



## Perceived insecurity and fear of crime in a city with low-crime rates



Sergi Valera<sup>a,\*</sup>, Joan Guàrdia<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Social Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, University of Barcelona, Passeig de la Vall d'Hebrón, 171, 08035 Barcelona, Spain

<sup>b</sup> Department of Methodology of Behavioral Sciences, Faculty of Psychology, University of Barcelona, Institute for Brain, Cognition and Behaviour (IR3C), Passeig de la Vall d'Hebrón, 171, 08035 Barcelona, Spain

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### ABSTRACT

Fear of crime is one of the most important problems in our cities, even in low-crime rate areas. The aim of this paper is to provide evidence of the issues involved in the perceived risk of victimization and fear of crime in these contexts using the Structural Equation Model (SEM) technique. Five hundred and seventy-one people living in a working-class neighborhood of Barcelona answered a 45-item questionnaire including the following 7 constructs: perception of insecurity, previous threat experiences, social representations of insecurity, personal control and coping skills, potential aggressors, urban identity, and perceived environmental quality. Findings confirm the theoretical model, in which fear of crime is structurally related to: a) environmental features, b) personal variables, and c) social representation of unsafe places. In addition, we found that the role of social aspects is as important as that of environmental and psychological ones. Residential satisfaction and urban social identity appear as relevant variables.

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### 1. Introduction

A fundamental idea underlies this paper: Fear of crime is one of the most significant social problems in our cities. Polls and social surveys offer data supporting this notion. Once instilled, fear grows through complex social dynamics beyond simple explanations (Curbet, 2011, pp. 10–19). Therefore, this type of urban insecurity is related to other uncertainties regarding labor, economic or emotional concerns (Hollaway & Jefferson, 1997), as well as social insecurities derived from changes in welfare state policies (Hummelsheim, Hirtenlehner, Jackson, & Oberwittler, 2011). Like social urgency, insecurity appears constantly in the media and generates both social awareness and individual fear (Dowler, 2003). Urban insecurity as the perceived risk of criminal victimization is also related to social and urban segregation (Vilalta, 2011), urban and social stigmatization (Quillian & Pager, 2010), and loss of public space as a social arena (Finol, 2005; Low, 2003, 2005; Valera, 2008).

In contrast, police data have shown a continuous decrease of crime rates in European cities. Even in America, the relationship

between fear of crime and crime evolution is not well supported (Cossman & Rader, 2011). A similar phenomenon appears in victimization data: in average terms, although few people admit to being victims of crime, even if they are minor crimes, many people admit to being afraid in urban public spaces at some point (see data from the Annual Victimization Survey in the City of Barcelona or the National Crime Victimization Survey in the USA). This inconsistency between objective security and subjective perception of insecurity has been questioned recently by Brunton-Smith and Sturgis (2011) by analyzing data from the British Crime Survey. These scholars find that “the incidence of recorded crime in a neighborhood is directly related to the level of reported fear” (p. 360). A similar effect occurs in relation to the personal victimization experience or visible signs of disorder: living near an area with a high crime rate or with high-level visible signs of disorder is linked to a higher probability of worry about crime, even if one’s immediate neighborhood context is kept constant (Brunton-Smith & Jackson, 2012). But when the experience of crime is inexistent, and so are signs of disorder, and the rates are low, then fear of crime as a general anxiety of the urban experience requires deep reflection and a management of the urban security policy different from the classical police measures considering, for example, the psycho-social characteristics of the social context. Therefore, several studies have pointed out the social variables of the neighborhood to explain the fear of crime effect. For example, Kanan and Pruitt (2002) highlighted the race

\* Corresponding author. Department of Social Psychology, Faculty of Psychology, University of Barcelona, Passeig de la Vall d'Hebrón, 171, 08035 Barcelona, Spain. Tel.: +34 933 125 182.

E-mail addresses: [svalera@ub.edu](mailto:svalera@ub.edu) (S. Valera), [jguardia@ub.edu](mailto:jguardia@ub.edu) (J. Guàrdia).

composition of the neighborhood rather than social integration, while Quillian and Pager (2010) emphasize race composition as well as incivilities (see also Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987).

However, these studies based on their analyses on variables with low incidence in cities like Barcelona. Barcelona is a city with very low-crime rates, non-racial differentiation by areas, and urban public places with well-recognized quality. Despite this, fear of crime has been, for many years, one of the three most important problems perceived by its citizens. For instance, in 2006 and 2010 it was the first problem pointed out by the citizens – with 22.3% and 18.7% of the answers respectively – and in 2012 it was the second, with 13% of the answers.<sup>1</sup> However, the victimization index is low and very stable: 15.3% in 2008, 17.7% in 2010 or 17.9% in 2012, and basically, it referred to minor crimes.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon leads us to consider this city as representative of an important number of European cities. So, what are the factors that could explain fear of crime in cities where the experience of crime and the main associated variables are non-significant? Is this the result of generalized anxiety rather than a specific worry about crime? Or could it be the consequence of a social amplification of the perceived risk, mainly derived from the media treatment? And finally, are the social variables involved in this phenomenon more determining than the individual ones?

