

CROWDING: MORE FEARSOME THAN CRIME- PROVOKING? COMPARISON OF AN ASIAN CITY AND A NORTH AMERICAN CITY

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To learn whether perceptions of personal danger in urban settings might be more closely related to crime rates or to population density, Toronto (four times greater crime rate) and Hong Kong (four times denser) were compared. Former residents are queried on numerous crime and security aspects of their urban experience. Toronto residents reported significantly more personal memories of crime, yet felt significantly safer than Hong Kong residents. In a present, shared environment, the two groups felt equally safe. Present evidence suggests crowding may be more associated with fears for personal safety than with crime rates, although more research is necessary.

Much recent research has centered on the controversial hypothesis of a link between statistical overconcentrations of people and high rates of crime, pathology and social disorganization. However, less attention has been paid to the experiences produced by high densities, or crowding as defined by Stokols (1972). Rarer yet is the study of the crowding experience in a field setting (Eoyang, 1974), and in particular the perception of personal safety under crowded conditions (Rosenberg, 1968; Prescott, 1971).

In one such study, however, 1194 Detroit (U.S.A.) metropolitan area households were surveyed on a variety of community problems, including crime and perceived personal safety (Marans, Nelson, Rogers & Worden, 1976). These authors found relatively uncrowded suburbanites felt safer where they lived than did more crowded downtown residents. All agreed that most crime was downtown. While crowding-crime relationships are complicated by numerous factors (Freedman, 1975), one difficulty of particular note in the Detroit study is that crime and density were not separable; one cannot infer whether one or both are the source of perceived danger or safety. A possible clue is contained in a Marans et al. finding that 52% of their sample claimed that "the threat of attack" kept them from spending more time downtown. Yet, curiously, most people did not consider crime an immediate threat, but rather as something "out there." Why people are afraid is not very clear.

As the evidence mounts that crowding and crime are not necessarily, directly or causally related (Lawrence, 1974; Freedman, 1975), the possibility emerges that perception of personal safety might be associated more with one of these variables than the other. But where crowding and crime are geographically coincident, it is not possible to tease out a differential effect.

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To do so within a field study approach, it is necessary to find cities or districts which strongly contrast in crowding and crime. If a city high in crime but low in crowding could be compared with one low in crime but high in crowding, one could begin to determine whether high density or high crime rates are more closely related to feelings of safety or danger experienced in cities. If crime rates are more critical, a city with high crime and low density should be more fearsome than the city with low crime and high density. If, on the other hand, personal safety is closely related to density, the reverse should be true.

Asian cities have had higher densities than North American cities for much longer periods. Anderson (1970) has described some of the methods Asian people have devised to compensate for and even enjoy high density living. It was decided that a study of Asian and North American cities might reveal some similarities and differences in reaction to high density conditions. Anderson states that North Americans might be able to learn coping strategies from Asians. This study was undertaken in the hope that some light on this problem might be produced.

METHOD

Cities: Hong Kong is by now a famous example of much crowding with little crime. Government statistics show it is a city of some 4.5 million people on about 50 inhabited square miles. In 1975, it had a crime rate of about 1600 per 100,000.

The City of Toronto is the borough of Metropolitan Toronto incorporating the downtown area. Its area is approximately that of Hong Kong's, 58 square miles, but it contains only about 1 million people. In 1974, its crime rate was about 6,000 per 100,000.

Thus, the city of Toronto has a fourfold greater rate of crime, while Hong Kong is populated four times more densely. These urban areas were chosen to maximize evenness of density, but although both are uniformly highly urbanized, there are some districts in each city where crowding and crime vary from the averages. Since both cities are part of the Commonwealth their crime reporting systems are more similar than might otherwise be expected when the distance between them is considered.

Subjects: To partially control for possible cultural differences in crime recall and other aspects of response to the questionnaire, subjects were drawn from a common present city. This allowed for comparison of their questionnaire responses concerning an environment they shared. If cultural, ethnic or socioeconomic differences in judgment of personal safety and crime recall exist, they should emerge when the two respond to items pertaining to the shared environment.

