

Crime Perception and Reality:

Public Perceptions of the Risk of Criminal Victimization in Australia

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INTRODUCTION

Australians appear to be increasingly concerned about crime. A December 1994 survey conducted for the Bulletin Magazine by AGB McNair asked a representative sample of 1,293 electors across Australia to rank 12 issues of 'real concern' ranging from 'violence/crimes' and 'interest rates' through to 'industrial disputes' in order of perceived importance. Concern about 'violence/crimes' was ranked by 70 per cent of respondents as an issue of 'real concern'. This was the highest level of endorsement given by respondents to any issue and represented a significant increase in the level of endorsement of 'violence/crimes' as an issue compared with the results of earlier identical surveys conducted in 1986 and 1992. In 1986 'violence/crimes' was ranked as an issue of 'real concern' by 51 per cent of respondents while the corresponding figure for 1992 was 65 per cent.

Despite the consistency with which crime appears in public opinion surveys as an issue of general public concern, paradoxically, most people do not express great concern about crime in their neighbourhood. The 1995 Crime and Safety survey, conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in New South Wales (NSW), provided a representative sample of approximately 12,900 residents with a list of crime and public nuisance issues. Each respondent was asked to state (a) whether any of the issues was perceived to be a problem in their neighbourhood and (b) if so, which of the issues was perceived to be the main problem. Surprisingly, nearly half (46 per cent) the respondents stated that there were no crime or public nuisance problems in their neighbourhood.¹

Moreover, those who said they had a problem were most likely to cite 'housebreaking/burglaries/theft from homes' or 'dangerous/noisy driving' as their principal concern. Less than one per cent of respondents nominated violence as the main issue of concern in their neighbourhood. Similar results have been obtained in earlier ABS household crime surveys.

The complexity of public opinion on crime is further evidenced in the fact that, although concern about crime ranks more highly than any other issue of general public concern, spending on crime is not at the top of the list of preferred Government spending priorities. When asked to identify where State Governments should be spending money, the community appears to perceive spending on law and order as a lower priority than spending on health and education. An August 1994 nationwide poll conducted for the Sydney Morning Herald by AGB McNair asked respondents 'If you were the State Treasurer, and had to decide where money would go, which of the following would you favour most: would you spend it on more police; smaller class sizes; shorter waiting lists for elective surgery; more public transport; more spending on roads?' Thirty-nine per cent of respondents said they favoured spending on shorter elective surgery waiting lists. Twenty-four per cent favoured smaller class sizes. Nineteen per cent favoured more police.

One way of interpreting these results is to suppose that, while most people regard crime and violence as an issue of concern, they do not generally regard themselves as greatly at risk of becoming crime victims. This is not as implausible as it might seem. Studies by Furstenberg (1971) and Lotz (1979)

suggest there may be little correlation between fear of and concern about crime. Public concern about crime may be driven more by media representations of it than by actual or anticipated personal experience. The low priority assigned to spending on law and order, relative to health and education, on this account, may just reflect the fact that these areas directly affect many more people than does crime. This is a difficult hypothesis to test using existing data because, although a good deal of research has been conducted both within Australia and overseas on public concern about or fear of crime, very little work has been conducted on the perceived risks of criminal victimisation. In Australia the only published studies on the subject appear to be those by Indermaur (1990) and the Queensland Criminal Justice Commission (1994).

Indermaur asked a random sample of 410 Perth (Western Australia) residents to estimate the likelihood (out of 100) that they would have some of their property stolen in the next 12 months or become the victim of a violent crime. He then compared the opinion poll results with actual risks of property and violent crime victimisation as estimated from 1983 ABS national crime victim survey data. Indermaur found that members of his sample often greatly exaggerated the risks of becoming a victim of crime. Forty-five per cent of respondents, for example, considered the risk of having something stolen from them over the next twelve months was between 50 per cent and 100 per cent. In general, however, they were less inaccurate in their judgments of the risks associated with violent crime than with those associated with property crime. Twenty-nine per cent of respondents

were classed as 'accurate' in their assessment of the risks associated with property crime whereas 52 per cent of respondents were classed as 'accurate' in their assessment of the risks associated with violent crime.

The Queensland Criminal Justice Commission report contains data on the perceived risk of crime drawn from a 1991 Queensland crime victim survey of over 6,000 randomly chosen Queensland residents. That survey asked respondents (among other things) to say whether the likelihood over the next twelve months of having their home broken into, of being attacked or robbed, or of being sexually assaulted was 'very likely', 'fairly likely', 'not very likely' or 'not at all likely'. As might be expected, respondents were more likely to endorse 'home broken into' as 'very' or 'fairly' likely than they were to endorse 'attacked or robbed' or 'sexually assaulted' in similar terms. For our purposes, however, the more interesting finding is that a high proportion of respondents regarded a home break-in as 'very' or 'fairly' likely over the next twelve months (over 30% of men and approximately 30% of women) and a high proportion regarded their risks of assault as 'very' or 'fairly' likely (nearly 20% of men and women).

