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FEAR OF CRIME AS BACKGROUND OF PENAL POLITICS?

In this study quantitative and qualitative research methods were combined to examine the individual perception of fear of crime. In a first step, a traditional survey was administered to a sample of 293 subjects. Next, thirty subjects were subsequently interviewed in a qualitative interview approach to get exact information about the reasons for their feelings of fear of crime and if the information they gave in the survey were to be confirmed in the interview. Factors are expounded that contribute to fear of crime but usually remain in hiding with traditional survey methods. Results further indicate that a quantitative survey approach alone overestimates fear of crime. Implications for political decisions supporting harsher sanctioning based on such surveys are discussed.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Fear of crime has been of crucial importance in the political discussion in recent years. The call for harsher sanctioning and stricter measures against crime often are based on supposedly high rates of fear of crime gained in surveys. Since the 1990s, criminological research has shown that the fear of becoming a crime victim as a result of the political changes in Central and Eastern Europe and the accompanied growing migration was on the rise in the years after the iron curtain fell. But soon fear of crime has been declining again.

This increasing fear of crime found in research surveys and opinion polls has been persistently discussed in the media - and did not fail to have the desired effect on matters of domestic policy. Measures to reduce the supposedly high fear of crime rates were called for. Meanwhile, local crime prevention has gained an important standing in European countries. There is an enormous number of local prevention projects. The police in particular are responsible for the development, organisation, and implementation of these measures. The private security business as well has received a boost by the increasing feelings of fear of crime. There are only few sectors that have scored that great successes like the private security industry did.

Considering that fear of crime has such an impact on criminal policy and home affairs this shows how important a valid operationalisation of fear of crime is. Fear of crime is complex and concocted of several aspects that are hardly to be covered with only one item in a survey. Nonetheless, most surveys ask for fear of crime with the standard item inquiring about the individual fear when walking alone in the neighbourhood at night. This standard item has its origin in early US-American surveys. The more recent literature differs between the affective or emotional, cognitive and conative dimensions of fear of crime (Boers & Kurz 1997, Obergfell-Fuchs & Kury 1996). Do surveys covering fear of crime with only one single item really measure the fear of becoming a victim of a criminal offence? It may be that only a certain aspect of fear of crime or a completely different fear or concern is addressed. In addition, there are a number of different methodological approaches that may account for varying results. Differences in operationalisation, design of questionnaires, and sampling can exert a considerable

influence on the findings (Kury 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1995a, 1995b, Kury & Wuerger 1993).

More recent research findings question previous data on conservatively assessed fear of crime. Farrall (2003) and Farrall and colleagues (1997) presented studies supporting the thesis that the common way of measuring fear of crime with a standardised, closed question overestimates fear of crime.

The first study of Farrall and his team (1997) combined a quantitative with a qualitative methodological approach. In the quantitative part of the study a common victim survey on fear of crime, cognitive risk assessment, and experiences of victimization was administered to a sample of 167 randomly selected inhabitants of Glasgow. Within a month after this survey was completed, a qualitative interview was held with 64 selected subjects of the given sample. In addition to the quantitative survey approach, themes such as specific fear of crime, feelings of insecurity in one's neighbourhood, and possible avoiding strategies were addressed. There were surprising and considerable discrepancies between the findings of the quantitative and the qualitative part of the study. The qualitative procedure resulted in lower rates of fear of crime than fear of crime rates discovered in the quantitative survey approach. One subject, for instance, marked "3" on a five-point scale asking for fear of vandalism. When asked for the person's fear of vandalism in the face-to-face interview, however, the person did not mention any fear at all. Inquiring this discrepancy, it turned out that the item in the survey was understood as a hypothetical event by the very subject, i.e. if he or she were frightened if he or she would be exposed to vandalism. Similar false or divergent information were given concerning specific fear of crime.

