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Community Ties and Urbanites' Fear of Crime: An Ecological Investigation[1]

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This study examines the relationship between urban residents' fear of crime and four forms of community involvement: neighborhood bonds (i.e., feelings of attachment to the locality), residential ties, social interaction with neighbors, and use of local facilities. Data used to examine these relationships were collected through in-person interviews with women living in three U.S. cities. While local crime rates were positively correlated with fear, neighborhood bonds were inversely and more strongly related to fear levels. Residential ties to the community were also related to less fear. However, social interaction with neighbors and use of local facilities were not associated with fear levels. Neighborhood bonds and residential ties appear to be directly related to fear levels rather than acting as mediators of the impact of crime rates. Possible ways in which community ties reduce fear are discussed.

Although the dramatic increase in crime since the early 1960s slowed and stabilized around 1975, crime rates in major U.S. cities remain considerably higher than those in other industrialized Western countries (Gurr, 1977; Skogan, 1978). Furthermore, the fear of crime is considered by some observers to be a major social problem in itself (Maltz, 1973). The stress incurred by living in a constant state of fear, and the oppor-

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tunities lost because of the avoidance of situations in which victimizations might occur, constitute substantial indirect costs of crime (Conklin, 1975). Yet reactions to the crime problem vary.

Although fear appears to be generally related to local crime rates, people within the same locality differ considerably both in the extent to which they fear crime and in their use of self-protective tactics, such as not going out alone after dark or carrying a weapon for protection (see Dubow, McCabe, & Kaplan, 1979, for a comprehensive review of literature on reactions to crime). Some people huddle behind locked and barred windows and doors, virtual prisoners in their own homes, while others in the same neighborhood do little to protect themselves from danger. Gender, age, and race account for a considerable amount of that variability (Dubow et al., 1979), but the extent to which people feel integrated into their communities may have additional effects on their reactions to crime independent of other personal characteristics (Jaycox, 1978).

Research in other areas documents the stress-buffering nature of social ties in protecting both physical and emotional health (Cobb, 1976; Dean & Lin, 1977; Gottlieb, 1979; Kaplan, Cassel, & Gore, 1977). Integration into a mutually supportive network of relationships results in a "psychological sense of community" that is critical to individuals' well-being (Sarason, 1974). Networks that provide support need not coincide with geographically defined communities (Fischer, Jackson, Stueve, Gerson, & Jones, 1977; Wellman & Leighton, 1979). Yet ties to others in one's neighborhood and involvement in local community life could provide support in the face of neighborhood-based problems such as local crime. In this paper we investigate whether community ties affect the responses of city dwellers to local crime problems and, in particular, whether they provide a buffer which moderates the deleterious impact of high crime rates on residents' quality of life.

Although the extent of correlation and the direction of causality remain unclear, previous research suggests that feelings of attachment to community influence the relationship between local crime rates and residents' attitudinal responses to crime. Baumer and Hunter (Note 1) tested Jane Jacobs' (1961) hypothesis that perceived safety of city streets is partly a function of the number of people using them. They found that those who felt less attached to the community expressed high fear of crime when many people were on the street, while those who felt more attached to their neighborhood expressed low fear of crime in the presence of equally high levels of pedestrian traffic. Thus, residents' relationships to their communities mediated the association between pedestrian traffic in a neighborhood and fear of crime. On the basis of telephone surveys of elderly residents of selected big-city neighborhoods, Jaycox (1978) reported that people who were less afraid of crime both lived in neighborhoods with lower victimization rates and were more likely to say they felt a part of

their neighborhoods. It may be then that fear of crime reflects fear of unknown and unpredictable dangers, or fear of unfamiliar people (Conklin, 1975) and places.

In addition to feelings of attachment, ties to other people in the neighborhood also can influence fear levels. Rifai (Note 2) found an inverse relationship between fear of crime and the extent of social interaction among the elderly. Lack of social interaction seems to magnify fear because support in coping with apprehensions or actual problems is absent (Gubrium, 1974). Based on these findings, we expect that extensive neighborhood social involvement and feelings of community attachment will be associated with lower levels of residents' fear.

Involvement in community settings is a multidimensional phenomenon, each facet of which may differentially affect reactions to proximal stressors. In an earlier paper, we identified two dimensions of community attachment: social bonds and residential ties within a geographical location (Riger & Lavrakas, 1981). The former refers to the extent to which residents feel familiar with local people and experience a sense of belonging to their neighborhood, while the latter refers to home ownership and length of residence. Both of these are distinct from two other modes of community involvement, social interaction with neighbors and use of local facilities for shoppings, banking, and such (Hunter, 1975).

