
Sense of Security and Crime: The Residents' Perspective

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Abstract:

Purpose: The cognitive purpose of the study was to analyse theoretical aspects of fear of crime based on the literature and current academic studies in this field. Furthermore, the utilitarian purpose was to demonstrate the relation, or absence thereof, between the sense of security and the level of security as expressed in statistical data.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The analysis of local sense of security was based on a diagnostic survey conducted by the author in 2017 with the survey technique among a representative sample of 600 randomly selected adult residents of the County of Cieszyn, Poland. The data on the crime level came from the statistics provided by Statistics Poland and the Police.

Findings: The level of the sense of security in each community is determined by the criminal offence rate. The lower the number of criminal offences, the higher the local community's sense of security. In the context of the total number of crimes detected, the above relation does not exist.

Practical Implications: The feeling of security of an individual in the context of crime is affected by such factors as: the actual level of crime and its subjective assessment, the presence of social problems and their subjective perception, objectively present signs of disorganisation of the local community, a subjective assessment of the risk of victimisation and the ability to control it, direct and indirect victimisation, demographic, and general characteristics of the idea about crime.

Originality/value: The sense of security of an individual, both in the context of its increase and decrease, depends on several factors, not just the level of crime. The research findings represent an introduction to further analyses of the problem, which should be based on the crime fear index, including the currently greatest fear - the fear for one's health, rather than just a single dependent variable.

Keywords: Sense of security, fear of crime, crime, County of Cieszyn.

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1. Introduction

Security is assumed to be one of the fundamental human needs. In his hierarchy of needs, A.H. Maslow places security right after physiological needs, but before the needs of belonging and love, respect, self-fulfilment, knowledge and understanding and aesthetic needs (Maslow, 1990). Certain psychologists, including C.P. Alderfer, treat the need of security and physiological needs as one, referring to them as needs of existence or needs of lower level (Romanowska, 2001).

Therefore, human needs in security can be understood as a deliberate endeavour of an individual to be prepared in all areas of human functioning for continuous and effective defence of his or her interests and values before against threats, ensuring the survival, success and well-being while creating favourable conditions for the development of his or her family and next generations. According to J. Szmyd, security is, on the one hand, a defined social, civilisational, cultural, political, economic, and ecological value, and on the other - an existential, moral, and spiritual one (Szmyd, 2000). At the same time, it is also a fundamental value for which one strives not for its own sake, but for the sake of other values which it secures. According to *Słownik terminów z zakresu bezpieczeństwa narodowego* (2002), security is defined as a state which gives the sense of certainty and a guarantee of maintaining it, as well as opportunities for excelling it.

Nowadays, the concept of security as a highly valued good affects all spheres of life "starting from random physiochemical factors (including climate, tectonic, fire threats), through biological and existential treats specific to the survival in the world of living organisms (ensuring food, technical energy, health) to factors that arise from mutual invasiveness of humans in social life" (Raczkowski, 2012; Walancik and Dacko-Pikiewicz, 2016; Szczepańska-Woszczyzna, 2013). Therefore, science has several typologies for security. In addition, when referring to the area of security, one clarifies it further by using such expressions as e.g., national, international, regional, local, public, common etc.

2. Subjective Aspect of Security

The instinct of seeking security goes back to the very beginning of the world of living beings and is the essential link in the continuity of its evolution. This applies to both to individuals and groups. On the one hand, security is a primordial and existential value, and every human's necessity that ensures survival and development of individuals and social groups. On the other, it can be regarded as "a state of mind" defined by *inter alia* the level of confidence and peace arising from the low level of perceived threats (Ćwik, 2020).

Therefore, one can distinguish two aspects of security, objective and subjective one, which is relevant to the research undertaken in this paper. The objective aspect is related with the existence of conditions for real threats to occur, whereas the

subjective aspect expresses the sense of security. Furthermore, the basic and primordial meaning of the word "security" was assigned to the subjective sphere and represented lack of fear, concern, and anxiety, and thus confidence and protection (Skrabacz, 2007).

Therefore, other important aspects of security include absence of threat and a sense of confidence, which can be both objective and subjective, and as such both tangible and intangible (Stańczyk, 1996). Absence of threats is an important, albeit not sole, aspect of the sense of security. The social awareness of the ability to ensure it is equally important. Intuitive understanding of security leads to a conclusion that it refers to the sphere of awareness of a given entity – a person, a social group, a nation, or nations.

For example, J. Kunikowski defines security as "a term that reflects absence of threats and sense thereof" (Kunikowski, 2005), for the sense of security is nothing else than "the peace of mind brought by the belief that there is nothing to be afraid of" (Sillami, 1994) or "a sense of freedom from fear and anxiety" (Reber, 2005).

