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## **The discovery of fear of crime in the UK**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter explores the way in which the fear of crime emerged as a policy issue and as a criminological topic in the United Kingdom in the early 1980s. The British Crime Survey (BCS, now CSEW) was the first large-scale survey to attempt to measure fear of crime in the UK. It included questions asking if respondents felt safe out alone at night, and whether they worried about becoming the victim of various crimes. The first BCS report suggested that fear of crime was inflated by media accounts of crime and argued that those who were least at risk tended to worry most – in short it implied a “risk/fear paradox”. BCS findings on fear were well received upon publication, but subject to criticism in the mid 1980s by ‘Left Realist’ criminologists who conducted various local crime surveys with an agenda of encouraging politicians of the centre/left to take crime problems seriously. A more balanced and nuanced BCS analysis of fear of crime emerged in the 1990s. The mid-1990s saw the start of a prolonged fall in conventional crimes against people and their property. Initially this resulted in a new variant of the “risk/fear” paradox, in that people continued to think that crime was rising despite the downward trends. However, after over 20 years of falling crime, people have started to recognise that this fall is a reality, and as a result, levels of fear as measured by the CSEW have also fallen, and fear of crime has largely fallen off the UK political agenda. Public concern remains about cyber-crime (which is increasing), about terrorism and about specific forms of violence such as knife crimes committed by young men.

## Introduction

Although it has a much longer pre-history, as documented by Lee (2007), fear of crime was 'discovered' as a policy issue in the UK<sup>1</sup> in the 1970s, and the need to address it became an orthodoxy in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s. This chapter provides an account of the emergence of research and policy interest in fear of crime at this time, and how public and academic debate about fear became more sophisticated over the 1980s and 1990s. As a coda, I shall discuss how the issue appear to have largely fallen off the political and research agenda with the new century.

I begin by saying something about my background and the claims to knowledge that this chapter makes. The British Crime Survey (BCS, now rebadged as the Crime Survey for England and Wales, or CSEW) provided much of the empirical foundation for discussion of fear of crime. I was a member of the small research team that developed the first BCS in the period from 1980 to 1982, and worked on subsequent sweeps of the survey both during my time at the Home Office and subsequently, as an academic researcher. I have had access to early reports and internal Home Office documents and files, and obviously have my own recollections of events. But I should acknowledge that documents can mislead, and that memory can be both fragile and biased.

It is worth stressing that at that time both policy civil servants and government researchers had rather more autonomy than they do now, often occupying and working the terrain left untilled by their political masters (cf Mayhew, 2016). Whilst the researchers working on the crime survey and on situational prevention at that time have been characterised as 'administrative criminologists' closely harnessed to the law-and-order policies of the then conservative government, this was far from the case. Our research on situational prevention (eg Mayhew et al., 1976; Clarke and Mayhew, 1980) initially met with scepticism from our senior policy colleagues in the Home Office, and our

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<sup>1</sup> As a shorthand this chapter refers to the United Kingdom, but strictly speaking I am referring largely to England and Wales. The first BCS covered England, Wales and Scotland, but not Northern Ireland. Scottish results were similar to those for England and Wales, but were reported separately.

work on police effectiveness (Clarke and Hough, 1980, 1984) encountered fierce resistance – but as I shall describe, our work on the BCS enjoyed rather more support within the Home Office<sup>2</sup>. However, ministerial interest in our work at that time was, at best, distant.

### **The emergence of fear of crime in the UK**

Policy research on fear of crime originated in the United States, and was very clearly associated with the 1967 President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, which commissioned a programme of surveys of victimisation and research into fear of crime (President's Commission, 1967). The US National Crime Victimization Survey (originally the National Crime Survey) was one of the legacies of this programme, starting in 1972. Over the following decade other countries, including the Netherlands, Canada and Germany, began to develop their own surveys. In the UK, the Home Office had commissioned Richard Sparks<sup>3</sup> and colleagues in 1973 to mount a small-scale pilot victim survey in London, which was very much along the lines of the US surveys (Sparks et al., 1977). It largely adopted the US perspective on fear, fielding a small number of questions including the very widely used one asking about feelings of safety out alone at night.

