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When Law-And-Order Politics Fail: Media Fragmentation and Protective Factors That Limit the Politics of Fear

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Law-and-order politics has long been a topic of scholarly work. The leveraging of fear of crime for political capital has been of particular concern. In the 2018 election in the Australian state of Victoria, crime and law-and-order became prominent political issues, particularly through racialized discourse about 'African gangs'. That election provides a case study here. This article turns the traditional analysis of the politics of fear of crime around and considers some of the key reasons why law-and-order politics failed to gain decisive political traction in this instance. Media fragmentation and diversification continues to challenge the primacy of political primary definers in unpredictable ways. As such, electoral strategies that seek to leverage fear of crime and community insecurity need to be understood in the context of broader individual, community and social protective factors that might mitigate fear of crime.

KEY WORDS: fear of crime, law and order politics, primary definer, media fragmentation, social cohesion

INTRODUCTION

In vain we boast of those liberties that are our birthright, if the vilest and most depraved part of the community are suffered to deprive us of travelling upon the highways, or of approaching the Capital from any direction after dark, without risk of being assaulted and robbed; and perhaps wounded or murdered. … if we cannot lie down in our habitations, without the dread of a burglary being committed, our property invaded, and our lives exposed to imminent danger before the approach of morning (Colquhoun 1799: 2).

Written in the last gasps of the 18th century in England, legal and policy reformer Patrick Colquhoun's lamentation above captured the mood of anxiety about crime at the time. It was penned in support of an argument for a new form of preventative modern public policing and a salaried police service—that is, it is written in the context of policy, and indeed, political reform. It suggests that 150 years before fear of crime was identified as a concept (Ditton and Farrall 2000; Lee 2001; 2007), anxieties about crime had potential as political and economic organising strategies. Colquhoun was not some disinterested bureaucrat developing and drafting policy solely for the public good. He was a statistician, a magistrate and later a diplomat, but first and foremost an industrialist and merchant. He and his ilk would benefit from the new police – for which the extract above was arguing. The working poor, from whom his profits were derived, would ultimately be their main target. Popular expressions of anxiety about crime are rarely politically, morally or value neutral. That is not to say they are always confected, or that they only constitute outrage with no basis in crime 'facts'. Rather, Colquhoun's colourful description of highways of fear, and people lying awake waiting to be burgled, expressed a very real public concern. But in highlighting and amplifying that concern, it also served his political and personal purpose – championing industrialist causes that benefited him and his political allies and supporters.

While the politics of fear has a long history, fear of crime as the social-scientific concept to which we refer to today was invented or 'discovered' in the 1960s (Lee 2001; 2007); the product of a new set of socio-political cultural relationships with risk and uncertainty. Market deregulation and the shift from welfarist mentalities of government to a neo-liberal ethos repositioned risk as something to be managed by individuals or markets (O'Malley 2010). High crime had become a normal part of modern life (Garland 2002) – a risk that individuals would be responsible for managing and guarding against. Pratt (1997) suggests that the 'threatening forces of modernity' made the horizons of life seem infinite and more exciting than the limited possibilities of the 'welfare era', but also created new fears and uncertainties through the erosion of traditional support structures like family, local community and the church. Dangerousness had the freedom to roam and feed off public fears and insecurities (Pratt 1997). While nation states' willingness and capacity to tackle the underlying social conditions that lead to crime diminished during the 1980s, recorded crime increased. As Gray (2018: 48) notes, 'in England and Wales …it exposed sections of the population to crime who had previously been unfamiliar with it'. Domestic burglary affected many (Morgan 2014) and shifted middle class perceptions about the threat of crime (Garland 2001). By the 1980s, the political salience of crime and public fears related to it had become, 'a central organising principle of political authority and social relations' (Loader 2008: 399). Crime fears also fed into far-right, racialized agendas in many parts of the world (Schuermans and De Maesschalck 2010). However, it was not simply that politicians amplified crime as a key concern, rather fear of crime became a more acceptable discourse for 'ordinary people' to voice (Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Godfrey 2018). While overall, many offence rates in Western democracies have fallen from the turn of the century on, even now there is a generation who reached adulthood in the 1960s for whom concern about crime remains a key issue, and who might '… always be afraid to walk home alone in the dark' (Simon 2018: 83). This legacy speaks to the generational effects of political socialization (Gray *et al.* 2018), even as some scholars have highlighted something of an international 'fear drop' or 'fear shift' (Eysink Smeets 2018) over the past 20 years or so – a drop or shift clearly not evenly distributed jurisdictionally or geographically.

In 2018, in the lead up to the Victorian State election in Australia, the Federal Liberal-National Party (LNP) Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton[1] regularly took to conservative talkback radio station 2GB and other media to discuss crime fears he suggested were felt by Melburnians, allegedly as a result of State Australian Labor Party (ALP) Premier Daniel Andrews' policies.

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1   At the time of publication he had just become opposition leader after the 2022 Federal election.

These fears he said were most specifically as a result of the State government's inability to address 'African gang crime'.

> "The reality is people (in Melbourne) are scared to go out at restaurants of a night-time because they're followed home by these gangs, home invasions, and cars are stolen and we just need to call it for what it is. Of course, it is African gang violence. […] We need to weed out the people who have done the wrong thing, deport them where we can, but where they are Australian citizens, we need to deal with them according to the law."

> Peter Dutton Interview on 2GB, January 2018.

