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LIFESTYLES OF THE OLD AND NOT SO FEARFUL: LIFE SITUATION AND OLDER PERSONS' FEAR OF CRIME

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ABSTRACT

Based on a survey of 1,448 elderly residents of Dade County (Miami), Florida, the impact on fear of crime of status characteristics, victimization experience, and various measures of life situation was assessed. The analysis yielded four main conclusions. First, in contrast to much academic and popular commentary, the elderly did not appear to have high levels of fear. Second, evidence exists that victimization experience increases, but is not the main determinant of fear. Third, the inclusion of life situation variables markedly improved the explained variance for both measures of fear of crime, thus supporting the utility of this line of inquiry. Fourth, consistent with previous studies, dissatisfaction with neighborhood and vulnerability were important correlates of fear of crime.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the mid-1960s, fear of crime took on the status of a social problem. In part, the focus on crime's affective costs may have reflected real shifts in public attitudes. Thus, national polls indicated that in 1965 nearly one-third of America's citizens were afraid to walk alone at night on a neighborhood street; a decade later, this figure rose to over 40 percent,

and in urban areas to nearly 50 percent (Erskine, 1974; Scheingold, 1984; Warr, 1995).

Even so, the rising salience of crime was nourished as well, if not fully, by a changing social context. Most obviously, escalating offense rates into the middle 1970s provided an objective reason for citizens' worry about victimization (Radzinowicz and King, 1977; Silberman, 1978). More importantly, however, the intensification of political and urban turmoil and the persistent questioning of the legitimacy of existing arrangements created a broader concern for the sanctity of the nation's law and order. In this context, conservatives mobilized to politicize crime by declaring that stern measures were needed to prevent the social fabric from tearing apart and to give citizens peace of mind (Finckenauer, 1978; Furstenberg, 1974; Scheingold, 1984; Lipset and Schneider, 1983). Even more liberal commentators soon joined the bandwagon. "Crime is not a nightmare of the right wing. It is real and menacing," *The New Republic* editorialized (TRB, 1966:5-6). "Americans are afraid to walk the streets at night" (TRB, 1974:4).

Over the past two decades, polls indicate that levels of fear have largely stabilized (Maguire, Pastore, and Flanagan, 1993; Scheingold, 1984; Updegrave, 1994; Warr, 1995). Nevertheless, there has not been a shortage of public commentary decrying crime's grip on the nation (Adler, 1983; Research & Forecasts, Inc., 1980; Updegrave, 1994). During this time, it has been commonplace for news reports to claim that "America is being overtaken by fear of crime" (Crime Watch, 1981:4); that "grim and unsettling testimony about quiet lives yanked off course, about nervous minds besieged by the fear, is so easy to come by. . . . America is afraid" (Kavesh, 1983:E-1); that there is "deep concern about crime" (Deep Concern About Crime, 1981:46); and that "fears of crime [are] paralyzing the U.S." (Fears of Crime, 1980:8). Public officials have shown little reluctance to reinforce this imagery. Fear of crime, observed one National Institute of Justice director, "imprisons citizens in their home" (Police Foundation Cites, 1986:6). Most recently, the rhetoric surrounding the federal crime bill has resulted in a "wave of anticrime fervor" (Rohter, 1994:A1).

Amidst this general appraisal of America as a nation afraid, senior citizens have been singled out for special concern. "All over the United States," observes Charles Silberman (1978:3), "people worry about criminal violence . . . [but the] elderly are the most fearful of all; barricaded behind multiple locks, they often go hungry rather than risk the perils of a walk to the market and back." Unlike the movies or television, it is claimed, seniors cannot rely on some vigilante to even the score and to restore tranquility to their daily lives.

Academic inquiry has been shaped by the prevailing social climate. Since the first part of the 1970s (Block, 1971; Conklin, 1971; Furstenberg, 1974; Poveda, 1972), fear of crime has been a major research paradigm (for summaries, see Baumer, 1985; Box, Hale, and Andrews, 1988; Garofalo, 1981; Greenberg, Rohe, and Williams, 1985:103-14; Skogen and Maxfield, 1981; Taylor and Hale, 1986; Warr, 1995). Investigations on elderly fear of crime, however, have been particularly plentiful (for summaries, see Akers et al., 1987; Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987, 1988; LaGrange and Ferraro, 1987).

Ironically, though nourished by the attention given to the issue by the media and by politicians, academic research has challenged many popular conceptions about fear of crime (Updegrave, 1994). To be sure, studies by criminologists and by gerontologists confirm fairly consistently that age and fear are related positively (e.g., Donnelly, 1988; Keil and Vito, 1991; Kennedy and Silverman, 1990; Ollenburger, 1981; Ortega and Myles, 1987; Warr, 1995). Even so, this research shows that the age-fear relationship, as well as the more general phenomenon of fear of crime, is more complex than popularly conceived.

