

FEAR OF CRIME

CRITICAL VOICES IN AN AGE OF ANXIETY



STEPHEN FARRALL & MURRAY LEE

Fear of Crime

As a concept, the 'fear of crime' has produced considerable academic debate since the 1960s. Attention to the 'fear of crime', 'anxiety about crime' and 'insecurity' in general has found its way into governmental thinking, policy interventions in crime prevention, and popular discourse. Many national, regional and local governments now conduct their own studies into the fear of crime, as do media companies and polling organisations.

Bringing together a collection of new and cutting edge articles from key scholars in criminology, geography, sociology, psychology and related fields *Fear of Crime: Critical Voices in an Age of Anxiety* sets out to challenge many assumptions which remain submerged in attempts to measure, and attribute cause to, crime fears. Questioning the orthodoxy through which models of fear of crime are conceptualised, and critically engaging with inquiries that have supposed that fear is objectively quantifiable, measurable and frequent, the essays collected here offer new paradigms and methods of inquiry for approaching the fear of crime. They will be essential reading for academics, practitioners, policy makers and students interested in this field.

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Fear of Crime

Critical voices in an age of anxiety

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Chapter 1

Critical voices in an age of anxiety

A reintroduction to the fear of crime

Stephen Farrall and Murray Lee

When faced with writing an Introduction, or indeed any sort of overview of the fear of crime, one is immediately struck with two questions. The first is ‘where to begin?’ and the second is ‘is there anything left to say?’. We think that there is still plenty left to say about the creature which has become known as the fear of crime (and since we do not intend to attempt an overview of the field, we give the first question a bit of a body-swerve). Those hoping to find between the covers of this book a review of the relationship between the fear of crime and various socio-demographic variables, or looking for a ‘quick fix’ to issues of how to reduce the fear of crime for some or other government target will find themselves sorely disappointed. We make no apologies for this. Such is the generally repetitive nature of most research on the fear of crime that Hale’s review (drafted in the early 1990s and published in 1996) is still an excellent summary of the field. However, this collection, we hope, drives on the debates which surround the fear of crime. All of the chapters are written by people who have some considerable experience of researching and thinking about the topics at hand. Our ‘critical voices’ come from around the industrialised world and from a variety of perspectives and backgrounds (urban geographers, sociologists, psychologists, psycho-analytically-inspired criminologists, political studies, and so on). Yet each, in some way, challenges some of the basic premises of the field. We shall return to these voices and what they have to say presently, but before we do we want to locate the fear of crime both in terms of the shifting nature of the debates and in terms of its place in wider social and political processes.

Locating the fear of crime I: An example from the UK

Interest in the fear of crime has ebbed and flowed since it was first discovered in the 1960s (some, see Loo, Chapter 2, in this book and Lee 2007, may prefer the word ‘invented’). Initially, the fear of crime was viewed as legitimate topic of research, expressing as it appeared to a range of concerns about urban disorder in the US and rises in crime rates in the UK. Debates at this point focused on the seemingly strangely high levels of fear given the

objectively low levels of risk. ‘Why were fear levels so out of kilter with risk levels?’, we asked ourselves. However, the tone of the debates changed, at least in the UK, from the 1980s onwards, as left realists and feminists waded into the field, questioning what crime surveys ‘did’ and what the fear of crime ‘meant’ and was ‘used for’. Some answered the ‘rationality question’ with a further question (along the lines of ‘what would a rational level of fear be, anyway?’, Sparks 1992) whilst others suggested that if one viewed levels of fear through the lenses of patriarchy and low level but enduring intimidation then the higher rates of fear for, amongst others, women, ethnic minorities and the urban working class, started to make sense. Following these debates, the UK’s Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) commissioned a programme of research entitled Crime and Social Order. A number of the projects touched on the fear of crime (or as it was sometimes called ‘anxieties about crime’ or ‘public sensibilities towards crime’ – and some of those most centrally involved in that programme and its work as it pertained to the fear of crime are amongst our contributors).

