

The frequency and intensity of the fear of crime in Leicestershire.

Background

Reducing the fear of crime has become an important issue over the last decade and will remain an important issue in the future. It is part of the National Community Safety Plan (2006-2009). In Leicestershire, one of the key outcomes of the Local Area Agreement (2006-2009) for safer communities is;

(Outcome 6) To reassure the public, reducing the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour so that people have improved confidence in the criminal justice system.

Previous research has highlighted that the survey tools used to measure the fear of crime may suffer from poor design (see Appendix I for more information). In addition to this

...it is contended [that] these tools fail to address a number of important issues which evaluators and policy makers will be interested in: namely the prevalence, frequency and severity of fearful episodes.¹

Such questions around the level of fear of crime provide little useful information as they tell us nothing about how often people experience this fear or how fearful people are. For example a previous survey of the Citizens' Panel (wave 6 in Oct' 2004) found that 19% of respondents felt 'very' or 'a bit' unsafe in their local area.

In the most recent round of the Leicestershire Citizens' Panel (wave 8 Nov' 2005) a question was included on the fear of crime. The question included followed the guidelines developed by Farrall and Gadd (2004) and was worded as follows:

- (a) In the past 12 months have you ever felt fearful about the possibility of becoming a victim of crime? [yes, no, can't remember]
- (b) How many times would you say you have felt fearful? [n]
- (c) Thinking about the last time you felt fearful, how fearful did you feel? [very afraid, a little afraid, can't remember]

Results

Table I (right) shows the results to the first question and indicates that just under a quarter of respondents said that they had felt fearful of becoming a victim of crime in the last year.

Table I. In the past 12 months have you ever felt fearful about the possibility of becoming a victim of crime?

	n	%
Yes	179	23
No	552	72
Can't Remember	41	5
Total	772	100

Note: Figures are weighted.

Produced by Jon Adamson, Research & Information Team, Leicestershire County Council (t: 0116 265 7419, e: jadamson@leics.gov.uk). Based on Farrall, S. and Gadd, D (2004) Brit. J. Criminol. 44, 127-132. Research Note on the Frequency of the Fear of Crime. Data sourced from the Leicestershire County Council Citizens' Panel (wave 8) Nov 2005. Individual responses have been weighted to reflect the demography of Leicestershire.

¹ Evaluating Crime Fears. A research Note on a Pilot Study to improve the Measurement of the 'Fear of Crime' as a Performance Indicator. Stephen Farrall and David Gadd, 2004. SAGE Publications. DOI: 10.1177/1356389004050216. Vol 10(4): 493-502. (See also, The Frequency of the Fear of Crime. Stephen Farrall and David Gadd. RESEARCH NOTE. BRIT. J. CRIMINOL. (2004) 44, 127-132.)

Respondents who stated that they had felt fearful in the last year were then asked how many times they had felt fearful. Table 2 (right) shows the uncoded values of responses to this open-ended question. Table 3 (below) shows the recoded summary.

Table 2 shows a wide range of different responses. It highlights that if presented with a question requiring an open-ended answer respondents are more likely to give a rounded, more memorable figure. For example, thirteen people responded that they had felt fearful ten times in the last twelve months but no one stated that they had felt fearful eleven times in the last twelve months. Also, a number of people gave a literal answer which corresponds to a more general recollection of the last twelve months, e.g. '52' for once a week and '365' for every day. Taking this into account, table 3 shows a recoded summary of this information.

It is evident that for the majority of people who have felt fearful in the last twelve months this has been fairly infrequent. Of those who have felt fearful in the last twelve months, around a third (28.3%) experienced this only once or twice and a further third (36.2%) experienced this around once a quarter. A small number of respondents (5.5%) felt afraid very often, more than once a week.

Thus, most individuals who have felt fearful of becoming a victim of crime in the last year experienced this very few times.

Table 2. Uncoded responses for 'How many times would you say you have felt fearful?'

No. of times	n	%
1	15	9.3
2	30	18.9
3	29	18.6
4	17	10.7
5	11	6.8
6	9	5.5
7	1	0.6
8	3	1.9
9	0	0.3
10	13	8.5
12	5	3.3
15	3	1.8
20	4	2.4
24	3	1.7
30	1	0.5
50	1	0.4
52	5	3.4
100	1	0.6
300	2	1.0
360	1	0.9
365	3	1.9
600	2	1.0
Total	157	100

Note: Asked only of those who reported feeling fearful. Figures have been weighted and 'n' is shown here rounded to the nearest whole number.

Table 3. Coded responses to 'How many times would you say you have felt fearful?'

description of category	number of responses	%
once or twice	44	28.3
once a quarter	57	36.2
every two months	12	8.0
once a month	22	13.8
twice a month	7	4.6
once a week	6	3.7
twice a week	1	0.6
once a day	6	3.8
twice a day	2	1.0
Total	157	100

Note: The coding framework for the weighted data in Table 3 and the subsequent Table 5 is as follows (uncoded, literal response in brackets): once or twice (1 or 2); once a quarter (3, 4 or 5); every two months (6, 7 or 8); once a month (9 to 15); twice a month (20, 24 or 30); once a week (50 or 52); twice a week (100); once a day (300, 360 or 365); twice a day (600).

Table 4 shows information on the intensity of fearful experiences in the past twelve months. This shows that just five per cent of respondents felt 'very afraid' the last time they had felt fearful.

