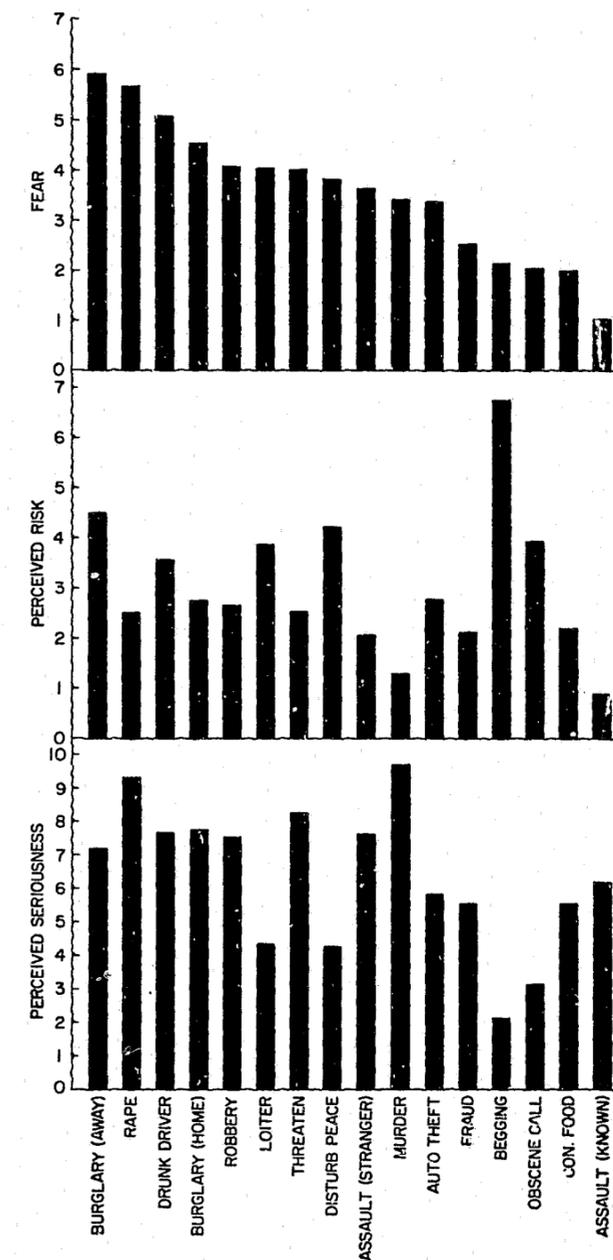


Figure 1. DISTRIBUTION OF THE OFFENSES ON (MEAN) FEAR, PERCEIVED RISK AND PERCEIVED SERIOUSNESS. (Note: The order of the offenses is the same in each histogram. Offense descriptions are abbreviated from Table 1)

Discussion and Conclusions

We have shown that, among types of offenses, fear of victimization is a multiplicative function of perceived risk and perceived seriousness, and that the weights given these two factors are nearly equivalent. The degree of fear evoked by an offense is *not* simply a function of its perceived seriousness, and, indeed, our findings only partially confirm the truism that fear is highest for violent or personal crimes.⁷ Note that in Table 1, fear is highest for a *property* offense ("having someone break into your home while you're away"). And if we compare each personal offense in Table 1 (offenses 2,3,5,7,9,10,16) with each of the remaining offenses (i.e., the property and public order offenses), we find that fear is higher for the personal offenses in only 39 (62%) of the 63 possible comparisons. True, given equal (perceived) risk for all types of crimes, violent crimes are uniquely *capable* of producing the greatest fear due to their higher perceived seriousness, but that potential is offset by the fact that the perceived risk of these offenses is typically low (in fact, the perceived risk and seriousness of the offenses in Table 1 are moderately, inversely correlated; $r = -.63$), and, just as importantly, perceived risk carries as much weight in producing fear as perceived seriousness.

From a policy viewpoint, the importance of this latter point can scarcely be underestimated. As noted earlier, were fear solely determined by the perceived seriousness of offenses, the prospects for reducing fear would be bleak. While reducing the perceived risk of victimization entails serious practical and ethical issues (see Warr, a,b), it appears to be an effective (and perhaps the only) means of reducing fear. Moreover, the fact that fear is not closely linked to the seriousness of offenses raises other important policy issues. In view of the consequences of violent crime for its victims, the reduction of violent crime deserves special priority. But that policy cannot be unequivocally applied when it comes to reducing *fear* of victimization. To use a stark example from Table 1, reducing the risk of residential burglary would do more to alleviate fear than reducing the risk of either murder, robbery, or aggravated assault.⁸ On the other hand, any substantial increase in these latter offenses could well increase fear enormously. So criminal justice policy-makers would do well to consider the balance of risk and seriousness in contemplating strategies for reducing fear.