Both Indermaur's results and those of the Queensland Criminal Justice Commission report suggest that the general public may be inclined to overestimate the risks of criminal victimisation. Neither study, however, could be regarded as providing definitive evidence on the issue. It is unclear how much the results of Indermaur's study are generalisable to the wider Australian community and, in particular, to demographically dissimilar States on the eastern seaboard. Furthermore, it is impossible to tell from the Queensland study what actual risks respondents had in mind when endorsing the items 'very likely' or 'fairly likely'. Despite this, the question of whether the Australian public overestimates the risk of criminal victimisation is an extremely important issue. Public opinion about the risk of criminal victimisation is probably more influential in shaping State Government spending priorities in law and order than the actual risk. If public concern about crime is driven by an exaggerated assessment of the risks of victimisation, then strategies need to be put in place to address the problem.

The present study was conducted with four aims in mind. Firstly, we sought to obtain a nationally representative picture

of how Australians perceive the risks of criminal victimisation associated with four commonly occurring offences: break and enter; motor vehicle theft; assault; and robbery. Secondly, we sought to examine variations between jurisdictions in the perceived risks associated with these offences. Thirdly, we sought to determine whether there was any relationship across jurisdictions between the actual and perceived risks associated with them. Finally, we sought to obtain information about the influence of gender and age on the difference between perceived and actual risks of victimisation associated with each offence.

METHOD

Public perceptions of crime risk were obtained from a household interview survey conducted for the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research by the ABS. Respondents were asked to estimate their chances of being victims of certain crimes within the next twelve months. The crimes covered by the survey were:

- the respondent's home, garage or shed being broken into;
- the respondent's vehicle being stolen;²
- the respondent being assaulted (attacked or threatened);
- the respondent being robbed (by attack or threat).

For each type of crime, respondents were asked to estimate their chances of being a victim as falling into one of the following five categories:

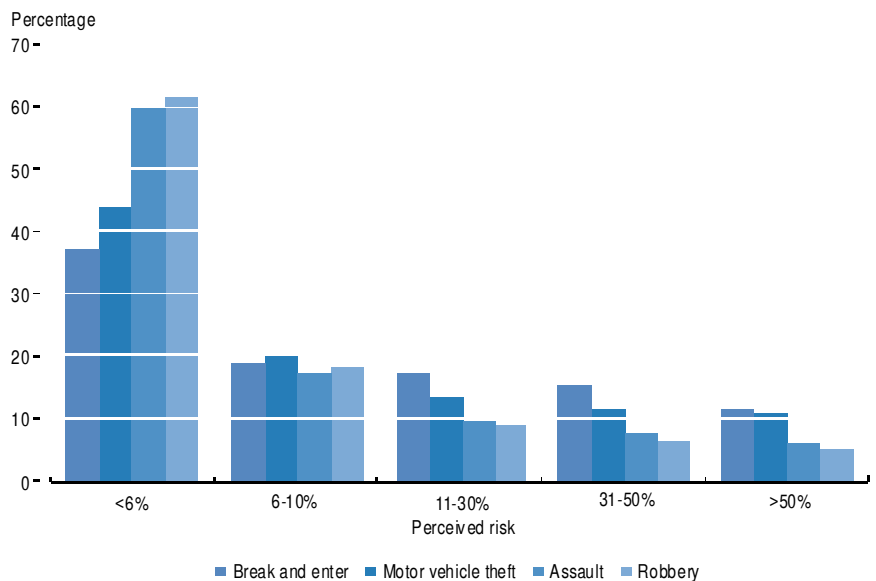
- less than 6%;
- 6% - 10%;
- 11% - 30%;
- 31% - 50%;
- more than 50%.

The survey was conducted by means of the *Population Survey Monitor* which is a regular household survey conducted quarterly by the ABS. The population from which the sample was drawn consisted of all persons aged 18 and over residing in private dwellings, in all States and Territories of Australia.³ Data were collected by means of personal interviews with randomly selected respondents. Only one person was interviewed per household.

The survey was conducted in August 1995. Interviews were successfully completed with 2,164 respondents across Australia.⁴ The data items collected included the responses to the specific questions on perceived risk of crime as well as the core data items which are included in every *Population Survey Monitor*. These core data items provide information on personal and household characteristics (for example, age, gender and income of the respondent; number of adults, family type and type of dwelling for the household).

The results presented in this bulletin are based on population estimates which

Figure 1: Perceived risk of victimisation by offence
Percentage of population within each perceived risk category



were obtained by applying appropriate weightings to the responses. The weightings were determined by the ABS and were designed (i) to adjust the estimates for the varying probability of selection in the sample (dependent on the State/Territory of enumeration); and (ii) to reduce non-response bias, by compensating for any under-enumeration (determined from population benchmarks in each age-sex-area cell).

