

**Myths and Facts about the Fear-Victimization Relationship**

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Those who are familiar with the literature on fear of crime know that research has mostly failed to detect consistent and substantial correlations between criminal victimization and fear of crime. Overall correlations were close to zero or slightly positive at best. Furthermore, women and elderly people showed higher levels of fear in spite of supposedly lower risks of victimization in comparison with other subpopulations. This latter finding is well known as the fear-victimization paradox.

Closer examination of the respective studies reveals, however, that these findings are largely artefacts. They are due to the violation of one or the other of the following research requirements: (1) an adequate definition of both fear of crime and victimization, (2) a symmetrical relation between indicators of victimization and fear, (3) the distinction of fear resulting from an actual as opposed to an anticipated or fictitious victimization, (4) the appropriate definition of non-victims, (5) the correction for restriction of range of correlations resulting from unequal frequencies of victims and non-victims, (6) the control of possible moderator effects, and (7) the consideration of different variances within different subgroups of victims and non-victims.

In the following, the relevance of these research requirements is demonstrated by analyzing conceptual deficiencies of past research and demonstrating empirically, how these deficiencies can be overcome by an incremental step by step control of confounding factors. Data used for this latter demonstration were collected in a nationwide representative survey on fear of crime and victimization, conducted by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony (KFN) in 1992. Samples used for calculations comprise up to 15771 subjects aged 16 years or more (Bilsky, Pfeiffer & Wetzels, 1993).

## DEFICIENCIES IN DEFINING CENTRAL CONCEPTS

Until today, much of our knowledge about the fear-victimization relationship derives from research on poorly defined and operationalized concepts. As regards *fear of crime* (foc), there is a long research tradition using thematically narrow, single item measures focusing on *anticipated, fictitious* events (e.g., the so called standard item) in order to represent a very differentiated and complex phenomenon. Although the shortcomings of this kind of operationalization have been evident and discussed in literature for years, research practice did not profit from these debates (Boers,1991; Fattah,1993). Aside from methodological deficiencies, there is a considerable lack of conceptual integration that, quite unnecessarily, results in a huge gap between a theoretically unrooted while politically challenging foc-concept and a bulk of theoretical evidence from decades of psychological research on fear (Bilsky,1993; Bilsky & Wetzels, 1994, in press).

The necessity to distinguish different forms of (personal) fear from more general (social) concern about trends in the development of crime (Skogan, 1993), and the possibility to interrelate fear indicators with well established psychological constructs could both be successfully demonstrated in the KFN-Survey. Intercorrelations between several theoretically distinct fear indicators (Bilsky, Pfeiffer & Wetzels, 1993), for example, ranged from  $r=.24$  to  $r=.75$  (N=3631, Old Federal States (OFS) of Germany); likewise, correlations between these indicators and the 'standard item' of fear of crime (Boers, 1991) proved to be only moderate ( $r=.32$  to  $r=.47$ ). The variability found between intercorrelations thus underscores the complexity of the phenomenon under study and the inadequacy of using conceptually biased single item indicators. In addition, set correlations between different foc-indicators and several psychological variables from a representative subsample (N=899; OFS) revealed considerable conceptual overlap. Trait-anxiety, coping styles, perceived coping competencies and interpersonal trust, for instance, and indicators of personal fear had more than twenty percent of variance in

common (Shrunken R-Square=.21). In the light of these findings, much of what has been said about fear of crime in criminological literature seems to be theoretically and methodologically questionable and ahistorical as compared to related disciplines of research.

