

## 8 The Fear of Crime and Its Behavioral Implications\*

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### INTRODUCTION

In the decade-and-a-half since victimization surveys were conducted in the US for the Crime Commission there has been a great deal of descriptive research on "fear of crime." Under this headline pollsters have revealed that people rate their chances of being victimized as moderate (below, for example, being involved in an auto accident), but substantial numbers of Americans fear to walk somewhere not far from where they live, and virtually everyone thinks crime is increasing.

This chapter summarizes some of this research, proposing three simple concepts by which many of these descriptive findings can be categorized: they are beliefs about crime, assessments of risk of victimization, and perceived threat of crime. The two latter categories turn out to deserve the general appellation "fear of crime," although they are conceptually distinct and measure somewhat different things.

However, the next section of the chapter argues that the most important manifestation of fear of crime is its implications for

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*behavior*. This raises at least two problems. Firstly, there has been much less good research on crime-related behaviors. Secondly, most research indicates that “crime-related behaviors” are only marginally related to many measures of fear. The first section of this chapter comments briefly on this paradox (for a more extensive review of the literature on this, see Skogan, 1981). The second section proposes some solution, in the form of four models of crime-related behavior which do *not* assume (as empirically seems the case) that attitudes and behaviors in this area are necessarily congruent.

## ATTITUDES ABOUT CRIME

Opinion surveys constantly ask about the issue of crime, usually dubbing responses measures of “fear”. The Harris Poll routinely inquires if the crime rate has been “increasing, decreasing, or has it remained the same as it was before?” The Gallup Poll asks if there is a nearby area ... “where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?” The US Census Bureau questions people if “crime is more serious than newspapers and TV say? Americans are also routinely quizzed about their “community’s worst problem,” and if more money should be spent on crime, or less. Answers to these questions are used to conduct research on fear of crime, to evaluate the consequences of crime prevention programs, and – perhaps – to make public policy. While opinion polls present a seeming jumble of data about popular perceptions of crime, those perceptions can be usefully divided into three categories: beliefs about the facts of crime, people’s perceptions of how likely they are to fall victim, and indirect but revealing measures of the threat of crime.

### Beliefs About Crime

On the basis of direct and indirect experience, people develop images of the world around them. These fact-images – the cognitive component of their world view – play an important role in shaping how they react to events and actors. Such beliefs are judgemental as well as “empirical,” if only because people’s attitudes and values shape how they view their environment and help them develop beliefs about things with which they have no real experience.

These fact-images are many and complex. They include ideas about how much crime there is, and whether it is going up or down. Individuals also hold beliefs about the nature of crime (for example, how violent it is) and criminals (why they do it), as well as general judgements about crime, including where it stands on the public agenda and how much money we should spend to deal with it.

Perhaps the most consistent belief revealed by public opinion polls is that crime is increasing. Polling organizations have been asking about crime since the mid-1960s, and since then close to a majority or more of Americans have reported they think crime rates are on the upswing. In 1967 the Harris Poll found 46% of the population thought crime had increased “in their area.” By 1975 that figure hit 75%. Further, asking about specific offenses, Harris found people were most likely to believe it was serious crimes – “robberies and house-breakings” – which were on the rise. This of course matches news accounts of official crime statistics. The FBI’s “crime clock” has ticked off an increasing number of “robberies every minute” for the past 20 years.

Research indicates people tend to overestimate the amount of crime around them. When asked about the number of burglaries or robberies which occur, most give figures which are much higher than the actual rate. They also overestimate the amount of violence relative to other kinds of crime. While most people realistically perceive that there is more property crime than personal crime, they grant the former too small a share of the total.

One very important feature of popular beliefs about the distribution of crime is the tendency to see it as a problem which occurs somewhere else, largely involving others. For example, in surveys conducted by the US Census Bureau in the nation’s five largest cities, respondents were asked if they thought crime was increasing or decreasing in two different contexts – their neighborhood, and the nation as a whole (Gaquin, 1978). It was revealed that 86% thought crime in the United States was increasing, but only 47% thought crime was on the upswing in their area. Violent crime in particular was seen as increasing elsewhere, while local increases were believed to be more confined to property crime. When asked to compare their neighborhood with others in the same city, only 6.1% thought their community was above average in terms of danger. Across the 26 big cities surveyed by the Census Bureau, the largest proportion who thought their own neighborhood was more dangerous than most was in Newark: there, 11% shared that pessimistic view.