Therefore, questionnaires were mailed to 108 students at the University of Guelph whose home addresses in a student directory were the City of Toronto or Hong Kong. The final set of respondents included 40 former Toronto residents and 28 former Hong Kong residents, a total of 68 returned questionnaires. All subjects had lived in their home city at least 5 years prior to coming to Guelph. The two groups had been in Guelph an average of 12.4 months, and did not differ in this respect. The total number of people living in the home city dwelling had been 5.3 and 5.8 for Toronto and Hong Kong, respectively. According to 92.5% of Toronto and 89.3% of Hong Kong residents, their neighborhood would be described by others as "desirable" or "very desirable". Thus, the respondents appear to be matched in experience, age, occupation and economic status. All were students at the University of Guelph, which is a school of about 11,000 students situated in the southwestern Ontario town of Guelph, population 70,000.

The respondent groups differed in some respects. Of the Toronto respondents, 88% had lived in a house, while 89% of Hong Kong respondents lived in an apartment. While nearly equal numbers of people lived in the dwelling, the Hong Kong residences contained half as many rooms. Thus, Hong Kong respondents experienced four times higher density living on a city-wide level and at least twice as much inside their homes (Hong Kong rooms are often smaller than Toronto rooms). This pattern

carried through to Guelph homes: approximately equal numbers of people shared respondents' dwellings (3.8 for Toronto respondents and 3.0 for Hong Kong respondents), but nearly twice as many people per room lived in the Hong Kong respondents' dwellings (1.1 to .6), and they more often lived in an apartment or room (67% to 25%).

The Questionnaire: In addition to the information detailed above, the questionnaire included three categories of questions: perception of personal safety, including measures taken to protect oneself and property, recall for occurrences of crimes (in general as well as specific types) and degree of crowding experienced indoors and outdoors. All questions were asked for both the home city and Guelph. The items were as follows:

Perception of safety:

Did you lock doors and windows in the dwelling? (Response scale: never to always).

In general, did you feel safe inside your dwelling? (Yes or no).

In general, did you feel safe in the streets near your dwelling? (Yes or no).

Recall for crime:

Can you remember any crimes occurring in your neighbourhood? (Yes or no).

Please rate each type (5 categories, each with a 7-point frequency scale).

Experience of crowding:

Did you feel crowded in your dwelling? (Yes or no).

Did you feel crowded in the streets near your dwelling? (Yes or no).

Was it easy for you to find privacy in your dwelling if desired? (Yes or no).

These questions were interspersed with a number of others intended to dilute their impact; they dealt with typical family activities, preferences for number of people to share a residence with, knowledge of neighbours and location of the dwelling. While the questionnaire was labeled as a study of housing density, subjects were not made aware of the comparison between Toronto and Hong Kong.

RESULTS

The questions on crowding and crime in the home city were intended as a kind of field study manipulation check. Respondent's answers on the crowding items accurately reflected the Toronto vs. Hong Kong statistics. More Hong Kong residents (29%) said they felt crowded in their dwellings than did Toronto residents (12%), $X^2(1)=2.7$, $p>.05$. Three times more Hong Kong residents felt crowded in the streets (39% to 12%, $X^2(1)=6.5$, $p<.02$). More Hong Kong residents found privacy difficult to obtain within their dwellings (21% to 12%). Thus, Hong Kong residents more often, but insignificantly so, felt crowded indoors. Significantly more felt crowded outdoors.

Recall for crime also basically reflected the available statistics. Of the Toronto residents, 72.5% remembered crime in their neighbourhood, while 43% of Hong Kong residents did [$X^2(1)=6.1$, $p<.02$]. In the results to follow, then, it should be remembered that in a relative sense, the respondents were aware of the crowding and crime rates in their cities. The recall differences not quite as strong as the differences in statistics, but in the main subjects were correct in their perceptions.

Did you feel safe in your dwelling? Nearly all respondents said yes (98% and 97%). Did you lock the doors and windows? Hong Kong residents said "always" 64% of the time, while Toronto residents said "always" only 25% of the time [$X^2(1)=10.6$, $p<.01$].

Did you feel safe in the streets near your home? Toronto respondents answered yes 95% of the time, Hong Kong respondents 75% of the time [$X^2(1)=9.8$, $p<.01$].