Farrall et al. (1997, p. 671) also point out that even the formulation of an item or question can lead to a false assessment of fear of crime. The English term "worry" which is often used in crime surveys covers a broad spectrum of meaning: being concerned with something, being frightened or afraid of something, suffering greatly, or being bothered by something. A different connotation can cause different or even "false" interpretation. Previous research already could show that the formulation of questions, position and order of an item in a questionnaire but also the number of alternatives to answer can have a significant influence on the results (Kury 1994a, 1995a).

In 2003, Farrall published further results on the real extent of fear of crime. The study is based on a survey administered to 977 subjects, 925 of whom gave information on fear of crime. Sixty-five percent (n=602) denied any feelings of fear of crime during the previous twelve months. Twenty percent (n=183) felt a low and 15% (n=140) a high level of fear of crime at least once over the past year. Subjects who felt quite or very fearful of becoming a crime victim at least once remembered either a single situation (3%), two (2%), and three or four (1%) situations, and 8% of the subjects contend that they had fear of crime in five or more situations during the last year. This shows that fear of crime was experienced in few cases only. One third of the subjects did not experience any situation at all that caused fear of crime during the previous twelve months. And of those who remembered a situation that provoked fear of crime only 15% stated that they felt quite or very fearful.

These findings point out that fear of crime measured in traditional surveys overestimate real fear of crime. Farrall et al. (1997, p. 676) conclude that fear of crime highly depends on how this construct is measured. A traditional quantitative research approach like closed questionnaires in particular are likely to hugely overestimate fear of crime.

Based on these findings, the goal of the present study was to examine whether the results found by Farrall and his team could be reproduced and thus further supported.

METHOD

Inspired by Farrall's approach, quantitative and qualitative methods were combined in the present study.

In the first step, a traditional quantitative victimization survey was administered to the subjects. This questionnaire encompassed items referring to victimization, severity of the offences, strategies to avoid victimization, general life risks and signs of incivilities. The questionnaire also included the standard item of fear of crime ("How safe do you feel when walking outside alone in your neighbourhood at night?", Kreuter 2002). This item was placed at the beginning of the survey. The rationale was that questions of victimization would influence information on fear of crime, if the fear of crime item was put after items relating to an individuals victimization experience. The subjects could choose between the answer alternatives "very safe", "quite safe", "quite unsafe", "very unsafe", and "don't know". The aim of adding the category "don't know" was not to force subjects without a particular idea to one of the more substantial items. Kreuter (2002) assumes that fear of crime is something most of the people don't have a particular idea of. The standard item of fear of crime used in the surveys ask for something the subject does not have an opinion of, something about they did not really think of. In most of the surveys the subjects are not given the opportunity to say "I don't know" which may result in a distorted picture of fear of crime.

In a next step the qualitative part of the study followed. A qualitative interview was conducted with selected subjects of the complete sample. The interviews focussed on the extent and background of the information on fear of crime given in the survey. A pre-test was conducted for the applicability of both the survey questionnaire and the interview with its guidelines.

SUBJECTS

The initial sample consisted of 293 randomly selected individuals living in Freiburg, a city of approximately 200,000 inhabitants in the South-Western part of Germany. Subjects had to be at least 18 years old and German speaking. First, a household in which a potential subject lived was identified. Next, the selected household received a letter that gave information on the aim of the study and the procedure. In addition, the addressees were politely asked to participate. The target person for final participation in each selected household was the person that would celebrate its birthday next. The subjects lived in three selected districts of the town. The criteria of choice for these districts were different rates of crime load and fear of crime in previous studies in the districts (Oberfell-Fuchs & Kury 1995). The response rate was 49.7%.

Thirty subjects of the initial sample were chosen for the qualitative interviews. Twenty-four subjects could be regarded as highly fearful of becoming a crime victim and six as not fearful at all according to the survey results. The six subjects without fear of crime were included into further analyses in order to examine whether a trend could be detected that subjects exhibiting low fear of crime in the survey would show higher fear of crime in the interview. Since there were no results confirming this trend this group is not pursued in this paper.

