

Fear of violent crime geography essay



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As a concept 'fear of crime' has caused much academic discussion since it was first developed as a school of thought in the 1960s. Even though interest in fear of crime has gone through peaks and troughs since its arrival in the social sciences, it has undoubtedly found its way into governmental thinking and subsequent policies (Lee & Farrall 2008). There are those who claim that fear of crime is a larger problem than crime itself and this is largely due to anxieties over violent crimes such as sexual assault which is particularly salient (Warr 1995). The public are informed that official rates of crime are falling hence this appears to substantiate the claim that public fears are disproportionate to reality or even 'irrational' (Skogan 1987). For example, the latest British Crime Survey (BCS) undertaken by the Home Office (2009) revealed that people's fear of violent crime in the UK out-weighs their chances of victimization. However a finding from the same survey showed that all regions in the UK experienced a reduction in the proportion of people with a 'high level of worry' about violent crime between 2001-2 and 2008-9 (Home Office 2009).

Source: BCS, Home Office (2009)

Percentage of people with 'high level of worry' about violent crime, 2001-2 and 2008-9

There have been many disputes as to how to define fear of violent crime and as such, official statistics are subject to criticism. Lewis and Salem (1981) claim that emotional feelings alone define fear of crime whereas other scholars place emphasis on cognitive judgments or behaviours (Garland 2001). There are also mixed findings on the connections between socio-

demographic factors and fears of violence. Differential fears of violent crime have been strongly attributed to factors such as age, sex, race, locality, personal experience and media consumption (Clemente & Kleiman 1977). It has been posited that further research on the fear of crime ‘ must be focussed spatially and socially upon particular populations’ (Weaver 2008: 4). This dissertation will investigate the often cited connections between fear of violent crime and locality focussing on the University of Nottingham student population. It will explore the impact these fears have on their use of public space and highlight any constraints on activities or opportunities as a consequence of behavioural modifications.

Nottingham: safe for students?

The City of Nottingham’s violent crime rates are higher than the UK average. However, recorded violence in Nottingham against the person has decreased from a rate of 34. 5 per 1000 in 2006/07 to 29. 79 rates per 1000 in 2008/09 (Home Office 2009). As a consequence perhaps, headlines in the media portraying Nottingham as being notorious for gun crime or as being an ‘ Assassination City’ (Sewell 2007) have decreased. Nevertheless the mass media continue to label Nottingham as being a hotbed of violence.

It has been argued that Nottingham is ‘ a victim of its own success’ (Tiesdell 1998). This can be attributed to the number of bars and clubs the city possesses, promoting a vibrant but volatile night-life. In 2008 Nottingham City Council announced that the city was an Alcohol Disorder Zone (ADZ). This declaration was met with disbelief and anger amongst the local press and the University of Nottingham. It was argued that the City Council had shot itself in the foot again. In 2002, the Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire

gave his opinion that the city was out of control; he referred to the frequency of violence and in particular, the use of firearms. ‘ The City Council agreed with him before it quickly back-tracked, but it was too late, Nottingham acquired a reputation as a number-one crime city. The impact was stunning, with The University of Nottingham, one of the best in the country, losing approximately a third of student applicants’ (M&C Report 2008).

Avoidance actions can have negative impacts on cities. For example, avoidance behaviours can lead to significant financial costs as the ‘ Nottingham Safer Cities Project’ (NSCP) discovered. The project conducted a public survey; the findings from which illustrated that a significant number of city residents usually avoided the city centre after dark. The project calculated that this avoidance strategy led to the loss of £12 million in turnover and 442 job opportunities in Nottingham’s central business district during the 6 months of the study (Beck & Willis 1995). Though outdated the project indicates the importance of investigating fear of violence amongst Nottingham’s university population as they are widely regarded to be a vital contributor to the city’s income and infrastructure (Beck & Willis 1995).

