



# Exploring socio-demographic factors, avoiding being a victim and fear of crime in a Nigerian university

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## Abstract

The study investigated the phenomenon of fear of crime in the Nigerian University system by recruiting 106 students with mean age of 23.44 years and standard deviation of 3.62. To assess the study variables in a cross-sectional survey, a 25-item preliminary development of Students Opinion Inventory on Fear of Crime was used. Statistical analysis of a two-way ANOVA for data analysis indicated that female students reported more fear of crime and perceived the campus as more unsafe than male students. And students' location (campus hostel or off-campus) did not differ with respect to their fear of crime. There is a link between prevalent crimes and reported preventive measures, informing the conclusion that the fear of crime is basically precipitated by socio-demographic characteristics of people. Redesigned situational crime prevention strategies that are rooted in proactive policing and target hardening were recommended to further direct policy approach.

**Keywords** Crime prevalence · Fear of crime · Nigerian University · Preventive measures · Socio-demographic factors

## Introduction

Crime and fear of its occurrences enflame negative reactions and traumatic experiences from primary, secondary and vicarious victims. The notion of fear of crime became a subject of criminological research in the late 1960s, following the mounting race disturbances, civil unrest and urban violence in the United States [US] (see Garofalo 1981; Zedner 2002; Farral et al. 2009; Eban 2011; Etuk and Nnam 2018). McConnell (1997) explained that the scholarship on fear of crime became an emerging social problem in the 1960s and thereby prompting the then President of the United States of America, Lyndon B Johnson, to state before the legislators that

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‘crime and fear of crime have become a public malady’. Indeed, the increasing incidence of crime has pushed back the frontiers of knowledge on exploring what could precipitate its perpetration. The study of victims and their offenders has become a subject of multidisciplinary studies. It now constitutes an interesting subject of discourse, not only in criminology and criminal justice system, as it were, but also has spanned the disciplines of sociology, psychology, biology and physiology (for a similar view, see Kelly and Tores, 2006).

There is no putative definition of fear of crime; the concept is socially constructed, underscoring the relativities and variations in the trends and patterns of its commission across jurisdictions, time and space. Biologically, for instance, fear is an alarm system that prepares the organism for escape or confrontation, which could lead to worry and possibly, depression that may push out impulse or behaviour, whether prosocial or antisocial. Consequently, fear of crime is a bio-physiological response towards places which make people not to feel safe (Pánek et al. 2019). In criminological parlance, fear of crime is simply described as an emotional response to potential victimisation (Prieto and Bishop 2018). Fear of crime explains the likelihood of the risk; it defines the state of being a victim of crime, as opposed to the actual probability of being a victim of crime. It is only a symptom of other observable and non-observable behaviours, an emotional response of anxiety to crime or symbols that an individual connects with crime (Ferraro and Grange 1987; Ferraro 1995).

The problem negatively affects individuals and their overall wellbeing and may even influence their behaviour. Vilalta (2011) opined that fear of crime is an important construct in the formation of quality of life, yet it is usually jettisoned from a public policy standpoint. Some studies suggest a link between fear of crime and social disorder and other serious crimes (Kelling and Coles 1997; Koskela and Pain 2000; Doran and Lees 2005). Students have been known to be susceptible to internalisation of negative influences from peers and colleagues, and in an evolutionary bid to ‘belong’ or feel appreciated and accepted by peers, they have either become victims of crime or perpetrators (Abonyi 2006). In so doing, the fear of crime becomes a recurring decimal and a source of worry for the youth population, students precisely.

The reason this study becomes an important subject of discussions is informed by the growing incidence of fear of crime and victimisation in Nigerian institutions of higher learning in recent times. Public safety is no longer guaranteed, and people are not only living in morbid and perpetual fear of being victimised, but also have actually fallen victim of one crime or another (see Eban 2011; Chekwa et al. 2013; Etuk and Nnam 2018; Nnam et al. 2018; Otu et al. 2018a, 2018b; Nnam et al., 2020; Eteng et al. 2021). Carter (1999) and Mbamalu (2014) explained that many students have become victims of campus crimes in Nigeria, and the country has been termed a ‘traumatised country’ and more impressionable to commit crime. It is pertinent to note that Nigeria, particularly the Northern region, has witnessed an upsurge in crimes and criminality.

There is increasing incidence of civil unrest, violence, banditry, armed robbery, kidnapping and terrorism, leading to paralysing fear which has, in turn, affected economic and social life of the country and even people who are not directly affected



(Radda and Ndubueze 2013). As a result of the growing rates and severity of criminality, successive governments in the country since the early 1980s have introduced diverse crime control measures, but without much success (see also Alemika and Chukwuma 2005). Examples include the idea of 'getting tough on crime and criminals' through firing squad or death penalty and imprisonment, as well as the establishment of more security and law enforcement agencies, such as Department of Security Service (DSS), Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) etc. to augment the efforts of the military and police in crime fighting.