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the perceived risk of victimisation over the next twelve months for the offences of break and enter, motor vehicle theft, assault and robbery.

There are three points worth noting about the figure. Firstly, it indicates that a substantial proportion of the community regard themselves as significantly at risk of criminal victimisation. In fact analysis of the data reveals that more than 26 per cent of people regard their risk of break and enter victimisation in the next twelve months as being greater than 30 per cent. The corresponding figures for other offences are lower but are still substantial. The percentages of respondents regarding their risks of victimisation as in excess of 30 per cent were 22 per cent for motor vehicle theft, 14 per cent for assault and 12 per cent for robbery.⁵

The second point to note about Figure 1 is that, as one might have expected, the percentage of respondents endorsing a particular level of crime victimisation risk falls off as the level of perceived risk rises. The most commonly endorsed risk category nominated by respondents in all four categories of offence was 'less than 6%'. The percentage of respondents endorsing a particular level of risk falls sharply between the 'less than 6%' category and the '6% - 10%' category and then declines slowly between the '6% - 10%' category and the 'more than 50%' category.

The third point is that, in general, respondents were inclined to rate the risk of motor vehicle theft and break and enter more highly than the risk of assault and robbery. Around 60 per cent of respondents in the categories of assault and robbery rated the chance of victimisation as less than 6 per cent. By contrast, less than 50 per cent of respondents in the category of motor vehicle theft and less than 40 per cent of respondents in the category of break and enter rated their chance of victimisation as less than 6 per cent.

Tables 1 to 4 provide a breakdown by jurisdiction of the perceived risk of break and enter, motor vehicle theft, assault and robbery over the next twelve months. Although the broad trends identified in relation to Figure 1 are reflected in each State's results, there are some interesting differences between States in the perceived risks associated with each offence.

Table 1 shows the distribution of perceived break and enter risk for each State. There is marked variation between States in the perceived risk of victimisation. At the low end of the perceived risk scale, the category of less than 6 per cent chance of experiencing break and enter was endorsed by only 28 per cent of Australian Capital Territory (ACT) residents but more than 40 per cent of Victorian residents. At the high

end of the perceived risk scale, less than 10 per cent of ACT residents but 18 per cent of Tasmanian residents rated the chance of break and enter as more than 50 per cent.

There is also variation among States in relation to the perceived risk associated with the other three offences examined in the study. For example, Table 2 shows that only 37 per cent of Western Australian residents rated the chance of motor vehicle theft as less than 6 per cent. About 18 per cent believed that the chance of motor vehicle theft over the next twelve months exceeded 50 per cent. By contrast, about 50 per cent of ACT residents regarded the chance of motor vehicle theft as being less than 6 per cent, while less than 6 per cent rated the chance as more than 50 per cent.

Table 1: Perceived risk of break and enter by jurisdiction
Percentage of population within each perceived risk category

Jurisdiction	Perceived risk					Total
	<6%	6-10%	11-30%	31-50%	>50%	
NSW	38.1	20.1	18.0	15.0	8.8	100.0
Vic.	40.6	19.1	16.3	13.0	11.1	100.0
Qld	36.1	15.2	16.9	18.0	13.9	100.0
SA	30.5	21.9	18.3	15.6	13.8	100.0
WA	34.4	16.5	18.9	15.5	14.7	100.0
Tas.	34.2	20.6	11.1	16.2	18.0	100.0
NT	36.5	17.1	17.1	13.6	15.7	100.0
ACT	28.0	27.4	14.7	20.2	9.6	100.0
Australia	37.2	18.9	17.2	15.2	11.5	100.0

Table 4: Perceived risk of motor vehicle theft by jurisdiction
Percentage of population within each perceived risk category

Jurisdiction	Perceived risk					Total
	<6%	6-10%	11-30%	31-50%	>50%	
NSW	42.6	22.8	14.0	10.9	9.8	100.0
Vic.	48.8	19.3	12.8	10.9	8.2	100.0
Qld	42.2	16.9	13.2	15.0	12.6	100.0
SA	39.9	19.6	13.0	14.2	13.3	100.0
WA	37.4	20.9	11.9	11.5	18.3	100.0
Tas.	43.5	23.0	17.1	8.7	7.8	100.0
NT	43.6	22.3	13.4	13.8	7.0	100.0
ACT	50.4	23.8	16.0	4.1	5.7	100.0
Australia	43.6	20.4	13.3	11.8	10.8	100.0

Note: Non-vehicle owners were excluded from the assessment of perceived risk of motor vehicle theft.