As regards *victimization*, this concept has been insufficiently defined in survey research as well. The mere use of the term 'fear-victimization-paradox' implies a general and comprehensive understanding of victimization. In other words, speaking of a paradox would not make any sense if victimizations inside and outside close relationships were not true and complementary subsets of victimizations on the whole. While the ubiquitous citation of this 'paradox' suggests just this, empirical findings are a slap in the face of such an understanding. Comparing incidence rates from the National Family Violence Resurvey (NFVR) and the US National Crime Survey (NCS), for instance, Straus and Gelles (1990) found a huge discrepancy, with the NFVR rates of physical violence against a spouse being more than 73 times higher than those of the NCS (Wetzels, 1993). Explanations for this discrepancy are manifold though tentative. Family problems and intrafamily conflicts, for instance, are not salient in criminological survey research and, therefore, remain unreported. Another one says that, even when salient, the threshold for reporting private and intimate experiences of victimization is higher than that for other, more public incidents. Finally, the victim's anonymity might not be sufficiently guaranteed in conventional survey research, both vis-à-vis the interviewer and the offender (e.g., a family member, friend, etc.) (see also Wetzels & Bilsky, 1994).

In the KFN-Survey, the aforementioned shortcomings were partly controlled by using a modified drop-off, sealed envelope technique in addition to conventional survey interviewing (Bilsky, Pfeiffer & Wetzels, 1993; Wetzels & Bilsky, 1994). As can be seen from Figure 1, victims of physical violence in close relationships are definitely not a true subset of victims of violence in general. Rather, the rate of victims of violence in close relationships that are identified by the drop-off

technique but not by standard survey questions is quite high (44.9% for a one-item measure) (see also Wetzels & Bilsky, 1994).

