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High Aesthetics/Low Incivilities: Criminal Victimizations and Perceptions of Risk in a Downtown Environment

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been substantial growth in the theoretical and empirical literature dealing with fear of crime. Research done on criminal victimizations and perceptions of risk in a downtown environment are discussed.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been substantial growth in the theoretical and empirical literature dealing with fear of crime. As this work proceeds, some meaningful distinctions among concepts are emerging, along with refinements of operational definitions in the design of research. Among these is the distinction between feelings of fear and perceptions of risk.

Fear is generally understood as an emotion—a feeling of impending harm to one's well-being, whether such harm is real or imagined. Perception of risk is an evaluative judgment; an assessment of the likelihood that harm to one's well-being will actually occur, based on accumulated information and cueing stimuli from one's environment.

LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic (1992) have observed that, in research concerning fear of crime, the above concepts are often confused. As a result, measures taken and conclusions reported about fear of crime might actually pertain to perceptions of risk. For example, "How safe do you or would you feel being out alone in your neighborhood at night?" is a standard question on the National Crime Victimization Survey, which is generally interpreted as an indicator of fear of crime. However, this item

is actually a better measure of risk ("How safe do you feel . . .?") than a measure of fear ("How afraid do you feel . . .?"), yet this is not explicitly stated in most of the literature (p. 315).

The point is well-taken. It cannot be assumed that people who perceive their surroundings to be unsafe are necessarily afraid. Fear may be a function of both perceived risk and perceived seriousness of an offense (Warr & Stafford, 1983, p. 1033). In such a case, high perceived risk and high offense seriousness are both necessary conditions for fear, but neither is sufficient (p. 1035). Thus, valid inferences about fear cannot be made solely from measurements of risk perception. As stated by LaGrange and Ferraro (1989), "Simply because people think they are unlikely to be crime victims does not mean they are unafraid of crime, nor does a heightened sense of perceived risk automatically translate into heightened feelings of fear" (p. 699). On the other hand, it does seem reasonable to assume that people who are afraid do not perceive their surroundings to be safe, so that measurements of fear can be appropriately interpreted to include perception of risk. It has been argued that perception of risk is an input, while fear of crime is the resulting output (Warr, 1987, p. 31). In fact, persons who perceive a high risk of victimization are more fearful of crime (LaGrange & Ferraro, 1989, p. 704). Of course, neither fear nor risk perception is necessarily related to probability of actual victimization (much like fear of flying more than driving, despite the far greater safety of air travel). In particular, studies of elderly people and females indicate that levels of fear and/or risk perception among members of these groups are considerably greater than their actual probabilities of being victimized (e.g., Baumer, 1978; Box, Hale, & Andrews, 1988; Clarke & Lewis, 1982; Erksine, 1974; Figgie, 1980; Garofalo, 1979; Parker & Ray, 1990; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981; Warr, 1984, 1990), although these differences may be greatly exaggerated due to measurement problems (LaGrange & Ferraro, 1989, p. 715).

In light of the need for greater specificity of concepts and measurements in this area of inquiry, it should be understood that the focus of this research is on perception of risk for criminal victimization. The design and findings of the study do not support inferences concerning fear of crime. As stated by LaGrange and Ferraro (1989), "Although the two concepts (risk and fear) share some commonality, perceptions of risk and feelings of fear are different and distinct crime perceptions and they deserve separate attention in research on this topic" (p. 704). Thus, the general purpose of the study is to examine relationships among environmental characteristics, perceptions of risk for criminal victimization (not fear), and actual criminal victimization. The particular matter of concern is the extent to which high levels of environmental aesthetics or low levels of environmental incivilities, the result of a carefully planned program of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), may be associated with perceptions of risk for criminal victimization and actual victimizations of persons at work, and en route to and from their places of employment. Specifically, four interrelated hypotheses are tested: (1) changes made to a downtown environment through a program of CPTED aimed at increasing aesthetics and eliminating incivilities will be associated with high ratings of area attractiveness among respondents; (2) conditions of high aesthetics/ low incivilities will be associated with low levels of risk perception for criminal victimization among respondents; (3) conditions of high

aesthetics/low incivilities will be associated with low levels of self-reported criminal victimization among respondents; and (4) self-reported victims of crime will report higher perceptions of risk than nonvictims of crime.