Away from your home? Toronto 90% yes, Hong Kong 35% yes [$X^2(1)=60.1$, $p<.001$].

Is it possible Hong Kong residents simply feel less safe, regardless of place? The safety questions, when applied to Guelph, resulted in nearly all respondents of both groups answering yes to all the questions. Of course, Guelph is not a city, and it does have less crime; about one-third the rate for Toronto. Still 18% of former Toronto residents lock their door "always", only slightly less than in Toronto, but only 14% of former Hong Kong residents lock their doors "always", a large drop from 64% at home in Hong Kong. There appear, then, to be no differences in perception of personal safety in the present, shared living environment.

DISCUSSION

More people in cities are the victims of fear than of criminals. In Hong Kong, if the present evidence is reliable, about two-thirds of the 4.5 million people feel unsafe in the streets away from their home. In the City of Toronto the comparable figure would be only 10%, but that amounts to 100,000 people, undoubtedly more than are crime victims. Of course, these estimates could be conservative. They are based on young people who will admit to being afraid, not the children or senior citizens who may be more often frightened.

This study only examines two cities, but for them it is clear that these fears are more closely associated with high density than high crime rates. Further work must focus on increasing the number of data points, i.e. comparing low density cities with high density cities in both cultures. Freedman (1975) has convincingly shown that density and crime are independent within New York City districts, but a study like the present one could examine both in relation to perception of personal safety in the city.

Freedman and others, like Hawley (1972), have pointed out the social disorganization is better explained by poverty and ethnic mix than crowding per se. Perhaps further research will show this is also true for fear. In the study of Detroit by Marans et al., blacks and poor were more afraid than whites and the middle class. But the poor and blacks also were more crowded. In this study, there do not appear to be large economic differences between groups, so poverty probably would not explain the differences in perceived safety. Previous studies do not include samples of people living in Asia or other continents.

Several intriguing explanations for the present data suggest themselves. First is the very persistent notion that crowding causes crime. If every man believes this, and finds himself in a crowded area, he may feel victimhood is imminent. Hence, greater fear. However, in this study respondents seemed to know (in a relative sense) that Hong Kong has less crime than Toronto.

Second, Gerbner and Gross (1976) have presented evidence that heavy watchers of TV violence distort the accuracy of their perception of personal safety. Marans et al., too, comment that the reporting of serious crimes in the media may make people feel unsafe on the street. We offer no direct evidence on the possibility that

Hong Kong respondents watched more violent TV programs; the Gerbner and Gross paper came to our attention after this study was underway. However, one of our filler items asked respondents to rank-order various family activities, including watching TV. The mean Toronto ranking was 1.8, while Hong Kong's was 2.7 on a scale along which "most frequent" was coded 1 and "least frequent" 4.

Another hypothesis is a sort of gain-loss (Aronson, 1976) interpretation. It has been suggested that both sets of residents may have been implicitly comparing their city with nearby metropoli. This might lead Toronto residents to think of Detroit (250 miles away), with its infamous murder rate (hence a "gain" in safety feelings). The Hong Kong residents might be thinking of mainland Chinese cities, where crime is said to be extremely low (hence a "loss" of safety feelings).

Fourth, it may simply be that higher densities causes fear and anxiety in humans. In laboratory studies such as that by Stokols, Rall, Pinner and Schopler (1973), subjects did not show any behavioral aberrations, but crowding did result in greater anxiety levels. Still, any such simple relation would be a first in the crowding literature! Undoubtedly other variables will be shown to affect the relationship in various ways. Fear, of course, is not likely to be felt in a laboratory situation, since subjects are quite aware of the university context.

Whatever the explanation for the fear—high density or another—the fear itself invites further examination. It is possible the sum total of the stress due to fear exceeds that assignable to actual victimhood. The popular notion that crime itself leads to fear is not supported in this study of two cities. Strategies for reducing fear in cities will differ markedly depending on whether the explanation lies in high densities, media reports, gain-loss comparison or some other factor. Replication and extension are invited; the authors would like to collaborate with Asian researchers on this problem.

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