> "This is a problem largely of pathetic bail laws and Premier Andrews has created this problem. It will not be fixed until he actually admits there is a problem, "Andrews can't even admit Sudanese gangs exist so how can he hope to fix the problem. He is out of touch and more people will get hurt or worse until the problem is fixed".

> Peter Dutton Interview Statement to Fairfax Media, July 22, 2018.

> "A state election is a month away in Victoria and I hope, I really do, that people weigh this up," "And the reality is it's not Daniel Andrews, the Premier of Victoria, that's suffering here, it is the people that have their houses broken into. "It's people assaulted on trains or in parks or in their own home".

> Peter Dutton Interview 2GB October 25 2018.

Dutton's rhetoric exemplifies only one voice that sought to leverage fear of crime for political gain during the 2018 State election cycle, but it demonstrates the perceived political economy of law-and-order and the relatively widespread belief amongst a political class that it can be deployed to advantage. We will return to Dutton's comments. However, while the political economy of law-and-order can also sometimes be taken as something of a given within critical criminological debates, as we demonstrate below, the cultural complexities (Sum and Jessop 2014) which underlay the success or failure of law-and-order politics as a political strategy are nuanced and complex. Indeed, understanding the meaning-making processes that not only animate law-and-order politics, but place it in the context of broader political considerations, struggles and media fragmentation, lead us not to a general theory of the demise of law-and-order politics as a political strategy *per-se*, but consideration of how such a strategy plays out relationally (Jessop 2005) amongst other political concerns.

THE CURRENT ARTICLE

Crime and law-and-order have long figured prominently in Australian State election campaigns (Brown and Hogg 1996; Alcorn 2018). However, despite the often-successful leverage of crime fears for political gain, the politics of law-and-order is not always successful. Yet we know much more about the successful exploitation of law-and-order politics than where it is unsuccessful. It follows that, rather than critically rehearsing the successes of law-and-order auctions, a potentially more novel and fruitful challenge is to identify some of the protective factors that mitigate law-and-order politics at the ballot box. In this article we analyse the failure of an attempt to politicise law-and-order by the conservative up to, and during, the 2018 Victorian State election campaign. While we acknowledge that less publicised policies around health and education, minority rights and the environment (Kelly 2018) all played a part in the election outcome, a relentless political and mainstream media focus on 'African gangs' that started in January 2018 was an LNP priority, sustained up until the November election. As (Weber *et al.* 2021) have noted, such media coverage dramatically and significantly decreased in the weeks and months following the election.

Our analysis here is informed by a mixed methods research design on fear of crime (Lee and Ellis 2018) analysing perceptions of crime in Victoria. While the project consisted of state-wide quantitative ($n = 2,862$), and qualitative ($n = 69$) research components, here we focus largely on the qualitative data – what Victorians were saying about crime and safety. The research was conducted five months after the State election (in April 2019) and so the themes of the campaign were still fresh. However, before turning to that data we analyse social and mainstream media discourse and polling in the lead up to the 2018 Victorian State election. The triangulation of this data sheds light upon the broad range of factors that contributed to an ALP election victory in the face of a relentless law-and-order campaign.

THE 2018 VICTORIAN STATE ELECTION

The 2018 State election in Victoria, Australia was held on Saturday, November 24. Within what is essentially a two-party system, incumbent first-term ALP government led by Premier Daniel Andrews was up against the conservative LNP opposition led by Matthew Guy. Guy sought to make crime, and particularly so-called ethnic-based African youth crime, a key election issue. This rhetoric was also capitalised upon by non-Victorian, incumbent Federal LNP politicians – as attested above. Nevertheless, the ALP won 55 seats in the 88-seat Legislative Assembly (lower house), increasing its majority by eight seats. Historically, only once before has the ALP held so many seats, and an ALP Victorian government has only been re-elected 5 times. The LNP suffered an 11-seat swing against it, winning just 27 seats. The Greens won three seats and three seats were won by independents. In the Legislative Council (upper house) the ALP won 18 seats, the LNP won 11 seats and the remaining 11 seats were won by minor parties. It was a resounding victory for the ALP that raises questions about the failure of the LNP's law-and order-rhetoric.

The LNP's approach largely consisted of referencing and amplifying long-held discourses and beliefs, reproduced episodically in the media by shock jocks, and by politicians, about 'ethnic gang' problems. Such gangs were seen as consisting of largely – but not exclusively – young men of South Sudanese background (Lee *et al.* 2021; Weber *et al.* 2021). While the Australian media has a long history of perpetuating stories linking blackness to criminality (Farquharson and Nolan 2018), there was a significant increase in media reporting about gangs and crime directly tied to the Victorian election (Weber *et al.* 2021).[2] As Majavu later argued (2020: 27), 'media reporting about the so-called "African gangs" is a good example that illustrates how the long-standing racist trope of conflating Blackness with criminality is employed in Australia'. Headlines well before the 2018 election campaign tell the story:

Teen Thugs Rampage (Hamblin, *The Herald Sun* March 14 2016)

The new Menace: Police alert on threat from African youths (Zervos and Hamblin, *The Herald Sun*, Dec 21 2017)

By January 2018, conservative columnists and commentators, predominantly from Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. through *The Herald Sun* and *The Australian* mastheads, were reporting on law-and-order themes through racialised crime discourse (Lee *et al.* 2021). *The Herald Sun* published a front-page special report – titled 'Victoria: State of Fear' (Minear 2018). This facilitated the LNP political strategy and provided social media content for the law-and-order narrative. Opposition leader Matthew Guy was straight to the point and tweeted regularly on the topic, re-tweeting the 'Victoria: State of Fear' headline with the following text[3]:

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2 Indeed, this specific media discourse and related 'gang talk' (Hallsworth and Young 2008) can be traced back to the early-2000s (Windle 2011; Nunn 2010; Hanson-Easey and Augoustinos 2010; Gatt 2011; Baak 2011).

