Age of hope or anxiety?
The dynamics of fear of crime in South Africa

Using SASA data and other HSRC public opinion surveys, Ben Roberts provides an overview of the nature of fear of crime in the country, and charts its evolution since the early 1990s.

The dynamics of fear of crime in South Africa

This article is concerned with an important and often neglected related social phenomenon, namely the fear of crime and not with the actual levels of victimisation in South Africa. Why is it important to focus on people’s anxieties about their personal safety rather than on the hard numbers related to levels of violent and property crimes?

The answer lies in the complex and detrimental effects that fear of criminal violence imparts on quality of life at the individual, community and societal levels. These include a reliance on racial stereotypes in discussing crime, constraints on people’s mobility and ability to socialise, a hastening retreat from public spaces and the proliferation of gated communities, high walls and fences and an array of private security measures.

Such anxieties may also diminish the sense of trust and cohesion within communities, as well as provide mounting appeals for the reinstatement of the death penalty and lend credibility to vigilante violence.

For many such reasons, the fear of crime has become a prominent social and political problem in international circles. In Britain, the United States and Europe, it has frequently been heralded as a public concern that is at least as pressing as crime itself. Since the 1960s, the fear of crime in its own right has been the focus of increasing attention of researchers and policymakers.

Countless studies have been conducted, with many concluding that fear continues to adversely affect the well-being of a proportion of the population.

The recognition of the harm that fear can cause to individuals and communities has led some governments to establish the reduction of the fear of crime as a social objective distinct from reducing actual crime and warranting specific government interventions.

National trends in fear of crime

HSRC attitudinal surveys since the early 1990s reveal that general perceptions of personal safety have been showing signs of improvement since the late 1990s (Fig.1). The percentage feeling personally unsafe has dropped from a high of 49% in both 1991 and 1998 to 30% in late 2007.

Fig.1: Percentage of South Africans feeling personally unsafe, 1991-2007
Note: From 1991-1997, the question was phrased “How safe do you feel in South Africa today?”, but since 1998 the phrasing has been “How safe or unsafe do you feel personally on most days?”. The percentages reported here are a combination of those that reported they felt “unsafe” and “very unsafe.”
However, the same cannot be said for feelings of neighbourhood or community safety. The 2005, 2006 and 2007 rounds of SASAS found that people are substantially more fearful of walking alone in their residential areas during the day and after dark compared to 1998 (74% in 2007 relative to 44% in 1998) (Fig.2).

Of particular concern is the worsening level of fear of walking alone in one’s area during the day, increasing from 15% feeling fairly or very unsafe in 2003 to 37% in 2007.

If compared to other parts of the world, South Africans emerge as significantly more fearful in relation to developed countries of Western Europe, or other African, Latin American or transition countries.

Who is more fearful?

The survey results pose critical challenges to some of the prevailing archetypal images of who the fearful in the country are, and provide further support for other national and sub-national surveys that have arrived at similar conclusions.

Firstly, over the last decade and a half, the level of fear of crime among men has virtually matched, and in a couple of instances surpassed, that of women. This finding draws attention to the feeling of vulnerability experienced by men, rather than portraying them solely as the aggressor and perpetrator. Fear of victimisation no longer has a predominantly female face.

Secondly, South African youth appear more fearful than the elderly, though the relationship is weak and inconsistent over time. This confronts the view that the decline in physical resilience associated with the process of ageing renders the elderly more fearful of crime than younger people.

Thirdly, Indian and black African respondents exhibited greater fear of crime than coloured and white respondents in 2005 and 2006 (Fig.3). Since fear levels for black South Africans improved at a slower rate than for white South Africans, the gap between the proportion of white and black South Africans who felt unsafe narrowed substantially in the late 1990s, and by 2005 a relative reversal of positions appears to have occurred.

The popular notion that fear of crime in the country is predominantly a ‘white fear’ is lamentable in that it is misleading and neglects the needs of a majority who are less able to adequately voice their concerns.

The geography of fear

The data provide support for the relationship between fear and the broader social environment. The character of the place where one resides clearly exerts an influence over perceptions of safety and fear of crime. While it was not surprising to find that people residing in rural areas tend to experience less fear of victimisation than their urban counterparts, a significant finding is that it is in the country’s informal settlements that fear seems most pervasive.

Responses to fear

As for attitudinal responses to such fear, the survey enabled the examination of several indicators of the demand for public safety and satisfaction with police effectiveness in cutting crime. Concern over crime has also resulted in a situation where the demand for publicly provided protective measures such as street lighting and street policing, as well as a number of private security measures are considered critical by a majority of South Africans as essential for all to have in order to secure a decent standard of living. The fear of crime also is related to sizable erosion of confidence in the police and dissatisfaction with crime reduction efforts at the neighbourhood level.

The policy relevance of fear of crime

Despite some signs of improvement with regard to feelings of safety and security, the study has confirmed that deep-seated fears about personal and community safety continue to be shared by a sizable contingent of South Africans across the socio-economic and demographic spectrum.

Identifying, testing and evaluating strategies for reducing the fear of crime should be recognised as a priority, alongside that of reducing crime itself. While this task is likely to be rendered difficult by the social, economic and political insecurity that tends to underscore fear of crime, it is only by doing so that we can expect to dislodge the shadow of anxiety that looms over the age of hope.

Fig. 2: Respondents’ feelings of safety when walking alone in their area after dark, 1998-2007
Sources: Statistics South Africa (1999); Burton et al. (2004); HSRC, SASAS 2005, 2006, 2007

Fig. 3: Percentage of respondents feeling personally unsafe by population group, 1991-2007
Note: From 1991-1997, the question was phrased “How safe do you feel in South Africa today?”, but since 1998 the phrasing has been “How safe or unsafe do you feel personally on most days?”. The percentages reported here are a combination of those that reported they felt “unsafe” and “very unsafe”

Benjamin Roberts is a Research Specialist in the Child, Youth, Family and Social Development (URED) research programme at the Human Sciences Research Council.