

## CHAPTER 1

### *Whither Fear of Crime?*

Crime is normal because a society exempt from it is utterly impossible.

Emile Durkheim

Scarcely a day passes that we are not hit anew with penetrating stories of criminal victimization. A thirteen-year-old girl shoots a cab driver in the back of the head, killing him, to avoid paying a six-dollar fare. A van carrying Hasidic Jews home from a hospital visit is sprayed with bullets. Drive-by shootings repeatedly occur in major cities. Scandals of fraud, embezzlement, and “impropriety” appear almost commonplace. Print and electronic media present frank depictions of violence and property crime, which show that America is under a siege of criminal activity. Indeed, the popularity of television means that most Americans can often watch criminal events or police reactions to them in living color—sometimes live. The preponderance of crime-related television shows and the preponderance of news stories devoted to crime are evidence that Americans spend considerable time pondering criminal victimization and efforts to constrain or punish offenders.

Yet what do we know about how most people really think about crime? While the media regularly reveals heinous acts of crime, terrorism, and incivility throughout the nation, does this shower of “crime news” make much difference in terms of daily living? Do violent crimes in New York City or Los Angeles make a difference to those who live in the respective suburbs, or even in Peoria? Are people aware of the relative risks of various types of crime and how that risk varies by communities? Are they afraid of crime? And, if so, how afraid are they? How do people interpret their own victimization risks in the course of everyday living? Do perceived crime risks and fears follow ecological patterns similar to those for crime? Who is most likely to be accurate in judging crime risk in their communities? Who is most likely to be afraid?

And do all these interpretive processes make any difference in daily behavior to avoid or protect oneself from crime? These and related questions are the focus of this book.

This is an empirical study of how people interpret criminal realities and victimization potentials around them. The social consequences of crime extend beyond those who are directly victimized, and this research focuses on one such consequence: fear. It is not intended to give directions on reducing fear of crime but may identify interpretive processes which can be seen as plausible intervention avenues. In a more general sense, the book goes beyond risk and fear of crime to examine how people interpret and make sense of their world. Using criminal victimization as the case in point, the conceptual framework and model developed may be fairly easily adapted to explain other phenomena from health behavior to decision-making processes.

While there is a clear consensus that crime is a serious social problem in the United States, there are two areas of controversy regarding reactions to it which are germane to this research. The first concerns the distribution and etiology of perceived risk and fear. Some scholars and policymakers paint a picture of rampant fear of crime in America, especially among older people, in part due to a *misunderstanding* of true risk (e.g., Clemente and Kleiman 1976; National Institute of Justice 1992; Ollenburger 1981). On the other hand, some researchers show that fear of crime exists in America but that it is closely related to risk and not nearly as pervasive a social problem as some suggest (Warr 1984; Yin 1982). Although it may be impossible to convince some that the findings from this project can settle the controversy, the present investigation represents the first national study to examine the relationship between crime risk and fear among various age groups. In addition, the most recent developments in survey research for the measurement of fear of crime are applied. Survey data on perceived risk and fear of crime are linked to official statistics to examine the accuracy of public awareness of crime risk and emotional reactions to it manifested in fear.

The second controversy hinges on strategies to overcome fear of crime. While this is not the focus of this investigation, it may be useful to consider the policy significance of this research. Regardless of the prevalence of fear of crime in modern societies, some effort is needed to reduce it. Edward Kennedy (1972) argued over two decades ago in a Senate hearing on housing for older people

that "A decent and safe living environment is an inherent right of all elderly citizens." No one disagrees with the goals of creating safe communities and reducing fear of crime but *how* to achieve these goals is hotly debated. The issue of contention remains the object for change.

The traditional and most widely accepted premise for reducing fear of crime has hinged on the formidable task of reducing crime. Yet, a more recent position, what some writers refer to as *perceptual criminology*, has arisen with the realization that many of the problems associated with crime, including fear, are independent of actual victimization. Crime is often viewed as a social problem, whether or not a person (or the person's significant others) has actually been recently victimized, because it may lead to decreased social integration, out-migration, restriction of activities, added security costs, and avoidance behaviors.<sup>1</sup> As Warr (1985) states: "And like criminal victimization itself, the consequences of fear are real, measurable, and potentially severe, both at an individual and social level" (p. 238).