Table 4. Thinking about the last time you felt fearful, how fearful did you feel? [Question (a) and (c) combined.]

	n	%
Not afraid	552	76
A little afraid	130	18
Very afraid	34	5
Can't remember	8	1
Total	724	100

Table 5 (below) combines the three parts of the question to look at the frequency and the intensity of occasions in the last twelve months when people felt fearful about the possibility of becoming a victim of crime.

Table 5 shows that only 3% of respondents had more than one or two fearful experiences in the last twelve months in which they felt 'very afraid'. Only 0.6% (or four people) felt very afraid that they would become a victim of crime at least once a week in the last twelve months.

Table 5. The infrequency of intensely fearful experiences about the possibility of becoming a victim of crime in the last twelve months. [Question (a), (b) and (c) combined.]

frequency	intensity	not afraid		a little afraid		very afraid		total	
		n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
	never	552	(78.9)	-	-	-	-	552	(78.9)
	once or twice	-	-	36	(5.1)	8	(1.1)	44	(6.3)
	once a quarter	-	-	44	(6.3)	10	(1.4)	54	(7.7)
	every two months	-	-	7	(1.0)	4	(0.6)	11	(1.6)
	once a month	-	-	15	(2.1)	3	(0.4)	18	(2.6)
	twice a month	-	-	8	(1.1)	-	-	8	(1.1)
	once a week	-	-	3	(0.4)	3	(0.4)	6	(0.9)
	twice a week	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	once a day	-	-	4	(0.6)	1	(0.1)	5	(0.7)
	twice a day	-	-	2	(0.3)	-	-	2	(0.3)
	Total	552	(78.9)	119	(17.0)	29	(4.1)	700	(100)

Note 1: this table excludes those respondents who could not remember how frequently or intensely they had been fearful that they would become a victim of crime.

Note 2: Combining the three sections of the question assumes that the last experience is indicative of all experiences in terms of the intensity of fear experienced. In reality, we do not know how fearful people felt on previous occasions, but we can assume that in aggregate the last fearful event is indicative of all fearful events.

Conclusion

The incidence of the fear of crime is very low: in the last year, less than a quarter of respondents had experienced a situation in which they felt fearful that they could become a victim of crime (Table 1). Furthermore, a third of respondents who felt fearful only felt fearful once or twice in the last year (Table 3). When the intensity of fear was examined only 5% of respondents felt very afraid in the last year (Table 4). When the incidence and the intensity of fear were examined together only 3% of respondents had felt very afraid more than once or twice in the last year about the possibility of becoming a victim of crime (Table 5).

These findings suggest that, for people in Leicestershire, regular exposure to heightened levels of fear of becoming a victim of crime are very rare. If such instances are very rare it is difficult to develop strategies and initiatives to reduce them. It would be better to identify the small minority of people for whom feeling fearful is frequent and intense. Identifying who those people are, and the appropriate way to respond to their fear, needs to consider all communities of people - geographic, demographic and common interest groups.

Appendix I

This appendix is a brief note on the seminar 'Measuring the fear of crime with greater accuracy'. This seminar took place at the Association of Chief Police Officers/Home Office (ACPO/HO) Conference on 'Effective local policing - what research tells us' (7th June 2005). Dr Stephen Farrall, Department of Criminology, Keele University led the seminar with a presentation and discussion around measuring the fear of crime.

The first section of this appendix describes some comments on one of the most commonly asked questions around the fear of crime: How safe do you or would you feel walking alone after dark in your neighbourhood? The second section of this appendix looks at an alternative question to ask around fear of crime, upon which this short paper has been based.

Section A: a common question on the fear of crime:

Starting a question like this with 'how' is leading and based on assumption. For example, "How do you feel about supporting Man Utd?" assumes that everyone supports Man Utd.

Including "do you or would you" mixes the real and the imaginary. Some people will respond for both, some for just real and some just imagining themselves in this scenario.

Do people do this? We are very rarely in a situation where there are no other people around, so this places people in a situation which they are very unlikely to be in.

How safe do you or would you feel walking alone after dark in your neighbourhood?

Responses to this question were categorised on a five point scale: Very safe; Fairly Safe; Unsure; Fairly Unsafe; Very Unsafe.

Other criticisms of this question:

- It mixes fear and risk (although it was argued that it's impossible to separate these as at some level the two are interrelated.)
- It fails to mention crime. People's response could be influenced by a range of other things, e.g. badly lit streets, poorly maintained paving, alien abduction
- It doesn't specify a time-scale. (There is an inherent difficulty in measuring relatively short term projects/initiatives because respondents base their answers on a much longer or at least a different time period.)

What is a neighbourhood and where is a neighbourhood? Some questions specify the area in which people can walk in 10minutes, but this will differ greatly for people. Thus their response will relate to completely different areas.

Section B: an alternative question:

In the past year, have you ever felt fearful about the possibility of becoming a victim of crime? [yes, no, can't remember]

(if yes) How often have you felt fearful? [n or can't remember]

(if yes) How fearful were you? [very afraid, a little afraid, can't remember]

Other comments:

- This isn't the only question you should ask about fear of crime, or necessarily the best question. It is a better alternative than the one asked above.
- There is very little evidence to show whether there is a relationship between fear and victimisation, or fear and the media.
- Other questions around fear of crime concentrate on an individual's behavioural response to their fear of crime, e.g. do they avoid certain areas, do they lock doors and windows. For these type of questions it is worth considering whether a behavioural response is a consequence of an individual's fear or vice versa, or are they nothing to do with each other?