The tendency of individuals to "distance" themselves from crime can be seen more dramatically in their views about effects of crime. In the Census Bureau's big-city surveys, respondents were asked about "limiting or changing activities because of fear of crime." Fully 87% of those in the largest cities thought "people in general" did this, but the figure for "people in their neighborhood" was 67%. When asked about themselves, only 48% indicated they limited their activities because of crime (author's computations). These perceptions are so widespread that Hindelang *et al.* (1978) concluded even urban dwellers see crime as a "non-personal, non-local" problem. In their view, people are not incapacitated by concern about nearby crime, and see the problem as a manageable one.

Popular beliefs about the causes of crime are more difficult to summarize. Surveys on the topic differ by methodology and over time. When people are asked sequentially about a number of potential causes of crime, they tend to give many of them high ratings; when asked to volunteer causes on their own, a lot fewer are mentioned. Three factors seem to be prominent when the latter approach is employed: drugs, law enforcement, and the breakdown of families. In more recent surveys, drug use is a frequently volunteered cause of crime and delinquency. There has also been a mild increase in the tendency of people to point a finger at the courts, a lack of severity in penalties, and leniency of laws. In earlier surveys, neglect and the inability of families to exert control over children were frequently mentioned, but that perceived source of delinquency has declined somewhat in popularity.

At a general level people's judgements about what society should do about crime show more consistency. Surveys indicate crime is a local rather than national problem. The Gallup Poll frequently asks, "What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?" Through the 1970s between 2 and 3% of the population put crime at the head of the list. It was bested by the cost of living, energy, unemployment, international affairs, and several other issues (Gallup Organization). On the other hand, many more people put crime near the top of their local community's list of problems, accurately reflecting the balance of local and federal contributions to law enforcement.

Whatever can be done, there is immense public support for government activity against crime. Since 1971, the Gallup Organization and the National Opinion Research Center have monitored people's opinions about government spending in ten major areas,

including cities, education, health, defense, space, foreign aid, and crime. They have been asked if "too much" or "too little" has been spent on those, or if spending has been "just about right." Over that decade, crime has had the most support for more spending. It has consistently been "number one" on the list of issues on which it is thought the government (presumably local) spends too little. Support for spending on crime has also been the most unwavering of the list; while public enthusiasm for other issues has waxed and waned (defense is now waxing, and the environment is waning), the proportion thinking that government does not spend enough on crime has remained constant at about 70%.

While most Americans say they want government to do more about crime, it is not clear that their beliefs about the problem have many implications for their own lives. Research on general beliefs about crime indicates by and large that they have few roots in experience, and are not related to individual behavior. Beliefs about crime are not related in any impressive way to the victimization experiences of individuals; at most, they vary a few percentage points between victims and non-victims (Hindelang *et al.*, 1978). Nor are general beliefs strongly linked to indicators of how vulnerable people are to attack, or to other attitudes they hold (Tyler, 1980). In fact, it is residents of low-crime neighborhoods who are most likely to place crime high on their agenda for public action (Furstenberg, 1971). As a rule, people overestimate its frequency and overvalue its seriousness.

General beliefs about crime *are* related to media exposure. Research in other areas indicate print and electronic media play an important role in shaping popular beliefs about the nature of social problems and the possibilities for public policy. Several studies indicate media exposure, but not personal experience or vulnerability, shapes beliefs about the volume of crime in America. Yet such beliefs seem to be unrelated to what people do about crime. Behavior is more rooted in experience and assessments of one's personal risk of victimization, which also are unrelated to general beliefs about crime (Tyler, 1980).

### Assessments of Risk

Unlike many beliefs about crime, assessments of risk are personal and concrete, and related to behavior. They are judgements people

make about how much crime problems threaten them. While beliefs about crime trends and their causes can be abstract and are often unrelated to experience, assessments of risk are evaluations of the reality of the threat of crime. They may not be entirely accurate, but they are how people read their immediate environment.

Most evaluations of how people perceive risk gauge "how likely" they think a particular crime will strike them or their household. Alternately, people can be quizzed about the likelihood some particular consequences of crime will occur, such as being killed or injured. Studies indicate these estimates are relatively accurate when risks of various sorts are evaluated comparatively (Green, 1980). Research on assessments of risk also indicates those judgements are related to – although not completely determined by – the "officially announced" level of crime and people's perceptions of how much crime there is around them.