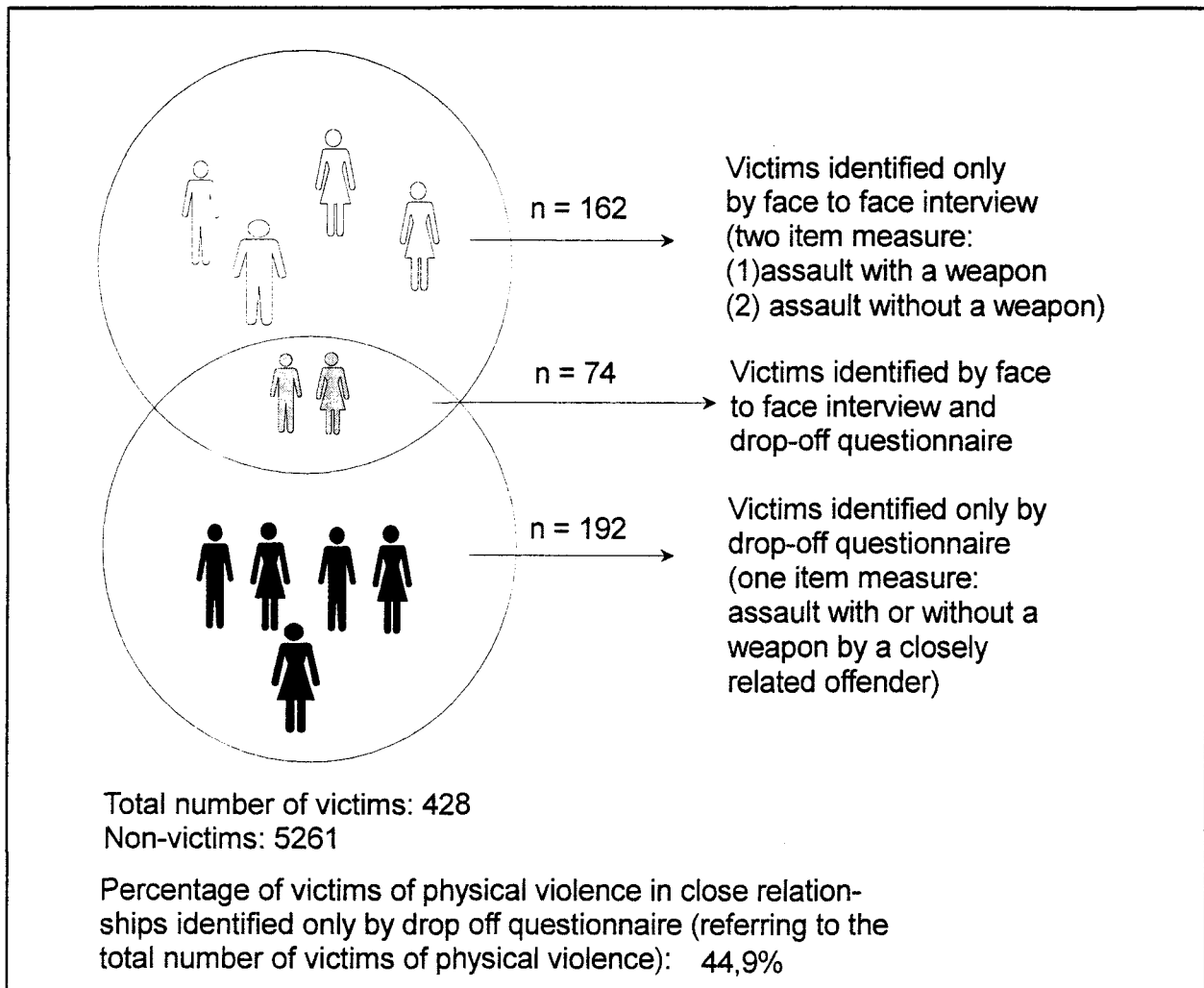


Figure 1: Identification of victims of assault by face-to-face interview and drop-off questionnaire on violence in close relationships (prevalence 1987-91, N=5689)

Furthermore, when cross-classifying victims of severe violence according to sex and age (Table 1), our data reveal that the rate of female victims clearly exceeds that of males when taking violence in close relationships into account. Obviously, the fear of women is not without foundation and the so called fear-victimization

paradox turns out to be nothing but a myth, resulting from a biased operationalization of victimization.

*Table 1:* Victims of severe violence<sup>1</sup> in the old and new federal states of Germany during the last five years (1987 - 1991) by age and sex (face-to-face interview and drop-off-questionnaire, only respondents who received questionnaire on fear of crime )

		men		women	
		< 60 years	≥ 60 years	< 60 years	≥ 60 years
OFS	victims	88 (10,35%)	18 (3,78%)	110 (11,67%)	64 (8,80%)
	non-victims	762 (89,65%)	458 (96,22%)	832 (88,33%)	663 (91,20%)
	N	850 (100,00%)	476 (100,00%)	942 (100,00%)	727 (100,00%)
NFS	victims	36 (8,57%)	9 (3,30%)	38 (10,04%)	27 (6,76%)
	non-victims	384 (91,43%)	263 (96,70%)	341 (89,96%)	372 (93,24%)
	N	420 (100,00%)	272 (100,00%)	379 (100,00%)	399 (100,00%)

<sup>1</sup> face-to-face interview: robbery , assault with a weapon , rape  
drop-off questionnaire: severe physical violence (CTS, c.f. Straus 1990),  
rape by family or household members

Even the fact that the elderly are less frequently victimized than younger people (Table 1) can be explained at least partly for men: The rough calibration of age

categories confounds the high-risk group of young men with that of the mid-aged, thus raising the overall level of victimization in this age category. This has to be taken into account when discussing the fear-victimization paradox with respect to age.

While most of the discussion on the fear-victimization relationship relates to data about anticipated or fictitious victimization, fear as a *consequence of previous victimization* deserves particular attention, especially when focusing on age-related differences. In the KFN-Survey, subjects who had actually been victimized were questioned about the impact of previous victimization on their level of fear.