Advancement of the Aims and Objectives

AIMS

- To discover whether fear of violent

crime

amongst

university

students in

Nottingham

is

dependent

on a)

gender b)

place of

domicile

residence c)

mass media

consumptio

n d)

personal

victimizatio

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· To

discover

how

university

students

react to

fear of

violent
crime and
how this
shapes their
use of
public
space in
Nottingham

Nottingham has higher levels of reported violent crime than the national average and is widely regarded amongst the mass media as being a particularly violent place. Furthermore students aged 16-24 years of age, statistically, are one of the most likely groups to fall victim to violent crime (Home Office 2009). Despite these findings, a thorough review of the previous literature showed that there are very few journal articles investigating fears of violence amongst university students and none were focussed on the city of Nottingham.

Extensive research on gender as a correlate of fear pays most attention to the fear gap between men and women. Fear of sexual assault is often given as the main reason for differential levels of fear (Balkin 1979) and as a result men's fears are neglected (Goodey 1997). This dissertation will compare the fears of both male and female students whilst focussing on violent crimes.

Most academics agree that being a victim of sexual assault leads to intensified fears (Box et al 1988). However, there are mixed findings on the impact personal victimization of other violent crimes has on the individual.

Some scholars argue that all physical assaults and muggings lead to greater fear of crime (Tulloch et al 1998) whilst others argue that they actually reduce fears (Sparks et al 1977). These inconsistent findings show that there is room for further research into the effects of violent victimization on public fears, which this dissertation aims to do.

Social scientists, on the whole, accept that fear of violent crime is place-dependent and as such; how individuals relate to ideas of place and community is an important indicator of fears (Girling et al 2000). However, studies in the UK examining the relationships between fear of violence and familiarity with place of residence are lacking. This dissertation will investigate the impact familiarity of place has on fears by comparing the fear index of students whose domicile residence is in Nottingham to those who lived somewhere else prior to attending University of Nottingham.

The mass media provide the public with much of their information. This information is often distorted through ‘popular’ tabloids which tend to sensationalise crime. It has been argued that the media cause fears of violent crime to increase (Gunter 1987) but findings are mixed. First year students, many being new to the city, will be an interesting focus group as many of them would have received much of their knowledge about ‘Assassination City’ through the media.

As aforementioned, modifications of behaviour in response to fears can have a significant impact on a city’s income hence research in this area (the second main aim) could arguably be important for future policy initiatives attracting more students to Nottingham. There may also be wider social

consequences for individual students with high levels of fear as it could limit opportunities, ultimately affecting well-being.

OBJECTIVES

1. To review

existing

literature to

acquire an

understandi

ng of the

different

theories

and views

on fear of

violent

crime

2. To

conduct

quantitative

surveys on

male and

female

University

of

Nottingham

first year
students
followed by
statistical
analysis to
determine
the
relationship
between
fear of
violent
crime and
the
following
variables:
a) gender
b) place of
domicile
residence c)
mass media
d) personal
victimization

3. To
conduct

group
discussions
with first
year
Geography
and Law
students at
the
University
of
Nottingham
to gain a
more
thorough
insight into
their fear of
violent
crime and
whether it
effects their
use of
public
space in
Nottingham

Fear of Violence: Academic discussion**Gender**

Research into the thorny issue of gender and fear of violent crime has found that women are much more fearful of violent crime than men yet women are less likely to be victims (Hale 1996). This fear amongst women was primarily viewed as being irrational by some scholars as women's high levels of fear do not equate to actual risk of victimization (Clemente and Kleiman 1977). It is widely acknowledged, however, that women have different experiences in public spaces than men. The BCS shows that young men are at greatest risk of victimisation for overall violence, although women are more likely to experience domestic violence and sexual assault (Home Office 2009). ' In public, fear of rape is a cardinal fear for women' (Riger et al 1994: 78) and is widely acknowledged as being the greatest factor leading to ' men and women sharing a consensus that females are much more fearful than males' (Sutton & Farrall 2008: 15). The " shadow of sexual assault" hypothesis (Ferraro 1996) states that women's fear of sexual assault shadows their fear of other types of crime, particularly violent crime. This dissertation aims to uncover the influence all violent crime has on female and male university students.