In the present investigation, we examine the impact of these four forms of community involvement on urban dwellers' fear of crime. Based on studies cited above, we expect to find an inverse relationship between community involvement and fear levels. Further, we expect that community involvement mediates the relationship between crime rates and residents' reactions of fear. That is, even in the presence of high crime rates, extensive community involvement should be associated with less fear among residents. In addition, we explore whether the four types of community involvement (feelings of bondedness, extent of residential roots, use of local facilities, and degree of social interaction with neighbors) are equally important as determinants of fear levels. We employ multivariate statistical techniques in order to assess the unique and combined effects of each of these forms of involvement on the extent of residents' fear.

METHODS

Subjects

The data analyzed in this investigation were collected as part of an extensive survey of the fear of crime conducted in 1977 by the Center for Urban Affairs at Northwestern University (see Gordon & Riger, 1978; and Lewis, 1978). Respondents were obtained through a two-stage

process. First, randomly selected residents of Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Francisco were interviewed by telephone. The demographic characteristics of the telephone random samples closely match the overall demographic profiles for the cities and neighborhoods from which the samples were drawn (Skogan, Note 3). At the end of the telephone survey, respondents in selected neighborhoods were given an opportunity to participate in an in-person interview. Two neighborhoods from each of the three cities were selected as in-person interview sites in such a way as to maximize the mix of social class and ethnicity. Because research consistently indicates that women both fear crime more than men and alter their behavior more in response to the threat of victimization (Baumer, 1978; Dubow et al., 1979; Erskine, 1974; Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978), in-person interviews were conducted with a disproportionate number of women in order to investigate the causes and consequences of their greater fear of crime. Self-selected female respondents who participated in the in-person interview constitute the sample for the present analyses. Responses from women only were used here because more extensive data were available on their community involvement.

To assess the representativeness of the sample, we compared those who participated in the in-person interview with those who were contacted by telephone in their respective neighborhoods. As compared with the telephone sample, women interviewed in person were wealthier ($\chi^2 = 14.58, df = 2, p < .001$), had more formal education ($\chi^2 = 21.53, df = 2, p < .001$), and had higher status employment ($\chi^2 = 15.32, df = 1, p < .001$). Women in the in-person interview sample were also younger ($\chi^2 = 24.70, df = 3, p < .001$) and more likely to be black than women interviewed by telephone ($\chi^2 = 11.44, df = 3, p < .01$). The modal woman in the in-person sample came from a household with an income under $10,000 (38% of the sample), had a high school (or less) education (51%), was less than 30 years old (45%), and was white (61%).

Each of the women was interviewed in-person for about 90 minutes. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of fear of crime, their background characteristics, and a variety of community-related attitudes and behaviors. (An extensive summary of other findings from the in-person interview is presented in Riger and Gordon, 1981.)

Measures

Fear of crime was measured with the question most widely used by researchers in this field (Fowler & Mangione, Note 4): "How safe

do you feel being out alone in your neighborhood at night: very safe, reasonably safe, somewhat unsafe or very unsafe?"

Involvement with local neighborhood life was measured with four scales reflecting various modes of community involvement: social bonds, residential roots, social interaction, and use of facilities. A detailed description of scale development for two of the measures, social bonds and residential roots, is presented in Riger and Lavrakas (1981).

Social bonds to the neighborhood is the unweighted sum of respondents' standardized scores on the following questions from the telephone interview: "In general, is it pretty easy or pretty difficult for you to tell a stranger in your neighborhood from somebody who lives there?" "Would you say that you really feel a part of your neighborhood or do you think of it more as just a place to live?" "How about kids in your immediate neighborhood? How many of them do you know by name: all of them, some, hardly any, or none of them?" Scores on this scale, labeled Bonded, range from approximately -4 to $+3$ with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 2.22. Positive scores represent above average social bondedness; negative scores represent below average bondedness.

Extent of physical roots in the neighborhood is the unweighted sum of the respondents' standardized scores on these questions from the telephone interview: "How many years have you personally lived in your present neighborhood?" "Do you own your own home or rent it?" "Do you expect to be living in this neighborhood 2 years from now?" Scores for this scale, labeled Rooted, range from approximately -3 to $+8$ with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 2.18. Positive scores represent above average physical rootedness in the neighborhood; negative scores represent below average rootedness.

