COPING WITH CRIME: FEAR AND RISK MANAGEMENT IN URBAN COMMUNITIES

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Introduction

The concept "fear of crime" has received a great deal of attention in social and evaluation research as well as in ordinary discourse and political life. It has received this attention, almost independent of crime itself, because of its impact upon the daily lives of many Americans. Unlike serious criminal victimization, which strikes only an unfortunate few in any given year, pollsters always find a disconcertingly large proportion of the population reporting they worry about the problem. Many who seem the most concerned about crime also are those for whom it objectively does not appear to pose much of a threat--including women and the elderly, who report relatively low rates of victimization in the Census Bureau's crime surveys. As a result, whenever surveys or other opinion-monitoring techniques are employed to examine crime, fear of crime measures are almost certain to be employed as research or evaluative tools. The fear of crime seems to be a social phenomena worthy of study in its own right, and a profitable target for public policy.

Most recent social and evaluation research employing the rubric of fear actually conceptualizes it in one of two distinct ways: as an object of concern or as an estimate of risk. Those who conceptualize fear as estimates of risk of victimization essentially ask respondents, "How likely is it to happen to you?" For example, in a recent evaluation of a community crime prevention program in Hartford, Conn., Fowler et. al. (1978) measured the impact of the program on fear using a measure of risk. They asked each respondent, on "a scale from 0 to 10," to estimate "during the course

of a year, how likely it is that someone would break into your (house/apartment) when no one is home?" Estimates of risk also were gathered to evaluate the Kansas City Preventive Patrol experiment (Kelling et. al., 1974).

Those who think of fear as concern about victimization, on the other hand, essentially ask, "How bad is it for you around here?" A typical operationalization in this genre is the common survey question, "How safe do you feel or would you feel alone on the streets of your neighborhood at night?" This wording was recently used by Anne Schneider (Schneider and Reiter, 1975) in a correlational evaluation of the impact of a high-intensity street lighting program in Portland, Oregon.

These two conceptualizations of fear would seem to tap quite different phenomena. "Concern" questions ask about the world "out there" and how it might make you feel if you were exposed to its dangers. Risk questions, on the other hand, ask how likely they are actually to happen to you. The effect of crime on our lives would seem to be the things that intercede between the two. These are things that people do in response to their assessment of how bad things could be that bring their risks within acceptable limits. We call these "coping with crime."

Based on how we assess our environment, there are at least two things that people can do on a daily basis to cope with crime: they can act to reduce their exposure to risk, and they can engage in defensive tactics when they find themselves in an exposed position. By exposure to risk I mean physical positioning in a high-risk environ (which is both a temporal and spatial concept), while by defensive tactics I mean behaviors which are intended to reduce one's vulnerability to predation within a given environ. For personal crimes, exposure to risk is greatest in bad

neighborhoods, after dark, and in other conditions thought to promote danger. Defensive tactics against personal crimes include efforts to appear less desirable as a victim ("dressing down"), or too formidable (walking in a group). Together these comprise "risk management strategies," or the things people do to reduce their likelihood of being victimized. They are more likely to do these things when concern about potential victimization is high; however, while pursuing risk management strategies may reduce estimates of risk of victimization, the two should remain positively correlated. Defensive tactics do not always work perfectly, and almost everyone is forced by circumstance occasionally to brave the outside world. Coping with crime, however, should substantially ameliorate the linkage between concern about potential victimization and estimates of actual risk.

To reiterate:

a) the motivating force behind risk management maneuvers is concern about potential victimization; it is "exogenous" to this scheme, driven by such factors as neighborhood crime levels, personal vulnerability to attack, and episodic events;

b) concern stimulates attempts to manage risks, and those who limit their exposure to risk and engage in defensive tactics perceive less actual risk than their assessment of potential risks would lead us to predict;

c) those who assess their environment discomfortingly will continue to see themselves facing larger risks even in the face of these efforts, for they cannot always be pursued, and some times they fail.

