Crime and Older People, ISBN 0 642 22739 X

Victimisation and Fear of Crime among the Elderly: A possible link?

Professor E. Fattah
School of Criminology
Simon Fraser University

\ldots in the last 20 years, fear of crime has (once again) ensconced itself as an integral part of criminal policy debate: no central debate on crime and/or punishment takes place without fear of crime emerging as one of the prerequisites for, or as a possible effect of, certain measures. (Flemming Balvig 1990, p.89)

Introduction

Fear of crime is problematic both as a research topic and a public policy issue. It is problematic as a research topic because it is difficult to define, operationalise, and measure. And it is problematic as a public policy issue because our criminal justice policy is based largely, almost exclusively, on the promotion of fear. Our approach to fear of crime is equally problematic because we have no qualms about exploiting it when it suits our purposes but we are quick to condemn it when it becomes a source of public concern or complaint. The persistent demands for lowering people's fear of crime seem to be based on the uncritical view that since it negatively affects the quality of life, reducing it is a worthwhile goal that should be actively and diligently pursued. This is an uncritical view because:

1) If fear is inherently or intrinsically bad then why are we willing to use it as the primary means of education and control? Or is it that fear of crime is qualitatively different from other fear? Is fear of criminal victimisation qualitatively different from
the fear of being killed by a reckless driver, or through the negligence or malpractice of a physician? Is it qualitatively different from the fear of getting cancer from pollution, radiation, or secondhand smoke? Is it different from the fear of having one's teenage kid commit suicide or one's young son killed in war? Is it different from the fear of being stopped and harassed by the police or of having one's home legally searched? Is it different from the fear of being falsely accused of sexual assault or sexual harassment? Is it different from a child's fear of being disciplined by legally permissible corporal punishment? If it is not different why is it that it is getting all the attention and why is it that nothing is being done to alleviate those other fears? Is it another case of "the end justifies the means"? Could it be that fear is acceptable when it could be exploited to achieve what we judge to be desirable goals but unacceptable if it is caused by other conditions?

2) Calls for reducing fear of crime are predicated upon the premise that it forces people to change their behaviour, for example, forcing the elderly to reduce their mobility and to restrict their activities. If this is true, then fear must also influence people's behaviour in positive ways. A lesson one learns early in the social sciences is that things are not one-sided, they have their positive as well as negative sides, they can be dysfunctional in some way but functional in another.

For example, if an elderly person living alone who has not thought of, or intended to, acquire a pet decides to get one because of fear of crime, shouldn't this be viewed as a positive move? After all, gerontological research suggests that old people living alone who have pets are less lonely, feel healthier and happier, and live longer than those who don't. If residents in an area who previously did not have much contact with each other decide, because of fear of crime, to get together to do something about what they perceive to be a high risk of victimisation, isn't this a positive outcome of such fear? Many researchers argue that the major benefit of programs which are mounted in response to fear of crime (such as Neighbourhood Watch) is not that they reduce crime but that they promote interaction, cooperation, and solidarity between those who live in the same block or the same housing project.
3) No one has scientifically or systematically researched the impact that a substantial reduction in the level of fear could have on the rates of criminal victimisation. Could the lowering of fear have unanticipated consequences or undesirable side-effects? Could attempts to lower the level of fear be at cross-purposes with crime prevention efforts? To my knowledge, no one has tried to answer this empirical question although fear of crime research has been going on for over two decades.

To look at fear of crime objectively and dispassionately, one has to set aside the popular political rhetoric. Claims made in the United States Congress in the late sixties that fear of crime has rendered American elderly prisoners in their own homes proved to be widely exaggerated. Surely, the elderly do not go out as often as younger age groups, and their nocturnal errands are much less frequent than youthful or middle-aged citizens, but this has more to do with changes in lifestyle than with fear of crime. Fear or no fear, as people grow older, as they retire from the workforce, as their social network shrinks through mobility, sickness, or death, their weekly or monthly trips outside the home become fewer and fewer.

So setting aside the popular rhetoric I will try in the time allocated to me to examine our ambivalent and somewhat contradictory attitudes toward fear. Next, I will summarise some of the major problems encountered in fear of crime research. Then, on the basis of the available, and admittedly inconclusive evidence, I will examine whether there is a link between fear of crime and victimisation and the nature of such a link if one does exist. To do so, the focus will be on research findings regarding the elderly. As you can see from this outline, the paper addresses substantive as well as research issues. The reason for pointing out some of the methodological problems of fear of crime research is to highlight the limitations, some would even say the failings, of the research in this area, and to alert you to the need to view the findings with caution.

Fear of Crime
Promoting Fear
Despite the growing concern about fear of crime, the mounting attention being paid to it, and the incessant demands to do something about it, we seem to be doing our best to promote rather than reduce fear among the general public. The portrayal of crime in the media and the message being conveyed about the state of crime seem to be designed to enhance people's anxiety and to heighten their fear of victimisation. We have ample evidence that members of the general public, particularly the elderly, have distorted perceptions of the crime situation. And yet instead of trying to correct these misperceptions we seem to be reinforcing them.

Surveys gauging people's views and beliefs about crime indicate that the perceptions are not based on the real incidence of crime or on how prevalent crime is. Sparks, Genn and Dodd (1977, p. 209), for example, found expressed feelings of crime or insecurity to have many sources, and to be strongly influenced by beliefs, attitudes and experiences which have nothing whatever to do with crime. Research also shows that fear of crime has little to do with the objective risks of victimisation. If this is the case, then it should be possible to change those perceptions and to reduce the fear without having to bring about any real change in crime rates. In other words, it is much more important and far easier to change people's impressions and beliefs about crime than to change the crime situation itself.