It would be mistaken to view our findings as anything more than a crude preliminary step toward understanding the proximate causes of fear of victimization; a number of crucial questions remain unanswered. First, are the relative effects of perceived risk and seriousness the same for different categories of the population? Second, is the higher general fear among females, blacks, and the elderly (e.g., Clemente and Kleiman) attributable

to differences in their perceived risk of victimization and/or the perceived seriousness of offenses, to differential weighting of these factors, or both? Third, when an individual fears more than one form of victimization, is that fear cumulative, or, say, fixed by the offense with the highest perceived seriousness and/or risk? Fourth, for any given offense, what is the threshold of fear (i.e., the point along the risk continuum at which fear begins), and how does this threshold vary from one offense to the next and among categories of the population? Fifth, what is the *maximum* fear which different offenses are capable of producing (i.e., at maximum perceived risk)? These questions can be answered with our data, and in time we hope to resolve some of them. For the moment, our hope is that this report will encourage investigators to examine the proximate causes of fear. Unless they do, efforts to construct more comprehensive causal models of fear of victimization will remain futile, and, perhaps worse, programs designed to reduce fear (see Henig and Maxfield) may continue to operate without any firm theoretical or empirical basis.

Notes

1. We prefer the phrase fear of victimization over the more conventional fear of crime, because the latter phrase is often used to denote something other than fear of personal victimization, our intended usage here. Indeed, as DuBow et al. point out, the phrase fear of crime has acquired so many divergent meanings (including concern over declining social trust or "moral decay") that it is in danger of losing any exact meaning whatsoever.
2. Throughout this paper, the term perceived seriousness is used to refer to the perceived harm or damage associated with an offense, not to normative evaluations (i.e., the wrongness) of an offense. While the two dimensions are probably highly correlated, the distinction seems important (e.g., smoking marijuana or visiting a prostitute may be viewed by some as wrong, but not harmful).
3. Given the conventional use of global measures of fear, our emphasis on offense-specific fear will strike some investigators as odd. Aside from sheer convention, the use of global measures seems to rest on the assumption that fear of victimization is a diffuse affective state, meaning that the offense(s) that individuals fear are not always phenomenologically apparent to them. That assumption strikes us as implausible because, in open-ended questions, our respondents had little trouble identifying exactly what they were afraid of. Even were the assumption true, that surely does not imply that fear of victimization does not have identifiable sources. Moreover, as suggested earlier, the use of global measures precludes any assessment of *variation* in the kinds of offenses that people fear. Two individuals may both be afraid to walk the streets at night, but for quite different reasons.
4. The point was to ensure that respondents consistently reported fear and perceived risk *only for themselves* (as opposed to, say, other household members). The use of the respondent as the hypothetical victim in questions measuring perceived seriousness is unusual; our use of this technique reflected the growing recognition of vulnerability as a potential cause of fear, meaning that fear may be affected by an individual's ability to recuperate or replace losses (e.g., Yin). By using the respondent as the hypothetical victim, we have incorporated vulnerability into our measure of seriousness, i.e., respondents are directed to judge the seriousness of victimization *for themselves*. In fact, when the respondent is the hypothetical victim, we see no real distinction between the concepts of perceived seriousness and vulnerability.
5. Pretest data revealed that respondents sometimes "ran out of room" in using the scales. For

example, in the pretest version of the perceived seriousness question, murder was placed fairly low in the list of offenses. As indicated by marginal comments from respondents and frequent re-scoring of prior offenses (i.e., erasing and substituting new answers), respondents who used large numbers for the initial offenses had no way to express the higher perceived seriousness of murder. The problem was eliminated by placing murder and the least serious offense (begging) at the beginning of the list, thereby anchoring the scale.

6. The reader is warned that inferential statistics are not fully justified because the observations are not statistically independent, that is, each respondent rated all of the offenses.

7. We use the terms violent and personal crime interchangeably, since all personal crimes are either violent by definition (e.g., murder) or potentially violent (e.g., armed robbery).

The assertion that violent or personal crimes generate the most fear is found throughout the literature on fear of victimization (e.g., Blau and Blau; Clemente and Kleiman; Liska et al.; McIntyre), and the assertion provides an interesting footnote in the sociology of knowledge. After an extensive review of the literature, we have located over a dozen statements to this effect, yet not one of those statements is accompanied by supporting evidence. A few authors cite the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice on this point, but the Commission itself provided no direct evidence for the assertion. After noting that "recent studies" (no citations were given) indicated that "physical assaults against the person" are viewed as the most *serious* offenses, the Commission thereafter simply substituted the words "most feared" for "most serious" (50). But the irony does not stop here. Since violent crimes occur with much lower frequency than property crimes, some writers have chided the public for its irrational fear of violent crime, when in fact there is no evidence that these offenses necessarily generate the most fear.

8. Assuming, of course, that those at risk are *aware* of such a reduction (see Warr, b).

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