

Fear of Crime Among African-American Males in Two American Cities: A Multivariate Analysis

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Abstract

This study examined the distribution of fear of crime and the influence of selected predictor variables of fear of crime among African-American male residents of Atlanta, Georgia, and Washington, D.C. The sample consists of over 240 male participants between the ages of 15 and 99. An important anomaly was found: 73 percent of the Atlanta sample and 76 percent of the Washington sample do not view fear of crime as problematic in their communities. However, the other findings support existing research positing a relationship between fear of crime, age, marital status, and education.

Concerns about personal safety and the likelihood of being victimized are major problems in American society. Studies tell us that

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a high percentage of Americans are afraid to walk alone in the neighborhood at night or visit community parks (Braungart et al. 1980; Clemente and Kleiman 1977; Lewis and Maxfield 1980; Parker and Ray 1990). Similarly, studies tell that fear of crime appears to be highest among the urban, aged, and women (Bankston et al. 1990; Hill et al. 1985; Lewis and Maxfield 1980; Rao and Rao 1988). The media of mass communications (e.g., books, films, magazines, newspapers, television networks, radio stations) also tell us that fear of crime restricts individuals' quality of life and freedom of movement. For example, in an editorial appearing in the August 1979 issue of *Ebony* magazine, the publisher stated that "Black communities from the Atlantic to the Pacific are becoming locked and divided camps, beleaguered and fearful places of bars, guards, alarms, metal gates and bolted doors."

This study describes the distribution of fear of crime and examines the influence of selected predictor variables on fear of crime among African-American male residents of Atlanta, Georgia, and Washington D.C. While previous research has identified some important correlates of fear of crime between racial and aged groups, few studies have focused on fear among African-American males without regard to their previous victimization experiences. By looking at characteristics of male residents from different cities, we may be in a better position to identify more clearly the characteristics of fearful black males in American society.

Previous Research

Fear of crime among segments of the population has been the subject of research over the past decades. Specifically, areas of research within the fear of crime literature have focused on 1) gender and fear of crime, 2) socioeconomic status and fear of crime, 3) age, and fear of crime, 4) education and fear of crime, 5) marital status and fear of crime, and 6) household income and fear of crime. The most persistent findings indicate that older people and females report higher levels of fear of crime (Antunes et al., 1977; Baumer, 1978; Braungart et al, 1980; Clemente and Kleiman, 1977; Ollenberger, 1981; Ortega and Myles, 1987; Parker and Ray, 1990; Parker et al., 1993).

Income and education have been examined frequently for their effects on fear of crime. In the general U.S. population, people re-

porting the lowest income and fewest years of schooling tend to report the highest levels of fear (Baumer, 1978; Braungart et al., 1980; Clemente and Kleiman, 1977; Ortega and Myles, 1987; Parker et al., 1993).

Several previous studies examined the relationship between marital status and fear of crime. The results generally indicate that individuals who are not married report higher levels of fear (Braungart et al., 1980; Parker, 1988). These studies suggest that, while there seem to be high levels of fear of crime among households with very young children, certain groups of unmarried people are especially fearful, particularly elderly people living alone and urban dwellers.

Methods

Communities Studied. Demographic characteristics of the two cities included in this study are provided for the purpose of identifying both similarities and differences in population size, crime rates and fear of crime levels. According to the 1981 Statistical Abstract of the United States, Atlanta, Georgia's 1980 population was 425,000. Of this number 283,000 (66.6 percent) were African Americans. Washington D.C.'s 1980 population was 638,000, of which 448,000 (70 percent) were African Americans. Although the population of Washington was larger than the population of Atlanta, the percentage of African American residents in the two cities is similar and is therefore suitable for comparative analysis.

Examination of the reported crime rates in each city is useful and also provides valuable information. According to the 1980 Uni-

Variable	Atlanta Sample (N = 132)	Washington Sample (N = 108)
Fear of Crime...		
Not a Problem	72.9	75.7
Somewhat a Problem	19.4	20.6
A Big Problem	7.7	7.7

form Crime Reports: Crime in the United States, the number of index offenses (excluding arson) reported in Atlanta in 1980 was 59,394, or a rate of .13975 (offenses/population). The number of reported violent offenses (i.e., robbery, murder, forcible rape and aggravated assault) was 11,075, or a rate of .026. Property crime offenses (e.g., burglary, motor vehicle theft and larceny) totaled 48,319, or a rate of .1136. The total number of reported index offenses (excluding arson) for Washington was 63,668, or a rate of .09979. Regarding violent offenses, Washington reported 12,772 such acts, or a rate of .020. Washington reported 50,896 property crime offenses, or a rate of .0797.

