FEELINGS ABOUT CRIME: FEAR AND CONCERN

Philippe ROBERT, senior researcher and Marie-Lys POTTIER, statistician, outline the findings of a study on the meaning of fear of crime, and changes in it over the last two decades.

n France it took awhile after the irruption of fear of crime as an issue on the public scene for the subject to receive any serious study: there were nothing but conjectures for several years. This is no longer the case: many monographs now shed light on one aspect or another of the issue. No overall picture was available however, and to achieve one, a study of comprehensive data homogeneously covering a sufficiently long period was required[1].

This is not the place to discuss methodological questions, some of which are quite delicate: we will therefore confine our discussion to the main findings.

There are two sides to what is expressed as fear of crime: one is the concern with a societal problem, whereas the other is the perception of a threat to oneself and one's dear ones, and the corresponding fear. Often the two go hand in hand, but not always, so that the question cannot be adequately comprehended if either of the two aspects is set aside.

Concern with crime

Assessment of the extent of this concern in contemporary France depends on the tool used to measure it. The lowest figure is yielded by a Figaro-Sofres "barometer", unfortunately discontinued in 1988 after fourteen years of existence: the figure for people obsessed with crime tends to oscillate around 15%.
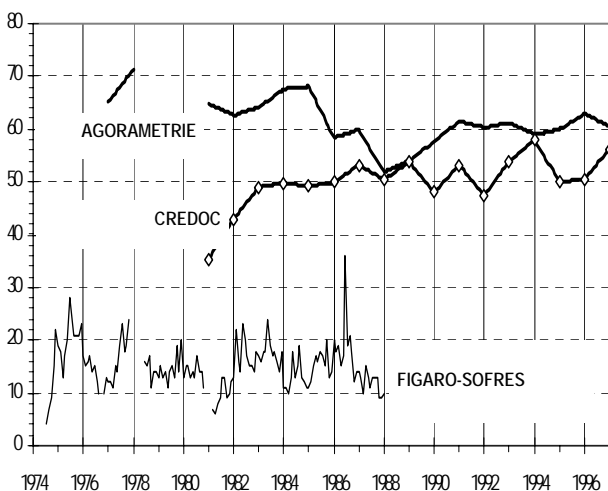
Figure 1: Indicators of concern with and fear of crime

AGORAMETRIE - We no longer feel safe[2].
CRÉDOC - Are you afraid of being assaulted on the street ?

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[1] This study made use of several types of data, and especially the results of the very careful and homogeneous surveys conducted over the last two decades by Jean-Pierre PAGÈS and the Agoramétrie association. We extend our whole-hearted thanks to them for allowing us to use their data.
[2] In this figure as well as the following one, the 'Agoramétrie' series' have been updated using recent surveys to which we did not yet have access upon our previous writing.

FIGARO-SOFRES - Top priority for the government: combating violence and crime.

The Agoramétrie survey shows the highest figure: since 1977, an average of one third of French people claim to be deeply concerned, another third more moderately concerned.

Despite this, concern with crime is nowhere as high as concern with unemployment, which increasingly seems to be obsessive, nor even with the more serious momentary concerns. Rather, it seems to be a not very acute cause of worry, overshadowed, but one that remains chronic and widespread.

There is some evidence — several definite signs — that it arose quite suddenly towards the mid 1970s: at that point concern with crime reached heights that have never been seen again. A downward trend then took over for a decade, despite a brief upsurge in 1983-1985. Since 1988, on the other hand, the trend is upward: in other words, we have a V-shaped curve, but with no radical break: the figures remain in the same range.