Finally, all of these efforts should affect rates of victimization. One of the reasons why vigorous pursuit of risk management strategies should reduce perceived risks is that they should reduce victimization. While there are not data adequate for testing this assumption, available

evidence suggests that highly defensive and slightly exposed groups like the elderly in fact enjoy low rates of victimization as a result.

The Data

The data to test these hypotheses are drawn from a random digit dialing telephone survey of residents of three central cities: Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. The survey was conducted during the Fall of 1977, and has an effective sample size of about 1370, spread evenly across the three communities. A randomly-selected adult was interviewed within each sampled household. (For a more detailed discussion of the survey, see Skogan, 1978).

Each of the four concepts to be examined here was measured by two or more items in the survey. The measure of risk of personal victimization is constructed of responses to two questions. Each respondent was asked:

> For the next question I'd like you to think of a row of numbers from ZERO to TEN. Now, let the zero stand for NO POSSIBILITY AT ALL of something happening, and the ten will stand for it being EXTREMELY LIKELY that something could happen. On this row of numbers from zero to ten, how likely do you think it is that...

This introduction was followed by capsule descriptions of the crimes of rape, robbery, burglary, and assault by a stranger. Responses to these questions were then used to form an additive scale measuring risk of personal victimization. Estimates of the probability of being raped had to be dropped, for that question was asked only of women. Perceived risk of burglary, on the other hand, seemed relatively independent of the remaining personal crimes. Estimates of risk of victimization for robbery and stranger assault were strongly correlated, and together they formed a scale with a reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) of .83.

The measure of defensive tactics was constructed from responses to four questions. Each respondent was asked:

> Now I have a list of things that some people do to protect themselves from being attacked or robbed on the street. As I read each one would you tell me whether you personally do it most of the time, sometimes, or almost never?
>
> When you go out after dark, how often do you get someone to go with you because of crime?
>
> How about taking something with you at night that could be used for protection from crime--like a dog, whistle, knife or a gun. How often do you do something like this?
>
> How often do you avoid certain places in your neighborhood at night?

Responses to these questions were correlated an average of +.39, and factor analysis indicated that they were single-factored. Added together they formed a scale with a reliability of .71.

The measure of exposure risk was constructed from responses to two questions:

> During the past week, about how many times did you leave your home and go outside after dark?
>
> In the past two weeks, about how many times have you gone somewhere in your neighborhood for evening entertainment--to go to a show or somewhere like that?

In each case the exact number of trips was recorded. The two measures were only moderately correlated, +.35, in part because only a few people sought nighttime entertainment in their locality. Added together, responses to the two items formed a scale with a reliability of .55.

Concern about potential victimization is measured by responses to two questions:

> How safe do you feel, or would you feel, being out alone in your neighborhood at night--very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe, or very unsafe?
>
> How about during the day. How safe do you feel, or would you feel being out alone in your neighborhood during the day--very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe, or very unsafe?

Responses to those two items were very highly correlated, and together they formed an additive index with a reliability of .70.

These four indicators can be used to test the hypotheses about the relationship between concern about crime, risk management strategies, and estimates of risk. The bivariate correlations between each of them are presented in the lower quadrant of the matrix in Table 1. There it can be seen that concern about potential victimization is moderately correlated with estimates of risk of victimization, but that both are correlated as expected with measures of risk management. Those who report making more defensive moves also report going out less and thus limiting their exposure to risk as well.

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Table 1 goes about here

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The best estimates of the strength of these relationships are reported above the diagonal in the matrix. These correlations have been corrected to correct them for attenuation attributable to measurement error. The reliability of each measure sets an upper limit on the magnitude of the correlation it can potentially exhibit with another variable. Correction for attenuation adjusts the observed correlations in terms of these upper limits, to better approximate the correlation between the true score components of each of the measures. The formula for doing so is,

Table 1

OBSERVED CORRELATIONS, RELIABILITY ESTIMATES,
AND CORRECTED CORRELATIONS

OBSERVED CORRELATIONS		CORRECTED CORRELATIONS				Reliability Estimates	Mean	St. Dev
		Concern	Exposure	Tactics	Risk			
	Concern		-.54	.71	.55	.70	3.42	1.40
	Exposure	-.34		-.53	-.24	.55	4.99	4.12
	Tactics	.50	-.33		.42	.71	1.80	.659
	Risk	.42	-.16	.32		.83	3.16	2.88

(N=1178)

$$r_c = \frac{r_o}{\sqrt{Rel_1 \times Rel_2}}$$

where r_o is the observed correlation, Rel_1 and Rel_2 are reliability estimates for each measure, and r_c is the corrected correlation (Bohrnstedt, 1970).