Degree of social interaction with neighbors is an additive scale produced from six in-person interview questions adopted from Hunter (1975). Scores are ratios of activities done with a neighbor to the six activities mentioned. The items include (a) going out for entertainment, such as a movie, (b) visiting, (c) doing a favor, such as watering plants or loaning tools, (d) talking about personal problems, or asking for or giving advice, (e) close friends living in the neighborhood as opposed to other parts of the city or elsewhere, and (f) getting to know local friends after moving into neighborhood as opposed to knowing them before. Scores on this scale, labeled Interact, ranged from 0 to 1.

Extent of use of neighborhood facilities was measured as a computed scale of the ratio of activities performed in the neighborhood to total activities performed. The eight items measuring these activities (adopted from Hunter, 1975) include weekly grocery shopping, buying

everyday items such as soap and Kleenex, banking, going to movies or other entertainment, visiting the doctor, working, going to church, and location of child's school. Scores on this scale, labeled Facilities, ranged from 0 to 1.

The reliability coefficients for each of these scales are modest: Bonded = .584, Rooted = .555, Interact = .491, Facilities = .532. This is likely to attenuate the maximum attainable correlation coefficients between these scales and scores on fear of crime.

Crime Rates. Neighborhood assault rates were used as indicators of the threat of victimization in the communities studied. Assault rates can be measured either with official police data or with data collected through victimization surveys of randomly selected urban residents (Hindelang et al., 1978). Victimization surveys are more accurate estimates of the actual incidence of crime than are police data, yet the latter more strongly influence most people's responses to crime (Dubow et al., 1979, Lewis & Maxfield, 1980). Therefore, assault rates were computed from police data using neighborhood boundaries similar to our sampling frame. Individuals living in the same neighborhood were assigned identical assault rates. All rates are expressed in terms of number of crimes per thousand population. The assault rates in the six neighborhoods studied varied from .922/1,000 residents to 7.5/1,000 residents.

RESULTS

Table I presents the zero-order correlations among assault rates, fear, and four measures of community involvement: Bonded, Rooted, Interact, and Facilities. As expected (see column 1), greater fear levels are associated with higher assault rates ($r = .21$, $p < .001$), fewer neighborhood bonds ($r = -.25$, $p < .001$), less social interaction ($r = -.11$,

Table I. Intercorrelation of Fear, Assault Rates, and Community Involvement Measures

	Variables					
Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Fear	–					
2. Assault rates	.21[a]	–				
3. Social interaction	−.11[b]	−.12[b]	–			
4. Neighborhood bonds	−.25[a]	−.10[b]	−.09	–		
5. Residential roots	.02	−.11[b]	.02	.28[a]	–	
6. Use of facilities	−.11[b]	−.04	.04	.24[a]	.00	–

[a] $p < .001$.
[b] $p < .05$.

$p < .05$), and the low use of local facilities ($r = -.11$, $p < .05$). Although the latter two correlations are significant and in the expected direction, the size of these relationships is small. There appears to be no relationship between residential roots and levels of fear ($r = .02$).

Inspection of the second column reveals that the measures of community involvement are negatively, albeit weakly, related to assault rates. Residents of communities with more crime are less likely to interact with their neighbors ($r = -.12$, $p < .05$), to be residentially tied to the area ($r = -.11$, $p < .05$), or to feel attached to the community ($r = -.10$, $p < .05$).

Column 3 reveals a surprising (but nonsignificant, $p = .076$) inverse relationship between neighborhood bonds and levels of local social interaction ($r = -.09$). Intuitively we would expect those who feel attached to their neighborhoods to interact more with their neighbors, but this does not seem to be the case. However, neighborhood bonds are positively correlated to residential roots, as indicated in column 4 of Table I ($r = .28$, $p < .001$); see Riger & Lavrakas (1981) for further discussion of this relationship. Those who feel more attached to their communities also tend to use local facilites more ($r = .24$, $p < .001$).

In order to determine the relative impact of community involvement measures on fear scores, we employed multiple regression analyses to examine the independent effects of each variable when controlling for all other variables simultaneously. The four measures of community involvement are intercorrelated, as indicated in the discussion above. But the strongest of these correlations, between residential roots and neighborhood bonds, remains fairly modest in magnitude ($r = .28$), indicating that there should not be problems of multicollinearity. Table II presents the results of a stepwise multiple regression analysis using the four measures of community involvement and assault rates as predictor variables, and fear of crime as the criterion variable. The strongest contributor to fear levels is neighborhood bonds (beta $= -.27$, $p < .001$), more important even than assault rates (beta $= .17$, $p < .001$) in determining fear levels.

