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THE EXTENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION AND THE NATURE OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS CRIME

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Summary

Within the public attitudes towards crime a distinction should be made between the personal feelings of fear and the political concern about rising crime rates. Both the fear of crime and the concern about crime is mainly directed at crimes of violence like murder or rape.

The fear of crime is strongest with women and the elderly, especially those living in big cities. More than half of the women in countries like West Germany or the Netherlands are afraid to walk alone at night in certain parts of their home towns.

The majority of the population of most West European countries considers the increase in violent crime to be one of the most serious problems at the present time. A substantial minority even considers it to be the most important problem. Three-quarters of the population is of the opinion that there has recently been a sharp increase in crime, with particular reference to crimes of violence. Concern about crime as a social issue in most Western countries is greatest among the poorly educated, the elderly and women.

The particularly high level of fear among young women in the big cities appears consistent with the actual risk of being sexually molested. The relatively high levels of fear among middle-aged women and the elderly are less easy to understand, however. Both middle-aged women and the elderly have much lower victimisation risks than the other population groups. The above average concern about violent crime among older men and women with little education is not consistent with their actual victimisation risk either. Young males, e.g. students, are the typical victims of violent crime in the big cities.

Actual experience of crime plays a limited role in the development of public attitudes towards crime. Public attitudes are very much concerned with

violent crime which actually victimises a small minority of the population. Apparently the majority of people derive their opinions on crime and its trends largely from vicarious sources. From a study of crime as a topic of conversation in the Netherlands it appeared that 79% of all conversations on crime dealt with recently committed crimes, mainly homicides. Those who had discussed an actual crime on the previous day were asked how they had come to know about it. Of those still able to remember, 66% said the paper, 13% the radio or television, and 13% another reason.

Crime reporting is one of the few areas of news dissemination in which the press has been able to retain a predominant position. Research among readers of the daily press has revealed that the crime news is one of the most popular, if not the most popular section of present-day newspapers. Crime reporting in the press is selectively aimed at serious crimes of violence. Attention is seldom paid to traffic or industrial crimes. This goes for both domestic and foreign crime reporting. Moreover, it appears that the reporting of both categories often offers the reader actuality without context. Articles giving a view of the extent, nature and background of the various forms of crime are in the minority by far.

The above-mentioned study of conversations on crimes also revealed that people who claimed never to read any newspapers were significantly less pessimistic about their personal victimisation risks than other comparable groups. This finding together with some other findings seems to be in line with the hypothesis concerning the "terrorising effect" of crime reporting by the mass media as put forward during the 10th Conference of Directors of Criminological Research Institutes in 1972. A theoretical foundation for this hypothesis can possibly be found in the works of the German mass media expert Noelle-Neumann on the impact of the mass media on attitude formation. Conclusive evidence concerning the discussed hypothesis is still lacking, however.

The theoretical model set out in the last paragraph of the report tries to explain the high level of fear of crime among middle-aged women and the elderly, and the concern about rising crime rates among the poorly educated. Dramatic articles on murders or rapes are among the most widely read and discussed. They particularly form a large part of the news consumed and reproduced by women, the elderly and the poorly educated. These three groups do not show particularly great interest in crime news. Rather, their ability to assimilate more complicated news items (on finance, economics, world politics) is often so limited that they are more likely to discuss traffic accidents and crime news. Women and the elderly have a relatively low threshold for fearful reactions. Some of them identify strongly with the victims in reports of murders (which often have sexual connotations). Their perception of crime, influenced by such reports, may lead to fear of crime and, finally, to crime-evasive behaviour patterns (including restriction of mobility). Poorly educated people tend to react to a perceived wave of serious violence by calling for repressive measures. The syndrome of punitiveness feeds on reports of "senseless killings".

The following recommendations have been made. The governments should ensure that the mass media are supplied with as much objective information about the extent and development of crime as possible. Police officers in contact with the press should not only supply information on the latest criminal events but also on crime as a social phenomenon. The results of local and national victim surveys are especially suitable for this purpose. These studies show the actual victimisation risk per type of crime for the various population groups and regions. It will be apparent in most countries that the victimisation risk for minor crimes is relatively high (2 % to 10 %), but that the risk for serious crimes is very low. In addition to these statistics the police should supply as much information as possible on the social correlates of crime and juvenile delinquency in the area. Specialised investigation squads could be asked to hold press conferences on subjects like drug dependence, pollution or industrial crime.

Lastly, the government itself could be more active in publicising the data on the actual crime situation. The advertising campaigns aimed at crime prevention could deliberately be used for the spreading of more objective information on crime. In this way such campaigns would be made instrumental to both crime prevention and the prevention of irrational fear or concern.

1. Relevance of the subject

Criminal policy is not the exclusive concern of the expert civil servant. In many countries public opinion often sets the trend of government policy and at all events public opinion draws the ultimate line. The influence of public opinion is at its height in countries that have their public prosecutors, police officers or judges elected. The experts are generally of the opinion that the purely quantitative enlargement of the police force and/or stiffer penalties are no rational reaction to the crime problem. Contrary to that, large parts of the population are very much in favour of the repressive approach. The more the subject of crime comes in the focus of attention the more pressure is put on governments to choose the repressive way in crime control. So the public concern about rising crime rates, as expressed at meetings of political parties, labour unions or pressure groups, in the mass media and in surveys, often forms a thwarting factor to a rational criminal policy by the government. Sometimes public opinion about crime is also utilised as a means to defend measures that are only in part aimed at combating crime. Thus, according to Harris (1968) and Weis and Milanovich (1974), in the United States certain political forces would purposely have manipulated the fear of crime as a means of hollowing out the constitutional civil rights. Block (1971) points out that feelings of threat generally reinforce the authority of the Establishment. In an environment of fear and uncertainty the citizens seek the protection of the established powers and are less open to emancipatory develop-

ments. On the other hand, feelings of fear and the like in regard to crime are sometimes interpreted as being a factor which can promote development into a more democratic society. According to this view, the rising crime rate is the striking proof of the shortcomings of the prevailing social order that cannot escape structural reform. Lastly, the commercial interest the security industry has in widespread feelings of unsafety should be pointed out (van Weringh, 1978).

Fear of crime – apart from the manifest and latent political functions it may have – is a social phenomenon which deserves attention on its own account. Fear in itself implies danger to the welfare of the citizen. In addition, people may attach far-reaching consequences to feelings of anxiety. Many women and aged persons dare not venture into the street, which in itself is an acute social problem (Brooks, 1974). People also resort to procuring a watchdog or a weapon. All these reactions combined may lead to people getting more and more estranged from each other, which may result in social disintegration (Conklin, 1975). The increase in the number of arms in private possession endangers directly the safety of the people. In its consequences fear of crime can very well be a causal factor of rising crime rates.

Public opinion about crime determines the limits within which government can pursue a rational and humane criminal policy. In addition to that, the feeling of unsafety which some people have form in themselves a considerable social problem. In short, there is every reason to undertake a study of the way in which public opinion about crime is formed and of the possibilities of influencing this process.

2. Structure of the argument

As appears already in some degree from the introductory remarks, we cannot overlook the necessity to distinguish various sub-phenomena within the phenomenon of public opinion about crime as a whole, such as "anxiety about crime" and "concern about rising crime rates". In the following section we shall try to clear up the complex of views and attitudes towards crime. After that, in Section 4, we shall examine what relations there are between the objective reality of crime and the views of the various groups of the population. From this analysis it will appear that at first sight these relations seem difficult to interpret. Anxiety and concern about crime are not always the highest with those groups of the population that suffer the most from it. In the fifth section, therefore, an attempt will be made to develop a theoretical model that can explain more fully how opinions about crime come into

being with the various groups of the population. In the final section some practical conclusions will follow about the possible ways of influencing public opinion about crime.