@MatthewGuyMP Jan 1, 2018 Victoria has an unprecedented crime crisis. Daniel Andrews and Labor will never solve it, only a change of government will. #MakeVictoriaSafe.

This rhetoric, amplified through mainstream and social media and subsequently endorsed by political 'primary definers' (Becker 1967: 241),[4] provided a platform for racist tropes and their further amplification in public discourse. This tweet provides a pertinent example:

@graeme_nolan Jan 5, 2018 Replying to @MatthewGuyMP
You need to publicly campaign on the facts that blacks bring crime with them and they are not welcome in Victoria under a strong @LiberalVictoria Government. Stop bowing to the politically correct left. #MakeVictoriaSafe #auspol

As do the letters to the editor in the Murdoch-owned national broadsheet *The Australian*:

Victoria is an example of a state declining into lawlessness. Its administration has become victim to a union-controlled left-wing government, an incompetent police leadership and an ineffective justice system. Victorians have learned to live with crime, union thuggery, violence in the streets and at home, and public disorder. Until they take a public stand they deserve what they get. (John George cited in The Australian January 4 2018).

The Australian also quoted prominent QC Peter Farris, who argued for tougher sentences for African youth, in an attempt to add weight to *The Australian's* largely anti-ALP campaign:

African youths, when faced with harsh punishment — any punishment — will cease breaking the law. It's a simple application of the old law-and-order position: lock a few of them up now and the rest will cease their criminal behaviour (Farris cited in *The Australian* January 3 2018).

The tone of the campaign deteriorated further when it was revealed that conservative political campaigners were dropping pamphlets into letter boxes in marginal seats stating that 'only the Liberals will: stop gangs hunting in packs', accompanied by a shadowy image of five young men gathered together in hoodies (Henriques-Gomes 2018a).
One of the key seats, Frankston, typified the campaigning:

The Liberal candidate, Michael Lamb, is running hard on one issue: law and order. The Liberal leader, Matthew Guy, says there's been a "crime tsunami" under Daniel Andrews' government. The shadow police minister, Ed O'Donohue, says the election will be a "referendum on who can fix violent crime in Victoria" *Acorn* November 3 2018).

Federal conservative politicians also weighed in, with the then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull saying there was 'real concern about Sudanese gangs' (Karp 2018). More pertinently the conservative Home Affairs minister Peter Dutton claimed, as quoted above, that Victorians were scared to go out to restaurants. Further conflation of general crime reportage into a trend of disorder in Victoria involved Peter Dutton relating the 'gang' problem with the stabbing death of a young 19-year-old woman at a party, suggesting it was evidence of a 'major law-and-order problem in Victoria' (Dutton cited in Henriques-Gomes 2018b).

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3   Drawing on a time series analysis of articles published between 2007 (which denotes the year media outlets began to link crime with migrants from Africa) and 2020, Weber *et al.* (2021) found a significant increase in media reporting occurred in January 2018 and continued up to the Victorian election. Following the election, the number of articles decreased dramatically.
4   See also Hall *et al.* 1978/2013; Ericson *et al.* 1989; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994.

However, the media discourse was fragmented and diverse. While mainstream commercial media – television channels Seven and Nine, for example – actively repeated a similar editorial line to the Murdoch owned media, the publicly-owned broadcasters ABC and SBS, and *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*[5] took more moderate approaches. Social media also proved a site of resistance for a progressive backlash.

Posts began to circulate with the hashtag #MelbourneBitesBack accompanied with photographs of Melburnians enjoying the restaurants and night-life the city is known for. The following were exemplars of this counter-discourse:

> Hey @PeterDutton_MP I managed to polish of this superb seafood meal without a single chip being stolen. #MelbourneBitesBack

> Was going to go out to dinner with the family then remembered how terrified we all are. Thanks @PeterDutton_MP for keeping us safe. I assume the SAS will be delivering our pizza! (cited in Ryan ABC News January 4 2018).

Ironically, the intervention from a Federal minister from another Australian state, Queensland, whose electorate is less diverse than much of Melbourne, may have helped turn the tide on public sentiment. As Willingham (2018) reported at the time, 'Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton telling Sydney radio that Melburnians are too scared to go out to restaurants is the most egregious example of the hyped-up rhetoric that passes for political debate on the matter'.

The 'African gang' label was also used pro-socially, with the hashtag #MelbourneBitesBack deployed by Twitter users in support of the Ujamaa Community Festival – a celebration of African communities in Victoria in July 2018. That celebration was sponsored by the #AfricanGangs social media campaign that promotes 'positive African stories', and which was then reported on by mainstream media (Walquist 2018). Activists, too, were fighting back, with Democracy In Colour, an advocacy organisation led by people from racial and ethnic minorities, telling voters that some state and federal politicians are trying to use Melbourne's 'racialised crime panic' as a smokescreen (Latimore and Nyuon 2018). McFadyen's (2018) words go somewhat to summarising the entire campaign:

> … criminal actions are amplified beyond the scope of the crime. Fear one, fear all. They're different aren't they? It's a despicable association of word and guilt association – "Africa", "foreigners", "tribes", "gangs". Thus an entire community becomes the target for the broadbrush of demonisation. And from such demonisation you create fear of all. And, in the most disturbing aspect, from that fear comes control.

