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## Reassessing the Fear of Crime

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## **Abstract**

A large body of empirical research exploring emotional responses to crime in Europe, North America and elsewhere suggests that substantial proportions of the public worry about victimisation. The British Crime Survey (BCS) has asked questions exploring worry about crime of English and Welsh respondents since 1982, and in the 2003/2004 sweep of the BCS new questions were inserted into a subsection to explore the frequency and intensity of such fearful events. As well as illustrating the rationale of the new measurement strategy, this research note reports the results of the new questions in direct relation to the 'old' methods. The findings show that few people experience specific events of worry on a frequent basis, and that 'old' style questions magnify the everyday experience of fear. We propose that 'worry about crime' is often best seen as a diffuse anxiety about risk, rather than any pattern of everyday concerns over personal safety.

## **Key words**

Fear of crime, methodology, survey design, emotions.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Social surveys in Europe, North America and elsewhere regularly find widespread fear of crime (Hough and Mayhew, 1983; Beukenhorst *et al.*, 1993; Skogan, 1990; van Kesteren *et al.*, 2000; Results of Eurobarometer 58.0; Vanderveen, 2006; Widdop, 2007) Studies such as the European Social Survey, the British Crime Survey, and the International Crime Victim Survey all substantiate the view that across Europe fear of crime is (a) common, and (b) a problem in its own right, separate to crime itself (Hale, 1996; van Kesteren *et al.*, 2000). Not only has fear of crime and disorder emerged as an exigent experience amongst the population of European countries; some researchers have suggested people tend to experience 'fear' beyond the objective risk of any likely victimisation (Hale, 1996; Vanderveen, 2006).

Yet despite the empirical, political and theoretical relevance of fear of crime, few studies have examined the actual frequency and intensity of such 'feelings'. Respondents are typically asked only whether they are 'very', 'fairly', 'not very' or 'not at all' worried (or afraid) about becoming a crime victim. Large-scale cross-national European surveys like the International Crime Victim Survey and European Social Survey do not even ask directly about crime when measuring 'fear', enquiring instead how safe respondents feel when walking alone in their area after dark. Respondents are thus not asked how often they worry, nor when they worry, nor what effects these worries have on their lives.

As a consequence, instead of data on the patterning and ecology of events of fear, we are left with only vague 'global' summaries of intensity of worry or feelings of unsafety. Crucially, these vague summaries may diverge from the reality of everyday emotions that affect people's lives. In a general discussion of 'emotional self-report,' Robinson and Clore (2002a, 2002b) argue that research into emotion rarely accesses *experiential knowledge* (the specific details surrounding an emotional arousal) since respondents are rarely feeling the particular emotion at the time of the study (C/f Farrall *et al.*, 1997). Instead, research typically evokes generalised beliefs about emotion. These beliefs do not neatly map onto experience because different processes are involved that invoke different forms of knowledge and knowledge retrieval. Indeed, asking respondents about overall intensities of worry ('How worried are you . . . ?') may complicate matters further. Warr (2000) suggests that standard summaries represent future-orientated anxiety rather than any summary of past episodes or current feelings of physical fear (see also Sacco, 2005). Jackson (2006) proposes that these questions access individual's mental image of the risk of victimisation, and that having a personalised, structured and emotionally tinged image of risk might be independent of whether they ever actually find themselves in threatening situations.

We believe that a more detailed examination of everyday emotions about crime is long overdue if we are to formulate a more comprehensive picture of the distribution and significance of fear of crime. The pilot work (Farrall and Gadd, 2004) on which this research is based employed a new set of measures which included: (a) the use of a filter question and (b) the assessment of the frequency and intensity of fearful episodes. Data from these new questions, fielded in an omnibus survey, suggested that while just over one-third of people in England and Wales (37%) had felt fearful about becoming a crime victim during the past year, actual episodes of fear were surprisingly infrequent. Indeed only 13% of the overall population had actually felt fearful more than five times in that 12 month period. This finding calls into question current official calculations as to the extent of the fear of crime problem – at least if one defines fear as the everyday experience of worry about crime (Farrall and Gadd, 2004).

