

Synopsis of National Community Safety Network seminar  
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# Feeling the fear: can we deal with it in any way?

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Reductions in levels of crime in an area do not necessarily lead to people feeling less fearful. As community safety practitioners, we need to help reduce the *fear* of crime as well as actual victimisation risk, particularly when, in many cases, the two are not directly connected. For example, many elderly people are fearful of becoming victims, even though they are one of the lowest risk groups. This irrational fear can affect people's health and lead to unnecessary self-imposed curfews, avoidance tactics or excessive property defence measures. Where does this fear come from? What can we do about it? Should we be telling the fearful to stop being silly and pull themselves together? Is a certain level of fear a good idea to prevent people being conned or placing themselves in unnecessarily risky situations? Henry Shaftoe's seminar at the conference explored these and other issues to do with fear. Below is a synopsis of what was covered. (A more detailed discussion of fear of crime can be found in Henry Shaftoe's new book: "Crime Prevention - Facts, Fallacies and the Future", published by Palgrave/Macmillan)

## What is fear?

Fear of crime is "an emotion, a feeling of impending harm to one's being, whether such harm is real or imagined".

-plus fear can be part of a more general "fear of many things" (from disease to armageddon)

Fear is "in your head" but it has external physical symptoms eg: sweating, quivering, feeling cold or hot, loss of appetite, dry mouth and inability to concentrate

## Who does it affect?

-women more men, older people slightly more than younger, people from certain ethnic or demographic groups more than the population as a whole

## Is the fear rational and realistic?

Actual victimisation risk (as opposed to *fear* of being a victim) is higher for young rather than older people. Males are most likely to be victims of street crime; women are most likely to be victims of violence from someone known to them in their own homes. The chances of being a victim depend on where you live - the highest risk is in poorer urban areas

But fear is linked to the likely *impact* of being a victim, not just the quantity or relative risk. For example a young male may shrug off injuries received after a fight outside a pub, whereas an aggravated burglary against an older person may traumatise them for the rest of their life.

## Does it *matter* that some people are fearful?

Yes because excessive fear can result in:

- mental and physical illness
  - self-imposed curfews and avoidance of whole areas of a city
  - excessive fortification
  - "white flight" as people with the income and choice get out of declining areas to live in homogenous suburbs or the country.
- Endemic fear allows crime to flourish (as local people become fearful to confront or report crime, in case of intimidation or retaliation)

## What *causes* fear?

- individual psychology (some people are more "nervous" than others)
- experience of being a victim already
- media reports about particularly nasty crimes (usually very unusual ones)

- "moral panics" (about crime waves, paedophilia, drug-crazed psychopaths etc)

## What are people fearful of?

- violent crime most, then property crime
- other people, youths, violent partners, people who are *different*
- threatening environments: subways, dark places, overgrown landscaping, graffiti, abandonment

## What can we do to reduce fear?

- work with the media and do our own communication about actual risk and levels of safety
- develop interpersonal and intergenerational projects (anything that brings "different" and stereotyped groups together for better understanding)
- environmental improvements: lighting, sightlines, care of soft landscaping, good maintenance
- safe public transport
- capable guardians (attendants, park-keepers, uniformed personnel of any description)
- "buddy" schemes for all age groups to support people who are suffering debilitating levels of fear

## Should people be "appropriately" fearful?

- If people have no fear (or suspicion) they are vulnerable to distraction thefts and confidence tricksters
- People need to be warned about risky locations and situations

The ideal would be a public awareness and caution appropriate to actual risk; no more, no less.