

In Wolfgang Bilsky, Christian Pfeiffer and Peter Wetzels (eds.)
Fear of Crime and Criminal Victimization.
Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke Verlag, 1993

The Various Meanings of Fear

Wesley G. Skogan

The Various Meanings of Fear

There have been several efforts to clarify the meaning of the concept of "fear of crime" (for examples, see Dubow, McCabe, & Kaplan, 1979; Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987). Most found it troublesome that there is no clear consensus among researchers on what the concept fear of crime means or how it is best measured. This chapter argues that this apparent heterogeneity of meaning simply reflects the fact that fear of crime is a general concept. It is suited for everyday conversation (Americans frequently talk about fear of crime and its social and political effects), but the concept needs to be refined for research purposes. How it is best defined depends upon the purpose of the research and the theoretical framework within which the research is being conducted. Therefore, any specific definition of fear of crime is not correct or incorrect; rather, it is either useful or not useful, and that is revealed by the results of the research.

Most research on fear of crime seems to conceptualize fear in one of four ways. Three of these definitions are cognitive in nature; they reflect people's *concern* about crime, their assessments of personal *risk* of victimization, and the perceived *threat* of crime in their environment. The remaining approach to defining fear is *behavioral*; some studies (such as the 1989 International Crime Survey; see van Dijk, Mayhew, & Killias, 1990) conceptualize fear entirely in how it is reflected in things that people do in response to crime. Dissecting these variations in how fear of crime is defined is important, because they make a great deal of difference in what researchers have found. Different definitions of fear can lead to different substantive research conclusions. This is particularly apparent in research on the elderly, one of the special foci of the KFN's victimization research.

A large body of research (summarized in Fattah & Sacco, 1989) suggests that for many older persons fear of crime, rather than actual victimization, presents the biggest problem. It is often claimed the elderly living in American cities are over-concentrated in bad neighborhoods and are concerned about conditions and crime in their neighborhood. It is also claimed that the elderly feel hopelessly vulnerable to crime, which can be evaluated using measures of self-diagnosed risk. Finally, it is claimed the elderly are "prisoners of fear," traumatized by the thought of venturing out because of the risks they would face. Cook and Cook (1976) concluded that "... the major policy problem associated with the elderly and crime is probably not crime per se. Rather, the problem is related to the elderly person's fear of crime and the restrictions to daily mobility that this fear may impose." They argued that "the policy response to victimization of the elderly should be targeted to alleviating fear."

However, an inspection of the various meanings of fear indicates that this conclusion is highly dependent upon what definition of fear is used. By many measures the elderly are not more fearful at all. This chapter illustrates this, using surveys from the US, Britain, and the Western area of the Federal Republic.

Concern about Crime

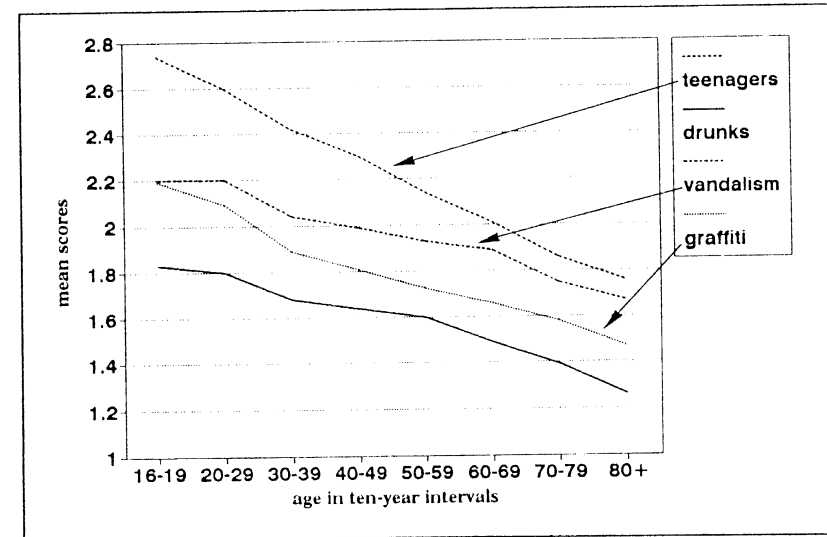
The "concern" definition of fear focuses on people's assessments of the extent to which *crime is a serious problem* for their community or society. Concern is a judgment about the frequency or seriousness of events and conditions in one's environment.