The Crime and Social Order programme ended towards the end of the 1990s. Various of the projects which had explored the fear of crime ended on notes which suggested that the fear of crime was a confused and congested topic (which indeed, it was and still is). For example, Wendy Holway and Tony Jefferson (2000) pointed to the importance of making sense of individual biographies when exploring the fear of crime. Others, such as Evi Girling, Ian Loader and Richard Sparks (Girling *et al.* 2000: 66) suggested that public sensibilities and ‘crime talk’ constitute ‘a means of registering and making intelligible what might otherwise remain some unsettling, yet difficult to grasp, mutations in the social and moral order’. This involves, they suggested, the use of metaphor and narrative about social change and the folding of stories, anecdotes, gossip, career, and personal biography together with perceptions of national change and decline. Yet others, for example the team lead by Jason Ditton, reported that they had pretty much lost faith in the then current survey measures used to explore the fear of crime (see Farrall *et al.* 1997 most notably). So, just as the Labour Party (or New Labour as they preferred to be called) came into office, academic criminologists in the UK dropped the fear of crime as a research topic and went off in pursuit of new toys. However, as Lee (2007) notes, despite the critical nature of this later qualitative turn, fear of crime had already become an object of intense governmental interest.

As academic research on the fear of crime in the UK pretty much dried up completely, so the fear of crime ‘industry’ switched homes; leaving academe and taking up residence first in central government departments before, like many approaching their forties, moving out to the provinces as part of a key plank in the Crime and Safety Audits inspired by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 (see also Lee, Chapter 3, in this book, for a review of the situation in Australia). If academics had appeared reluctant to engage with

the fear of crime for methodological or conceptual reasons prior to this, there was now no way that many of them were going to get their hands dirty with the messiness of ‘delivery’. This is not to suggest, by any stretch of the imagination, that there are no UK academics prepared to ‘roll up their sleeves’ and put the concept to good (and critical) use, for some notable exceptions do exist. Betsy Stanko, now of the Metropolitan Police, but formerly well and truly of academe, is amongst the best known of UK-based researchers who has taken on this task, and of course, her work will be familiar to more than just British readers. Still, by and large, academic criminology in the UK has fallen out of love with the fear of crime.

We hope that, perhaps, this book can go someway towards reinvigorating academic interest in the topic – certainly if this collection of voices cannot inspire further research, it is hard to see what can. For while many contributors to this book might lament the invention of fear of crime as an organising principle for this body of research and literature, most would also be wary of it becoming the exclusive domain of an ‘administrative criminology’ conducted only in the service of government and government-inspired targets. To disengage with the debates now runs the risk of a poor organising principle, and a range of mediocre if not counter-productive methodologies, becoming even more ingrained. As we have seen with the development of this body of knowledge, time-series data can often become normalised in a way that reinforces its own truth value (Farrall 2004; Lee 2007).

Locating the fear of crime II: Where ‘is’ the fear of crime, what does it ‘do’?

By posing these questions, we do not mean to embark upon a series of (frankly, quite tedious) paragraphs devoted to discussions of ‘hot spots’ of crime, ‘sink estates’ or to go through the houses on poorly-lit underpasses. Nor do we see ourselves initiating a review of the fear of crime as enforcer of after-dark curfews or of reducing levels of social cohesion (although, undoubtedly for some, it does have this effect). Rather, we see these (and similar questions) as a way into our own efforts to think through what it is that the fear of crime does to debates in contemporary societies and how it influences debates about ‘law and order’ (for want of a better term). We sketch these ideas out as Figure 1.1.

This figure attempts to describe the relationship(s) between the fear of crime (at the centre of the figure) and key political, social and economic organisations and institutions (in bold in the square boxes). The relationships are represented by the arrowed lines, and their operational characteristics described in italics in smaller square boxes.