In this latest study we explore the utility of these new, updated questions in direct comparison with 'old' standard methods that have been employed in the British Crime Survey (BCS) since 1984. The 2003/2004 sweep of the BCS included the new measures of fear within

one of the four follow-up modules administered to a subsection of respondents (approximately 5,000 respondents). Participants also answered the old style fear of crime measures in the main questionnaire. This article presents the initial raw data for both new and old style measures with respect to three specific crimes: car crime, burglary and robbery. It also describes in more detail than previous articles the full rationale of the new measurement strategy. We turn first to the rationale.

### *Old and new questions: Contrasting strategies of measurement*

#### *Old questions*

Large-scale representative sample surveys ask respondents questions along the following lines:

‘How worried are you about being [burgled/mugged/raped/physically attacked by a stranger]?’

Respondents select one answer from a set of response options. A standard example would be: very worried, fairly worried, a bit worried, or not at all worried. At first glance, this research strategy seems unproblematic. Surveys ask for a brief summary of respondents’ worries which respondents are presumably able to provide. Researchers then estimate the distribution in a given population to produce an estimate of the everyday experience of worry among the general populace. One assumes such worry negatively affects individuals and disrupts communities.

Yet greater attention to detail may clarify the nature and impact of fear of crime in people’s everyday lives (Farrall *et al.*, 1997). For example, how often do people worry, feel fearful or anxious? The answer could be less often than we think: ‘old’ standard measures may imply a greater prevalence of fear than specific measures of frequency commonly find (Farrall, 2004, Farrall and Gadd 2004). Surveys rarely, if ever, ask how *frequently* people worry, only how worried they are overall (although see Jackson, 2004 and 2005). Moreover, which thoughts, feelings and behaviour best characterise public responses? Anger may be more frequent than fear (Ditton *et al.*, 1999), uneasiness more common than corrosive fear. Yet survey measures only specify ‘worry’.

More questions arise. How can we compare the answers of different people if respondents interpret the meaning of ‘worry’ differently? Some may think of ‘physical fear’, others of ‘a passing moment of anxiety’ (c/f Hough, 1995). In addition, how do these emotions shape behaviour and well-being? Surveys rarely enquire into the impact of worry on people’s everyday lives, so we simply do not know. And might some level of emotion be a naturally occurring response to crime rather than a pressing social problem in its own right? Why do we always assume worry is negative (Fattah, 1993; Hale, 1996; Warr, 2000; Ditton and Innes, 2005)?

Gladstone and Parker (2003: 347) argue that: ‘As a phenomenon, [worry] can range from an innocuous activity possibly associated with positive consequences (i.e. solution finding), through to a distressing and uncontrollable process like the excessive and chronic worry recognised as the cardinal feature of generalised anxiety disorder. It has been defined broadly as repetitive thought activity, which is usually negative and frequently related to feared future outcomes or events.’ Intriguingly for fear of crime research, this definition suggests that what might be called *dysfunctional* or *damaging* worry is characterised by the frequency of these experiences. As such, asking people about the regularity of crime fears is both methodologically and empirically meaningful.

Gladstone and Parker go on to suggest that worry has a number of distinctive factors. First, it is predominantly comprised of cognitions (thoughts), often involving a series of future-

orientated reflections, involving the embellishment of hypothetical outcomes. Second, it has a 'dynamic (and malleable) and narrative process in which themes are developed and elaborated rather than simply occurring as a string of negative thoughts' (*ibid.*: 347). Finally, worry involves awareness of or attention to possible danger, 'which is rehearsed without successful resolution . . . [and] usually [self-] described as difficult to dismiss' (*ibid.*: 347). Tallis *et al.* (1994) investigated the everyday experience of normal (i.e. non-pathological) worry. They found that most of the individuals interviewed viewed their worries to be routine, mostly acceptable, with a narrative course and real-life triggers, focusing on realistic, rather than remote problems, which were often beneficial by stimulating activity. Worry was often seen as a problem-solving activity, but Matthews (1990) believes that it is more of a 'mimicry' of problem-solving activity since worry involves the rehearsal of fearful scenarios and the amplification of worse-case scenarios: people who worry also engage in more catastrophic thinking (Davey and Levy, 1998; Vasey and Borkovec, 1992). In Tallis *et al.*'s (1994) study, negative consequences were noted amongst 'high worries', including greater frequency, more mood disturbance, a difficulty to stop worrying, and more perceived impairment in everyday functioning.