There are a number of approaches to measuring concern. Opinion surveys ask whether crime is increasing or decreasing, and whether respondents would place crime on their list of the nation's most important problem. Most research adopting this definition of fear examines neighborhood conditions. In my research I have asked about "how big a problem" respondents think that various conditions are in their immediate area. These problems have been of two types. *Disorder* has been assessed by questions about neighborhood deterioration and deviant behaviors that are closely linked to fear of crime. City residents take them as signs that neighborhood conditions are out of control, which is fear provoking. These conditions include public drinking, vandalism, graffiti, begging, street harassment, juvenile truancy, street prostitution, gang activity, and abandoned buildings (see Skogan, 1990). Concern about *serious* crime also is reflected in responses to questions about neighborhood problems with burglary, robbery, assault, rape, and theft.

The relationship between concern about crime and age is first examined in Figure 1. The data presented there were drawn from the 1988 British Crime Survey (BCS), a national survey of England and Wales which questioned over 11,000 respondents. They were given a list of disorders and asked, "... how common or uncommon they are in your area?" Figure 1 charts the age distribution of four of these problems: "teenagers hanging around on the streets", "drunks or tramps in the streets", "vandalism and deliberate damage to property", and "graffiti on walls or buildings". In each case respondents were asked to rate the problem on a four-point scale, from "very common" to "not at all common". Figure 1 presents average scores on these measures for persons in each age category. In the BCS these disorders were closely linked to fear of crime.

These disorders (and three others included in the 1988 BCS) were significantly related to age, but it was the youngest respondents who thought they were the most common in their area. These forms of behavior are violations of what James Q. Wilson (1975) called "standards of right and seemly conduct." He argued that they are read by "proper" citizens as signs that the social order is in disarray. While between 20 and 30 percent of those interviewed in the BCS thought these problems were very common or fairly common in their neighborhood, they were not particularly bothersome to the elderly.

Figure 1: Concern about Disorder and Age. Average BCS Concern Scores

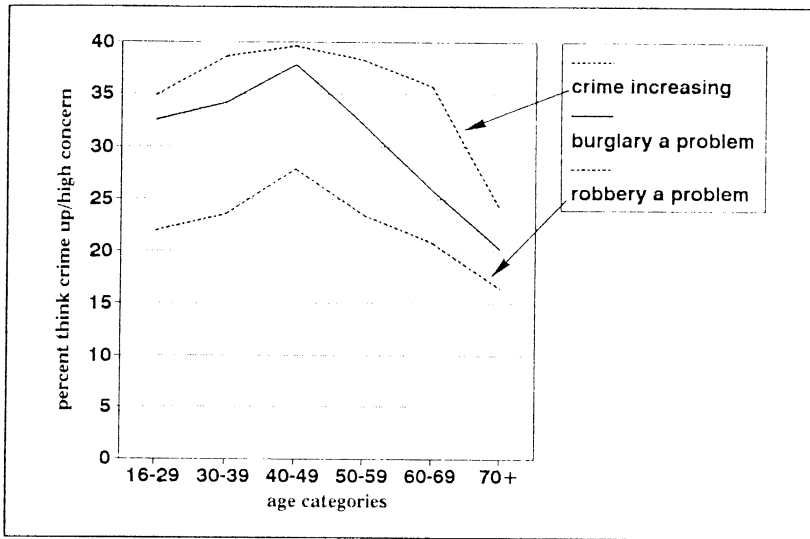


A somewhat different pattern emerges when one considers concern about serious crime rather than disorderly conduct. In this case, the highest levels of concern are expressed by those in their 40s; on the other hand, the elderly are again the least likely to be concerned. Figure 2 reports the findings of surveys conducted in five American cities, including Newark, Houston, Baltimore, Oakland, and Birmingham. Respondents were asked about whether they thought crime in their neighborhood was increasing or decreasing, and "how big a problem" burglary and robbery was in their immediate area. As Figure 2 indicates, about one-third of those who were interviewed thought crime was going up in their neighborhood, and a few less thought that burglary was a big problem in their area. Fewer were concerned about robbery, which is much less frequent.