One study of the relationship between perceived risk and official rates of crime is summarized in Table 8.1. In a survey of the Chicago metropolitan area (Lavrakas, 1980), respondents were asked how likely it was they would be victimized by three types of crime "in the next couple of years." Table 8.1 links their responses for each type of crime to comparable official crime rates (per 100,000 residents) for their suburban municipality or city community area. Perceptions of the risk of personal crime are particularly strongly linked to police figures on the incidence of crime in each area. The officially announced risk of burglary is less closely linked to declining perceived risk.

The relationship between perceived and officially recognized risk of victimization is independent of such individual-level factors as sex, age, race, or income. Official crime rates for areas were related to personal estimates of risk in quite consistent fashion, even when those individual attributes were taken into account. These estimates of risk seem to be rooted in the reality of community conditions.

Other studies confirm that individual estimates of the probability of being victimized are linked to local crime rates and to victimization rates measured independently, via surveys. Perceived risks are higher among blacks and latins, the poor, and center-city residents (Lavrakas, 1980). They are also higher among people who have had direct personal experience with crime – victims – and those who have reported personal contact with others who have been victimized. The latter is a form of indirect or vicarious experience with crime with many significant consequences for perceptions of crime. Further,

TABLE 8.1 *Assessments of risk and official police reports of crime*

<i>Perceived risk of victimization</i>	<i>Official crime rate per 100,000</i>		
	<i>Robbery</i>	<i>Assault</i>	<i>Burglary</i>
very likely	582	350	1136
somewhat likely	337	264	1032
somewhat unlikely	220	180	1014
very unlikely	180	118	998

Based on random-digit dialing telephone survey of the Chicago metropolitan area, 1979. For further information, see Lavrakas, 1980.

SOURCE: Author's computations.

people who are more vulnerable to crime rate their risks of falling victim higher than do others. Two strong correlates of perceived risk are sex and age, with women and elderly (but see Lavrakas, 1980) being more likely to report high levels of risk, even when controlling for many other factors (Tyler, 1980). Both groups are (comparatively) vulnerable to physical attack, more powerless to resist if they are assaulted, and are exposed to more traumatic physical and emotional consequences when they are attacked (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981).

One reason beliefs about how much crime there is are unrelated to assessments of risk is that perceptions of the amount of crime are unrelated to all of these factors. As indicated above, general beliefs about crime seem to be shaped by the media, and not by personal or indirect experience with crime, or even vulnerability to attack. On the other hand, perceived risk is strongly related to these aspects of people's lives, as well as to community crime and victimization rates. All of this indicates assessments of risk of victimization reflect a somewhat realistic reading of one's environment, which may explain why perceptions of risk – but not beliefs about crime – are related to individual behavior.

It is important to note that people's reports of perceived risk probably have some assessments of their own behavior, as well as readings of environmental conditions, factored into them. That is, people who are actively doing things to protect themselves from victimization seem to perceive somewhat lower levels of personal risk as a result. When measures of neighborhood crime rates or people's

perceptions of the level of crime in their neighborhood are compared to their self-assessed level of risk, the discrepancy between the two (higher crime but lower risk) is greatest for those who report limiting their exposure to risk. Personal vulnerability, environmental conditions, and behavior, all are important factors shaping these assessments.

### **Threat of Crime**

If popular beliefs about crime and people's assessments of their risk of falling victim are cognitive and evaluative components of their perceptions of victimization, then fear of victimization is the affective or emotional dimension. It is both an expressed attitude and a psychological state provoked by an immediate sense of personal risk. While individuals *hold* beliefs about crime, they *feel* danger.

The physiological state of fear is triggered when we encounter fear-provoking stimuli – perhaps a band of youths, or a dilapidated street. These are learned associations with danger (Stinchcombe *et al.*, 1978). The physical manifestations of fear include a rapid heart rate, narrowed field of vision, high blood pressure, enhanced reaction time, an increased flow of blood to the large muscles, and endocrinal changes such as the release of adrenalin in the blood stream. These all prepare us for “fight or flight.” They are autonomic, visceral reactions over which we have little direct control (Baumer and Rosenbaum, 1980).