In one of the first empirical investigation of measures, Farrall *et al.* (1997) asked 64 respondents a series of survey questions relating to worry, perceived risk of crime, perceived safety, victimisation experiences and worries about other non-crime issues. Approximately one month later, these respondents were asked the same questions again, this time in qualitative interviews. 'Mismatches' or inconsistencies in the responses given by respondents on sweep one and two were common. Specifically, 'mismatches' were defined as instances where an individual gave different answers depending upon the nature of the interview being undertaken. Only 15 out of 64 sets of interviews did not produce mismatches. A significant number (where answers differed to a moderate to strong degree) were related to the nature of the methodology - e.g. 46 out of a total of 114 were mismatches were generated between 'open' and 'closed' questions. In the majority of these cases, survey measures exaggerated the day-to-day experience of concern or worry. The authors concluded:

'...the results of fear of crime surveys appear to be a function of the way the topic is *researched*, rather than the way it *is*. The traditional methods used are methods which seem consistently to over-emphasise the levels and extent of the fear of crime. It seems that levels of fear of crime, and, to a lesser extent, of victimisation itself, have been hugely overestimated' (Farrall *et al.* 1997:676).

Two follow-up studies then investigated whether questions about *frequency* better capture the everyday experience of worry. Farrall and colleagues (Farrall and Gadd, 2004 and Gray *et al.*, 2006) developed and tested a new set of measures with two novel aspects: (a) the use of a filter question, followed by (b) an assessment of the frequency and intensity of events of emotion. Farrall and Gadd (2004) found that frequency questions yielded smaller estimates of the fear of crime than 'old' standard BCS questions. Jackson *et al.* (2006) found that the discrepancy in the levels of fear identified by the old and new measures suggested that some people reported being *worried* (using standard measures) without actually *having worried recently* (using new measures).

#### *New questions*

The experience of some emotions is akin to events or brief episodes which can be located in space and time. In this we include many people's fears about crime. In order to assess the extent of everyday experience of the fear of crime, the new questions explicitly focus on episodes of fear. Old questions ask about a more *general* model of experience ('How worried

are you . . .'). It is unclear whether faced with the old questions respondents summarise the frequency with which they worry; whether they assess the intensity of each event and calculate some kind of average; whether the process involves assessing both intensity and frequency; or whether such an overall intensity fuses the everyday experience with other facets of 'fear of crime' (see Hough, 2004; Jackson, 2004; Farrall *et al.*, 2006; Jackson, 2006).

Initially piloted as part of an earlier ESRC-funded project (RES 000220040), the question set, included in the 2003/2004 BCS, attempts to describe the *frequency* and intensity of people's worries. Specifically, the new questions contain a filter question, measure frequency and intensity of fearful episodes and employ a narrow time frame of 12 months to allow respondents a specific reference period which we believe they will be able to recall more accurately. The measurement strategy outlined here focuses on *events* of worry; while it explores the intensity of the last fearful event, it does not elicit an overall intensity summary of worry (Farrall and Gadd, 2004):

- Q1: 'In the past year, have you ever felt worried about....' (car theft/ burglary/ robbery)  
Q2: [if YES at Q1] 'How frequently have you felt like this in the last year' [n times recorded]  
Q3: [if YES at Q1] 'On the last occasion how fearful did you feel?' [not very worried, a little bit worried, quite worried, very worried or cannot remember].