Risk of Victimization

The second common meaning of fear meaning is the perception that one is *likely to be victimized*. Since the surveys sponsored by the US Crime Commission in the mid-1960s, researchers have been asking people to rate their chances of being victimized. For example, respondents may be asked to rate "how likely" they are to be attacked or burglarized, on a scale ranging from "not very likely" to "very likely". Assessments of risk are respondents' perceptions of the likelihood of things happening to them, and are recommended as measures of fear (Biderman, Johnson, McIntyre, & Weir, 1967; Yin, 1980;).

Figure 2: Concern about Crime and Age. Percent Concerned in Five US Cities



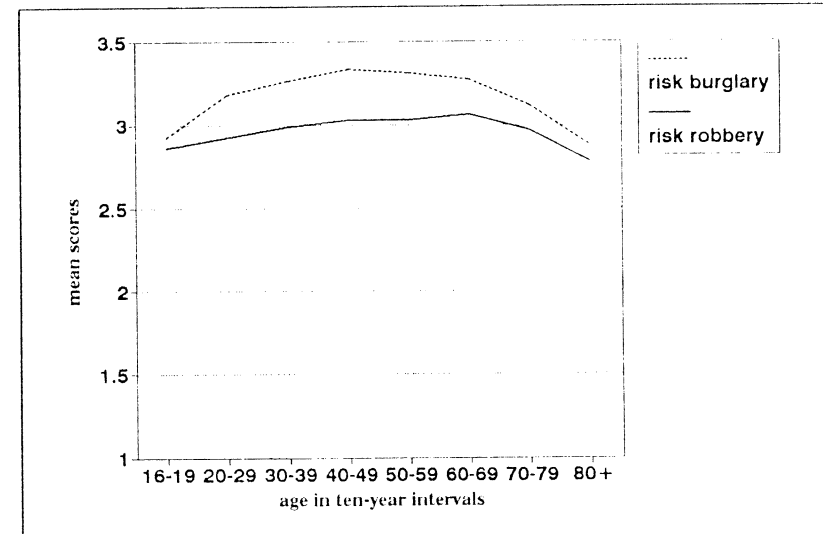
Of course, if these assessments of risk are realistic reflections of patterns of victimization, they generally should be *lower* for elderly persons than the risks reported by younger persons. Most common crimes are less likely to involve elderly victims. Therefore, if the elderly perceive that they face particularly high levels of risk, it would be fair to label them fearful.

Figure 3 indicates that this is not the case. In the 1988 BCS, respondents were asked to rate their risk of being victimized in the next year, on six-point scales ranging from "certainly not" to "certain to be victimized". Figure 3 presents the age distribution of estimates of risk of victimization by burglary and robbery. Residents of England and Wales gave the highest rating to risk to burglary, which is congruent with the frequency of burglary in contrast to personal crime. However, burglary is almost four times as frequent as robbery (Mayhew, Elliott, & Dowds, 1989), a difference in rates of victimization that was not accurately reflected in these assessments of risk. As in most surveys, BCS respondents overestimated the relative risk of violent crime.

Likewise, from an analytic perspective older Britons overestimated their risk of victimization relative to younger age groups, while younger people underestimated them. For example, respondents who were under 30 years of age were almost four times more likely to be robbed than those who were 50 years of age and older, a difference which is not reflected in the perceptions of risk illustrated in Figure 3. On the other hand, there was little difference in burglary victimization between various age groups (although the elderly had the lowest risk). This

was also not accurately reflected in Figure 3. However, Figure 3 does indicate that the elderly still were among the least fearful groups in the population, based on their own assessments of their risk of being victimized.

Figure 3: Risk of Crime and Age. Average BCS Risk Scores



Threat of Crime

Definitions of fear focusing on threat emphasize the *potential* for harm that people feel crime holds for them. Threat levels are high when they believe that something *could* happen to them, if they exposed themselves to risk. The concept of threat is distinct from those of risk and concern. People may adopt various tactics to reduce their vulnerability to victimization, and as a result they may not rate their risk as particularly high because they avoid exposure to risk. However, they might rate the threat of crime as high if they were to be exposed to risk. Because many people believe that they are capable of dealing with crime, threat also is distinct from concern about the issue. Threat is measured by questions that ask "How safe would you feel if you were out alone?"; or "How would you feel if you were approached by a stranger on the street or heard footsteps in the night?"