The London survey drew the attention of Home Office policy officials to victim surveys, but it failed to capture their imaginations – perhaps partly because of the length of time that it took for findings to emerge, and partly because of the academic style of publication. In 1979, however, researchers at the Home Office Research Unit (Ron Clarke and Pat Mayhew, with myself in tow) began to mobilize interest within the Home Office in mounting a national victim survey, with the support and encouragement of an internal 'think tank', the Crime Policy Planning Unit (CPPU).<sup>4</sup> The Home

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<sup>2</sup> Mayhew (2016) explores these issues more fully.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Sparks, not to be confused with Professor Richard Sparks at Edinburgh, was based at the University of Cambridge at the time and subsequently returned to the US as a Professor at Rutgers, before his death in 1988.

<sup>4</sup> See Hough et al., 2007, for a fuller account of this process. Bob Morris, director of the CPPU, was a key ally in arguing for the survey.

Office researchers consulted extensively with US, Dutch and Canadian colleagues about options for a UK survey, and a high-level Home Office policy committee picked over the idea. Eventually the Research Unit and the CPPU convened a three-day workshop in Cambridge where senior Home Office officials considered proposals for a national survey, together with researchers and international experts. The latter included Al Biderman, Wes Skogan and Jan van Dijk, as well as senior staff from the US Department of Justice and the Canadian Solicitor General's Office<sup>5</sup>. This cast list gives a clear idea of the intellectual and technical origins of the BCS, which was given the go-ahead by the Home Secretary shortly after the workshop.

The rationale for the survey were largely as described by Lee (2007) though I would place emphasis on different factors. The BCS research team undoubtedly had a policy agenda for the survey, which was to provide empirical research findings that would challenge the then dominant public discourse about crime. This dominant discourse was best illustrated by the febrile tone of media coverage about crime, which in our view created a risk of populist responses to crime. Calls for a 'war on crime' were commonplace; so too were news stories with 'crime clocks' showing that a crime was committed in Britain every 'x' seconds<sup>6</sup>. We thought that information that 'normalised' crime – stressing the mundane reality of most offences – would lead to more balanced debate about responses to crime.

This normalising or calming agenda was not restricted solely to the Research Unit, however. The CPPU paper presenting the case at the Cambridge workshop for a national survey argued that:

The message [coming from media coverage] is unequivocal: crime is fearsome; the public are in peril; and the dangers are increasing all the time. The message is far from new, but it is increasingly felt to inhibit rational discussion of crime problems and what action should be taken to deal with them (Home Office, 1981:15)

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<sup>5</sup> Al Reiss had also provided consultancy advice but was unable to attend the workshop.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Cohen (1972) and Hall et al. (1978) for contemporary discussions of media treatment of crime.

And specifically on fear of crime, it argued that:

Evidence from victim surveys seems to point to rumour rather than direct experience as the main influence in arousing fear of crime. Fear is most widespread amongst the elderly and women, yet these groups are the least likely to be victimised. Forty per cent of people interviewed by Sparks thought that they would not be safe outside after dark. Sparks emphasised that that these feelings were little affected by actual experience of crime, and were instead by personal factors and other beliefs and experiences that had nothing to do with crime. (Home Office, 1981:19)

A parallel paper written by the Research Unit team similarly argued that:

There is some evidence to think that fear of crime is a phenomenon only loosely linked to the incidence of crime, and that fear of crime may be criminogenic. The more that fear of crime keeps people away from certain streets or parks, for example, the less protection against crime is afforded to those who continue to use such places. The survey would aim to explore some of the issues surrounding fear of crime. (Home Office, 1981:29)

The report of the proceedings of the Cambridge workshop stated that:

