

Fear of Crime & Victimization

What is Fear of Crime?

“Fear of crime” is challenging to understand and even more difficult to define. Actual crime is a weak predictor of fear of victimization. For instance, young males (age 15-24) are the most likely group in society to be a victim of crime, yet they are the least likely to fear crime. In contrast, women and older Canadians are more fearful of crime, but are at a lower risk of victimization (Statistics Canada, 2009). In reality, many more people experience a “fear of crime” than are actually victimized by a crime.

The more vulnerable a person feels, the more they will fear crime.

What Causes Fear?

If the crime rate decreases it does not necessarily mean that our fear of being victimized decreases. Even in the face of evidence that tells us our community is safe, several factors contribute to a natural human tendency to be fearful of crime. These fears can be heightened in certain neighbourhoods, at certain times of day, and depend on whether we are alone or in a group. These fears can also be shaped by:

- Age
- Gender
- Household income
- Past victimization
- Social and physical disorder in a neighbourhood (i.e. prostitution, drug use, loitering, vandalism, graffiti).

Trends

- Waterloo Region is one of the safest communities in all of Canada. Recent statistics show that the national crime rate continues to fall, and the crime rate in Waterloo Region is well below national averages when it comes to the overall crime rate, crime severity, homicides and robberies (Statistics Canada, 2012).
- More than 9 in 10 people in Waterloo Region (95%) feel “very safe” during the day (WRPS “2011 Community Survey Highlights”)
- Nearly 8 in 10 people in Waterloo Region (77%) perceive crime levels to be the same or decreasing (WRPS “2011 Community Survey Highlights”).
- Fear of crime tends to rise with age for both men and women.
- Females are significantly more fearful than males.



The Role of the Media

The media plays a substantial role in determining the extent of our fear of crime. “Shock crimes” such as murder and other violent incidents get our attention and the headlines. The media’s extensive coverage of crime stories contributes to a perception that a community is less safe. So while crime may make up a relatively small part of what happens in a community, it can take up a rather large part of a newscast or newspaper.

The more often we see, read and hear stories about robberies, assaults and even murders, the more likely we are to be fearful of crime. This leads us to believe that there is more crime than actually exists and in turn creates a heightened sense of fear.

Several studies also suggest that the media can reinforce the stigmatization and fear of certain groups (youth, ethno-cultural communities) and of certain geographical locations or neighbourhoods. Misleading media coverage of specific groups and places can lead to harmful policies and generate false stereotypes about certain groups as offenders. This in turn can feed our fear of being victimized by certain groups or in certain neighbourhoods (ICPC, 2008).

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The ‘Broken Windows’ Theory

The Broken Windows Theory suggests a broken window in a building, left in disrepair, will soon lead to other windows in a building being broken. And that once one social norm is violated, it will encourage individuals to violate other social norms.

This theory can be extended into other areas of our community where we see disorderly behaviour such as littering, loitering or public intoxication. The more disorderly behaviour that is present, the more likely that it is to increase. And our fear of that area will also increase.

What Can You Do?

Fear of crime is real and it can affect our quality of life. What can you do to reduce the fear?

- Get involved in your neighbourhood
- Organize a community clean up
- Get to know your neighbours - Just say hi!
- Share good news stories about your community
- Follow statistics, not headlines, to identify trends
- Bring together residents, agencies, local government, businesses and police to create new approaches to reducing crime
- Become a Friend of Crime Prevention



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