

Greer, C. (2008) 'Fear of Crime', in Goldson, B. (ed). Dictionary of Youth Justice, Cullompton: Willan.

## **DICTIONARY OF YOUTH JUSTICE**

### **Fear of Crime**

A sense of worry, dread or anxiety occasioned by the subjective assessment, whether rationale or otherwise, of one's risk of and vulnerability to criminal victimisation.

### **Discussion**

Fear of crime is a complex phenomenon influenced by a range of interconnected social and demographic variables, including perceptions of risk and vulnerability, age, social class, geographical location, ethnicity, personal experience of criminal victimisation, media reporting and popular wisdom (Hale, 1996). It can have a variety of effects on individuals' 'quality of life', ranging from not walking home alone at night to withdrawing from society altogether and living in isolation. Felt or expressed fear of crime bears no necessary relationship to the objective risk of victimisation and, paradoxically, those who tend to demonstrate the greatest fear - older people and women – are often those who are least at risk (Ferraro, 1995). For this reason, some have questioned just how 'rational' fear of crime really is.

In the 1980s, for example, Left Idealists suggested that much fear of crime was unduly amplified by media-induced moral panics orchestrated to legitimate the authoritarian state and fuel a law and order agenda. By contrast, Left Realists highlighted the disproportionate concentration of crime in socially deprived, inner-city areas and, on

behalf of those whose fears appeared entirely rational, determined to ‘take crime seriously’ (Lea and Young, 1984). Fear of crime became a serious policy issue around the same time, when the British Crime Survey claimed that it was becoming as big a problem as crime itself (Hough and Mayhew, 1983). Since then, a massive private security industry has mushroomed out of the crime-risk-fear complex, and politicians and criminal justice practitioners – recognising its political currency – routinely discuss tackling both crime and the fear of crime.

Attempts to tackle fear of crime are often targeted at young people, since ‘youth’ remains closely associated with the visible street crimes that generate such intense public anxiety and worry. Often accompanied by populist rhetoric and sensationalist headlines, youth crime initiatives are often punitive and situational rather than socially reforming because it is believed such measures will produce more immediately visible results, and thus be more popular with the voting public. However, high profile, short-term government initiatives targeting ‘visible’ youth deviance, like anti-social behaviour or robberies, do much to ensure the continued presence of youth offending in headlines, and in the public imagination. This, in turn, may help explain why a fall in recorded crime rates is not necessarily accompanied by a corresponding fall in public fear of crime (Collier et al, 2005).

## **References**

Collier et al (2005) ‘Managing Police Performance: Accountabilities, Performance Measurement and Control’ available from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

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