3. Public opinion about crime: Its various components

3.1. An a priori analysis of opinion about crime

Public opinion on crime in its widest sense implies the aggregate of all knowledge, attitudes, emotions and behaviour concerning crime of the various sub-groups of a population. Instead of formulating a more sophisticated definition of the subject we will try to determine its most important components.

On theoretical grounds it can be assumed that public opinion about crime in the first place has a cognitive component: people form a notion of the nature and extent of crime. Their perception of crime may relate to various levels of social reality. First, people can have an idea of the height of their own risk of becoming a victim of certain crimes and also of the development of this risk. Many people will also have an opinion about the crime rate in their own district or town. The vaguest are their assumptions about the extent, nature and development of crime all over the country.

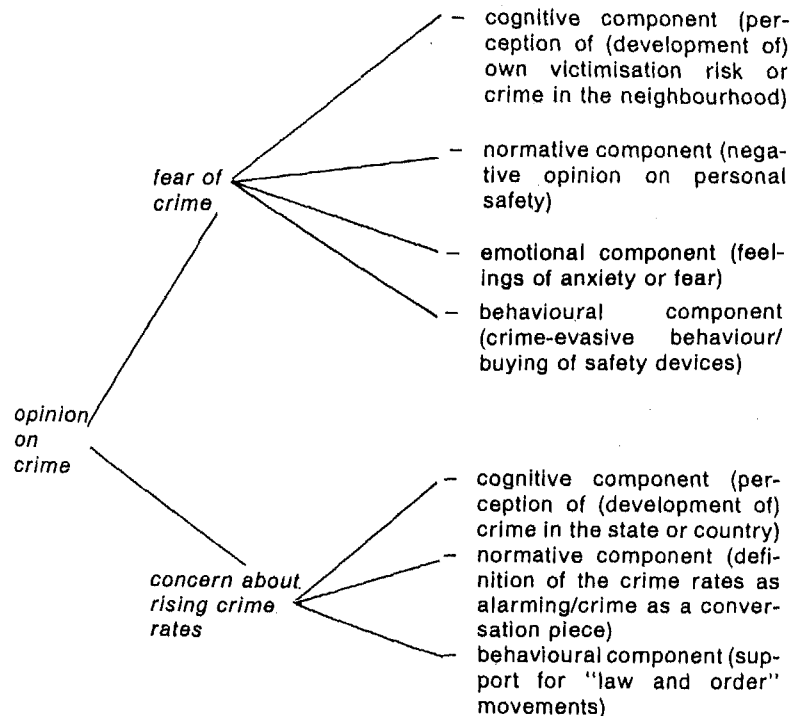
The notion one has about crime will in many cases be connected with a certain judgment. In many cases notion and judgment are hardly even distinguishable from each other. Many people, for instance, will not exactly know the magnitude of their risk of victimisation, but nevertheless think this risk to be "intolerably high in these days". The most prominent dimension of judgment connected with crime perception is the question whether the personal risk of victimisation or the crime rate of the place of residence or country are felt to be a problem which requires some kind of action. To what extent crime is experienced as a problem may vary considerably. As the criminologist's interest in public opinion about crime often originates from an ideological point of view, as was mentioned in the introduction, it is sometimes forgotten that certain types of public concern are just conversational clichés. Some much-discussed "problems" almost exclusively seem to function as a topic of conversation. In this connection the much-discussed generation gap of the sixties comes to mind. To some people crime as a problem may constitute only a problem in words. On the other end of the scale there are those who really consider crime the primary social problem of the present day or those who systematically reflect upon the risk of becoming a victim.

With people who experience their personal risk of victimisation as a continuing threat, the opinion about crime will often have an affective or emotional component. In certain situations they will experience feelings of anxiety and in addition may have a continual feeling of tension.

Finally, people who personally feel themselves under threat of crime may display distinct behavioural patterns in which their fear manifests itself. Examples of such manifestations are a change in their evening-out behaviour or the refusal to answer the door when a stranger rings the bell ... Also the purposive purchase of anti-theft devices can be regarded as an indication that somebody feels himself threatened by crime.

Figure 1

An a priori analysis of the various aspects of public opinion on crime



To sum up, we assume that within public opinion about crime a cognitive, a normative, an emotional and a behavioural component can be distinguished. The perception of crime can relate to the personal risk of victimisation as well as to the crime rate in the place of residence or the country. The perception of the personal risk of victimisation is likely to relate to a specific judgment and to specific emotional and behavioural patterns. The perception of the general crime rate is likely to be associated with a political opinion on that point. Our *a priori* analysis of the various contexts of public opinion on crime has been summarised in Figure 1.

3.2. *An assessment of the empirical data*

Empirical research into public opinion about crime is almost exclusively represented by studies that followed the methods of a mailed questionnaire or interviews. Observational studies of the attitudinal or behavioural components have never been made as yet. So the empirical data available on this subject consist of answers to various survey items. A caveat has to be put in concerning the validity of this body of knowledge. Items in questionnaires on emotional topics like crime or criminal policy will often have a suggestive phrasing or introduction (van Weringh, 1978). Besides, certain elements of the fear of crime – e.g. the fear of rape – are probably not easily expressed during an interview.

On the one hand, we would like to stress the importance of observational studies on the subject of fear of crime. On the other hand, we feel the international collection of survey data on this subject should not be discarded too quickly. The weakness of much research done by polling agencies is due to the absence of a proper context of interpretation. When a conceptional frame of reference is made available the results of various polls or surveys can more easily be tested for consistency. Consistency of findings may indicate validity, as has been pointed out by Noelle-Neumann (1977). When slightly different versions of the same question yield highly similar results, this question is presumably unambiguous and "to the point". In addition, a theoretical model will enable one to test the internal consistency of a complex of findings concerning a particular phenomenon. It also yields better opportunities for external validation.

Still, cross-cultural comparisons in particular should, of course, be made with great caution. The concepts used in both questions and answers can have different meanings in the various cultures. As we will show, public attitudes towards crime in the West are centred around

images of serious crimes of violence. Presumably the realities of violent crime are much more uniform across the Western world than, for instance, the realities of law enforcement. As a consequence we assume the key concepts of public opinion on crime to be relatively cross-cultural too. This basic assumption has, of course, to be validated by sophisticated research. The comparisons between findings from various cultures that will be made in this report will hopefully be a stimulus to such research.

In the following we will first examine in which studies and by means of which questions the various components of public opinion on crime have been measured. We will then discuss the main results of these studies accordingly. At the end of the paragraph we will discuss the interrelationship of the various components and/or items.

The cognitive component

In some studies the perception of the personal risk of victimisation has been measured by means of the question whether one's personal risk of victimisation was assumed to be high or less high (Fürstenberg, 1971; Block, 1971; Conklin, 1975; Erskin, 1973; Ennis, 1967). The standard question reads, for example: "How likely is it that a person walking around here at night will be held up or attacked?". In practically not a single survey is it asked to give an absolute estimate of the personal risk.¹

Almost invariably it is asked what people as residents of a certain district or town, roughly speaking, think of their chance of falling victim to a specific offence.

In a number of studies people are asked for their perception of the growth of crime in their district during the last two years (Kleiman, David, 1973; Erskin, 1974; Stephan, 1976). One study asks for people's perception of the development of their personal risk of victimisation (Cozijn, van Dijk, 1976).

One of the most frequent questions in public opinion polls about crime is the question whether crime has increased or not in the respondent's own country or state (Banks, Maloney and Wilcock, 1975; McIntyre, 1967; Courtis, 1970; Peyrefitte, 1977). In a Swedish survey it was asked to give a numerical estimate of the number of homicides during the past year (Lenke, 1973).

1. From a Dutch exploratory study it appeared that most respondents are unable to answer such a question (Gubbels *et al.*, 1978). A similar problem was met by Davis (1952).