Most survey measures of the fear of crime stand at a considerable distance from these reactions. Public opinion polls ask people “how afraid” they feel under certain conditions (like “walking in your neighborhood at night”), or how worried they are about being victimized. They obviously do not measure fear when it occurs, but ask people to recall episodes of fear they have experienced, or which they anticipate they would feel under selected conditions (Garofalo, 1980). They actually measure the perceived “threat” of crimes under those hypothetical circumstances. Surveys also asked about levels of crime in the area, or “how much of a problem” neighborhood crime is, often by type of crime, to get a reading of perceived possible danger.

The rather general way in which opinion polls measure threat, and the great distance between verbal responses to those questions and the immediate and acute emotional state they represent, have led

critics to challenge the validity of research on perceptions of crime. The criticism has been cast in two ways. First, it is argued that popular measures of the fear of crime in fact measure many things besides people's reactions to the risk of crime itself. Second, critics contend that the emotionalism of the issue clouds responses to the questions, and treats the fear of crime as an irrational attitude unrelated to the reality of crime.

People's expressions of fear have been attributed to a number of conditions in addition to the direct and immediate threat of crime. The concern about crime registered in opinion polls may be a manifestation of other problems, including mounting interpersonal distrust and suspicion, cynicism about the efficacy of authorities, unhappiness about changing values, and anxiety about the future and the course of social evolution. Fear may have as much to do with anxiety about neighborhood change and the disruption of normal routines as it does with crime (Garofalo and Laub, 1978). Fear levels mount with city size, as do crime rates. However, because urban dwellers have many reasons to evidence these other concerns, they may as a result register high on measure of worry or unease about crime. Finally, any discussion of the validity of fear-of-crime measures must confront the issue of race. It is widely argued that among whites discussions of crime are in fact covert conversations about their fear of black Americans, and that fear of crime in these instances reflects racial intolerance.

Recent research has challenged these criticisms, however. It indicates that perceptions of threat are largely independent of most of those alternative interpretations of their meaning. In a national survey, perceptions of threat were not linked to other forms of mistrust, suspicion, and concern about change, and they were uncorrelated with expressions of racial intolerance by whites. Instead, they were related to the threat of crime and of becoming a victim. People who live in neighborhoods with crime and disorder problems are more threatened than those from more placid communities. Those who are victimized by personal crime feel more threatened than do others, controlling for a host of alternative causes of fear, and the more serious the victimization the greater the perceived threat (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981). A number of studies also indicate that perceived threat levels are higher in cities and neighborhoods with higher official crime rates (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981; Skogan, 1977), as are assessments of risk.

Others have questioned the validity of expressions of fear because they do not seem to square with the social distribution of victimization. One of the most significant findings of crime-related surveys has been the relatively low levels of victimization reported by women and elderly, two groups which seemed to suffer from severe crime problems (Antunes *et al.*, 1977). They both report fairly low rates of victimization, but at the same time express high level perceived threat (Riger, 1981). This seeming paradox led some to question whether fear of crime is indeed a rational response to crime at all.

Again, recent research has pointed to many sources of fear among less victimized groups which seem "rational" indeed. Frequently they fear the potential consequences of victimization rather than its sheer frequency, and for women and the elderly those consequences are likely to be more severe. Elderly victims face the possibility of never recovering from physical injuries in their lifetime, while women face the implicit threat of sexual assault in nearly every criminal encounter. Those groups are also physically more vulnerable to attack, less able to resist young males who constitute the bulk of offenders. Stories about crimes against the elderly and women are also prominent in the media, and are widely discussed by neighbors when they take place nearby. Those stories generate even more fear when they reach people who are similar to the featured victims (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981). Many criticisms which presume the irrationality of perceptions of the threat of crime have been too narrowly focused on the relationship between direct personal victimization and fear, and have not paid attention to other sources of information and cues for concern which *should* provoke heightened levels of perceived risk.

All of this suggests that the concern about crime registered in public opinion polls can be taken at some degree of face value. When people say they would be frightened, it reflects their experiences, vulnerability, conditions around them, and information which comes to them about crimes and victims.

