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Women's Fear of Violence in the Community

Carlos Carcach and Satyanshu Mukherjee

Fear of crime has emerged as one of the most important issues in many communities—this problem is almost as serious as crime itself. In 1996, the Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted a survey on 6333 Australian women to measure physical and sexual violence perpetrated against women, as well as other factors such as harassment, abuse, and feelings of safety. Based on data collected from this survey, research at the Australian Institute of Criminology has shown that women's fear of crime is greater among those who have lower incomes, those in the older age groups, and those living with a partner.

Women who have experienced violence are more likely to be fearful of crime than other women, and this is particularly so among women who have been victims of domestic violence. An earlier Trends and Issues paper (no. 124, Mouzos 1999) revealed that 58 per cent of female homicide victims have assailants who are intimates/former intimates. These facts provide a strong argument for early intervention to prevent domestic violence and provide assistance to dysfunctional and violent families.

Adam Graycar
Director

Fear of Crime in the Literature

The concept of fear of crime refers to people's emotional response to crime. A consistent finding from crime surveys is that women admit to more fear of crime than other population groups. Yet, specific research on the women's fear of crime is very limited.

Fear of crime has been associated with people's perceptions of local problems, derived mainly from a high incidence of physical and social incivility (Taylor and Hale 1986). More recently, there has been an emphasis on the multidimensional nature of fear of crime. One's fear of crime is associated with concern over violence and property crime, as well as other factors such as social and economic disadvantage, isolation, and vulnerability (Hale 1996). This emphasis enables us to understand the social context of people's perception of crime and its consequences. Vulnerability entails three major dimensions: exposure to risk, loss of control, and seriousness of consequences (Killias 1990).

Women are amongst the most vulnerable groups. This vulnerability is enhanced by factors such as being of an advanced age and having a lack of access to networks of social support. Madriz (1997) found that immigrant women in the US, especially illegal and non-English speaking migrants, express a particular sense of social vulnerability and helplessness.

Women are less likely to be victimised than men are; yet, they express greater fear of crime than men do—some have even qualified the extent of women's fear of crime as irrational. This is known as the fear-victimisation paradox. There are two approaches to this paradox. One argues that crime surveys and official statistics fail to capture the full extent of victimisation against women. Once the full

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extent of women's victimisation is taken into account, their fear is not inappropriate (Hale 1996). The other approach links women's greater levels of fear to heightened perceptions of personal vulnerability.

To some authors, the resolution of the fear-victimisation paradox lies in the understanding that women are exposed to a wide range of hidden violence, particularly in domestic, sexual assault, sexual threat, and harassment situations, which is not reported in official statistics or crime surveys (Stanko 1988). Stanko (1992) observed that the greater fear of crime expressed by some women may reflect their perceived risk of abuse by spouses or family members, as well as by strangers. Junger (1987) found there was a stronger relationship between women's fear of crime and sexual harassment experiences within the family than outside the family.

The exact nature of the link between fear of crime and victimisation has been the subject of debate in the literature (Lewis and Salem 1986; Hale 1996). Unit-record analyses of the relationship between fear of crime and victimisation have produced mixed results. Mawby and Gill (1987) found a positive correlation, Box, Hale and Andrews (1988) found a negative correlation, while Carcach et al. (1995) found no direct correlation between fear and victimisation risk. The hypothesis tested in these studies is that increases in the risk of victimisation would raise levels of fear about crime. Bursik and Grasmick (1993) suggested that this relationship might run in the opposite direction. High levels of fear, by weakening the informal social control processes that inhibit crime, would raise levels of crime and delinquency.

Sacco (1990) found that the level of fear is negatively related to risk-taking behaviour. Accordingly, women have a greater level of fear than males because they exhibit lower preferences for risk. The dimensions associated with the women's fear of crime are

varied and complex. Women tend to experience what Warr (1992) called "altruistic fear"—the emotional, attitudinal, or assersive reactions to the possibility of victimisation of themselves, as well as their family members and friends.

Data and Methods

This paper examines the role that factors such as vulnerability (both physical and social) and experiences of violence play in the formation of women's perceptions of personal safety. The data used for this study is from the Women's Safety Survey, conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics during February to April 1996. The survey's primary focus was the measurement of physical and sexual violence perpetrated on women by both males and females. In addition, the survey measured abuse, harassment, and women's feelings of safety within the home and the community. The survey was completed by 6,333 women (78% response rate).