Because people may be concerned about or afraid of crime without experiencing victimization, some scholars have argued that more than just crime should be targeted for change. Indeed, some scholars go so far as to conclude that fear of crime is a more severe problem than crime itself (Clemente and Kleiman 1976). Accepting this premise can lead to a host of strategies to affect public beliefs about crime. For example, consider the concept of *symbolic reassurance* offered by Henig and Maxfield (1978) which includes increasing police visibility and community interaction in order to change public beliefs about crime. Few may argue with initiatives to change public beliefs about crime in order to limit reactions such as out-migration and fear. The tension among scholars and policymakers arises, however, when changing public beliefs is seen as a substitute for or more important than reducing criminal victimization per se. In other words, if a zero-sum game is played, how much effort should be given to the two objectives? Of course, the other important questions surrounding this debate are whether public beliefs about crime are inaccurate, irrational, or even in need of change. The interrelatedness of the basic science questions on the distribution and etiology of crime risk and fear and the policy questions on appropriate intervention avenues should now be readily apparent. If our answers to the first question are in error or ill-informed, then we will invest in social inter-

ventions for the wrong people or under the wrong circumstances. As a result, it is possible that such interventions could actually create fear of crime rather than reduce it—an iatrogenic effect.

Many published reports contend that the public beliefs about crime are inaccurate, largely because of media distortion in covering crime (Baker, Nienstedt, Everett, and McCleary 1983). Quinney's (1970) comments on the distortion of criminal realities by the media were seminal in this regard: "Coverage of crime by the mass media, therefore, is not only selective but is a distortion of the everyday world of crime" (p. 284). The distortion is often attributed to the "overemphasis on violent crime, the creation of artificial crime waves, the use of crime news as 'filler,' misleading reports of crime statistics, and police control of crime news" (Warr 1982, p. 187).

While media no doubt play a significant role in shaping perceived risk and fear of crime, other factors may influence such beliefs. Moreover, there are comparatively few studies which make direct tests of public beliefs about crime in relation to objective data. What few studies offer direct tests of public beliefs suggest that the media distortion thesis may be an oversimplification. Generally speaking, the studies reflect an overall pattern of considerable public accuracy in estimating crime risk (Kleinman and David 1973; Lewis and Salem 1986; McPherson 1978; Stafford and Galle 1984; Warr 1980, 1982) although certain social categories and ethnic groups appear more accurate than others in judging the prevalence of crime (Janson and Ryder 1983). Each of the aforementioned studies is limited by studying the relationship between objective and perceived risk of crime among only one urban place or perhaps a limited sample of metropolitan areas. The present study seeks to extend our knowledge by using national data including urban and rural areas.

In short, the central research question focuses on the distribution and etiology of fear of crime in America. I seek to identify those persons who are most afraid of crime and offer explanations for their fear. Fear of crime is an emotional response of dread or anxiety to crime or symbols that a person associates with crime (Ferraro and LaGrange 1987, 1992). To produce a fear reaction in humans, a recognition of a situation as possessing at least potential danger, real or imagined, is necessary. This conception of potential danger is what we may call perceived risk and is clearly defined by the actor in association with others. Therefore,

although many previous studies of fear of crime do not explicitly consider the concept of risk or perceived risk in the modeling process, the approach taken here is to consider perceived risk as central to the entire interpretive process.

In the process of answering the general questions about who is most afraid of crime and why, we can also address a series of specific research questions raised by previous researchers regarding age and gender differences in fear of crime. The findings of this study have considerable policy relevance as we try to tame the crime monster in American society—but the emphasis here is on improving our understanding of what produces fear of crime, not advocating selective intervention efforts. I see fear of crime influenced by knowledge and experience of criminal realities, environmental context, and biographical features. In order to reach the stated objectives, our first step is to articulate the theoretical approach to be used in studying it.