It is important to note that "crime" needs to be broadly conceptualized to fully encompass the range of experiences which seem to stir the blood of ordinary citizens. Some measures of threat ask about levels of serious crime in the neighborhood – rape, robbery, and burglary. However, another important class of threatening environmental conditions are important as well, those "incivilities" (Lewis and Salem, 1980) which threaten what Wilson (1968) called "the right and seemly standards" of community life. These often involve troublesome conditions which the police do not take seriously (or,

more likely, have given up on), including the presence of loitering bands of youths, public drinking, street solicitation, visible graffiti and vandalism and the presence of abandoned buildings. Surveys indicate that incivilities have important implications for fear of crime (Fowler and Mangione, 1981), perceptions of risk and satisfaction with neighborhood safety (Taub, Taylor and Dunham, 1981), community organization (Lewis and Maxfield, 1980), and individual and household protective measures (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981).

#### THE RESEARCH AGENDA: MODELS LINKING PERCEPTION AND BEHAVIOR

As the previous section indicated, there has been a great deal of descriptive research on levels of fear of crime, variously conceptualized. While fear of crime alone is a legitimate focus for research and policy, perhaps its greatest significance is to be found in its implications for behavior.

At one extreme, individuals may be "prisoners of fear," locking themselves away behind steel doors and barred windows. At the other they may become activists, banding together with neighbors to prevent crime by taking aggressive steps to challenge strangers, intervene when they observe suspicious circumstances, and act to reduce opportunities for crime. Some research has been conducted and a great deal of money has been spent by the government in an effort to encourage the latter, which some would characterize as "public minded" rather than "private minded" behavior (Lavrakas, 1980). Large numbers of people find their lives touched by crime in some noticeable way. The Census Bureau's surveys in the mid-1970s found between 35% and 56% of adults "limited or changed activities" because of crime, depending upon the city involved (Garofalo, 1977). A recent national survey found more than two-thirds of Americans reported doing something to prevent crime (Mendelsohn *et al.*, 1981).

However, the *relationship* between what people think and do about crime is problematic. The things individuals can do in response to crime range from passive withdrawal through aggressive communal action to eventual flight from the jurisdiction. They at the same time express a variety of beliefs about the nature of the crime problem and the threat it possess and feel the emotional impact of crime.

However, there is not a simple, one-to-one relationship between the two. As extensive reviews of the research literature on this issue indicate (Skogan, 1981; DuBow, 1979), we cannot assume that beliefs, assessments of risk, or perceived threat of victimization propel people to action in some mechanical fashion. What I have called beliefs about crime seem in particular to be unrelated to experience or subsequent behavior. Most forms of household behavior are adopted more frequently by those enjoying lower rates of victimization and living in more secure neighborhoods. Community organizers frequently find it most difficult to mobilize those living in high-crime areas. Whites and the well-to-do in cities generally report the fewest problems with crime and fear, but they are still the most likely to move to the suburbs.

In the face of these paradoxes, researchers have advanced a number of explanations of individual reactions to crime which seem "closer to the data." These explanations can be thought of as "models" of behavior, because they take the form of simplified sketches of theories about the relation between perceptions and action. This section reviews four models of crime-related behavior which do *not* assume a simple relation between perception and action. The testing of these models – and developing new ones – appears to me to lie at the top of the research agenda on "fear of crime."

### Conflicting Sociological Models

Sociologists have advanced two prominent theories of the relationship between the threat of crime (in the language used here, risk and fear) and what people do in response. One theory emphasizes the positive effects of crime, the other its negative consequences.

The first theory, that of the French Sociologist Emile Durkheim, argues crime has an integrative function. In this view, crime shocks the sentiments of ordinary people by threatening their life, property, and views of appropriate behavior. The affront leads them to act individually – and more important, collectively – to "do something." This effort increases community solidarity and morale, and strengthens the informal social control exercised (in part through crime prevention) by the collectivity (Conklin, 1975).

Another view, in opposition to Durkheim (see Lewis, 1979), is that

crime erodes the capacity of communities to exercise social control. According to Conklin (1975), the key is that fear of crime generates insecurity, suspicion, and withdrawal from community affairs. In high-crime areas, residents lose confidence in the capacity of formal authorities to assist them, and develop a negative view of their own neighborhood. Interaction with their neighbors drops off, as does participation in the collective life of the area. Community facilities stand empty. As a result, the community is even less capable than before of exercising control over juveniles and strangers there. Unlike Durkheim, Conklin emphasizes the negative consequences of crime. In his view, personal precautions (and if possible, flight) will be the predominant reaction to crime in high-fear communities, while household and collective efforts will dwindle in the face of increasing disorder.

