

Police Methods

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“Section 3.4: Fear of Crime,” authored by Gary Cordner, presents a nuanced perspective on the psychological aspects of police work, particularly focusing on the management of public fear. This section is vital for students in policing as it underscores that effective policing transcends crime prevention to significantly include alleviating public fear and enhancing perceptions of safety.

The text delves into the profound impact fear of crime has on society. It illustrates how fear influences a wide range of societal behaviors, from dictating where people choose to live and shop to shaping the political landscape. Students are encouraged to understand that fear, while subjective, has tangible effects on the dynamics of communities.

A critical part of the narrative is the discussion of various police strategies aimed at addressing community fear. The guide emphasizes the importance of data in understanding fear within communities, advocating for techniques like surveys and environmental audits to identify fear patterns. It then moves to the concept of implementing specific responses to these identified sources of fear. These strategies range from infrastructural improvements, like enhancing street lighting, to more community-centered approaches.

The text also discusses the significance of institutionalizing fear reduction into the police mission and operational strategies. This includes tracking fear levels and integrating them into command accountability systems. Furthermore, the section highlights the role of community and personalized policing methods, such as foot patrols, in reducing fear. These methods are shown to be effective in building trust and reassurance within communities.

The narrative concludes with a focus on a targeted, problem-oriented approach to fear reduction, deemed more effective than broad, unfocused strategies. This involves directly addressing specific causes of fear in a community. For students preparing for careers in law enforcement, this section is crucial as it broadens the scope of police work beyond traditional crime-fighting roles. It underscores the multidimensional role of policing in fostering community well-being and trust-building. Students are guided to appreciate the importance of managing public perception and fear, key to fostering a safer and more trusting community environment.

Reducing Fear of Crime: Strategies for Police

Fear of crime has a huge impact on American society. Individuals often choose where to live, shop, and socialize based on their perceptions of the relative safety of different cities, towns, and neighborhoods. Parents allow their kids to play in the park or walk to school if they think it

would be safe. Neighborhoods and entire cities have gone into spirals of decline because fear of crime motivated those residents and businesses who could afford to move, to do so. Fear of crime routinely drives local politics, occasionally influences national elections, and has been the catalyst for vastly increased federal crime-control efforts since the 1960s. Concern about heightened fear of crime in the 1980s and 1990s helped spur the development of community policing. Since the 1990s, the actual level of crime has fallen dramatically, but fear of crime has not seemed to recede as quickly or as substantially.

This Guide argues in favor of including fear reduction (making people feel safer) among the explicit components of the modern police mission. It is based on the following interrelated assumptions:

- Fear matters—it negatively affects individuals and communities.
- Fear is real—while it is just a feeling, fear affects behavior, politics, economics, and social life.
- Admittedly, fear is not as important as crime—the harm caused by fear should not be equated with the tangible and often tragic harm caused by violent crime or significant property crime.
- But fear is very important—while making people safe is perhaps the most important purpose of government, making them feel safe is nearly as important because fear has such negative ramifications for politics, economics, and social life.
- Reducing fear is and should be a police responsibility—the important government purpose of making people feel safe falls to the police logically and of necessity.
- Police can reduce fear—promising fear-reduction strategies and practices have been developed and tested in the past 30 years.
- Reducing fear should be an explicit police priority—unless police specifically target fear of crime, their attention tends to get distracted toward other issues, and fear reduction efforts are neglected.
- Fear-reduction efforts should be targeted—the preponderance of the evidence on police effectiveness in general is that more targeted strategies work best. This general principle applies to the specific challenge of reducing fear of crime

This Guide briefly reviews information about the phenomenon of fear of crime as well as historical and contemporary police efforts to reduce fear. The main focus, however, is on tools and techniques that police can use to target and reduce fear of crime, and institutionalize fear reduction within their agencies. Some promising practices and best practices have been identified—these are strategies and programs that have been implemented and that have been tested and shown to be effective.

Targeting Fear. Police departments need to begin measuring and analyzing fear of crime more systematically. During the past few decades, police have learned that they need crime analysis to target crime—the same goes for fear of crime. This often requires both communitywide and neighborhood-level surveys, but those are not the only methods for learning about fear. Community meetings, key individuals, environmental audits, and routine

public contacts can also serve as very useful sources to learn about the concerns and worries of community residents. Once police have some information about fear of crime in the community, they can use it to identify demographic groups that are most affected, neighborhoods where fear is the highest, and other trends and patterns. Police can also identify anomalies, such as neighborhoods where crime is low but fear is high. Armed with data and analysis about fear of crime, police can begin to focus and target their attention, just as they do with crime itself.