Assertion of this concern with crime is part of a very stable structure[3] which also includes belief that the death penalty should be maintained or reinstated, along with the feeling that there are too many immigrants, a desire for order, or at least a concern with disorder, a demand for punishment and hatred of foreigners, or at least fear of loosing one's collective identity. There is nothing surprising nor particularly new in the fact that concern with crime is tainted with a punitive attitude: perhaps this expresses the attendant feeling of powerlessness. The strong link with denunciation of immigration is less commonplace, but may in fact be another expression of the same feeling of powerlessness. When concern with crime is coupled with touchiness about nationality as an identifier — which translates as resentment against invaders perceived as unassimilatable — there is an easy, more or less explicit carry-over by which the house-robber or thief, who turns out to be elusive, is confused with the foreigner (who is quite visible). Offenders and immigrants can then be turned into one and the same category, basically different from "us", so that exclusion is the only solution for them. More deeply, one has the impression that a lack of bearings, perhaps even of identity, leads to a demand, obviously insatiable, and pointing to a basic lack well beyond what seems to be sought: a demand for clearly visible frontiers differentiating us and protecting us from others, from those who are different, from offenders, from foreigners, so that we may have hopes of rediscovering our collective identity by the increasingly strict, radical subtraction of the "non-us"... with the obvious risk that there will not be too many people left when all the others have been removed. Contrary to appearances, the problem is not the others, but the "us": there is a breakdown of the ability to recognize them: criteria are lacking for their identification, and there is constantly a risk of discovering that everyone is inexpiably other. Hatred of foreigners is so great because there are doubts about the ability to turn them into "us", perhaps because there are hesitations about who "we" are.

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[3] This structure is evidenced by analysis of correspondences, performed on opinions statistically linked with concern with crime.

A second lesson pertains to judgments of public institutions: when the right governs, assessment of its efficacy is practically independent of the concern punitiveness xenophobia triad; conversely, when the left is in power the two are combined in a single factor, as if to say that only then is concern with crime tinged with criticism of the government. If the concerned accuse left-wing governments and not right-wing ones, it is because they are close to the latter, and not to the former. The fact that their allies are in power is increasingly insufficient to mitigate their concern, but they then simply avoid politicizing their resentment. Were this containment to cease, there is every reason to believe that their vote would go to the extreme right.

A more thorough analysis shows the complexity, and in fact the heterogeneity of this concern with crime[4]. Strong concern with crime always goes hand in hand with a demand for punishment, but its link with xenophobia may disappear in provincial working-class contexts, or among practising Catholic women, provided they are not linked to the extreme right or to right-wing extremists.

Figure 2: Opinions on concern with crime, xenophobia, punitiveness[5]
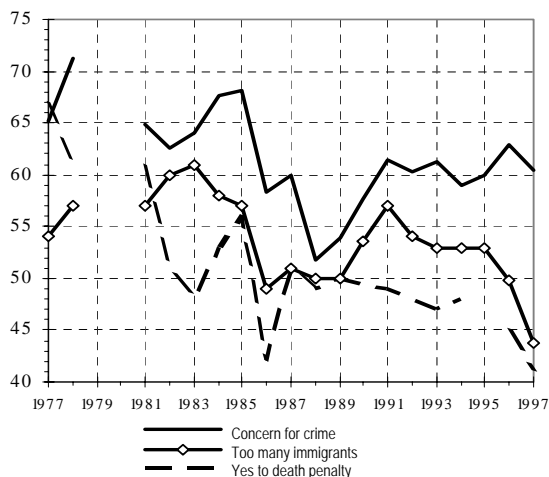
Note: Linear interpolation in 1990 (no existing survey).

Conversely, more moderate concern with crime may be completely devoid of punitive demands in people with a left-wing Parisian working class culture. But urban employees do sometimes exhibit the concern with crime death penalty xenophobia pattern, although in a less extreme form, and with special emphasis on the latter element in their case. The portrait of unconcerned individuals contrasts with the complexity of concern, in that it is quite homogeneous: they are male, relatively youthful, Parisian, well-educated and often well-employed... at most, we find a slight difference between people who practise a religion and those with no religion. One has the impression that refusal of a crime-concerned, xenophobic mentality is the prerogative, so to speak, of an educated, if not rich, urban elite.