Particularly, the implication of fear of crime on students' behavioural orientation and academic pursuit is almost always negative, as most of them have been robbed, assaulted, threatened and burgled (see Otu and Elechi 2015; Etuk and Nnam 2018). This has, in turn, negatively impinged on the lives of students, amounting to behavioural anomalies such as anxiety, avoidance behaviour, agitations, and increased students' unrest and unnecessary activism. Other possible reactions range from constrained behaviour, compensatory defensive actions to abandoning their studies, and so on. Yet, incisive policy frameworks and empirical literature on the problem are grossly lacking in Nigeria. Of particular concern is that, there is low-level awareness campaigns and availability of evidence-based interventions arising from research and practice to address the issue of fear of crime. A critical and systematic examination of this phenomenon would assist the school management and security agencies in understanding why and how unsettled students are while on campus for policy formulation and implementation. Generally, therefore, the present study sets out to fill this gap by interrogating topical issues in fear of crime studies in Nigeria using Nasarawa State University, Keffi (NSUK) as a unity of analysis. Specifically, the complex subject of fear of crime is further explored in relation to some social and demographic factors, offence category and prevalence, and prevention and control.

## Theoretical and empirical literature review

Numerous studies have been carried out to develop theories, highlighting the most probable causes that underlie fear of crime. However, to determine the exact leading causes of criminal behaviour among young people appears not to be an easy task, as more complex social factors could be the cause rather than simply as a result of an event. Given the nature of this study, different relevant victimisation theories, perspectives and constructs were integrated to underpin the phenomenon of interest. Hence, and firstly, the theory of lifestyle exposure is considered suitable and comprehensive to explain socio-demographic variables or factors, victimisation and fear of crime among students. Lifestyle-exposure theory poses as one of the first systematic theories of criminal victimisation developed by Hindelang et al. (1978). The theory was originally proposed to account for differences in the risky tendencies of violent victimisation across social groups. The basic premise underlying the lifestyle-exposure theory is that demographic differences in the likelihood of victimisation are attributed to differences in the personal lifestyles of victims.



Variations in lifestyles are important because they are related to the differential exposure to dangerous places, times and situations in which there are high risks of victimisation. From this perspective, an individual's way of life is the deciding variable that determines risks of criminal victimisation (Hindelang et al. 1978). People's daily activities may naturally bring them into contact with crime, or they merely increase the risk of being victims of crime. Nevertheless, there has been a tendency to consider crime as an urban rather than a rural issue because crime rates are far lower in the latter areas than in former locations (Yarwood and Gardner, 2000 as cited in Wynne 2008). This is where lifestyle exposure intersects with deviant place model to further elucidate the core of the problem under investigation. For instance, Etuk and Nnam (2018, p. 4) revealed that "residing in a deviant/criminal neighbourhood (such as slums, shanties and ghettos) and flashpoint areas where people of the minority origin and lower social backgrounds are living (this supports deviant place model)" precipitates crimes and fear of them. Even extant research attests that deviant/criminal neighbourhoods are typically poor, densely populated and highly transient where commercial and residential property exist side by side (Stark 1987). Experts' opinions further revealed that:

Such an environment places residents at a high risk of robbery victimisation and provides victimisers with suitable targets and easy escape. Offenders engage in certain crimes such as pick pocketing, shoplifting and assaults in this type of environment. Residents of such defenceless and unsecure backgrounds may not only be susceptible to armed robbery victimisation, but also are predisposed to other criminal victimisations such as assault and battery, kidnapping, rape and related sexual offences, and even violent death (Etuk and Nnam 2018, p. 7).

Other theoretical leanings on fear of crime include the victimisation and vulnerability perspectives at the personal level, as well as the social control and social problem perspectives at the societal level (Winkel 1998; Chadee and Ditton 2003; Boers 2003; Sutton and Farral 2005). Previous studies using sample students indicate that they are more likely to become victims as a result of their lifestyles, such as keeping late at night, excessive alcohol consumption, uncontrolled partying and drug abuse (Mustaine and Tewksbury, 2002; Lee and Hilinski-Rosick 2012; Etuk and Nnam 2018). Certain activities which include hanging out with friends and going out at night are often connected with increased stalking victimisation risk against female students (Jensen and Brownfield 1986; Fisher and Smith 2009). Another study reveals that female students are more fearful of crime. The study further believes that they are more likely to be attacked and more likely to adopt self-protective behaviours than their male counterpart (Pryce et al. 2018).

