

Why Traditional Fear of Crime Surveys Are Failing Us (And How to Fix Them)

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A practical guide for community safety professionals, local government managers, police, and CPTED practitioners

If you've ever conducted a fear of crime survey, you've probably noticed something puzzling: nearly everyone rates their fear level as "4" on a 1-5 scale. This isn't coincidence—it's a fundamental flaw in how we're measuring public safety perceptions.

After years of working with community safety data, I've identified why traditional fear of crime surveys produce misleading results and, more importantly, how we can design better ones that actually inform effective interventions.

The "Rule of 4" Problem

When asked to rate their fear of crime or perception of safety on a scale of 1-5, respondents consistently cluster around "4." This happens because people position

themselves as "somewhere in the middle"—neither fearless nor terrified—but then add an extra point hoping their response might attract resources or attention to their community.

This systematic bias renders most survey data **nearly useless** for decision-making.

Eight Critical Flaws in Traditional Fear of Crime/Community Safety Surveys

There are seven typical flaws in Fear of Crime and Community Safety surveys.

1. Biological Reality is Ignored.

Humans are naturally 30% more fearful after dark—a hardwired response that has nothing to do with actual crime risk. Traditional surveys don't account for this diurnal variation. Artificial lighting doesn't change this.

2. Familiarity vs. Risk Confusion

A person visiting an entertainment district for the first time will report high fear levels. After a week of regular visits, their fear disappears—not because the area became safer, but because familiarity breeds comfort. Their initial assessment was essentially meaningless.

3. Fear vs. Worry: A Crucial Distinction

True fear is a visceral, immediate physical bodily response to a direct, close and immediate physical threat - a knife to the throat or similar . Instead, what surveys typically measure is **mentally-based worry or concern** about hypothetical future events. These are fundamentally different phenomena requiring different interventions. For a **real immediate physical threat** causing real fear, the only response is to remove the threat. For **mentally-based worry or concern** the appropriate response are those that reduce people's mentally-based worries.

4. The Crime Prevention Paradox

Paradoxically, crime prevention activities—including surveys themselves—can increase reported fear levels. When residents see police cars in their neighbourhood, their first thought isn't "I'm safer now" but "What's wrong?"

5. Chronic Anxiety Masquerading as Crime Fear

Some respondents rate everything as "5" on a fear of crime survey because they experience generalized anxiety about all aspects of life. Their responses tell us nothing about crime-specific concerns.

6. Inevitable Leading Questions

It's nearly impossible to design traditional fear of crime surveys without introducing bias through leading questions, making the results unreliable for policy decisions. One way to address this is to deliberately make the Likert scale levels explicit.

7. Generic, Actionable Data Gap

Likert scale responses provide vague, general information that offers little or no specific guidance for designing targeted interventions.

8. Failing Individuals Seriously At-Risk

It is essential to identify those who are seriously and continuously at risk of abuse and violence. These are an essential group to provide significant support. Generic Likert scales fail to clearly identify individuals in this group or the scale of this problem in any location. Explicit Likert scales address this easily.

A Better Approach: Three Key Elements

After extensive testing, we've developed an improved methodology that addresses these fundamental problems while providing actionable insights.

1. Calibration: Define What "Safe" Actually Means

We must distinguish between **fear** (bodily response to immediate real physical threat - knife to the throat and similar) and **concern** (mental projection about potential future adverse events).

What is safe? This is a real world not some theoretical abstract perfect fantasy. Being 'safe' means being able to undertake one's life without major real instances of violence and crime happening to us on a frequent basis. In normal life we 'safely' crossroads. Being 'safe' means that we take account of other road users and pedestrians and to be 'safe' we adjust our lives to suit the behaviour of others.

This is what being 'safe' means. Having to adapt to life, noise and the behaviours of others is part of a safe life. A safe life is not being subject to an actual threat in the moment - i.e. no one is actively trying to run you over or actively stealing your wallet at this moment.

2. Representation: Get the Demographics Right

Survey responses must proportionally represent the community's actual demographic composition based on recent census data.

This usually requires either commissioning specialist survey firms or conducting surveys across different times and locations to carefully ensure representative participation.

3. Measurement: Define Every Response Category

It has proved important to explicitly defined each level in a Likert scale, so respondents understand exactly what each choice means. This enables more accurate response analysis.

Here's our refined 5-level scale:

- **Level 1 - Fully Safe:** Normal life includes disagreements, minor inconveniences, and hearing about crimes happening to others. In a safe life you haven't experienced major crimes against oneself personally in over a year.
- **Level 2 - Occasional Minor Risks:** Fundamentally safe but occasionally having suspicious behaviour occur to you (e.g. someone checking your car door handles, finding an unwelcome visitor in your garden who leaves when asked).
- **Level 3 - Recent Crime Victim:** You've experienced at least one actual significant crime against you personally (not family, friends, or neighbours) within the past year.
- **Level 4 - Under Active Threat:** You require legal or physical protection—domestic violence refuge residents, those with protection orders, or people requiring official security details.
- **Level 5 - Immediate Daily Danger:** You face real daily physical danger—victims of ongoing criminal abuse, those with active death threats, or front-line officers in violent situations.

Real-World Results

When we've implemented this improved methodology, we consistently see:

- **Reduced reported fear levels** among participants.
- **More accurate situational assessments**
- **Significantly improved and better justified basis for CPTED and crime prevention investments**
- **Participant feedback** indicating they hadn't realized how safe they actually were.
- **Clear identification** of the small percentage of **people in genuine danger** who need immediate support.

The Bottom Line for Practitioners

Traditional fear of crime and community safety surveys aren't just flawed—they're actively misleading. They waste resources, misdirect interventions, and fail to identify people in genuine need.

The solution isn't to abandon measurement but to measure more precisely.

By distinguishing between fear and concern, providing clear definitional frameworks, and ensuring representative sampling, we can gather data that actually informs effective CPTED and community safety strategies.

For community safety professionals, this means moving beyond generic "how safe do you feel" questions toward specific, calibrated assessments that reveal both the reality of public safety and the genuine needs of our most vulnerable community members.

What's been your experience with community safety surveys? Have you noticed the "rule of 4" phenomenon in your own data collection? I'd welcome your thoughts and experiences in the comments.

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