Table 3: Perceived risk of assault by jurisdiction
Percentage of population within each perceived risk category

Jurisdiction	Perceived risk					Total
	<6%	6-10%	11-30%	31-50%	>50%	
NSW	59.5	17.4	9.4	7.5	6.2	100.0
Vic.	61.5	17.4	8.6	6.8	5.7	100.0
Qld	56.9	16.1	11.9	8.2	6.9	100.0
SA	60.3	16.8	9.8	7.1	5.9	100.0
WA	57.6	16.8	9.5	9.3	6.8	100.0
Tas.	70.0	13.9	4.2	5.3	6.6	100.0
NT	68.9	12.2	8.3	7.3	3.3	100.0
ACT	64.9	21.2	5.1	5.9	3.1	100.0
Australia	59.9	17.0	9.5	7.5	6.1	100.0

Table 4: Perceived risk of robbery by jurisdiction
Percentage of population within each perceived risk category

Jurisdiction	Perceived risk					Total
	<6%	6-10%	11-30%	31-50%	>50%	
NSW	61.8	17.7	8.1	7.2	5.2	100.0
Vic.	63.1	18.3	8.8	5.3	4.4	100.0
Qld	56.8	22.3	10.7	6.3	4.0	100.0
SA	58.7	16.1	11.6	10.2	3.5	100.0
WA	61.2	13.2	8.8	8.1	8.8	100.0
Tas.	62.6	18.3	9.8	2.2	7.1	100.0
NT	70.5	11.5	8.7	6.2	3.2	100.0
ACT	65.4	22.3	6.0	3.6	2.8	100.0
Australia	61.2	18.1	9.1	6.7	5.0	100.0

Table 5: Crime victimisation rates, April 1993
Household and personal victims as percentages of all households and persons

	NSW	Vic.	Qld	SA	WA	Tas.	NT	ACT	Australia
<i>Household victims:</i>									
Break and enter	3.7	3.3	5.2	5.0	7.5	4.0	7.4	5.0	4.4
Motor vehicle theft	2.0	1.7	1.3	1.7	2.2	1.0	0.7	0.8	1.7
<i>Personal victims:</i>									
Assault	2.6	2.2	2.9	2.5	2.2	2.8	3.6	3.5	2.5
Robbery	1.3	1.0	1.2	1.3	1.3	0.8	1.7	1.7	1.2

Inspection of Table 3 shows that, although a majority of respondents in each State rated the chance of assault as less than 6 per cent, there were rather wide variations between States in the percentage who endorsed this level of risk. For example, while about 57 per cent of Queenslanders rated the chance of assault as being less than 6 per cent,

70 per cent of Tasmanians endorsed this level of risk. Further, while nearly 7 per cent of Queenslanders rated their risk of assault over the next twelve months at 50 per cent or more, only 3 per cent of ACT residents saw themselves as facing such risks.

Table 4 shows that less than 57 per cent of Queensland residents rated the

chance of robbery as less than 6 per cent but more than 70 per cent of residents of the Northern Territory regarded themselves as similarly exposed to the risk of robbery. At the other end of the spectrum of perceived robbery risk, nearly 9 per cent of Western Australian residents regarded themselves as facing a higher than 50 per cent chance of being robbed over the next twelve months, while less than 3 per cent of ACT residents saw themselves in this category.

How does each State or Territory's perceived risk of criminal victimisation compare with its actual risk? Table 5 shows the actual risk of victimisation for each Australian jurisdiction, for each of the four offences of interest in the twelve months preceding the 1993 national ABS Crime and Safety survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1994).

It is clear that the actual risk of victimisation, even for the offence of break and enter, never exceeds 8 per cent for any Australian jurisdiction. Indeed, in every jurisdiction the actual risk of assault is less than 4 per cent while the actual risk of robbery is less than 2 per cent. These results indicate that Australians greatly exaggerate the risk of falling victim to the offences of break and enter, motor vehicle theft, assault and robbery. Is there any tendency, however, for residents in a State with a higher actual risk to have a higher perceived risk?

One way of assessing this issue is to take each offence and rank each State and Territory in terms of both the perceived and actual risk of falling victim to that offence. We can then compare the correlation between the rank order of the States and Territories in terms of their perceived risk and their rank order in terms of actual risk. To measure actual risk, we can use data from the 1993 ABS national crime victim survey. For perceived risk we can take the percentage of persons judging the risk of an offence to be less than 6 per cent and call it a measure of 'perceived relative safety'. We would expect a State with a relatively high actual risk to have low perceived relative safety. That is, we would expect a State with a relatively high actual risk to have a relatively small percentage of people in the 'less than 6%' perceived risk category.