It was agreed that popular conceptions of crime, particularly as reflected by the media, bore little resemblance to the picture uncovered by crime surveys. By concentrating on the statistics of recorded crime and on its most violent manifestations, the media depicted a society rowing steadily more lawless and unpleasant; but crime surveys showed that most crimes were trivial and suggested that increases in recorded crime often exaggerated and sometimes falsified the real trend. (Home Office, 1981:6)

In other words, not only the research team but senior policy officials in the Home Office were keen to address misrepresentations of crime that created needless public concern and constrained the

political room for manoeuvre in constructing better criminal policy. There was a shared concern that the climate of political debate was becoming overheated and would lead to tough but ineffective populist policies. This orientation was to my mind illustrative of the liberal elitism that characterised not just mainstream criminologists but senior civil servants at that time – an approach to policy that Loader (2006) described as ‘Platonic Guardianship’. As Loader (2006:577) put it, “Much of the work of the Home Office research unit in the early 1980s can be interpreted as, and was in part understood by its authors to be, a quiet rearguard action against the wilder excesses of Conservative law and order politics.”

It is much less clear that plans for the crime survey were driven by the ‘responsibilisation agenda’ that Garland (2001), Lee (2007) and others attribute to administrative criminologists<sup>7</sup>. Certainly it was argued at the Cambridge workshop that the picture of crime painted by crime surveys would help promote situational crime prevention measures, and that crime surveys were well-suited to analysing risk. As Mayhew (2016) has described, it was clear to us at the time that a national crime survey would sit comfortably with our work, led by Ron Clarke, on situational crime prevention (eg Clarke and Mayhew, 1976) and on the limits of police effectiveness (eg Clarke and Hough, 1980, 1984). And certainly, it was true that by the *late* 1980s the Home Office was starting to adopt situational crime prevention as part of its overall crime reduction strategy. However, it would be wrong to suggest that plans for the BCS formed a clearly articulated part of a larger plan for a preventive philosophy emerging from administrative criminology. Nor was there any sort of guiding hand whatsoever from the (Conservative) Home Office ministers of the day<sup>8</sup>. And I certainly do not recall any significant proposals to exploit fear of crime to advance situational prevention, despite Lee’s (2007:92) suggestion that, “There is little doubt that new administrative criminology had begun to appreciate that fear of crime could serve as one of a plethora of technologies that could function as modes of social regulation; mentalities of *government through fear*.” We were much more taken

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<sup>7</sup> See Hough (2014) for a discussion of the competing definitions of administrative criminology.

<sup>8</sup> Except, of course, to the extent that our policy colleagues anticipated and acted upon likely ministerial reactions. Where this occurred, as in opposition to the publication of *Police Effectiveness*

with the arguments of Jane Jacobs (1961) and Oscar Newman (1972) that fear of crime was dysfunctional – ideas which were also central to the 'Broken Windows' thesis of James Q Wilson and George Kelling (1982)<sup>9</sup>, but which also resonated with 'left idealist' criminology ideas about over-reaction to crime and deviance, notably Stan Cohen's (1972) influential book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* and Geoff Pearson's (1983) *Hooligan*.

It is probably more accurate to see the BCS as a machine that served multiple research and policy agendas, rather than as something that was tightly harnessed to administrative criminology narrowly defined as advocating a new form of governance based on risk. Using research as a means of cooling down overheated public debate was a consistent theme, however. Not only was there the agenda relating to fear of crime, but also, for example, my own and colleagues' work on several sweeps of the BCS on public attitudes to punishment (Hough and Mayhew, 1985; Hough and Moxon, 1985; Walker and Hough, 1988; Hough, 1998; Hough and Roberts, 1998, 1999), which are better described as part of Loader's 'quiet rearguard action' against penal populism<sup>10</sup>.