In 1973, 48 % of the United States' population held the view that crime in their own district had increased during the past year. In the German town of Stuttgart this percentage was 20 % during that year. In 1975, 40 % of the Dutch population were of the opinion that their personal risk of victimisation had been on the increase during the last two years. The percentage of people that hold the view that crime on the national or metropolitan level has increased is considerably higher. In the United States (Washington D.C.) in 1975, three-quarters of the citizens thought that crime had increased during the past year (Biderman *et al.*, 1967). In Canada (1969) and England (1966) three-quarters of the population likewise thought crime was on the increase (Courtis, 1970; Banks *et al.*, 1975). The purest comparison between the perception of crime in one's own district and that of crime in general can be found in the Stuttgart survey. Twenty per cent were of the opinion that in their own neighbourhood crime had increased, while 83 % felt that crime in West Germany had increased (Stephan, 1976). In Switzerland these percentages were 19 % and 70 % respectively (Stephan, 1976). In France in 1975 a good 75 % held the view that violence in general had increased (Peyrefitte, 1977).

The resulting hypothesis that many people perceive the development of crime in their own neighbourhood as much less gloomy than the development of crime in general is also affirmed in another way. It has appeared from several American studies that three-quarters of the respondents think their own neighbourhood to be relatively safe (McIntyre, 1967; Gibbons *et al.*, 1972).

Also the majority of residents of neighbourhoods with relatively high crime rates thought their neighbourhood to be relatively safe (McIntyre, 1967). In this connection Rhodes (1977) discusses the outcome that even residents of neighbourhoods with an *extremely* high crime rate think favourably of the level of crime in their neighbourhood.

Which types of crime?

The research carried out by Cozijn and van Dijk (1975) demonstrated that, in the Netherlands, to almost three-quarters of the population the word "crime" evokes thoughts of acts of violence (murders, robberies, etc.). In the Netherlands, however, most people estimate their own risk of becoming a victim of an offence against their person to be lower than their risk of becoming victim of an offence against property. Half of the Dutch population feels that he/she runs the greatest risk of becoming a victim of an offence against property.¹

1. Of the female population below the age of 35, however, a majority thought the personal risk of being sexually attacked to be greater than the risk of becoming a victim of a property offence.

In the German study it was asked which type of crime, in the judgment of the respondents, had increased most in their own neighbourhood and in the Federal Republic respectively. Regarding their own neighbourhood, "theft" and "breaking and entering" were especially mentioned as offences being on the increase. At the national level, however, the rise in the number of robberies was thought to be highest. The perception of the development of crime at the national level is likely to be determined by the perception of the development of serious offences against the person. The perception of crime at the local level seems, on the other hand, to be also determined by the perception of crime against property (Stephan, 1976).

An analysis of the development of the perceptions of crime between 1965 and 1973 in the United States additionally shows that these perceptions strongly fluctuate annually. The percentage of people holding the view that crime had increased was particularly high after the Kennedy murder and during the Vietnam demonstrations (Erskin, 1974). Obviously, the perception of crime is strongly influenced by political tensions. This condition might explain people's favourable perception of the crime rate in their own neighbourhood compared to that in others. Political tensions will not generally manifest themselves in their own neighbourhood in the form of demonstrations and the like.

The normative component (opinion on personal safety)

Many surveys have a question concerning the respondent's opinion about *the level of safety* of his/her own city or neighbourhood (Block, 1971; Conklin, 1975; Curtis, 1970; Cozijn and van Dijk, 1975; Ennis, 1967; Gibbons *et al.*, 1972; Hindelang, 1974).

The standard question runs: "Is there any area right around here – that is, within a mile – where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?". Many surveys also have questions on opinions about the development of the perceived safety of the place of residence (Erskin, 1974). In 1972, 41 % of the United States population gave an affirmative answer to the above-mentioned question (Hindelang, 1974). In the Netherlands in 1975, 31 % of the respondents answered a comparable question affirmatively (Cozijn, van Dijk, 1975) and in Canada 36 % (Curtis, 1975).

The percentage of the residents of Toronto who indicated worry about the chance of being burgled was much smaller than the percentage who worried about the chance of becoming a victim of an act of violence. Also in England (Banks *et al.*, 1975) and the Netherlands

(Cozijn and van Dijk, 1975) it appeared that most people worry more about (sexual) acts of violence than about offences against property.

The unanimous conclusion of the research into attitudes regarding the personal risk of victimisation is that most people regard the risk of becoming the victim of an act of violence as the primary problem (McIntyre, 1967). In the foregoing, however, we observed that the perception of the personal risk of victimisation is especially aimed at offences against property. So a strong interrelation between perception and attitude is not to be expected here.

Crime as a social problem

In the United States, since 1945, people are regularly asked to express their views on which social problems are the most serious. Only in 1965 for the first time part of the respondents spontaneously mentioned the problem of (violent) crime (Erskin, 1973). In response to an open-ended question, 13 % of the inhabitants of Frankfurt (West Germany) mentioned crime as one of the five principal problems of the town. When people are asked to select the three main problems from a list of specified problems, crime is selected by the largest percentage of the population. In the United States this type of opinion poll even shows frequently that crime is most often regarded as the chief problem (McIntyre, 1967). In West Germany (Stephan, 1976) as well as in the Netherlands (Cozijn and van Dijk, 1975) 15 % of the population mentioned crime as the main social problem. In that survey, crime as a problem came second only to unemployment. In France, crime control was reckoned among the three first priorities of the government (Peyrefitte, 1977). In England in 1968, crimes of violence ranked second (Gallup Institute, London, *vide* Lenke, 1973). How crime is judged as a social problem can also be examined by using specific, narrow questions. Fiselier (1978) asked, for instance, in an interview whether the respondents could agree with the statement that crimes of violence had increased appallingly in the last few years. The concern about rising crime rates is probably measured most accurately in such a way.¹

Taken together, the polling results seem to indicate that a substantial minority of the population considers the development of violent criminality as the primary problem of society. A majority of the population considers violent crime to be one of the most pressing problems at the present time.

1. The ranking of social problems assumes the existence of a unidimensional scale. The question is whether such a scale obtains in the mind of the public.

Crime as a conversational topic

As already noted in the introduction, crime may also be superficially viewed as a problem. Broadly speaking, public opinion on crime includes every remark made about crime. In order to get an insight into public opinion on crime in its broadest sense, people were asked in a national survey whether they had discussed crime with anyone the day before the survey (Coenen and van Dijk, 1978). It appeared that 19% of the adult Dutch population had had a conversation about crime the day before. Of the ten other topics mentioned in the questionnaire only sport and unemployment had higher percentages. Politics were discussed by a smaller percentage of the population (17%). The majority of conversations about crime took place in a domestic setting. Most respondents indicated the conversation had been quite serious and lasted for at least ten minutes. Half of the conversations about crime centred on a recently committed crime of violence against the person. This result revealed that murder is one of the Dutchman's favourite topics of conversation. Broadly speaking, one out of ten Dutch people has a daily conversation about an actual murder case. Only 16% of the Dutch population claimed never to discuss crime.

The emotional and behavioural components of the fear of crime

The emotional and behavioural components of the concept of fear of crime have, as far as we know, been exclusively investigated in surveys.¹ In two Dutch surveys people were asked if they ever felt really frightened at home, and if they were ever afraid while they were out (Cozijn, van Dijk, 1975; Fiselier, 1978). Questions like: "How safe do you feel walking alone in your neighbourhood after dark?", could be said to measure both an opinion on crime and the emotional component of the fear of crime. Various interview questions have been used in surveys on the different types of evasive behaviour which people display in order to protect themselves from crime (McIntyre, 1967; Conklin, 1975; Courtis, 1970). In the United States, respondents were asked if they ever went out at night for entertainment (and if not, why not) and whether they ever thought seriously about moving to another neighbourhood (and if so, why). In the American surveys, and in similar surveys in Germany, Canada and the Netherlands, respondents were asked whether they actually avoided visiting certain areas in their cities because of fear of crime. In the Netherlands, respondents were

1. The WODC is currently making a pilot study in which the *actual* behaviour of those who stated in a survey whether they open the door to strangers at night or not, will be determined a month later.

also questioned about their most likely reaction when a strange man rings the doorbell at ten o'clock at night. In Canada, respondents were asked what precautions they take before leaving their houses for a long period of time (Curtis, 1970). Finally, the purchase of such technical safety devices as extra locks, burglar alarm systems, etc. and weapons may also reveal the fear of crime. The study of methods of unarmed combat, etc., for self-protection is another possible indication of this. It must be borne in mind, however, that both the possession of weapons and the learning of methods of self-defence are strongly influenced by (sub)culture. Seven per cent of the Canadian population carries a weapon. The percentage for the Netherlands is much lower. This does not mean, however, that the fear of crime is much greater in Canada than in the Netherlands. The fact is that possession of weapons is much more strictly controlled in the Netherlands.