Let us start not with the fear of crime, but with government. Governments initiate crime surveys in order to assess crime in their jurisdictions. This is partly because of a widening disillusionment with official crime statistics

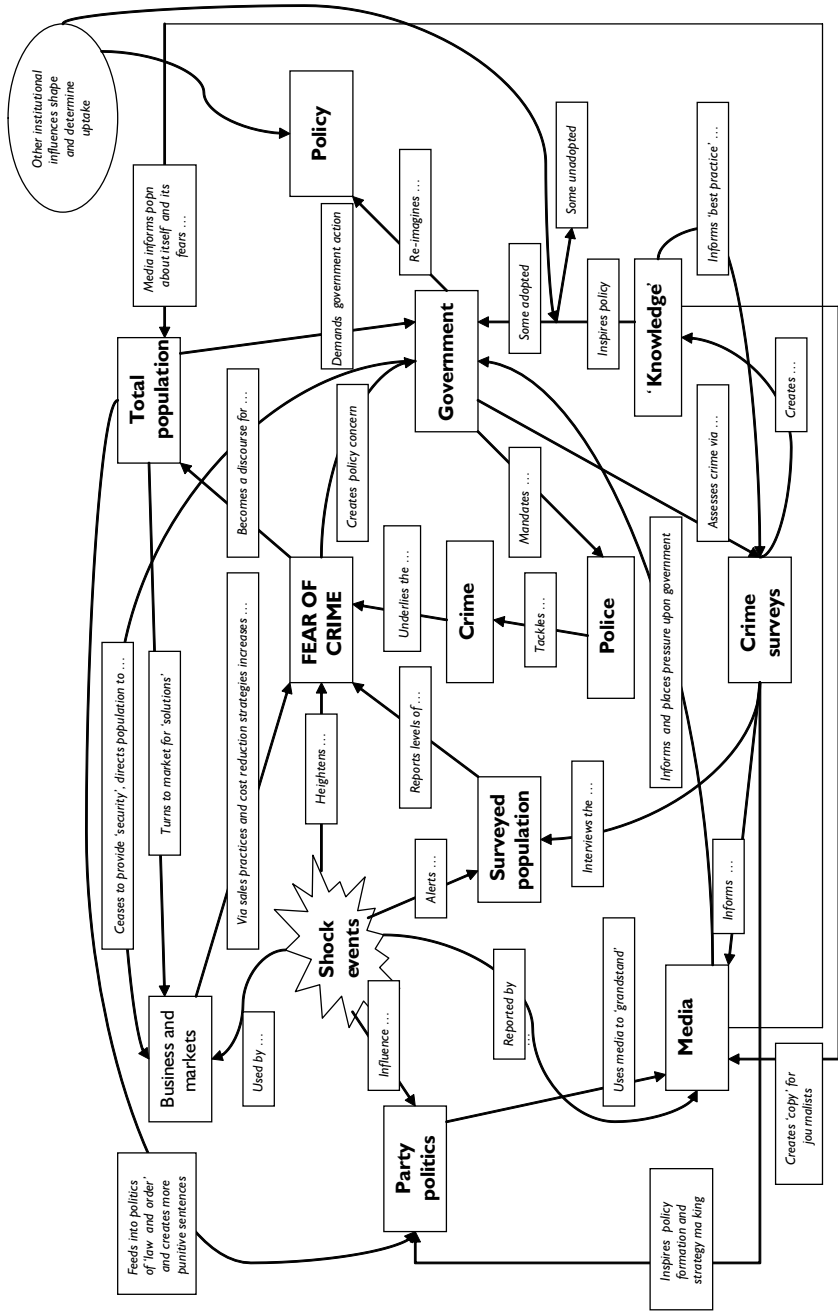


Figure 1.1 Relationship(s) between the fear of crime and key political, social and economic organisations and institutions

