

Who's afraid? Feelings of personal safety

Fear of crime can affect the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities.¹ If people feel unsafe, this can influence their socialisation patterns through limiting or avoiding social activities,² and can reduce trust within neighbourhoods by weakening an individual's sense of community.³

Feeling unsafe can be shaped by personal experience of crime, but is also associated with personal characteristics such as age, sex, ethnicity, education, health and economic status. Media reports and social networks can also influence people's perceptions about their personal safety in the wider social and physical environment in which they live.²

Using information on feelings of safety when alone at home, when walking in the neighbourhood or when using public transport alone at night, this article examines the characteristics of people who feel unsafe.

Prevalence of feeling unsafe

In 2008–09, over four million adults, or 26% of those aged 18 years and over, reported feeling unsafe alone at home, walking alone at night in their neighbourhood, or taking public transport at night alone. Included in this 'felt unsafe alone' population were 19% of people who avoided being alone in at least one of these situations because they thought it was unsafe.

Characteristics influencing feelings of safety

...crime victimisation

In the 12 months prior to the survey, 6% of the adult population had experienced at least one robbery, physical assault, threatened assault and/or sexual assault. Victims of these types of personal crimes were generally more likely than those who had not been a victim to report that they felt unsafe (38% compared with 25%). Men who had been victims of crime were twice as likely as other men to feel unsafe (26% and 13% respectively), and similarly among women, 54% of female crime victims reported feeling unsafe compared with 36% of those who had not been a victim. Despite being more likely to feel unsafe, victims only accounted for 9% of the adult population who felt unsafe.

Data source and definitions

This article uses data from the ABS 2008–09 Crime Victimization Survey, which is collected as part of the Multi-Purpose Household Survey. The summary of findings from this survey is contained in ABS [Crime Victimization, Australia, 2008–09](#) (cat. no. 4530.0).

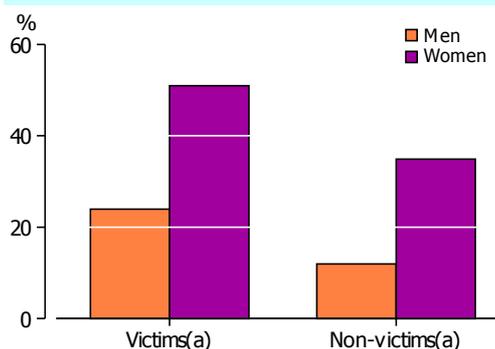
Felt unsafe refers to people aged 18 years and over who felt unsafe when alone in at least one of the following situations: at home during the day or night, or when walking in their neighbourhood or taking public transport after dark. It includes people who were never alone in at least one of these situations because they thought it was unsafe.

Neighbourhood problems refer to louts or youth gangs; prowlers or loiterers; drunkenness; vandalism, graffiti or damage to property; dangerous or noisy driving; illegal drugs; and problems with neighbours that respondents identified as occurring in their neighbourhood (a given area, street or whole suburb, as defined by the respondents themselves).

Perceptions of crime refers to car theft, other theft, household break-ins, sexual assault and other types of assault that people reported as problems in their neighbourhood.

Personal crime refers to a robbery, physical assault, threatened assault or sexual assault. Victims of personal crime refers to people who experienced at least one of these offences in the 12 months prior to the survey.

Feeling unsafe alone, by sex – 2008-09



(a) Victims refers to people who experienced robbery, physical assault, threatened assault and/or sexual assault during the 12 months prior to survey.

Source: ABS 2008-09 Crime Victimization Survey

...sex

Women were more likely than men to feel unsafe alone in their community (37% and 14% respectively). Almost three-quarters (74%) of adults who felt unsafe were women, although men were more likely to be victims of crime – 58% of adults who experienced personal crime were male in 2008–09. The disproportionate number of women who felt unsafe alone compared with men may be attributed to women's greater sense of personal vulnerability.⁴

...age

While 18–24 year olds were twice as likely to be victims of personal crime as people aged 25 years and over (11% and 5% respectively) young adults felt no more unsafe than older age groups (with around 26% of each age group reporting feeling unsafe).

Older people were overall no more likely than the rest of the adult population to report feeling unsafe. However, this was in part because they were less likely to be alone in situations outside of the home. For example, around three-quarters (76%) of people aged 55 years and over did not use public transport at night for reasons other than feeling unsafe. Excluding these people from the population aged 55 years and over, 44% (530,000) avoided using public transport because they thought it was unsafe.