The Concept of Fear of Crime and its Measurement

In this study, the concept of fear of crime was measured from the answers related to how safe the respondent felt when walking alone in her local area after dark. These are standard items included in most victimisation surveys such as the British Crime Survey and the US National Victimisation Survey. However, the use of standard questions to measure fear of crime has been criticised. Firstly, the surveys have not mentioned crime specifically. Secondly, the term 'area' has

different meanings to different people. Finally, respondents are asked to assess their personal safety when walking alone after dark, this may be a rare activity for some people (Garolfo 1979). The reference to potential rather than to actual assessments of personal safety is, perhaps, the major weakness (Hale 1996).

The Women's Safety Survey recorded whether the respondent had ever walked alone in her local area after dark. Respondents who did not engage in this activity were asked whether it was because they did not feel safe. Using information from these additional items, a measure of fear of crime that is close to actual assessments of personal safety was derived. The value of 1 was assigned to the respondents who reported they feel unsafe while walking alone, or choose not to walk alone in their area after dark because they felt unsafe. Otherwise this variable was set to 0.

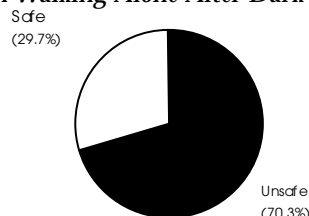
The measure of fear was not defined for respondents who never walked alone in the local area after dark for reasons other than not feeling safe (1,649 respondents). The analysis was, therefore, based on 4,684 cases. A preliminary analysis showed that the sample used to define the measure of fear was not significantly different from the whole sample of 6,333 respondents in terms of the distribution of the main survey variables.

As shown by Figure 1, 70.3 per cent of women felt unsafe when walking alone in their area after dark, which is higher than the percentages reported by the 1996 British Crime Survey (47%) and the 1991 Queensland Crime Victims Survey (45.3%). However, these figures are much lower than the result obtained in a study carried out in Edinburgh in 1992. The results collected from self-report postal questionnaires showed that 91 per cent of respondents felt unsafe outside at night (Pain 1997).

Methodology

Table 1 shows the indicators used to measure fear and the percent-

Figure 1: WOMEN'S SAFETY SURVEY, 1996, Fear of Crime. Perceptions of Safety When Walking Alone After Dark (N=4,684)



age of respondents admitting to fear of crime in each category.

The concept of physical vulnerability was measured from the age of the respondent. It is hypothesised that as women become older, and, therefore, more vulnerable, their level of fear of crime increases.

The concept of social vulnerability was measured from labour force status, presence of children at home, partnership arrangements, and country of birth. Women who are in lower income groups, live alone, sole parent of little children, separated or divorced, and those from non-English speaking background are expected to be more fearful of crime.

The measures of physical and social vulnerability attempt to capture the notion that fear of crime arises as a response to perceived loss of control when facing the possibility of violence. Measurements of the other two dimensions referred to by Killias

(1990), namely, exposure to risk and seriousness of consequences, are impossible to obtain from the survey.

Household structure, age, and labour force status are inextricably linked to each other. Their impact on women's fear of crime is complex. Continual exposure to violence by a current or former partner may heighten women's fear of crime due to a sense of helplessness, especially those who are not working and have little children. Even without being necessarily exposed to domestic violence, women living with a partner and children may fear more for themselves when they know others depend on them.

The data in Table 1 suggest that perceptions of personal safety in the community vary across respondents. Note, however, that any relationship between a factor and the measures of fear suggested by the data in this Table could be spurious. As

an example, the data in Table 1 suggest that women living with a partner are more fearful of violence in the community than other women. The relationship between fear of violence and partnership arrangement may be mediated by labour force status. Among women who are not in the labour force, those not living with a partner may experience higher levels of fear than women living with a partner.

There is only a little correlation between women's experiences of victimisation and their perceptions of personal safety in the community. This may be due to the effect age and income which are correlated with both the risk of victimisation and the fear of crime (see Borooah and Carcach 1997). It may be that any association between women's age and their fear of crime is mediated by other factors such as whether they with a partner.

Conclusions about the relationship between fear of crime and any factor based on the data from Table 1 are likely to be misleading, as they would not account for the concurrent effects of other characteristics.