Of the two models, empirical research seems to favor Conklin. Precautions such as staying home, exercising great caution on the street, and avoiding strangers predominate in higher-crime urban areas. Participants in community organizations and anti-crime programs are less fearful than nonparticipants. Household crime-prevention efforts and community participation are greatly encouraged by having substantial economic stakes in the community, and both are more frequent in cohesive, low-crime areas. These data seem more consistent with the view that crime is incapacitating, not a motivating force behind positive responses to the problem.

However, none of this research has taken seriously the collective, community-level elements of these theories. For example, Durkheim's functional view implies that crime's shock to community sentiments reduces the *dispersion* of attitudes or norms about behavior, thus "pulling the community together" more tightly. Crime, by clarifying what actions lie outside the bounds of acceptable behavior, reaffirms the collectivity's central norms and draw clearer boundary lines around their perimeter. Action is facilitated by this consensus, at whatever degree of tolerance it is struck. This hypothesis is not well tested by (say) examining the individual-level relationship between fear and participation or intervention. Rather, we want to know: are individuals more likely to intervene in communities united in their normative view? Does a lack of normative consensus (measured, perhaps, by its variance) inhibit public-minded action or collective organizing efforts. Testing these formulations of the problem requires data aggregated at the community level as well as individual reports of behavior.

### The Utilitarian Model

Utilitarian models of behavior of all kinds stress that actions have costs as well as potential benefits. Thus, there is no such thing as cost-free crime avoidance. As Green (1980: 277) put it:

Pragmatically, what is really of interest is how people will behave in relation to some level of risk. We may want to know, for example, how much people would be willing to pay for some decrease in risk.

From this point of view, people strike an optimum balance between the risks they face and the cost of reducing them any further. That point is their level of "acceptable risk." This model of behavior also is called "economic" because it assumes a more-or-less rational cost-benefit analysis on the part of individuals.

Of course, the cost side of this analysis of behavior should take a broad view as to how they are measured, but some of the costs of avoiding crime are direct and financial. Furstenberg's (1972) original typology of crime-prevention behavior categorized together tactics that needed money to be carried out, and he found higher-income people were more likely to adopt them. Recently, I priced a full "security package" of hardware items in the Sears and Roebuck Spring/Summer Catalog, including front and back steel security doors, a burglar alarm, good quality door locks, and other interior and exterior equipment. Together with shipping, but exclusive of tax and installation charges, this order would cost almost \$900.00. Householders who are not particularly handy would find the one-time cost of a full security package a very substantial investment. And if they desired to purchase special household theft insurance, it would set them back about an additional \$100.00 every year. A handgun for the home would be extra.

In addition, there may be other direct costs attendant to risk reduction. For example, people may be driven to give up jobs or abandon investments in higher-crime areas, or to pay more in travel costs to go shopping in the suburbs, because they are unwilling to bear the level of risk they see attached to lower-cost options.

What economists label opportunity costs for feeling safe probably are far greater economic burdens of crime for these citizens than the direct cost of victimization (Biderman *et al.*, 1967).

There are a host of non-dollar costs that people may be forced to pay in order to reduce their risk of victimization. Economists would label them the "externalities" of crime prevention. Some of these are social. In high-risk areas, isolation and withdrawal may be the most effective way to avoid personal victimization. People may avoid parks, playgrounds, the downtown, and community facilities because they perceive the risks of crime there to be too high. Young singles may fear to visit the nightclub district, while the elderly may avoid public transit even if it is their only transportation option. There are also psychological costs to be paid for acting to forestall victimization. Staying at home, installing steel doors, avoiding the neighbors, and other behavioral restrictions may impose undue restrictions on our freedom of movement. Buying a gun may be an affront to other values. In the end,

There will come a point where any further increase in the safety of a situation means going without so many other things that an increase in safety is not worth having. Ultimately the value of any increase in safety is a value judgement ... (Green, 1980:284).