Based upon these corrected estimates of the true correlation between the variables, concern about crime seems to be a powerful predictor of both exposure to risk and defensive tactics; those correlations are -.54 and +.71, respectively. As people become more concerned about the threat of crime in their neighborhoods they are likely to do something about it.

The psychological effect of engaging in these risk-management maneuvers can be assessed by examining how they serve to reduce levels of fear reported by urban dwellers, relative to their reading of the dangers of their environment. To do this we examine the effect of controlling for our measures of exposure to risk and defensive tactics upon the correlation between levels of concern and estimates of actual risk, using multiple regression. This analysis indicates that engaging in risk management strategies does ameliorate levels of risk to some extent: the correlation between concern and risk drops from +.55 to +.40, when we take into account what people do to bring the latter within acceptable limits. However, living in a fear-provoking environment still continues to be a major determinant of people's assessments of their likelihood of being victimized by personal crime, regardless of their best efforts.

The relatively small reduction in the strength of this environment-risk assessment linkage contributed by people's actions, 27 percent, suggests the limits of personal actions to cope with crime. The fear of

crime problem may be exacerbated by the fact that people cannot do much as individual citizens to reduce their perceived risks, given the environment within which they must lead their daily lives.

A search for subgroups in the population who do cope fairly successfully with crime revealed, interestingly, that it is the urban elderly for whom the gap between concern about crime in the neighborhood and estimates of personal risk of attack is the most extreme. Figure 1 charts the variables examined here, by age. In each case, the indicators have been converged to standardized scores to facilitate displaying them on the same scale.