Despite the strengths of the reviewed theories in understanding and explaining the complex subject of fear of crime, some weaknesses have been observed in them. The theories tactically absolve offenders of crimes they committed by transferring the blame to their victims who happened to be 'at the wrong place at the wrong time'. Particularly, lifestyle-exposure theory has been criticised for its failure to distinguish between 'probabilistic and absolute' exposure (see also Garofalo 1987), suggesting that offenders cannot succeed in doing the crime or victimisation if there



were no exposed potential victims. Another area of weakness found in this model is within the contexts of the assumption “that the number of nights spent outside the home, with nonfamily members and particularly, on weekends increases the probability of victimisation” (Walklate 1989, p. 13). However, studies show that various forms of rape and sexual harassment, particularly date and acquaintance rape (which is common among the study population), are more often perpetrated in offices, homes and dormitories (Walklate 1989; Bechhofer and Parrot 1991; Schwartz and Dekeseredy 1997; Donat and While, 2000).

Related empirical studies on crime and the fear it convokes among students abound. For instance, Joe-Akunne et al. (2014) surveyed 507 undergraduates and found that male and female students perceive the campus environment as unsafe. Jonathan (2009) recruited 1800 participants and tried to understand the psychological perspective on vulnerability in the fear of crime. The author established that females are found to worry more frequently than their male counterparts. In another related study, Ukafia (2017) examined the effect of fear of crime at the University of Uyo, Nigeria by recruiting 127 participants and found that students who live in the school hostel responded more on the fear of crime than those who live outside the school hostel. Ehigie and Mobolaji (2014) conducted a similar research by investigating the influence of experienced traumatic event(s) (high/low) and place of residence (on-campus/off-campus) on the level of crime among 281 University students. The results showed that traumatic event(s) had significant relationship with fear of crime and place of resident being a significant independent determinant of fear of crime. This further underscored the importance of deviant place and lifestyle-exposure theories in the current study, as reviewed in the preceding section. Data were also extracted from crime records of the University Security Department, which revealed a prevalence of 19 crimes, such as assault, criminal intimidation, threat to life, theft of handset, among others (see the Results and Discussion Sections for details).

On their part, Braaten et al. (2020) examined the perceptions of campus safety among 697 college students in the United States, and results indicated significant effects of gender, fear of crime and satisfaction with campus security measures on students’ perceptions of campus safety. Females were less likely to perceive that their campus was safe. Tandoğan and Topçu (2018) investigated the fear of crime by sampling the opinions of 413 students. They found that 228 respondents reported they had been a victim of crime in urban areas, while 159 females as against 97 males experienced fear of crime. Chui et al. (2012), while assessing 170 Hong Kong college students majoring in social work, found that women reported a significantly greater fear of crime than men for all offences except for being cheated; fear of rape and sexual assault was found to be a significant predictor of fear of serious crimes for women. Badiora (2018) revealed after obtaining data from students of Federal University of Technology, Akure (FUTA) in Nigeria that room break-in is the most prevalent crime on campus. Maier and DePrince’s (2020) study showed that perception of lighting on campus was the only variable that predicted fear of crime. On a related finding, Sani et al. (2020) recruited 775 students and found that the most reported crimes were robbery and theft, while the least prevalent were sexual offence, domestic violence and fraud.



Other empirical studies on fear of crime, safety and security are found in the scholarly works by Tseloni and Zarafonitou (2008), Chekwa et al. (2013), Igba et al. (2018), Hardyns et al. (2018), Okoye et al. (2019), Pánek et al. (2019), Helfgott and Diaz (2020) and Ceccato and Nalla (2020). Although the importance of these studies are widely acknowledged, none of them considered the measures to adopt in reducing the risk or to avoid being a victim of crime by linking it with prevalent crimes in University settings. Indeed, they did not investigate the role of gender and location of students' residence and their level/year of study, particularly within the volatile North Central of Nigeria in contemporary times of increased crimes and criminality in the country. Based on the prevailing reality, the researchers were motivated to explore socio-demographics and prevalence of crimes as it relates to the fear of crime among undergraduates at NSUK.

## Methods

### Participants

A total of 106 undergraduates of NSUK University in Nigeria were recruited for this study. The students' ages ranged from 15 to 35 years with a mean age of 23.44 years and standard deviation of 3.62. Participants (i.e. undergraduates) were selected from the Faculties of Social Sciences, Natural and Applied Science, Administration and Law, while the students of Faculty of Arts were used for the pilot study, which assisted in drafting result-oriented questionnaire. This was made possible through probability sampling. Here, the simple random sampling was employed to select the four Faculties out of the existing seven by writing out the names on a sheet of paper, folding each and putting them all in a sack. Then, a passerby was called to pick five at random. Four served for the main study while one served for the pilot study.

### Instruments

In order to measure fear of crime, the following scales were employed as scales of measurement: Socio-demographic variables—to measure the socio-demographic variables. The following characteristics were added after the introductory part of the study measure: gender, age, type of housing (location) and level/year of study. However, only gender and location were randomly selected for hypotheses testing.