### **The early BCS treatment of fear**

To my mind, the first two sweeps of BCS largely delivered on the prospectus for fear of crime that we offered at the 1981 Cambridge workshop. Following the go-ahead given by the then Home Secretary, Willie Whitelaw, Pat Mayhew and I designed and developed the survey in the second half of 1981 in close collaboration with Douglas Wood from Social and Community Planning Research (now NatCen, the National Centre for Social Research) with advice from Wes Skogan, Jan van Dijk and others in the international crime survey 'circus'. We included a battery of questions on fear of

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<sup>9</sup> At the time there were well established links between the Research Unit and the US Police Foundation, directed by George Kelling, who visited the Home Office on several occasions from the late 1970s onwards.

<sup>10</sup> The BCS showed fairly convincingly that people were ill-informed about crime levels, crime risks and levels of punishment, and we argued that this could explain the widespread desire for tougher court penalties that co-existed with results of sentencing exercises that were broadly in line with actual penal practice. See especially Hough and Robert, 1999.)

crime, asking how much people worried about crime, and if so, which crimes they worried about. We also asked the well-worn question about feelings of safety out alone at night<sup>11</sup>. The first report (Hough and Mayhew, 1983) included a short chapter on fear of crime which documented the ‘risk/fear’ paradox – that those least at risk felt most fearful, hinted that fear of crime was irrational and raised the possibility of fear reduction strategies. In hindsight, the risk/fear paradox was much less paradoxical than it appeared to us at the time, as will be discussed below.

Overall, the first report was very well received by the media, and captured a great deal of attention. The tentative, balanced tone of the section on fear may have helped ensure that the media fairly uncritically reported our conclusions – even if our treatment of the topic was fairly simplistic and derivative from the treatment of fear by US academics and survey researchers. The positive reception from the media may have reflected the fact that journalists from the broadcast media and the broadsheet press were already sympathetic to the thrust of our findings, and had been carefully briefed in advance by the Home Office press officers.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact that they were the main ‘Aunt Sally’ that we wanted to hit, the tabloid press appeared to take their lead from the BBC coverage.

The first report was followed quite quickly by a more detailed analysis of the findings from the first BCS on fear of crime, produced by Michael Maxfield<sup>13</sup> (1984). Although this examined fear of crime and its correlates in more depth, there remained a central pre-occupation whether fear of crime was a problem in its own right that needed to be addressed separately from crime. It raised the question whether fear was excessive, but (sensibly) held back from giving a definitive answer. Instead, it

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<sup>11</sup> The BCS variant of this question was, “How safe do you feel walking alone in this area after dark? Would you say you feel very safe, fairly safe, a bit unsafe or very unsafe?” It originated from Ennis’ (1967) survey for the President’s Commission.

<sup>12</sup> At that time, there was less mutual suspicion between government departments’ press offices and journalists, and as researchers we also kept in touch with key home affairs journalists ourselves, albeit in a low-profile way.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Maxfield, the American academic, was at the time working as a consultant for the Home Office; he had previously worked on crime surveys with Wes Skogan at Northwestern University.

began to address the interplay between risk, vulnerability and fear, and to recognise significant gender differences both in vulnerability and in preparedness to admit to fearfulness or anxiety.

The report of the second sweep of the BCS (Hough and Mayhew, 1985) returned to the topic, including a chapter on the results of a redesigned questionnaire module on fear which has largely remained unchanged in the BCS/CSEW questionnaires ever since. This was rather fuller than the treatment given to fear in the first report, with the new suite of questions on worry about crime informed by the various analyses of the first sweep. The chapter on fear was more nuanced; it made a sharper conceptual distinction between measures tapping fearfulness, and those that measured anxiety – and settled on anxiety or worry as the primary focus of the suite of new questions on reactions to crime. It argued that at least in the UK context, measuring worry or anxiety about crime was more appropriate than trying to measure fearfulness. However it also began to offer a more adequate analysis of the question about feeling safe out alone after dark, suggesting that again in the UK context this question tapped not only people's fear of crime, but more diffuse anxieties. Importantly, it also charted how risks of crime (burglary in particular) varied widely across area, using the ACORN classification of neighbourhood (Hough and Mayhew, 1985:37) and showed how anxiety about crime co-varied with risk. It began to offer a more gender-sensitive account of anxiety about crime, and rowed back somewhat from the political message in the first report, that people's fears about crime might be irrational. A fuller analysis of the second BCS sweep's findings on fear of crime was produced by Maxfield (1987).