PROCEDURE

A male and a female interviewer were responsible for the study. After the randomly selected households were again randomly assigned to one of the interviewers, the interviewers personally delivered the questionnaire and a date was arranged when the interviewer would return to pick up the completed questionnaire. The interviewer made up to five attempts to finally catch a subject given the person was not at home to the arranged point of time. When the interviewer met the subject to pick up the completed questionnaire he or she asked the subject to take part in a face-to-face interview. In such a case, the address of the subject was written down on the (anonymous) questionnaire with the subject's approval in order to be able to contact the person again, should he or she be selected for an interview.

RESULTS

Between 65.7% and 74.4% (depending on the district of Freiburg they lived in) of the subjects who had completed the questionnaire were ready to participate in the interview.

In a first step, the answers to all relevant open questions in the interview were used to predict the level of fear of crime a subject had given in the questionnaire in the standard item referring to fear of crime. In particular this meant that, on the one hand, the feeling of safety at night alone in the neighbourhood that could be derived from the data given in the interview was used to predict the answer a subject had give to this item in the survey. On the other hand, the individual fear of crime was also estimated by the interview data. In the survey, fear of crime was also operationalised by the standard item asking for the individual feeling of safety at night alone in the neighbourhood. Next, the random probes procedure (Schumann 1966) was used to distribute points after determined criteria to judge the correspondence of predicted and actual data. Results are shown in table 1.

Table 1: number of interviews depending on criteria of judgement

Criterion of judgement	Points	Number of interviews (estimating feeling of safety in neighbourhood)	Number of interviews (estimating fear of crime)
Clear reasons and exact prediction	1	12	9
Vague reasons and exact prediction	2	1	3
Completely vague reasons, prediction not possible	4	1	1
Clear reasons and false prediction	5	13	14
Vague reasons and false prediction	5	3	3
No reasons given ("don't know")	5	–	–

Each interviewer analysed all 30 interviews including the interviews her or his counterpart conducted. Inter-rater reliability was thus calculated for the predictions of the standard item and fear of crime. Inter-rater reliability was measured by the correlation between the interviewers' predictions. The correlation between the predictions of the interviews for the standard item was $r = .90$ (Kendall-Tau = .85) and for fear of crime $r = .89$ (Kendall-Tau = .85). Correlations of this order are satisfying and show a high degree of inter-rater reliability.

Exact predictions for fear of crime and for the standard item of fear of crime (feeling of safety when walking outside alone in the neighbourhood at night) could be made in

only less than half of the interviews. In only twelve cases fear of crime and in thirteen cases the standard item could be exactly predicted (line 1 and 2 in table 1). False predictions were drawn in 16 cases for feelings of safety in the neighbourhood and in 17 cases for fear of crime, i.e. the information derived in the interview did not correspond with the survey data. In 15 of 16 false predictions of the item "How safe do you feel when walking outside alone in your neighbourhood at night?" this item was underestimated, i.e. according to information given in the interview subjects felt safer than stated in the survey. Fear of crime was highly overestimated in the cases of false prediction. Comparing the information of the interview with the survey data this means that, according to the standard item of fear of crime used in the questionnaire, every other subject can be classified as highly fearful of a criminal act and very unsafe; according to the interview results, on the other hand, only two of the 30 subjects were classified as subjects with high fear of crime.

The results of this study revealed several factors that contribute to thoughts of victimization. In the first place, media reports seem to be of crucial importance. Eleven interviewees said that their ideas of crime depended on local or national media reports. The town in which this study was conducted has one of the highest crime rates in Baden-Wuerttemberg, the state of Germany Freiburg is located in. A meticulous inquiry showed that some subjects thought crime has to be a serious problem because of what they read and hear in the media. They rather rated fear of crime as a potential threat for "any" other people but not particularly for themselves. They rated fear of crime in the sense of what they thought might be "normal". Confronted with their judgement in the interview some subjects were surprised about it.