The campaign also brought demonstrable harm to multicultural harmony in the state with notable increases in racial attacks against Sudanese Australians or those of 'African appearance' (Henriques-Gomes 2018c). As Weber *et al.* (2021) note, the real losers though were the demonised Sudanese community.

In the end, even the News Corp. had to concede defeat. On top of the failure of law-and order-to swing the election they noted:

> On display was another variation of the proven ALP winning formula: generous funding of health and education; a compassion agenda dedicated to women, youth and minorities; a renewables-based industry policy to address climate change … (Kelly November 28 2018).

A review by the LNP found that 'Victorian voters dismissed former opposition leader Matthew Guy's focus on "African gangs" and crime at last year's state election as a political tactic because

5   The latter two both owned by Nine Entertainment, a publicly listed company that owns Channel Nine.

they did not feel unsafe', and 'only 6% of voters said that law and order influenced their vote "and not necessarily to our advantage"' (Willingham 2019). While, as noted, there were other key factors at play – including unrest and leadership changes in Federal LNP ranks, and revelations that Guy had once dined with a crime boss – the law-and-order campaign had failed.

POLLING

It is possible to track the polling fortunes of both major parties across the four-year election cycle using two party preferred data of the major polling companies. Figure 1[6] demonstrates how by January 2018, when the law-and-order discourse was taken to a new level by not just State LNP politicians and their supporters in the mainstream media, but federal players such as Peter Dutton, the ALP had but a 1 per cent lead – certainly within the margin of error for all the pollsters (see Figure 1). This remained relative unchanged through to July. Indeed, on July 8th *The Age* (Towell 2018) reported that Premier Daniel Andrews led Opposition Leader Matthew Guy by a narrow 50.6–49.4 margin as better Premier. In the same poll Guy edged Andrews by 50.1 per cent–49.9 per cent on who voters thought was more trustworthy. The LNP had a 50.8 per cent–49.2 per cent lead over the ALP on party best to handle Melbourne's congestion, a 51.6 per cent–48.4 per cent lead on managing Melbourne's growing population, and a 55.8 per cent–44.2 per cent lead on law-and-order.
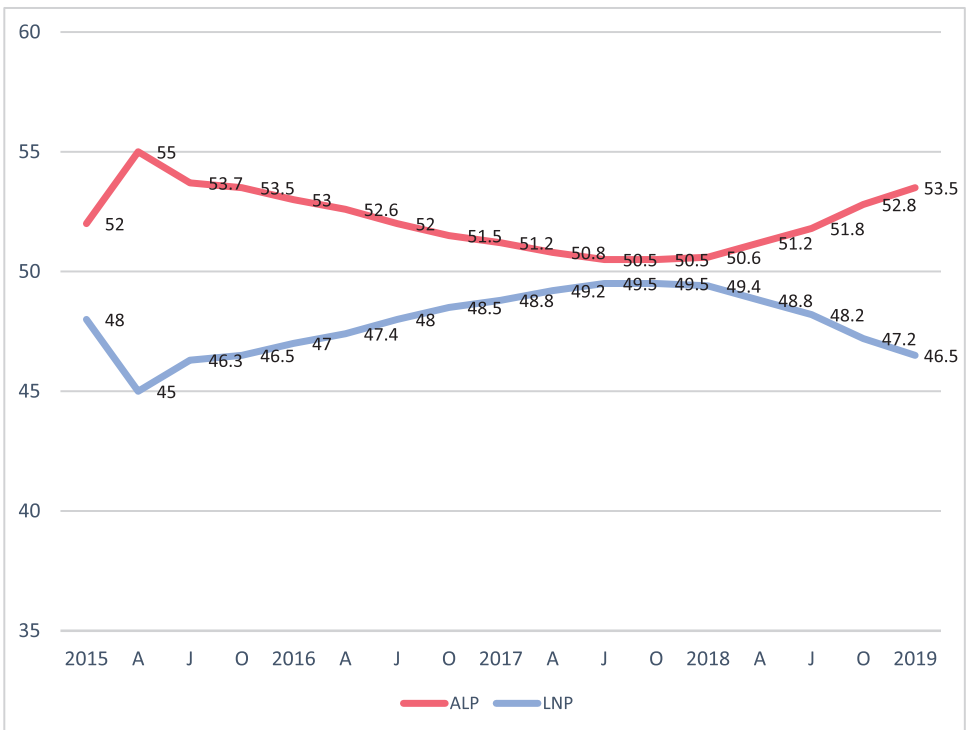

Fig. 1. Two party pref. opinion poll results – 2014 election to 2018 election

6   Data collected by William Bowe 'The Poll Bludger' https://www.pollbludger.net/, Figure produced by the authors.

By August 2018 – the same time #MelbournBitesBack was getting a second life on twitter promoting the above mentioned Ujamaa festival, and when the LNP then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull also bought into the fear discourse (Karp 2018) – the ALP strengthened its polling position somewhat, putting it around three percentage points ahead. By October 3rd, a ReachTel poll published in *The Guardian* showed the ALP with four-point lead 52 per cent–48 per cent, with Daniel Andrews still only marginally ahead of Mathew Guy 51 per cent–49 per cent as preferred premier. *The Guardian* noted that concern about law-and-order seems 'to have affected voters' (Davey 2018). Yet by the end of October, Andrews had climbed 'four percentage points since April' with 45 per cent support as the preferred premier, while Matthew Guy, fell five percentage points to 29 per cent. The poll gave the ALP a significant 54–46 per cent two party preferred lead – a position largely replicated on polling day. On election eve the Financial Review (Potter and Durkin 2018) reported on the final polls:

> …despite this intense focus, the Coalition enjoys only a modest 52:48 lead as the party best able to handle law and order issues, even though Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton joined Mr Guy's attack on Labor after the Bourke Street attack[7].