Definition of Terms

Aesthetics

Aesthetics, of course, refers to beauty: qualities that are pleasing to the senses. Insofar as environmental characteristics of urban areas are concerned, the term may be generally taken to include well-maintained buildings; neat vacant properties; grounds immediately surrounding buildings; clean streets/parking areas/ walkways; attractive natural foliage and plantings; bright night-lighting of all public use areas; and orderly, unobtrusive behavior of people. In essence, high levels of aesthetics is equivalent to low levels of incivilities.

Incivilities

Incivilities have been generally described as "untended property" and "untended people and behavior" (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). More specifically, these include abandoned buildings with boarded or broken windows, abandoned lots with an accumulation of trash, litter in streets/walkways/parking areas, graffiti on buildings and walls, groups of people loitering/arguing/fighting on streets, derelicts and winos reclining in doorways and alleyways, poorly lit streets and dark entries to buildings and alleys, and the presence of illegal drug activity (Covington & Taylor, 1991; Hunter, 1978; Lewis & Salem, 1981; Rohe & Burby, 1988). A number of research studies have reported a significant relationship between conditions of incivility and fear of crime and/or perception of risk for victimization (Appleton, 1975; Biderman, Johnson, McIntyre, & Weir, 1967; Box et al., 1988; Covington & Taylor, 1991; Gates & Rohe, 1987; Greene & Taylor, 1988; Hunter, 1978; Lewis & Maxfield, 1980; Lewis & Salem, 1986; Maxfield, 1984, 1987a, 1987b; Pate, Wycoff, Skogan, & Sherman, 1986; Skogan, 1986; Taylor, Shumaker, & Gottfredson, 1985; Wilson, 1968). These conditions have been variously referred to as "signs of crime" (Skogan & Maxfield, 1981), "early signs of danger" (Stinchcombe, Adams, Heimer, Scheppele, Smith, & Taylor, 1980), "urban unease" (Wilson, 1968), "perceived neighborhood problems" (Gates & Rohe, 1987), "non-normal appearances" (Goffman, 1971), "disorder" (Skogan, 1980), "soft crimes" (Reiss, 1985), "prelude to trouble" (Skolnick, 1966), and "cues to danger" (Warr, 1990). It is not surprising that environmental conditions are also associated with high rates of actual victimization, especially for offenses such as robbery (Camp, 1968; Tiffany & Ketchell, 1979; Wise, 1983), rape (Stoks, 1983), and burglary (Robinson, 1994, 1997; Taylor & Nee, 1988).

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)

In the early 1970s, the seminal works of C. Ray Jeffery (1971) and Oscar Newman (1972) promoted a growing interest in crime prevention through environmental design-now familiarly referred to as CPTED. Newman's work is largely associated with prevention techniques called defensible space-physical design changes aimed at increasing solidarity among residents and their neighbors and increasing the potential for surveillability of outside offenders. Jeffery's influence is seen more frequently in studies and projects involving the "facts of objective and perpetual space, urban form, offenders, target opportunities, and the roles that all these play in criminal events" (Brantingham & Jeffery, 1991, p. 237).

Generally, CPTED focuses on the locations where crimes occur and on mechanisms to reduce the vulnerability of those locations to crime (Taylor & Harrell, 1996, p. 1), because CPTED is based on the assumption that characteristics in the external physical environment play a major role in promoting crime (Clarke, 1995, p. 2). CPTED programs are primarily aimed at eliminating opportunities for crime in various physical environments, as well as at reducing fear or perceptions of risk, and increasing the quality of life (Crowe, 1991).

