

THE REACTIONS TO CRIME PROJECT

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The Reactions to Crime Project is a multidisciplinary effort funded by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration to examine how urban dwellers cope with crime. The project ultimately is concerned with individual behavior and collective reactions to crime, and with understanding how cities and neighborhoods structure opportunities to engage in those activities. Data on these issues have been collected in three cities: Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. They include both citywide and neighborhood telephone surveys, the Census Bureau's victim surveys, a content analysis of local newspapers, official administrative data from police departments, and thousands of pages of field notes accumulated from over a year of field observation in target localities in each of the cities. Although these data still are being analyzed, several key findings are beginning to emerge.

First, it is clear that personal experience with crime cannot directly explain the high levels of fear of crime which plague these cities. Violent crime and burglary seem to be major generators of fear among those who have been victimized, but comparatively few are seriously victimized by these crimes in any given year. Many more are exposed to disturbing news about crime; "indirect" vicarious experience accounts for substantially more fear than does direct victimization. People are more fearful when they hear that crime is taking place in their neighborhood, when they are related in some way to victims, and when in demographic profile nearby victims are "people like them." People also react to

more subtle clues that signal the presence of danger, aspects of their environment which Arthur Stinchcombe has dubbed "the signs of crime" and what we call "incivility." These include physical deterioration, heavy use of public spaces by teenagers, and vandalism. Finally, people are much more apprehensive about crime when they have more to lose. Women and the elderly are two groups who seem less able to resist attack and who believe that they are likely to suffer from more serious consequences if they do fall victim to crime.

People learn about crime problems in a number of ways, including personal conversations with others and through the media. Whereas the flood of crime information through the media has some clear effects on people's images of the crime problem, the best evidence is that it does not directly affect their behavior. Rather, such messages affect their more general impressions of the crime rate and the magnitude of the crime problem for the wider society. Only more direct personal experience with crime seems to affect their assessment of the risks they face, and through that their actions to reduce their chances of being victimized. Personal conversations about crime, especially with neighbors and relatives, seem to have more attitudinal and behavioral consequences, for they more often carry information about nearby crimes and known victims.

We found it useful to examine their responses to these problems in three categories: property protection, personal protection, and collective action. Protective measures to protect their property are taken most often by those who have the most to lose from those crimes, although ironically they also are often less likely to be threatened by such problems. Their neighborhoods are in general plagued by fewer pathologies. People take special steps to protect themselves and to limit their exposure to personal victimization when they perceive that their immediate environment has gone awry. Again, the fewest precautions are taken by those with the highest victimization rates, although the elderly and most women greatly limit their exposure to risk and enjoy relatively low rates of victimization in return.

Collective responses to crime involve cooperative behavior among friends and neighbors and generally are aimed at reducing property crime. Thus it turns out that they are generally encouraged by stability and investment in local communities and do not particularly flourish in high crime areas, which generally are unstable and subject to disinvestment.

In addition, the local structure of opportunity to participate in community organizations coupled with a local capacity to influence land-use decisions are important factors in mitigating the fear of crime among large-city residents. The effect of these contextual factors are best seen in the impact of incivility issues on local citizens. In neighborhoods where problems of incivility are addressed positively by strong organizations or where those issues emerge as problems within families, fear is not accentuated, but if incivility issues emerge in areas where there are few effective organizations to channel concern into viable political action, fear levels are magnified. This magnification process is particularly strong in neighborhoods where individuals have strong vested interest in preserving a healthy moral climate but lack an effective arena for political action. Fear of crime then is only partially an assessment of the risk of victimization "contained" within a geographical terrain. That fear is more the consequence of both subjective assessment of moral and physical decline of the area and the lack of political effectiveness which residents manifest in combating that decline. In neighborhoods where local control of land-use decisions is exercised, either through private ownership or community organization, fear is moderated. The level of incivility in a neighborhood is a direct measure of that effectiveness and a crucial indicator of the level of fear in that area. Where incivility is low fear is low; where incivility is high fear will also rise if local citizens cannot either formally or informally mount a campaign to regain control over their own moral and physical living space.

Fear of crime from this perspective is an important issue that reaches far beyond the criminal justice arena. That fear is shaped by the level of control local citizens can muster over their resi-

dential enclaves and may be reduced by the empowerment of those neighborhoods in the competition over land. Threats to safe and secure neighborhoods can be met through local action to protect if not the sovereignty of citizens at least their capacity to debate the future of their neighborhoods.

Much of this research is still in progress. Some preliminary results of our findings are reported in several articles in the winter 1979 issue of *Victimology*, a special issue on the fear of crime. Other reports of our research on fear have appeared in the *Gerontologist*. Project staff have also presented several papers at professional conventions and several book-length manuscripts dealing with specific issues are in preparation. The telephone survey data collected for the project will be available through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research of the University of Michigan in the fall of 1979.

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