### Fear of crime

A 25-item preliminary development of Students Opinion Inventory on Fear of Crime (SOIFOC) as developed by Iloma (2015) was utilised. It is divided into two: Sections A and B, while a complementary fear of crime instrument as generated by Engelbrecht (2009) made up the last section designated as C. Section A of the SOIFOC comprises a 10-item Likert scale that rates the level of fear students entertain with regard to the various types of crime committed on campus. Section B is made up of a 15-item Forced Choice format that measures steps people can possibly take



to reduce the risk or chance of being victims of crime. After constructing the items, information obtained from NSUK's Security Department and related journals, the researchers subjected the scale to standardised validation by seeking for experts' opinions to obtain certification for the face and content validity. This was done by approaching some lecturers in the Departments of Psychology, Sociology and Criminology and Security Studies who specialised in psychometrics, victimology, fear of crime and public safety to scrutinise the scale. Thereafter, a construct validity and reliability was conducted. Prior to the use of SOIFOC, the instrument was first pilot-tested on a separate sample ( $N=61$ ) of participants to ensure that the items were clear and conveyed the intended message. The 61 participants were undergraduates of NSUK selected from the Faculty of Arts (who were not part of the main study) and a Cronbach Alpha measure of 0.85 was obtained which clearly shows that the instrument was highly reliable with a good internal consistency.

The second instrument which was a complementary fear of crime instrument as generated by Engelbrecht (2009) was embedded in Section C. It comprises 6 items with a possible score of 6 to 24, having a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4 for each item. One of the items reads: 'How safe did you feel walking and/or driving alone in your neighbourhood during the day?'

## Setting

Nasarawa State University, Keffi (NSUK) served as the research setting. NSUK is relatively a new University in the North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria and is about 40-min drive from/to the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Nigeria, Abuja. NSUK was established under the Nasarawa State Law No 2 of 2001 as passed by the State House of Assembly. It has a total of seven Faculties and a School of Postgraduate Studies. The school is bounded in the North by Kaduna State, in the West by FCT, in the South by Kogi and Benue States and in the East by Taraba and Plateau States.

## Procedure

After obtaining necessary research approvals from the Department of Psychology and NSUK, 120 copies of the questionnaire were on a face to face fashion distributed by hand around the Faculties of Social Sciences, Natural and Applied Sciences, Administration and Law. However, obtaining the population of students at NSUK proved problematic; the researchers were reliably informed that the information is classified. Based on this, the use of estimate response rate for sample size estimation, as proposed by Alshibly (2018), becomes necessary. In most studies, the author added, the sample is determined effectively by the nature of data analysis proposed and the estimate response rate. In the current study where ANOVA is adopted as the statistical analytical tool, a sample size of  $100 + 8k$  is required, where  $k$  is the number of predictors which will give us 116 because there are 2 predictors or independent variables. As in previous research (see Alshibly 2018), we agree that adopting this procedure of reaching sample size guarantees result generalisation. However, in





order to safely recruit up to the required figure, 120 copies of the questionnaire were produced and administered.

The target audience (students) was approached individually and, in some cases, in groups of 4, 5 and 7 at the point of either waiting for a lecture or chatting among themselves. Although letter of consent formed the first/cover page of the questionnaires, the oral free and informed consent of the participants was obtained before instrument was administered. This is in addition to the ethical approval obtained from the University under study. Some students were reluctant to participate, but the majority of them who agreed to participate were properly instructed on the need to be honest in responding to the questionnaires. They were also guided on how to complete the instrument properly. Despite the close monitoring, at the end of the three days exercise, 14 copies of the questionnaire were not properly filled out, which narrowed down the target population from 120 to 106, the latter being the final sample size and representing an acceptable response rate of 83.33%.

## Design and statistics

The study utilised a cross-sectional survey research design and the Two-Way ANOVA was employed as statistical tool to measure the inherent differences between the levels of the two independent variables (gender and location) and to ascertain the interactions between the independent variables on fear of crime using the IBM SPSS Statistics (version 25). Hence, the research design was  $2 \times 2$  factorial design. In other words, this implies: 2, Gender (male vs female)  $\times$  2, Location (school hostel vs off-campus) factorial design.

## Results

Apart from the age demographics, Table 1 indicates a noticeable mean difference between male and female students. On the other hand, a noticeable mean difference was also observed between students who resided in NSUK hostels and those who stayed off-campus hostels. However, this difference was not significant enough to attract scientific attention. Furthermore, mean difference was observed between Year One and Year Four/Five students.