Since the early 1970s, numerous projects have been implemented, and evaluative studies have been conducted, indicating that CPTED focusing on architectural and spatial arrangement, as well as land-use design, can reduce rates of crimes such as burglary and robbery in residential neighborhoods and commercial areas (for discussions, see Brantingham & Brantingham, 1981; Jeffery, 1990). While improving aesthetics and reducing incivilities have not been the primary focus of most of these endeavors, neither have these factors been left unattended. That is, many environmental design features aimed at increasing public surveillability of crimetarget sites, as well as those intended to reduce offender accessibility to some sites, wittingly or unwittingly, result in the reduction or elimination of various incivilities and make substantial aesthetic improvement-for example, more attractive spatial arrangement, design, and maintenance of buildings, parking areas, and walkways; removal or reconstruction of deteriorated buildings; installation of brighter lighting; selective location and trimming of foliage; and so forth. In fact, some claim that CPTED is specifically aimed at such goals beyond crime prevention (National Crime Prevention Institute, 1986).

Few of the evaluative research studies on CPTED projects have included measures of public fear of crime or perception of risk; and, as mentioned earlier, it is understood that neither of these factors is necessarily related to actual victimization. Still, to the extent that an abatement of incivilities and improvement of aesthetics is associated with CPTED activities-that is, that the "signs" of danger or crime are removed or at least reduced-it seems plausible to project that relatively low levels of public perception of risk and low levels of actual victimization would be present following an intensive CPTED program in a given area of a city. The testing of this proposition, then, is the objective of the present study.

Design and Methodology

The research was conducted in Tallahassee, Florida, where a major project of civic improvement in the downtown area has been underway during the past half decade. Like many small cities whose populations and land areas have greatly expanded in a relatively few years, a number of small downtown businesses either closed altogether or moved to the suburbs. Even so, the "old downtown" environment of Tallahassee was not left to deteriorate into conditions of incivility which emit signs of danger and are related to actual occurrences of crime. Considering that Tallahassee is the capital city of the state of Florida, and that many if not most of the downtown buildings house central offices of government (city, county, and state), it is understandable that various commercial and professional firms would seek offices in the immediate vicinity. Thus, old buildings vacated by a variety of small businesses, as well as a number of historical homes in the area, were and are yet being renovated or replaced. Also, improvements of streets, walkways, courtyards, parks, and parking areas have been and continue to be made, not only to serve people during daytime working hours, but also to promote hotel, dining, and entertainment activities during evenings, weekends, and holidays for a variety of people.

Interviews with personnel of the Downtown Development Office, the Downtown Improvement Authority, and the Tallahassee Police Department (D. Dunson, M. Larson, and J. Rioux, respectively, May 12, 1995) revealed that, since 1991, all public and private improvements and renovations in the downtown area of the city have been made in consultation with the Crime Prevention Unit of the Tallahassee Police Department. The interrelated objectives of increasing aesthetics, eliminating incivilities, and preventing crime are routinely promoted as critical aspects of all projects. Indeed, along with many aesthetic improvements in the central city environment, police data also reflect very low levels of reports of actual criminal offenses, relative to other areas of the city. According to the Tallahassee Police Department, the downtown environment is one of the most street-crime-free areas of the city, except for a small frequency of crimes against automobiles.

At the same time, in terms of overall safety from crime, the City of Tallahassee as a whole is ranked 341 out of 343 metro areas (where 343 is the highest crime rate area) evaluated in the United States and Canada (Savageau & Boyer, 1994). The rankings are based on figures "derived from the FBI's Crime in the United States, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, and 1992, and from the Bureau's unpublished 'Crime by County' reports for each of the years . . . Canadian figures are derived from the Centre for Justice Statistics unpublished 'Table 3' reports for 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, and 1991" (Savageau & Boyer, 1994).