Reducing Fear. Once fear problems are identified and understood, the key is to apply responses tailored to those problems. If the source of a neighborhood's fear is poor street lighting, a community newsletter is not going to fix it. If the cause of fear is aggressive panhandlers in a shopping district, then showing homeowners how to put better locks on their doors will not work. This Guide strongly recommends tailored responses—specific to the nature and causes of fear of crime as revealed through information and analysis. In conjunction with this kind of problem solving, implementing more personalized policing and encouraging more community engagement are recommended, since both have generally been associated with making the public feel safer. Then there is one more crucial ingredient, feedback. People will not become less fearful unless they know that the sources of their fear have been addressed. Fear is based on perception, so police intent on reducing fear have to follow through and make sure that the public sees, hears about, or otherwise recognizes when problems have been fixed, conditions improved, etc. This is so important that police departments should also begin thinking more about the larger function of strategic communication. Police need to become more sophisticated purveyors of reassurance as an antidote to the inevitable messages of mayhem and fear that predominate in politics and the media.

Institutionalizing Fear Reduction. The final section of this Guide considers how fear reduction might be more firmly cemented into the ongoing operations of police agencies. One key step is to formally acknowledge that fear reduction is part of the mission and bottom line of policing. Another is to permanently implement systems for measuring and tracking fear of crime so that lack of data cannot be an excuse for lack of targeting. Besides, in policing “what you measure is what you get.” Along this line, fear reduction should be built into CompStat like systems of command accountability—area commanders should know that making their residents feel safer is one of their obligations, and one of the criteria upon which their performance will be judged. The same goes for beat-level sergeants and officers—if they know that they will be held accountable for addressing fear of crime in their neighborhoods, they will more likely take it seriously. Moreover, this is a very reasonable aspect of accountability since many fear problems are neighborhood-based, and we know from 25 years of broken windows and community policing that neighborhood residents really appreciate it when beat officers target disorder, incivilities, and other causes of neighborhood anxiety and fear.

Fear of crime is a different animal from crime, disorder, or traffic, but it is not really all that esoteric. This Guide will help police understand what fear of crime is, why it matters, and why it

should be an important target of police attention. The Guide provides a number of tools and techniques that should enable any police department to successfully add fear reduction to its operational strategy and organizational bottom line.

Police Strategies for Reducing Fear

How can police reduce fear of crime? This Guide ultimately recommends a targeted problem-oriented approach as the most effective strategy for fear reduction. Such a strategy, though, has to proceed hand-in-hand with a community oriented policing philosophy, which in turn has to rest on a solid foundation of professional policing principles and practices. These approaches to modern policing have been evolving during the past 50 years and are now seen as completely complementary.

The traditional view that reducing crime leads to reduced fear of crime has already been discussed. There is certainly a baseline connection between the amount of crime and the level of fear of crime that should not be discounted. However, it has frequently been observed that rises and falls in crime from year to year are not closely matched by rises and falls in fear of crime—if crime is already falling yet fear of crime is not, something else is needed. Similarly, some individuals and groups with rather high levels of fear of crime already have low levels of crime victimization—if these people are already safe but still fearful, then something else is needed. In these and other scenarios, reducing crime does not seem like a sufficient approach to reducing fear. Something else is needed.

As of the 1970s, the dominant approach to policing was the professional model, with its emphasis on training, policies, supervision, and technology as means of establishing reliable, dependable, lawful, and efficient policing. Strategically, professional policing relied on motorized patrol, rapid response, and follow-up investigation of reported crimes. Much to everyone's surprise, key studies in the 1970s and 1980s determined that these strategies were not very productive. The Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment found that varying the level of motorized patrol did not affect crime or public perceptions. The Police Executive Research Forum study of response times in three cities determined that quick response rarely made any difference in catching offenders or satisfying citizens. The Rand Corporation study of criminal investigation found that 80 percent of reported crimes are never solved (this is still true more than 30 years later) and that detectives make only limited contributions to crime solving.

The only one of these studies that specifically addressed fear of crime was the preventive patrol experiment. Varying the levels of motorized patrol in Kansas City between zero patrol units per beat to 2–3 patrol units per beat for a year had no impact on the public's fear of crime. Why not? Most important, the public did not notice the varying levels of patrol (this includes the residents of five beats in which preventive patrol was eliminated for an entire year). Also, the level of crime was unaffected. Thus, the citizens of Kansas City were not aware of any changes in how they were policed and did not experience any differences in actual victimization, no surprise, then, that their fear of crime was unchanged.