First, research has shown that senior citizens do not comprise a homogeneous category and do not experience equally fear of crime (Braungart, Braungart, and Hoyer, 1980:56; Clemente and Kleinman, 1976). Although results across studies are not fully consistent and differ by the measures of fear employed, previous studies tend to indicate that fear of crime among the elderly is highest for females, the disadvantaged, African Americans, urban residents, the physically

vulnerable, and the socially isolated (for summaries, see Akers et al., 1987; Eve, 1985; Lawton and Yaffe, 1980:768; Young, 1992). In any case, sufficient evidence exists to argue for more detailed research into the determinants of fear of crime among senior citizens.

Second, although much of the academic literature prescribes to the view that elderly fear of crime is a serious social problem, revisionist scholars have questioned this conclusion (Ferraro and LaGrange, 1988; LaGrange and Ferraro, 1987, 1989; LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic, 1992; Mawby, 1986; Yin, 1982). Previous research, for example, has not distinguished carefully enough between relative and absolute levels of fear: The elderly may be more fearful than younger citizens, but their own level of fear may not be pronounced. Akers et al. (1987:496) discovered that only 6 percent of an elderly sample reported being "very fearful" of "being a victim of a serious crime." Further, methodological considerations shape the strength of the age-fear connection. Thus, the elderly have higher levels of fear if asked about being victimized on the streets or by crime in general ("formless fear"), but this finding disappears or is reversed when they are asked about being victimized in their home or by specific types of criminal acts ("concrete fear") (Jeffords, 1983; LaGrange and Ferraro, 1987, 1989).

Third, researchers soon detected the "fear-victimization paradox": The elderly have comparatively higher levels of fear of crime despite lower levels of victimization (Akers et al., 1987; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981; Yin, 1980; Warr, 1995). This finding counteracted the commonsensical assumption that fear grew ineluctably from direct experience with crime and raised the issue that the aged's fears were irrational. When age variations in vulnerability or sensitivity to risk are taken into account, however, the fear-victimization relationship becomes less paradoxical and seniors seem less irrational. Because older citizens are less able to defend themselves and more fearful of crime, they take precautions that lower their victimization; and because they potentially will sustain more damage in a criminal incident (e.g., broken hip), they have more basis for fearing victimizations that could occur (Balkin, 1979; Keil and Vito, 1991; Kennedy and Silverman, 1990; Linquist and Duke, 1982; Miethe and Lee, 1984; Stafford and Galle, 1984; Warr, 1984, 1995; Clarke et al., 1985; Cook et al., 1978).

Commentary on the fear-victimization paradox helped to prompt research both on the elderly and more generally on how circumstances other than direct crime experiences can foster fear of crime. The impact on fear of vulnerability, as mentioned above, has been one important avenue of inquiry. Skogan and Maxfield (1981:69–74) offered the useful distinction between (a) personal vulnerability, the ability to resist and recover health following a victimization; and (b) social vulnerability, how location in society affects differentially exposure to the likelihood of victimization and the capacity to absorb the costs of crime (e.g., loss of property, time off work). Status characteristics often have been employed as proxies for vulnerability (e.g., age and gender for physical vulnerability; income and race for social vulnerability), but other measurement strategies also have been used. Some studies, for example, have investigated how status groups, such as the elderly and women, differ in their cognitive assessments of the likelihood and consequences of victimization (Miethe and Lee, 1984; Warr, 1984, 1985, 1987; Warr and Stafford, 1983). Other researchers have used factors such as poor health and a lack of social integration as indicators of vulnerability (Akers et al., 1987; Braungart, Braungart, and Hoyer, 1980; Lee, 1983).

Exploring the effect of neighborhood context on fear has been a second prominent line of inquiry. This perspective argues that beyond levels of crime, fear is generated by signs of disorder or of incivility—for example, abandoned vehicles, buildings with broken windows, trash on the street, boisterous youths congregating on street corners (Covington and Taylor, 1991; LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic, 1992; Lewis and Maxfield, 1980; Lewis and Salem, 1986; Rohe and Burby, 1988; Skogan, 1990). In particular, research indicates a consistent relationship between fear and perceptual measures of incivility and of other neighborhood problems (Covington and Taylor, 1991; Greenberg, 1986; Kennedy and Silverman, 1985; LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic, 1992; Lewis and Maxfield,

1980; Lewis and Salem, 1986; Mullen and Donnermeyer, 1985; Taylor and Hale, 1986). These findings suggest that fear of crime emerges from a "lack of congruence" between person and environment (Taylor and Hale, 1986:188) and from residents' "uneasiness" over "their inability to control what goes on around them" (Donnelly, 1988:84).

Results of a national study by LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic (1992) support the idea that social incivility maintains a much stronger influence on fear compared to a respondent's age, and that age might actually operate as an indirect effect on fear through its relationship with social incivility. In short, these authors found that the elderly were generally less fearful of crime because they disproportionately reside in nicer neighborhoods across the United States (i.e., greater incivility tends to characterize areas with younger and more transient populations). Their results imply that, if one were to examine a sample of the elderly population only, variation in social incivility among the elderly should correlate significantly with their fear of crime. The study presented here provided the opportunity to extend LaGrange et al.'s study of social incivility by examining whether the relationship between incivility and fear holds among the elderly alone in a large, urban area.