### **Push-back from 'left realist' criminologists**

If the media reception of the first two sweeps of the BCS were all that we could hope for, academic reactions were more mixed. In particular, various 'Left Idealist' criminologists had begun to reconstruct themselves as 'Left Realists' in the early 1980s, with a policy agenda that collided with that of the BCS. Key figures were Jock Young and John Lea. 'What is to be done about law and order'

(Lea and Young, 1984) was the first major public statement of the Left Realist position. The underlying aim was to persuade Labour politicians to take crime seriously as a policy issue and not to abandon the field. The Conservatives, in power since their landslide victory in 1979, had successfully badged themselves as 'the party of law and order'. The Realists needed to persuade their key audiences that crime was a real problem for important segments of the Labour electorate – notably blue collar households in inner city areas.

Crime surveys were to become an important technology for getting this message across. In *The Failure of Criminology*, Jock Young (1986:23) argued for an accurate victimology, using local crime surveys. Reflecting the political work that it was intended to do, he and colleagues used local crime surveys to show that some people faced very high risks of crime, and their lives were blighted by crime and anxiety about crime. Both Richard Kinsey's (1984) Merseyside Crime Survey and the Islington Crime Survey (Jones, Maclean and Young, 1986) were significant pieces of empirical work.

If the Realists had a specific political audience in mind, by contrast, key targets for the BCS were politicians and media commentators whose respective electorates and audiences were drawn from 'Middle England'. Our message that public debate about crime had become overheated and that the media painted a purple picture of crime was clearly unhelpful to the Realist agenda, and unsurprisingly they critiqued the BCS (eg Young, 1988).

However, the critiques were rather thin. The local crime surveys were closely modelled on the BCS, and of course, using near-identical methods, the local and national surveys produced perfectly consistent results. But reflecting the conflicting underlying political agendas, there were marked differences in emphasis and tone in the reporting of results. To market their political message the Left Realists had to differentiate themselves clearly from us 'administrative criminologists'. The most irksome of their criticisms were that as a national survey the BCS could not provide any sense of variations in risk, and that statements of crime risks nationally were 'ludicrous generalisations' (eg Lea, undated.) As an unnamed Realist put in in an interview given to Farrall and colleagues:

As Jock Young put it ....the [British] Crime Survey produced blancmange, what he called blancmange figures – in other words it levelled out the distinction between different parts of the country ... If you produced more detailed studies in particular locations, then you discover ... that fear of crime might actually be in his words rational rather than irrational. (Farrall et al, et al., 2009:33)

The implication was that our suggestion that fear of crime might be unnecessarily stoked by media treatment rested on these generalised and inappropriate crime risks. The criticism always struck me as unfair, as we had published detailed analyses of variations in risk (eg Gottfredson, 1984, Hough and Mayhew, 1985) prior to publication of the Islington results, showing that there were wide variations around the mean, and that some types of neighbourhood, such as the poorest council estates (or housing projects) had very high levels of crime indeed. There is nothing misleading in presenting an average population risk, along with findings on variation in risk.

The same Realist respondent in Farrall and colleagues' study of fear went on to say that Young's (and presumably his own) view of the BCS agenda an attempt "to deny the problem of crime ...because it suited the Conservative government to issue such a denial." (Farrall et al, et al., 2009:33). If this view accurately represented Realist perceptions of the BCS at that time, it shows that they were only dimly aware of the realities of research in a government department at that time – and the distance that separated the researchers from their ultimate political bosses<sup>14</sup>.