Table 6 shows, separately for each offence, the rank order of jurisdictions in terms of actual risk and perceived relative safety. The ranks have been

Table 6: Ranks of actual risk (AR) and perceived relative safety (PRS) by jurisdiction

Jurisdiction	Break and enter		Motor vehicle theft		Assault		Robbery	
	AR	PRS	AR	PRS	AR	PRS	AR	PRS
NSW	2	7	7	4	4	3	6	4
Vic.	1	8	5	7	2	5	2	6
Qld	6	5	4	3	6	1	3	1
SA	5	2	6	2	3	4	5	2
WA	8	4	8	1	1	2	4	3
Tas.	3	3	3	5	5	8	1	5
NT	7	6	1	6	8	7	8	8
ACT	4	1	2	8	7	6	7	7
Kendall's test statistic	-6		-16		8		10	

assigned in ascending order of actual risk or perceived safety. A low rank therefore indicates a low value for both actual risk and perceived relative safety. For example, for break and enter, Victoria has the lowest actual risk whereas the ACT has the lowest perceived relative safety.

If there were a close relationship between the actual risk of criminal victimisation in a State or Territory and its level of perceived relative safety we should expect to find that the higher a State or Territory's rank in relation to actual risk the lower its rank in relation to perceived relative safety. That is, we expect a negative correlation between the ranks of actual risk and the ranks of perceived relative safety. The significance of any such correlation can be examined using a Kendall's rank order correlation test. The test results are shown in the bottom row of Table 6. With a sample size of N=8 (i.e. the number of States and Territories), the value of the test statistic has to be less than or equal to -16 to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Only the correlation for motor vehicle theft is significant. These results suggest that, for offences involving break and enter, assault and robbery, actual levels of crime victimisation risk between States and Territories show no consistent relationship with perceived levels of such risk.

Since actual risks of personal victimisation (assault, robbery or sexual assault) vary markedly by age and gender, as shown in Figure 2,⁶ it is of interest to enquire whether there is an inverse relationship between perceived

relative safety and actual risk of crime victimisation when age and gender are examined.

As Figure 2 shows, the actual risk of becoming a victim of a personal crime declines sharply with age for both men and women but is consistently higher for men in most age groups than it is for women. The gender differential is particularly notable between the ages of 15 and 34 years.

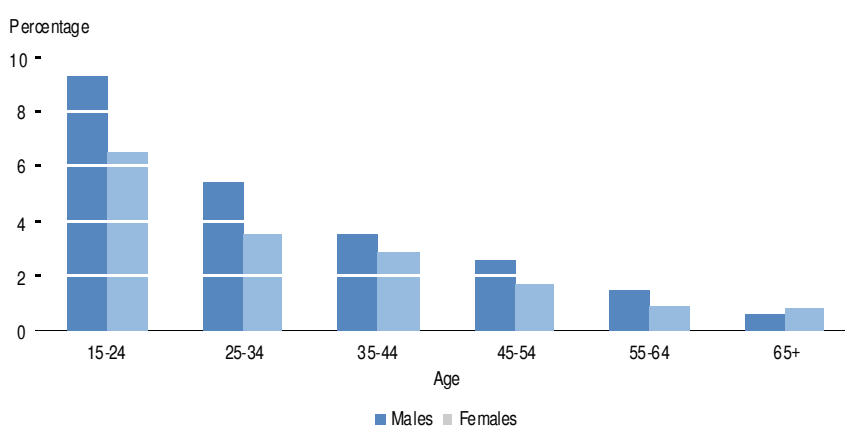
There is no directly comparable measure of the perceived risk of personal crime (because the present survey does not explicitly ask about the perceived risk of sexual assault victimisation whereas the national ABS crime survey includes

sexual assault in its definition of personal crime). However it is possible to compare the distribution of actual personal crime risk shown in Figure 2 with the distribution of perceived risk by age and gender for assault and robbery taken separately. These two offences, it should be noted, probably account for most of the variation in actual risk by age and gender because the actual risk of sexual assault, as measured by the national ABS crime survey, is very low.

For the present survey, Figures 3 and 4 show the relative frequency with which male and female respondents of various ages stated that their perceived risk of falling victim to assault (Figure 3) or robbery (Figure 4) was less than 6 per cent. Given the data in Figure 2, one would expect to find a relationship between the age of respondents and their perceived relative safety. Because actual risk decreases with age, one would expect the proportion in the 'less than 6%' category for perceived risk to increase with age. Further, given the pattern in Figure 2, one would also expect to find a higher proportion of women than men identifying themselves in the 'less than 6%' category for most age groups, but particularly in the younger age groups.