The gendered stereotypes of ' fearless male/fearful female' (Goodey 1997) are challenged by academics who suggest that men are socialised in society to be less fearful than women hence men have a tendency to minimise and hide their fears. This recent theory of the ' Socially Desirable Responding' (Farrall et al 2009) has important implications for research findings as it has been suggested that men are more likely to under-report their concerns in order to fit the hegemonic masculine ideal (Goodey 1997). This could be to

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such an extent that when this was taken into account, men's fear outstripped women's (Sutton & Farrall 2005). This is in contrast to the view that women report higher fears because they are physically weaker than men and may have rape foremost in their minds when answering questions about violent crime (Stanko 1990).

It has been posited that fear declines with age amongst girls and to a greater extent, boys. Young boys are relatively open about their fears yet as they mature their fears are somewhat 'downplayed as normative adult identities are adopted' (Goodey 1997: 402). This dissertation compares female fears of violent crime with the 'neglected arena of male fears' (Goodey 1997: 52) focussing on first year university students who are in a liminal stage of neither being viewed by wider society as children nor adults.

First Year University Students and the Fear of Violent Crime

First year University students, being young adults, are often stereotyped as 'strong, fearless and are often construed as the offender rather than the victim' (Tulloch 2000: 452). However a comprehensive report by Tulloch et al (1998) found that young adults are more fearful of crime than previously recognised. In addition statistical analysis has indicated that they have the greatest fear of violent crime when compared to other age groups (Ferraro 1995). These fears are arguably justified by The British Crime Survey (Home Office 2009) which asserted that reflecting their younger age profile, students (8.6%) had a higher than average risk of being a victim of violent crime throughout the year 2008/09. The BCS claim this is likely to be related to lifestyle. For example, people who visited nightclubs more than once a week in the month prior to interview had a higher risk of violent crime (12.

4%) than those who had visited nightclubs or discos less than once a week on average (6.6%) or not at all (2.5%).

First year university students or ‘Freshers’ do not fit into one clearly defined category or stereotype. Some see university students as belonging to a ‘problem population’ inducing moral panics through binge drinking and yobbish behaviour. ‘As city centres are perceived to be dangerous, they are given over to gangs of revellers and drunkards after dark’ (Trench et al 1992). Others see students as law abiding citizens who are likely to be victims of violent crime at the hands of excluded local youths who, like students are demonized through the media.

Place of Domicile Residence and Fear of Violent Crime

‘Perception of community has a strong influence on subjective estimates of being a victim of violent crime’ (Jackson 2004)

Literature on fear of crime has shown that it is an absorbent topic bound up in how individuals relate to ideas of place and community (Farrall et al 2009). In a recent study Farrall et al (2009) use in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the connections people make when talking about crime, their environment and community. The study suggested that at the root of fear of crime is public unease about the health of local neighbourhood order and concerns about social decline and community fragmentation. They concluded that public perceptions of crime are strongly linked to objective and subjective assessments of community, environment and change. It was also acknowledged that this can have varying degrees of significance for respondents ‘depending on a participant’s own circumstances or history’

(Farrall et al 2009: 137). Due to university students' varied experiences and histories they will be an interesting population to explore.

There is a sufficient gap in research on dimensions of place and fear of violent crime; there are few place-based studies that have considered relationships between fear of crime and familiarity with place of residence. Nevertheless, an example of one such study in Washington DC found that the percentage of a resident's life spent in the same neighbourhood was associated with a decrease in fear of violent crime (Roman & Chalfin 2008).

Mass media consumption and fear of Violent Crime

' It is widely recognised that crime stories and discussions about ' law and order' are the staple diet of the written press' (Sparks 1992).

The mass media provide a major source of our knowledge. As such there is much academic debate as to what extent media in the UK influences individual fear of violent crime. Academics such as Jewkes (2004) have argued that that the mass media harbours the power to instil fear in the public by the way in which it presents crime. Such arguments fit the ' Hypodermic Syringe Model' which focuses on the mass media representation of crime and how that representation is perceived by the public. It is argued that ' the media inject values, ideas and information directly into the passive reader or viewer' (Jewkes 2004: 9). The information that the ' popular' media ' inject' into the public is often distorted as they tend to sensationalise crime by following the rule that ' if it bleeds it leads'. They pay privileged attention to some crimes at the expense of others, often violent crimes at the expense of non-violent (Keating 2002).