> This is less than the 54:46 law and order edge the Coalition enjoyed in the previous ReachTEL poll on October 7. The problem for the Coalition is that few Labor voters say they have shifted to the Coalition since the attack, and few have shifted the other way, *suggesting the tough-on-crime rhetoric may repel as many voters as it attracts.* (Emphasis added)

So, while when prompted, the general public still modestly placed the LNP ahead of the ALP on law-and-order, it did not go close to swinging the election.

Having provided an overview of the public and media polling contexts of the election campaign, we now analyse data from our large-scale perceptions of crime project undertaken across Victoria from early 2019. This data provides insight into the factors that might have mitigated the cut through of law-and-order politics in the 2018 state election in Victoria.

METHODOLOGY

The data analysed and discussed below is drawn from a large-scale perceptions of crime project undertaken in Victoria in 2019, five months after the 2018 election.[8] The qualitative component of the project (upon which this paper largely draws) comprised 15 focus group interviews (*n* = 69 participants). The focus group interviews targeted a cross section of Victorians but harder to access groups were over-represented (the elderly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, LGBTIQ participants and migrant participants). Many of these social groups have traditionally been categorised as vulnerable to heightened fear of crime (Hale 1996; Farrall *et al.* 2009). Respondents were sampled through community organisations. The locations of the interviews were chosen on the basis of a stratified sample of high, medium or low crime areas. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded, transcribed and coded. The themes were developed by three team members and a process of comparison and analysis ensured intercoder reliability. The state-wide quantitative survey involved a sample of (*n* = 2,862). Key demographics of this sample are represented in Table 1. We use the results of the quantitative data as a backdrop to the discussion of the focus group data.

In analysing the interviews, we focused on the three conceptual components of fear commonly deployed in perceptions of crime research. Feelings (*affect*), actions (*behaviour*) and

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7   On 9 November 2018, 15 days before the Victorian 2018 state election, Hassan Khalif Shire Ali set fire to his vehicle and stabbed three people (one fatally) on Bourke Street in the Melbourne city centre before being fatally shot by Victoria Police.

8   The *Social Cohesion and Pro-Social Responses to Perceptions of Crime* project.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics of survey sample*

Demographics	Percent of sample (%)
Age (*n* = 2,851)	
15–19 years	3.09
20–34 years	17.71
35–44 years	20.8
45–59 years	26.9
60–74 years	22.76
75 years and over	8.73
Gender (*n* = 2858)	
Female	49.09
Male	50.91
Language spoken at home (*n* = 2,840)	
Speaks English at home	76.55
Language other than English	23.45
Marital status (*n* = 2,773)	
Not currently partnered	30.58
Partner	69.42
Educational attainment (*n* = 2,834)	
High school	29.75
Trade certificate or diploma	21.31
University qualification	48.94
Employment (*n* = 2,827)	
Full time employed	47.47
Part time employed	15.14
Not in the labour forcea	37.39
Locality (*n* = 2,862)	
Urban suburb	87.21
Regional suburb	12.79
Prior victimisation experience (*n* = 2,846)	
No experience	87.81
Previously a victim of crime	12.19

a This category includes self funded retiree/self supporting/on a pension/student/ unemployed.

thoughts (*cognition*) that focus on the subjectively conceived threat of criminal victimisation (Ferraro 1995; Hale 1996; Farrall *et al.* 2009). The affective aspect of 'fear of crime' involves a number of emotions about the possibility of victimisation, including (but not limited to) physical responses to immediate threat ('fear'), repetitive thoughts about future uncertain harm ('worry'), and a more widespread but diffuse low-level emotion about uncertain future events that are separate from concrete feelings of imminent danger ('anxiety'). Behavioural

responses to fear include avoidance behaviour, protective behaviour, behavioural and lifestyle adjustments, and participation in relevant collective activities (Miethe 1995). Avoidance strategies include the minimisation of one's contact with 'hot spots', such as particular neighbourhoods, entertainment places and parks, especially at certain times, as well as avoidance of public transport. Protective behaviour constitutes activities that aim to deter or resist crime, installing alarms, locking doors, increasing lighting, owning guns and wider activities of self-protection. Behavioural and lifestyle changes include withdrawal of common activities such as subway usage at night, drinking in bars and other night-time activities. Collective responses to crime risk encompass participation in relevant community groups, such as neighbourhood watch programs and self-help or support groups, promotion of victim and witness programs and related legislative initiatives. Cognitive assessments refer to an individual's sense of risk, threat and vulnerability (Killias 1990; Hale 1996; Gabriel and Greve 2003; Farrall *et al.* 2009; Jackson 2009).

The novel element of our approach here is that we use affective, behavioural and cognitive responses to the perceived threat of crime to develop a thematic understanding of why respondents do *not* feel and express fear, why they do *not* change their behaviours and why they do *not* see particular signs and signifiers of crime as risky. In sum, it can be argued that if participants are agnostic to these components of fear, they are unlikely to connect with law-and-order rhetoric. In coding the qualitative focus group data, we were able to code some 640 statements as highlighting these kinds of protective themes. Many participants clearly articulate the kinds of community dynamics that mitigate against fear of crime taking hold. In the next sections we analyse these focus group data in relation to the key conceptual components of fear of crime.