The developing research on vulnerability and on neighborhood context share a common strand: Independent of the effects that crime victimization experiences exert, fear of crime is shaped intimately by the life situation in which people find themselves. Thus, crime variables—even when broadened beyond personal victimization to include secondhand information about victimization ("vicarious victimization")—have only modest success in explaining fear (e.g., Akers et al., 1987; Skogan, 1987). A more complete understanding of the sources of fear of crime would seem to depend on probing in greater detail the life situation circumstances that trigger worry among the elderly and the general population.

Using a sample of elderly residents in Dade County (Miami), the present study builds on these insights to explore the relationship to fear of crime of a variety of life situation variables. The analysis includes measures of physical and mental vulnerability, neighborhood context, and social stability/integration. The results suggest the utility of this line of inquiry. Further, the data allow comment on the debate over whether fear of crime is a serious social problem for the elderly.

Because the secondary analysis of an existing, cross-sectional data set is relied on, the present study is limited in several ways. First, several authors have demarcated and then tested specific theoretical models of the origins of fear of crime (Baumer, 1985; Greenberg, 1986; Taylor and Hale, 1986; Garofalo, 1981). An unambiguous test of these models could not be presented. At the same time, the results reported here are theoretically relevant; they have clear implications on which types of circumstances engender fear and on how fear of crime as a social problem is best conceptualized and addressed.

Second, measures of community crime rates could not be constructed, and the data set did not directly assess cognitive judgments on the likelihood of and sensitivity to victimization. Vicarious victimization also could not be included in the analysis. These omissions, however, are balanced in part by the availability of data on self-reported victimization (for self and/or household members) and of measures of general vulnerability.

Third, a few scholars have observed that fear of crime may have reciprocal relationships with other causal conditions (e.g., fear may contribute to neighborhood disorder, increased social isolation, and even poorer physical health) (Garofalo, 1981; Skogan, 1986, 1987; Lawton and Yaffe, 1980; Ross, 1993). The data of the present study do not allow for a meaningful assessment of such effects. Consistent with previous research, it is assumed that fear is a reaction to crime experiences and social location. As with the bulk of the research in the field, however, subsequent longitudinal studies testing for reciprocal effects might help to specify the empirical relationships reported here.

Fourth, as Ferraro and LaGrange (1987; cf. Baumer, 1985) point out, the use of single-item measures of crime fear has been normative. The present study's data set has the advantage of including two different single-item measures of

formless fear (crime in general), but it lacks more sophisticated multiple-item indices and measures of concrete fear (specific types of crime). Recall that previous research suggests that the elderly have higher levels of formless fear and lower levels of concrete fear (LaGrange and Ferraro, 1987, 1989).

In sum, the present study shares the weaknesses of much previous research. The data set's major advantages, however, are that it is large, includes multiple measures of elderly citizens' life situation, and, it is hoped, shows the utility of exploring the link of fear to life circumstances.

METHODS

Sample

The sample is comprised of 1,448 noninstitutionalized residents (i.e., no nursing home residents) aged sixty and over of Dade County, Florida. The sample was selected through random-digit dialing. In all, 3,088 households with a person sixty or over were contacted; if more than one elderly person lived in a household, the respondent chosen for the interview was selected randomly. The final sample size was 1,448. Although the completion rate was only 46.9 percent, there are no substantial biases in the representativeness of the respondents (discussed below).

The telephone interviews were conducted between July and October 1986. On average, the interviews lasted forty minutes. Interviewers employed in the study received four training sessions and were monitored by a supervisor. Bilingual interviewers and a translated survey instrument were used for Spanish speaking respondents.

The lengthy telephone survey could have contributed to the relatively low response rate of 46.9 percent. The low response rate, however, had a nonsignificant impact on the representativeness of the final sample, with the exception of three characteristics discussed below. (These three apparent biases had absolutely no bearing on the validity of the results, also discussed below.)

Table 1 reports the main status characteristics for the sample. When compared with U.S. census data for Dade County, the sample appears very representative of the county's age and gender distribution for citizens over sixty.

Three nonrepresentative aspects of the sample exist. First, residents of the North Miami and North Miami Beach areas had higher refusal rates. A comparison of the descriptives for the subsample from these areas with aggregate statistics calculated from census tract data from the 1980 and 1990 U.S. Census indicates that the subsample is representative of the nonrespondents from these areas.

TABLE 1

STATUS CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE (N = 1,448)

Variable	*Percentage*[a]
Gender	
Male	41.6
Female	58.4
Race/Ethnicity	
Caucasian	47.3
African American	12.6
Hispanic	36.6
Other	3.5
Age	
60–64	23.1
65–69	24.3
70–74	20.7
75–79	14.2
80–84	11.1
85–89	5.3
Over 90	1.3
Education	
No schooling at all	4.6
Some elementary	20.4
Completed 8th grade	9.7
Some high school	18.0
Completed high school	19.4
Some college	12.2
College graduate	15.8
Family income in last year	
Under $2,999	5.2
$3,000–3,999	7.5
$4,000–4,999	14.8
$5,000–6,999	11.0
$7,000–9,999	13.5
$10,000–14,999	13.2
$15,000–19,999	10.9
$20,000–39,999	16.5
Over $40,000	7.5
Self or household member victimized in last year	
Yes	8.5
No	91.5

[a]Due to rounding, percentages may not total 100 percent.

