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Alex C. Michalos

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Perceived Risk of Crime

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Without Abstract

Synonyms

Crime risk perception

Definition

Perceived risk of crime is one's own evaluation of the probability of being a victim of a criminal offense.

Description

Perceived risk of crime is related to the possibility of experiencing criminal victimization, i.e., an experience which, per se, can determine negative changes in quality of life. Beyond its harmful physical and economic consequences, it may have undesirable psychological outcomes, in that – being based on the perpetrator's intention to cause harm to the victim – it

may jeopardize the victim's assumptions of (a) the benevolence of the impersonal world and of other people, (b) the existence of a just, meaningful, and controllable world, and (c) self-worth (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Indeed, research has shown criminal victimization to foster stress (Norris & Kaniasty, 1994), lowered levels of well-being (Denkers & Winkel, 1998), lowered perception of health (Koss, Woodruff, & Koss, 1990), and even posttraumatic stress disorder (Resnik, 1987).

Thus, due to the potentially severe consequences of experiencing a criminal offense, it is far from surprising that people tend to interact with their relational and social world developing specific levels of crime-related worries, among which crime risk perception and fear of crime. Even if these two constructs have been often used as synonyms, they have a different psychological nature. Fear of crime, which belongs to the emotional sphere, should be considered as a feeling of dread or anxiety about victimization (Ross & Jang, 2000), while perceived risk of crime, which belongs to the cognitive sphere, is related to people's beliefs about the probability of being victimized (Perkins et al., 1992). Nonetheless, fear of crime and perceived risk of crime share many common predictors, even though not all of them (Rountree & Land, 1996).

If realistic, crime risk perception should be considered as a healthy mechanism helping people to defend themselves from the risk of being victimized (Fattah, 1993). However, if disproportionate, it may have negative consequences on people's quality of life at the intrapsychic level, in that it fosters stress, anger, aggressiveness, anxiety, disempowerment, and may even have psychiatric consequences. Moreover, several negative behavioral effects have been detected (mainly withdrawal from social participation and the imposition of constraints on one's own life) (McKee & Milner, 2000). Furthermore, at the community level, perceived risk of crime can weaken community integration, social support, and social capital, fostering people's disinvestment on social relations and public life (Houghton, 2001). In addition, at the social and economic levels, the spread of disproportionate crime risk perceptions may (a) increase the division between the rich and the poor and between people who can afford private security measures and those who cannot (Hale, 1996), (b) transform some public places into no-go areas (Wilson, 1975), (c) exert a chilling effect on participation (Saegert & Winkel, 2004), and (d) help increase crime levels themselves, leading people to spend more time in their homes and thus reducing the level of surveillance in public places (Goodstein & Shotland, 1980). Finally, at the political level, it can impact on the climate of opinion, promoting the development and spread of a security ideology that can turn the legitimate demand for living in safe communities into an attempt to legitimize xenophobia and exclusion (Jeudy, 1986).

Researchers have typically explained perceived risk of crime relying on one out of two main families of predictors, respectively focused on contextual or on individual characteristics. Three sets of ecological factors showed to foster perceived risk of crime. First, the crime rate,

which may be considered as a proxy variable for the objective risk of being victimized spread in the community. Second, social and economic disadvantage of people's life space, that weakens residents' control, efficacy, and even physical health (Franklin, Franklin, & Fearn, 2008; Taylor & Covington, 1993). Third, the spread of social and physical neighborhood disorder (LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1992). Social disorder refers to disruptive behaviors such as loiterers, unruly and rowdy teenagers, gangs, begging, public drunkenness, prostitution, and public drug use or sales. Physical disorder refers to disorderly inanimate environments such as those in which there are abandoned cars, vandalized property, litter, graffiti, vacant houses, and dilapidated homes. Disorder worries residents because it is easily considered as the epiphenomenon of the fact that social order and social control have broken down and of the incapacity of residents to manage their neighborhood (Skogan, 1990).