Data from numerous surveys indicate that the threat of crime is felt most strongly by the elderly, and in comparison to measures of risk or concern, questions measuring threat clearly differentiate senior citizens from the remainder of the adult population. This is confirmed in Figure 4, which

illustrates the relationship between age and one measure of threat of crime, responses to a question about how fearful respondents would feel if they were out alone at night in their local area. Variations of this question have been used in surveys in the United States, the Federal Republic of (West) Germany, and the BCS. Figure 4 presents the percentage of respondents in each of those nations who indicated that they were fearful on these measures.

These surveys point to strikingly similar conclusions; the perceived threat of personal attack is relatively low among younger respondents, and increases in frequency only slowly through about age 50. In each survey, there is a tendency for those under fifty to report similar perceptions of threat, but for levels of threat to be much higher among older age groups.

Surveys also indicate that this expression of fear is very much confined to night-time risks. For example, in the US Census Bureau's surveys of five large cities, about 48 percent of all residents indicated some degree of concern about going out alone after dark, but only 11 percent had any hesitation about their daytime safety. The elderly were more likely than others to express uneasiness about their safety during the day (17 percent as opposed to 9 percent under sixty years of age). In a survey in Hartford, 28 percent of those over sixty expressed at least some worry about "street crime" during the day, but that figure stood at more than 60 percent after dark. A Texas survey using similar measures also indicates that this fear is confined to on-street as opposed to at home risks. In that study (a statewide mail questionnaire with a reasonable rate of return) older people were more likely than others to indicate fear of walking alone, but were less likely to express fear about being home alone at night (Jeffords, 1980).

Figure 4: Threat of Crime and Age. Percent Threatened in Three Nations

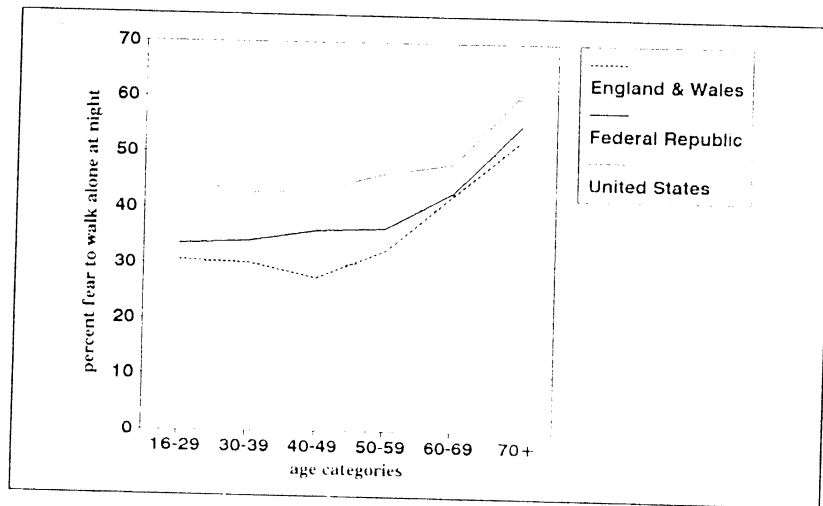
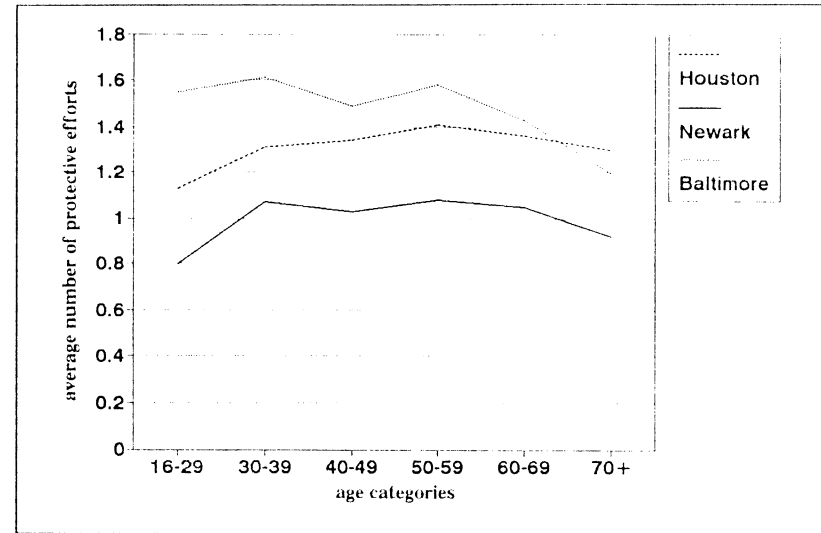


