Fear of crime – a brief summary of the literature

Fear of crime is nothing new. However, fear of crime became a topic of serious criminological enquiry in the 1970s and 1980s in the UK, United States, and Canada. Through the 1980s and 1990s crime rose rapidly, but after the 1990s in these countries most forms of crime against people and property dropped steeply. Research on fear of crime, however, has continued.

**Defining fear of crime**

Fear of crime is generally described as an emotional response to a danger or threat of an actual or potential criminal incident. However, there are a number of different aspects to fear of crime. Early literature was criticised for failing to differentiate between fear and perceived risk. For example, a person might be very afraid of being murdered, but actually rate the risk of that happening as very low. Many surveys ask respondents how ‘worried’ they are about becoming a victim of crime, sometimes specificizing particular sorts of crimes (e.g. being burgled). Others ask about fear or anxiety. Ideally, surveys would ask about both perceived risk, fear, and worry, while providing a scale for respondents (such as 1-5) rather than fearful or not fearful.

**Why does fear of crime matter?**

Fear of crime does not always reflect actual crime rates – that is, people are often more fearful of crime than their actual risk of being victimised. Nonetheless, there are a number of reasons why fear of crime can become a social problem. First, on a personal level, fear of crime can cause extreme anxiety that is detrimental to people’s quality of life and mental health. At a social level, it can lead to prejudice and segregation. Richer people may withdraw to areas such as gated communities to protect themselves and their property, which might displace crime to poorer areas. Fear of crime may also lead to vigilantism, which can become a major safety concern for police.

**What factors are associated with fear of crime?**

There are a number of factors at the level of the individual that are associated with fear of crime. The most consistent of these is gender, with women reporting more fear of crime than men. However, men are much more likely to be victims of crime than women. Nonetheless, women consistently report more fear of crime in many different countries. There are a number of theoretical explanations for this paradox. One is the ‘shadow of sexual assault’ hypothesis, which posits that because women are more likely to be victims of sexual assault, and that many crimes (e.g. burglary) have the potential to involve sexual assault, this fear of assault generalises to a greater fear of all crime. Other explanations involve gender socialisation. Women tend to be socialised to believe they need protection from others, especially strangers in public places, which can normalise fear of crime amongst women. Conversely, men may have been socialised to believe that showing fear is a sign of weakness, normalising lower levels of fear of crime amongst men.

Age has been studied with regard to fear of crime for some time, but the relationship between the two is complex. In some studies, older adults report more fear of crime, possibly due to perceived physical vulnerabilities. On the other hand, other studies also show that younger people (who are actually more likely to be victims of crime) tend to fear crime more than older people.

There has not been quite as much research on fear of crime and ethnicity. In the USA, research shows that African Americans are more likely to fear crime than White Americans. This may be because they tend to live in poorer, higher-crime areas. However, less is known about how fear of crime is related to ethnicity in other countries.

Similar to ethnicity, people with lower socio-economic status have been found in some studies to be more fearful of crime. Again, this may be because of living in more crime-prone areas. Exposure to crime may also be higher; for instance, poorer people may have to use public transport, or not be in a position to make their homes more secure through installing alarms and other security measures.

Researchers have also examined contextual factors relating to fear of crime. Prominent amongst these is neighbourhood disorder. If people perceive that their neighbourhoods are untidy, unsafe, and disorganised, they may believe that this signals a crime problem, and that they may become victims. In general, higher levels of neighbourhood disorder (such as rubbish in the street or rundown buildings) tend to be associated with more fear of crime amongst residents.

**Gaps in the literature**

Fear of crime is complex, and researchers are still working to understand it. There are a number of questions still to be explored. One is the role of actual victimisation. It might be assumed that experiencing crime would increase fear of crime, but this is not always the case. As noted above, findings about the role of age in fear of crime are inconsistent in the literature, and ethnicity is understudied. In addition, many researchers have called for more research on the consequences of fear of crime, in terms of mental health and how people may change their behaviour in response to fear of crime. Finally, fear of cyber-crime is a growing field of research.