
Fact Sheet

Recent Trends in Fear of Crime and Perceived Risk of Victimization in Baton Rouge, LA

Matthew R. Lee, Ph.D.
Frederick D. Weil, Ph.D.
Edward S. Shihadeh, Ph.D.

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Although criminal victimization itself causes significant physical, emotional, and financial harm, the implications of a high level of fear of crime or a high perceived risk of victimization for community residents can be substantial. When community residents are fearful and estimate that they have a high likelihood of being a victim of crime, they may avoid certain places at certain times (avoidance behaviors), they may stop socializing with residents in their own communities (withdrawal), or they may take more extreme measures such as buying guns or outfitting their homes with alarm systems (protective measures).

The national standard for measuring fear of crime is the widely used public opinion polling question “Is there any area right around here, say, within a mile, where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?” Although there is some academic debate regarding whether or not this particular question measures actual fear of crime, it is the widely used national benchmark, and so we use it here to index the same phenomenon in Baton Rouge. While there are some demographic variations in fear of crime and

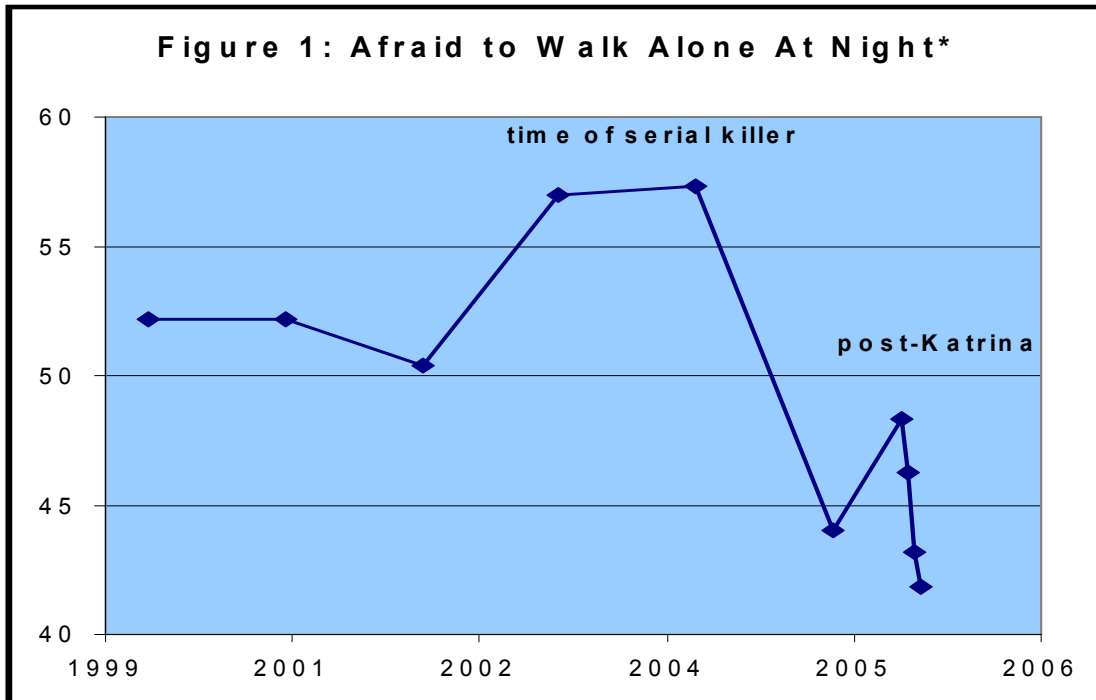
perceived risk of victimization, (e.g., females are typically more fearful), variation over time in this indicator can also be informative. This is particularly the case in Baton Rouge, where over the last several years a widely publicized serial killer was captured. Moreover, being the most proximate metropolitan area to New Orleans, the significant influx of evacuees after Hurricane Katrina in August and September of 2005 may have also had an impact on fear of crime, especially in light of media reports (now recognized as being significantly exaggerated) which provided accounts of widespread murder, robbery, and rape by some who were stranded in New Orleans.