These data reveal that in 1980 Atlanta experienced higher crime rates than Washington, especially property offenses. What is interesting about these data is almost identical percentages of residents of Washington and Atlanta expressed similar concerns about fear of crime. As reported in Table 1, 73 percent of the Atlanta sample and 76 percent of the Washington sample indicated fear of crime was "not a big problem"; 19 percent of the Atlanta sample and 21 percent of the Washington sample thought fear of crime was "somewhat a problem"; 8 percent of the Atlanta sample and 4 percent of the Washington sample believed fear of crime was "a big problem." We feel the identification of factors affecting fear of crime is important because it will help ascertain differences in fear of crime between the samples and also provide insight into the nature of this social construct.

Sample and Procedure. Data for this study are taken from the social survey titled *Research on Minorities (1981): Race and Crime in Atlanta and Washington, D.C.* Residents from four communities in Atlanta, Georgia, and four communities in Washington, D.C., were interviewed about a variety of crime and crime-related (i.e., psychological, sociological, criminological) issues.¹ Two communities in Atlanta and Washington, respectively, were designated high-crime areas and the other communities were designated low-crime areas. The principal investigator of this data set was Julius Debro.

¹ The survey measures the relationship between crime and fear of crime, sociodemographic, familial and religious factors within black communities in Atlanta and Washington, D.C. The data were collected through personal interviews using a multi-stage area probability sample.

The interviews were conducted during strategic times (the early evening) to increase the likelihood of reaching individuals at home. Contact was made with 624 residents and questionnaires were completed by 621 respondents. Approximately 240 respondents identified themselves as black or African American male and are included in this study.² The ages of the respondents range from 15 to 99 years.

Measurement Variables

Fear of Crime. Fear of crime was measured by asking respondents about crime and fear of crime in their community. This question asked about the problematic nature of "fear of crime" in the community. Response categories were "not a problem," "somewhat a problem," or "a big problem." While the question of what constitutes the best indicator of fear of crime has not been settled in the scientific literature, we feel the measure used here has strong validity and reliability because it taps the respondents' perception of crime in the community.

The independent variables consist of gender, marital status, age, designated crime tract, education and family income. Age is coded as teenager (15 – 18), young adult (19 – 5), adult (26 – 64), and senior (65 +); marital status is coded "0" not married and "1" married; community crime tract is coded "0" low-crime and "1" high-crime.

Family income is the total income from all sources last year: it is coded "0" no income, "1" \$100 – 5000, "2" \$5001 – 12000, "3" \$12001 – 18000, "4" \$18001 – 25000, and "5" \$25001 and over. Education is measured as "0" still enrolled in high school, "1" less than high school, "2" high school graduate or equivalent–GED, "3" some college, "4" college graduate or professional training.

Description of the Samples

Table 2 contains descriptive information about the Atlanta and Washington samples (55 percent and 45 percent, respectively). These data show 62 percent of the Atlanta sample and 63 percent of the

² When analyzing the sample across racial identification it was found that respondents identifying themselves as "other" than Black or Afro-Americans numbered only 13 respondents: Black/African = 1; Black/West Indian or Caribbean = 6; Spanish = 1; Other = 5. To avoid any unfounded generalizations across race, and since the number of "nonBlack or Afro Americans" was too small for confidence in analyzing them as subgroups, we deleted them from our study.

Table 2		
Sample Characteristics (Percentages)		
Category	Atlanta Sample (N = 132)	Washington Sample (N = 108)
Age		
Teen	26	21
Young Adult	21	21
Adult	42	49
Senior	11	9
Marital Status		
Not married	62	63
Married	38	37
Family Income		
No income	2	
\$100 – \$5,000	10	5
\$5,101 – \$12,000	19	8
\$12,001 – \$18,000	37	15
\$18,001 – \$25,000	12	23
\$25,000 +	20	49
Community crime tract		
Low crime	50	41
High crime	50	59
Education		
Still enrolled in school	18	19
Less than high school	27	16
High school graduate or GED	24	17
Some college	24	30
College graduate or professional training	7	18