Actual fear of crime

This other facet should not be confused with the one discussed above... first of all, in that it has not followed the same course. The best and oldest barometer is certainly the *CREDOC* question on fear of being assaulted, for which the order of

magnitude of replies changed suddenly and lastingly: while one third of those questioned in 1981 responded positively, the figure was one half two years later, and has remained at about that level from then on. This fact must be placed in perspective, however, since the hierarchy of fears places many others, and not only the fear of unemployment, higher on the scale.

The Agorametrie surveys show concern and actual fear to go hand in hand in two cases out of three. But the fact remains that one out of three people interviewed responds in an unexpected manner, and these discordant voices are often quite eloquent. The *concerned but personally fearless* tend to be women — there is a strong link between concern with crime and female gender — people under age 25, farmers, white collar workers or retired; they mostly live in rural areas, claim to be politically indifferent or to prefer the centre, and to be Catholic but often not church-going... a type of concern with crime that prevails in places where there is little crime. The profile of the *unconcerned but personally fearful* is quite different: they tend to be men in the prime of life, working in intellectual or middle management professions, politically in the centre and asserting their lack of religion, often Parisian. Their intellectual weapons and ideological options protect them from the crime-concerned mentality but not from personal fear, perhaps because of great exposure to risk.

In fact, despite the correlation between concern and fear, the explanatory patterns are quite different. The risk of aggression plays the most important role in the anticipation that constitutes the claim of fear of crime. In the case of concern, the main role seems to be played by the prevailing socioeconomic situation as epitomized by the unemployment rate: concern with crime seems to be greatest in particularly distressed areas. It definitely seems to be linked to crime — but only to property crime, which constitutes a general risk, and to actual fear of crime, more precisely to apprehension, or anticipation of it — sufficiently so to show that it is not simply a way of talking about something else. At the same time, the link is not strong enough to be reduced to a simple stimulus-response pattern. Further, crime alone is probably not the cause, as much as the divorce between the outburst of property crime and the mild response of governmental agencies.

Figure 3: Evolution of crime recorded by the police and
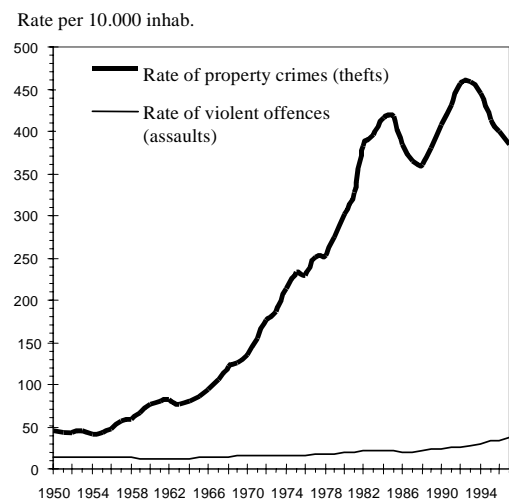
gendarmerie between 1950 and 1997

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[4] Result of typological analysis of people interviewed on their opinions, using the dynamic clusters method.
[5] Percentages of agreement with the opinions: *agree* and *entirely agree.*

Figure 4: Evolution of the clearance rate for thefts
between 1950 and 1996

━━━ % of thefts elucidated
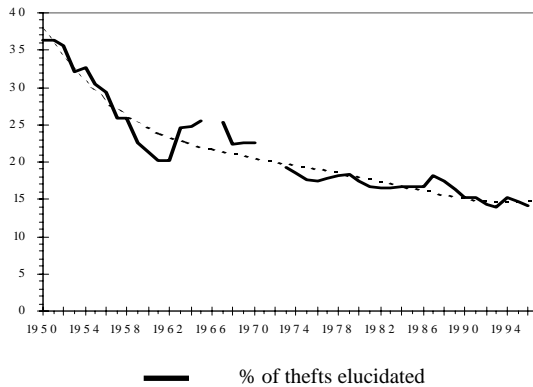
At the same time, one is struck by the fact that concern with crime arose as full employment crumbled, and that it tends to affect those regions most fragile in that respect; and yet, unemployment does not account for the outburst of property crimes, which began much earlier, and the concerned do not necessarily belong to the group that is most concerned with unemployment, or that is most exposed to it. Concern with crime prospers among people who are too poorly equipped (insufficiently qualified or with extremely rigid attitudes) and do not have enough time ahead of them (too old) to have much of a chance of successfully coping with the new economic and social challenge. Perhaps they also tend to be the people who are not yet really in deep water but are afraid they soon will be.