Figure 5: Household Protection and Age. Average Protection Score in Three Cities



Fear as Behavior

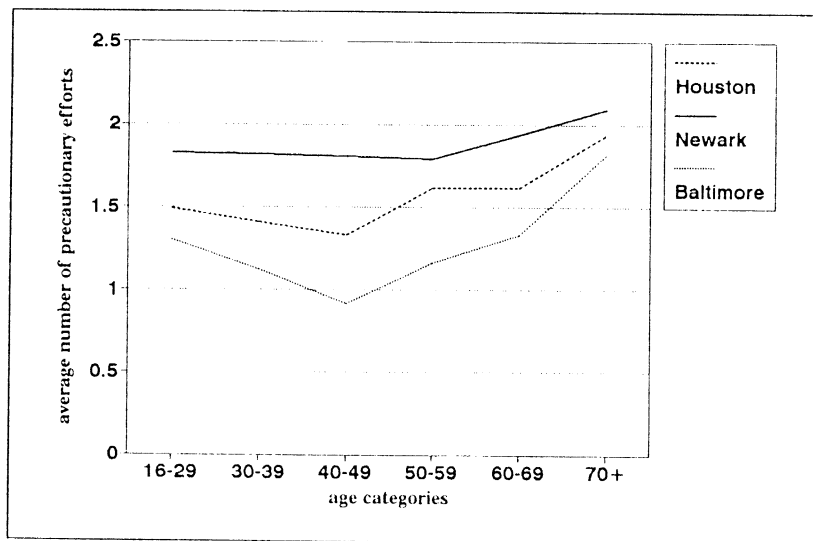
This section turns to another important conceptualization of fear of crime, what people do in response. This meaning of fear reflects a focus on the behavioral rather than cognitive aspects of the attitude. From this perspective, fear is best assessed by how it is manifested in the frequency with which people go out after dark, restrict their shopping to safer commercial areas, fortify their homes against invasion, and avoid contact with strangers (Skogan, 1981). Claims about fear of crime among the elderly frequently dwell on such behavioral indicators. It is often stated that the elderly are "prisoners" of fear; that their daily activity patterns are significantly shaped by the threat of victimization.

The analyses reported here deal with two general classes of responses to crime: those which limit risk of personal attack by avoiding potentially threatening situations, and defensive tactics which reduce the vulnerability of households to burglary and home invasion. This distinction was first drawn by Furstenberg (1975), who dubbed them "avoidance" and "mobilization". The data are drawn from large surveys in Houston, Newark, and Baltimore. Figure 5 illustrates the relationship between age and a measure of the extent to which respondents fortified their homes against crime. The latter is based on the number of positive responses to questions about the adoption of five security measures, including special outdoor lights, door locks, window bars, and interior lights, and whether they had marked any of their property with a special identification number.

The average number of "yes" responses is presented in Figure 5, for each age group. It suggests that the elderly are not particularly likely to fortify their homes against crime. In two cities the elderly stood at about the over-all mean, and in Baltimore they were less likely than others to reporting taking these defensive actions.

On the other hand, Figure 6 does point to distinctive levels of fear among the elderly, based on a definition emphasizing behaviors aimed to reducing their risk of personal crime. The fear measure presented in Figure 6 is based on the average number of positive responses to three questions about avoiding dangerous places and people, and walking only with an escort rather than alone after dark. In all three cities, those in their sixties were more fearful than younger residents, and those seventy and older were even more fearful.

Figure 6: Personal Precautions and Age. Average Precaution Score in Five Cities.



Lessons for Research

Are the elderly more fearful? To illustrate the impact of the definition of fear that a researcher employs, this chapter examined the relationship between age and fear in several nations. The data suggested that by many definitions fear of crime is surprisingly *undistinctive* among senior citizens. The elderly did not report disproportionate concern about crime, nor did they perceive their neighborhoods as excessively plagued by the minor "incivilities" of urban life. They also did not rate their risk of being victimized as particularly high, when compared to other age groups

(although from an analytic perspective one might conclude that they overestimate it relative to their actual risk). The distinctive fears of the elderly were few and clearly focused upon personal attack, primarily after dark. Behavioral indicators of fear suggested that they did not place themselves in situations that threatened this very often.