Taking all of the above into account, it was felt that the downtown area of the City of Tallahassee would be particularly appropriate as the geographical focus for this study. In order to assess public perception

of risk for criminal victimization in this area, a random sample of 350 state employees working in downtown locations was selected for data collection by telephone survey. This sample size is similar to many previous studies in the area of incivility and CPTED research (e.g., LaGrange & Ferraro, 1989 in = 320 phone interviews]; Warr & Stafford, 1983 [n = 339 mail survey respondents]). Considering that state government employees account for 41% of the total workforce in the city (Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce, 1995), that state offices are highly concentrated in the downtown area, and that people working in those offices necessarily encounter the downtown environment with considerable frequency while travelling to and from work, running errands downtown, eating lunch in the numerous parks, and so forth, this respondent group was taken to be appropriate for the purposes of the study.

After obtaining demographic characteristics of each respondent, as well as his or her specific location of employment, the data collection proceeded by asking all to rate the attractiveness of the downtown area on a five-point scale ranging from poor to excellent (plus uncertain). In the same manner, respondents were asked to rate their feelings of personal safety (perceptions of risk from criminal victimization) in downtown Tallahassee in general, and specifically while traveling to and from work and while at work (parking areas for employment locations were considered to be "at work"). Additionally, respondents were asked about victimization experiences (in 1994) on the way to and from work, as well as while at work. Self-reported victims were also asked about type of criminal victimization and location of the offense.

The data analysis procedures involved figuring simple percentages and zero-order correlations. These correlations include Kendall's Tau-b (for ordinal by ordinal relationships) and Phi-squared (for 2x2 nominal relationships). The goal of the research was not to search for causal relationships between the variables in the study, but rather to search for associations between them. Since the author does not have access to pre- and post-CPTED program measures of levels of incivilities, perceptions of risk, and actual occurrences of criminal victimizations, the study does not utilize an experimental design. Rather, the study is cross-sectional in nature. That is, the study is aimed at locating relationships between levels of incivilities, perceptions of risk, and criminal victimizations in one time period-1994.

Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1 reflects how respondents rated the level of personal safety associated with downtown Tallahassee, and the attractiveness of the downtown Tallahassee area. In terms of the area's attractiveness, only 5% rated the downtown area as poor or below average, while 21% rated it as average, and 71% rated the downtown area as good or excellent. This supports our earlier observation that downtown Tallahassee is an area containing high levels of aesthetics, with few environmental incivilities. The employees perceive that there is very little "untended property" or "untended people and behavior" in the downtown environment (Hypothesis 1). Things such as abandoned or burned out

buildings; abandoned lots; loitering teenagers; illegal drug use; vandalism; fighting and arguing; litter; graffiti; and gangs, drug users, and winos are rarely or never present in the downtown Tallahassee environment. With this finding that the highest percentage of respondents rated Tallahassee as an area which was highly attractive, we expected to find a low percentage of respondents who felt that downtown Tallahassee posed personal safety risks (Hypothesis 2).

Table 1 also shows that a moderately low 19% of respondents rated the level of personal safety associated with downtown Tallahassee as poor or below average. Also, 29% of respondents rated the level of personal safety in downtown Tallahassee as average. Yet, 40% of respondents indicated that downtown Tallahassee was a place with a good or excellent rating of personal safety. Thus, more respondents rated downtown Tallahassee's attractiveness as good or excellent (71%) than rated it a place with a good or excellent personal safety rating (40%). Also, while only 6% rated the downtown area as poor or below average in attractiveness, 19% of respondents rated the level of personal safety associated with downtown Tallahassee as poor or below average. This represents a statistically significant zero-order correlation between levels of aesthetics and levels or perceptions of risk of -0.28 (Tau-b). This means that among respondents, high levels of perceived aesthetics were associated with low levels of perceived risk of criminal victimization. The moderate correlation does suggest that feelings of personal safety are decided by more than just attractiveness of the area alone; perhaps, they are decided by actual criminal victimizations; demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and race; as well as exposure to media crime stories, or more specific environmental conditions associated with specific buildings and/or parking garages and lots where state employees work.