(which comes in part from 'knowledge, that is academic and officially-approved versions of truth which point to the failings of such official crime statistics) and the media (which report such views). Having commissioned crime surveys, samples of the population are surveyed, and over time, the information gained from such surveys fed back to the media and the wider population itself (the 'double hermeneutic' as Giddens (1984) would have it, or the fear of crime feedback loop in Lee's work, for example 2001). The surveyed population reports varying levels of crime fears (amongst other things, of course). Such fears become a discourse amongst the wider population for making sense of events (Girling *et al.* 2000) or for expressing other anxieties (Taylor and Jamieson 1998; Farrall *et al.* 2006), and also creates a pressure for the government of the day to 'do something' about crime. As well as placing pressure upon the government, the views of the populous (along with the data from crime surveys) are used by political parties to attune policies and encourage some to appeal to the electorate by making crime (and/or the fear of crime) an election issue. Survey data also, of course, assist in the formulation and reformulation of 'knowledge' and hence policy suggestions.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the government is slowly moving away from its role as 'provider of safety', instead pointing citizens towards the market for solutions to crime and their fears (which the population, with its understanding of budget restrictions and their own responsibility, has little choice but to embrace). Businesses operating in this market, which is – like all markets – competitive, need to exploit such fears and anxieties in order to sell their goods and services (new credit cards which are 'fraud-proofed', new windows which are burglar-proof and such like, see Hardy 2006 on the motor cycle insurance industry). Such practices remind the population that it is 'at risk' and serve to heighten crime fears. Shock events (murders of 'decent passers-by', abductions of children, serious crimes against members of the public, unexpected rises in crime rates, etc.) are used by those operating in the market to 'ram home' their message, and in so doing such events both directly and indirectly increase fears by their usage by businesses, media reporting and political grandstanding.

'Knowledge' suggests to government various policies which could be pursued to tackle the fear of crime. Some of these are adopted, others are not. The reasons for the adoption or non-adoption of such policies is influenced by a range of institutional pressures. Some of these relate to cultural norms which are unique to each nation, its history, political colour and popular ideas (which influence both government officials and academics, of course) about the causes of crime. All of these will vary over time and are not in anyway static.

This fluidity of crime fear discourse, its diffuse and yet often intensely localised nature, is often lost in its attempted quantification – or at least in the way it has traditionally been quantified. If there is one theme that,

perhaps, defines this book, it is this inclination to move away from a static enumerated reading of fear of crime and to see it in its socio-political, psycho-social and geo-spatial contexts. That is not to suggest that the contributors here have disengaged with quantitative methodologies; rather they engage with these in new and reflexive ways with intense critical reflection which takes account of the researchers' own role in the production of knowledge. Reading this book will, no doubt, confirm that fear of crime is irreducible to specific 'causes', inherently political, discursive and yet intensely personal.

The collected essays

Our first essay is that by Dennis Loo. Loo takes us back to the 1960s, and to the US. Loo identifies the Republican Party's desire to challenge the bedrock of values which had produced and been consolidated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal programme and the notion of a Great Society under Democratic President Lyndon Johnson. Loo argues that 'elites fabricated a fictive consensus around "law 'n' order" in the 1960s and employed it as a device to introduce momentous public policy changes', directly challenging the notion that these changes in social values occurred naturally. In a telling passage, Loo argues that:

By combining several different items into a category created after the fact, Gallup created the impression that crime concerns were much higher than they actually were. Other polls publicised in the remainder of 1968 also either conflated categories, perpetuating the impression of more robust crime concerns than were actually justified by the data or particular polls were selectively presented in a manner that generated the same impression. The polls *not publicised* in 1968 actually revealed crime concerns were *dropping*.

The ultimate message of Loo's essay, however, is that the Republican Party shifted the terms of the debates from social injustices to a focus on law and order, pollsters manipulated or selectively reported their results to reflect this shift, leaving the Democratic Party little choice but to follow the agenda as it moved. A similar, although, of course, not identical process was witnessed during the UK's 1979 General Election campaign, when Mrs Thatcher (who won the campaign for the Conservative Party) spoke of citizens having the right to feel 'safe in the streets' (the central referent of a key measure of the fear of crime in many a crime survey) and needing 'less tax and more law and order' (see Farrall 2006).

Following from Loo's essay, we turn to that by Lee. Lee's aim is to 'identify a range of obscured dimensions of knowledge and power in relation to the representation of data concerning public anxieties about crime'. Lee argues that the intensely political dimensions of the fear of crime (and the