‘ In Britain, readers of tabloid newspapers which have more sensational crime coverage reported higher levels of fear than readers of broadsheet papers, whose crime coverage is less predominant and less dramatic’ (Grabosky 1995).

By exaggerating the risks of violent crimes the media may orchestrate ‘ moral panics’ or ‘ media panics’ (Cohen 1972). These moral panics often correspond to BCS statistics. The popular press use one statistical area such as Nottingham and distort the truth by sensationalising the factual data using terminology such as ‘ epidemic’, which in turn, may lead to moral panics. Although there is some basic truth to what the media are presenting to the public, it usually becomes dramatised to the point of disconnection from the truth. This may lead to a ‘ deviancy amplification spiral’ (Cohen 1972) inferring that the area is particularly dangerous. Another consequence for such localities is that, once the decline begins, the community becomes part of the media generated folklore on crime and rare events such as firearm offences seem to be commonplace (Keating 2002).

Fear of violent crime levels can also be rationalised by using Post-Modernist approaches. Hall et al (1978: 46) suggest that the public are interested in the mass media representation of crime, especially violent crime, as ‘ violence represents a basic violation of the person.’ The public are therefore more affected by violent crimes, as they worry for their own safety. The BCS (Home Office 2009) statistics show that the number of violent crimes is decreasing annually, but this data is not yet reflected by public opinion.

The 'Hypodermic Syringe Theory', 'Moral Panic Theory' and Post-Modernist approaches have been widely criticised by researchers who have found the causal relationship between media and fear of violent crime to be at best, inconclusive. One key finding from Tulloch et al (1998) stated that the media are not as influential as previously thought. It has been suggested that the media alone can not cause fear of crime but 'they can address fears, play upon them, exploit or reassure them' (Sparks 1992: 155).

Behavioural Responses to Fear of Violent Crime

A review of the quantitative evidence to date illustrates that the findings for a causal relationship between fear of violent crime and modification of behaviour are somewhat inconsistent (Foster & Giles-Corti 2008). Numerous studies exhibit that people often avoid actions which they view as being dangerous such as travelling on public transport or going out after dark (Box et al 1988). On the contrary an important finding from Tulloch et al (1998) found that even though young adults are more fearful of violent crime than any other age group, they still go out at night and use public transport.

Episodes of being afraid of violent crime are often short lived. For example, one may become fearful if they hear footsteps behind them when walking down a dark alley. Farrall et al (2009) describe these fears as 'experiential'. Experiential fears are short-lived episodic experiences that are in response to external direct stimuli bound up in details of time and place. It has been argued, however, that although there may be heightened awareness in situations whereby one perceives there to be a potential threat of violence, this does not necessarily lead to outright fear but a calculated set of behavioural responses (Garland 2001).

By conducting in-depth interviews, Farrall et al (2009) found that many participants believed it was their responsibility to protect themselves from violent crime and that precautionary behaviour is a necessary part of every day life. Some modified their behaviour, avoided certain places at certain times and purchased security equipment. It has been suggested that fear of violence is not always detrimental to an individual's well-being. Some degree of fear might be healthy in certain situations as it creates a natural defence against crime. When there is a perceived risk of actual violence, a certain amount of fear might actually be beneficial. Experiential fears of violent crime stimulate 'responsibilization' which leads to precautionary behaviours, makes people feel safer and ultimately lowers the risk of victimization. This has been described as 'functional fear' (Jackson & Gray 2009). This 'functional fear' can be illustrated in the 'Health Belief Model' (Rosenstock 1974). This model has been applied by social scientists to explain why some people change their behaviour to combat violent crime (Hammig & Moranetz 2000). The model asserts that individuals who fear being a victim of violence will change their lifestyle habits if they believe that altering certain behaviours will enhance their overall well-being.