Table 2 shows that out of the 350 respondents surveyed, 0%, were victims of crime while going to work, 7% of respondents were victims of crime while at the workplace, and only 1% of respondents were victims of crime while leaving the workplace. Thus, the data suggest that overall, there was little work-related criminal victimization of state employees in 1994 (Hypothesis 3). The data demonstrate that it is less safe for state employees in Tallahassee to actually be at the workplace than to go or leave the workplace; however, this finding of a higher level of criminal victimization at work may merely reflect an increased opportunity structure at work—there is more opportunity to be a victim of crime at work than on the way to or from the workplace, since employees spend more time at work than they do while traveling to and from work.

Table 3 illustrates the types of crimes that state employees were victims of while at work and while leaving their workplaces. Most of the criminal victimizations were property offenses. For example, 59% of offenses at work were motor vehicle thefts, thefts from automobiles, or vandalism against cars. Twenty-five percent of crimes committed at the workplace were thefts. The remaining 16% of crimes committed were violent offenses: 8% were threats of violence ($n = 2$), 4% were batteries ($n = 1$), and 4%

were robberies (n = 1). Therefore, state employees in Tallahassee, Florida were very seldom victims of violent crimes in 1994, which suggests extremely low levels of actual personal safety risks.

Of the criminal victimizations acknowledged and identified by state employees, which were committed against them while leaving the workplace, 50% were aggravated assaults (n = 1), and 50% were hit and runs (n =1). Yet with only two self-reported violent victimizations, these results only reveal that state employees were extremely safe in 1994 from criminal victimization while traveling to or returning home from their places of work.

Table 4 shows that most of the criminal victimizations committed at work against state employees were committed in parking lots (70%). Meanwhile, 30% were committed in the office. This is largely due to the fact that most of the offenses were property offenses, especially committed against motor vehicles of state employees, and against state employees by means of thefts within the office setting. This is an important finding for several reasons. First, it supports opportunity theory in general, and perhaps more specifically, routine activities theory, which holds that crime happens as a result of three converging elements: (1) the presence of motivated offenders, (2) the presence of suitable targets, and (3) the absence of capable guardians to prevent the crime (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Automobiles of state employees are left for extended periods of time in parking lots or parking garages; thus, they are suitable targets, especially since they are not protected by capable guardians such as their owners or any other security personnel. They are a logical primary target of offenders in the area.

Another implication of the finding that most criminal victimizations were committed within parking lots and parking garages is that there is great opportunity for the implementation of crime prevention strategies in this type of physical environment. Protecting the property of one's employees from criminal victimization in parking lots and parking garages, as well as the safety of state employees there, should be sought after by employers.

Since the largest percentage of state employees were victims of crime at work rather than on the way to work or on the way home from work, an attempt to test the relationship between being a victim of crime and perceptions of personal safety risks was made using only victimizations at work (Hypothesis 4). Table 5 shows that state employees who were victimized by crime at the workplace were only slightly more likely than nonvictims to indicate that their personal safety was at risk at work (8.3% versus 4.9%, respectively). A low percentage of both crime victims at work and non-crime victims felt their personal safety was at risk at work. This represents a nonstatistically significant zero-order correlation between actual crime victimization at work and feelings of personal safety risk at work of 0.00 (Phisquared). The findings that criminal victimizations of state employees at work is not associated

with feelings of personal safety risk at work should have probably been expected, since most of the criminal victimizations suffered were property crimes rather than violent crimes. Property crimes suffered by the self-reported victims among the respondents were not of a nature likely to threaten someone's personal safety. It is possible that respondents in the survey would have been more likely to indicate higher perceptions of risk had violent crime victimizations at work been more frequent. Luckily for these employees, violent crime victimizations at work were rarely experienced.