resulting data, of course) and the socio-cultural implications of this, are often overlooked by government or 'administrative' criminologists who, on the assumptions that this thing 'exists' and is 'out there' to be measured, tend to reduce debates about 'fear of crime' to technical arguments. This, Lee argues, ignores all of that work (see Lee 2001, 2007; Stanko 2000; Loo and Grimes 2004; Loo, Chapter 2, in this book) which suggests that the fear of crime is contingent – something of a category of convenience. To paraphrase Lee, we created the concept (of crime fears) and only *then* reflected on whether or not it might be the most appropriate organising principal for a body of social scientific knowledge. This, naturally, is not to suggest that there was no anxiety about crime prior to the 1960s, for certainly there was (Pearson 1983). Rather, it is that the term 'fear of crime' was not an *organising principle*. As Lee elsewhere has noted (Lee 2007), the term was rarely if ever used before 1965. That the enumeration of such fear which resulted from surveys indicated significantly high levels of fear – or whatever was measured – meant that it became a governmental problematisation. Of course, once the fear of crime was enumerated and had become an organising principal for a range of criminal justice and social policy targeting, it also became a staple object of criminological inquiry attracting research funding and becoming the topic for thousands of academic publications (Hale 1996; Lee 1999; Lee 2007; Ditton and Farrall 2000). Consequently, not insignificant resources were invested in the 'new problem' of the fear of crime. As such, and this is also connected to the previous point, fear of crime became political from the moment it was enumerated.

Recent evidence (as if further evidence were needed) of the politicisation of the fear of crime and the associated concept of 'insecurity' has stemmed from the attacks on the US in 2001. Our next two essays consider this topic in some depth. First of all we have Smith and Pain's essay, in which they develop from two models of analysing fear – the everyday and the geopolitical – a third model of understanding the fear of crime. This is an approach which does not ignore global processes and events or attempts at political manipulation, and which accepts that outcomes at the rather more mundane or 'everyday' level, are not predictable, requiring that they 'make space for resistance to fear and fear discourses in everyday life too'. Ultimately, they argue that we need to shift the emphasis from 'authoritative, remote, top-down models of fear' towards more nuanced and grounded approaches based on everyday realities and perceptions. In so doing, Smith and Pain highlight the entwined nature of globalised fears and the processes which underlie them. Their ideas on the immediate local everyday fears and anxieties that are already present in some people's lives and the relationship of these to the wider world stimulates further thoughts about their connections.

Weber and Lee seek to 'critically assess the use of fear as a governmental tactic which has been employed as part of a national security discourse'. They go on to argue that the strategies for dealing with the threat of terrorism

adopted by 'liberal' governments 'represent the ushering in of a new era of pre-emptive, and as-yet largely unconstrained, forms of governance'. In a tenor which is reminiscent of the opening essay by Dennis Loo, and building on Bauman's insights (2004), Weber and Lee argue that 'official fear' about terrorist attacks has been 'contrived' in such a way as to create a demand (or at least to create the image of a demand) for the ever-tightening of anti-terrorist legislation and the extension of state powers. Weber and Lee are careful not to suggest that governments have *created* the 'fear of terrorism' (nor do they deny the possibility of terror attacks nor the legitimacy of targeted and lawful action to prevent them), rather arguing that 'a politics of fear has tapped into generalised anxieties which have deep seated roots in wider structural change and that these anxieties often suit contemporary political agendas'. In so doing, they offer a critical assessment of the use of fear as a governmental tactic – one which has been employed as part of an ongoing national security discourse.

Our next two essays deal with the thorny issue of gender and the fear of crime. Most research undertaken has sought to assess if males or females were more or less fearful than one another (often finding that females 'win' the competition to be more fearful, Hale 1996). Both of the essays in this book come to the topic from a different perspective. Relying on qualitative interviews with men, Day explores the experiences of men of being feared in public, finding this to be heavily racialised. Such feelings of being feared, especially when experienced amongst certain ethnic minority men, become bound up in processes of physical exclusion from some arenas of public space (such as shopping arcades, city streets and bars). Such experiences, as Day notes, have the potential to scar the individual and collective psyches of the groups feared, leaving them left with an unconscious sense of their and their ethnic groups' position in society. Sutton and Farrall approach the topic of gender and the fear of crime from an altogether different position to Day (although we would invite readers to reflect on both essays simultaneously). Using quantitative data, they suggest that when answering survey questions aimed at measuring their fear levels, men suppress the extent of their fears, hence the oft found lower levels of fear amongst men when compared to women. As the authors are at pains to point out, they are not suggesting that men deliberately distort their fear levels. Sutton and Farrall go on to suggest that 'men and women share a consensus that females are much more fearful than males'. This result provides evidence of the gender stereotypes which have been assumed to underlie the tendency for men to minimise their fears (see also Sutton and Farrall 2005).

