



# Social fabric and fear of crime: Considering spatial location and time of day



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## ABSTRACT

Criminologists have long noted that social networks play a role in influencing residents' fear of crime, but findings vis a vis the exact nature of that role have been mixed. More social ties may be associated with less fear of crime through their role in collective action, trust, and emotional support, but also with more fear of crime because of their role in the diffusion of information on local crime patterns. In what follows, we suggest temporal and spatial distinctions in how social ties matter for fear of crime with respect to these different mechanisms. Analysis of data from a large scale egocentric network study in Southern California provides evidence for these claims.

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## 1. Introduction

Fear of crime is a long-standing policy issue of great importance in the U.S., and a large body of literature has emerged on the question of its determinants (Ferraro, 1995; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981; Warr, 1990). One recurrent theme in this literature is that social networks play an important role in influencing residents' fear of crime (e.g., see Bursik and Grasmick, 1993); however, there is considerable debate about the *nature* of that role. For instance, residents who have more local alters might have more information about criminal activities in the area and hence express *more* fear, but residents with more local alters might also perceive more potential for collective action in the neighborhood, and therefore express *less* fear (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981).<sup>1</sup> The importance of alter locations for the types of ties ego is likely to have to them, and the types of exchanges taking place through those ties, suggests that the spatial dimension of network structure (itself a topic of growing interest e.g., see Butts et al., 2012) may help disambiguate the relationship between personal

networks and fear of crime. In particular, we posit that different mechanisms of social ties for fear of crime have distinct spatial implications. As most research in this area either ignores space or implicitly presumes that alters are only of interest when located in the area nearby ego, little consideration has been given to the effects of alters who are located farther away. In this paper, we examine alter distance on ego's fear of crime, explicitly testing for the effects of both proximate and distant alters.

While the spatial distribution of alters may matter for perceptions of fear of crime, we further posit that these spatial patterns have distinct temporal consequences for fear of crime. A strand of the criminology literature posits that fear of crime is higher at night due in part to darkness providing cover for offenders and reducing the availability of guardianship (Felson, 2002; Ferraro, 1995). Nonetheless, most studies do not explicitly test fear of crime at different times or examine how fear may change over the course of the day (e.g., see Liska and Baccaglioni, 1990). In this paper, we suggest that some mechanisms through which social ties influence fear of crime likely differ from day to night, whereas others may be time invariant. For example, some alters may only be available to watch over the neighborhood and help with activities during the nighttime suggesting less fear at night than during the day, while confiding ties for emotional support may vary little at different times of day.

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<sup>1</sup> As Wasserman and Faust (1994) note on page 42: "An ego-centered network [i.e. a personal network] consists of a focal actor, termed ego, as set of alters who have ties to ego."

The general public has a longstanding interest in fear of crime, with ongoing demands for effective treatments, policies, or changes in behaviors to quell it. To the extent that such fear is sensitive to temporal, spatial, or socio-structural factors, understanding of the relevant social processes seems crucial for informing potential interventions. To examine these potential relationships, we use data from the American Social Fabric Project (Butts et al., 2014), a large-scale egocentric network study with data on ego/alter locations and ego's self-reported fear of crime, along with other data on actual crime patterns in both ego's and alters' neighborhoods (Hipp and Kubrin, 2012). Our main foci for this study are 1.) how personal networks affect fear of crime between night and day and 2.) how the spatial location of alters and the crime rate in their neighborhoods impact ego's own fear of crime. We begin by first discussing how social ties are expected to relate to fear of crime through collective action, support, trust, and information on crime patterns. We then turn to explaining how these mechanisms might vary as a function of the location of alters, as well as time of day. We test these proposed relationships by modeling egos' self-reported fear of crime as a function of contextual factors. In our models, we examine a variety of spatial scales of distance to alters, including a general measure of distance to alters, a measure of alters isolated to the home, a measure of alters only in the local neighborhood, and more distant alters located in the broader region. In addition, we examine how crime patterns in both ego and alters' neighborhoods have consequences for ego's fear of crime. We test predictions involving relative levels of fear during the day and night (respectively), as well as predictions involving differences in levels of fear from day to night.

## 2. Mechanisms through which social ties could influence fear of crime

Although there are a variety of potential mechanisms for how social ties may have an impact on fear of crime, we focus on four key potential mechanisms in this paper: 1.) more local social ties facilitate collective action in response to local problems; 2.) more social ties provide a greater level of familiarity and trust with persons in the areas in which alters reside; 3.) more social ties provide greater access to emotional and social support; and 4.) more social ties create the opportunity for more exposure to and hence awareness of information about crime. In what follows, we argue that the first 3 mechanisms will be associated with reduced fear of crime, whereas the latter mechanism will be associated with enhanced fear of crime. We now discuss each of these mechanisms in regards to their general predictions about fear of crime, and in the next section we discuss more explicitly how these mechanisms might differ depending on the spatial location of alters and time of day.