In the second place, an individual's estimation of the risk of becoming a crime victim considerably depends on his or her social integration in the neighbourhood. There was a significant correlation of high fear of crime with poor social integration. Subjects who were well integrated into their neighbourhood on the other hand exhibited only low fear of crime. Subjects living in the same high-rise-building gave greatly varying estimates of the safety in their neighbourhood and the extent of the incivilities (loafing youth, beggars, drunks, garbage, graffiti, and equal signs of dilapidation) depending on their social integration.

In the interview, the subjects also admitted that the fear of crime they had in mind while filling in the survey referred to a particular situation they had in mind like walking through a parking lot at night. We dare to say that it is not abnormal to have a feeling of uneasiness in such a situation. A general fear of crime is then derived from such common feelings of fear in those particular situations; even though the subjects do not feel limited in their freedom of movement and do not feel fear in other situations.

Finally, some subjects stated that they are annoyed by incivilities like drunks in the park. They wanted to express their displeasure with this situation but they do not feel even threatened. The survey, the question of fear of crime in particular, just gave them the opportunity to give their view on their annoyance. These dramatizations went so far that subjects claimed to have taken precautions of safety: Most of the safety measures at doors or windows mentioned in the survey could not be found when the interviewer was at the subject's home. In addition, subjects were asked to rate their personal concern with 18 life risks including fear of crime. As can be seen in figure 1, fear of crime fades in importance compared to other concerns. The fear of becoming a crime victim is mentioned in the last place only and by 12,0.% of the subjects at all.

Sixty-three percent of the subjects were concerned with the cost of living and 57.4% with their pensions.

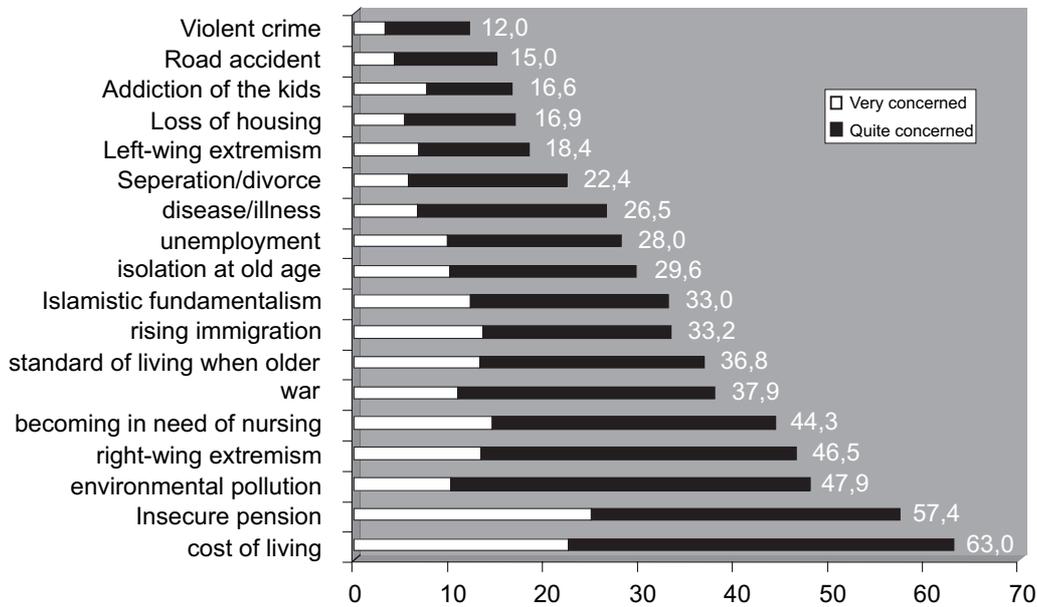


Figure 1.: Fear of crime compared to other social concerns in the present sample (percentage of very and quite concerned subjects)

DISCUSSION

Findings from the present study revealed that fear of crime is over-scored when measured with a survey approach only. In fifty-seven percent of the cases the feelings of insecurity when walking outside alone in the neighbourhood at night was overestimated in the survey. In 46% of the cases subjects were mistakenly rated as highly fearful of becoming a crime victim. Taken into account that in other studies higher fear of crime rates were reached by giving different answer alternatives even higher false rates can be expected for other surveys. In addition, the interviewers rated conservatively, i.e. in case of doubt subjects were rated as fearful.