Questions one and two above focus on the frequency of crime worries, allowing an estimation of the regularity with which people fear of crime that is arguably more precise. Specifically, individuals can be classified according to whether they worry and, if they do, how often. Of course, it is an empirical question as to whether this strategy produces different results to standard measures. But as mentioned above, there is early evidence that might be the case (Farrall *et al.*, 1997; Farrall and Gadd, 2004; Jackson *et al.*, 2006).

After the two frequency questions comes one item on the intensity of the last event of worry, and this provides a different type of population estimate. Instead of sampling *individuals* and the number of times each individual worries, this question samples *events*. Consider in any one day that a number of people have worried about crime: a number of events of worry occurred, and each event had a level of intensity (as well, of course, as a given context and a set of antecedents and consequents). The new questions, posed in the BCS, ask respondents to think back to the last time they felt worried and to report how intense that episode was.<sup>1</sup> By employing inferential statistics to infer to the population of England and Wales, we can thus produce at the aggregate an estimate of the intensity of all of the individual events of fear that occurred during the past 12 months of individuals throughout England and Wales.

### *Results*

The analysis is organised by three different types of crime: being robbed; being burgled; and having one's car stolen. Top-line frequencies are first provided from the 'old' standard

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the way memory works, and because of the likely impact of the availability heuristic, we expect respondents to be biased towards the most vivid and easily accessed recent event (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973). The 'most recent event' will thus be more likely to be the most intense episode that occurred relatively recently rather than previously the most recent (Clore and Robinson, 2002a, 2002b). This is because more emotional episodes are easier to remember than less emotional episodes. As such we expect our estimates to err on the side of exaggeration of the intensity of events of worry.

measures of worry: ‘How worried are about being . . . [each type of crime]?’ , and then, second, from the new questions<sup>2</sup>.

### *Worry about robbery*

Table 1 shows results according to the old ‘standard’ measures of worry. In the 2003/2004 sweep, just over one-third of respondents reported being worried about being robbed (combining 11 per cent ‘very’ and 24 per cent ‘fairly’). Just under one-half were ‘not very’ worried (45 per cent), leaving one-fifth who were ‘not at all’ worried (20 per cent) about robbery.

Table 1: Standard measure of the fear of crime (Robbery) – ‘How worried are you about being robbed?’

<b>Overall intensity of worry</b>	<b>%</b>
Very worried	11.0
Fairly worried	24.2
Not very worried	44.9
Not at all	19.8
Don’t know	0.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: 2003/2004 British Crime Survey, weighted data, entire sample used

The new questions, asked later in the interview, posed the question slightly differently. When asked: ‘In the past 12 months, have you actually worried about being robbed?’, only 16% of respondents reported having worried (Table 2). Those who said that they had recently worried were then asked how often. Remarkably, just over one-third of those who had worried over the past year had only worried between one and three times during that period, with a further one-quarter worrying between four and eleven times.

Table 2: New measures of the fear of crime (Robbery) – ‘How frequently have you felt like this in the last year? [n times]’

<b>Filter question</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>frequency question (raw scores categorised)</b>	<b>% of those who worried</b>	<b>% of all respondents</b>
Not worried in the past year	84.5	0		84.5
Has worried in the past year	15.5	1-3 times	34.7	5.4
		4-11 times	25.4	3.9
		12-52 times	23.9	3.7
		53+ times	9.4	1.5
		Don’t know	6.6	1.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: 2003/2004 British Crime Survey, weighted data, sub-sample Follow-up D

Overall then, and taking the filter and frequency questions together, 85% of respondents said that they had not worried about being robbed in the past year, and only 5% of all respondents had worried once a month or more. This is to be contrasted with the one-third

<sup>2</sup> Although both styles of questions were given to respondents in the same sitting, they were asked in separate sections of the questionnaire and they were not asked immediately following each other. The structure and routing of the BCS makes it hard to assess exactly how many questions there were between the old and new batteries, but we estimate this to be between 35 and 96.



who said they were ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ worried about being robbed when asked the old standard worry question (Table 1).