Against fear's affective responses

While it is not the key focus of this article, these high-level descriptive data found relatively low levels of worry about crime across a range of crime types. Generally, people were not worried about burglary (78 per cent), robbery (89 per cent) or harassment (95per cent). Furthermore, those who were worried were worried relatively infrequently (see Table 2).

This data provides some broad insight into why the media and political framing of 'African gangs' as a perceived threat might have failed to cut through with voters at the ballot box in the 2018 Victorian state election.

However, many respondents discussed crimes they had heard about, including 'African youth crime'. For most respondents this 'awareness' of crime (Jarrett-Luck 2015) did not mean they became worried or fearful. Despite crime coverage in the media, particularly commercial

Table 2. *Frequency of worry*

	Burglary (n = 2,862)	Robbery (n = 2,862)	Harassment (n = 2,862)
Not worried	78%	89%	95%
Worried 1–5 times	12%	7%	4%
Worried 6–15 times	6%	3%	1%
Worried more than 16 times	4%	2%	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%

television stations, participants were able to separate their own proximate experiences from the effects of the media coverage (Warr and Stafford 1983; Gouseti 2018). An older English second language female living in an inner-city high-crime suburb spoke about her neighbours as a reason for her low fear despite, being aware of problems through the news:

> My neighbour is very good. I no have any problem... Only, well, I read the newspaper, I hear about the problem... in Brunswick, but with me, nothing, at the moment I'm very happy. .… Reading local newspaper. *The Sun* sometimes. The local paper, *The Leader*. In there I read many troubles, many [...] but with me, no problem.

Or this older man, again from a high crime suburb:

> We've got good neighbours. We look after each other. […] Here in the Marsh I don't think we're so worried as [other suburbs …] by what we can hear and see on TV.

Harder to reach respondents in the focus groups often lived in higher crime areas. Sources of information about crimes that occurred geographically closer to respondents often came from local Facebook groups or others in the community. However, this also seemed to have limited capacity to instil or amplify fear as this older woman from a high crime area attests:

> I don't have a problem walking around day or night. I've got a 93 year-old neighbour who walks around the area so we're quite comfortable. When you look at Facebook, and there are about four or five different Bacchus Marsh groups, you do hear that there are cars broken into or things stolen or things like. … and I feel they are isolated.

So, while close in the physical sense, and while there was a clear acknowledgement of online crime talk (Girling *et al.* 1999), this was not expressed as any unusual fear or anxiety. Some even found it 'bizarre' that they hadn't succumbed to fear, like this older female from a medium crime area:

> Bizarrely I suppose it hasn't bothered me. I am also on the Moorabool Police [Facebook] page.

Even when concerns about behaviours were expressed, there was an acknowledgment of the importance of context. The younger male participant below lived and worked in a high crime area and was aware of crime and disorder in the areas, however, they attributed it to a 'lack of opportunities'. A sense of community and 'looking after their own' shaped responses to crime:

> You always see on the news like African youth gangs or now it's just become really diverse. It's not just Africans anymore. It's like the Islanders, the Afghans. Everyone's sort of created a gang sort of to protect their own. I think we'll see a great rise in that because of lack of opportunities.

Similarly, this male respondent from a high crime suburb calls out selective news coverage focusing on minority groups:

> I think Channel 9 too and 7. When you hear it on the ABC […] it is not as sensationalised as the other channels […] If it is an African or it appears to be an African or Asian, that one can be repeated about 20 or 30 times but if it is Caucasian, sometimes you are even lucky to see it once or to hear about it.

And similarly:

> I just think there's a jaundiced view of who we need to be mindful of and it feeds a bit of fear by, you know, "home invasions" and "African gangs". Like who was it that was saying that they're too scared to dine out because of the fear of African gangs?
>
> *Interviewer: Dutton?*
>
> Yeah. And sorry, I dine out all the time […] and I just think all that reporting of home invasions and illegals and African gangs is really unhealthy and it creates an atmosphere of fear. I think it's irresponsible reporting, and that goes on TV. […] And the newspapers, especially *The Australian* will play all that up to the... It's a very divisive tool of media, and so that disappoints me. […] The big owners of the media, moguls have their own political barrow to push.

Finally, this Aboriginal respondent tells how she called out racism on the local Facebook site, only to suffer a backlash.

> I hate it. It gets reported that an African appearance means a big fight about they need to be deported and stuff like that. One time I wrote on [the local Facebook site], did you notice that a white - an Anglo-Saxon person stabbed somebody down the shopping centre, and [my post] was removed and I got a lot of abuse for being insensitive to the people that experienced it at the shopping centre.

So even here, where there is some articulation of a potential 'gang problem', there is still 'not so much fear'. Indeed, such thinking it likely to align with the ALP's focus on health and education, and so mitigate fear and its accompanying law-and-order response. Also, respondents were more likely to talk about getting their information about crime from Facebook than from any MSM source – which feeds into the argument that politically manufactured mainstream media amplification of law-and-order 'issues' as panic, may not cut through on social media

Against fear inspired behavioural change

Participants also articulated the ways in which even hearing about crime did *not* affect their daily routines. That is, they would expressly *not* modify their own behaviours as a result. Many people took no or minimal behavioural precautions against crime, as reflected in responses from elderly women who lived in a medium crime town in regional Victoria. When asked about precautions against crime, one said:

> None. I don't lock my doors. … these days there's a slight sense of guilt about not locking your door.