After the method of the qualitative interview was added the previously found high rates of fear of crime were relativised. The high fear of crime derived from the standard survey technique could not be confirmed in the interview. It can be assumed that the subjects were invited to give "any" information as a result of how the questionnaire was designed. As could be shown by thorough inquiries in the interviews most subjects interpreted the standard item of fear of crime in some way or the other prior to answering it. As a result, not much of the original meaning the researchers put into the standard item remained. Thus miscellaneous aspects were subsumed under the standard item: the opportunity to utter one's annoyance about incivilities in the neighbourhood, the estimation of a "normal" level of fear of crime, or the fear of a particular situation in which it might be usual to feel uneasy.

The comparison of the importance of different personal concerns might help to further understand the construct of fear of crime. In the present study, a life risk questionnaire developed by the R + V Infocenter was administered to the subjects at the beginning of the survey. The fear of becoming a crime victim was mentioned in the last place only stressing that other concerns are far more important for the subjects than fear of crime. These data for the R + V items are comparable with the results of the most recent representative German survey conducted by R + V (R+V-Infocenter für Sicherheit und Vorsorge 2003): The major concerns of the Germans are a troubled economy (44%), increasing cost of living (44%), unemployment (44%), and becoming in permanent need of nursing (41%). Only 18% were concerned with fear of crime. Fear of crime falls thus back to the last but one position. These findings explain that fear of crime is greatly overestimated as a problem.

The results of the present study suggest that traditional methods to measure fear of crime overestimate this construct and thus supports the findings of Farrall and his team (1997, 2003). As Farrall et al. (1997) already assumed, the standard operationalisation of fear of crime rather measures a general feeling of insecurity than a specific fear of becoming a crime victim. Reports on falling or rising levels of fear of crime in a society cited in the media are hence not really reliable. It remains vague whether these trends really refer to fear of crime in particular or a general sense of security. The initially mentioned rising fear of crime rates after the political changes accompanied with the fall of the Iron Curtain might have also been an expression of feelings of insecurity connected with the far-reaching social changes. In addition, the social and geographical context is not taken into account in most traditional surveys.

Another German survey conducted by Boers (1995) showed that general fear of crime measured by the standard item was higher than specific fear of crime differentiating between certain offences. This overestimation applied in particular to female subjects and to subjects from the Eastern part of Germany. The difference between general fear of crime and the specific fear of being robbed was 15% and of burglary 23% for female subjects (Boers 1995, p. 13). In a survey by Boers and Kurz (1997, p. 203) some subjects had rates of general fear of crime that were twice as high as fear of crime rates for specific offences. These results further support Farrall's and present findings that fear of crime exclusively operationalised with the standard item leads to a distorted estimation of fear of crime.

To conclude, it has to be doubted that the traditional quantitative approach to measure fear of crime is a valid operationalisation. Fear of crime as measured in the surveys ignores the numerous aspects that contribute. Dramatizing, for instance, a natural sense of protection or disregarding social contexts leads to false assumptions and irresponsible political decisions, since not validly grounded. Fear of crime is extremely overemphasized, it is not that much of a problem in the life of people as often portrayed. Nevertheless, supposedly trustworthy research results from traditional surveys are presented – not say misused - to give reasons for harsher preventive measures and more restrictive actions against criminal offenders. This kind of policy can give the impression that fear of crime has to be eradicated even though it seems to be "normal" to be afraid of certain situations.

Further research is needed to develop more precise methods for measuring fear of crime. In addition, the meaning and importance of fear of crime in the context of other risk factors and concerns have to be studied.

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