Those who reported having worried recently were also asked to think back to the last time and report how worried they had felt worried. Table 3 shows that the vast majority of events were either ‘a little bit’ (43%) or ‘quite’ (40%) worried. However, once we include those respondents who not had worried during the previous year, we find that only 8% of all respondents had reported feeling ‘quite’ or ‘very’ worried most recently.

Table 3: New measures of the fear of crime (Robbery) – ‘On the last occasion how fearful did you feel?’

<b>Intensity of most recent event of worry</b>	<b>% of those who worried</b>	<b>% of all respondents</b>
Not worried		84.5
Not very worried	3.7	.6
A little bit worried	43.4	6.7
Quite worried	39.7	6.1
Very worried	12.8	2.0
Don’t know	0.4	0.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: 2003/2004 British Crime Survey, weighted data, sub-sample follow-up D

#### *Fear levels for burglary*

Table 4 shows that, according to standard measures of fear, levels of worry were higher for burglary than for robbery. Just under one-half reported being worried (12% ‘very’, 35 per cent ‘fairly’); only 12% were ‘not at all’ worried.

Table 4: Standard measure of the fear of crime (Burglary)– ‘How worried are you about being burgled?’

<b>Overall intensity of worry</b>	<b>%</b>
Very worried	11.9
Fairly worried	34.9
Not very worried	40.9
Not at all	12.2
Don’t know	0.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: 2003/2004 British Crime Survey, weighted data, entire sample used

The new measures of the frequency of fear confirmed that people worried more about being burgled than they did about being robbed (Table 5). Just under one-third (32%) said that they had worried about being burgled over the last 12 months. As with robbery, however, people worried relatively infrequently. In a follow-up question to those who had confirmed some experience of worry in the past year, 59% reported that they worried between 1 and 11 times (i.e. less than once a month). Only 12% of said they worried more than once a week (53 times or more).

Table 5: New measures of the fear of crime (Burglary) – ‘How frequently have you felt like this in the last year? [n times]’

<b>Filter question</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>frequency question (raw scores categorised)</b>	<b>% of those who worried</b>	<b>% of all respondents*</b>
Not worried in the past year	67.7			67.7
Has worried in the past year	32.3	1-3 times	36.1	11.6
		4-11 times	22.6	7.3
		12-52 times	23.5	7.6
		53+ times	11.5	3.7
		Don't know	6.4	2.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: 2003/2004 British Crime Survey, weighted data, sub-sample Follow-up D

Overall, using the total sample, 68% of respondents said that they had not worried about being burgled in the past year and 19% had worried less than once a month (1-11 times). Only 4% had worried about burglary more than once a week. Meanwhile, Table 6 shows that, again, the vast majority of the most recent event of worry was either ‘a little bit’ (50%) or ‘quite’ (32%) intense. When one considers the whole sample, we can see that just 3% would describe their last fearful event as ‘very’ worrying. Compared to robbery, the intensity was overall a little lower.

Table 6: New measures of the fear of crime (Burglary) – ‘On the last occasion how fearful did you feel?’

<b>Intensity of most recent event of worry</b>	<b>% of those who worried</b>	<b>% of all respondents</b>
Not worried in the past year		67.7
Not very worried	7.4	2.4
A little bit worried	50.3	16.2
Quite worried	32.2	10.4
Very worried	9.8	3.2
Don't know	0.2	0.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: 2003/2004 British Crime Survey, weighted data, sub-sample follow-up D

#### *Fear levels for car crime*

According to standard measures, car crime elicited levels of worry (45%, Table 7) that were closer to burglary (47%) than robbery (35%).

Table 7: Standard measure of the fear of crime (Car Theft) – ‘How worried are you about having your car stolen?’

<b>Overall intensity of worry</b>	<b>%</b>
Very worried	14.4
Fairly worried	30.1
Not very worried	39.0
Not at all	16.5
Don't know	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: 2003/2004 British Crime Survey, weighted data, entire sample used

The frequency with which respondents worried was also closer to burglary than to robbery (Table 8). Just under one-third (32%) had worried in the past year. Of those who had worried, 57% reported having worried between 1 and 11 times. Twelve per cent had worried more than once a week.