A similar position is held by B. Malinowski, who, when referring to emotional states, noted that security is freedom from fear (Malinowski, 2001). In turn, T. Parsons observed that lack of security is the determinant of fear (Parsons, 2009). Similarly, to psychological concepts, also sociologists see security as freedom from fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, and consider it as playing a very important role in satisfying human needs.

Threat means a certain state of mentality or awareness induced by perceiving phenomena that are assessed as adverse or dangerous. The possibility of an adverse situation to materialise forces an entity that can experience it to take preventive measures, as security is in a close relation with threats and means the ability to confront them. These threats can lead to a crisis, which absence of any response by the subject causes a state which disturbs the expected and acceptable level of security (Olszewski, 1998). Furthermore, increased awareness of threats, in addition to significantly reducing the area affected by those threats, additionally contributes to increasing the sense of security (Socha, 2014).

Crime is among various types of threats to humans. Crime is a complex phenomenon where one can observe unexpected social behaviours that are difficult to understand, control and sometimes quantify (D'Orsogna and Perc, 2015; Helbing *et al.*, 2015). Crime is understood as a set of events which are defined as offences, and an offence is a punishable human act prohibited by legislation as a crime or transgression, which is unlawful, culpable, and socially harmful to a degree higher than negligible (Błachut *et al.*, 2001).

3. Fear of Crime

In Polish criminology, "sense of security" is described with the term "fear of crime" or, alternatively "anxiety of crime". Fear of crime can be treated as the sum of three components, the affective one (emotional), defined as the subjective sense of security or insecurity, and fear of victimisation, the cognitive one, which is the assessment of the development of crime and the likelihood of victimisation, and the conative one, defined as precautions which individuals undertake to protect themselves against victimisation or to avoid victimisation (Błachut *et al.*, 2001; Wyant, 2008). Precautions undertaken by an individual can be divided into defensive measures (e.g., locks and alarms) and evasive measures (e.g., avoiding certain locations, situations or contacts which are considered dangerous).

The concept of fear of crime was first used and raised in the USA in the second half of the 1960s (Bankston *et al.*, 1987). In 1967, the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice was appointed in the USA in the wake of emerging public anxiety regarding criminality. The Commission was to focus on that anxiety and, in consequence, investigate those aspects of crime which caused that anxiety, assess the influence of that anxiety on everyday lives of Americans, and define ways of addressing it.

The commission conducted three crime surveys, which laid the foundations for the US National Crime Survey regularly conducted to this day. The report on the first pilot survey contained a chapter titled "Fear of Crime" which presented answers to five questions comprising the so-called "anxiety index". The first survey alone was sufficient to confirm that the level of an individual's fear of crime did not reflect the threat to US citizens measured with official crime statistics, suggesting that citizens' fears were not based on any victimisation experiences (Bankston *et al.*, 1987).

Similar surveys were conducted in the United Kingdom, where crime rate surged in the 1970s and 1980s (Ostaszewski, 2012). After Margaret Thatcher, whose key slogans included ensuring public security to citizens, took power in 1979, the British government conducted the British Crime Survey, the first findings of which were published in 1983 (Jackson *et al.*, 2006).

The purposes of the survey included providing the public with comprehensive information about the actual scale of crime and the sense of threat, which was meant to mitigate the fear felt by individuals. Unfortunately, the survey itself and the publication of its findings contributed to increasing the public interest in the scale of crime, thus causing a further increase in the level of fear.

The level of fear of crime can therefore depend on many factors, both attributable to an individual and objective one which are beyond direct control of an individual. Therefore, it can be considered *inter alia* "within the system of interrelations between three constantly elements, the society, law enforcement institutions and the level of

crime threat" (Misiuk, 1998). It must be highlighted that the concept of fear of crime carries a broader range of negative associations, suggesting the fact of experiencing emotions rather than a certain manner of perceiving the reality. Therefore, the author considered sense of security, not sense of fear, for the purpose of this study.

4. Sense of Security (Fear of Crime) in Scientific Studies

The history of studies into determinants of sense of security (fear of crime) in Poland is much shorter. One such analysis, based on the data collected in the second edition of the ICVS, was conducted by A. Siemaszko, who used a three-question index of fear of crime as the dependent variable. The study demonstrated that sense of fear is affected by sex (being a female), the number of offences of which the respondent was a victim, sense of absence of police patrols in one's place of residence, sense of absence of mutual help in the neighbourhood, education (the number of years studied), and socialising (Siemaszko, 2001).

Gruszczyńska (2007) categorised the issue of fear of crime among key factors that disrupt the functioning of an individual in everyday life. In her opinion, an important role in generating that fear is played by media. A. Gruszczyńska claims that females are more afraid of sexual crime, and the related fear is transmitted to other types of offences. The findings presented by A. Gruszczyńska are reflected in feminist criminology, which highlights the differences in the perception of fear of crime in females and males.