'For women, crime is a considerable reason as to why they do not go out after dark at night' (Crawford et al 1990: 49).

As aforementioned, social scientists have indicated that gender is one of the strongest predictors of fear of violence; women are more fearful of violent crime than men. Some scholars such as Warr (1985) and Ferraro (1995) have suggested that this differential 'irrational' fear among females is mostly due to their fear of sexual victimization. As a result of this fear women restrict

their lives in private and public spaces due to the perceived threat of criminal victimization (Gilchrist et al 1998). Findings from Warr (1985) substantiate this claim revealing that 40% of women do not go out at night compared with 9% of men. This indicates that fear of violent crime could have real consequences for female university students, limiting their use of public space and restricting them from fulfilling numerous opportunities in Nottingham. However, findings from studies can vary depending on the different behaviours that are measured. For example, a study in the US which investigated young male preventive behaviours against violent victimization found that 27% of respondents reported practicing preventive behaviours against violent crime regularly (Hammig & Morinetz 2000). Existing studies therefore do not provide concrete evidence for a strong relationship between fear of violent crime and modifications of behaviour.

Victimization and the ‘Irrational’ Fear of Violent Crime

Tulloch et al (1998) found that people’s fear of violent crime depends on personal experience and that an individual’s fear of violence is likely to be heightened if the individual has been victimized. However, past research on the issue has been surprisingly inconclusive. In a review of the research, DuBow et al (1979) concludes that there has been no convincing evidence that victimization increases one’s fear of violent crime. In a more recent study using qualitative analysis, Farrall et al (2009) reach a similar conclusion that many who had experienced violence didn’t admit to amplified levels of fear. Furthermore, they found differential levels of fear between ‘isolated’ and ‘repeat’ victims with the latter reporting greater fears.

Skogan (1987) claims that due to the lack of a strong relationship between fear and direct experience of violent crime, some people's fears such as women's has been branded 'irrational'. 'Interest in the 'irrationality' of high levels of fear of violent crime was fuelled by the weak correspondence of many survey measures of fear of crime to people's self reported victimization experiences' (Skogan 1987: 112). Rifai (1982: 193) denotes that fear of crime is 'irrational' simply because many people don't do much about it; 'There is usually little behavioural change that is reflected in what could be termed crime preventative or victimization preventative behaviour' (Rifai 1982: 193). As previously discussed, however, findings on behavioural changes are mixed and inconclusive.

Violent crime does not impact on all members of society in the same way. A controversial argument put forward by Rifai (1982) stated that victimization and fear are not strongly linked because most crimes and a large proportion of violent crimes are trivial in their consequences hence they aren't fear provoking. 'A number of case studies have suggested that in most occurrences of victimization there is little effect on the daily lives of the victims' (Rifai 1982: 199). The experience of victimization can serve to dispel some of the myths and anxieties about what becoming a victim of crime might feel like. The latest BCS statistics for 2008/09 indicate that, continuing a similar pattern to previous years, assault without injury accounted for the largest proportion (40%) of all violent incidents (British Crime Survey 2009). Perhaps then, Sparks et al (1977) are justified in arguing that victimization by assault reduces fear. They explained a negative correlation between victimization and fear by hypothesising that people 'fear the worst' before

they have any direct experience with crime, but when they are victimized and are physically unharmed, their anxieties may be alleviated.

Furthermore, it has been suggested by Skogan (1987) that the exclusion of non-victims from most of the literature has left unanswered the question of to what extent victims differ from comparable non-victims as a result of that experience. For this reason my dissertation will compare the fears of both ‘victims’ and ‘non-victims’ of violent crime.