Table 8: New measures of the fear of crime (Car Theft) – ‘How frequently have you felt like this in the last year? [n times]’

<b>Filter question</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>frequency question (raw scores categorised)</b>	<b>% of those who worried</b>	<b>% of all respondents*</b>
Not worried in the past year	68.3			68.3
Has worried in the past year	31.7	1-3 times	29.4	9.3
		4-11 times	27.0	8.6
		12-52 times	26.1	8.3
		53+ times	12.2	3.9
		Don't know	5.2	1.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: 2003/2004 British Crime Survey, weighted data, sub-sample Follow-up D

Focussing on the overall sample, Table 8 shows that 68% of respondents said that they had not worried about car theft in the past year and 18% had worried between 1 and 11 times. Four per cent had worried at least once a week. Turning to Table 9 – and confirming a trend in data on robbery and burglary – the vast majority of the most recent events of worry about car crime were either ‘a little bit’ (50%) or ‘quite’ (33%) intense. Just 3% would classify their last experience as ‘very worrying’ when we include the whole sample in the analyses.

Table 9: New measures of the fear of crime (Car Theft) – ‘On the last occasion how fearful did you feel?’

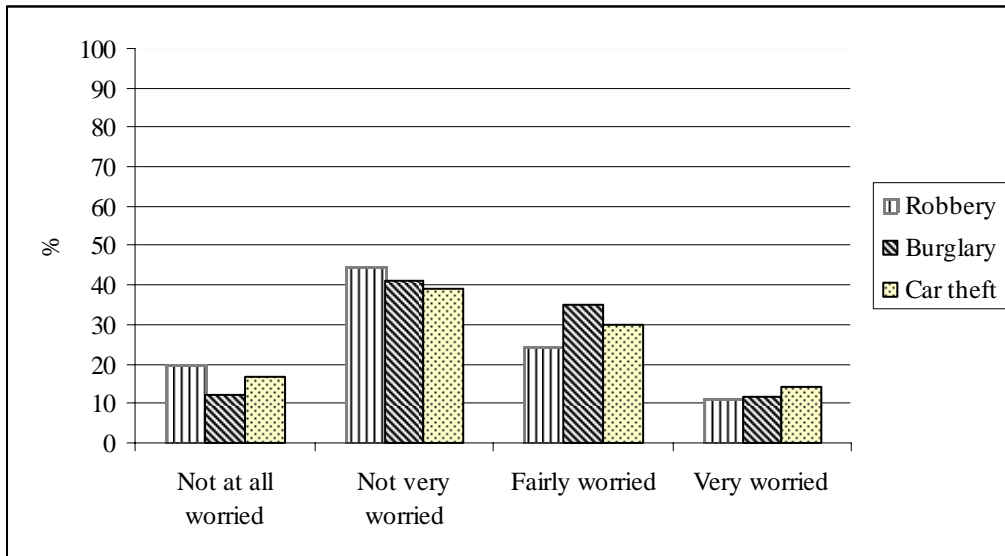
<b>Intensity of most recent event of worry</b>	<b>% of those who worried</b>	<b>% of all respondents</b>
Not worried in the past year		68.3
Not very worried	7.5	2.4
A little bit worried	49.8	15.8
Quite worried	33.4	10.6
Very worried	8.7	2.8
Don't know	0.6	0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: 2003/2004 British Crime Survey, weighted data, sub-sample follow-up D