Among adults aged less than 55 years, 62% didn't use public transport at night for reasons other than safety. Of the remaining 38% of adults this age, one-quarter (one million) avoided using public transport because they felt unsafe doing so.

Around half (51%) of people aged 55 years and over did not walk alone in their neighbourhood after dark for reasons other than their personal safety. Excluding these people from the population aged 55 years and over, just over one-third (36%) of them avoided this activity because it felt unsafe.

Less than one-third (31%) of adults aged less than 55 years did not walk alone after dark in their neighbourhood for reasons other than feeling unsafe. Of the remaining 69% of adults less than 55 years, one in five did not walk alone because it felt unsafe to them.

...neighbourhood problems

Perceptions of anti-social neighbourhood problems, including the occurrence of crime, can erode people's sense of social order. This may lead to some people sensing a breakdown of morals in the community and affect people's sense of safety.⁵

Just over two-thirds (69%) of adults reported at least one anti-social or criminal problem in their neighbourhood. Adults who felt unsafe were almost twice as likely as those who felt safe to have reported four or more neighbourhood problems (42% compared with 22%).

The types of problems most commonly reported by adults who felt unsafe were dangerous driving (59%); vandalism, graffiti or damage to property (49%); house break-ins (43%); and louts or youth gangs (33%). Although adults who felt unsafe reported similar types of neighbourhood problems as those who felt safe, the prevalence of problems was higher in their neighbourhoods. For example, break-ins, thefts, and problems with louts or youth gangs were around twice as likely to be reported by adults who felt unsafe.

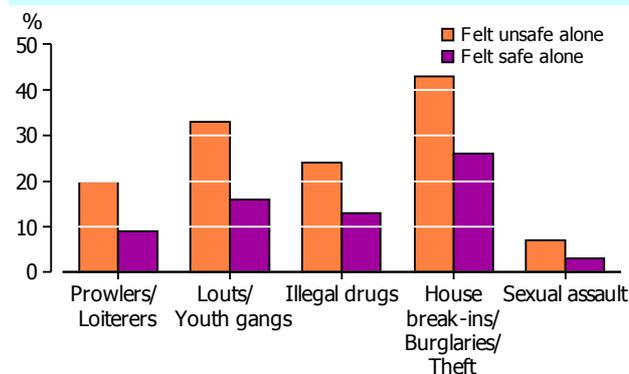
Feelings of safety at night, using public transport by age(a) – 2008-09



(a) Excluding people who did not use public transport at night for reasons other than they felt it was unsafe.

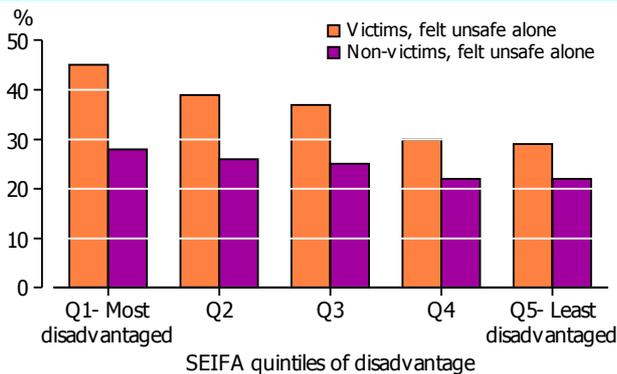
Source: ABS 2008-09 Crime Victimization Survey

Selected types of neighbourhood problems reported – 2008-09



Source: ABS 2008-09 Crime Victimization Survey

Experience of crime and feeling unsafe, by relative disadvantage of area – 2008-09



Source: ABS 2008-09 Crime Victimization Survey

Areas of socioeconomic disadvantage

Neighbourhoods with high levels of perceived crime problems are often areas that are socioeconomically relatively disadvantaged. Living in areas of social disadvantage may place people at greater risk of being a victim and increase the likelihood of people feeling unsafe.

The ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) Index of Relative Disadvantage combines social and economic indicators of geographic areas in which people live and ranks areas according to level of socioeconomic disadvantage. In 2008–09, adults living in the areas of most disadvantage were twice as likely to be victims of personal crime (8%) as adults living in areas of least disadvantage (4%).

Victims of crime felt more unsafe than non-victims regardless of their level of socioeconomic disadvantage. However, victims of crime in the most disadvantaged locations were more likely to feel unsafe than victims living in the least disadvantaged locations (46% and 29% respectively). Adults who had not been a victim of crime, and who were living in the most disadvantaged areas, felt more unsafe than those living in the least disadvantaged areas.