In fact, there is no indication of an increasing perceived relative safety with increasing age, except for female assault victimisations. As age increases, there is an increasing proportion of females who rate their perceived risk of assault as less than 6 per cent but there is no such

Figure 2: Actual victimisation rate by age and gender, Australia Personal crimes



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994, *Crime and Safety, Australia, April 1993*, Cat. No. 4509.0

Figure 3: Perceived risk of assault by age and gender, Australia
Percentage of population with less than 6% perceived risk

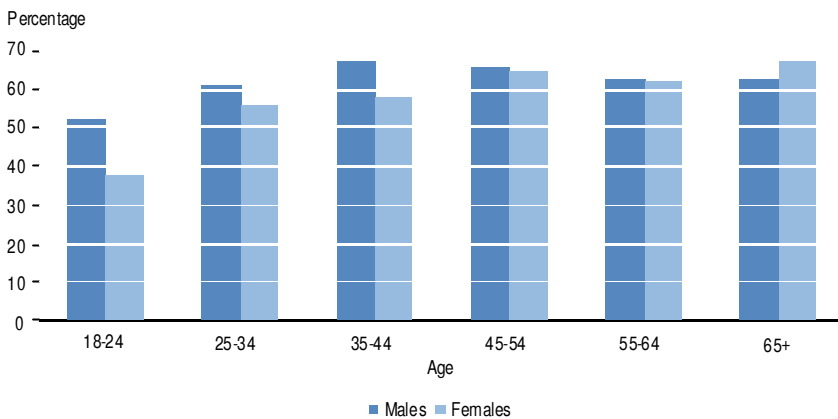
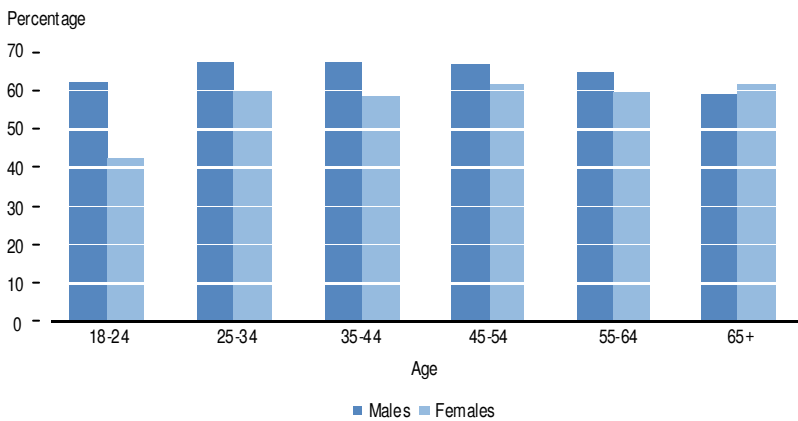


Figure 4: Perceived risk of robbery by age and gender, Australia
Percentage of population with less than 6% perceived risk



trend for the perceived risk of robbery or for males' perceived risk of assault.

The expectation that a higher proportion of women than men would rate their perceived risk as low is not confirmed by the data. Although women generally experience lower levels of personal crime victimisation than men, a smaller proportion of them generally place themselves in the lowest risk category for personal crime. Even more unexpectedly, this result is particularly pronounced amongst the lowest age groups where, as noted earlier, the actual personal crime risk differential between men and women is most pronounced in favour of women.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The results of the present survey reveal that Australians often greatly exaggerate their risks of falling victim to break and enter, motor vehicle theft, assault and

robbery. Whereas the results of the 1993 national ABS crime victim survey suggest that the actual risk of each of these offences in a given twelve month period is generally less than 6 per cent, a substantial proportion of respondents across Australia judged their risks to be much higher than this. As noted earlier, the percentage of respondents who regarded their risk of falling victim to these offences over the next twelve months as being higher than 30 per cent, ranged from 12 per cent in the case of robbery to 26 per cent in the case of break and enter. The level of exaggeration is notably larger for the two property offences (break and enter, and motor vehicle theft) than for the two violent offences (robbery and assault) and this, at least, accords with the fact that the actual risks for the two property offences are significantly higher than for the two violent offences.

There is considerably less evidence of an accord between perception and reality

in other aspects of the survey findings. For example, there are marked differences between jurisdictions in terms of perceived risk for the offences examined in the survey. For assault and robbery, Queenslanders had the lowest perceived relative safety (i.e. the lowest proportion of residents with a perceived risk of less than 6%). Residents of the ACT had the lowest perceived relative safety for break and enter and Western Australians had the lowest perceived relative safety for motor vehicle theft. Given that residents of Western Australia have the highest actual risk of motor vehicle theft, they are correct in their judgement about this offence but the other perceptions are incorrect. In fact there is no statistically significant relationship across jurisdictions between the actual and perceived risks of criminal victimisation for any offence except motor vehicle theft. For this offence at least, the relationship is as it should be. Jurisdictions with higher actual risks of motor vehicle theft generally have a smaller proportion of residents who perceive the risks associated with this offence to be low.

When it comes to violent crime, the distribution of perceived risk by age and gender also appears to depart significantly from the distribution of actual risk in relation to these variables. The actual risks of assault and robbery decline with age. However, there was no indication of a similar trend in perceived risk except for women's perceived risk of assault. The proportion of women rating their assault risk in the lowest category increased with age. Similarly, whereas for nearly all age groups men are more at risk of personal crimes such as assault and robbery than are women, women perceived their risks to be greater in most age groups. For both assault and robbery, a smaller proportion of women than men in every age group below the age of 65 years judged their risks to be less than 6 per cent. Furthermore, women were most likely to perceive their risk as high compared with men in precisely the age group where their actual risk is lowest compared with men (i.e. 18-24 years).