In the aftermath of these key studies in the 1970s and 1980s a conventional wisdom developed that “nothing worked” in policing. This conventional wisdom, while exaggerated, spurred an era of experimentation and evaluation in policing that helps account for the subsequent development and spread of community policing and problem-oriented policing. With respect to fear reduction, it is important to note (and somewhat surprising) that no major studies have specifically tested whether rapid police response or solving crimes helps reduce fear. Absent much solid scientific evidence, one could conjecture as follows:

- Because most citizens already get a quick police response whenever a serious event occurs, small improvements in response time are unlikely to have much impact on fear of crime. Making police response more rapid is likely to reduce fear of crime only in those jurisdictions where response is currently perceived as slow.
- Because many citizens are (1) unaware of the low clearance rate for reported crimes and (2) often report crimes only for insurance purposes (not expecting a full-scale investigation), small improvements in crime solving are not likely to have much of an impact on fear of crime. Better crime solving is likely to reduce fear of crime only in those jurisdictions where there is currently a widespread perception that “crime pays” and that offenders are rarely held accountable for their misdeeds.
- Similarly, increased police patrol and/or police visibility is likely to reduce fear of crime only in those neighborhoods and jurisdictions where there is currently a widespread perception that police are never available and never around when something bad happens. Moreover, sudden increases in police visibility can actually increase fear of crime if citizens interpret the enhanced police presence as evidence that the area is more dangerous than they realized.

It seems most useful to regard professional policing as a necessary but not sufficient strategy for reducing fear of crime. If the police are not distributed and visible, if they do not respond quickly to serious incidents and investigate them thoroughly, then the public’s fear of crime may grow. However, once these baseline professional conditions are established, merely ratcheting them up with more visibility, faster response, and more intensive investigations does not produce added dividends for fear reduction. Something else is needed.

Crime Prevention

Within the realm of police strategies, crime prevention tends to describe activities performed by specialists, as opposed to the more general strategy of preventive patrol discussed above. Some crime prevention techniques are aimed at engaging the community—these will be covered in the next section on community policing. Here the focus is on so-called target hardening measures that largely aim to change the physical environment to make it more difficult to commit crimes.

Logically, crime prevention measures are designed to prevent crime—whether they also reduce fear of crime is an important question without too many answers. It is fairly clear that fear of crime motivates citizens to employ such crime prevention measures as locks, alarms,

CCTV, dogs, and guns, but whether these measures then make people feel safer is in doubt. The limited available evidence is mixed, with some indication that an overzealous reliance on target hardening measures helps create a “fortress mentality” that actually increases one’s fear of crime rather than decreasing it and that crime prevention publicity campaigns can heighten anxiety. These boomerang effects might be exacerbated by the security industry in its zeal to advertise and sell locks, alarms, and associated services.

One crime prevention measure that does seem to have the capacity to reduce crime as well as fear of crime is improved street lighting. Studies suggest that street lighting can improve women’s perceptions of safety at night, and generally that smart use of street lighting can reduce fear of crime and increase pedestrian use of public spaces after dark. Inasmuch as “fear of the dark” is probably a fundamental and even primal component of many people’s fear of crime, it makes sense that effective lighting might have a reassuring effect. Within the context of CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design), significant expertise about lighting has been developed related to degree of illumination, pathways of light, and other technical details that can be used to maximize the effectiveness of lighting without going so far as turning nighttime into daytime.

Community Policing

Another approach to crime prevention that became popular in the 1970s was community crime prevention. The underlying premise of community crime prevention is to strengthen communities, not just individual homes, primarily by encouraging neighbors to watch out for each other through Neighborhood Watch, Citizen Patrol, and related programs. There is plenty of evidence that communities that enjoy more neighborliness, social cohesion, social capital, and collective efficacy also experience less fear of crime. Unfortunately, the limited evidence that is available suggests that participation in neighborhood watch programs often makes people more sensitive to the risks associated with crime in their communities, and thus more fearful.

Community crime prevention became more effective, though, when linked with community policing. The development of community policing is a complicated story and one that is still unfolding. For our purposes in this Guide, a few key ingredients are most important, and the first is police officers on foot patrol. This patrolling method had been greatly reduced in most police departments by the end of the 1970s, as the focus of policing had shifted to rapid response, motorized patrol coverage of large areas, and enforcement of traffic laws. However, as described above, research revealed that motorized patrol and rapid response were not really very effective.

In the early 1980s, two studies of foot patrol had a major impact on strategic police thinking. In Newark, New Jersey, an experiment was conducted that involved adding foot patrols in some neighborhoods and eliminating it in others. Just as in Kansas City when variations in the level of motorized patrol were tested, there was no impact on crime. Unlike Kansas City, though, neighborhood residents in Newark noticed the fluctuations in levels of foot patrol, and when

they had foot patrol, they felt safer. A study in Flint, Michigan, had similar results. This clear-cut positive effect of foot patrol on fear of crime grabbed the attention of police strategists, in part because the earlier studies of motorized patrol and rapid response had such discouraging results.