Summary

The above research results concerning public opinion on crime may be summarised as follows. Crime in general and murder, etc., in particular are among the most popular topics of conversation. The majority of the population considers the increase in violent crime to be one of the most serious social problems at the present time. A substantial minority even considers it to be the most important problem.

Three-quarters of the population is of the opinion that there has recently been a sharp increase in crime, with particular reference to crimes of violence.

The population is somewhat less pessimistic about the personal victimisation risk. Less than half the population thinks that there has been a recent increase in the personal victimisation risk. It seems that perception of the personal victimisation risk is often determined by the perception of crime against property. The great majority of citizens consider the crime rate to be relatively low in their own neighbourhood. However, in spite of the optimistic view of the personal victimisation risk, there is considerable fear of becoming the victim of violent crime.

A large minority of the population manifests such fear of violence by having serious feelings of fear in specific situations, and by crime-evasive behaviour.

The interrelation of the various components of public opinion on crime – the difference between concern for crime as a social issue and fear of crime

The survey conducted by Fiselier (1978) included a large number of different questions concerning public opinion on crime.

This survey revealed that there was only a weak correlation between opinions on the increase of crime in society and those on the increase of the personal victimisation risk and feelings of fear. Cluster analyses show that two clearly distinct clusters were involved here.¹ This result ties in with the conclusion reached by Cozijn and van Dijk (1975) that the Dutch people who consider crime to be the greatest social problem do not themselves display a particularly marked fear of crime. Various studies in the United States have also determined that there is little correlation between personal feelings of unsafety and the political concern about high crime rates (Fürstenberg, 1971; Rhodes, 1975). Concern about crime as a social issue and personal feelings of unsafety apparently have different backgrounds.

Research by Cozijn and van Dijk (1975) showed that the relation between fear of crime and political concern was less tenuous in areas with relatively high crime rates. When fear of crime is based on personal experience (of serious crime) it apparently does become a factor in determining the political attitude towards crime. From now on the two dimensions in public opinion on crime mentioned above will, however, be discussed separately.

Perception of victimisation risk and fear of crime

Research by Cozijn and van Dijk (1975) and Fiselier (1978) did not reveal a strong connection between the perception of increased personal victimisation risk and fear of crime. The reason for this could be that the perception of increased personal victimisation risk is linked to crime against property, while the fear of crime is linked to crimes of violence. Someone who considers the level of property crime to be stable may at the same time show great fear of violent crime. Research by Conklin (1975) revealed a relation between the perception of the local crime rate and the fear of crime in areas with relatively high crime rates. Perception of the local level of crime apparently only becomes a factor related to the fear of crime if it is backed up by personal experience of crimes of a more or less serious nature. Without this

1. The correlation between the (scaled) variable "fear of crime" and the (scaled) variable "concern for high crime rates" was particularly weak among the sub-category of males.

personal experience the perception of crime seems to be more casual and concerned with crime in general. Moreover, the people who are seldom confronted with crime are presumably the ones whose perception of it is often coloured by news about social confrontations (demonstrations, strikes, etc.).

There is a strong link between the opinion about personal safety and the emotional component (fear of crime). People who worry about becoming the victims of violent crime also experience more feelings of anxiety (Cozijn and van Dijk, 1975). There is also an obvious relation between the opinion on personal safety and crime-evasive behaviour. However, there is relatively little relation between the decision to buy technical safety devices and weapons for the prevention of crime, and the other indicators of fear of crime.

Boggs (1971) noted that in the suburbs people protect their houses better against crime than people in poor urban neighbourhoods, although the former consider their own neighbourhoods to be relatively safe. The purchase of technical safety devices does not seem to bear much relation to fear of crime in Canada (Courtis, 1970), France (Peyrefitte, 1977), and the Netherlands. It is likely that economic position is a much more important factor here. Moreover, fear of crime is inspired by crimes of violence, while technical safety measures are used to prevent property crime.

Summary

There is very little connection between concern for rising crime rates as a political issue and personal fear of crime. Two distinct dimensions within public opinion on crime are involved here. In the rest of the report the factors involved in the development of the fear of crime will be investigated separately from those involved in the development of politically loaded concern about high crime rates.

The connection between the perception of (increased) personal victimisation risk and the other indicators of fear of crime is weaker than one would expect. The apparent explanation for this is that personal fear of crime is inspired by (sexual) crimes of violence while perception has a more general basis. There is a close correlation between the opinion on personal safety and the emotional components of the fear of crime. The purchase of technical safety devices appears to be influenced more by the economic position of those in question than by the fear of crime. Technical safety measures are aimed at the prevention of burglary, whereas the fear of crime is mainly inspired by crimes of violence.

4. Investigation into the origin of concern for rising crime rates and of fear of crime

4.1. The influence of past victimisation

According to common-sense reasoning, actual victimisation will be the most important source both of concern about rising crime rates and of fear of crime. People who have themselves been victims of a traffic accident will presumably be more aware of the dangers of modern traffic, and more concerned about them too. Likewise those who have personally been the victims of crime, or know of someone from their neighbourhood who has, will be much more aware of the possible dangers than people who have never had such experience. Some recent American studies showed that people who had recently been victims were indeed more pessimistic about crime and the victimisation risk than others (Ennis, 1967; Kleiman and David, 1973). A recent investigation into mugging, in particular, revealed a great fear of crime among the victims (Conklin, 1975).

Remarkably enough, however, most studies have shown little difference between recent victims and the remaining respondents where perception, concern and fear of crime are concerned. McIntyre (1967) and Block and Long (1973) based their conclusion that neither anxiety nor concern bear much relation to personal experience on the results of national research in the USA. The only exception to this was the increased fear of crime among a group of male Negroes who had recently been victims. The percentage of the French population actually confronted with crime is so small that the confrontations in question are unable to account for the concern about violence (Peyrefitte, 1977). It is true that significant relations between the degree of confrontation with crime and the opinion on crime were discovered in Germany (Stephan, 1976) and the Netherlands (Cozijn and van Dijk, 1976). However, this accounted for only 1.5 % of the variance in the fear of crime scores in the Dutch study. Fiselier (1978) did not find any correlations between his measurement of exposure to crime and the opinion on crime at all. The reason for the low correlation between these variables may be traced to the fact that almost no respondents had been the victims of a really serious offence. It is obvious that the experience of being the victim of a minor property crime will have hardly any influence on the fear of crime and concern about the rising crime rate, as the latter are inspired by crimes of violence. As personal experience of crime is insufficient explanation for the variance in public opinion on crime, there must be other factors which play an important part in shaping public opinion. In order to trace these factors we shall

first study the distribution of concern about crime as a social issue and fear of crime among the different population groups. If a particular population group is seen to display a remarkably great fear of, or concern about, crime, it then becomes relevant to analyse the characteristics of the group in question to discover which are likely to be responsible for such an opinion. The objective victimisation risk of the group would also have to be investigated.