Table 1: Distribution of the Measures of Fear of Crime According to Selected Factors

Factor	Indicator	Categories	Percentage of those who feel Unsafe Walking Alone After Dark During the Evening (N=4,684)
Physical Vulnerability	Woman's age	18-24	65.8
		25-34	70.6
		35-44	67.1
		45-54	65.8
		55 & Over	78.9
Social Vulnerability	Partnership Arrangements	Partner present	71.8
		No Partner Present	67.5
	Household Composition	Woman Alone	72.0
		Couple Only	71.6
		Couple and Children	70.9
		Woman and children	69.6
		Other	62.7
	Labour Force Status	Employed	64.5
		Unemployed	70.2
		Not in Labour Force	79.2
	Weekly Income	No Income	74.7
		\$1-\$99	77.6
		\$100-\$199	75.7
		\$200-\$299	72.1
		\$300-\$499	66.7
Non-English Speaking Background	\$500 & Over	62.4	
	Women and at least one parent born in non-English Speaking Country	72.3	
	Other	69.6	
Experience of Violence	Physical Violence by Current or Former Partner	Yes	68.9
		No	70.7
	Sexual Violence by Current or Former Partner	Yes	69.4
		No	70.3
	Physical Violence by a Male <i>other</i> than Current or Former Partner	Yes	71.4
		No	70.2
	Sexual Violence by a Male <i>other</i> than Current or Former Partner	Yes	66.5
		No	70.7
	Violence by a Female	Yes	64.8
		No	70.7
Total			70.3

Explaining Women's Fear of Violence in the Community

A technique known as logistic regression was used to assess the effect that the components of vulnerability and experiences of violence (see Table 1) have on the likelihood of women being fearful of violence in the community. Table 2 contains the estimated odds of experiencing fear for each of the factors included in the final model. These odds represent the likelihood of women being fearful of violence when they possesses an attribute, relative to the likelihood when they do not possess the attribute, *after controlling for the effect of all the other variables included in the model*. For example, the data in Table 2 indicate that among women not living with a partner, those who are not in the labour force and have children under 15, are over 4 times more

likely to experience fear of violence than women who are in the labour force and do not have children under 15.

Figure 2 shows the odds of fear of violence in the community according to the characteristics included in the logistic model.

Women living with a partner are likely to experience greater fear of violence, even after controlling for all other variables, in particular household structure. The interaction between presence of young children, partnership arrangement, and labour force status supports the claim that women's fear of crime is "altruistic fear". Figure 2a shows that among women living with children under 15, those who also live with a partner and are not in the labour force, are 4.3 times more likely to experience fear of violence in the community than women with children under 15 but not living with a partner.

Not being in the labour force is also a significant contributing factor to women's fear of violence in the community. This factor, however, acts through other characteristics such as presence of young children, presence of a partner, and women aged 55 years and over. In general, the data in Table 2 show that women who are not in the labour force are 1.9 times more likely to feel unsafe in the community than

women who are either working or unemployed and looking for work. The odds of fear for women in the 55 years and over age group and not in the labour force are 70 per cent higher than younger women who are not in the labour force. In addition, women aged 55 years and over and live with a partner have a 13 per cent higher chance of experiencing fear than those who do not live with a partner in the same age group. However, the odds of fear for women who are working or looking for work drop by 43 per cent (see Figure 2b).

Figure 2c shows that among women with no partner, those aged 45–54 are more likely to experience fear of violence in the community than younger women are. The presence of a partner or children under 15 and labour force status did not impact on the feelings of personal safety among women aged 45–54. Data from the survey show that 28 per cent of women in this age group were not in the labour force, and that 29 per cent lived with children under 15. These results suggest that the fear of violence in the community among women in this age group can be explained either by their own experiences with violence or a sense of physical vulnerability.

Table 2 shows that women with a non-English speaking

background are 1.2 times more fearful of violence than other women, irrespective of whether they had a partner or not. Interestingly, women living with their children only are 1.4 times more likely to feel unsafe walking alone in the local area after dark than women on other types of living arrangement.

Experiences of Violence and Fear of Crime

Our analysis suggests that there is a strong and complicated association between women's fear and experiences with violence. The survey measured women's experience of physical and sexual violence by a partner (current or former), by a male other than a partner, and by other women.

There is no significant correlation between women's fear in the community and their experiences of sexual violence by a partner, another male, or a female. The analysis revealed that women who are victims of physical violence by a male partner (current or former), or by another male tend to admit to more fear of crime than other women do. Being a victim of violence by a partner (current or former) or another male contributes to worsen women's perceptions of safety in the community, however, the really strong effect appears from experiencing violence *both* in and outside the home.

