

## Crime

## Fear itself

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### The police are supposed to reduce fear of crime as well as crime. That's hard when there's little relationship between the two

THE release of the national crime statistics this week brought mixed news to those in the law-and-order business. Contrary to crimson-tinged reports in the national newspapers, the actual number of crimes committed has fallen by around 2%; an apparent increase is explained by new recording practices. But there was bad news, too. Thanks in part to the aforementioned newspaper reports, fear of crime is on the rise.

According to the British Crime Survey, 38% of people believe that crime has risen "a lot" in the past two years—up from 25% for those surveyed in 2001. A further third of the population reckons crime has gone up a little, while only 4% take the optimistic (and accurate) view that it has fallen. The number of people who worry about walking the streets at night and perceive their neighbourhoods to be disordered is also up.



For a government that concerns itself as much with perception as with reality, this is a problem; and the government has made it a problem for the police. Fear levels are now used as "best value performance indicators", meaning that police forces have to keep track of them and think up ways of calming people down. In the coming year, watch for a lot of converts to the "reassurance agenda" and the doctrine of putting more bobbies on the beat.

There can be few better examples of the tail (in this case, an imaginary tail) wagging the dog. Fear of crime is a serious matter—when keenly felt, it can prevent people from living productive and fulfilling lives. It is, however, hard for police to do much about it. Ask people their feelings about crime, and you will dredge up a mess of concerns about things like social fragmentation, sexual permissiveness, immigration and racial mixing. As Elizabeth Stanko, professor of criminology at Royal Holloway College, London, says, "fear of crime is like a sponge: it absorbs all kinds of social anxieties."

A further problem with targeting people's fears is that they bear only a tenuous relation to patterns of crime. Those least likely to suffer from crime often fear it most. So allocating police resources to people who are afraid may mean taking them away from people who are really likely to be victims.

This year's figures show that 16% of women over 60 think they are likely to be mugged—a fate that actually befalls fewer than one in two hundred. Meanwhile, young men, who are victimised at more than three times the national rate, are unusually unbothered. People living in Avon and Somerset seem irrationally calm, given above-average rates of burglary and car crime. But the inhabitants of Durham, who suffer around a quarter less crime than people elsewhere in the region, are very worried about it indeed; 26% have even managed to convince themselves that they live in a highly disorderly area.

What's more, gathering information about fear may generate more of the stuff. Some questions ("how

worried are you that someone might break into your home?”) are unintentionally leading. Stephen Farrall, a Keele University criminologist who has surveyed Glaswegians, says that one man, who had reported very low levels of anxiety, rang a few weeks later to report that he had thought about nothing else in the intervening period. Mr Farrall has persuaded the Home Office to start surveys by asking people about how many times they actually experienced fear in the past year. Under this line of interrogation, levels of fear fall by around half—by more among the over-60s.

Given the intangible and messy nature of crime fears, it hardly seems reasonable to expect the police to assuage them. To try to do so may even turn out to be counterproductive. After all, much the easiest way to reduce fear of crime is not to cut crime itself, but to convince people that bad things are unlikely to happen to them. At first glance, that sounds reasonable; but it risks turning the police into public relations officers and lowering people's natural defences against crime.

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