4.2. *Disaggregations of public opinion on crime*

4.2.1. *Concern about crime as a social issue among the various population groups*

The idea that serious crime is on the increase and poses a serious problem is equally prevalent in urban and rural areas (Ennis, 1967). It is difficult to say how much the objective crime situation in the place of residence affects the concern about crime as a social issue. In the Netherlands concern about crime does not appear to be related to the degree of urbanisation of the place of residence: the inhabitants of big cities do not display higher levels of concern (Cozijn and van Dijk, 1975; Fiselier, 1978). However, according to the results of national victim surveys, the objective victimisation risks are much greater in the big cities (van Dijk and Vianen, 1977).

In the American city of Baltimore, concern levels appeared to be higher in areas with the lowest recorded crime rates (Fürstenberg, 1971). However, a positive relation between concern about crime and the local crime rate was revealed in two other American studies (Gibbons *et al.*, 1972; Conklin, 1975).

The relation between the local crime situation and concern about crime as a social issue is somewhat unclear. A more consistent picture emerges, however, from the analysis of the relations between socio-graphic variables such as sex, age and social status, and the concern about crime. In the United States, concern about crime seems to be evenly distributed among the various population groups. This is not the case in Europe. French research reveals that most concern is shown by the elderly and those with little education (Peyrefitte, 1977). In the German city of Stuttgart, the elderly and those of lower social status also showed more concern about rising crime rates (Stephan, 1976). The German study also revealed that there was slightly more concern among the female population. English research yielded identical results (Banks *et al.*, 1975; Lenke, 1973). The idea that murder is on the increase has most effect on women, the elderly and people with little

education in England. In a Swedish survey, respondents were asked to estimate the number of murders committed there annually. The majority of respondents seem to have greatly overestimated the number. People with little education, women, and those from the provinces gave the highest estimates (Lenke, 1973). Finally, in the Netherlands multivariate analysis of the relations between a large number of independent variables and the variable concern for rising crime rates revealed that the most important factor is education, followed by age and sex (Fiselier, 1978). In the Netherlands the poorly educated, the elderly and women display an above-average concern about the increase in violent crime.

Concern about crime as a social issue in most Western countries is greatest among the poorly educated, the elderly and women. Are these also the population groups which suffer most from crime? This is definitely not the case where the elderly are concerned. Victim surveys in the USA (Cook, 1976), Germany (Stephan, 1976) and the Netherlands (van Dijk and Vianen, 1977), reveal that the victimisation risk for all forms of crime decreases with increasing age. In general, the victimisation figures are also lower for the female half of the population (McIntyre, 1967; Aromaa, 1974, Stephan, 1976; van Dijk and Vianen, 1977). The only exception to this is the higher victimisation risk of rape for young women.

The relation between level of education or social status and victimisation figures is less obvious. The higher social classes in the USA, Germany and the Netherlands clearly suffer more from property crime. The lower social classes in Germany and the USA have higher percentages where violent crime is concerned. In the Netherlands being a victim of violent crime is not clearly linked to social status (van Dijk and Vianen, 1977; Fiselier, 1978). In Scandinavia it is the higher social classes which have the highest victimisation figures for violent crime (Aromaa, 1974). To sum up, it may be concluded that concern about crime as a social issue is greatest among older men and women, with little education. The degree of urbanisation of the place of residence seems to make little difference in this respect. The group of concerned citizens just described does not, according to the results of victim surveys, belong to the sector of the population suffering most from violent crime. Young men, e.g. students, are the typical victims of violent crime in the big cities. People from the highest social classes are the typical victims of burglary, etc. In the next chapter we shall deal with the question of which factors lead middle-aged people with little education to show the greatest concern about violent crime when they have relatively little to fear from it.

4.2.2. *The fear of crime in different population groups*

There is a high correlation between the fear of crime and the degree of urbanisation of the place of residence (Hindelang 1974; Cozijn and van Dijk, 1976). In general, it can be said that fear of crime is greater when the local victimisation figures are higher (Bloch, Long, 1973). This presumably means that the fear of crime is more closely linked to people's everyday social experience than is the case with concern about crime (Fürstenberg, 1974).

It is sex, out of the demographic factors sex, age and social status, which has the highest correlation with fear of crime.¹ In Germany, France, the USA, Canada and the Netherlands, the women's scores for the indicators of fear of crime were often twice as high as the men's (Stephan, 1976; Hindelang, 1974; Courtis, 1970; Peyrefitte, 1977; Cozijn and van Dijk, 1975).

The connection between the age factor and the fear of crime is less obvious. In Canada, the Netherlands and Germany the youngest age group had a relatively high score for the attitudinal components of the fear of crime.

Further analysis of the Dutch figures revealed that the young women accounted for the group's relatively high score. It appears that the population group with the greatest fear of crime consists of the young women in big cities (Cozijn and van Dijk, 1975).

Both German and Dutch research has revealed the existence of a curvilinear relation between the age factor and fear of crime. The fear of crime is relatively low among the middle-aged. The fear of crime increases again after the fiftieth birthday. The feelings of fear among the elderly appear to be a recent phenomenon. In 1965 American research revealed that fear of crime among the over-sixties was no greater than in any other age group. It was obviously greater in 1974 (Cook and Cook, 1976). In the USA the social status factor and fear of crime are closely linked. Coloured people and those with lower incomes show relatively great fear of crime (Hindelang, 1974). In Germany (Stephan, 1976) and the Netherlands (Cozijn and van Dijk, 1975) the connection is either very weak or non-existent. Here, too, one must ask whether the distribution of opinion is consistent with the actual victimisation risk. It is clear that fear of crime is more firmly based on personal experience and realistic perception of the local

1. A possible explanation is that Western women are more inclined to admit to feelings of fear than men. The correlation between the sex factor and the various indicators of fear of crime is so high, however, that this can only be a partial explanation.

crime situation than is the case with concern about crime as a social issue. The relatively high level of fear shown by the inhabitants of big cities and slum neighbourhoods appears to be a logical corollary of high local crime rates. Also the particularly high level of fear among young women appears consistent with the actual risk of being raped or sexually molested. The relatively high levels of fear among middle-aged women and the elderly are less easy to understand, however. Both middle-aged women and the elderly have lower victimisation risks than any other age or sex group (Cook and Cook, 1976; Stephan, 1976; van Dijk and Vianen, 1977). The high level of fear among both groups needs further investigation, since the actual victimisation risks cannot account for it.

5. A closer look at the concern about rising crime rates among the lower socio-economic strata, and at the fear of crime among the middle-aged and the elderly

5.1. Introduction

In the above paragraph it was shown that concern about rising crime rates as a social issue had little connection with actual victimisation risks. Much closer relations were found between the concern about crime and the level of education.

Concern about crime appeared to be most prevalent among middle-aged people with little education.

The fear of crime appears to be rooted in personal experience and realistic expectations to a higher degree than concern about crime as a social issue. However, the high level of fear among middle-aged females and the elderly is not consistent with their relatively low victimisation risks. There seems to be an irrational element in the fear shown by these two groups.

Actual experience of crime plays a limited role in the development of public opinion on crime. Public opinion is very much concerned with violent crime, which actually victimises a small minority of the population.

Apparently the majority of people derive their opinions on crime and its trends largely from vicarious sources. Public opinion on crime is shaped and expressed in daily conversations at home and in the office. Therefore, data about such conversations might offer a clue as to which factors are involved in the development of public opinion.

5.2. *Crime as a topic of conversation and the news media*

From the above-mentioned study of crime as a topic of conversation it appeared that 79 % of all conversations dealt with recently committed crimes (van Dijk and Coenen, 1978). Those who had discussed an actual crime were asked how they had come to know about it. Of those still able to remember, 66 % said the paper, 13 % the radio or television, and 13 % another person. This result is in line with the finding of McIntyre (1967) that 45 % of the population of the USA consider the newspapers to be their main source of information about crime rates. It seems that personal observation hardly ever leads to a conversation about crime.