However we account for the costs, the utilitarian model has people choosing one position or another on a curve relating cost and risk. Those without much money, or with a taste for higher levels of risk – such as young people – might position themselves on the higher-risk, lower-cost end of the curve linking the two. People with vested interests to protect, whose social lives are not severely impacted by staying close to home, or who have the wherewithal to remove to the suburbs, might locate themselves at a higher-cost, lower-risk position. Living in a city as opposed to rural areas would have the effect of shifting the entire curve; in cities, higher levels of risk go with similar investments in security.

There is evidence supporting this view of crime-related behavior. For example, fewer people install burglar alarms, window bars, or outdoor lights (high-cost items) than routinely ask their neighbors to watch their home when it is empty. The most frequently purchased piece of household anti-crime hardware is the indoor light timer, costs less than \$8.00 (Lavrakas, 1980). Furstenberg's (1972) finding that higher-income households are most likely to undertake higher-cost tactics is consistent with the economic argument. So is the higher frequency of household protection efforts by homeowners, upper-income whites who face lower objective and self-assessed risks of



victimization (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981). Perhaps the greatest contribution of this mode of thinking is its message that researchers should examine more carefully the behavior side of the perception-and-behavior linkage, and consider both the potential benefits and tangential, "external" effects in light of their costs.

### **A Psychological Model**

"Rational-cognitive" psychological theories about human behavior emphasize people's experience, information-processing capacities, view of causation, and beliefs about responsibility for conditions and events. In this tradition, perhaps the predominant model of individual "prevention" behavior is that advanced by Irwin Rosenstock (1966), the "Health-Belief Model" (HBM). The HBM stresses the importance of three factors in explaining why people act to protect themselves, in predicting who will and will not do so, and in designing interventions to encourage them to do so more frequently. Those factors are risk, seriousness, and efficacy (Lavrakas, 1980). Being psychologists, advocates of the HBM focus upon perceptions of those elements of one's environment and alternatives, but others have found those perceptions to be rooted in reality (Green, 1980).

The first components of the HBM is one's perceived probability of being struck, infected, or visited by some threatening condition or event. In disease studies, this likelihood of infection is labeled "susceptibility," while for our purposes it is the perceived risk of victimization.

The second component of the HBM is the perceived severity of a threatening condition or event. The common cold and umbrella theft differ in anticipated impact from heart disease and armed robbery, and this makes a difference in how stimulating they are.

Together, the probability of the threat and its potential seriousness constitute "readiness to take action" in the HBM (Mendelsohn *et al.*, 1981). Actions themselves are evaluated in terms of their efficacy. Not surprisingly, the HBM postulates that people will be more likely to take an action if they think it has a high likelihood of actually preventing or reducing a problem, and if it seems at all feasible to take it. Note this is a hypothesis about statistical *interaction*, predicting step-level shifts in levels of protective behavior among those in the "high-high" subgroup on these measures.

In sum, the HBM is a rational-cognitive model of individual decisionmaking about behavior. It hypothesizes that people are

motivated to act by a desire to lower their risk in the face of potentially severe consequences, when they think it is likely to work.

The HBM is a powerful model of prevention behavior. In a national survey, Mendelsohn *et al.* (1981) found a component of the model – perceived vulnerability – to be the "one factor above all others" explaining the number and frequency of individual crime-prevention actions. It was a particularly strong predictor of taking precautions against personal crime. Lavrakas (1980) also found both risk, seriousness, and efficacy to be related to individual behavioral restrictions. Both studies revealed that beliefs about the efficacy of proposed actions were good predictors of their being taken and repeated frequently. In Mendelsohn's survey, efficacy beliefs ("how likely is it to work") were particularly strong correlates of individual precautions, while Lavrakas found efficacy beliefs (but not risk and seriousness) to be very strongly linked to household protection.

There are a number of variations on the basic HBM. For example, evaluations of prevention campaigns usually investigate the effect of "cues to action" as well. These include the message, treatments, or shocks which were intended to trigger particular prevention efforts. Mendelsohn's survey was undertaken to evaluate a federally financed media campaign encouraging people to "Take a Bite Out of Crime." Other studies may take into account "barriers to action." These are constraints or limitations which affect the feasibility of particular tactics, or which bar them completely. In the case of crime prevention, these might include renting rather than owning one's residence, limits on what can be spent for risk reduction, or role demands – such as having a night-shift job – which force people to expose themselves to what even they feel to be high-risk situations.