Studies of public perceptions of crime (Doob & Roberts 1982) unequivocally demonstrate that when widely held beliefs are checked against objective or statistical reference points, they prove to be, more often than not, wrong. This finding has important policy implications. It means that everything which gives, or is likely to give, the impression that the crime situation is bad, is becoming worse, or is getting out of hand, can only contribute to the already widespread misperceptions about crime. Frequently used metaphors, such as "declaring war on crime" are bound to foster or reinforce the impression of a state of siege, of desperate and ever deteriorating conditions where criminals are gaining the upper hand. The impact is likely to be greater on those vulnerable members of society like the elderly who might feel that they are particularly threatened by the risk of crime.

It goes without saying that when people are constantly bombarded with messages telling them that they live in an unsafe society, they will become convinced that crime is rampant and that their risks of being victimised are quite high.
Even actions, motivated by the best of intentions, namely to heighten awareness of certain types of victimisation or to sensitisise us to the plight of crime victims can contribute to aggravating the problem and are bound to raise an already high level of anxiety about crime and a lingering fear of victimisation. The same could be said of widely publicised estimates that seem to take on a life of their own and quickly assume the status of facts. Among the most cited in Canada is the one about one wife in ten being battered or that one in four females is, or will be, a victim of sexual abuse, to say nothing of the widely exaggerated estimates of elderly abuse. As you can imagine, the lay person, the ordinary citizen, the uninitiated member of the public does not realise that these are just estimates, and like all estimates are subject to error, even serious error. To them, the difference between an estimate and an actual statistic is blurred and the estimate soon becomes a reality.

All this begs the question of how crime should be portrayed. Should we project a reassuring image or a fear-generating and anxiety-provoking one? Should we convey a message of safety and foster a sense of security or do we want to draw a bleak picture of the crime situation? And if it is true that fear of crime affects or impairs the quality of life then the question is whether the portrayal of crime should be done in a manner that is likely to promote or reduce fear.

Unfortunately, there are many groups in society that are doing their very best to convince the public that the crime situation is really bad.

The media's obsession with crime, its sensationalisation and overdramatisation of crime news, though understandable, is disturbing. Mundane, average or typical crimes do not make headlines and are not, by any account, big news. What makes the news are the atypical, the abnormal, and the extraordinary. The more unusual the crime, the more newsworthy it is. The selection, the filtering and the dramatisation mean that the public is presented with an uncharacteristic and unrepresentative image of crime.

Crime also provides work to hundreds of thousands of individuals. There are many constituencies that use crime to buttress their demands for more money and manpower. Edgar Hoover who headed the FBI for many years, and who is usually credited with inventing the infamous crime clock, was able to convert increases in crime rates into successful requests for greater congressional appropriations for the agency.
But there are several other agencies in society which have an obvious interest in painting a
gloomy crime picture and in emphasising and capitalising on whatever real or apparent increase may
take place in crime rates. In addition to the social agencies that stand to gain from a worsening
crime situation, there are numerous industries which clearly benefit from a growth in crime and a
rising fear of victimisation. Among the most visible of these industries are the private security
industry, the crime gadget industry, the personal safety training industry, and the insurance industry.

With all these interests trying their utmost to raise concern about crime and to spread a
threatening message about it, it is not surprising that a large segment of the general public hold
distorted perceptions, impressions, and beliefs about crime.

Exploiting Fear

There is no doubt that the concern about fear of crime, particularly among the elderly, is a laudable
concern, and that the desire to do something about it is a worthwhile goal. What is often
overlooked is the fact that we constantly use fear, threats, and scare tactics to influence and mould
the conduct of children and adults alike, to produce conformity to the norms, rules and laws, to
impose what we believe to be appropriate lifestyles or patterns of behaviour. In other words, we
use fear to coerce people into behaving to our liking or to do what we judge to be in their best
interest. We see nothing wrong with doing that. We even try to amplify and magnify the threat way
beyond its objective reality in order to ensure maximum compliance.

We threaten people with hell if they commit sin, with punishment if they break the law
(programs such as "Scared Straight" are quite popular and operate in many American penal
institutions). We threaten them with dire consequences if they masturbate, if they have sex, if they
use drugs, if they smoke, if they drink, if they eat fat., if they overexpose themselves to the sun, etc.
We instil fear in the mind of children so that they may not misbehave. To put it mildly, our daily life
is an uninterrupted sequence of threats meant to make us so fearful and to intimidate us into doing
this or not doing that. No one complains that these scare tactics are affecting the quality of life of
those at whom they are aimed. And certainly there are many other conditions that more seriously
affect the quality of life of the elderly and yet fail to generate the same interest, concern, or outcry:
high taxes, high inflation, high costs of medical care or drugs, etc. Surely, the quality of life of an
elderly person who, by reason of poverty, is unable to afford a pair of glasses, dentures, a wheelchair, or heating in winter, is far more affected than by fear of crime!

In our endeavours to prevent crime we do not hesitate to use fear to induce caution and prudence, to change people's attitudes, and to make them refrain from crime facilitating behaviours. We use fear of crime to dissuade people from hitchhiking, from keeping their doors or their cars unlocked, from leaving valuables in their vehicles, from carrying large amounts of cash, or to persuade them to take the necessary precautions with their credit cards, their jewellery, etc.

We use fear of crime effectively as a marketing strategy to sell a wide variety of goods and services ranging from protective security to insurance. One of the booming industries in these times of economic recession is the crime gadget industry, primarily engaged in the manufacture, marketing, sale, rental, maintenance and monitoring of mechanical and electronic protective or alerting devices such as burglar, hold-up, and fire alarm systems, sensors, metal detectors, locks, chains, safes, vaults, bullet-proof vests, unbreakable glass, automatic light and sound switches, whistles, chemical sprays, to name but a few. Recent TV commercials advertising some of these gadgets such as the mace spray cans are designed to convince women that no female should leave home without them.