Summary of Literature

The literature I have reviewed covers the most relevant concepts on the fear of violent crime put forward by influential academics who have worked within the realms of this discourse. One may argue that due to the sheer abundance of research that has been advanced by leading scholars, a relatively minute project such as mine based on Nottingham university students would prove insignificant. It could also be suggested that the field has been exhausted hence there isn't any room for further research. Yet it is recognised by the majority of academics that there is always room for further exploration. This is particularly true for investigating the fear of crime as many findings are inconsistent or inconclusive. Girling et al (2000: 136) describe fear of crime as ‘a topic that never quite stays still and submits itself for dispassionate examination’. My dissertation is therefore relevant as it is a contemporary investigation into an ever-changing topic that focuses on a previously neglected group, university students, in the unexplored context of Nottingham.

Methodology

Overview

There is much debate within the social sciences as to what ‘fear of violent crime’ actually means and how it should be measured. For example, numerous academics such as Hale (1996) believe it is primarily based on emotions i. e. actually feeling fearful. Other researchers criticise the emotional aspect of ‘fear’ and maintain that other aspects are more important such as what an individual ‘actually does’ to combat perceived threats of violence (Garland 2001). Alternatively, cognition i. e. what people perceive to be the risk of victimization has also been measured in previous studies. My research has investigated the complex relationships between the emotional, behavioural and cognitive aspects discussed. By acknowledging all three elements, fear of violent crime will be measured more accurately (Weaver 2008).

Data collection involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. Primarily, only fixed surveys (Farrall et al 1997) were going to be used as it would generate a large quantity of results for analysis. However, this method used alone has come under much criticism. It has been argued by leading academics such as Girling et al (2000) and Pain (2000) that the ‘tick-box survey’ is too blunt an instrument on its own to gain understanding of public fear of crime. Taking this into consideration, it was decided that fixed surveys would be used to cover a large sample of the first year student population in Nottingham. Focus groups would then be used to carefully uncover fears, behaviours and cognitive judgements that arguably do not become evident from analysing questionnaire results.

A self-completion, closed 'tick-box survey' was assembled and distributed to first year students studying a wide range of academic courses at the University of Nottingham. Once surveys had been completed and returned, face-to-face discussion groups or 'focus groups' with first year Geography and Law students were then conducted. Collecting quantitative data from the surveys prior to the group discussions enabled the latter to delve deeper into students' fears of violence and uncover any behavioural responses that could not be explained in the closed tick-box surveys.

Some survey questions have a tendency to elicit socially desirable responses (Farrall et al 2009). These are answers that don't necessarily reflect the respondent's real feelings but 'the one which they feel best fits the image of themselves; the image which they wish to show to the person interviewing' (Farrall et al 2009: 146). As aforementioned, men are particularly likely to give socially desirable responses. Sutton and Farrall (2005) make this point in a review of previous quantitative data on fear of crime. They suggest that when answering survey questions aimed at measuring fear of crime, men often suppress the extent of their anxieties. This may have implications for survey results. Furthermore, 'it is not uncommon for people under the researcher's gaze to feel self conscious or threatened' (Flowerdew and Martin 1997: 129). For these reasons, questionnaires were not conducted face to face but were handed out and returned within a week to a 'pigeon hole' in the University of Nottingham main reception.

Sampling Methods

Focussing on first year students at the University of Nottingham placed constraints on possible sampling techniques. The dissertation, ideally, would

have an equal number of female and male respondents, and an equal number of students' whose domicile residence was in Nottingham and elsewhere. In the pilot test a quota sampling method was adopted. This sampling method was conducted at the University of Nottingham ' fresher's fair'. This method encountered problems. Firstly, the survey did not result in a 100% response rate. Secondly, it proved almost impossible to find an equal number of respondents whose domicile residence was in Nottingham as those that weren't. The final decision was to use cluster sampling. Cluster sampling was used as it was deemed to be an appropriate and realistic method of surveying first year university students. Study participants were thus recruited through the University of Nottingham. Questionnaires were distributed to the university, with permission, which then handed them out to first year students for completion. As such, all participants met the study requirements. 200 surveys were distributed, 124 of which were returned projecting a 62% response rate. First year geography and law students were recruited for the focus groups by administering voluntary sign up sheets to the University of Nottingham which were then placed in the Geography and Law buildings of the university.

Ethical Issue