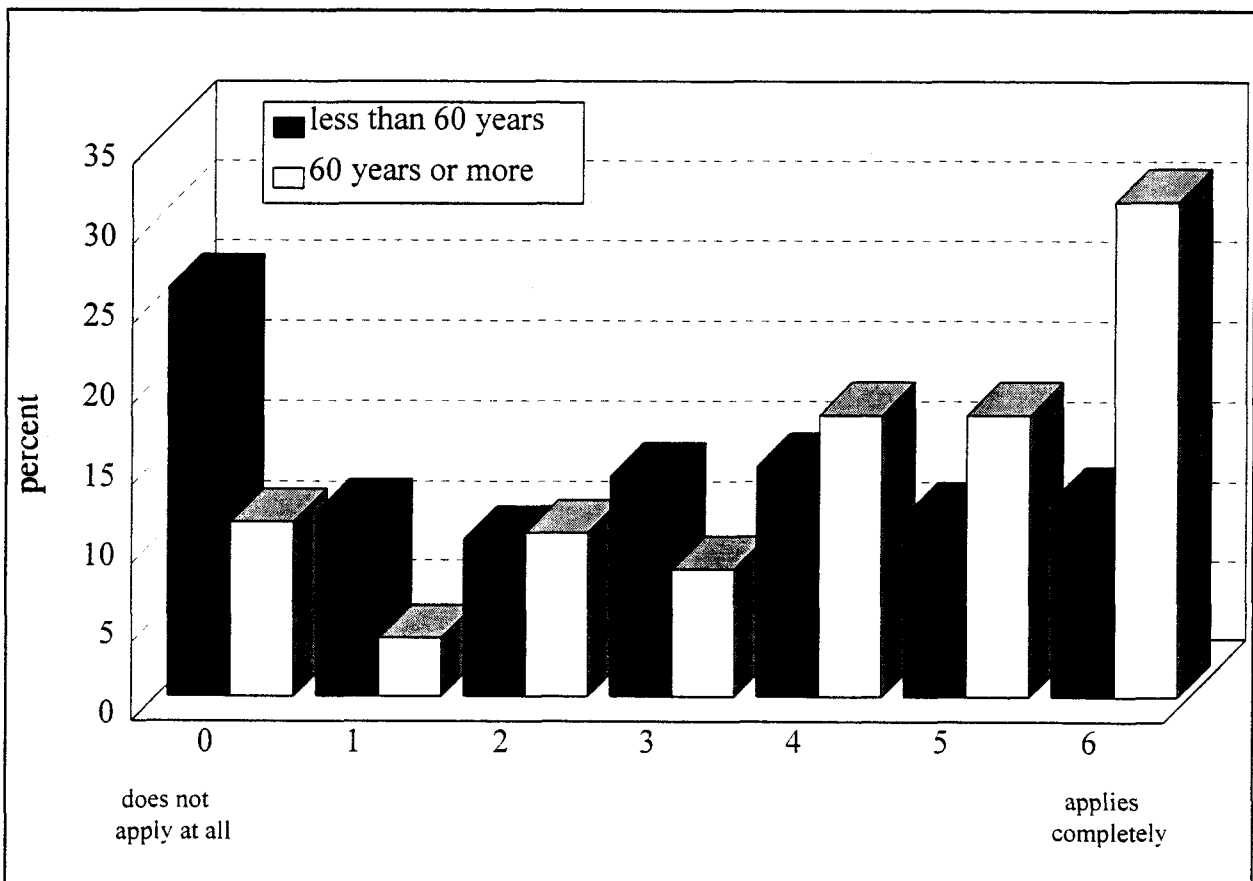


Figure 2: Fear reaction to most serious victimization in 1990/91 only victims of offences including violence and/or threat ("I've become more fearful since then")

As can be seen from Figure 2, some remarkable differences between victims of threat and violence showed up (N=3135): Victims older than 60 years of age reported an increase in fear as a consequence of previous victimization more frequently. This finding might perhaps best be interpreted as resulting from a heightened salience of vulnerability and lack of coping resources in the subsample of elderly victims.

Thus far, we concentrated mainly on some conceptual deficiencies in the study of the fear-victimization relationship. Next, we will demonstrate that this relationship can be further clarified by consequently controlling for methodological artefacts.

#### CONTROLLING FOR ARTEFACTS: SOME EXAMPLES

In the following exploratory analyses, we focus on (1) the effects of different definitions of non-victims, (2) the restriction of range of correlations, (3) between-group differences in fear of crime, and (4) the role of victimization in close relationships. Our calculations are meant to illustrate methodological problems in this field and not as a comprehensive and final documentation of our research. To demonstrate the importance of methodological control, the same data set from the KFN-Survey (N=9311) was analyzed repeatedly, with additional controls on every next step. The foc-measure used is an aggregated index comprising both affective and cognitive components of fear related to physical violence, robbery, and sexual assault/rape. The index of victimization used parallels this foc-index, thus satisfying the principle of symmetry. The results of our analyses are summarized in Table 2.