Information drawn from the press seems to be almost conditional to having a conversation on crime. Therefore, the possible influence of crime reporting in the daily press on public opinion on crime will be scrutinised in more detail in the following paragraphs. After a brief discussion of the volume and contents of crime reporting in the daily press we will explore the relations between exposure to crime reports and public opinion, with special reference to those groups of the population whose attitudes towards crime are hard to understand on the basis of their exposure to victimisation.

5.3. *The central role of newspapers in crime reporting*

In theory the three mass media, the press, radio and television, could give an equal amount of coverage to crime. However, recently committed crimes are seldom mentioned in news programmes broadcast by Dutch national television networks. In fact, Dutch television news programmes only report on politically motivated kidnappings or hijackings. Neither do the current affairs programmes cover ordinary crime. Apparently homicide, armed robbery and rape are not considered newsworthy enough for television. It is possible that such topics only have local news value and therefore lack significance in national news broadcasts. The non-commercial nature of television broadcasting agencies could also account for their cautious attitude towards crime news. Perhaps educational considerations have greater influence on the selection of items for news broadcasts than they do on the editorial policy of certain newspapers.

Fatal traffic accidents and serious crimes are often given a brief mention at the end of radio news programmes. In practice, newspaper journalists have the field of crime reporting pretty much to themselves, as this category of news is largely ignored by television. Crime reporting is one of the few areas in which the press has been able to

retain a monopoly position. The daily papers, especially, have ample opportunity to come up with scoops.

Market research among (potential) readers of the daily press has clearly revealed that the crime news is one of the most popular, if not the most popular, sections of present-day newspapers (van Wieringh, 1978). The equal amount of interest shown by both sexes in crime news makes it even more popular than sports news. Our own study also shows that the reports on crime and traffic accidents are the most frequently read parts of the daily paper (Coenen and van Dijk, 1978).

Bearing the above-sketched background in mind, it may be expected that many newspapers will have recently begun to devote more editorial space to crime reporting. A study of ten representative newspapers in the Netherlands, from 1966 to 1974, revealed that the percentage of editorial space devoted to crime articles had increased by 30 % during that period (Coenen and van Dijk, 1976). This statistically significant upward trend was caused by an increase both in the number of articles printed and in their average length (including illustrations).¹

This emphasis on crime reporting in the papers would appear to be a logical consequence of the supply and demand situation in the mass media market.²

5.4. *The contents of crime reporting in the daily press*

In the first place a distinction must be made, within journalistic crime reporting as a whole, between domestic and foreign crime news. Foreign crime news is mainly concerned with politically motivated crime and political trials, so it actually belongs to the category of foreign *political* news. However, reports on politically motivated crimes often emphasise the crimes themselves rather than the motives or circumstances behind them (Knopf, 1970). Such reports often take the form of actuality without context (Stuart Hall, 1973). It is often difficult for foreign journalists to understand the context of these crimes. The fact that many European newspapers have had to reduce the number of

1. In 1974, 3.44 % of editorial space was devoted to articles on crimes committed within the Netherlands. Dutch papers devote almost as much space to reports on political crimes and trials taking place abroad (Coenen and van Dijk, 1978). This means that on balance Dutch newspapers devote the same percentage of editorial space to general crime reporting as the papers in other West European countries (Lenke, 1973).

2. The increase in crime reporting cannot be explained solely by the increase of registered crime. The editorial space devoted to crime news has long been known to be independent of crime rates (Davis, 1952; Rock, 1973). Moreover, the great differences between the various newspapers with regard to crime news indicate that the percentage of space devoted to crime reports is based on editorial policy.

foreign correspondents in their employ has aggravated the problem. Superficial reports on politically motivated crimes committed abroad may contribute to the general sense of living in a world full of meaningless explosions of violence. Since the victims of terrorism are often selected at random, such reports may be particularly fear-inspiring to certain groups of readers.

Reports on domestic crime are mainly concerned with serious crimes of violence. According to Lenke (1973), an average of 45 % of crime reports in West European newspapers deal with violent crime. A study of the trends in crime reporting in the Swedish press between 1951 and 1970 reveals that there is an increased emphasis on the reporting of violent crime (Lenke, 1973). Our study revealed that 31 % of all crime reports and 37 % of all trial reports were devoted to crimes of violence, which account for less than 5 % of all registered crime in the Netherlands.¹ The actual emphasis on violent crime is revealed not only by the disproportionately large number of articles on crime, but also by the placing and layout of these articles. Articles on violent crime and public disturbances appear much more frequently on the front page than articles on other types of crime, and usually have larger and bolder headlines (Coenen and van Dijk, 1975).

Our study also revealed that about two-thirds of the crime articles come under the category of news reports. About one-fifth of all crime articles deal with reports on trials. Thirteen per cent of all crime articles can be categorised as articles dealing with certain aspects of crime in general (e.g. articles on crime trends or on the causes of particular categories of crime).

An extensive attempt has been made to define the characteristics of the contents of various crime articles more accurately. However, this more refined content analysis has yielded mainly negative results. It appeared that only 4 % of the reports on particular crimes or trials contained general remarks on certain categories of crime or criminal.² Opinions on the behaviour of the police, the prosecution or the judge were rarely expressed. Like Roshier (1975) we found that most articles were lacking in information on the social or psychological background of the offender.

These results indicate that most reports on crime or trials supply little factual information and few explicit opinions on crime or crime

1. The percentages give the amount of total column space devoted to crime reports and trial reports respectively.

2. Nine times out of ten, general remarks on crime trends or the fear of crime state that crime rates and/or the feeling of insecurity are on the increase.

prevention. There are great quantitative differences between the daily papers where crime reporting is concerned. Dutch daily papers aimed at the masses devote twice as much space to crime reporting as the so-called quality papers. It is more difficult to define qualitative differences¹. According to Angenent (1976), however, several small studies have indicated that it is the papers aimed at the mass readership which supply relatively little background information.

These papers also have the tendency to sensationalise their reports on crime. Schneider discusses the comparable results of a German study in his report (see below).

To sum up, it may be said that crime reporting in the press is selectively aimed at crimes of violence. Attention is seldom paid to traffic or industrial crimes. This goes for both domestic and foreign crime reporting. Moreover, it appears that the reporting of both categories often offers the reader actuality without context. Articles giving a view of the extent, nature and background of the various forms of crime are in the minority.

5.5. The impact of crime reporting on public opinion on crime

Newspapers pay a disproportionately large amount of attention to serious crimes of violence. It follows that one may get an exaggerated impression of the extent and increase in violent crime from reading the newspapers, while underestimating the seriousness of other types of crime. Reports on violent crime may very well give the impression that anyone could be the next victim, because of their tendency to isolate the horrifying incident from its social and psychological context (Lenke, 1973). What has empirical research on the influence of the press in this area revealed until now? According to Noelle-Neumann (1977), the mass media have the greatest influence on public opinion when a certain stereotyped view is portrayed with great regularity by both the television and the press. In such a situation people are no longer able to dissociate themselves from the message by means of selective observation. At the same time, alternative views come to be associated with the deviant standpoint of a minority. Since most people are reluctant to admit to a minority view for psychological reasons, a "public opinion" comes into being after a certain amount of time. Public

1. The supposition expressed by Meyer (1976), that papers considered to be more conservative may tend to report more of what happens after the commission of a crime, is based on a study of crime reporting in two newspapers in the USA. Our study did not confirm this (Coenen and van Dijk, 1976). The reverse seems to be true where the reporting of foreign crime is concerned. Liberal newspapers tend to print more articles on political trials in foreign countries (Coenen and van Dijk, 1978).

opinion, that is an opinion which can be expressed in public without fear of reprisals. Opposing views fall into "the spiral of silence".