In this case people turn to the State for protection, particularly so since it previously formed the keystone of an appeased and reasonably well integrated wage-earning society. It is a fact that chronic unemployment weakens this societal model by fragilizing its pillars: including access to a stable wage-earning status, of course, now confined to a privileged, and seemingly shrinking, minority — but also the social welfare benefits, subsidized housing and public services, funding of which is threatened at the very time when the safety net they represent is increasingly solicited.

The most concerned are not the most directly and the most immediately threatened, but those people who are most sensitive to the fragilization of the societal model and to the uncertainties concerning its remoduction process, and ultimately its continuation. Concern with crime is not the only reaction to the deepseated changes of the last twenty years — it is specific to those people who care most about the maintenance of a permanent collective identity — one cannot avoid noting that xenophobia, as well as strong punitiveness, is closely tied to the assertion of concern with crime. This may be interpreted as a doubt, perhaps even as great anxiety about the positive shape and definition of the collective identity. Clearly, people who claim to favour the reinstatement of the death penalty and the expulsion of immigrants are well aware that the guillotine will not be set up Place de la Concorde and put to work from sun up to sun down, and that all foreigners will not disappear by a stroke of the wand, and perhaps that is not really what they want. But this is a way of asserting their determination to reconquer control of the definition of "us". If we do not know how to fight, or do not have the strength to do so, it is up to the State to at least reassure us as to the inviolability of the national community.

Even if their conservatism still prevents them (for how long ?) from explicitly tying the crime with which they are concerned to

criticism of government action (at least when the conservative parties are in power), the fact remains that these people are aware of the inability of these policies to appease their anxiety: while some kinds of social vulnerability constitute the soil in which concern with crime may thrive, this concern crystallizes when crime control problems receive inadequate treatment. Over the last two decades, the proclaimed and actual severity of punishment — the prisons are full of clandestine migrants, prison sentences are considerably longer in case of physical violence or drug offences — cannot hide the government's persistent indifference to petty property offences, nor the fact that it has given up prevention work and relinquished any effort to elucidate the complaints of private citizens. Although repainting buildings, subsidizing citizens' groups and sending adolescents from the suburbs on vacation are probably praiseworthy and even useful initiatives, they do not succeed in outweighing the administration's lack of commitment to the safety of its citizens. Since it does not dare to require that its agents actually take on this commitment, or to invent the new forms of policing that would be required to deal with the problem, and is actually unable to even identify the crux of the matter, the State simply encourages the development of a sore spot on which to focus fears and concern, as well as the exacerbation of the demand for punishment. By turning away from public safety, it definitely has allowed the creation of a niche in which concern with and fear of crime may crystallize. This niche has deepened, while no-one paid attention to it: public debate was saturated with major collective conflicts at the time, the State seemed capable of guiding society towards seemingly limitless development, the insatiable demand of the labour market was believed to be capable, in the long run, of reintegrating the deviants and the marginalized. At the time, the government did not know what risk it was taking: when the times began to change, they did not know how to regain control of a situation they had neglected for so long. Their diagnostic errors were definitely instrumental in worsening the situation.

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For further information, see:
ROBERT (Ph.), POTTIER (M.-L.), Sur l'insécurité et la délinquance, *Revue française de science politique*, 1997, 47, 5, pp. 630-644.
ROBERT (Ph.), POTTIER (M.-L.), "On ne se sent plus en sécurité"; délinquance et insécurité; une enquête sur deux décennies, *Revue française de science politique*, 1997, 47, 6, pp. 707-740.