Table II. Fear of Crime Regressed Onto Assault Rates and Community Involvement Measures

Predictor variable	Multiple R^2	Beta	p
Neighborhood bonds	.06	−.27	.000
Assault rates	.09	.17	.009
Residential roots	.11	.15	.022
Social interaction	.12	−.11	.079
Use of facilities	.12	−.04	.512

Residential roots is also a significant contributor to fear levels (beta = .15, $p < .05$). However, these three variables together account for only 11% of the variance in fear scores.

Based on the previous research discussed above, we expected not only that measures of community involvement would have an effect on fear scores independent of crime rates, but also that they would mediate the relationship between crime rates and fear. In order to test this hypothesis, we examined the partial correlation coefficients between crime rates and fear when controlling for each of the community involvement measures. If the hypothesis is supported, then the correlation between fear scores and crime rates should increase when the effects of community involvement are removed. However, the results indicate that this did not occur. The partial correlation between crime rates and fear controlling for neighborhood bonds is .188; for residential roots, .209; for social interaction, .195; and for use of local facilities, .203. These correlation coefficients are all similar to the zero-order correlation between assault rates and fear, .206.

The preceding analyses assume that the relationships among the variables are linear. However, it is possible that the relationships among fear and the community involvement measures are nonlinear, thereby depressing the correlation coefficients and masking the impact of community involvement on fear. In order to examine this possibility, we categorized assault rates and respondents' community involvement scores as low, medium, or high, based on the distribution of scores in the sample. Although shifting from interval to ordinal scales reduces total variance in each measure, and hence involves the loss of information, it does allow possible nonlinear relationships to emerge. One-way analysis of variance indicated that one variable, assault rates, had an effect on fear that deviated significantly from linearity, $F(1, 1) = 6.67$, $p < .01$.

We computed a series of two-way analyses of variance with fear as the dependent variable and assault rates and the community involvement measures as independent variables. If community involvement mediates the impact of crime on residents' experience of fear, then the interaction terms should be significant. However, significant interaction terms were not obtained for any of the combinations of community involvement measures and assault rates.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The results presented here provide partial support for the proposition that community involvement affects urban residents' fear of crime. As

expected, higher levels of officially recorded criminal activity (i.e., assault rates) were associated with more fear of crime. Strong neighborhood bonds and residential ties to the community were associated with lower levels of fear. When all the variables act in concert, the extent of neighborhood bondedness is the strongest contributor to fear scores, even more important than rates of criminal activity. However, two other measures of community involvement, social interaction with neighbors and use of local facilities, did not appear to have an impact on fear levels in multivariate analyses. Also, the expectation that community involvement would mediate the relationship between assault rates and fear was not supported.

Two notes of caution are in order in generalizing from the results presented here. First, the total amount of variance in fear explained by the significant predictor variables (local assault rates and neighborhood bonds and roots) is modest, 11%, and several of the statistically significant correlation coefficients reported here were small in magnitude. Since the findings were in the expected direction, it is possible that these relationships simply reflect weak associations among variables. However, another factor may be operating. The relatively modest reliability coefficients for the four community involvement scales may have artifactually depressed the strength of the relationships among these variables and fear. The measure of fear we used had only four possible responses. This may be too few to adequately assess the actual variation in women's fear. A conclusive test of these relationships awaits improvements in methods of measuring fear and neighborhood variables.

Second, this study examined only women's fear of crime. Previous research consistently indicates that the indirect effects of crime, in prompting apprehension about victimization and the use of restrictive precautionary behaviors, more strongly affect women than men, though men are more frequently victimized except for the crime of rape (Dubow et al., 1979). Analyses of fear levels reported by men in our study indicate that most men report little fear, and there is little variability in their scores (Riger, Rogel, & Gordon, Note 5). Therefore, community involvement may not have as great an impact on men's fear scores as on women's.

The results presented here prompt us to consider why strong neighborhood bonds and roots are associated with less fear. Baumer and Hunter (Note 1) suggest that integration into community settings mitigates fear by decreasing the number of people who are strangers (since fear of crime may be fear of strangers), by increasing the awareness of "strange" people at "strange" times of day, and by increasing the belief in or ability to rely on neighbors for assistance if needed. Research on bystander intervention indicates that people are indeed more likely to help others if they are familiar with them and/or the area, even if only briefly acquainted (Hackler, Ho, & Urquhart-Ross, 1974; Latané & Darley, 1970). Familiarity

with the community may also promote more accurate "mental maps" of dangerous or safe areas within the neighborhood, so that people know which areas to avoid (Lewis, Note 6). Involvement in community settings, hence, can be a medium for obtaining information and assistance, and so can serve to reduce the stress resulting from the threat of crime.