Second, compared to 1980 census data, the sample underrepresents by 12.9 percent the proportion of Caucasian elderly citizens and overrepresents the proportion of African American (by 5.9 percent) and Hispanic (by 7.3 percent) citizens. Both of these groups, however, grew significantly in size while the proportion of Caucasians declined in Dade County throughout the 1980s, as evidenced by the results of the 1990 Census of Population and Housing (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1992). Therefore, the apparent conflict between the 1980 census figures and the 1986 sample proportions appears to have been mitigated by demographic changes during the 1980s (Dluhy and Krebs, 1987).

Third, the sample does appear to overrepresent lower-income groups, a factor that previous research suggests would, if anything, heighten the level of fear in the sample (cf. Akers et al., 1987; Baldassare, 1986). More generally, unlike other questions in the survey, which had few missing values, over one-third of the sample declined to provide income information. (This was dealt with through mean substitution for missing data in order to prevent reducing the sample size further. The rationale for this technique is presented in the following section. Income is an important variable in studies such as this, even if only as a control variable, so the option of leaving the variable out of the analysis altogether was not appealing.) The original interview team attributed the high refusal rate to respondents' fears that disclosure of income might affect their eligibility for government benefits (Dluhy and Krebs, 1987). In any case, this particular bias would be problematic if it created significant intercorrelations between income and other predictors in the complete model where none exist in the population. (A truly random sample guarantees that the intercorrelations between the predictors are not significantly different from those in the population. This helps to prevent multicollinearity, thereby leaving no doubt regarding the separate magnitude of each variable's effect on a dependent variable.) Fortunately, the intercorrelations between the other predictors in the model and the nonrandom distribution of income do not pose problems of multicollinearity for the study presented here. None of the predictors, acting alone or together, account for a significant proportion of the variation in income across the sample. This means that the results for all of the independent variables in the model can still be considered valid for the types of elderly persons represented in the sample.

Given the nature of the three biases existing in the sample, it is believed that the goal of obtaining a sample that could yield valid results on the subject was achieved. Furthermore, the large number of respondents (N = 1,448) was clearly sufficient to estimate a complete model with sixteen predictors.

Measures

Dependent variables. Two measures of fear of crime were included in the survey. First, the respondents were asked, "How safe do you feel or would you feel being out alone in your neighborhood?" Possible responses were very safe, safe, unsafe, and very unsafe.

With one exception, this question is identical to the wording of an item that is contained in the National Crime Survey and is one of the most frequently used fear of crime measures: the question does not include the final phrase ". . . alone in your neighborhood *at night*." The failure to direct the respondents' attention to being out alone at night might result in the sample reporting lower levels of fear (Akers et al., 1987; Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987). At the same time, the question used in the present study may have more content validity as a measure of the fear that elderly citizens are likely to experience. As Ferraro and LaGrange note:

> The common scenario of walking *alone at night* in [the NCS question] seems to set up the respondent to reply that he or she would be afraid. Because few of us walk alone on the streets at night . . . questions of this genre have dubious relevance to our everyday lives, and especially to the everyday lives of the elderly to whom much of this research is directed. (Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987:279)

Second, the respondents were told that "as people get older some problems become more serious than others." They then were read a list of thirteen common problems (e.g., poor health,

taking care of myself, keeping a job), which included the statement "fear of crime." They were asked to rate the problems as either very serious, serious but manageable, or not a problem. This variable was recoded so that a high response indicates that respondents see fear of crime as a very serious problem.

Although the items used here are consistent with those used in previous research, debate exists over the best way to measure fear of crime. Previously it was noted that measures may tap formless fears by asking about crime in general—as it was done here—or concrete fears by asking about specific offenses. LaGrange and Ferraro (1987; cf. Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987, 1988) note further that fear of crime questions may not measure emotional distress or actual worry over potential victimization, but may measure assessments of safety or perhaps of general concern over crime. In this regard, the first measure of the present study—being out alone in your neighborhood—may be conceived best as a measure of perceived safety (LaGrange and Ferraro, 1987). The second measure seems to require respondents to evaluate more directly how serious fear of crime is for them personally.

Ordinary least squares regression was used to estimate the models predicting the two dependent variables. Some readers might wonder why the second dependent variable with only three categories was not dichotomized and examined with logit regression. This was not done because of the substantive differences in the meaning of each category in conjunction with the significant variation existing between the categories very serious and serious but manageable (the two categories that would have been collapsed). Eight percent of the sample, or 116 respondents, claimed that fear of crime was a very serious problem for them. The substantive difference between this category and serious but manageable is that the former infers that a respondent's fear of crime is such that it is not manageable. Combining 116 respondents into a substantively different category could mask important variations that could be accounted for by the independent variables in the complete model. For this reason, the three original categories were maintained. Ordinary least squares regression is appropriate for this type of distribution as long as enough cases exist in each of the categories of the dependent variable.