### *Discussion*

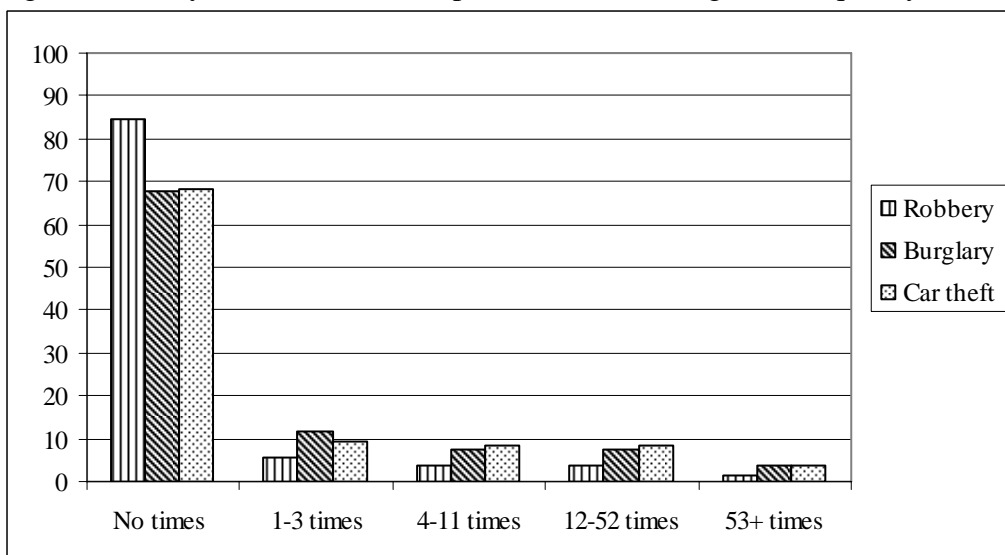
This article presented data from the 2003/2004 BCS which fielded new and old measures of the fear of crime. Figure 1 summarises the results from the old measures. Overall, 35% of respondents reported being worried (summing ‘fairly’ and ‘very’) about being mugged or robbed, 47% reported being worried about being burgled, and 45% reported being worried about having their car stolen.

Figure 1: Worry about crime – standard measures.



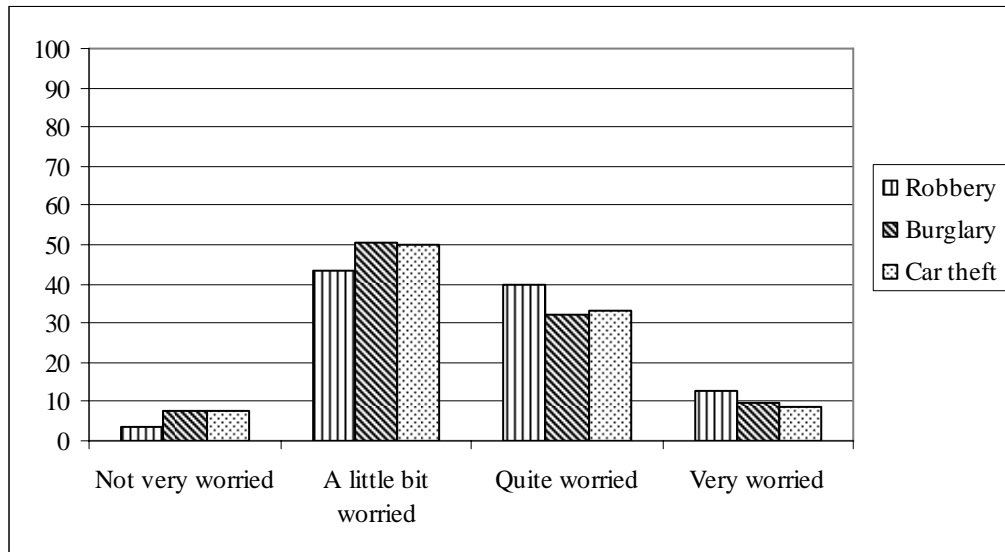
Data from old measures thus suggest that fear of crime is fairly widespread across England and Wales. Intriguingly however, the picture is different when one draws upon data using questions phrased slightly differently but fielded in the same survey to the same respondents (albeit at different stages of the interview). Figure 2 shows that 85% of respondents had not actually worried in the past year about being mugged. Indeed, 68% had not actually worried about being burgled or having their car stolen. Moreover, of those who had worried, the frequency of these events was surprisingly low – very few people had worried more than once a week during the previous year (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Worry about crime in the past 12 months using new frequency measures



Additionally, the new questions sampled events of worry. By asking respondents who had worried recently to think back to the last time and report how worried they felt, the BCS samples events rather than individuals. We can therefore infer the intensity of individual events of worry across England and Wales. Figure 3 shows that the vast majority of such events involved the individual feeling ‘a little bit’ or ‘quite’ worried.