Crime then, is big business. It generates profits not only for the criminal but also for a host of private industries and service delivery businesses. These businesses and industries reap benefits from an increase in the threat of crime and from the amplification of the risks of criminal victimisation. As with other goods and services, those related to the threat of crime need to be marketed and some of the marketing strategies are rather obvious:

- creating, fostering or reinforcing an impression that certain types of crime are rampant or are rapidly increasing;
- emphasising or exaggerating the threat and the dangers of victimisation by crime. The greater the threat, and the higher the risk, the greater is the need for protection, security, prevention, and so on;
- stressing "the pressing need" to take specific and effective measures to prepare and to protect oneself, one's home, one's business against a wide variety of crimes;
highlighting some of the available techniques and new, modern devices for protection against criminals, as well as publicising the products designed to reduce the risks of victimisation or minimise the losses from crime.

Defining Fear

One of the major research problems is the concept of fear itself. Fear is an emotion and like other emotions (love, hate) it is difficult to define and to measure. Attitudes (such as concern about crime) or perceptions (such as estimates of the chances of being victimised) are less problematic. By recognising and treating fear as an emotion the common mistake of having fear branded as rational or irrational, as founded or unfounded, could be avoided. Emotions, by definition, are irrational and there is no such thing as a "rational emotion". The same can be said about attempts to determine whether the level of fear is, or is not, commensurate with the real risks to which the group in question is exposed. Emotions, such as fear, are not based on rational objective assessments of the chances of becoming victim. There is no sense, therefore, in trying to determine whether they are proportionate or disproportionate to the real dangers and the objective risks of victimisation. Despite the large number of studies dealing with "fear of crime" during the past two decades, it is hard to come across a definition of the concept. Most of the studies treat "fear of crime" as if it were self-explanatory. This flagrant omission is probably due to the insurmountable problems of trying to come up with a clear, accurate, and easy to operationalise definition of what is in essence a basic human emotion. And yet, if research on fear of crime is to be informative and enlightening it has to use standardised definitions that are operationalised in a manner that ensures both continuity and comparability of research findings.

Another problem with research on "fear of crime" is the interchangeable use of different concepts without taking into account the subtle distinctions between them. One encounters references to fear, fright, anxiety, worry, feelings of safety, feelings of security/insecurity, as if they are all one and the same. Quite often, no distinction is made between fear of global crime (with crime treated as a general, vague, and somewhat abstract category) and fear of concrete forms of victimisation. Sometimes, although the talk is of "fear of crime" what is being measured is not fear at all. For example, although the study by Wiltz (1982) bears the words "fear of crime" in the title and
although the author refers to same repeatedly in the text, what was actually measured were the respondents' perceptions/estimates of their chances of being victimised.

Measuring Fear

Crime is a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional phenomenon. Criminal offences vary greatly in their seriousness, their consequences, and the likelihood of their occurrence. It is obvious, therefore, that those who are afraid do not fear all crimes, or even the most common ones, to the same degree. They may feel very vulnerable to certain types and quasi immune to others. Women, for example, might fear rape more than any other crime while the elderly might be mostly afraid to have their house or apartment violated or broken into, particularly while they are inside. Not only the level of fear, but also the nature of fear, may vary according to the type of victimisation most feared. Fear of physical or sexual assault may be qualitatively different from that of having one's car stolen or one's purse snatched. One general shortcoming of fear of crime research (particularly the earlier studies) is the failure to differentiate between various types of crime. It relied on "global" measures of fear rather than offence-specific measures (Warr 1984).

Like other researchers (Gibbs, Coyle & Hanrahan 1987; Miethe & Lee 1984; Yin 1980), Fattah and Sacco (1989) are critical of the "global measures" inability to distinguish levels of fear associated with particular offences. The global measures do not allow us, for example, to detect the difference between respondents who might be afraid for their personal safety because of a concern about being sexually assaulted and others who may be unconcerned about sexual assault but are "anxious" about being robbed or having their purse snatched. Early research made no distinction between fear of personal violent crime and property crime. It did not recognise the fact that some crimes are more fear-provoking than others. Questions about feeling "unsafe when out alone at night" or being "afraid to walk alone in an area in one's neighbourhood" can only tap one's fear or anxiety about the types of crime likely to be committed on the street. They do not capture people's "worries" about other victimisations to which they may be subjected while at home, nor crimes that are committed against the household: burglary, vandalism, motor vehicle theft, etc. Skogan and Maxfield (1981), for example, admit that the way they operationalised fear by asking "How safe do
you feel or would you feel being alone in your neighbourhood at night?” misses entirely one emotion-arousing crime, burglary.

Questions asking respondents whether they think that the "neighbourhood crime rate has increased", or whether "there is more violence on the street now compared to a year ago", and similar others, are not only global measures but they do not as mentioned above, measure fear at all.

Research on fear of crime among the elderly, quite popular in the 1970s and the 1980s, generally failed to assess their worries and anxieties about certain types of victimisation to which they are particularly susceptible such as consumer fraud, abuse by a caretaker, exploitation by a younger relative, and so forth. The type of questions asked did not lend themselves well (or at all) to tapping or measuring the elderly's feelings and attitudes vis-à-vis these types.

By using global measures, or by mostly asking questions about safety in the streets, fear of crime research has advertently or inadvertently focused on some crimes and neglected others. The questions asked meant that only anxiety about certain crimes will be tapped but not others, for example, crime in the streets but not household crime; crimes by strangers but not crimes by intimates; burglary, vandalism, car theft, etc., but not fraud and swindling, and so forth.