Local restaurants, rather than being fearful night-time experiences were generally seen to be safe as this older man of Vietnamese background in a high crime area attests:

> I feel quite safe … because I took family out at night, after 6 and then we have dinner in the restaurant … Yeah, we finish at 8 or 9 o'clock, still feel safe.

Thus, even the most basic behavioural protection was not activated – except for one respondent who noted a 'slight sense of guilt' in not doing so. Yet even this behaviour was a function of responsibilisation (Lee 2007; O'Malley 2010) more than concern.

So distant was crime for some, that when prompted on behaviour change they articulated that things such as the poor quality of pavements more important concerns. As this older female in a medium crime area puts it:

> I'd just say my precautions at night aren't so much about crime usually as about, will there be an uneven sidewalk that I can fall over.

Those participants who *did* describe behavioural change in response to worry about crime did so in regard to direct victimisation in their local area – rather than media or political discourse. However, even this did not stop them from going about their daily activities as this Hazaragi woman living in a high crime area put it:

> These things never effect us because now we are here and we should adjust our self with the society and we have to go to study and we have to go for our shopping, we have to go our daily routines.

So despite some concern, behaviour modification was resisted rather than embraced by many of the participants. This demonstrates again how discourses of Melburnians fearful to eat out at restaurants and the like did not cut through to every-day experience.

Against cognitive assessments of risk

These focus group data also provide evidence that people who were aware of crime generally, from media and other sources, and also aware of crime in their community, did not rate their perceived risk of being a victim highly. Some (but not all) respondents talked about the presence of police being important – and indeed followed police social media channels. Respondents across divergent socio-cultural groups felt somewhat reassured seeing patrolling being undertaken. Two Aboriginal women, one from a medium crime, and one from high area, commented on the police presence. They saw it as a form of reassurance but also as a risk given the history of colonisation and violence against Aboriginal people:

> The mall - they actually have got coppers going down there and doing their patrols and they've got them horses as well.

> I've seen horses down at the creek, they do do that because I lived near the creek so the horses do go down there.

For those who had fled dangerous lives in other parts of the world, Victoria was comparatively safe. It was thus unlikely that the law-and-order politics of an election campaign would have much effect. Melbourne, it must be remembered, is home to more recent immigrants than anywhere else in Australia. This older respondent of Cambodian background put it succinctly:

> I think I'm the luckiest man to be able to stay in lucky country... I'm originally from Cambodia and I had to run from the killing time in Cambodia and then I migrated to Vietnam and at the time Vietnam was still – there was a war... So our family had to use our life to trade for freedom, when we travel on the high sea and we have to experience a lot of pirating and a lot of things terrible happen on high seas. Now I'm very grateful…

One of the very clear narratives to come out of the interviews concerned positive family, friendship and neighbourhood attachments and their protective capacity. Importantly for

respondents, knowledge about, and feeling safe in their local area and having control over their environment, meant that they did not perceive themselves to be at great risk of victimisation (Nasar et al. 1993). This was even true when 'crime talk' (Girling *et al.* 1999) about an area preceded engagement in the space as this older male from a Vietnamese background demonstrates in a medium crime area:

> I think [this...]is a good place to live for Asian people. We have a friendly shopping, friendly place to live. Years ago there's a bad name [suburb] – crimes, drugs trafficking but now it's almost disappeared. You can't see the violence here at all.

Similarly, construing one's local environment as positive and welcoming seemed to quell feelings of risk across the majority of focus groups (Wickes *et al.* 2016). Often a positive community was described as a diverse or multicultural area. This may point to a reason as to why racialized fear of crime rhetoric was unsuccessful; diversity was central to descriptions of why many respondents liked their local area.

> I like that it's very leafy. I like that our waterways are connected to the Western Water. There's a - the mapping of ecological type - the waterway is - it's right near my house and I can get to walk across. ...So I really like that [its...] has been designed with the future in mind. I like how multicultural it is.

> I find it a very pleasant area to live in. There's quite a lot of diversity among ethnic groups ages. You get everybody from two months old in prams to the centenarians living in an aged care home which makes it more interesting. There's a variety of houses versus flats ...people really like living here.

A theme that is woven through many of the interviews was that community cohesion can protect against feelings of unsafety, even when there is an acknowledgement of vulnerability. Such cohesion can also mitigate against the 'dangerisation' of offenders.

> I know it [crime victimisation] does happen and I feel like it's not personal if it did happen to me. ...I don't perceive these people as being horrible, big monsters, I actually have a lot of empathy. There's usually mental illness, cultural displacement.

DISCUSSION

As shown in our analysis of social and mainstream media and polling leading up to the 2018 state election in Victoria, racialized discourses of out of control 'crime' failed as an electoral strategy for the Victorian LNP, and at worst, it swung voters back to the ALP. Indeed, the qualitative responses demonstrate low correlations between amplificatory mainstream commercial news media consumption on law-and-order, and its impact on general worry, precautionary behaviours, indeed perceived risk. In short, our sample of respondents did not generally indicate their quality of life was significantly affected by crime, nor their perceptions affected by relentless discourse about crime.