The influence of gender on the perceived risk of criminal victimisation will not surprise many criminologists. Published studies examining the issue consistently find that women exhibit higher levels of fear of or concern about crime than men (Furstenberg 1971; Garofalo 1979; Baumer 1978; Hindelang, Gottfredson & Garofalo 1978; Braithwaite, Biles & Whitrod 1982; Clark & Lewis 1982;

Maxfield 1984; Sampson 1985; Ortega & Myles 1987; Gray & O'Connor 1990). It is possible to offer an explanation for this finding in terms which set it apart from the general finding that both male and female Australians appear to exaggerate their criminal victimisation risks. Mugford (1984), for example, cites empirical research by Gove and Tudor (1973) indicating that women experience higher levels of psychoneurosis than men and speculates that, for this reason, they may be more inclined to fear most things (including crime) more than men. Others have suggested that women are more physically vulnerable to personal crime than men and for this reason may be more inclined to exaggerate the risks it presents.

In our view these explanations are unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. Firstly, the suggestion that women experience generally higher levels of psychoneurosis, even if accepted, provides no warrant for the conclusion that women fear everything (including crime) more than men. We are aware of no evidence to support this generalisation. Secondly, the hypothesis that women 'fear everything more than men' provides no explanation for the fact that the influence of gender on the perceived risk of victimisation is age-dependent. The proposition that women feel more physically vulnerable than men to personal crime may be accepted and this would be expected to raise their level of concern about crime. It is not entirely clear, however, why greater feelings of vulnerability would automatically lead to higher levels of perceived risk, especially among the very age groups where the actual risks of personal crime victimisation so heavily favour women. Indeed, if women react to feeling vulnerable by taking more precautionary measures than men to prevent personal crime victimisation they might be expected to evince lower levels of perceived risk even if they experience greater levels of concern about crime.

An alternative possibility is that both the gender differential in relation to perceived risk and the general tendency of Australians to exaggerate their criminal victimisation risks have a common origin in media treatment of crime. It is true that, taken overall, the present results run counter to the proposition, considered in the introduction, that public concern about crime is driven more by the level of media attention given to crime than it is by the expectation of becoming a victim. A significant proportion of

Australians clearly regard their risk of criminal victimisation as high and we must assume that this is at least one of the reasons why they consistently rate crime at the top of their list of concerns. However, some explanation must be given for the fact that so many members of the Australian community greatly exaggerate the risks of break and enter, motor vehicle theft, assault and robbery. Given that most of what we know about crime comes to us through radio, newspapers or television it seems reasonable to suppose that media treatment of crime is a factor in elevating public perceptions of the risk of criminal victimisation.

It is certainly true that the commercial imperative within the media to maintain ratings or circulation coupled with widespread public interest in crime prompts almost ubiquitous media coverage of the subject. Some have argued that these same considerations cause media outlets to deliberately distort and misrepresent information about crime. There is no doubt that deliberate distortion and misrepresentation sometimes occur. One local newspaper in NSW, for example, recently ran a front page story proclaiming a 'Crime Wave' on the Central Coast (Tucker 1996). Readers were provided with series of bar-charts suggesting large increases in the recorded rate of several offences even though the time periods involved in the comparisons were of unequal duration and several of the offences which appeared to have increased had not increased in frequency at all.

Media treatment of crime can distort public perceptions of crime in more subtle ways, however, than deliberate distortion and misrepresentation. The nature of what usually constitutes 'news' (i.e. information which is interesting, unexpected or unusual) will inevitably lead to an emphasis by media organisations on relatively infrequent or unusual events at the expense of more commonplace ones. For this reason alone one would expect greater media attention to be given to offences such as homicide, sexual assault, robbery and assault than to break and enter or motor vehicle theft. One would also expect disproportionate emphasis on more serious as compared with less serious examples of these offences, on crimes against women compared with offences against men and on offences against the elderly or the very young as compared with those committed against the youthful or middle-aged.

Furthermore, the fact that public perceptions of the risk of crime are conditioned to some extent by information about its incidence (absolute frequency) rather than by information about its prevalence (relative frequency, i.e. frequency per head of population) provides a further reason why media treatment of crime may unintentionally tend to distort the public impression of its prevalence and seriousness. Consider, for example, that in 1993 Australia recorded a total of 300 murders. This means that a news story on murder in Australia can be run, if a media outlet so chooses, on average, approximately every 30 hours. On these same figures, however, and taking account of Australia's population, the probability of someone in Australia falling victim to murder in any twelve month period is approximately 0.000017 (about one chance in 60,000). By any reckoning this is fairly low. Nevertheless, even a State such as Victoria, which has the lowest murder rate of any jurisdiction in Australia outside of the ACT, would expect to receive news of a murder within its borders on average once a week. The sheer volume of crime in a large population provides the foundation for a steady supply of news stories about crime. Even if only a small proportion of offences are considered serious or shocking enough to be newsworthy, the attention they get may be sufficient to raise the perceived risk of their occurrence.