On a first step, correlations between foc and victimization are based on a *wide definition* of non-victims. According to this definition, the number of non-victims equals the number of interviewees who had not reported a *violent* victimization during the past five years. As shown in Table 2, the resulting correlations ( $r=.14$  and  $r=.15$ , respectively) are only slightly positive, thus conforming to the results



often reported in criminological literature (Kury, Dörmann, Richter & Würger, 1992).

*Table 2:* Fear-victimization relationship  
(Correlations between fear of crime and criminal victimization)

	Age of respondent	
	< 60	≥ 60
Step 1: wide (standard) definition of non-victims	.14	.15
Step 2: narrow definition of non-victims	.24	.19
Step 3: controlling for restriction of range of correlations: repeated random sampling of non-victims, equal sample size of victims and non-victims (mean correlation)	.30	.35
Step 4: controlling for between group differences: only women in the OFS, repeated random sampling of non-victims, equal sample size of victims and non-victims (mean correlation)	.36	.37
Step 5: including victimization in close relationships: only women in the OFS, repeated random sampling of non-victims, equal sample size of victims and non-victims (mean correlation)	.32	.46

On the second step, the wide definition of non-victims was replaced by a *narrow* one. This means that the number of non-victims equals the number of interviewees who had not reported *any* kind of victimization during the past five years. The rationale of this definition is that violence - although not explicitly mentioned in the survey interview - might quite well be a *byproduct* of other forms of victimization. Choosing a narrow definition of victims should thus prevent the masking of fear-victimization interrelations by 'hidden' violence. The increase in correlations ( $r=.24$  and  $r=.19$ ; Table 2) stresses the importance of such confounding effects.

Step three focuses on the fact that victimization is a *rare event*, resulting in an unequal number of victims and non-victims. Since asymmetry of distributions affects the *range* of possible correlations, repeated random samples were drawn from the non-victims, each approximately matching the number of victims (narrow definition). Mean correlations based on nine random samples are reported in Table 2, showing again an increase in the interrelation of fear and victimization ( $r=.30$  and  $r=.35$ ).

Descriptive analyses of our data revealed quite different variances of *foc* in several subsamples of the KFN-Survey. To control for these *between-group differences*, analyses on step four were restricted to women from the OFS. Other things being equal (see step 3), mean correlations increased again, although not dramatically (Table 2).

In steps one to four, the definition of victims was based only on the data from the standard survey. However, following our own arguments on the importance of victimization in *close relationships*, we revised the definition of victims in step five by incorporating the information available from the drop-off study. With the other controls conforming to the step four analyses, mean correlations of .32 and .46 were found in this final round of computations (Table 2). Without speculating

about possible reasons for the differing size of intercorrelations between the two age-groups in this final step, it should be evident by now, that the outcome of correlational analyses between fear of crime and criminal victimization is heavily affected by some minor controls of the computational context, and that the interrelation of both variables is quite substantial.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we tried to show that there is a considerable gap between theoretical and methodological know-how in social sciences and its use in criminology as regards research on fear of crime and its relation to criminal victimization. There is another gap within criminology between theoretical reasoning and practical research showing up until today, both in publications and on international conferences (e.g. in Budapest 1993). As a consequence, the ignorance of general theoretical and methodological know-how and the inconsistencies within criminological research practice have contributed to a permanent repetition and reiteration of equivocal and misleading results of research into fear of crime.

Given that they fit into the prevailing political climate, criminological research results are willingly accepted by politicians. Since agenda setting in the media, political initiatives and activities are quite likely to affect the situation of both victims of crime and of fear of crime, it is a matter of scientific responsibility and ethics whether or not criminologists stick to well established but obviously poor practices in research on fear of crime. To our understanding, better studies are needed - and possible - in this politically delicate and sensitive domain.

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