A great theoretical contribution of the HBM is its emphasis on the efficacy of anti-crime efforts. This is particularly important in light of our very limited knowledge of what actually works in the area of crime prevention. Mendelsohn and his colleagues emphasize the responsibility crime-prevention specialists have for not overselling their recommendations. People seemingly will not act unless they believe there will be concrete benefits to be gained, but they also will not be fooled for long if those benefits are not forthcoming.

### **Opportunity Theory**

The problematic relationship between what people think and feel about crime and what they do about the issue can also be seen as a

political problem. In this view, what people can do about crime is shaped in considerable degree by the structure of opportunity which confronts them. This constitutes a framework which opens or forecloses various possibilities for action. Opportunities for action are shaped by the options made available to people in the form of proximity to services, their physical surroundings, employment possibilities, school quality, access to transportation, and capacity to pay for private-market products as well as to qualify for public sector goods and services. The distribution of these opportunities in society is determined in the largest sense by politics.

Where the structure of opportunity confronting them is limited, people have more difficulty acting on the basis of their values. No one wants to face a crime problem in his or her neighborhood, but some are more successful than others in getting their wishes. The poor living in high-crime areas fear for their safety, hope neighborhood toughs will not harass them, want safe public transit, and need better police protection. Their problem, from this point of view, is that they often do not have the political, economic, and institutional capacity to achieve their goals.

City dwellers also want safer homes. They want stronger doors, working security arrangements, and most of the hardware package detailed above. But those with the greatest crime problems are very frequently renters rather than homeowners. Control of one's living space is an important prerequisite for making such improvements, in the absence of strong building codes specifying security standards for rental housing.

People in problem-plagued neighborhoods find it difficult to band together in common action against their problems. Frequently those neighborhoods experience tremendous residential turnover each year, those who live there are poor, and many families are headed by only one adult. In the absence of professional leadership it is very hard to sustain community organizations in such an environment. However, it is neighborhoods like these which also cannot afford to support on their own a paid organizational infrastructure to guide an attack on local problems.

The opportunities – options, environment, and resources – that people have are thus an important force in shaping individual and household reactions to crime. Some seemingly blocked opportunities can be reopened by industry, intelligence, political action, and luck, but others can seem insurmountable when viewed as a practical problem. The reactions to crime which are most frequently reported

by the poor are the cheapest and most individualized – staying at home, closely restricting their behavior, and avoiding victimization. These also may be the most costly options in terms of their impact on individual morale and neighborhood cohesion. An important message of the opportunity model of behavior is that social-structural factors surrounding individuals affect the relationship between what they want and what they get, since what they get may not always be what they need.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I argued there is a problematic relationship between how people perceive crime and their reactions to it. This seeming paradox hinges in part on how those perceptions of crime are conceptualized. Many of the beliefs individuals hold about crime appear unrelated to their behavior. The more general and impersonal those beliefs, the less rooted they are in experience and the conditions which surround people. General beliefs about crime are shaped by the media and the value-and-belief “filters” which organize our thoughts about things for which we have little personal “data.” On the other hand, assessments of their risk of victimization are more strongly linked to people's reports of what they do about crime. There is some evidence that those estimates are rooted in neighborhood conditions as well as the personal vulnerability of individuals to attack. Most surveys indicate that measures of fear of crime are particularly strong correlates of things people do to protect themselves from personal victimization.

The relationship between perception and behavior also becomes clearer when we examine alternative models of how the two might be linked. Except for Durkheim's “naïve sociological model,” none of them assumed a simple fit between perception and action. Conklin's alternative to Durkheim stressed how perceived risk and fear make it more difficult for people to do much beyond withdraw from the community. Of the four categories of reactions to crime that we have reviewed here, only individual precautionary tactics seem to be directly encouraged by fear. The utilitarian model of behavior stresses their costs, and points out that individuals endure risks at some acceptable level which take those costs into account. We should not assume that people are always trying to reduce their risks, even if they perceive them to be relatively high. The health belief model also

emphasized how features of possible countermeasures shape how frequently those who are exposed to risk adopt them. The perceived efficacy and feasibility of various tactics are part of the perception-behavior calculus. Finally, the opportunity model pointed out that fear and perceived risk may shape what psychologists would call *behavior intentions*, but that a number of real-world constraints inhibit the capacity of people to act on their predispositions. People may not get what they want, especially in high-crime neighborhoods.

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