...trust

Based on information from the 2006 General Social Survey, adults who felt safe reported lower levels of general distrust in others, compared with those who felt unsafe (39% compared with 28%).

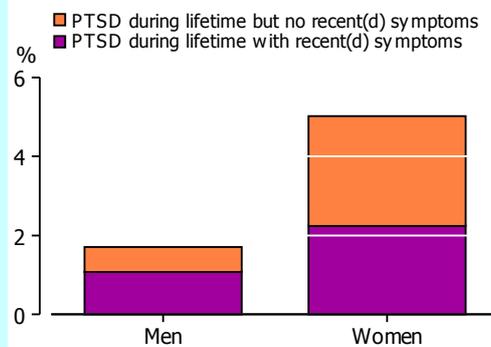
The socioeconomic status of the area in which a person lived was also associated with levels of trust. Among adults who felt unsafe, those living in the most disadvantaged locations were more likely to disagree that most people can be trusted (47%) compared with those living in the least disadvantaged locations (31%).

Mental health consequences of experience of violence

Experience of violent crime can have a range of mental health consequences for the victim, such as the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In 2007, around one million people aged 18–85 years said that the most traumatic event in their lives was being beaten, held up or threatened with a weapon, or sexually assaulted. Of these people, 521,000 (3.4% of all people in this age range) experienced symptoms such as flashbacks, nightmares or anxiety, that were sufficiently severe and long-lasting for a diagnosis of PTSD.

Around half of those diagnosed with PTSD (1.7% of all people aged 18–85 years) had experienced violent crime-related symptoms of PTSD during the 12 months prior to being surveyed. Women were around twice as likely as men to have had PTSD with recent symptoms, and around four times as likely to have had PTSD but with no recent symptoms.

People(a) who experienced violent crime(b) related symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder(c) – 2007



(a) Aged 18-85 years.

(b) Being beaten, held up or threatened with a weapon, or sexually assaulted.

(c) A delayed and/or protracted response to a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience.

(d) During the 12 months prior to survey.

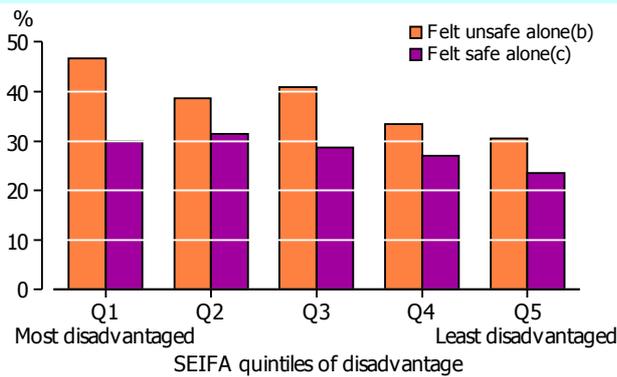
Source: ABS 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing

People aged 18–54 years were around twice as likely as those aged 55–85 years to have recently experienced violent crime related PTSD (2.1% compared with 0.8%).

For more information on PTSD see ABS [National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results, 2007](#) (cat. no. 4326.0).

People living in the areas of greatest disadvantage who felt safe reported slightly higher levels of distrust than those living in the areas of least disadvantage (30% compared with 24%).

Proportion(a) who disagree that most people can be trusted, by relative disadvantage of area – 2006



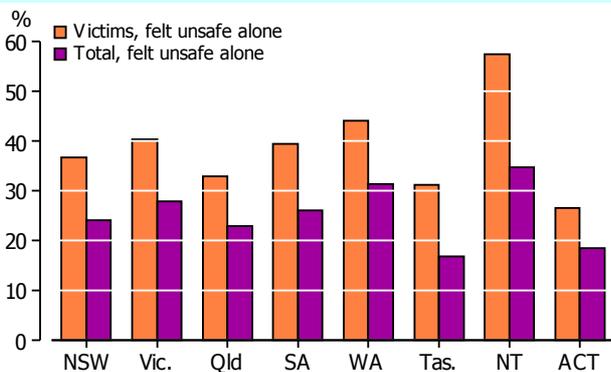
- (a) Of people aged 18 years and over living in each quintile.
- (b) People who reported feeling unsafe when alone in any of three situations: at home during the day, or night, or when walking in their neighbourhood after dark.
- (c) People who did not report feeling unsafe when alone in any of the above three situations and who felt safe in at least one situation.