Since the publication of Hollway and Jefferson's book (2000) stemming from the UK ESRC's Crime and Social Order programme, there has been a resurgence in interest in psycho-social explanations within criminology. Gadd and Jefferson start from the assumption that 'subjects are not rational unitary beings with full self-knowledge, but psychosocial subjects with a

split consciousness, constantly unconsciously defending themselves against anxiety'. With this in mind, they go on to argue that unconscious defensive activity affects what and how anything is remembered. Painful, fear-inducing or threatening events are either suppressed (that is forgotten) or recast in a modified fashion which renders the threatening aspects of the memory less challenging. Using the case study of one man, Gadd and Jefferson argue that the positions which any individual adopts are negotiated in relation to their biography and (any) attendant anxieties. Added to this are the discursive fields available to the individual (which are often influenced by their class, ethnicity, age and gender). As such, whether someone invests in the position of being fearful and preoccupied with the threat of victimisation depends, in part, as to how available that position is to him or her.

Jon Jackson's essay is an attempt 'bridge the social and the psychological in the fear of crime'. In this essay Jackson develops some of his earlier work in this area (see Jackson and Sunshine 2007; Jackson *et al.* 2006, 2007), and attempts to outline an approach to the fear of crime which draws upon cultural analyses of risk perception, the psychology of the individual, explanations inspired by sociological thinking, and geographical readings of the environment (see also Bannister 1993). Along the way he touches on survey methodologies, the circulation of narratives of fear and anxiety in society, and notions of morality. Jackson suggests that psychological analyses of risk perception need to account for the culturally embedded meaning of risk. However, he argues, psychologists have tended to ignore why people select one risk and not another. By arguing that a contextualised formulation of risk which bridges both levels of analysis (the psychological and the sociological) offers a promising way forward, Jackson points to new avenues for the quantitative investigation of the fear of crime.

Mike Enders and Christine Jennett revisit two large research projects conducted in Sydney Australia with the aim of further exploring the ideas of community cohesion and 'sense of community' and their relationship to fear of crime. They draw heavily on Sandra Walklate's (1997) research and are interested in how and in what circumstances community networks and relationships can mitigate against levels of crime fear. Their research identifies considerable problems with the ways in which New South Wales (NSW) policing policy and practice, including strategies such as high visibility policing, might not reduce but, in fact, increase problems associated with fear of crime in some circumstances. Enders and Jennett suggest the NSW police need to take seriously their stated objective to reduce both crime and fear of crime. Their research also has implications for the functions of local government suggesting that local strategies of community building can have positive effects in reducing crime fear and that local government needs to be funded accordingly to successfully conduct this work. While their work accepts that fear of crime is a problematic and contingent object of research,

they believe that the concept still has the potential to operate as an organising principle for policy intervention.

The essay by Derek Chadee and his colleagues attempts to explore the relationship between anxiety and fear of crimes as articulated in the psychology literature. The literature on fear of crime has mostly dealt with this concept from a sociological or criminological perspective with no attempt to deconstruct the concept from an informed psychological perspective. Chadee and his colleagues find that the fear of crime (as measured in surveys) owes more to feelings of individual trait anxiety than it does to state anxiety, or even victimisation. As such, the fear of crime may simply be an articulation of altogether different anxieties, which are unrelated to crime.

Many of the essays in this book can be read as attempts to expand and challenge the existing narrow definitions of fear of crime. Others attempt to challenge the established methodologies and propose new, less reductive programs of research and methodologies in their place. Still others turn the concept on its head and attempt to situate the fear of crime and debates around it terms of a set of power relations which are played out at societal or interpersonal levels. It is perhaps pertinent to view this diverse range of essays through the lenses of power relations and the variety of ways they address questions of power. The power to define fear of crime in particular ways to particular political ends, the power of fear of crime to operate as a form of social exclusion, the power of fear of crime discourses to help construct our everyday geographies and subjectivities. As such, we are left with both a set of individual and collective research agendas and a collective challenge to current and future researchers in the field.

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