Another problem with the use of global measures is the failure to realise that attitudes about crime and fear of crime might be largely determined (or at least greatly influenced) by one single type of victimisation. Warr (1984), for example, believes that fear of rape is central to women's fear of crime, that it is the "master offence" that shapes women's attitudes and reactions to crime. He feels that for younger women, in particular, fear of crime is in reality fear of rape. He writes: "There can be little doubt, then, that rape occupies a central place in the fears of many women. The use of an omnibus measure of fear...does not permit us to isolate the unique effect of rape in producing differential sensitivity to risk among men and women...” (p.700).

Despite considerable improvements in recent years, the measures currently used to tap "the fear of crime" still leave much to be desired. Except for non-scholarly surveys, such as those conducted by the Gallop Institute, which continue to use a single question, most of the recent studies on fear have used multiple questions, a scale or an index meant to capture the various aspects and dimensions of fear. A combination of questions aimed at both cognitive and behavioural dimensions is not uncommon.
Classifying Fear

Some authors have tried to differentiate between certain concepts that are commonly used in the attempt to gauge people's feelings about crime and their reaction to what they perceive to be their risks of victimisation. Furstenberg (1971) distinguished fear of crime from concern about crime, how worried people are about being victimised and how concerned they are about the level of crime in their neighbourhood, community, or society at large. Another distinction is the one made by the Figgie Report (Figgie 1980) between concrete fear (that is the fear of becoming the victim of a specific violent crime) and formless fear (that is a non-specific fear about safety in one's home, neighbourhood and larger community).

Warr (1984) makes a distinction between fear of victimisation which he describes as "fear of criminal acts committed against one's own person or property" and fear of crime which refers to a general fear of crime (or its consequences) without necessarily fearing personal victimisation. Warr insists that the matter is not simply a "terminological quibble". He explains that his rejection of the phrase "fear of crime" is due to its having acquired so many divergent meanings in the literature that it is in danger of losing any specificity whatsoever.

More recently the same researcher (Warr 1992) drew attention to the difference between personal fear (that is fear for one's own safety) and altruistic fear (that is fear that individuals might have for the safety of others close to them e.g. children, spouses, friends). Warr deplores the fact that research on fear of crime during the past three decades has concentrated solely on personal fear.

Victimisation and Fear of Crime among the Elderly

Are the elderly the least victimised age group?

One consistent finding of victimisation surveys is that those over 65 are the least victimised age group. In the United States, Catherine Whitaker (1987) analysed data from the National Crime Survey (NCS) and concluded that between 1980 and 1985, the elderly (those age 65 and older) had the lowest victimisation rates of any age group of the US population age 12 and older.
Findings of the American National Crime Victimisation Survey for 1990 again show that those 65 years and older have the lowest rates for both crimes of violence and for crimes of theft. The rate of assault, for example, was 63.5 per 1,000 persons aged 16 to 19 and 1.9 per 1,000 persons 65 or older. Crimes of theft show a similar pattern with those 16 to 19-years-old having a victimisation rate of 113.4 per 1,000 persons (12 or older) and those 65 or older having a rate of 21.2 per 1,000 persons.

Australian victimisation survey data reported by Braithwaite and Biles (1984) are consistent with this pattern with the 20-24 year-olds having the highest rates on the majority of offences, and the over-60s the lowest.

In the Canadian General Social Survey (Sacco & Johnson 1990) a victimisation rate for the 65+ age group could not be estimated because of the low figures of reported victimisation.

Another Canadian study (Juristat 1992) based on data from 13 police departments found that 3 per cent of violent crime victims were 60 years of age and older, considerably less than their proportion in the 1991 Canadian population (16 per cent). The same study reports that, between 1981 and 1990, approximately 11 per cent of the homicide victims were elderly which is less than their proportion in the general population. Elderly females who outnumber elderly males in the general population (56 per cent to 44 per cent) constituted 40 per cent only of the elderly victims of violent crime.

Are the elderly the group most afraid?

Although the elderly are by far the least victimised age group they seem to be more afraid of crime and victimisation than younger age groups. Fattah and Sacco (1989) reviewed several studies on fear of crime and found most to report a relationship between age and fear of crime with the elderly expressing greater fear (Clemente & Kleiman 1976; Kahana et. al. 1977; Main & Johnson 1978; Cook et al. 1981; Canada 1985b; Cook & Cook 1976; Eve 1985; Garofalo 1981; Skogan & Maxfield 1981). They concluded that:

In general, and despite some important exceptions, the weight of the evidence would seem to support the conclusion that elderly persons
are somewhat more likely than younger people to express a fear of crime particularly if they are asked about their feelings of personal safety in situations that might involve a violent attack by strangers (1989, p. 213).

Another literature review of fear of crime research (Brillon 1987) concluded that there appears to be consensus among researchers that older people are more afraid of crime than other age groups and that this fear seems to increase with age.

Data from the Canadian General Social Survey (Sacco & Johnson 1990) indicate that concern about personal safety is most frequently expressed by females and the elderly who live in cities (p. 49). There also seemed to be an additive relationship among "gender", "age", and "residence" such that 55 per cent of urban women aged 65 and over feel unsafe whereas only 5 per cent of rural males between the ages of 25 and 44 feel unsafe (Ditterhoffer 1990, p. 2).

There are reasons to believe that the elderly's fear of victimisation may actually be even higher than the surveys suggest. Since most of the surveys use questions that ask the respondents about how safe they feel walking in their neighbourhood at night, they are likely to miss the worries about being attacked at home by a stranger or being assaulted or abused by a caretaker. They are also likely to miss the fear of being defrauded, swindled, cheated, or exploited. They do not measure what Warr (1992) calls "altruistic fear", that the elderly might have about having their children, grandchildren, or other close relatives or friends attacked or victimised.