Independent variables. Consistent with most sociological studies, measures for gender, race/ethnicity, age, education, and family income during the last year are included in the analysis. Table 1 reports the categories used to measure each variable. Note that for race/ethnicity the "other" category includes groups such as Orientals. Further, in the regression analyses, the African American, Hispanic, and Other categories are treated as dummy variables.

As discussed above, status characteristics often are treated in the literature as proxies for physical (age, gender) and social (income, race) vulnerability (Akers et al., 1987; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981). While this approach offers a useful conceptualization, status characteristics offer, at best, an indirect operationalization of vulnerability. Accordingly, status characteristics were supplemented with three separate measures of vulnerability. These variables do not purport to measure respondents' cognitive assessments of their vulnerability to victimization (e.g., "What do you believe your chances would be of resisting an attack?"). Instead, they assess the extent to which a person is in a life situation in which they are physically or mentally vulnerable. Previous research on fear of crime has conceived of health status as a measure of vulnerability (Akers et al., 1987; Braungart, Braungart, and Hoyer, 1980).

First, the respondents were asked to rate their overall health at the present time, as either excellent, good, fair, poor, or very poor. Self-reported ratings of health status are considered acceptable measures of health status because they are correlated with physicians' physical examinations and are good predictors of mortality (LaRue et al., 1979; Mossey and Shapiro, 1982). Further, self-ratings of health have been used in fear of crime research (Akers et al., 1987; Braungart, Braungart, and Hoyer, 1980; Lee, 1983). In the current study, this variable is labeled *physical health problems*; a high score indicates poor health.

Second, the variable *physical vulnerability* is measured by four items, which asked if respondents experienced difficulty in completing

household activities such as: (a) mowing grass; (b) doing heavy housework like moving furniture and washing floors; (c) making minor repairs around the house like leaking pipes, cracked plaster, peeling paint; and (d) making major repairs around the house like holes in the ceiling or wall, sagging floors, or bad wiring. Possible responses included: "I can do them without difficulty," "I can do them, but with difficulty," "I can do them only with the help of another person." Cronbach's alpha for this measure is 0.90. Conceptually, it was assumed that this scale would tap the respondents' sense of physical mobility and of physical efficacy. Further, this scale builds on the Skogan and Maxfield (1981:73) study which observed that "vigor . . . would have been useful" as a measure of physical vulnerability.

Third, mental health problems are assessed through an eight-item index. The respondents were asked to state how often (often, sometimes, rarely) during the past few weeks they had trouble falling asleep, felt excited or interested in something, had a poor appetite, felt like crying, felt relaxed and free of tension, thought the future looks bright and hopeful, and felt depressed or unhappy. The scale also included an item in which the respondents self-rated their mental health. The alpha for the measure is 0.61. A high score on this index indicates less mental health and, thus, greater vulnerability.

Sociologists from Durkheim (1897) to more recent social support theorists (Vaux, 1988) have asserted that social integration insulates against strains. In effect, to the extent that it diminishes isolation and provides resources for coping with daily problems, social integration is the opposite of vulnerability. Fear of crime researchers often have incorporated this variable (or a variant of it) into their analyses, though the results have been inconsistent (cf. Akers et al., 1987; Braungart, Braungart, and Hoyer, 1980; Clarke, 1984; Kennedy and Silverman, 1984–1985; Lee, 1983; Sundeen and Mathieu, 1976).

Unlike several other researchers, the present study chose not to use marital status or living arrangements (alone/with someone) to develop a measure of integration. These variables assess levels of interaction only indirectly and, in past studies, have had inconsistent effects (Akers et al., 1987). Further, preliminary data analysis revealed that they had a nonsignificant zero-order relationship with the present study's two dependent variables. Instead, the variable *social integration* was measured by asking the respondents if, in their free time, they did or did not: volunteer; take special trips; attend adult education classes; watch TV or listen to the radio; attend concerts, movies, theater; visit with friends and relatives; participate in senior center activities; participate in other social organizations or clubs. The alpha for this index is 0.64.

A measure of residential stability also was included by asking respondents how long they had lived at the same address. This variable may be seen as a structural measure of social integration and of a person's life situation in a neighborhood. Further, previous research has shown the residential stability to be inversely related to fear of crime (Kennedy and Silverman, 1984–1985).

As noted previously, existing research indicates that perceptual measures of neighborhood problems (incivility, disorder) are related to fear of crime (e.g., LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic, 1992). Accordingly, the present analysis contains a single-item measure, dissatisfaction with neighborhood, that was measured by the statement: "Overall, how satisfied are you with this neighborhood as a place to live?" Possible responses were satisfied, mixed, and dissatisfied.