From the results in Table 2, it is evident that preventive measures frequently used by students were more visible in six out of the seven identified preventive measures reported to be very high as possible action or behaviour students take in order to reduce the risk of being a victim of crime in the University environment. The first and third measure, 'Install iron protector on doors/windows' (i.e. burglar proof) and 'Engrave identification numbers on possessions' (i.e. operation/property identification) were categorised under the physical preventive approach. While 'Train in self-defence', 'Avoid lonely areas in school during the night' and 'Avoid lonely areas in school during the day' were categorised under the behavioural preventive measure approach, 'Install tracking device/password on handset' was categorised under the software preventive measure. However, the majority of the participants declined on





**Table 1** Table of frequency distribution, mean and standard deviations of demographic characteristics of student's fear of crime as it applies to age, gender, location and level of study ( $N=106$ )

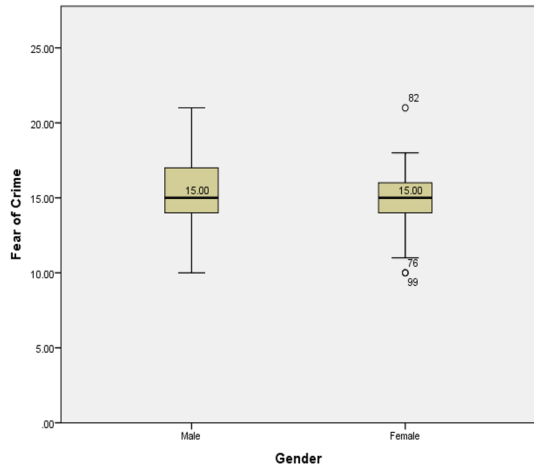
Variables	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD
Age			
Minimum age = 15	106	23.44	3.62
Maximum age = 35			
Gender			
Male	55	32.47	10.43
Female	51	36.53	8.07
Location			
NSUK hostel	70	35.87	8.45
Off-campus	36	31.61	10.96
Level of study			
100 level	21	36.14	9.34
400 level	82	34.13	9.48
500 level	3	30.33	14.50

**Table 2** Table of frequency showing the frequency between fear exhibited by students and the possible action or behaviour in order to reduce the risk of being a victim of crime in the university environment

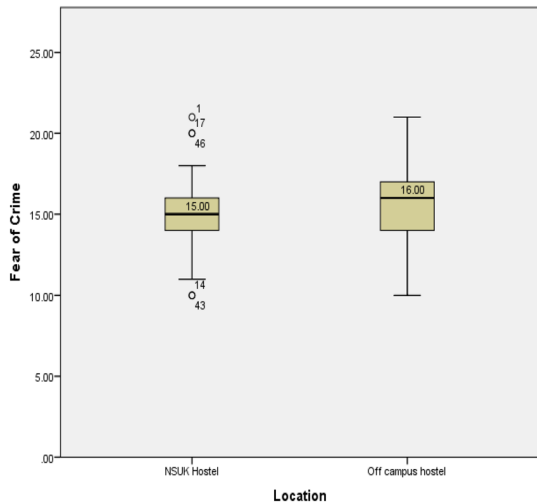
Research items	<i>N</i>	Percentages (%)
Install iron protector on doors/windows		
Yes	88	83.0
No	18	17.0
Install tracking device/password on handset		
Yes	84	79.2
No	21	19.8
Engrave identification numbers on possessions		
Yes	60	56.6
No	46	43.4
Train in self-defence		
Yes	65	61.3
No	41	38.7
Carry a weapon around for self-defence		
Yes	18	16.0
No	88	83.0
Avoid lonely areas in school during the day		
Yes	76	71.0
No	30	28.1
Avoid lonely areas in school during the night		
Yes	87	82.1
No	19	17.0



**Fig. 1** Fear index on male and female participants



**Fig. 2** Fear index on whether participants lives inside or outside campus



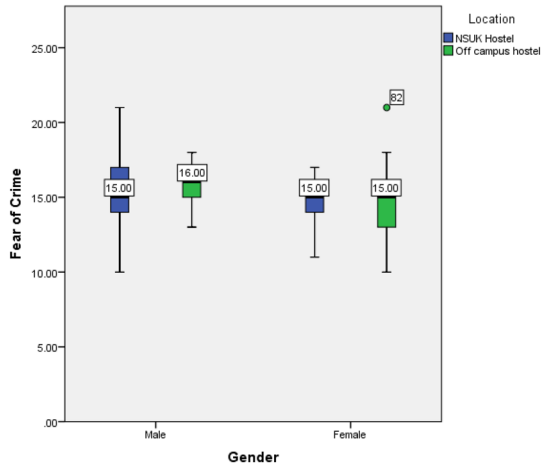
one preventive measure: ‘Carrying a weapon around for self-defence’ as possible action to prevent fear of being a victim of crime.

Results from Fig. 1 indicated a difference between male and female participants on their fear of crime with outliers visible among female participants. Upper outliers were found in the 82nd case, while lower outliers were visible with the 76th and 99th cases. The median for both male and female were 15.00 and fear of crime was less among male participants as made bare by the whiskers of the two categories.