Explaining the low-victimisation/high-fear paradox

As mentioned earlier, fear of crime, feelings of safety or insecurity, have little to do with actual crime rates or with objective risks of victimisation. If this is the case, then what is usually referred to in the literature as the high fear/low victimisation paradox is not a paradox at all. Describing senior citizens fear as "irrational" or as disproportionate to their risks of victimisation overlooks this basic fact. It also means that we have to look at factors other than victimisation risks to explain why the elderly are the most afraid.
That the elderly express higher levels of fear of crime than younger age groups despite their substantially lower victimisation rates, coupled with the finding that women are more afraid than men despite their lower victimisation rates strongly suggest that other factors may be more significant in determining the level of fear than objective risks or actual victimisation rates. They also suggest that:

- the level of fear might be more influenced by the subjective perceptions of the risk of victimisation and personal estimates of that risk than by the objective risk of becoming a victim;
- the level of fear might be more related to perceived vulnerability to victimisation than it is to actual victimisation rates;
- estimates of the potential consequences of victimisation and perceptions of the potential impact victimisation is likely to have on those victimised might be important factors that affect the fear level.
- people's perceptions of their ability/ inability to cope with the consequences of victimisation and to recuperate from its impact could have a bearing on their fear level;
- weak and ineffective defences against risks of victimisation might be influential in determining the level of fear even when the risks of becoming victim are relatively low;
- people's weak (or weakened) control over their lives and their environment could have a significant impact on their fear level even when their chances of victimisation are relatively low;
- powerlessness, helplessness, and defencelessness felt and experienced by the weaker members and weaker groups in society (women, elderly, minorities, etc) could be important factors in shaping their fear level regardless of whether their victimisation risks and rates are high or low (see for example Jones 1987).

Why do the elderly express higher fear than other age groups?

1) Gender

Studies on fear of crime strongly suggest that women are more fearful of crime than men are. Since females far outnumber males in the upper age groups, this is bound to raise the percentage of those who express fear among those who are 65 and older.
2) **Isolation**

Research on fear of crime also shows that those who live alone are more likely to be afraid than those living with others. Since a high number of elderly females live by themselves, it is only natural that they will express higher fear than other respondents in the survey. One of the basic postulates of Balvig's (1990, p. 93) theory on fear of crime is that there is a direct connection between social isolation and fear of crime: the greater the social isolation—the more one is left out in society and the weaker one's position in the social network—the greater the fear of crime.

3) **Vulnerability**

It seems reasonable to assume that a person's fear level is a function of their perceptions of personal vulnerability. Those who see themselves as particularly vulnerable to predatory victimisation, such as children, the elderly, females, are likely to fear crime more than those who feel less vulnerable or invincible. The decline in physical strength and agility, the weakening of the senses such as hearing and eyesight, and the ability to mount an effective resistance if attacked, from which many old people may suffer, are likely to enhance their feelings of vulnerability, thus making them more fearful of being victimised than the younger population. Vulnerability, in other words, is a state of mind (Mawby 1988; Sacco & Glackman 1987). The notion of vulnerability explains well why it is that groups with low victimisation rate may exhibit high levels of fear. As Sacco and Glackman (1987, p. 101) put it:

> To the degree that people believe they are vulnerable, they may define the threat and risk of crime with a level of trepidation that does not, and would not be expected to, correspond in any precise way to the objective realities of threat and risk.

4) **Impact of victimisation**

It is also reasonable to assume that people's fear of crime will be proportionate to their subjective assessment of the impact of victimisation. If the consequences are seen as serious, debilitating, or devastating, the fear of being victimised is likely to be quite high. If the person believes that the impact is not that drastic, that the consequences could be easily and quickly overcome, and if they
estimate that they can easily and rapidly recover from the negative effects of victimisation, they might not be terribly afraid of being victimised.

For various reasons the elderly are likely to belong to the former rather than the latter group. Due to their frailty, vulnerability, isolation, and lack of resources, it would not be surprising were they to overestimate the physical, emotional, and financial consequences they might suffer if victimised. And there are good reasons for that. Poor health, chronic ailments, weak physical strength, enhance the chances of serious physical injury and lengthen the healing time if injured. Diminished economic resources mean that the same financial loss will have a harder impact on the elderly than on younger more resourceful groups.

A weakened social network means that there are fewer human resources to count on in the case of victimisation; that help, assistance, and support might not be as available or as handy as for younger individuals.

Why are the elderly less victimised than younger age groups?
The high vulnerability of the elderly and their low rates of victimisation indicate that vulnerability and victimisation do not go hand in hand, that the most vulnerable are not necessarily the ones most sought out by offenders. The high vulnerability/low victimisation also suggest that there are certain factors, behaviours, and conditions that are shielding and protecting the elderly against criminal victimisation.

Victimisation research (Fattah 1991), the rational choice perspective (Clarke & Cornish 1986), the lifestyle (Hindelang et. al 1978), and the routine activity (Cohen & Felson 1979) models offer valuable insights that help explain why the elderly, though vulnerable, are less victimised than others. Research on target selection suggests that the elderly are less attractive, less accessible, and less exposed targets for criminal victimisation than the younger population. The lifestyle and routine activity suggest that the elderly behave in manners that are likely to reduce their chances of personal victimisation and of certain types of property victimisation.