For the first mechanism, research in criminology on social networks as a determinant of fear of crime stems most notably from Shaw and McKay's social disorganization theory, which argues that social ties are useful for *collective action* within the neighborhood (Shaw and McKay, 1942). In this literature, neighborhoods with more residential instability and ethnic/racial heterogeneity are expected to have fewer ties among residents in the neighborhood. When residents have more local social ties per capita, they are expected to have more potential for mobilizing to address local problems (Bursik and Grasmick, 1993).<sup>2</sup> Few studies in this literature have directly measured the personal networks of residents, and most studies use proxies for the number of social ties that residents have (i.e., degree) such as length of residence, with the idea being that residents who have lived in the neighborhood for a

longer time will have more social ties and be able to more easily collectively organize with residents to solve problems. In this paper, we directly measure residents' degree, and we posit that residents with higher (local) degree will have more potential for collective action and therefore generally express less fear of crime. Nonetheless, depending on the type of actions taken, what the actions are trying to accomplish, where alters are located, and when they are expected to have consequences, there may be differential consequences for fear of crime at different times of day, a possibility that we discuss in the next section.

As a second mechanism for fear of crime, residents with more local social ties may have more *familiarity and trust* with their neighbors and therefore less fear of crime. These residents likely feel a sense of cohesion with their neighborhood that can result in reductions in fear (Markowitz et al., 2001; Scarborough et al., 2010). When residents know more of their neighbors, they are expected to feel more familiar with and trusting of others in the area, and this may make them less fearful of crime (Merry, 1981; Taylor, 2002). Other research suggests that it is not necessarily trust or familiarity per se but the presence of unknown "other" groups, such as immigrants (Merry, 1981), racial minorities to which ego does not belong (Chiricos et al., 1997; Moeller, 1989; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981; St. John and Heald-Moore, 1996), or others differing from ego on ethnic or other lines (Covington and Taylor, 1991) that is relevant for fearfulness. One study found that residents who live near others with whom they are more socially distant (based on various social status dimensions) perceive more crime (Hipp, 2010). When residents feel more trust and familiarity with others, they may perceive that other residents are less threatening and therefore report generally less fear of crime, regardless of the time of day.

A third mechanism for fear of crime is that social ties may be used for *support* and thus higher degree on support-relevant relations will again be associated with less fear of crime. Residents may perceive that they can draw upon their ties for support in times of need (Heaney and Israel, 2008; Viry, 2012; Wellman and Wortley, 1990), including for protection, emotional support, and guardianship. Residents who have higher degree may feel more supported and less vulnerable to crime, and therefore less fearful of crime. Nonetheless, one possibility is that support may change at different times of day due to differences in availability of these alters, and thus fear may also change at different times of day, an issue we note shortly.

A fourth mechanism for how fear of crime may be impacted by social ties is through *information* on crime patterns. While most research posits that fear of crime is reduced when egos have more social ties, it has been argued that higher degree may actually create *heightened* concern for crime via enhanced exposure to information on criminal acts transmitted via alters, and thus more awareness and exposure to more information on crime events leads to more fear of crime overall (e.g., see Bursik and Grasmick 1993).<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, the official crime rate in ego's neighborhood may be related to fear of crime.<sup>4</sup> This may occur because the actual crime rate in egos' neighborhood is a major source of perceptions of crime

<sup>3</sup> Research on gossip and urban legends also suggests that fear can develop from socially communicated information not because of actual risk, but because of the message's direct emotional impact (Heath et al., 2001). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that messages carrying more emotionally extreme information (if arousal inducing) are more likely to be passed to others (Berger and Milkman, 2012). To the extent that higher-degree individuals are more likely to be exposed to widely circulating messages regarding crime in their communities (or other communities regarded as comparable by ego to his or her own), they are expected to obtain information that is biased in a fear-inducing direction.

<sup>4</sup> Numerous national surveys have also found that residents' fears of crime are not driven entirely by crime rates (Saad, 2010; Warr, 1993), suggesting that other factors beyond crime in ego's neighborhood might motivate fear.

<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, one study recently found that more collective efficacy in neighborhoods actually led to an increased fear of burglary (Yuan and McNeeley, 2015).

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