Considering the output in Fig. 2, outliers were prevalent among participants who resided within the campus. The upper outliers include the 1st, 17th and 46th case; while the lower outliers were 14<sup>th</sup> and 43<sup>rd</sup> cases. The box plot clearly revealed that participants who resided outside the University campus reported more fear of crime.



**Fig. 3** Fear index on the interplay between gender and location



**Table 3** Table of 2-Way ANOVA depicting the influence of gender and location of residence on fear of crime among undergraduates of NSUK

Source	SOS	df	MS	F	Sig	Decision
Gender (A)	30.45	1	30.45	0.36	<0.05	Retained
Location (B)	256.44	1	256.44	0.16	>0.05	Rejected
A * B	71.53	1	71.53	0.84	>0.05	
Error	8187.07	96	85.28			
Total	135,177.00	106				

$R^2 = .144$  (Adjusted  $R^2 = .064$ )

The median for NSUK hostel were 15.00 and participants who reside outside the campus were 16.00.

In Fig. 3, an intersection box plot was conducted and the result showed that males who resided in NSUK hostel reported less fear of crime as against their counterparts who resided outside the campus. Similarly, female who reside in NSUK hostel reported less fear of crime as against their counterparts who resided outside the campus. Only one outlier (i.e. 82nd case) was found in this intersection for female participants who resided outside the school campus. Additional descriptive analysis was carried out to determine the fear levels of participants and result indicated that 48(45.3%) of the participants leaned towards high fear of crime while 58(54.7%) reported low fear of crime.

**Hypothesis one**

From Table 3, the first hypothesis which states that a significant difference will exist between male and female students on fear of crime was retained,  $F(1, 106) = 0.36$ ,  $P < 0.05$  level of significance. Females involved scored (Mean = 36.53) higher than male students (Mean = 32.47).



## Hypothesis two

The second hypothesis which states that students who live outside the school hostels will show higher fear of crime than those who live in the school hostels was discarded at  $F(1, 106) = 0.16, P > 0.05$  level of significance. Finally, no significant interaction existed between the predictor variables (gender and location of students' residence) on fear of crime,  $F(1, 106) = 0.84, P > 0.05$ . However, the correlation coefficient square ( $R^2$ ) indicated that 14.4% of the variance in fear of crime was as a result of the combined influence between gender and location of students' residence which can explain the mean difference observed in the levels of location from the earlier as presented in Table 1.

Compiled crime records at NSUK from 2010–2015 as obtained from the Chief Security Department in 2015 revealed prevalence of 19 crimes with highest figures beginning from 'assault' (26 cases), 'criminal intimidation' (17 cases), 'threat to life' (16 cases) and 'theft of handset' (15 cases). Others are 'theft of motorbike' which has 12 cases and 'cheating (rent and money)' which had 11 cases, among others (Table 4).

**Table 4** Compiled crime records and prevalence of crime from 2010 to 2015 as obtained from the Security Department, Nasarawa State University, Keffi (2015)

Type of crimes	Prevalence
Assault	26 cases
Criminal intimidation	17 cases
Threat to life	16 cases
Theft of handset	15 cases
Theft of bike	12 cases
Cheating (rent and money)	11 cases
Breach of trust	7 cases
Criminal breach of trust	6 cases
Defamation of character	5 cases
Conspiracy/criminal conspiracy	5 cases
Burglary/house breaking	5 cases
Examination malpractice	4 cases
Theft of laptop	4 cases
Robbery	4 cases
Inciting disturbance and disrupting public peace	3 cases
Certificate forgery	2 cases
Rape and attempted rape	2 cases
Possession of indian hemp	2 cases
Cultist activities	2 cases

Source Chief Security Department, Nasarawa State University, Keffi (2015)



## Discussion

The first hypothesis which stated that there will be a significant difference between male and female students on fear of crime was confirmed. This means that gender is a significant factor that should be considered in explaining fear of crime. The current study went further to show that female students reported more fear of crime and perceived the campus as more unsafe than male students. This finding is in agreement with Jonathan (2009) and Joe-Akunne et al. (2014) who establish that male and females perceive the campus environment as insecure, though females worry more on this than males, on the average. The findings also correspond with the study of Helfgott and Diaz (2020) and Braaten et al. (2020). The reason is that males are more prone to joining violent groups such as campus secret cults and engage in self-defeating behaviour than females who are rather more fearful of physical and sexual harms.