Two related measures also were included. First, respondents were asked to rate more specifically how satisfied they were with their present housing; the four possible responses ranged from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. Second, dissatisfaction with life was assessed with a single item that asked, "How satisfied are you with your life in general. . . . satisfied, mixed, dissatisfied?" Taken together, these two measures should assist in separating respondents' concerns about their neighborhood from concerns about housing per se and about life in general.

Victimization experience was measured with the question, "Have you or anyone in your household been a victim of a crime in the last year?" In this study's sample, 8.5 percent answered "yes" to the victimization question. Al-

though measured differently, this item is similar to the concept of households touched by crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1988). As a point of comparison, National Crime Survey statistics indicate that approximately 25 percent of households nationally are touched by crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1988). Alternatively, the study by Akers et al. (1987) reported that 4 percent of the elderly in their Florida/New Jersey sample were victimized personally. Victimization experience, thus, may include twice as many respondents than a measure of personal victimization. Note as well that victimization experience has a vicarious dimension to it: In some instances, respondents will learn of a household member's victimization only if told about it. Even so, researchers generally have used vicarious victimization to refer to information about crime received from neighbors or sources outside the immediate household (e.g., Akers et al., 1987; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981).

Three final methodological issues should be mentioned. First, following Cohen and Cohen (1975), means are substituted for missing values, thus yielding a conservative test of relationships. Second, with the exception of education and being Hispanic ($r = 0.74$), the correlations among independent variables do not exceed 0.31, thus minimizing the risks of multicollinearity. Third, the correlation between the two dependent variables is 0.30. Although the magnitude of the correlation is moderate, it indicates that there is statistical dependence between the two measures. The lack of a strong correlation could be the result, as discussed previously, of one measure actually reflecting a respondent's personal risk of crime and the other measure tapping whether fear of crime is a problem for a respondent. This essentially means that neither measure can be seen as a perfect proxy for the other, and it justifies the separate analysis of each measure rather than one or the other. Consistency in results between the two models, however, would provide support for the idea that the two measures are indeed tapping the same theoretical construct. This type of consistency also would reinforce the validity of the results for each model separately.

RESULTS

Level of Fear

Table 2 reports the responses on each of the dependent measures. The data reveal that relatively low levels of risk of crime and fear of crime as a social problem exist across the sample. Nearly four-fifths of the respondents (78.8 percent) stated that they felt very safe or safe being out alone in their neighborhood. Similarly, 70.1 percent of the sample responded that fear of crime was not a problem and less than 10 percent labeled such fear as very serious.

Safety in Neighborhood

Table 3 presents the regression analysis for the dependent variable fear for safety alone in neighborhood. The table is arranged to present data on two models: Model I includes only status characteristics and victimization experience; Model II also includes the life situation variables. The purpose of this arrangement is to show more clearly the role of life situation variables in accounting for variance in the dependent variable. (This same strategy is used in Table 4 for the second fear of crime measure.)

Two broad conclusions can be drawn from Table 3. First, when the life situation variables are introduced, the amount of explained vari-

TABLE 2

LEVEL OF FEAR OF CRIME IN THE SAMPLE ($N = 1,448$)

Question	*Percentage*
How safe do you feel or would you feel being out alone in your neighborhood?	
Very safe	37.5
Safe	41.3
Unsafe	16.9
Very unsafe	4.3
As people get older, some problems become more serious than others. I would like to read you a list of common problems . . . fear of crime:	
Very serious	8.0
Serious but manageable	21.9
Not a problem	70.1

TABLE 3
DETERMINANTS OF FEAR FOR SAFETY, ALONE IN NEIGHBORHOOD (N = 1,448)

	Model I		*Model II*	
Independent Variables	*Beta*	*p*	*Beta*	*p*
Status characteristics				
Age	−.022	.395	−.014	.563
Gender (female = 1)	.090	.000	.032	.191
Education	−.026	.388	−.049	.178
Income	−.077	.008	−.012	.661
African American (yes = 1)	.036	.188	−.028	.284
Hispanic (yes = 1)	−.129	.000	−.028	.481
Other ethnicity (yes = 1)	−.028	.289	−.156	.506
Crime				
Victimization experience (yes = 1)	.184	.000	.089	.000
Life situation				
Physical vulnerability			.133	.000
Physical health problems			.054	.035
Mental health problems			−.038	.114
Social integration			.003	.915
Residential stability			.050	.044
Dissatisfaction with life			.058	.022
Dissatisfaction with housing			.103	.000
Dissatisfaction with neighborhood			.342	.000
R^2	.063		.251	
F for equation	12.118		30.056	
$p <$	.001		.001	

TABLE 4
DETERMINANTS OF FEAR OF CRIME AS A SERIOUS PROBLEM (N = 1,448)