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Figure 1 goes about here

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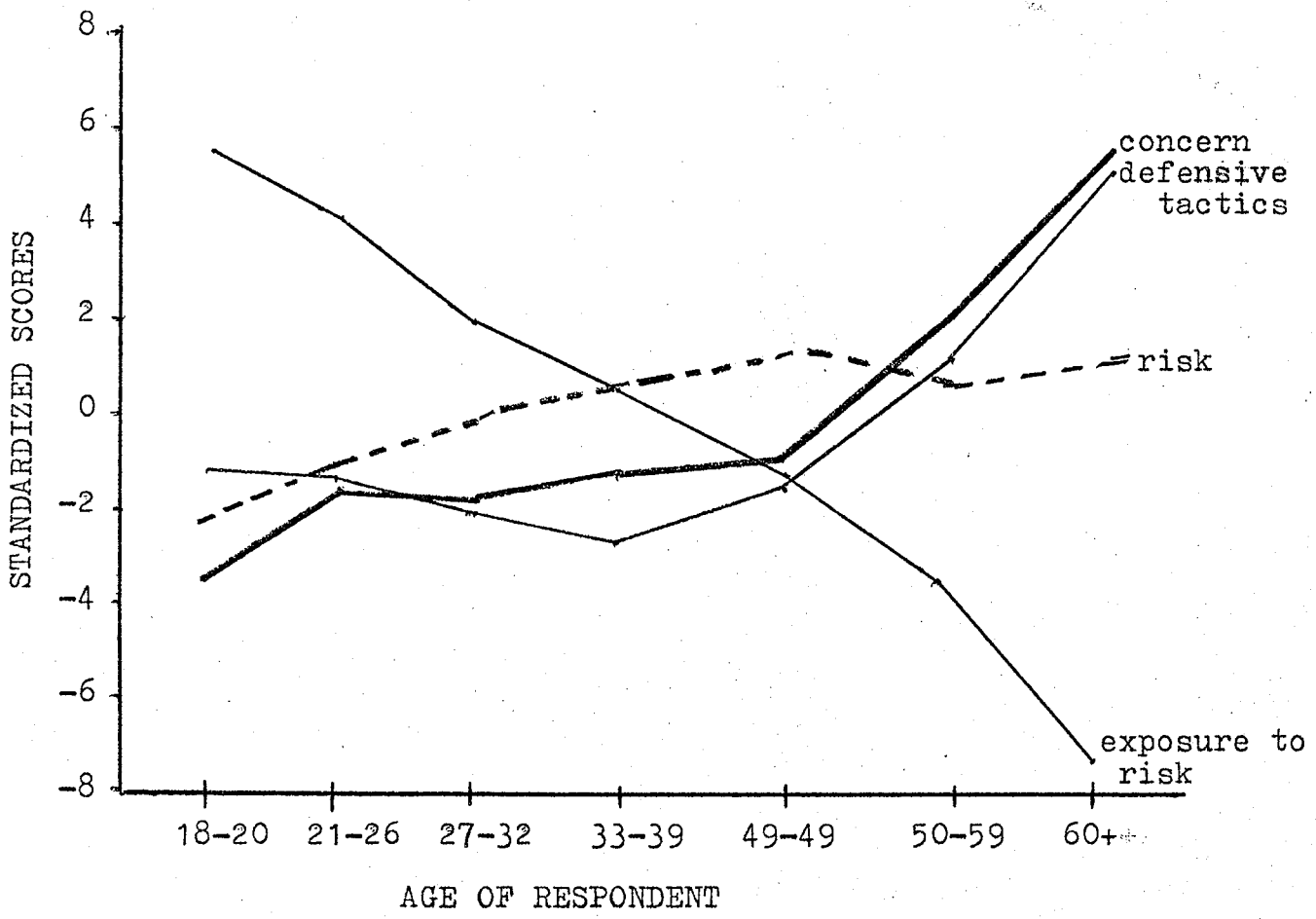
As we can see in Figure 1, concern about crime stays relatively constant across younger age categories, then begins to rise after age 50. The extent to which our respondents reported engaging in defensive tactics parallels concern about neighborhood crime quite closely. Exposure to risk drops steadily with age, generally paralleling concern with crime (but dropping "too" rapidly among younger age groups). Estimates of risk generally rise with concern about crime through the forties; however, after that point they fail to rise with increasing concern about crime, but rather pursue a more moderate course. It is among the elderly, who are by far the least exposed to risk and the most prone to take defensive measures when they are exposed, that estimates of risk of victimization are most "brought under control" relative to concern about neighborhood crime.

It may be, therefore, that estimates of risk of victimization are effected only when levels of risk management are extremely high. Among

FIGURE 1

FEAR AND RISK MANAGEMENT, BY AGE



those over sixty, 58 percent replied that they "never go out" in response to our questions about exposure to risk, which was twenty-five percentage points higher than those in the next most limited category. In the aggregate only 20 percent of those under sixty reported similar levels of immobility. Differences by age were just as extreme for the component measures of the defensive tactics scale, especially that asking about "going with someone" because of crime. In fact, by these measures only 25 percent of the elderly were at all vulnerable to victimization by street crime--the remainder either never went out or always went with an escort.

If these extreme levels of defensive maneuvering and very low levels of exposure to risk explain why the elderly report lower estimates of risk of victimization than they "should," they may also explain why rates of victimization are so low among this group as well. All recent analyses of the fear-of-crime problem among the elderly have pointed to the seeming discrepancy between their levels of fear (here "concern") and levels of victimization. This analysis suggests that the crucial mediating linkage between the two may be the fact that elders "cope with crime" more successfully (or at least more extensively) than most.

This proposition is impossible to test with any extant data, however. First, survey measures are necessarily retrospective measures, asking respondents about what has happened to them in the recent past, while most surveys ask about behaviors and life styles in the present tense. Thus, these data are more suitable for examining what victimization does to people's behavior than it is for asking what people's behavior does to their chances of being victimized. For probing the latter we need panel data which links people's responses to questions about victimization and activity patterns over time.

CITATIONS

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