Other criticisms included a failure to define precisely what we meant by fearfulness, worry or anxiety, and a failure to ground our analysis adequately on any theoretical foundation. This latter critique – about atheoretical empiricism – has consistently been launched at Home Office research

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<sup>14</sup> I do not recollect any of the BCS team have any contact with ministers whatsoever over the planning, commissioning, or reporting of the first two sweeps of the BCS. Ten years later, political control over the Home Office research programme had become very much tighter and submission to, and meetings with, ministers were commonplace (cf Mayhew, 2016).

since the time of the National Deviancy Conference, and is still rehearsed today by those still flying the realist flag, such as Matthews<sup>15</sup> (2014:13). Some government criminology certainly is conceptually unsophisticated and intellectually incurious, but this was not the case for the BCS.

With the benefit of hindsight, I believe that the Left Realists could have mounted a much more effective critique of the 'risk/fear' paradox by arguing that the right people probably worry about the right crimes, but that it is for not researchers to assess whether they are worrying the right amount. I produced such an analysis using the 1994 BCS (Hough, 1995). The 1994 survey included a range of fear-relevant questions, including measures of physical and social vulnerability and people's tendencies to worry about things other than crime. Coupling this new material with findings on crime risks, I was able to show very clearly that levels of anxiety about specific sorts of crime varied systematically according to crime-specific risk, vulnerability and general disposition to worry – but there was no way that I as a researcher could judge that the quantum of anxiety expressed by any respondents was sensible or rational. (In an interview I gave to the Daily Mail upon publication, I said something to the effect that the right people were worrying about the right crimes, but I couldn't say whether they were worrying the right amount. This was reported as, "People are right to worry about crime, says criminologist....", reflecting the difficulties in getting the correct message out in the media environment.)

It seems a shame that the Left Realists and the BCS team were unable to have a better dialogue about the "risk/fear paradox" in the 1980s. A resolution of our research differences would not really have been difficult to achieve, if mutual suspicions could have been allayed. However, in all probability the political imperatives that drove the Realist agenda rendered such a dialogue impossible. It would have been very poor tactics for them to deploy government research findings

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<sup>15</sup> Matthews (2014:13) offers the rather jejune argument that: "An indication of the conceptual weakness of administrative criminology, however, is evident in the very title of the 'British Crime Survey'. The survey is in fact not about Britain but is limited to England and Wales and is not about crime but victimisation." When we designed the survey, Scotland was included, which explains "British". I can't now remember whether we settled on "crime survey" just because it was the convention at that, or because the survey was conceptualised a something rather broader than a survey of victimisation.

carried out under a Conservative administration to win Labour politicians over to their cause. I personally felt a great deal of sympathy for Realist ambitions to get Labour to take crime seriously – even if the Red-top press coverage of crime – and the attendant risks of penal populism – also struck me as an equally serious problem as Labour neglect of crime.

Since the 1980s the ‘law and order’ policy landscape has changed beyond recognition, of course. Crime in England and Wales – however measured – rose steeply in the ten years from the mid 1980s. When Tony Blair became Shadow Home Secretary in 1992 he famously adopted the slogan “Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime” (see Allen and Hough, 2008, for a discussion of Blair’s impact on criminal and penal policy). I do not know to what extent the Left Realist criminologists should take the credit (or any of the blame) for this. What is very clear indeed is that the original BCS agenda of cooling the temperature of debate about crime and justice secured very little purchase on the political calculations of Tony Blair, whether as Shadow Home Secretary, Labour leader or prime minister. Nor did Jack Straw, David Blunkett or subsequent Labour Home Secretaries and Secretaries for Justice show much penal restraint. Since Blair’s original pledge to be tough on crime, we saw under the Blair administration further steep rises in the prison population, the introduction of ‘three strikes’ legislation introducing a range of mandatory prison sentences, enormous hikes in the tariffs for life sentence prisoners, and the introduction of indeterminate sentences of Imprisonment for Public Protection (since repealed by the Tories). I imagine that for many Realists these developments were a form of unwelcome surrealism. However, if they secured a Pyrrhic victory on getting Labour to take crime seriously, the original BCS argument that ‘fear of crime is a problem in its own right’ became a policy orthodoxy in the 1990s.