Washington sample were not married; 50 percent of the Atlanta sample and 59 percent of the Washington sample lived in high-crime communities. Approximately equal percentages of the Atlanta sample and the Washington sample were still attending school (18 percent and 19 percent, respectively); 24 percent of the Atlanta sample and 17 percent of the Washington sample had completed high school (or the GED); 24 percent of the Atlanta sample and 30 percent of the

Table 3		
Correlations		
Variable	Atlanta Sample (N = 132)	Washington Sample (N = 108)
Age	.042	-.039
Marital Status	.059	-.071
Family Income	.026	-.072
Community crime track	-.167	-.048
Education	.252*	.041
*P < .01		

Table 4		
Standardized Regression Coefficients of Fear of Crime on Predictor Variables for the Atlanta and Washington Samples		
Predictor Variables	Atlanta Sample (N = 132)	Washington Sample (N = 108)
Age	-.269	-.131
Marital status	.219*	.031
Income status	-.055	-.123
Crime rate of Tract	-.214*	-.060
Education	.274*	.028
R ²	.138	.019
Adj. R ²	.087	-.049
*P < .05 **P < .10		

Washington sample attended college; 7 percent of the Atlanta sample and 18 percent of the Washington sample completed a four-year college degree or a professional degree or training. Two percent of the Atlanta sample reported zero income; 29 percent of the Atlanta sample and 13 percent of the Washington sample reported an annual income between \$100 and \$12,000; and 20 percent of the Atlanta sample and 49 percent of the Washington sample reported an

income of \$25,000 or more. The Atlanta sample consisted of 26 percent teenagers and the Washington sample consisted of 21 percent teenagers; 21 percent of young adults comprised each sample; 11 percent of the Atlanta sample and 9 percent of the Washington sample comprised the senior population.

Results

Correlation analysis is used to assess relationships between fear of crime and the predictor variables. Table 3 discloses that a significant bivariate relationship exists between fear of crime and one of the predictor variables for the Atlanta sample: fear of crime and education ($R = .252, p \sim .05$).

Contrary to expectations, zero-order correlations between age, marital status, family income, community crime tract and fear of crime are not significant for the Atlanta sample. Also, zero-order correlations between the predictor variables and fear of crime are not significant for the Washington sample. The absence of a significant relationship between these variables may indicate that other effects are present. In order to delineate the effects of the predictor variables on fear of crime, multiple regression analysis will be used. Findings from the regression analysis will be presented for both samples.

Standardized coefficients for the regression of fear of crime on marital status, family income, education, age, community crime tract for the Atlanta sample are presented in column one of Table 4. The findings show education ($\beta = .274$), age ($\beta = -.269$), community crime tract ($\beta = -.214$), and marital status ($\beta = .219$) have significant independent effects on fear of crime. People with higher levels of education, people living in high-crime communities, younger respondents, and people who were married reported a higher level of fear of crime than people with lower education levels, people residing in low-crime communities, older respondents, and people who were not married.

Column two of Table 4 contains the standardized coefficients for the regression of fear of crime on marital status, education, family income, age, and community crime tract for the Washington sample. Surprisingly, these findings show that none of the predictor variables had significant independent effects on fear of crime.

Conclusion

The first purpose of this study was to examine the distribution of fear among African American male residents of Atlanta, Georgia/ and Washington, D.C. The findings indicate that approximately 19% of the Atlanta sample and 21% of the Washington sample felt fear of crime was "somewhat problematic" in their communities. The findings also indicate that 8% of the Atlanta sample and 4% of the Washington sample reported fear of crime in their communities was "a big problem." In short, almost equal percentages of Atlanta and Washington respondents indicated fear of crime was problematic in their communities.

The second purpose of this study was to examine the influence of selected predictor variables on fear of crime among African American male residents of Atlanta, Georgia, and Washington, D.C. The results for the Atlanta sample disclose that people with higher levels of education, people living in high-crime communities, younger respondents, and people who were married report higher levels of fear of crime than people with lower education levels, people residing in low-crime communities, older respondents, and people who were not married.

The demographic nature of the present sample restricts generalizability of the findings, but points the way toward a more extended analysis. Additional research may help determine if urbanicity is a conditional factor in fear of crime among African American males. Although none of the predictor variables had significant effects on fear of crime among African-American male residents of Washington, D.C., comparative urban and urban related research can be beneficial in two ways. First, assessing the predictive effects of selected variables on fear of crime among urban residents extends (potentially) the generalizability of research on fear of crime. Second, if different descriptive and causal patterns emerge from these analyses, a greater understanding of the manner in which urban environments influence personal feelings about crime can be determined.

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