In breaking down the ways in which the affective, behaviour and cognitive components that make up fear of crime appear *not* to have broadly taken hold, we can make the following tentative claims. First, the relatively low overall levels of fear of crime in the survey responses triangulated with focus groups, responses indicate there was likely to be a 'buffer' to the amplificatory effects of law-and-order politics; that is, the strategies of amplification outlined in the media

analysis had little lasting effect. While there was *media* framed panic, amplified by political primary definers, this panic did not develop into a *moral* panic (Cohen 2011) that could be harnessed for electoral gain in this context. As Dennis Loo (2009:16) has argued in relation to the law-and-order campaigns of conservatives in 1960s United States, 'is it a moral panic if it is fundamentally confined to the actions of media and/or the state? Is it a panic if the public is not involved in panicking'? It may be overly optimistic to suggest that the moral vapidity of amplification and conflation of racial profiling with general crime reportage through mainstream news media, and its further amplification and conflation by political primary definers, does not necessarily have the political currency that it might once have had. However, a diversified and fragmented media landscape provides a broader spectrum of views, particularly through social media, news aggregators and search engines (Newman *et al.* 2017). So, despite the intuitive acceptance of the existence of 'filter bubbles' or 'echo chambers' (Bruns 2017), which may reflect a narrow world view, there can also be a disjuncture between mainstream media reporting and its influence on voters in this context. One aspect of this structural change, in conjunction with the polarisation of mainstream media editorial positions, is that it can no longer be assumed that political 'primary definers' – agenda setters such as politicians – will have their perspective believed because of their perceived access to more information than anyone else (Becker 1967). Scrutiny of political discourse through social media networks continues to challenge mainstream unidirectional news and public relations conventions that present those politically motivated editorial positions as consensus. Those conventions continue to provide narrow perspectives to broad audiences upon which to *evaluate* the veracity of political truth claims (Ellis 2021). These factors play some part in providing a broader evidence base upon which to evaluate claims of lawlessness and fear of crime rhetoric through election campaigns based on law-and-order politics and the limitations of leveraging empty fear of crime rhetoric as a result.

Second, while many of the qualitative focus group respondents were clearly familiar with the media stories of 'gangs' 'out of control', the sense that they were at risk of victimisation as a result of these dangerised groups was mitigated by the physical, geographical or psychological distance they put between such reports and themselves (Warr and Stafford 1983; Nasar *et al.* 1993; Gouseti 2018). Neighbourhood solidarity and community cohesion appeared, as we might expect from other research (e.g. Brunton-Smith and Sturgis 2011), to neutralise the affect of more distant threats. It is nicely summed up by our respondent above who stated, 'bizarrely it hasn't bothered me'.

Third, the behaviour changes discussed in the focus groups were minimal and could be more accurately referred to as an actions that follow awareness of risk, rather than fear – or as 'functional fear' (Jackson and Gray 2010; Gray *et al.* 2011; Lee *et al.* 2020a, 2020b). Moreover, we see in the qualitative responses examples of outright resistance to behaviour change, and perhaps most strikingly, referring back to the media analysis, the #MelbourneBitesBack resistance was a clear indication that many Victorians refused or resisted discourses that sought to make them fearing subjects (Lee 2007). As outlined above, divisive media framing of difference through racial profiling is in direct contrast to the protective capacities of social cohesion within many of these communities, despite the vulnerabilities they might face. As a result, they did not change their behaviours.

Finally, when it came to assessments of risk, while there was an acknowledgement that 'crime happens' and that one may become a victim, satisfaction and integration into local communities or neighbourhoods proved key to ensuring this acknowledgement of risk did not generally slide into outright fear. Melbourne is a diverse and multicultural city, and the majority of its residents (and Australians in general) see this diversity as a strength (Scanlon Foundation 2016). This was evidenced in our qualitative responses to questions of cognitive fear where satisfaction with local place and community was an oft repeated discourse. Moreover, according to our data,

more recent immigrant groups regard the city as far safer than many of the parts of the world from which they had come, and which is a safety they seek to maintain through social cohesion.

All of this demonstrates that for a law-and-order political campaign to be successful, it has to be able to co-opt cultural beliefs and processes of meaning-making from below, as well as speaking to a broader political and policy narrative from above. That is, it has to somehow satisfy these broader relational questions of cultural and social political economy (Jessop 2005). It seems the LNP in 2018 at least, fell short.

CONCLUSION

Scrutiny of political discourse through social media networks continues to challenge mainstream unidirectional news and public relations conventions that present those politically motivated editorial positions as consensus. Our research thus outlines 'protective factors' against negative perceptions of crime that can see media and political law-and-order rhetoric fall short at the ballot box. In the broadest sense such factors include relatively low levels of background fear, a multiplicity of media sources, attachment to, and social and cultural investment in neighbourhood, community and place and the relationships one has therein. In short, respondents appeared to be somewhat buffeted against discourses of fear. We also see how discourses of fear can be contested and resisted through a diversified and fragmented, if sometimes volatile and unpredictable, social media context.

This article has demonstrated that the dependability of law-and-order politics as a political organising strategy is no longer guaranteed. The 18th century of Colquhoun's England can be contrasted with the 24-hour digital media politics of 21st century Australia. Both demonstrate how worry about crime can be weaponised politically – and indeed how different crime problems effect different generations (Farrall et al. 2020; 2021). In multicultural Melbourne in 2018, with no exceedingly high levels of community fears, and a reportedly high satisfaction with neighbourhoods and community networks, the LNP and Murdoch driven law-and-order fear campaign failed. Nonetheless, damage was done to community cohesion – and in particular to the Sudanese community demonised by media and politicians (Weber *et al.* 2021). Even the failure of law-and order-politics comes with a cost.

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