	Model I		*Model II*	
Independent Variables	*Beta*	*p*	*Beta*	*p*
Status characteristics				
Age	.007	.778	.033	.906
Gender (female = 1)	.102	.000	.069	.010
Education	−.036	.231	.036	.372
Income	−.105	.000	−.065	.022
African American (yes = 1)	−.032	.244	−.035	.224
Hispanic (yes = 1)	.073	.014	.061	.162
Other ethnicity (yes = 1)	−.011	.673	−.007	.794
Crime				
Victimization experince (yes = 1)	.142	.000	.100	.001
Life situation				
Physical vulnerability			.088	.002
Physical health problems			.043	.125
Mental health problems			.007	.763
Social integration			.036	.201
Residential stability			−.013	.635
Dissatisfaction with life			.071	.010
Dissatisfaction with housing			.024	.370
Dissatisfaction with neighborhood			.158	.000
R^2	.058		.111	
F for equation	11.113		11.228	
$p <$	.001		.001	

ance increases four-fold from 6.3 percent to 25.1 percent. Second, in Model II no status characteristic remains statistically significant.

Several more specific findings are of interest. First, dissatisfaction with neighborhood has a strong positive, statistically significant relationship with the fear for safety measure (β = .342). Dissatisfaction with housing and physical vulnerability also exert significant effects.

Second, three life situation variables—physical health problems, dissatisfaction with life, and residential stability—are significantly related to fear for safety. Even so, these relationships are of little substantive importance (note the small betas), and reflect the power of the statistical test (given the large sample size) to detect small effects. Similarly, the effects of mental health problems and social integration are nonsignificant.

Third, although the size of the relationship is reduced in Model II, victimization experience is significantly related to fear for safety.

Fear of Crime as a Problem

Table 4 reports the regression analysis of the degree to which a respondent sees his or her fear of crime as a problem. Overall, Model II explains much less variance (11.1 percent), though this figure is nearly two times higher than the variance accounted for by Model I (5.8 percent). Once again, dissatisfaction with neighborhood is related most strongly with perceptions of fear as a problem. Physical vulnerability also remains statistically significant, but its effect is reduced and marginally important. A similar effect is exerted by dissatisfaction with life. In contrast to the data in Table 3, in the current analysis two status characteristics—gender and income—remain statistically significant in Model II; still, their substantive effects are weak. Victimization experience also is related significantly to the degree to which fear of crime is seen as a social problem. No other independent variables in Table 4 are statistically significant.

Summary of Regression Results

Examining the regression results across both dependent variables (Tables 3 and 4), the life situation variables account for a substantial amount of the variance. Dissatisfaction with neighborhood exerts the strongest effect on both measures. Physical vulnerability, victimization experience, and dissatisfaction with life (which had weak relationships) are the only other variables that are statistically significant in both regressions.

DISCUSSION

The results reported here support in large part the position of revisionist scholars that elderly fear of crime is much overestimated in popular and academic literature (Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987, 1988; LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic, 1992). A substantial proportion of the sample indicated that they felt safe out alone in their neighborhoods and that fear of crime was not a serious problem. These findings should not mask that a minority of the respondents felt unsafe to walk in their neighborhoods and defined fear of crime as a very serious problem. Even so, the portrayals of aging citizens paralyzed with fear behind barricaded doors captures the experience only of a limited segment of elderly America.

Possibly, if a different methodology had been used—for example, more probing survey questions or in-depth interviews—higher levels of risk of crime and the degree to which fear of crime is seen as a social problem might have been detected. At this point, however, it seems imprudent to dismiss as methodological artifact the conclusion that intense fear of being victimized among the elderly is not widespread. First, the survey was conducted in an urban area marked by social diversity and much publicity over crime and drugs—circumstances which, if anything, would bias the results toward high levels of fear. Second, the study measured risk and fear of formless crime. As opposed to measures of fear of concrete forms of crime, such indicators generally are biased toward finding more fear among the elderly (Ferraro and LaGrange, 1988; LaGrange and Ferraro, 1987). Third, the results are similar to those reported by Akers et al. (1987) in their research on Florida and New

Jersey elderly residing in retirement and in age-integrated communities. Fourth, survey evidence exists that the general public estimates higher levels of fear among senior citizens than the elderly report for themselves (Ferraro and LaGrange, 1988).

This last point suggests that researchers might explore profitably the social construction as a social problem of elderly fear of crime. In part, the portrayal of the elderly as fearful is shaped by the inaccurate portrayal of the citizenry in general as paralyzed with fear (Scheingold, 1984). The singling out of the aged for special focus, however, indicates that circumstances unique to the elderly also are at work. Thus, to what extent do stereotypes of the elderly as ineffectual and infirm influence media and academic assessments of their fear? Further, what imagery is evoked and social functions served by defining the elderly as living in fear and with predators only a bolt lock away? For example, to what extent are such accounts informed by an implicit racial commentary (i.e., is the image conjured up that of Caucasian elderly threatened by minority youths?), or give truth ostensibly to James Q. Wilson's (1983:260) claim that "wicked people exist. Does nothing avail except to set them apart from innocent people"?