Figure 1 provides time trend data on fear of crime in Baton Rouge on a yearly basis for 2000 to 2005. These data clearly indicate that fear of crime spiked during the serial killer era, but by early 2005 after he was caught, the fear level resettled at a level significantly lower than the pre-serial killer era. At the end of the trend however, the data indicate fear of crime spiked again shortly after Hurricane Katrina, but over the 3 months following Katrina it began to drop

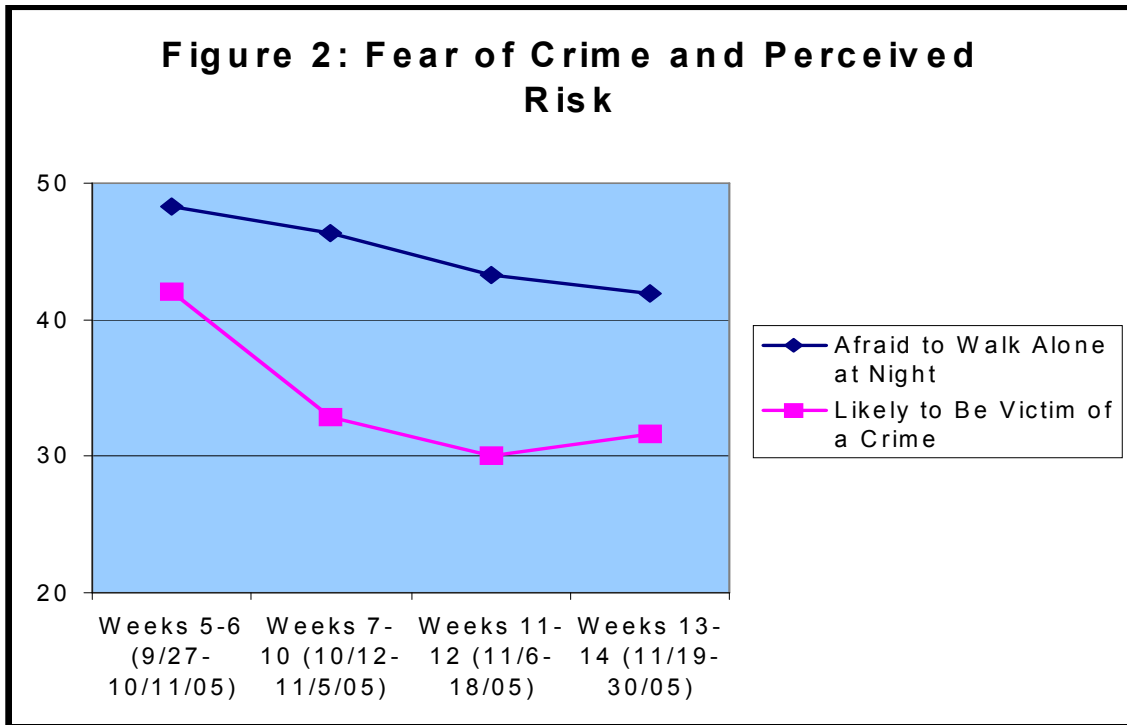
sharply. Clearly there have been fluctuations over recent years in the fearfulness of Baton Rouge residents.

Figure 2 extends this analysis by making use of public opinion data collected in Baton Rouge from the end of September to the end of November in 2005, covering the period of 5 to 14 weeks after Hurricane Katrina inundated New Orleans. Pictured here are short term trends in both fear of crime and an indicator of the perceived risk of victimization (“How likely do you think it is you may be the victim of a crime in the next 12 months? 1. Very likely, 2. Somewhat

likely, 3. Somewhat unlikely, 4. Very unlikely”). These data illustrate a general tapering off in both fear and perceived risk as the population shock from the evacuation becomes a more distant memory. In conclusion, although recent events have caused apparent consternation among Baton Rouge residents, the most recent data suggest that fear of crime and the perceived risk of victimization in Baton Rouge are settling back down to baseline levels.



* Figure 1 methodological note: The data from 2000-2005 are from annual random-digit-dialed surveys of Baton Rouge residents conducted every spring semester by Frederick D. Weil. Marginals for these data are available from [http://appl003.lsu.edu/artsci/sociologyweb.nsf/\\$Content/Baton+Rouge+Social+Surveys?OpenDocument](http://appl003.lsu.edu/artsci/sociologyweb.nsf/$Content/Baton+Rouge+Social+Surveys?OpenDocument). The post-Katrina data in Figures 1 and 2 are from a survey conducted by Frederick Weil, Edward Shihadeh, and Matthew Lee of the Sociology Department at Louisiana State University. Interviews were done September 27 to November 29, 2005. Data are based on a random-digit-dialed telephone sample, representative of the general population age 18 and over in East Baton Rouge Parish, LA, who already lived there before the hurricanes. Survey includes 1,349 completed interviews. The results are weighted to reflect the combined age-gender-race/hispanic distributions, according to U.S. Census estimates for 2004. Data collection was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation.



Authors

Matthew R. Lee, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at Louisiana State University and co-coordinator of CAPER.

Frederick D. Weil, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at Louisiana State University, Director of Undergraduate Studies, and a Research Fellow with CAPER.

Edward S. Shihadeh, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at Louisiana State University and co-coordinator of CAPER.

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