1) Less attractive targets
Old age acts as a protective device against criminal victimisation by making the elderly less attractive targets, both physically and culturally. In most societies, there are strong cultural prohibitions against
victimising the old, the weak, the handicapped, the helpless, the defenceless. Such cultural prescriptions reinforce the moral inhibitions and render members of those groups less desirable victims. The techniques of neutralisation and of desensitisation that enable potential offenders to silence their conscience, to inactivate the informal mechanisms of social control, and to avoid post-victimisation cognitive dissonance, are not likely to be effective in the case of the elderly as they are likely to be when the chosen victim is a member of a socially stigmatised group such as a drug-trafficker, a homosexual, or a prostitute. There are other reasons why the elderly are less attractive targets. Their victimisation is less likely to be dealt with leniently and is more likely to result in harsher penalties. Many offenders, especially experienced ones, have more or less accurate perceptions of the general level of sanctions meted out for certain offences, and the likely variations in the penalties when specific victims or groups of victims are involved. It does not require any particular knowledge of, or experience with, the criminal justice system to realise, for example, that vulnerable victims, such as children or the elderly, or victims who are handicapped, such as the blind or the deaf, evoke more sympathy among the police, prosecutors, and judges. Their criminal victimisation is likely, therefore, to draw heavier penalties from the courts than the victimisation of a less vulnerable person (Fattah 1991, p. 251).

In sex offences in which age and physical attractiveness are important criteria for the selection of the victim the elderly are not likely to be the preferred targets. And because of their generally meagre economic resources they are less desirable victims for experienced property offenders seeking lucrative and profitable targets.

2) Less accessible targets

The fact that the elderly spend a great deal of time at home, much more so than younger age groups, means that they will be less accessible as targets for a variety of offences. It is true that they might have their purse snatched while on the street, in a park, or while using public transportation, but by and large they are not available as targets for the crimes that are usually committed outside the home in the late hours of the night. The fact that the vast majority are no longer members of the work force also means that they are immune to those offences committed in the workplace or against those engaged in certain occupations.

3) Less exposed
One important tenet of the lifestyle and routine activity models is that victimisation is closely linked to exposure to potential offenders and to high-risk situations and environments. The higher the exposure, the greater the risk; the lower the exposure, the lesser the likelihood of being victimised. The level and degree of exposure vary according to sociodemographic characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, hence the different risks of victimisation along these variables. Since the elderly are generally less exposed, their victimisation rates are low.

Certain social activities, such as alcohol consumption in public entertainment places, increase the level of exposure by bringing potential targets in close proximity to a large pool of unknown, anonymous potential offenders. This means that the probability of personal victimisation is related to the frequency of evenings out for leisure and social activities and to the amount of time a person spends in public places at night (Hindelang, Gottfredson & Garofalo 1978). It also explains why the victimisation rate of the elderly is low.

Another important factor in explaining variations in victimisation risks is association. Thus, individuals who are in close personal, social, or professional contact with potential delinquents and offenders have a higher risk of being victimised than those who are not. It follows that persons who share potential offenders' sociodemographic characteristics (being young, male, single, for example) are more likely to interact socially with those potential offenders. In so doing, their chances of being victimised by those offenders increase (Cohen, Kluegel & Land 1981).

It has also been shown (Jensen & Brownfield 1986) that activities involving the mutual pursuit of fun involve a higher risk of victimisation than do activities that passively put people at risk. This is yet another reason why the victimisation rates of the elderly are low.

4) Capable guardians

The routine activity approach (Cohen & Felson 1979) stipulates that the occurrence of direct-contact predatory victimisations is the outcome of the convergence in space and time of three minimal elements: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and absence of capable guardians. As mentioned earlier, the elderly are not the most suitable, the most attractive, or the most accessible targets. In addition, they are capable guardians whose presence at home for a good deal of the time reduces the probability of victimisation. As Cohen, Kluegel, and Land (1981) point out, all else
equal offenders prefer targets that are less well-guarded to those that are more well guarded. Therefore, the greater the guardianship, the lesser the risk of criminal victimisation.

5) **Less involved in illegal, delinquent and deviant activities**

Another factor that contributes to the elderly's low victimisation rate is their negligible involvement in illegal, delinquent, and deviant activities. There is ample evidence (Fattah 1991) that delinquent and criminal activities are more strongly and positively related to criminal victimisation than non-delinquent activities. Moreover, many deviant and illegal pursuits, such as dealing in illicit goods and services, fencing, trafficking in drugs, racketeering, trading sex for money, and cruising or seeking sex partners lead those who engage in them to dangerous places at dangerous times and get them involved with marginal individuals in dangerous transactions and situations. The casualness and anonymity of some of these contacts, the potential for conflict, and the lack of social and police protection create excellent opportunities for criminal victimisation and place those involved in greater risk of being victimised than others (Fattah 1991, p. 345).

**The role of fear in reducing victimisation**

Now that we have demonstrated that the elderly are the least victimised but the most afraid and have examined some of the factors that may explain why, we might ask whether fear does play a role in reducing victimisation, whether it is, at least partially responsible, for the low victimisation rate of the elderly. After all the high fear/low victimisation phenomenon does not seem to be restricted to the elderly. In fact, there appears to be some correspondence between people's level of fear and their victimisation rates. Young children are more fearful than teenagers or young adults and their victimisation rates are lower. Women are more afraid than men, and with the exception of sexually motivated crimes, their victimisation rates are below those of their male counterparts. So is it mere coincidence that those who seem to entertain the highest levels of fear also have low or the lowest rates of victimisation? Could there be a link between the two? Is it possible that a high fear level might lead directly or indirectly to reduced victimisation? Does fear produce attitudinal and behavioural changes that reduce risk and minimise exposure thus lowering the victimisation? And if so, would a substantial reduction in fear result in higher victimisation rates for the elderly?
All these are important research and policy questions that do not seem to have received the attention they deserve. I know of no study that tried to establish whether low victimisation rates are linked to high fear levels and to determine the nature of such a link if one does exist. And yet it is quite possible, one can even say extremely plausible, that fear does play an important role in reducing victimisation. The relationship is too obvious, almost axiomatic. A child who is afraid of dogs has a much lesser chance of being bitten than another whose lack of fear induces him to approach, play with, or tease any dog he encounters. A person who does not travel by plane because of fear of flying reduces the probability of dying in a plane crash to nil. Individuals who are afraid of being victimised are less likely to take chances than those who aren't. They are not likely to hitch-hike, accept rides or invitations from strangers, they will not keep their doors or windows unlocked, etc. The examples are endless. A natural response to a high level of fear is for fearful individuals to reduce their exposure to risk and to try to minimise their chances of being victimised by holding certain attitudes, taking certain precautions, and by adopting specific avoidance and defensive behaviours (Cook & Skogan 1984; Riger 1981; Skogan 1986). This is bound to reduce their victimisation rates.