The message that senseless crimes of violence are committed on a very large scale in present-day society is conveyed with great frequency by both television and the press. As the Schneider report shows, the contents of television programmes on crime are similar in many respects to the contents of crime reports in the press. So, according to the Noelle-Neumann theory on the influence of the mass media, it may be surmised that public opinion on crime and violence is partly shaped and maintained by the media. The mass media may have made certain exaggerated opinions on violent crime into "*des opinions chic*".

Research on the influence of crime reporting on attitude formation may be divided into two categories. The first type of study compares the perception of crime rates or trends with both the actual crime rates and the contents of crime reporting. The hypothesis is that the perceptions of crime have greater similarity to the contents of crime reporting than to actual registered crime. The second type of study tests the hypothesis that fear of crime or concern about rising crime rates within a population of individuals is positively correlated with exposure to crime reports in the daily press.

The first type of study has yielded contradictory results. Davis (1952) found confirmation of his hypothesis where the perception of violent crime was concerned. Other findings contradicted this, however. Roshier (1973) discovered that the perception of crime was more closely linked to actual registered crime than to the contents of newspaper reports. A weak point, in our opinion, is that the various aspects of the perception of crime have not been sufficiently taken into account in these studies. The study of the relationship between the degree of exposure to crime news and opinion on crime has also yielded contradictory results.

Conklin (1975) found no connection between exposure to mass communications generally and fear of crime. Both Coenen and van Dijk (1976) and Fiselier (1978) found a significant positive correlation between the frequency with which various crime articles were read and the fear of crime, various external factors being controlled.

A study by Coenen and van Dijk also revealed that people who claimed never to read any newspapers were significantly less pessimistic about their personal victimisation risk than other comparable groups. However, the established measures of association in the

latter studies were rather weak. No correlation was found between exposure to crime reports and concern about rising crime rates.

Correlational studies by themselves can, of course, never produce conclusive evidence on the existence of a causal relation between the reading of crime reports and the emergence of specific opinions on crime. Many of the available findings, however, appear to be in line with the hypothesis of Lenke (1973) concerning the "terrorising effect" of crime reporting by the news media.

A possible reason for the lack of strong links between exposure to crime reports and opinion on crime is that the variable "exposure to crime reports" does not differentiate very much between individuals. The idea that nearly everyone is exposed to crime reports in one way or another becomes plausible enough when the two-step flow of information is taken into account: readers passing the contents of crime reports on to the others. Comparative research in countries like Yugoslavia, where fewer crime reports appear in the daily press, would be of great value.¹

5.6. *The selective use of the news media by the various population groups*

In the above paragraph we put forward both the theoretical and empirical arguments for the thesis that exaggerated views about the dangers of violent crime are partly shaped and maintained by the mass media portrayal of crime. Bearing this in mind, we shall now attempt to deal with the question of whether there are differences in the use made by certain relevant population groups of the mass media crime reports.

American studies have revealed that people with little education show a relatively great interest in violent movies on television, while they are significantly less interested in news programmes (Israel, Simmons and Robinson, 1970).

Similar results were obtained in the Netherlands by Mokken and Bergsma (1971). In our study particular attention was paid to the frequency with which the articles on various topics were read (Coenen and van Dijk, 1978).

Factor analyses revealed the existence of two distinct dimensions in reading habits. One dimension consists of the frequency with which

1. The French report edited by Peyrefitte (1977) is interesting in this connection: there was remarkably little concern about crime in a town where the local papers printed relatively little crime news.

articles of a high information content are read: articles about finance, politics, science, the arts, etc. The other consists of reading habits where such topics as entertainment, sports, crime and family affairs are concerned. There appeared to be a definite correlation between the frequency with which informative articles are read and the respondent's sex and social status. This type of article is less frequently read by women and people of low social status. The same applies to the elderly, but to a lesser degree. There appears to be no relation between the frequency with which the more entertaining type of article, including those on crime, are read and the factors sex, social status and age. The conclusion drawn from these analyses is that while women, those with little education and the elderly read crime articles just as often as the rest of the population, they read articles on finance, politics, economics, science, etc., far less frequently.

Women, the poorly educated and the elderly do not consume more press reports on violent crime. They do not show a remarkably great appetite for this kind of information. They do, however, consume many fewer daily press articles on financial, scientific or political news. Consequently, their daily menu of news about society consists of a relatively large part of crime news. It is therefore to be expected that crime is a relatively important topic when women, the elderly and the poorly educated have their daily conversations about developments in society. Respondents who had read the papers the day before the survey took place were asked if they had discussed what they had read with anybody. Distribution of these conversations according to subject revealed that 17 % were about crime. For the group of women the percentage was 21 % and for the 50-year-olds, 19 %. The percentage was above 17 % for readers of all provincial papers, and under 12 % for readers of "quality" papers.¹

According to these findings, the attention of many women, the elderly and the less educated is drawn to homicides by the reading of a newspaper as a result of their relative incapacity to absorb and discuss other categories of news.

5.7. *The assimilation of crime news by the various population groups*

The subject of crime is not necessarily chosen as a topic out of a particular interest in it, but it is presumably often chosen as a substitute for more complicated and difficult topics of general interest.

1. These deviations from the average percentage were all statistically significant.

People do not always take conversations about crime or murder reports seriously. As we have seen, however, there are indications that public perception of crime trends is influenced by the extreme images of crime portrayed by the news media. These media-induced images may in turn influence attitudes towards crime. The way in which the person receiving information via the media will be influenced very much depends on his preconceptions of crime. Accordingly, the intensive consumption of crime news will have a different effect on women and the elderly, than on men with little education.

Women and the elderly will often be inclined to react fearfully to images of increasing (sexual) violence because of their relative inability to defend themselves. The social isolation of many women, and the elderly in particular, also fosters a defensive attitude to violence. In this way, sensational murder reports in the papers help to increase the fear of crime among women and the elderly who have never been victims of violence, and whose victimisation risks are extremely low. In the Cozijn and van Dijk survey (1975), one of the indicators of fear of crime was a positive answer to the question of whether one ever worried about the possibility of being victimised. Women accounted for 60 % of the respondents who answered yes. When asked for the instigations of such worries, 40 % spontaneously mentioned the newspaper. Women and the elderly are particularly inclined to let fear of crime have a restrictive effect on their social life. As a result, women and the elderly dare not go out at night because of their fear of crime, stimulated and reinforced by sensational stories in the press, when they actually have hardly any need to be afraid.

The relatively great interest in crime news – as a substitute for more informative news about society – shown by the poorly educated appears to be one of the sources for the greater concern about violent crime among the lower social strata. This pronounced concern about the social problem of violent crime can very well give birth to political ideas which are not in agreement with the true interest of the persons involved. The poorly educated, middle-aged people are, for various reasons not to be discussed here, generally in favour of harsh, repressive measures against crime (Bank *et al.*, 1975; Erskin, 1974; Jubelius *et al.*, 1977; Fiselier, 1978). The association of the social problem of crime with "senseless killings" strengthens this attitude of punitiveness. The emergence of more nuanced and enlightened opinions on crime and crime control is practically blocked by "the continuing story" of the latest murder case in the daily newspapers.

One consequence of the relatively high consumption of crime news by the poorly educated seems to be that a real or imaginary increase in violent crime quickly brings a call for repressive measures. This call for law and order is only partly based on personal experience of crime or personal feelings of being at risk (Fiselier, 1978; Fürstenberg, 1974).

In our view it might be a response to the exaggerated portrayal of crime in the media to which the lower strata of the population are differentially exposed as a result of their restricted access to other news categories.