Source: ABS 2006 General Social Survey

...states and territories

The proportion of adults who felt unsafe varied considerably between jurisdictions. Whilst nationally, 26% of adults felt unsafe, the proportion in the Northern Territory who felt unsafe was 35%. The Northern Territory also had the highest crime victimisation rate (12%), and the highest proportion of victims who felt unsafe (58%). Western Australia had the second highest proportion of the adult population who felt unsafe with 31%, while Victoria was just over the national average with 28%. Four states and territories recorded below the national average for feeling unsafe – New South Wales (24%), Queensland (23%), ACT (19%) and Tasmania (17%).

Experience of crime and feeling unsafe, by State and Territory – 2008-09



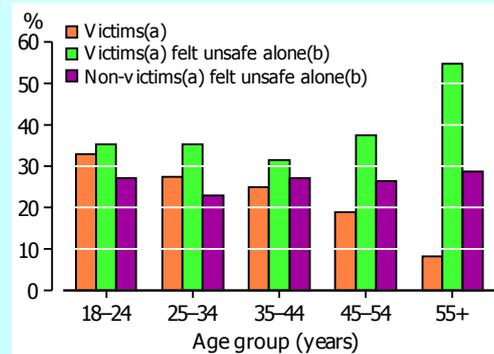
Source: ABS 2008-09 Crime Victimisation Survey

Feelings of safety among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

In 2008, 29% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 18 years and over said that they felt unsafe when alone at home during the day and/or night, or when walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark. Indigenous women were three times as likely as men to report feeling unsafe (42% compared with 14%). However, Indigenous men and women had the same victimisation rate for actual and/or threatened physical violence during the last 12 months (24%).

Indigenous adults who had been a victim of violence were more likely than those who had not been a victim to say they felt unsafe (36% compared with 26%). Indigenous women were much more likely than men to report that they felt unsafe – 51% of Indigenous female victims reported feeling unsafe, compared with 19% of male Indigenous victims. Indigenous women who were not victims were around three times as likely as men who were not victims to feel unsafe (39% compared with 12%).

Indigenous people aged 18 years and over, victims of physical violence(a) and feeling unsafe(b) by age – 2008



- (a) Victims refers to people who experienced actual and/or threatened physical violence during the 12 months prior to survey.
- (b) People who reported feeling unsafe when alone at home during the day or night, and/or when walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark.

Source: ABS 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey

The likelihood of Indigenous adults experiencing violence decreased with age. Indigenous people aged 18-24 years were four times as likely as people aged 55 years and over to have been victimised recently (33% compared with 8%). Older victims of violence were more likely than victims aged less than 55 years to feel unsafe.

Awareness of neighbourhood problems or crimes was generally more commonly reported among Indigenous adults who felt unsafe, while those who felt safe were more likely to report no problems (29% compared with 16%). Among those who felt unsafe, 48% said that they thought alcohol was a problem in their neighbourhood, compared with 39% of those who felt safe. Almost half (47%) of Indigenous adults who felt unsafe disagreed that most people could be trusted, while 36% of those who felt safe reported general distrust in others.

Information from the 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey should not be compared with other data used in this article, due to differences in definitions and survey methodology.

Conclusion

Feeling unsafe is a significant issue for many people and affects individual and community mental health and wellbeing. Feeling unsafe is strongly linked with experience of crime, and with the number and type of problems reported in a neighbourhood. Gender is also a factor, as women, whether they had been a victim of crime or not, disproportionately felt unsafe. Adults living in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage experienced more crime, and felt more unsafe compared with adults living in less disadvantaged areas.

Endnotes

- 1 Stafford, M, Chandola T, and Marmot, M., 2007, 'Association between fear of crime and mental health and physical functioning', *The American Journal of Public Health*, 97(11), pp. 2076–2081.
- 2 Ferraro, K. F., 1995, 'Fear of crime: Interpreting Victimization Risk', New York, State University of New York Press, pp. 1–179.
- 3 Jackson, J., 2004, 'Experience and expression: Social and cultural significance in the fear of crime', *British Journal of Criminology*, 44(6), pp. 946–966.
- 4 Carcach, C. and Mukherjee, S., 1999, 'Women's fear of violence in the community', *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, No.135. Australian Institute of Criminology, pp. 1–6.
- 5 Innes, M., 2004, 'Signal crimes and signal disorders: Notes on deviance as communicative action', *British Journal of Sociology*, 55(3), pp. 335–355.