It would be foolhardy to claim that the low victimisation rates of the elderly are entirely due to their high level of fear of crime. As will be pointed out later on, victimisation risks are closely linked to lifestyle and routine activities. People do change their lifestyle and their activities for many reasons when they age and when they retire. The elderly's withdrawn, less active, and disengaged lifestyle is conducive to low victimisation rates. There is no doubt, however, that fear is an important factor that contributes in many different ways to lowering their rates of victimisation.

Fear of crime as a promoter of caution and prudence

Risks of criminal victimisation are not evenly distributed within the general population. Certain attitudes enhance the chances of being victimised while others lower the probabilities of victimisation. Fear of crime promotes the latter attitudes thus acting as a risk reducing factor. Fear fosters caution, prudence, and vigilance. These are desirable virtues in the dangerous society in which we live. Modern life is a hazardous life and in our industrial, technological, motorised, and mechanised society we are daily exposed to a wide variety of risks and hazards. To minimise the risks we have
to reduce our exposure, we have to be vigilant, cautious, and to exercise care and act with prudence. Fear discourages people from taking chances and encourages them to avoid risks, particularly foolish, unnecessary, and undue risks.

Fear injects a certain amount of distrust and suspicion in our attitude to others thus shielding us against various types of victimisation. We advise, even urge people, children and adults alike, not to be too trustful, too credulous, or too gullible so that they may not be easily tricked or fooled.

People's attitudes to risk are different. There are risk-takers and risk avoiders and the probability of victimisation by crime can vary greatly for each type. Everywhere, the young are fearless, adventurous; they feel invulnerable, invincible. They take all kinds of risk. Is it any wonder that their victimisation rates are the highest? The elderly, on the other hand, perceive themselves as vulnerable, weak, and defenceless. They are afraid and are therefore unwilling to take risks. As a result of this healthy caution they are able to avoid most types of personal victimisation. Such risk avoidance is not limited to risky crime situations. Is there any doubt, for instance, that it is the fear of having an accident that makes the elderly drive more cautiously and have a much better driving record than the young?

Defensive and avoidance behaviours as outcome of fear

In addition to these attitudinal changes, fear of crime leads those who are afraid to adopt certain behaviours in order to protect themselves and to minimise the probability of being victimised. These defensive and avoidance behaviours are among the most effective ways of reducing exposure and victimisation.

Victimisation surveys indicate that the risks of being victimised are closely linked to lifestyle and that crime rates are largely dependent on available opportunities. The surveys also show that personal victimisation, particularly violent victimisation, occurs more frequently in the evening and early night hours and on weekends. Hence, people's activity patterns, particularly out-of-home activities, can have a strong bearing upon their chances of being victimised (Fattah 1991, p. 344). A good part of personal victimisation, particularly predatory victimisation, takes place on the street or in other public places during hours of darkness. Thus, the more people are on the street or in public places during the late evening or early night hours, the higher are their chances of being victimised
Personal victimisation, particularly assault victimisation, occurs with a certain frequency in or close to places of public entertainment. Hence, the frequency with which people visit these places or congregate in their vicinity can affect their risks of victimisation. These findings from victimisation research, and many others, illustrate quite well why it is that certain avoidance behaviours, like those adopted by the elderly, could substantially reduce exposure and minimise the risks of being victimised.

We should keep in mind that many risks of criminal victimisation could be easily avoided by taking very simple precautions. We should also remember that a great deal of opportunities to commit crime are created by the behaviour of the potential victims. People provide varying levels of opportunity by choosing to recognise or ignore the threat of victimisation in structuring their daily actions (Cook 1985, quoted in Maxfield 1987). Those who choose to ignore the threat increase their chances of being victimised, while others, like the elderly, who recognise the threat and respond to it lower their risks of becoming victims.

Fear as an injury-reducing mechanism
There is yet another positive effect of fear. There are many reasons that prevent victims from actively resisting an offender, be it a rapist, a robber, a purse snatcher or else. Fear of the attacker figures prominently among those reasons. By reducing the frequency of resistance, fear also reduces the probability of injury and death. Research on victim's response to face-to-face victimisation (Fattah 1984; Fattah 1991) suggests that victim resistance is the variable most strongly associated with the frequency and seriousness of injury sustained by the victim. Active physical resistance is the response most likely to elicit a violent reaction from the victimiser (Hindelang et al. 1978).

Because of their fear, the elderly resist less than other age groups. National Crime Survey data (US Bureau of Justice Statistics 1987) indicate that elderly violent crime victims of 65 and over were less likely to take self-protective measures than were younger victims (52 per cent versus 72 per cent). Block (1989) found the decision to resist a robber to be related to the victim's age. From the twenties to old age, the percentage of victims who do not resist increases linearly from 37 per cent to 64 per cent. Of those who do resist, the percentage who forcibly resist declines with
age from 51 per cent among victims in their twenties to 29 per cent of those who are older than seventy.