In the United States, the National Council on Aging (1975) found that in a number of areas of life the general public seemed to have an exaggerated view of the importance of the problems facing the elderly. Respondents younger and older than age 65 were asked to rate the importance of a list of problems for the elderly, and a comparison of their responses indicated that younger respondents gave most of them higher significance than did the elderly themselves. One of these presumed problems was fear of crime, which was much more highly ranked as an elderly problem by younger respondents than by older respondents. The "prisoners of fear" issue may be another example of this phenomenon. Perhaps the aged "... are not as easily daunted as our stereotypes of the 'vulnerable elderly' might have thought them to be" (Lawton & Yaffe, 1980, p. 778).

A more general implication of the analysis presented above is that what researchers find can be highly contingent upon how they operationalize their concepts. In this example, fear was either distinctively high or distinctively low among the elderly, depending upon which of several reasonable definitions of fear was employed. Similarly, research on the effects of mass media coverage of crime is contingent upon the conceptualization of fear that is employed. For example, Tyler (1980) and Tyler and Cook (1984) found that exposure to media stories about crime increased people's *concern* about crime, as it is defined here as the belief that crime is a growing community problem. However, they also found that it did not affect people perception that their own neighborhood was unsafe, or that their personal safety was at risk. Other researchers have found that political attitudes and measures of ideological position are correlated with concern measures, but not with risk or threat measures. Victimization, on the other hand, has clearer effects upon both risk and threat measures, and both are more closely linked to behavioral measures of fear. In each research project it is necessary to consider carefully the relevant meaning of the fear of crime construct.

References

- Biderman, A.D., Johnson, L.A., McIntyre, J., & Weir, A.W. (1967). *Report on a pilot survey in the District of Columbia on victimization and attitudes toward law enforcement*. Washington, DC: (President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice: Field Studies I).
- Cook, F.L., & Cook, T.D. (1976). Evaluating the rhetoric of crisis: A case study of criminal victimization of the elderly. *Social Service Review*, 50, 632-646.
- Dubow, F., McCabe, E., & Kaplan, G. (1979). *Reactions to crime: A critical review of the literature*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.
- Fattah, E.A., & Sacco, V.F. (1989). *Crime and victimization of the elderly*. New York: Springer.

- Ferraro, K., & LaGrange, R. (1987). The measurement of fear of crime. *Sociological Inquiry*, 57, 70-101.
- Furstenberg, F.N. (1975). Fear of crime and its effects on citizen behavior. In A. Biderman (Ed.), *Crime, justice and the public* (pp. 19-29). New York: Appleton-Century Crofts.
- Jeffords, C. R. (1980). *The impact of age upon fear of crime*. Unpublished paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (March).
- Lawton, M. P., & Yaffe, S. (1980). Victimization and fear of crime in elderly public housing tenants. *Journal of Gerontology*, 35, 768-779.
- Mayhew, P., Elliott, D., & Dowds, L. (1989). *The 1989 British Crime Survey*. Home Office Research and Planning Unit Report No. 111. London: HMSO.
- National Council on Aging (1975). *The myth and reality of aging in America*. Washington, DC: National Council on Aging.
- Skogan, W.G. (1981). Assessing the behavioral context of victimization. *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, 72, 727-742.
- Skogan, W.G. (1990). *Disorder and decline: Crime and the spiral of decay in American cities*. New York: The Free Press.
- Skogan, W.G., & Maxfield, M.G. (1981). *Coping with crime: Individual and neighborhood reactions*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Tyler, T.R. (1980). The effect of directly and indirectly experienced events: The origin of crime-related judgements and behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39, 13-28.
- Tyler, T.R., & Cook, F.L. (1984). The mass media and judgements of risk: Distinguishing impact on personal and society level judgements. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 47, 693-708.
- Wilson, J.Q. (1975). *Thinking about crime*. New York: Basic Books.
- Yin, P. (1980). Fear of crime among the elderly. *Social Problems*, 27, 492-504.
- van Dijk, J.J.M., Mayhew P., & Killias, M. (1990). *Experiences of crime across the world: Key findings of the 1989 international crime survey*. Deventer: Kluwer.