The Ferraro hypothesis (Ferraro, 1995) regarding an extended impact of anxiety of a sexual assault, characteristic of females, is also confirmed by studies conducted by Lane and Fisher (2009), who claim that sex play the main role in determining the level of fear in humans. Furthermore, according to Italian studies, fear of crime can result from many factors and circumstances (e.g., age, sex, place of residence), not necessarily a single socio-demographic variable (Maffei *et al.*, 2009). In turn, British studies mention the perception of social life as the source of that fear (Jackson *et al.*, 2009).

It is also worth mentioning studies into determinant of sense of security in the context international comparison of fear of crime levels. An attempt to make such a comparison, on the example of residents of Scotland and Iceland, was made by Kristjánsson (2007) and demonstrated that in Iceland (where there is only one big city) a bigger role in determining the fear is played by urban-rural relations (although it is also an important factor in Scotland).

Furthermore, personal incomes differentiated the fear to a larger extent in Scotland than in Iceland. The factor of sex, mentioned earlier, was important in both countries, with Scotland coming slightly on top (Kristjánsson, 2007).

5. Research Methodology

The cognitive purpose of this study was to analyse theoretical aspects of an individual's fear of crime based on the literature and current academic studies in this area. The utilitarian purpose was to determine the relation, or absence thereof, between the sense of security and the level of security. These purposes led to formulating the research problem as follows: What are the relations between the level of crime and the sense of security as illustrated by the example of a local community? The research problem thus formulated allowed the author to investigate the area of knowledge that had to be investigated to present the impact of crime on the sense of local security.

The purposes and the research problem determined the selection of theoretical and empirical research methods. The analysis of local sense of security was based on a diagnostic survey conducted by the author in 2017 with the survey technique among a representative sample of 600 randomly selected adult residents of the County of Cieszyn. It must be noted that in 2017 the population of the County of Cieszyn was 178,251 people, who accounted for 3.9% of the population of Śląskie Province.

Females (51.4%) were in slight majority compared to males. People aged above 65 accounted for 17% of the County's population, and rural areas were inhabited by 55% of the population. The original study covered two relevant dimensions: the sense of security at the place of residence and the assessment of actions taken by the Municipal Police and the Police to ensure local security. Importantly, for the purpose of solving the research problem formulated in this paper, only a fragment of the study's analysis was used. The data on the crime level came from the statistics provided by the Police.

In this paper, the level of crime in Poland was determined based on statistical data presented by Statistics Poland. Furthermore, when determining the level of crime in the County of Cieszyn, which is in southern Poland and borders the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, the author relied on the statistics provided by the County Police Headquarters in Cieszyn and based on data contained in the Report on operations of the County Police Commander in Cieszyn and information on the state of public security and order in the County of Cieszyn in 2017.

The starting point for describing the data was determination of the trends in the number of offences identified as a set of all events defined as offences in a given territory and period, i.e., across Poland and in the County of Cieszyn in 2017. It must be explained that the term "offence identified" means an offence which is a crime or transgression prosecuted by public indictment, also including tax offences covered by a completed investigation because of which the existence of a prohibited act was identified. Two indicators were used for solving the assumed research problem: the offence per resident rate and the criminal offence per resident rate.

The offence per resident rate is the quotient of the number of offences identified in each area and the number of residents. The criminal offence per resident rate is the quotient of the number of criminal offences identified in each area and the number of residents.

6. Impact of Crime on the Declared Sense of Security

Fear of crime exists as a social phenomenon (Austin *et al.*, 2002) which affects the quality of life (Jackson and Gray, 2010) by *inter alia* inducing various psychological problems in humans (Ruijsbroek *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, fear of crime is comprised of many factors, with the actual crime being the most important one. At local level, one can expect that people who suffer because of higher crime rates experience stronger fear (Curiel and Bishop, 2018).

At individual level, a significant degree of fear is often signalled by people who enjoy a low level of victimisation, because of which there are generally more people who experience fear than those who experience violence (Skogan, 1987). Also, on the country-wide scale, locations where crime rates are lower can be perceived as less safe, and the fluctuations in the number of offences observed do not lead to an increase or a decrease in general concerns about the criminality in the region (Prieto *et al.*, 2016).

To solve the research problem assumed in this paper, the author presented partial findings of his survey conducted among residents of the County of Cieszyn. On this basis, it was established that most of the respondents considered their place of residence as safe and peaceful (96%), while people claiming otherwise were clearly in minority (4%). As regards the division into males and females, 99% of males and 89% of females considered their neighbourhood as safe.