In a consumer-oriented economy such as ours, once the level of public concern about crime begins to rise, other factors come into play which are likely to further elevate public perceptions of the risk of crime. Insurance and security (and, more recently, telephone) companies are likely to find it easier to sell their services at a time of rising public concern about crime. It is therefore not surprising to see advertising campaigns for insurance or home security taking advantage of this fact. Some companies appear to trade on public confusion about the distinction between incidence and prevalence, presenting vehicle and burglary rates in terms of their frequency per minute or hour rather than in terms of the proportion of people in the community who experience these offences in any given time period. Nor is the tendency to exploit rising public concern about crime confined to insurance and security companies. Democratic governments of every political persuasion from time to time find themselves confronted by opponents keen to exploit public fear of crime for political ends.

It would be a mistake to suppose, however, that the forces affecting public perceptions of the risk of criminal victimisation are all institutional in nature. A number of studies have shown that environmental factors, such as neighbourhood change and urban decay, also play a significant role (Skogan 1986). Women and the elderly, especially in large cities, are often subjected to sexual harassment or incivility in public places. In the poorer parts or entertainment areas of a large city this behaviour often occurs against a backdrop of litter, graffiti and vandalism or in a public space which is poorly lit, badly maintained or colonised by rowdy and inebriated young men. It would not be surprising if such conditions exaggerated public fear of serious crime victimisation. Offensive language, threatening behaviour and harassment may seem like minor forms of criminal behaviour to some but such conduct can easily be taken by its victims as a signal of willingness to engage in more serious forms of offending behaviour. The fact that, on occasion, more serious criminal conduct does follow in the wake of low-level harassment naturally reinforces this tendency.

Whatever its root causes, the tendency among Australians greatly to exaggerate the risks of serious crime should not be lightly dismissed as 'irrational'. Fear of crime can seriously reduce the quality of an individual's life. Unwarranted public concern about crime can also lead to excessive expenditure by governments on law and order at the expense of other important areas of public service (e.g. hospitals and schools). It may also lead to a range of other social problems. Skogan (1986) argues that fear of crime can in some circumstances precipitate neighbourhood decline and thereby generate an increase in crime and other social problems. He argues that, as fear of crime rises in a neighbourhood, the better-off residents begin to leave, the poorer remaining residents increasingly withdraw physically and socially from community life and this weakens the informal social control processes which inhibit crime and disorder. The result is a positive feedback process in which crime and fear of crime reinforce each other over time, leading to a serious decline in the quality of community life.

Skogan's vivid characterisation of the influence of fear of crime on the quality of community life may be a better description of cities in the United States than in Australia. Whether this is true or not, the present findings give compelling reason for Australian policy makers to treat the problem of public fear of crime as deserving of serious attention. As Grabosky (1995) points out, there may be no 'magic bullet' for fear reduction but reductions in the level of public disorder, incivility and harassment, improvements in police-community relations and in the design of public spaces can all be expected to be of assistance. Improvements in the quality of information provided to and by the media about crime trends and patterns may also help reduce unwarranted fear of crime. The fact is, all reasonable avenues for reducing public fear of crime deserve to be explored. There may be commercial benefits to be gained by some from a public misinformed about the risks of criminal victimisation, but there are no long-term social or political benefits to be had.

NOTES

- 1 In this bulletin, results from both the ABS Crime and Safety survey and from the survey of perceived crime risk are often quoted in terms of percentages of respondents. It should be noted that the results from the ABS surveys are actually estimated percentages of the population, rather than the unadjusted percentages of survey respondents.
- 2 Only vehicle owners were asked about vehicle theft.
- 3 Private dwellings in sparsely settled areas were excluded from the survey. In addition, the following persons were excluded from the population sampled: (i) overseas visitors usually resident outside Australia; (ii) diplomatic personnel and non-Australian members of their households; and (iii) non-Australian service personnel stationed in Australia and their dependants.
- 4 A total of 3,267 households were visited. Data were not obtained from 1,103 households for the following reasons: refusal - 367 households; vacant or under construction dwellings - 405 households; uncontactable during interview week - 250 households; death, illness or language problems - 81 households. Interviewers made at least 3 call-backs in rural areas and at least 5 call-backs in urban areas before a dwelling was classified as uncontactable.
- 5 See note 1.
- 6 In the ABS Crime and Safety survey, assault and robbery victimisation rates are measured for both males and females, aged 15 and over. However, sexual assault victimisation rates are measured only for females aged 18 and over.

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