In the space of a few years, renewed interest in foot patrol expanded into the widespread adoption of community policing. Many police agencies saw that foot patrol would be of limited utility for them (because of low population density, for example) but sought other ways of capturing some of the value of foot patrol. This led to bicycle patrol, police storefronts and mini-stations, beat teams, specialized community policing officers, and a host of other alternatives to routine motorized patrol. Among the essential components of community policing, increased police-citizen contact, more personalized policing, more opportunities for community input, more information sharing between police and the public, police-community partnerships, and systematic multiagency collaboration in support of community safety can all be traced to notions about how foot patrol makes the residents of a neighborhood feel safer.

The available evidence generally supports the view that community policing (not just foot patrol) makes people feel safer. One review found that while increased police presence reduced fear of crime in 62 percent of 50 studies, integrated proactive and community oriented strategies had an even higher likelihood of reducing fear (74 percent). Increased police-public contact, whether through foot patrol, police visits to homes and stores, or more formal meetings and other organizing efforts, seems to reduce fear of crime directly, or else indirectly through the mechanism of enhancing public opinion toward the police. When community policing efforts become too diffuse and unfocused, however, their effects on fear of crime and other outcomes tend to diminish.

Problem-Oriented Policing

What has been largely missing in the preceding discussion, however, was any sense of targeting. This is important because the strongest evidence about police effectiveness in general favors targeting more than anything else, that is, policing focused on specific places, behaviors, and people. Following this logic as it applies to reducing crime and disorder, we might hypothesize that police efforts aimed at reducing fear of crime would be most successful when they are targeted.

In this respect, a problem-oriented approach to fear reduction might have even greater potential than broad-based community policing or Broken Windows. Community policing tends to be expansive and diffuse rather than focused, and it is aimed principally (although not exclusively) at enhancing police-community relations and the public's trust and confidence in the police. Broken Windows is directed toward minor crime, disorder, incivilities, and similar kinds of incidents and conditions. It is quite a testament to both of these strategies that they have been relatively successful at reducing fear of crime, inasmuch as neither is specifically or primarily targeted at fear reduction.

Addressing fear of crime in this way is not a theoretical proposition. When the Baltimore County Police Department took a problem-oriented approach to fear reduction in the 1980s, it was measurably more successful than previous efforts using saturation patrol and traditional crime prevention techniques. A problem-oriented approach to school crime and disorder in Charlotte, North Carolina, led to decreased fear of crime among students and teachers. The national evaluation of Reassurance Policing in the United Kingdom, focusing on the particular problem of juvenile nuisances for comparison purposes between sample agencies, concluded that “across the trial sites there appeared to be a consistent pattern. Those sites that showed a significant positive change in public perceptions of juvenile nuisance were the same sites that appeared to have implemented problem solving well.” Several systematic evaluations of problem-oriented policing targeted at street-level drug markets have documented reductions in fear of crime.

Personalized Policing

One of the basic elements of community policing is decentralization, especially geographic decentralization. Police agencies try to assign officers more permanently to neighborhoods and beats, establish geographic accountability for supervisors and commanders, and generally increase the degree of familiarity between residents and their police. One desired outcome of these measures is more personalized policing—officers who know the people who live in their beats and feel a degree of responsibility for protecting them, residents who recognize their regular beat officers, and residents who can identify the sergeant, lieutenant, or captain who oversees policing in their neighborhood. Ideally, police-citizen interactions become more personal and less bureaucratic, increasing the public’s sense that the police care about them and can be counted on to protect the community.

Personalized policing is believed to be part of the reason why foot patrol makes people feel safer. Officers on foot seem more approachable, are more likely to have casual interactions with citizens, and are more individually identifiable than police officers in cars. As one citizen explains in the National Institute of Justice “Foot Patrol” video in the Crime File series, foot patrol officers create a “felt presence.” Another observation on the same video is that, from the public’s perspective, when they see foot patrol officers, they assume that the officers are there for them (for the neighborhood), not just on their way somewhere else, which is what they often assume when they see a passing patrol car.

To be effective in reducing fear of crime, personalized policing still requires policing. That is, if neighborhood residents get to know their beat officer, but that officer does not make any effort to address crime and disorder in the neighborhood, does not follow up on citizen complaints, does not engage in any reassurance efforts, and does not solve neighborhood problems, it is unlikely that the residents will feel safer. It seems most likely that personalized policing has a small measure of reassurance value in its own right, but most of its success is secondary, that is, officers come to understand the concerns of citizens, and then if they address those concerns, the public feels safer. In other words, personalized policing is an important ingredient in the recipe for fear reduction, but it is not the whole recipe.