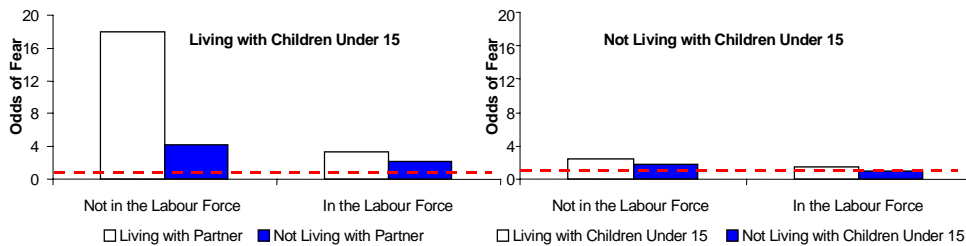
Figure 3 shows that women who experience physical violence, *both* by a male partner (former or current) *and* another male are over twice as likely to admit to fear than those who experience physical violence by either perpetrator or those who have not experience physical violence at all. These results support Madriz's (1997) finding that women victims of domestic violence have to face violence at home and violence on the streets that other women face, which would increase their level of fear of crime in the community.

Table 2: Relative Odds of Fear of Crime

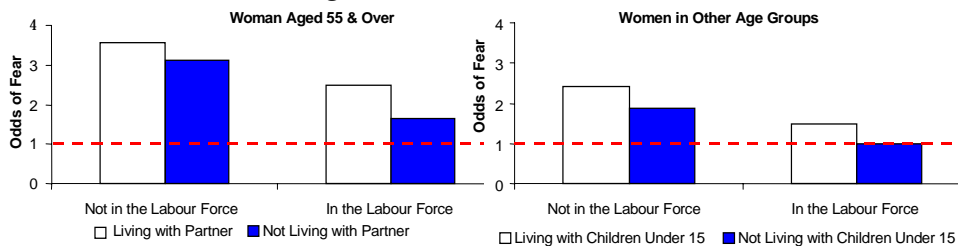
Woman Characteristics Included in the Logistic Regression	Odds of Fear	
	Living with a Partner	Not Living with a Partner
Aged 35–44	1.17	0.82***
Aged 45–54	1.18**	1.16
Aged 55 & Over: Working/Unemployed	2.49***	1.66
Aged 55 & Over: Not in the Labour Force	3.57***	3.13***
Aged 18–34 (Reference Category)	1.49***	1.00
Not in Labour Force: Not Having Children under 15	2.43**	1.88***
Not in Labour Force: Having Children under 15	17.97***	4.15***
Working/Unemployed: Having Children under 15	3.30*	2.20***
Working/Unemployed: Having with Children under 15 (Reference Category)	1.49***	1.00
Having a non-English speaking background	1.76	1.18***
Not Having a non English speaking background (Reference Category)	1.49***	1.00
Victim of Physical Violence by a Partner or Former Partner AND Victim of Physical Violence by a Male Other than a Partner or Form Partner	2.68	1.80***
Victim of Physical Violence by a Partner or Former Partner	1.34	0.90
Victim of Physical Violence by a Male Other than a Partner or Form Partner	1.50	1.01
Not a Victim of Physical Violence by a Male (Reference Category)	1.49***	1.00

*** ($p < 0.01$), ** ($p < 0.05$), * ($p < 0.10$)

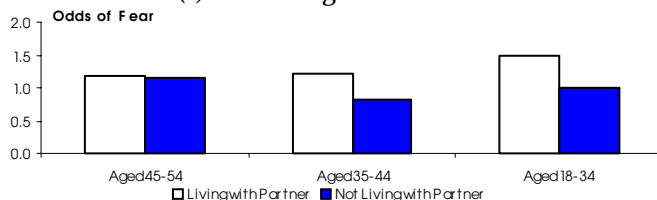
Figure 2: Odds of Fear of Violence in the Community and Partnership Arrangements
(a) Presence of Children Under 15 in the Woman's Household and Labour Force Status



(b) Woman Aged 55 Years & Over and Labour Force Status



(c) Woman Aged less than 55



Conclusion and Policy Implications

The finding that women in partnership arrangements express greater concern about violence in the community is somewhat intriguing, but it seems to be consistent with qualitative studies on the topic (Madriz 1997). The results in this study indicate that fear may arise from judgments about the personal safety of other family members or close friends, taking the form of "altruistic" fear (Warr 1992).