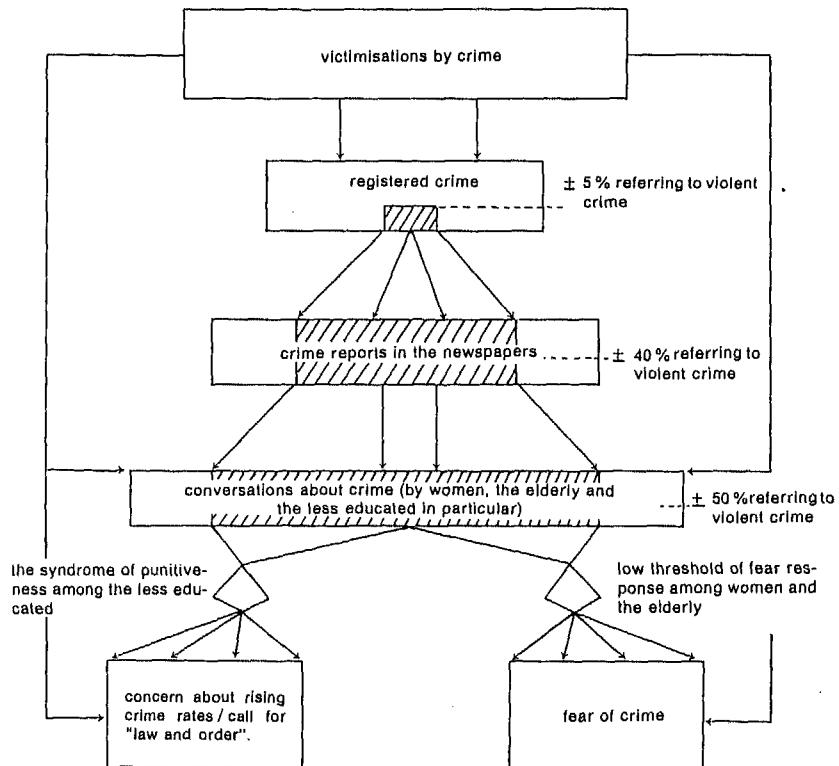
Arzt (1976) has shown that law and order movements are often responses to political tensions, and only take on a virulent character if fed by personal experience of crime (and resultant fear). In our opinion, personal experience of such minor crimes as vandalism and larceny can indeed reinforce both the fear of crime and concern about rising crime rates. Someone who has been the victim of vandalism may take this experience to mean that violent crime is a real threat to him. This type of experience, in combination with the consumption of murder stories in the papers, leads to conversations about the rising crime rate. It must also be said here that the experience of being victimised may also lead to the development of a more realistic view of crime and delinquents. The study by Cozijn and van Dijk (1975) revealed that recent victims were less inclined to subscribe to certain negative stereotypes of delinquent than those who had not been victimised.

The tentative, theoretical model set out here in order to try and explain the high level of fear of crime among middle-aged women and the elderly and the concern about rising crime rates among the poorly educated may be summarised as follows. The daily press in North America and Western Europe in general, and the papers aimed at the non-intellectual sections of the population in particular, pay great attention to recently committed serious crimes of violence. These dramatic articles are the most widely read and discussed. They particularly form a large part of the news consumed and reproduced by women, the elderly and the poorly educated. These three groups do not show a particularly great interest in crime news. Rather, their ability to assimilate more complicated news items (on finance, economics, world politics) is often so limited that they are more likely to discuss traffic accidents and crime news.

Women and the elderly have a relatively low threshold for fearful reactions. Some of them identify strongly with the victims in reports of murders (which often have sexual connotations). Their perception of

Figure 2

A graphic representation of a theoretical model which tries to explain the emergence of public attitudes towards crime. The different volumes of the blocks should not be interpreted to represent the exact ratio of the phenomena. Feedback loops have not been taken into account.



crime, influenced by such reports, may lead to fear of crime and, finally, to crime-evasive behaviour patterns (including restriction of mobility). Poorly educated people tend to react to a perceived wave of serious violence by calling for repressive measures. The syndrome of punitiveness feeds on reports of senseless killings. Both the fear of crime among women and the elderly and the concern about crime among the poorly educated are reinforced by experience with petty crime. Such minor victimisation is often taken as proof that society is indeed unsafe.

Lastly, it should be understood that this theoretical model only holds within certain boundary conditions. When the victimisation percentages of serious crimes of violence surpass a critical level personal experiences of crime will become a predominant factor of attitude generation. These boundary conditions, however, are still clearly present in most parts of Western Europe.

In Figure 2 an attempt has been made to give a graphic representation of the discussed model.

6. Some recommendations

Since the fear of crime among women and the elderly has a negative effect on their welfare, it poses a serious social problem. The concern among the lower social strata about rising crime rates and the subsequent call for law and order form a hindrance to a rational and humane criminal justice procedure. The call for law and order is also a threat to the cultural achievement of the democratic constitutions of the West. It goes without saying that a sharp reduction in the crime rate would eventually abolish both fear of, and concern about, crime. The primary responsibility for the above-mentioned attitudes lies with the failing policies of crime control of present governments. It is doubtful, however, that there will be any significant reduction in serious crime in the near future. The fact that the phenomena of fear of crime and concern about crime also exists in countries with relatively low crime rates must also be taken into consideration.

The use of police patrols might help to reduce the fear of crime. The mere presence of policemen may increase feelings of safety, even if it does not actually reduce the crime rate. One view which is currently being put forward within the police force is that the main aim of the police, beside that of reducing crime, should be to prevent the fear of crime (Souchon, 1978; Alderson, 1978). Acceptance of this view necessitates a reappraisal of the methods and tasks of police patrols. It

is in any case clear that police action should, where possible, try to avoid increasing fear of crime and concern about rising crime rates. Research aimed at the evaluation of police work will have to pay special attention to this aspect of it. This is also an important aspect of campaigns aimed at stimulating people to take preventive measures themselves. Advertising experts are inclined to juxtapose informative material to certain stereotyped portrayals of crime and criminal in their campaigns. The use of such stereotypes may actually lead to a reinforcement, if not emergence, of the fear of crime. This danger is *a fortiori* present in the often more aggressive advertising campaigns run by the manufacturers of safety devices.

It follows from the tentative model described here that the mass media in general, and the daily papers in particular, presumably play an important part in the development of public opinion on crime. In this respect, theoretically, there is a reasonable chance of reducing the irrational elements in the fear of crime and concern about rising crime rates. In practice, however, the government can do little. Newspaper policy with regard to crime reporting is partly determined by commercial interests. The papers aimed at a broad general public will stick to a sensational portrayal of murder, etc., for economic reasons. Governmental attempts to induce a less sensational treatment of crime are unlikely to have much effect. In any case, the principle of the free press – one the cornerstones of the democratic state – does not permit this kind of action by the government.

In our opinion, the daily press does not create interest in violent crime, but merely plays on an already existent demand for this type of easily digestible news items. Women, the elderly and the poorly educated show as a group great interest in news about fatal traffic accidents, murder, etc., because the really important news about society is relatively inaccessible to them. Ideally, it is the task of journalists to translate the important news for as wide a public as possible. It is clear, however, that the political and cultural emancipation of women, the elderly and the poorly educated is primarily the task of society at large. Fear of crime and concern about rising crime rates are symptomatic of the cultural and social disadvantage of large sections of the population. This does not mean to say that the government should not make an effort to influence the channels of communication leading to exaggerated public opinion on crime. First of all, the government can ensure that the mass media are supplied with as much objective information about the extent and development of crime as possible. Police officers in contact with the press should not only supply information on the latest criminal events but also on crime

as a social phenomenon. The results of local and national victim surveys are especially suitable for this purpose. These studies show the actual victimisation risk per type of crime for the various population groups and regions. It will be apparent in most countries that the victimisation risk for minor crimes is relatively high (2 % to 10 %), but that the risk for serious crimes is very low. In addition to these statistics, the police should supply as much information as possible on the social correlates of crime and juvenile delinquency in the area. Specialised investigation squads could be asked to hold press conferences on subjects like drug dependence, pollution or industrial crime.

Lastly, the government itself could be more active in publicising the data on the actual crime situation. The advertising campaigns aimed at crime prevention could deliberately be used for the spreading of more objective information on crime. In this way such campaigns would be made instrumental to both crime prevention and the prevention of irrational fear.

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