However, due to the ecological fallacy, the correlations identified at the contextual level do not necessarily reflect those at the individual level. Thus, another set of studies analyzed the individual predictors of perceived risk of crime, focusing on two main sets of variables. First, those assessing vulnerability, both from the physical (i.e., limited mobility and lack in physical strength and competence) and the social (i.e., the lack of material and social resources necessary to protect one's own home and/or retrieve financial losses in the event of victimization) points of view (Pantazis, 2000). Consistent with the idea of a vulnerability – crime risk perception link, people belonging to socially marginal groups (mainly women, the elderly, people low in education, and people belonging to low-income groups (Hipp, 2010; Miceli, Roccato, & Rosato, 2004) showed the highest crime risk perception).

The second – and most relevant – set of individual predictors of crime risk perception is made of direct (the experience of personally being the victim of an offense) and indirect (the experience of being victim of an offense involving a member of one's social network) criminal victimization experiences. Even if – somewhat paradoxically – the first research on the topic found a weak or null relationship between victimization experiences and crime risk perception, subsequent studies performed using multivariate statistical analysis to control for respondents' vulnerability have identified very strong relationships between perceived risk of crime on the one hand and direct and indirect victimization on the other hand (Rountree & Land, 1996). Recent research showed that criminal victimization tends to influence perceived risk of crime among people living in areas characterized by social disorder (Roccato, Russo, & Vieno, 2011) and by a high unemployment rate (Vieno, Russo, & Roccato, 2011), plausibly because victimization, by pushing residents to deeply explore their community, should make focal its contextual cues and make salient its signs of menace.

Moreover, criminal victimization showed to impact longitudinally on crime risk perception (Russo, Roccato, & Vieno, in press). However, its effects showed to be relatively short (less than 12 months). In addition, the effects of multiple (being a victim of different crimes) and repeat (repeatedly being a victim of the same crime) victimization showed to be much

weaker than those of a single victimization experience (Russo & Roccato, 2010). These results indirectly suggest that people effectively cope with the negative effects of criminal victimization, succeeding in neutralizing them.

Given that predictors of crime risk perception lay both at individual and the contextual level, in the late 1990s and in the early 2000s some authors started to model it using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM), a statistical technique that allows researchers to conjointly consider different level predictors as well as their cross-level interactions. Such analyses, beyond substantially confirming the results of the research focused on individual or ecological variables taken separately, showed that perceived risk of crime actually depends both on individual characteristics and experiences on the one hand and on the features of people's life space on the other hand.

Conclusion

From the theoretical point of view, the entwinement of individual and contextual variable at the basis of perceived risk of crime suggests that this construct has both a rational and a nonrational nature. On the one hand, its links with victimization, the crime rate (which account, at least in part, for the "objective" risk of being victimized), and the social disadvantage of people's area of residence support the idea that crime risk perception is a rational cognitive reaction to crime. This idea is also supported by results showing that the more salient, but less diagnostic, information about the immigrant rate does not show significant links with crime risk perception. However, the relationship between crime risk perception and the unemployment rate is also consistent with the thesis advanced by the most radical criminological researchers (e.g., Mathieu, 1995), according to which crime-related worries disguise a wide array of social and economic insecurities experienced by people in Western countries by conveying them into an insecurity that is more easily handled and faced by the dominant classes.

At the individual level, perceived risk of crime mainly depends on individual vulnerability and on criminal victimization. However, the social and economic disadvantage of people's area of residence can foster it, both directly and as moderator of the effects exerted by its individual predictors. Thus, from the methodological point of view, given that the quota of crime risk perception variability due to ecological features is far from irrelevant and because, like the other crime-related worries, crime risk perception is inherently nested into the contexts where people live, the most appropriate statistical technique to predict it is hierarchical linear modeling.

Cross-References

Changes in Quality of Life

Climate of Opinion

Education

Neighborhood Disorder

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

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