Figure 3: Worry about crime using new event-sampling measures



Finally, to provide a further useful comparison of the old and new questions, when we look at the responses for ‘all crimes’ (robbery, burglary and car theft combined) we can see that very different terrains of fear are invoked by the old and new measures. Table 10 shows how many crimes, out of the three possible offences, respondents had worried about according to the old and new questions.

Table 10: Not worried about robbery, burglary or car theft – comparison of old and new measures of the fear of crime

Number of crimes worried about	Old standard measure (n=4448)	New measure (n=4440)
Not worried about any crimes	7.0	54.5
Worried about one crime	8.9	23.5
Worried about two or more crimes**	84.1	22.0
Total	100	100

Source: 2003/2004 British Crime Survey, weighted data, sub-sample follow-up D

\*\* The categories for worried about two and three crimes have been collapsed since the new questions excluded those who did not have ‘regular access to a car’, while the old questions did not, although respondents had the option of replying ‘not applicable’.

Noticeably, the old measures picked up some level of worry (worry about one or more crimes) almost throughout the sample (93%), while less than a half of the same sample (46%) reported some instance of worry via the new measures. Indeed, while the old questions suggest the majority are worried about two or more crimes (85%), 78% of people answering the new questions are either not worried or just experience worry about one crime in isolation. This comparison eloquently demonstrates that the old standard questions not only seem to uncover much larger numbers of people who worry about crime, but tap into a more generalised or broad expression of worry (Hough, 2004). The new questions meanwhile, which have been designed in accordance with current thinking on survey design (Farrall, 2004) suggests to us that the extent to which people actually experience worrying events in their everyday lives is much lower by comparison.

### *Conclusions*

We began this article by highlighting how anxiety about crime is widely viewed as a lived experience above and beyond the actual likelihood of victimisation. How has this perception fared in the light of our empirical findings? The findings from the study presented in this article suggest that the extent of fear of crime – here defined more specifically as episodes of worry that manifest in people’s everyday lives – may have been overstated by standard research tools. Old survey questions indicate that a significant minority of the English and Welsh population reported being worried about crime. Yet new questions show that the frequency of worry is actually rather low.

This suggests that questions about the frequency of worry measure something more specific than questions about an overall intensity of worry; in many instances, standard indicators may be tapping into a more diffuse anxiety (Hough, 2004), a generalised awareness and ‘image’ of risk (Jackson, 2006), and a condensation of broader concerns about crime, stability, and social change (Taylor and Jamieson, 1996; Girling *et al.* 2000; Farrall, 2006). On this matter we must remain cautious at least for a little while; we will explore this idea in much more detail in future work. Nevertheless this has important implications for the manner in which we measure fear of crime, not least because worry about crime has become an important policy issue across Europe. In the UK, for example, it is an indicator of effectiveness for crime reduction partnerships and the police, and legitimises a wide range of anti-social behaviour strategies and community safety agendas (Burney, 2005). Critically, policy makers and practitioners may be most interested in reducing the ‘type’ of fear that manifests in specific events.

People experience anxiety about all sorts of things – their family, their employment, their health. One reason why fear of crime has become a significant social and political issue, and attracted so much social scientific research, is that it is widely seen as a significant *social problem*. Such status may rest, in large part, on the assumption that fear of crime occurs regularly amongst the populace, with all the deleterious effects that this entails. Yet it seems, after all, to be a relatively infrequent experience when research focuses on a more experientially-based conception of fear. Intriguingly, many people are happy to report an overall level of worry in crime surveys. As Garland (2001) argues, crime has become a part of public consciousness. Yet we have shown that specific events of worry are relatively rare. Is it time to start to reassess the conceptual and social-problem status of the fear of crime?

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