Admittedly, males are likely to join violent organisations like campus/street secret cults. As such, they knew the intricacies and implications of cultism, as well as how to manoeuvre the hard ways and associated obstacles, which make them less fearful compared to 'jewmen/juumen' (generic name given to non-cult members by cultists in Nigeria) (see also Nnam 2014; Nnam et al. 2021), who are mainly females. Information from the World Health Organisation (WHO) revealed that there is a higher prevalence of such conduct disorders as aggressive and antisocial behaviours among boys than in girls (WHO, 2002). Furthermore, an intersection boxplot was conducted and the result showed that male students who reside in NSUK hostels reported less fear of crime, as against their counterparts who reside outside the campus. Similarly, female students who reside in NSUK hostel reported less fear of crime, as against their counterparts who reside outside the campus. What this means is that males only showed more fear of crime when they reside outside the University premises than when they reside within the campus (school hostels), and the same result was also found among the female participants (see the Figures for details).

The second hypothesis which states that students who live outside the school hostels will exhibit high fear of crime than those who live in the school hostels was not retained. This finding is in consonance with the predictions of lifestyle-exposure theories of victimisation developed by Hindelang et al. (1978). The implication is that wherever students reside (campus hostel or off-campus) makes little difference on their fear of crime or the probability of them being victimised. This could best be understood in the further analysis conducted with regard to the location variable using the boxplot (for details, Figs. 2 and 3). The result revealed that participants who resides outside the campus reported more fear of crime than those who live in the University hostel. Therefore, people's routine activities may naturally bring them into contact with criminals and/or they increase the risk of criminal victimisation. Time spent in one's home generally decreases victim risk, while time spent in public settings increases risk. The findings are in tandem with Ukafia's (2017), who found a significant difference between students who live in school hostels and students who reside outside the school hostels regarding fear of crime. These were also in agreement with the findings of Ehigie and Mobolaji (2014).



From the data collected at the School Security Department/Unit, it was observed that, in the last 16–17 years when NSUK began to graduate its first set of students, the rate of crime began to increase, resulting from increase in the population of students without corresponding security measures in place to effectively address the situation and guarantee public safety. In addition to this, cultism particularly has been rearing its ugly head in the University, making it difficult to differentiate cult activities from common criminal activities. Campus secret cult members have been known to operate with deadly weapons such as cutlass, knives, guns, axe, broken bottles and even raw acid is poured on their victims in some rare cases and hence increasing the fear of crime among students (for similar results, see Ajayi et al. 2010; Amaele 2013; Nnam 2014; Nnam et al. 2021). They carry out their activities most times under the influence of psychoactive substances. Generally, the existence of crime in schools has become both a universal phenomenon in Nigeria and a problem that has caused serious disruptions in the school system, as well as adversely affected learning processes and public safety.

The result of this study signals that gender is a major factor to deal with in measuring or investigating the problem of fear of crime, particularly among students. From this study, fear levels of the participants stood at 45.3% (i.e. 1 in every 2 student exhibits fear of crime); hence, students reported fear of crime and are prepared to take various steps to reduce the risk of being a victim of crime. Installation of burglar proofs appeared to be the highest preventive measure reported by the students. The study, therefore, reiterates that female students reported more fear of crime than their male counterparts. And students who lived in the school hostels and those who lived off-campus hostels experienced similar level of fear of crime. These results generally show that fear of crime in the University of study is on the increase and unabated. Nonetheless, from some preventive/security measures that students responded to, it is evident that the following measures: ‘Install iron protector on doors/windows’, followed by ‘avoid lonely areas in school during the night’ are of paramount important to guarantee public safety.

Efforts were made to establish a possible preventive and control strategies, where installation of tracking device/password on handset and avoiding lonely areas in school were highly recommended respectively by the respondents. This was followed by the idea of training students in self-defence tactics and engraving identification numbers on possessions. These were reported by students as possible action to take in order to reduce the risk of victimisation and fear of crime in the University environment. The surprising and a bit troubling finding is that, whereas as high as 61.3% of the participants reported to ‘train in self-defence’, a majority (83%) declined on one measure: ‘carrying a weapon (firearms precisely) around for self-defence’ as possible action to reduce fear of crime. The reason for the decline is not farfetched: Weapon carrying is a felonious crime in Nigeria.

## Conclusion

The findings informed the conclusion. This study investigated 106 undergraduates’ responses to fear of crime and the approach to prevent and control being a victim, while clarifying the empirical influence of gender and location of respondents at



NSUK which is located in the North Central of Nigeria. By employing descriptive and 2-way ANOVA statistics, findings revealed that gender appeared to be a major factor to deal with in measuring or assessing fear of crime amongst students. More students reported fear of crime and were prepared to engage in different preventive and control measures to reduce the risk of criminal victimisation (see Tables 2 and 3 for details). Descriptive findings as regards mean scores indicated that 'newbies' (first year students) were less fearful of being victims of crime than students who have spent four years and above in the University. In view of the findings, conclusion and policy implications focused on the need for students to be better informed on how to prevent and control their fear of crime and enlighten them on proactive means of target hardening and safe self-defence in events of attack or victimisation while on campus and even beyond.