**Conclusion**

If it is true that there is a link between fear of crime and the rates of victimisation, if it is true that a high level of fear leads to reduced victimisation, then fear might be viewed in a different light. In politics as in social science, fear of crime has been treated invariably as an extremely negative feeling, as a social malaise that adversely affects and greatly diminishes the quality of life. Hardly any attention was given to the positive functions or the positive outcomes of fear. Totally overlooked was the fact that fear is a natural reaction, a vital mechanism of survival, of self-preservation, an essential requirement for avoiding risk and minimising danger. And yet if it is true that vigilance and prudence are by-products of fear, that fear and caution go hand in hand, then fear might be considered a positive mobilising and protective force that could be harnessed to achieve useful ends. Rather than trying to eliminate or reduce fear of crime at any price, it might be wiser and more feasible to maintain it at a reasonable level as a means of influencing the behavioural patterns of potential victims in a desirable direction that would ultimately lead to reducing their exposure and vulnerability and to minimising their risks as well as the opportunities to victimise them.

As much as we might dislike being afraid, as much as we might hate being scared, we have to realise that fear, like other emotions, is an integral part of our human existence and performs a necessary and useful natural function, to alert us to, and protect us from, the dangers in our environment.

A reasonable dose of fear might not be that bad and might even be good for us. We need to fear God, the devil, authority, etc. And we also need to fear those who have the audacity to violate the law or to cross social and legal boundaries. Most people do not mind being afraid. They are even willing to pay to experience a shiver or a chill in the spine once in a while. That is what makes horror movies so popular and the roller-coaster or the ghost tunnel so much fun. And without being dare-devils many get their kicks from engaging in fear-producing activities such as mountain climbing, parachuting, car racing, skydiving, bungee jumping, etc. One issue to be considered when policies are formulated is that reducing fear might have an undesirable side-effect,
namely higher victimisation. A wise policy is a policy that aims at maintaining a balance, a fine line between complacency and overconcern, between exaggerated fear and nonchalance. A rational policy might try to establish the optimal level of fear of crime for various groups in the population and try to use it constructively to influence the behaviour of potential victims in the same way that we use fear of punishment to influence the behaviour of potential offenders and to correct the misbehaviour of children. After all, victimisation research shows unequivocally that a good part of crime is a function of opportunity, that a great deal of criminality is made possible through behaviours and situations created by those who are victimised, and could have been prevented by a simple change in the behaviour of those victims (Fattah 1991).

Since we are not able to offer inducements or rewards to potential victims to get them to act with caution and with prudence, to change their crime facilitating behaviour or to reduce crime opportunities, it might not be a bad idea to let nature run its course, by letting fear induce the defensive and avoidance behaviours that provide the best protection against crime. Like in nature, in the social jungle it might be dangerous to neutralise the defensive and protective mechanisms with which nature has endowed us. I am not arguing that we should enhance or amplify existing fear of crime. I am only suggesting that instead of this endless talk about fear we should better try to do something about crime itself.

Still it would be a grave error to trivialise fear of crime or to ignore the impact it has on the life of many, particularly those who live in high crime areas. But it would equally be a serious mistake to keep it constantly in the headlines because by so doing we could inadvertently reinforce the perceptions that generate fear in the first place.

We also should not underestimate the enormous capacity people have to adjust to their environment, and to adapt their lifestyle to the wide array of risks, dangers, and threats that are part of their daily existence. People have an amazing ability to go on with their lives and their usual activities without letting the thoughts of victimisation whether by earthquake, disease, accident, or crime affect their lives or upset their daily routine. We only need to think of how the residents of London, England, go about their daily business totally oblivious to the ever present threat of bombs by the IRA. While it is reasonable and necessary to keep them alert and on guard, no useful purpose, except that of the terrorists, would be served by raising their fear and anxiety or
overplaying the danger to which they are exposed. It is much more sensible to take a reassuring
stance, to remind them of how remote the chance of being injured or killed is. And that is what we
should also be doing with regard to victimisation by crime.

Bibliography
319-35.
343-58.
254-64.
Baumer, T.L. 1985, "Testing a General Model of Fear of Crime: Data from a National Sample",
Block, R. 1989, "Victim-Offender Dynamics in Stranger to Stranger Violence: Robbery and Rape",
in The Plight of Crime Victims in Modern Society, ed. E.A. Fattah, Macmillan,
London.
Braithwaite, J. & Biles, D. 1984, "Victims and Offenders: The Australian Experience", in
Victimisation and Fear of Crime: World Perspectives, ed. R. Block, U.S. Dept. of
Justice. NCJ - 93872, Washington, D.C.
Braithwaite, J., Biles, D. and R. Whitrod 1982, "Fear of Crime in Australia", in The Victim in
Braungart, M.M., Braungart, R.G. & W.J. Hoyer 1980, "Age, Sex and Social Factors in Fear of


Sacco, V.F. & Glackman, W. 1987, "Vulnerability, Locus of Control and Worry about Crime", *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health*, vol. 6, pp. 99-111.


Skogan, W.G. 1980 (unpub.), "Adjusting Rates of Victimisation for Exposure to Risk, to
Understand the Crime Problems of the Elderly", unpublished manuscript, Northwestern
University, Evanston Ill.


1, pp. 135-54.

Smith, D.L. 1976, "The Aftermath of Victimisation: Fear and Suspicion", in Victims and Society,

Sparks, R.F., Genn, H.G. & Dodd, D.J. 1977, Surveying Victims, John Wiley and Sons, New
York.


Sundeen, R. & Mathieu, J. 1976, "The Urban Elderly: Environments of Fear", in Crime and the


Taylor, R.B., Gottfredson, S.D. & Bower, S. 1984, "Block Crime and Fear: Defensible Space,
Local Social Ties, and Territorial Functioning", Journal of Research in Crime and


and Delinquency, vol. 10, pp. 199-209.