The aim of this paper is to analyze the main variables that define the subjective perception of insecurity and fear of crime in a city with low-crime rates. For this purpose, we obtained and explored data in the neighborhoods of Barcelona's Zona Franca district, where the victimization index is close to the average victimization index of the city as a whole. From a theoretical point of view, according to previous works (Carro, Valera, & Vidal, 2010; Valera & Guàrdia, 2012), there have been breakthroughs in developing a conceptual model, including several classic individual, social, and environmental variables, along with new ones related to social identity and residential satisfaction.

## 2. Studying fear of crime and the subjective perception of insecurity

We need to express a classic distinction between fear of crime and perception of insecurity. Fear is usually related to emotional features, while insecurity is related to both risk theories and cognitive processes. The studies assuming this difference all point out that risk perception and fear of crime are well-distinguished constructs. We adopt proposals similar to the ones found in Rader (2004), who sets forth a more inclusive concept of the *victimization threat* involving three components: affective (*fear of crime*), cognitive (*perceived risk*), and behavioral (*restricted behaviors*). These three components all share complex relationships with each other.

Moreover, studies on perception of insecurity and fear of crime have been developed not only with emphasis on environmental disorders and objective crime data, but also considering social disorders and the social construction of unsafe environments. As shown in previous studies (see, for example, Miceli, Roccato, & Rosato, 2004), different levels of analysis have been considered. The first level, according to statistical relevance, is the objective crime rate. It is well established that not all crimes have the same impact on fear, and fear itself is not usually related to objective crime rates and victimization (Garland, 2005; Torrente, 2001). The second level, a low-intensity one, concerns *incivilities* because this

phenomenon is usually related to social degradation and potential threats (LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1992; Roché, 1993). This construct, identified by Hunter (1978) and widely developed through such theories as the *broken windows theory* (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), has provided one of the most fruitful hypotheses in relation to our subject: the greater the disorder people perceive in their neighborhood, the more concerned they are about their safety. Disorder can be both physical – for example, related to the maintenance of urban areas, vandalism, graffiti, or damage to furniture – or social – for instance, related to disordered or threatening behaviors, social incivilities, or loitering (Boyd, 2006; Fyfe, Bannister, & Kearns, 2006; Phillips & Smith, 2006).

Furthermore, other variables, collectively referred to as *urban life* by Skogan and Maxfield (1981), include such aspects as crowding (Thomé & Torrente, 2003), social integration difficulties, the presence of threatening social groups, ethnic diversity (Brunton-Smith & Sturgis, 2011), social conflict (Di Masso, Dixon, & Pol, 2011), building size (Newman & Franck, 1982), and degrees of urban vegetation (Kuo & Sullivan, 2001). Moreover, socio-demographic variables have been considered as well. In this sense, despite certain critical positions (Reid & Konrad, 2004), many studies note that women, the elderly, and young people are more likely to feel fear of crime than others (Amerio & Roccato, 2005; Gardner, 1990; Jackson, 2009; Lawton & Yaffe, 1980; Mesch, 2000; Saldívar, Ramos, & Saltijeral, 1998; Warr, 1984). Nonetheless, there seems to be a consensus in the literature about women generally feeling a low risk of sexual assault, especially in relation to their peers (Gidycz, McNamara, & Edwards, 2006). On the other hand, the results for age are controversial (Tseloni & Zarafonitou, 2008). These findings lead us to refuse age and gender as direct indicators of vulnerability. More generally, people who perceive themselves as more physically vulnerable tend to develop a greater fear of crime and more feelings of insecurity (Cossman & Rader, 2011). The relationship between fear of crime and vulnerability (Jackson, 2004), the perception of limited capability when facing threatening situations (Moser, 1985), or the social level of tolerance regarding incivilities or risks (Torrente, 2001) complement this framework. In relation to these ideas, risk theories consider fear of crime as the interplay between emotion and cognition (Jackson, 2006). They also highlight perceived control and perceived consequence as important factors which moderate the relationship between perceived likelihood and worry about crime (Jackson, 2011), even in victimized individuals as an effect of resilience (Shippee, 2012). Moreover, social strategies and spatial configurations allow a community to control its environment when carrying out daily activities safely, what is broadly identified as the *defensible space theory* (Newman, 1996). In addition, the social and structural characteristics of the neighborhood can influence collective efficacy and social control mechanisms (Sampson, 2009). Other times, though, the problem is not fear of crime or of the offender, but fear of the social difference (Sandercock, 2000), fear of the stranger, the outsider (Sandercock, 2005).

In Ferraro (1995), the author considered two stimuli when assessing potentially threatening situations: environmental variables and shared information about unsafe environments. In a similar way, Fernández-Ramírez and Corraliza (1996, 1997, 1998) considered two different perspectives when defining “dangerous environments”. The *neighborhood perspective* emphasizes the social dynamics involved in generating information about insecurity at the neighborhood level. Conversely, the *contextual perspective* focuses on the socio-physical features of places that people perceive as dangerous and to which they react with fear (Wilcox, Quisenberry, & Jones, 2003). Recent research has shown the predominance of social factors, rather than environmental factors, in defining a place as unsafe (Acuña-Rivera, Uzzell, & Brown, 2011).

<sup>1</sup> Source: Municipal Services Survey. Barcelona City Council.

<sup>2</sup> Source: Barcelona's Victimization Survey. Barcelona City Council. Data refer only to completed crimes.

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