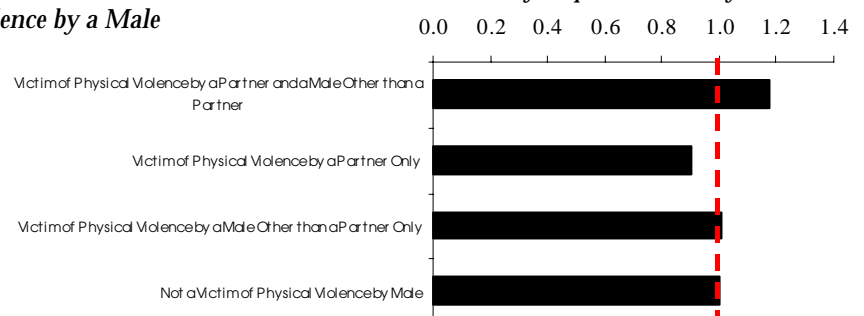
Women with a partner, in particular women in disadvantaged groups, may develop higher levels of emotional and economic dependence, which constraints their daily lives by avoiding certain places or activities perceived as being dangerous. This may be the result of cultural factors operating to limit the role that women play at the interior of families and in society. As women tend to spend more time at home, their knowledge of the external world derives mainly from the opinions, attitudes and

perceptions of other family members, and may be more easily influenced by the pictures of violence portrayed by the media.

Women's perceptions of personal safety in the community are also influenced by their actual experiences with physical violence, this suggests that women's fear of violence has some dose of "rationality".

Our findings are somewhat consistent with theoretical expectations regarding the role that vulnerability, in particular social and economic vulnerability, plays in the formation of women's perceptions of personal safety in the community and give empirical support to conjectural explanations offered by other researchers (Hale 1996).

Figure 3: Odds of Fear of Violence in the Community Experience of Physical Violence by a Male



Women of non-English speaking background express heightened concern about personal safety in the community. However, women from non-English speaking background are among the least likely to be the actual victims of physical or sexual violence (Carcach and Mukherjee, forthcoming). These results apply equally to women with and without a partner. It could be speculated that perceptions of personal safety among non-English speaking background women are influenced by factors such as command of the English language, length of residence in Australia, ethnicity, culture, and education. Are women from non-English speaking background less likely to be victims of violence because their extreme concern about personal safety restricts their participation in the community, not necessarily employment? Are women from non-English speaking background more fearful of violence in the community and in the home because they actually experience physical and sexual violence at higher rates than other women do, but they do not report it? Do women from non-English speaking background experience greater fear of violence because they perceive themselves as being highly vulnerable? These are questions which cannot be answered from the survey and further research is required in this area.

Important policy implications are derived from this study. Women's fear of violence is real and is associated with actual assessments of personal safety or others' safety. Vulnerability and concern for the safety of others appear are the main factors

underlying women's fear of violence. Initiatives aimed at improving women's social and economic status, in particular those in disadvantaged groups, can improve their perceptions of personal safety and increase participation in community life.

The consequences of women's exposure to violence by a current or former partner can be tragic. Over 25 per cent of homicides in Australia involve current or former intimate partners. Evidence suggests that these homicides may be the result of conflicts of a domestic nature that may have been going on for relatively long periods of time. Over 75 per cent of the victims of intimate-partner homicide are women (Carcach and James 1998). Interventions aimed at improving the safety of women who had just left a violent relationship and enhancing women's ability to regain control over their lives are among the many options available to reduce their concern about violence.

The possibility of women feeling unsafe in the community due to exposure to domestic violence by a current partner cannot be neglected. Programs that target couples going through problems of family violence must be enhanced in order to provide them with conflict management skills. In addition, women in this situation, particularly those from disadvantaged groups, should receive special education and/or labour market programs.

The Women's Safety Survey should be considered as the first in a series of collections aimed at obtaining data on women's experiences with violence and their consequences. Fear of violence is one of the many areas requiring further research. For example, women's perceptions of social and physical disorder in their local areas, the cohesiveness of their communities, and their social networks. In addition, future survey questions on fear of violence need to make explicit reference to the possibility of women being the victims of physical and/or sexual violence.

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