Lewis and Maxfield (1980) found that signs of social disorder and decay, such as abandoned buildings and teen-agers hanging out, affected residents' levels of fear in addition to local crime rates. Long-term residence and feelings of attachment and familiarity with the area may heighten residents' cognitive ability to identify such signs of danger. In doing so, familiarity may enable people to perceive or actually exert control over their exposure to that danger, and hence reduce fear. For instance, knowing the names of teen-agers in a housing project is associated with lower levels of fear of crime (Merry, Note 7), perhaps because knowing them permits some degree of control over their behavior, or at least increases the predictability of that behavior. Neighborhood bonds thus may facilitate the exercise of informal social control mechanisms to reduce the frequency of criminal (or noncriminal but deviant) acts that generate fear.

Previous researchers have suggested that social interaction can reduce fear by providing social and emotional support in coping with apprehension about crime (Gubrium, 1974). The findings presented here indicate that social interaction with neighbors did not have a large impact on fear levels. It is possible that residents receive social support in coping with local problems from people outside their neighborhood. However, the cognitive consequences of local involvement, rather than the social-emotional support, may be the critical factors in reducing fear. In a classic series of social psychological experiments, Schachter (1959) demonstrated that anxious people preferred waiting with others in the same situation rather than by themselves, not necessarily for companionship but because the social comparison process which ensued allowed them to assess the reasonableness of their fear levels. Residents of urban neighborhoods may receive information about the appropriateness of their fears, not necessarily by talking with others, but rather by becoming familiar with the patterns of behavior that occur in the daily routine of their neighborhoods.

The results of this study also raise questions about the causal direction of relationships among crime rates, fear, and community involvement. The impact of crime on community cohesiveness has long been a topic of concern to urban observers. Years ago, Durkheim (1933) suggested that crime may increase solidarity among city dwellers by uniting them in the face of danger. More recently, Conklin (1975) opposed this assertion and argued that crime furthers disunity by creating distrust and suspicion that drives people apart. But Hartnagel (1979) reports the absence of a

relationship between either neighborhood cohesion or social activity and fear of crime, although fear was negatively related to satisfaction with the neighborhood as a place to live. With Conklin (1975) and Lewis and Maxfield (1980), we suggest that the impact of crime on community residents may be a function of, as well as have an affect on, their attitudes toward the locality. Where a high degree of community solidarity exists, crime and the concomitant fear that it generates may not be sufficient to destroy this cohesiveness. Where less solidarity prevails, crime could have a strong impact on relations among community dwellers. Elsewhere we have reported that fear of crime is strongly associated with the use of precautionary tactics such as not going out alone at night or not talking to strangers (Riger, Gordon, & LeBailly, forthcoming). It seems likely that some of these behaviors preclude the establishment of local ties.

Henig and Maxfield (1978) suggest that social policies encouraging the participation of residents in community life may reduce fear indirectly by heightening social integration. The findings presented above indicate that increasing residents' familiarity and sense of attachment may have the most beneficial impact on fear, while policies designed simply to encourage interaction may not significantly change fear levels. Increasing community cohesiveness in itself cannot reduce crime (Lewis & Maxfield, 1980). By diminishing fear, however, greater community attachment may serve to both add vital resources to the community and reduce the stressful effects of the threat of victimization on residents.

Finally, the results presented here suggest that the role of neighborhood involvement should not be overlooked when examining the quality of contemporary urban life. Much of the recent research on social networks emphasizes the extraterritorial nature of such ties. For example, Fischer (1976) argues that friendship has shifted from a neighboring of place to a neighboring of taste. And Wellman and Leighton (1979) state, further, that a variety of structural and technological developments, such as cheap, effective transportation systems and high rates of residential mobility have lessened the dependence of urban residents on their neighbors for members of their social networks. Ties with neighbors tend to be weak and to be imbued with limited rights and obligations. However, forms of community involvement other than local social interaction may affect residents' reactions to proximal stressors such as crime. In addition, as transportation becomes increasingly expensive, or as local problems become more acute, proximal social ties may become more salient.

Warren and Warren (1975) assert that "the survival of democracy depends in large measure on the quality of political and social life in one's own neighborhood. These microworlds very often are the . . . crucible in which most people confront the often prodigious problems of our urban culture" (p. 80). Certainly crime is one of those problems, and

the extent of attachment of community residents to their locality may well have a major impact on the overall quality of their lives.

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