

Peer-group composition and the perceived risk of victimization: modeling fear of crime in a school-based sample

Ph.D Dissertation

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Abstract

Criminologists interested in the role of fear of crime have provided numerous descriptive accounts of the epidemiology of fear in the adult population. Little attention has been directed to etiology, and there has been a general paucity of attention given to fear among adolescents. Further, the fear of crime literature has been criticized for failing to incorporate panel data, multi-item scales, and a theoretical basis. The current dissertation addresses these limitations by testing the applicability of a risk assessment model of fear in a school-based adolescent panel of individuals using two waves of data. Measurement issues are addressed by incorporating a multi-item crime-specific set of questions assessing the fear and perceived risk of victimization, following the guidelines set forth in the fear of crime literature. An expanded risk assessment model of fear, following the work of Ferraro (1995) will also be examined by incorporating variables measuring membership in a delinquent peer-group; a known risk factor for victimization.

Consistent with much of the extant research on fear of crime, females, racial/ethnic minorities, and younger adolescents report relatively higher levels of fear. Perceptions of neighborhood disorder and the perceived risk of victimization are positively associated with fear of crime. Through the use of path analysis, the current study does not completely support the applicability of a risk assessment model of fear in adolescence. Namely, demographic variables and membership in a delinquent peer-group are not significantly related to the perceived risk of victimization, while they are significantly related to self-reported victimization. Further, the perceived risk of victimization does not fully mediate many of the variables in the model, a key hypothesis of the risk assessment model of fear. Finally, members of delinquent peer-groups, while victimized at a higher rate than other youth, report lower levels of fear. Policy implications, as well as the strengths and limitations of the research are discussed.