Therefore, the findings relate to feminist criminology, which highlights the differences in the perception of fear of crime in females and males. It must be noted that a significant part of the studies demonstrated differences between the two sexes – namely, males are more exposed to crimes than females, whereas females are more afraid of crimes than males (Fisherm 1995; Warr 2000; Jennings *et al.*, 2007).

Similar findings were presented by the author of the *Aktualne problemy i wydarzenia* study (323) conducted between 30 March – 6 April 2017 on a randomly selected sample of 1,075 adult Poles with the face-to-face interview method supported with Computer Assisted Web Interviews (CAPI). According to the findings, as many as 95% of the respondents assessed their immediate neighbourhood as safe, with only few (4%) declaring that they lived in a dangerous place (*Opinie o bezpieczeństwie*, 2017).

Similar findings were included in *Komunikat z badań. Poczucie bezpieczeństwa i zagrożenia przestępczością* (Polish: Communication from studies. Sense of security

and threat of crime) (Communication), according to which, as of 2017, 93% of the respondents declare their place of residence and neighbourhood as safe, with only 6% holding the opposite opinion (1% of the respondents were unable to express their opinion).

Considering the relation between the number of offences identified in the area concerned the number of residents, in the County of Cieszyn there was 0.0216 crime per resident in 2017, of which 0.010 was a criminal offence. On the other hand, the population of Poland was 38,432,992 in 2017, and at the country level there were 753,963 offences identified, including 463,907 criminal offences (stat.gov.pl). Therefore, there was 0.196 offence per resident, and 0.12 criminal offence per resident.

Table 1. Sense of security and level of security – analysis of the findings

| 2017 | Poland | County of Cieszyn |
|--|------------|-------------------|
| Declared sense of security at place of residence | 95% | 96% |
| Total number of crimes | 753,963 | 3,856 (0.51%) |
| Number of criminal offences | 463,907 | 1,829 (0.39%) |
| Number of residents | 38,432,992 | 178,251 (0.46%) |
| "offence rate" per resident | 0.0196 | 0.0216 |
| "criminal offence rate" per resident | 0.012 | 0.010 |

Source: Own study.

In the context of the findings presented, it can be assumed that the level of the sense of security in each community is determined by the criminal offence rate. The lower the number of crimes, the higher the local community's sense of security. In the context of the total number of crimes detected, the above relation does not exist. This fact can be explained by the fact that crime consists of several offences (e.g., economic crime) and sense of security of a member of a given community is determined by the types of crime which he or she is likely to experience every day, i.e., criminal offences.

Naturally, the findings presented in this paper are not free of limitations, but they offer an opportunity to better understand the social conditions of the fears, compare them with objective threats and develop an appropriate local strategy to mitigate fear of crime. Having said this, when building a local security policy oriented towards *inter alia* mitigating the fear, one should consider not only the hard data on respective categories of security (crime rates), but also the residents' perceptions. This can help in identifying problems, e.g., psychological ones, which can determine the residents' assessment of security (Siemiątkowski *et al.*, 2020).

7. Conclusions

The 21st century is a period of constant expansion of the concept of "security", because of which it does not have a single universally accepted interpretation. In

addition, the multitude of definitions makes it difficult to identify the area. The start is most often done from defining security as freedom from threats, fear, anxiety, or attack. The 21st century shows also that studies into the public fear of crime are attracting an increasing interest on the side of the academic community (Ferraro, 1995). One must not forget that sense of security is affected not only by crime, but also stable employment, fair salary, security at one's home, as well as health and environmental security etc.

To summarise the above deliberations, it can be assumed that an individual's sense of security in the context of crime is affected primarily by such factors as:

- the actual level of crime and its subjective assessment,
- the presence of social problems and their subjective perception,
- objectively present signs of disorganisation of the local community,
- a subjective assessment of the risk of victimisation and the ability to control it,
- direct and indirect victimisation,
- demographics,
- popular ideas about crime, risk and social changes passed by mass media and in ordinary conversations.

Considering the declared level of sense of security and a decrease in the number of offences committed in Poland in the period concerned, as shown by police statistics, and the concurrent increase of crime detection rates, one could propose a thesis that the level of an individual's sense of security should be determined by the level of crime in one's area.

Therefore, the relation should be reversely proportional, i.e., the lower the number of offences identified, the higher the sense of security, and conversely - the higher the number of offences identified, the lower the sense of security. Naturally, this is a very simplified claim, for an individual's sense of security depends on many factors, both attributable to that individual and objective one which are beyond the individual's direct control, not only on the level of crime measured with official statistics. It must be noted that the purpose of this study has been achieved, and the conclusions allowed the author to solve the research problems assumed.

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