The present study also offers insights on the determinants of elderly worry over crime. First, in contrast to much previous research (Skogan, 1987), victimization experience was related significantly to both dependent variables. Admittedly, this relationship might diminish if only personal as opposed to household victimization had been measured and if vicarious victimization had been controlled for (cf. Akers et al., 1987). Even so, the finding here suggests the possible utility of using household measures of victimization and lends support to Skogan's (1987) contention that it would be premature to dismiss as unimportant the impact of victimization (Lee, 1983).

Second, and perhaps most salient, the results point to the importance of incorporating into fear of crime studies detailed measures of the respondents' life situations—for example, their physical and mental health, quality of social relations, congruence with their environment. Previous research has made noteworthy strides in this direction, but clearly this is a line of inquiry that could be pursued more systematically.

In this regard, Akers et al. (1987:500, fn. 5), whose analysis explained 7 percent of the variance, noted that "even the best models in the literature do not account for much variance in fear of crime." By using more detailed life situation variables, the present study was able (a) to explain considerably more variance than a model comprised only of status characteristics and of victimization experience, and (b) in the case of the degree to which fear of crime is seen as a social problem, to achieve an R^2 of nearly 25 percent. These results do not appear idiosyncratic: employing a similar analysis, Kennedy and Silverman (1984–1985) explained 31 percent of the variance in responses to the standard item measuring fear for safety alone at night in neighborhood.

Third, the differential effects of variables across the two dependent variables lends support to the position, espoused most forcefully by LaGrange and Ferraro (1987; Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987), that various indicators of fear of crime may be measuring different reactions. This observation suggests, in turn, that the notion of fear of crime deserves closer conceptual and methodological attention. In the current study, it appears that life situation variables are related more strongly to the elderly's assessment of the safety of their immediate environment as opposed to how personally salient (serious) they judged fear of crime to be.

Fourth, the findings also reinforced previous research, noted earlier, which linked fear of crime measures to vulnerability and to neighborhood conditions (e.g., incivility). The current analysis shows the utility of moving beyond proxy measures to more direct indicators of vulnerability. The significant effects of the physical vulnerability measure are particularly instructive. This finding provides beginning evidence that vulnerability should be assessed by measures of physical efficacy or, as Skogan and Maxfield (1981:73) call it, "vigor." More generally, research might benefit from distinguish-

ing types of physical vulnerability, including the capacity—perceived or actual—to fend off potential attackers.

The strong effects of the dissatisfaction with neighborhood variable across both dependent variables helps to reinforce the theoretical approach that sees fear of crime not simply as a reaction to infrequent episodes of victimization, but to the social context in which people are enmeshed daily (Greenberg, 1986; Lewis and Salem, 1986; Taylor and Hale, 1986). This line of inquiry suggests that fear of crime increases in salience as the elderly (and others) become troubled over their congruence with and sense of control over their environment (Baldassare, 1986; Donnelly, 1988; Normoyle and Lavrakas, 1984).

When coupled with previous discussions, these latter insights raise two major policy implications. First, the generally low levels of perceived risk and the degree to which fear of crime is seen as a social problem among the elderly question the wisdom of special campaigns—or calls for such campaigns in popular and academic writings—to alleviate the aged's fear of crime. Although the plight of the minority of elderly burdened by fear should not be overlooked, the risk exists that such campaigns will be fueled by politics and ideology, and will have only symbolic effects. Even worse, exaggerated attention to the problem of fear may have self-fulfilling consequences.

Second, to the extent that interventions are undertaken, the consistent findings on the important effects of perceived neighborhood conditions indicate that reducing perceived risk and the degree to which fear of crime is seen as a social problem among the elderly depends on reestablishing confidence in the viability of the local environment (cf. Taylor, Gottfredson, and Brower, 1984). In this regard, the emerging popularity of community-oriented policing—with its emphasis on foot patrols and increased personal contact with citizens on the beat—seems a welcomed development (Skolnick and Bayley, 1986). Evidence exists that not only links confidence in the police to lower levels of fear (Norton and Courlander, 1982), but also shows that community-oriented policing can reduce citizens' worries about crime (Moore and Trojanowicz, 1988). As Box, Hale, and Andrews (1988:353) observe, "a greater visibility, a willingness to be seen moving along groups of troublesome teenagers, and a preparedness to remove drunks and vagrants, may be just what older inner-city residents want to restore their confidence in the police and simultaneously experience less fear of public places."

At the same time, the limits of the capacity of criminal justice interventions to solve socially-produced, crime related problems must be recognized (Currie, 1985). Fear of crime, while mitigated by police presence and interest in citizens' problems, also has structural roots (cf. Liska, Lawrence, and Sanchirico, 1982). Research by Greenberg (1986:60–62), for example, indicates that "confidence in the economic well-being of a neighborhood" is "pivotal" in reducing fear. Similarly, Lewis and Salem (1986:130) concluded that neighborhoods with "political power" were more able to address local problems and that "this capacity often appeared to contribute to diminishing levels of fear." Taken together, these observations suggest that attempts to increase residents' confidence in neighborhood viability in the hope of reducing perceived risk and the degree to which fear of crime is seen as a social problem among the elderly must go beyond changing policing styles to reinforcing the community's economic and political fabric.

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