Summary and Discussion

This study tested the relationship between high aesthetics/low incivilities, a result of an intensive CPTED program in downtown Tallahassee, and perceptions of feelings of personal risk and self-reported criminal victimizations among 350 state employees who work in the downtown area of Tallahassee. General support was found for the expectations that (1) changes made to a downtown environment through a program of CPTED aimed at increasing aesthetics and eliminating incivilities would be associated with high ratings of area attractiveness among respondents; (2) conditions of high aesthetics/low incivilities would be associated with low levels of risk perception for criminal victimization among respondents; and (3) conditions of high aesthetics/low incivilities would be associated with low levels of self-reported criminal victimization among respondents. Whether the high ratings of aesthetics by respondents, the low perceptions of risk for criminal victimization, and the low self-reported criminal victimizations were because of the CPTED program that has been implemented in the downtown Tallahassee environment is impossible to know without the pre-implementation measures that could not be obtained by the research.

The correlation between perceived levels of high aesthetics and perceived levels of low safety risks in downtown Tallahassee was not large, although the relationship was related to the original prediction. It is likely that this is due to many other variables which decrease levels of perceived personal safety risks such as a low occurrence of violent criminal victimizations suffered by state employees, either at work, on the way to work, or on the way home from work. This may suggest that a low level of direct experiences with actual violent criminal victimizations is associated with low levels of perceived personal safety risks. Since state employees in downtown Tallahassee were seldom victims of crime in 1994, and since the majority of those were property offenses, there may have been little reason to expect that state employees should have rated personal safety risks as highly problematic in downtown Tallahassee.

In general, the findings serve as an example that intensive CPTED programs at work in downtown environments, directed at increasing aesthetics and reducing incivilities, perceptions of risks, and actual rates of criminal victimization, can be associated with beneficial results, even in cities which are characterized by very high crime rates. It is recommended that CPTED programs aimed only at reducing criminal victimizations and perceptions of risk among citizens should also include measures aimed at

increasing aesthetics and lowering perceptions of incivilities. Whether this will cause citizens who inhabit certain areas to feel safer cannot be known for certain.

It is clear that further study is needed in this area, especially as it relates to individuals who spend great amounts of time in familiar environments such as employees in a downtown area. The findings suggest that this future research should focus on more specific environments, such as building and parking lot characteristics, since this may be more directly related to both actual criminal victimization and feelings of personal safety risks.

Table 1
Ratings of Perceived Personal Safety and Attractiveness of the Area

Rating Level	Type of Rating	
	Personal Safety	Attractiveness
Poor	5.4%	1.4%
Below Average	13.4%	4.3%
Average	28.6%	20.6%
Good	35.7%	44.3%
Excellent	12.6%	26.3%
Not Sure	4.3%	3.1%
Total	100%	100%
n	350	350

Table 2
Self-Reported Work-Related Criminal Victimizations of State Employees

Reported Victimization	Place of Victimization		
	Way to Work	At Work	Way from Work
Yes	0%	7%	1%
No	100%	93%	99%
Total	100%	100%	100%
n	350	350	350

Table 3
Types of Self-Reported Work-Related Criminal Victimizations of State Employees

Type of Victimization	Place of Victimization		
	Way to Work	At Work	Way from Work
Motor Vehicle Theft, Auto Burglary, or Auto Vandalism	0%	59%	0%
Theft	0%	25%	0%
Threat of Violence	0%	8%	0%
Battery	0%	4%	50%
Robbery	0%	4%	0%
Hit and Run	0%	0%	50%
Total	0%	100%	100%
n	0%	24%	2%

Table 4
Site of Self-Reported At-Work Criminal Victimizations of State Employees

Site of Reported Victimization	Place of Victimization	
	At Work	
Parking lot		70%
Office		30%
Total		100%
n		24

Table 5
Effects of Self-Reported At-Work Criminal Victimizations of State Employees on Feelings of Personal Safety

	At-Work Victimization	
	Yes	No
Feelings of risk to personal safety		
Yes	8.3%	4.9%
No	91.7%	95.1%
Total	100%	100%
n	24	326

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