

Police and fear of crime

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The authors discuss the role of the police in reducing fear of crime, which is obviously a larger problem than crime itself. Fear of crime leads to sentencing populism and to the belief that the system of social control is not functioning, resulting in the demand for more severe punishment and the emergence of vigilantism. The authors describe the factors that cause fear of crime and present the socio-demographic and socio-psychological model developed by Van der Wurff, Van Staaldunin and Stringer (1989). They also present the contradictions and inconsistencies in literature dealing with fear of crime. These contradictions mainly concern conceptions of crime, the relative objectivity of perception of crime and the presentation of crime as a growing problem. The authors also pay attention to public, political and mass media presentations of the police role, as well as to the consequences of expectations that people have of the police. The findings indicate that particular attention should be paid to women and the elderly, who are in principle more afraid of crime than other people. In coping with fear of crime, it is necessary to take into account the assessment of victimization, vulnerability and strength of social control. According to the theory of police activity, the visibility and availability of police officers are the most important factors that contribute to an increase in feelings of safety. However, people expect effectiveness from police officers, as well as availability, visibility and politeness. Community policing is actually based on these factors, although it cannot have any impact on the decay of a neighbourhood, for example, because this is a matter outside the competencies of the police. The role of the police in the reduction of fear of crime is controversial; on the one hand the presence of the police in neighbourhoods comforts its residents but, on the other, it can be interpreted as a consequence of higher risk of crime and violation of public order.

Key words: fear of crime, police, community policing, neighbourhood, community

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