### **Fear of crime in the 1990s and beyond**

In understanding how fear reduction became an orthodoxy in the late 1990s, one has to bear in mind how crime trends had changed. In the 1980s and early 1990s, crime, whether measured by

police statistics or the BCS, was rising very rapidly, and the empirical foundation of fear reduction strategies at that time was open to challenge. From 1995 onwards, however, most forms of conventional crimes against people and their personal property began to fall quite steeply<sup>16</sup>, and by the turn of the century the crime drop was marked.

Criminological preoccupation with fear of crime continued into the 1990s and beyond. Reports on fear continued to emerge from successive sweeps of the BCS (Mirrlees-Black and Aye Maung, 1994; Hough, 1995; Mirrlees-Black and Allen 1998). These showed on the one hand that BCS/CSEW measures of fear were also in decline. For example the proportion of people saying they were “very worried” about burglary halved in the decade from 1994, and then plateaued, with worry about car crime and violent crime showing similar trends (ONS, 2015). On the other hand, public perceptions of crime trends seemed insulated from the changing trends in crime. Large majorities of BCS respondents continued to believe that crime was rising nationally and locally until the turn of the century (refs)<sup>17</sup>. In other words, there was something tangible to reassure the public about – whether this was constructed as misplaced anxiety about crime risks, or perhaps more accurately, misplaced concern about the overall direction of crime trends, and an associated decline in communities’ capacity to regulate themselves.

A significant development was Martin Innes’ and Nigel Fielding’s working on the ‘Signal Crimes Perspective’ in the late 1990s and thereafter (Innes and Fielding, 2002, 2004; Innes, 2014). The Signal Crimes Perspective was important for offering a framework for understanding the new variant of the risk/fear paradox, that people’s perceptions of security seemed unrelated to changes in actual levels of risk. The central idea of the Signal Crimes Perspective is that the signs of some forms of crime are disproportionately potent in shaping how people feel about their neighbourhoods and their personal

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<sup>16</sup> Cyber-enabled fraud and theft has clearly counterbalanced this trend to some extent, but the recent ONS figures on cybercrime imply that the overall trend is still downward (ONS, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, however, increasing proportions of respondents reported that crime in their own area was not rising – even if they still thought that crime across the country doing so (ONS, 2015).

security, and more broadly in eroding communities' collective efficacy, or capacity for self-regulation. The implication for policing is that intelligent targeting of specific signal crimes would achieve a disproportionate impact on public perceptions of security.

Fear reduction as a policy objective became firmly established in the UK from the mid-1990s onwards, as local authorities<sup>18</sup> and police began to set up community safety partnerships. These originated from Home Office pressure on local authorities to play a large part in crime prevention, and were originally set up by those local authorities who bought into the idea. However legislation introduced by the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act *required* local authorities to set up community safety partnerships, and required that these prepared an annual community safety plan. Many of these plans included the objective of 'reducing crime and the fear of crime', and numerous examples can be found simply by doing internet searches of the term 'fear reduction community safety partnership'.

The Signal Crimes Perspective had a significant impact on policy development in policing and crime reduction. The impetus for these ideas can be found in the new variant of the risk/fear paradox, which was becoming known as the 'reassurance gap' – the gap between the downward trend in crime and the persistent public perception that crime rates were rising<sup>19</sup>. In particular, the Association of Chief Police Officers developed a 'reassurance policing strategy' designed to close the gap. The work of Innes and Fielding on the Signal Crimes Perspective provided the intellectual underpinning for the strategy.

The reassurance policing strategy developed into the National Reassurance Policing Programme, with a visible fear reduction dimension to it (Tuffin et al, 2006). The programme aimed to reassure

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<sup>18</sup> Local authorities (or local councils) are sub-regional units of local government, covering individual cities, or parts of larger conurbations, or in the case of more rural areas, groupings of towns.