Furthermore, the conclusion is reached that behavioural action of training in self-defence did not tally with the behavioural outcome of carrying a weapon around the campus for self-defence. The 'weapon' (firearms) could be the reason for this decline, as that may implicate the students when apprehended, and the students may appear to be the perpetrator rather than the victim. In sum, more behavioural preventive actions were reported by students than physical and software preventive approaches. Examples of the former include avoiding lonely areas in school at night and during the day and training the students in self-defence tactics, while the latter entail installing burglar proof (iron protector) on doors/windows and engraving identification numbers on possessions. This was followed by software approaches such as installing tracking device or password on mobile phones.

Seeing that the revealed prevalences of 19 crimes were assault (26 cases), criminal intimidation (17 cases), threat to life (16 cases) and theft of handset (15 cases), more dynamic and eclectic preventive approaches that are anchored in target hardening, as highlighted in the results and discussion of findings, are advocated. Adopting the proposed interventions would go a long way in tackling crime in the Nigerian University system and even beyond. This conclusion was reached due to the fact that a clear and direct link has been established between measures to reduce the risk of victimisation and the reported crimes already committed in the study area. In other words, the crimes reported explained the possible measures indicated by students to adopting safeguarding themselves from being victims.

### **Implications for policy planners and recommendations**

Understanding the phenomenon of fear of crime, particularly in relation to socio-demographic variables, is an important aspect of political, psychological, sociological and criminological studies. It is, therefore, incomplete to discuss the subject without taking into consideration its implications for security and harm reduction. Gaining scientific knowledge about the fear of crime tends to facilitate plans that would help potential victims and stakeholders to prevent and control this phenomenon or outright commission of crime. When the public are exposed to the hidden methods of approach and modus operandi of violent offenders and criminal victimisers, as unravelled in this study (see the Results Section for details), their level





of fear of crime is not only reduced, but also are better informed on how to guard against being victimised.

From the findings, more insights into the predictors and risk factors of fear of crime have been gained, which are vital components that direct institutional policies and programmes on harm reduction and public safety. Thus, understanding the core of the subject, especially in relation to socio-demographic factors, is imperative for policy design aimed at yielding vital information for both potential victims of violent crimes and the criminal justice system, particularly law enforcement agents. Arising from this study is the need to establish a robust and sustained collaborative policing and security network between University authorities, informal social control agencies in the host communities and formal policing institutions in Nigeria. Particularly, the study outcomes are capable of educating the students on more proper and advantageous personal means of self-defence and, thus, provide them with better protective measures in events of abuse and attack on their person and property within and outside the campus.

The study recommends that Nasarawa State University's Security Department personnel, and by extension, other Universities in Nigeria be enlightened on-campus-community fear of crime and perceived risk of victimisation. They should be vigilant at all times, particularly at night, to monitor students' activities around odd locations within the campus. Other recommendations include the adoption of an eclectic preventive approach (situational crime prevention strategies) in tackling the crime problem and its fear in the University, avoiding lonely areas in school during the night, training in self-defence, installing burglar proofs, avoiding lonely areas in school during the day, engraving identification numbers or names on possessions and installing tracking device or password on mobile phones.

The study further recommends mandatory sensitisation sessions on proper ways of coping with fear and devising preventive strategies for self-protection and crime prevention, especially during students' first year entrance orientation programmes and other workshops in the course of their studies. Female students were found to be more prone to violent attacks and, therefore, should be given special training in self-defence such as using pepper sprays in the events of attack. The study also recommends that the University authorities should provide adequate and affordable hostels within the campus in order to tackle the issue of out-of-campus-residence pattern which is a strong predictor of fear of crime. Similarly, uninterrupted electricity supply and installation of bright security lights and advanced electronic surveillance gadgets like closed circuit television be should installed in strategic locations of the campus to help reduce the risk of crime incidence and fear of it, especially at night hours. The University security personnel should engage in constant patrol of hot-spots and mount beat.

### **Limitations and suggestions for future studies**

Despite the numerous findings and their importance, the study is limited in its geographical structure in terms of participants' selection and location. That is, NSUK may not be a good representation of the students' population in the Northern Nigeria



or in the country generally. Another limitation of this study was that responses were not obtained from parents, lecturers and other important persons in the life of students. In view of this, one cannot adequately guarantee that the students whose level of fear of crime was high or low had no confounding interactional effect with some significant persons in their lives. For this reason, future research should be aimed at replicating this study in other regions of the country for stronger generalisation; include unreported crimes; and sample other individuals that are related to students such as lecturers and parents. Finally, further studies should include other socio-demographic factors such as age, ethnic origin, religion and personal personality factors for broad-based understanding and explaining of fear of crime in an undergraduate population.

**Data availability** All data, models or codes that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Items include the raw data of the study obtained from the fieldwork and stored in IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Software file.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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