<sup>19</sup> The best community safety partnerships proposed well-thought-through fear reduction strategies that made appropriate connections between signal crimes, residents' individual well-being and neighbourhoods' collective efficacy in self-regulation. However, the quality of community safety plans was very variable and my impression at the time was that some partnerships adopted fear reduction policies simply because they were fashionable, and because it helped the authors of the plan to fill some space on the page.

the public of two things: first, that they were safe, and secondly that they could have confidence in the police. The Home Office evaluation found that the programme was successful at least to a degree on both counts, and the programme formed the basis for a new Neighbourhood Policing programme. I have argued elsewhere (Hough, 2007:75) that reassurance policing and the Neighbourhood Policing programme may have started off as responses to misperceptions about crime, but developed increasingly into a strategic response to a perceived deficit in police legitimacy.

### **Fear of crime meets its nemesis**

If the late 1990s and the early 2000s saw fear reduction as a policy orthodoxy, the 1990s also saw the emergence of a number of studies offering a critical reassessment of research on fear. In particular, Jason Ditton, Stephen Farrall and colleagues produced a series of articles and books arguing that researchers had seriously overstated the extent of fear of crime, and that a policy Frankenstein had been needlessly conjured into existence (eg Ditton et al, 1999; Farrall, 2003). In a memorable hyperbole, they argued that, "Fear of crime is now bigger than General Motors" (Ditton et al. 1999, 83). Much of this research was funded by the ESRC Crime and Social Order programme, which ran from 1993 to 1998.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to review these studies in any detail, but they amounted to a significant substantive and methodological challenge to previous work. One line of argument was that research had overestimated fear of crime by focussing on questions that asked how much people worried about crime, rather than how frequently they experienced fear. Another was that research had paid far too much attention to fear or anxiety, and far too little to other emotional reactions, particularly anger about crime. This body of research critically reassessing fear continued into the 2000s; Lee's 2007 book *Inventing Fear of Crime* and Farrall and colleagues (2009) book *Social Order and the Fear of Crime in Contemporary Times* together provided a fairly definitive statement of what can be said about fear of crime.

## Conclusions

This chapter has charted the emergence in the UK of fear of crime as a criminological concept and of associated policy ideas. From the outset criminological research on fear was harnessed to political agendas – though I have suggested that the Left Realist critiques of the early BCS agenda misinterpreted its origins as emerging directly from the Conservative administration of the day. The papers prepared for the Cambridge workshop at which the foundations for the BCS were laid recognised that an agenda of this sort was fragile:

“What is even less certain is whether a crime survey can convey the kind of political message for which it seems to be such a suitable vehicle. It is true that surveys provide a platform from which please for a more rational approach to crime can be broadcast: what risks it actually presents, and how they can be avoided. A survey may indeed act as a stimulus to crime prevention efforts, reduce public fear of crime, affect popular conceptions of crime problems and alter the nature of debate about these issues. But equally, there are obstacles to achieving these aims which it would be foolish to ignore. One of these lies in the way in which the popular press treats crime issues and whether the cautious and restrained message that researchers like to think that surveys convey will find a ready outlet in their pages. (Home Office, 1981, 23)

In hindsight, it is clear that the caution expressed in this quote was well-founded. Public perceptions of crime trends and crime risks have probably gone their own way, independent of the ‘rational’ messages that the BCS. I doubt that our calming messages had any direct impact on the public mood about crime in the 1980s. However it is clearer that research findings on the topic were picked up by

policy officials in both central and local government and by senior police officers. By the end of the last century, fear reduction strategies were a policy orthodoxy, and ‘closing the reassurance gap’ became a central plank of policing policy. By then, however, the BCS/CSEW began to show that ‘the horse had bolted’, and that fear reduction strategies were chasing a non-problem: most people were noticing the reality of the crime drop, and no longer thought that crime in their neighbourhood was rising. Levels of anxiety about specific crimes had fallen markedly. And now, fear of crime has largely fallen out of the criminal policy lexicon in the UK.

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