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# Re-locating Fear on the Streets: Homelessness, Victimisation and Fear of Crime

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› **Abstract\_** *Fear of crime has been explored from an academic perspective for some decades now within the sphere of criminology. Within this exploration, the focus has consistently been on clearly identifiable and opposing 'actors' cast in the roles of 'feared' and 'fearing'. In this think piece, I argue that the binary format upon which fear of crime discourse has developed is inherently flawed, in that those groups who are cast in the role of 'feared', in this case homeless people, are denied the status of 'fearing', which has a significant and detrimental impact on both homeless people from a policy perspective and the academic study and understanding of fear of crime. The paper starts with an overview of traditional approaches to conceptualising fear of crime, then moves on to explore constructions of homeless people as always feared and never fearing. Drawing on victimological discourse, the paper then makes the case that a re-framing of street homeless people as fearing subjects is required. The piece closes with a call for the academic study of fear of crime to move away from its traditional binaries and embrace a new approach to locating street homeless people within fear of crime discourse.*

› **Key words\_** *Street homelessness, fear of crime, cities, public space, victimisation, welfare policy.*

## Introduction: Street Homeless People and Fear of Crime

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The fear of crime first emerged as an area of criminological enquiry after it was 'discovered' in 1960s America via household crime surveys (Hale, 1996). Over a period spanning more than forty years it has developed into a fully- fledged sub-discipline of criminology, a phenomenon worthy of attention both in terms of furthering academic knowledge and developing criminal justice and policy responses that reflect the impact and serious nature of the issue (Lee, 2007). Indeed, as Walklate (2007, p.82) puts it, the fear of crime "... now has a life that is somewhat independent of the actual experience or risk from crime itself". Research into fear of crime among women tends to dominate this area of enquiry (Sutton and Farrall, 2005), and such studies continually find women to be predominantly fearful of men (Stanko, 1985, 1990; Kelly, 1988; Madriz, 1997; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Sheard, 2011). Although research has diversified to consider fear among a range of social groups, including the elderly (Pain, 2001; De Donder *et al.*, 2005; Beaulieu *et al.*, 2007), children and young people (Tulloch, 2000; Cockburn, 2008; Cops and Pleysier, 2011) and ethnic minority communities (McDevitt *et al.*, 2001; Perry, 2009; Mears and Stewart, 2010), fear of crime as a discipline can be said to have developed on a binary format whereby, as old fear young, black fear white, women fear men and so on, the 'actors' within fear of crime are cast in the role of weak and strong, powerless and powerful, good and bad. Within these perceived boundaries for examining fear of crime as a social phenomenon, it is unusual to encounter a study that identifies individuals or groups as simultaneously fearful and fearing, or that identifies the 'good' as feared and the 'bad' as fearful.

The purpose of this think piece is to move beyond this dualism to consider fear of crime among a group who would ordinarily be considered a source of public fear – street homeless people. I argue that, rather than groups like rough sleepers only having a relationship with fear of crime in the sense that they *cause* it, the very nature of street homelessness is inherently linked to fear of crime in terms of *effect*, in that being fearful of crime is, for many, central to the status of being homeless. Moreover, whilst fear of crime is an everyday feature of life for rough sleepers, it is also a both a key reason for people becoming homeless, and a problem exacerbating the difficult transition from being homeless to having a home. I argue, thus, that fear of crime discourse, rather than highlighting the role that rough sleepers play in creating public fear of crime, should be instrumental in illustrating harms caused to rough sleepers, both in terms of the stress and anxiety that fear causes them, and in terms of the mis-categorisation of rough sleepers as always feared, and never fearing, subjects. In doing this, I consider the influence of constructions of fear of crime as a feminine phenomenon, the influence of constructions of rough sleeping as a masculine phenomenon, and the implications for both policy responses and the academic study of fear of crime.

## Responding to Street Homeless People as Always Feared and Never Fearing

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“Cities collect strangers. Major population movements concentrate vulnerable people in the places where other people choose not to go” (Rogers and Power, 2000, cited in Cochrane, 2007, p.71).

Lee (2007) identifies two central yet opposing actors within mainstream fear of crime discourse: the fearing subject – she (or occasionally he) who routinely fears crime, and is targeted, or even created, by governments via crime reduction strategies and self protection ideologies; and the feared subject – the ‘other’ actor, less known and understood than the fearing subject, upon whom all our vague fears, pertaining to crime or otherwise, can be projected. Within fear of crime discourse,

*Feared subjects* are constantly and easily created. The experience of fear makes us hungry for a range of stereotypical *others* through which our anxieties can be justified (Lee, 2007, pp.154-5, emphasis in original).

Taking Baudelaire’s conceptualisation of the *flaneur* – the man who walks the streets of the city in order to understand it, so much so that he ultimately represents and even embodies the public nature of the city (Pope, 2010) – as his starting point, Lee identifies the ‘feared subject’ as replacing the harmless, even playful *flaneur* as the representation of street life, usurping him and rendering his public playground an unsafe place. The tension between the feared subject and the fearing subject, and the notion that each is the polar opposite of the other (Lee, 2007), is my starting point for exploring the positioning of rough sleepers within this binary.

People who live their lives on the street are frequently understood, from a policy perspective, as a feature of public life that exacerbates fear of crime. Indeed, when it comes to attempts to alleviate fear of crime,

... crime prevention efforts can have a contradictory impact and significance for those who are at once frequent victims, frequent offenders and frequently ‘moved on’ (Newburn and Rock, 2005, p.18).

Consequently, policy measures are put in place to clear areas of rough sleepers and ‘beggars’ in an attempt to ‘sanitise’ the streets and, as a result, reduce levels of fear (Cochrane, 2007). Moore (2008) discusses the elimination of “street-life people” (p.180) and identifies the requisite characteristics for a group to be eligible for eradication from an area: visibility, particularly when this occurs against a backdrop of urban regeneration and/or gentrification; demonization, characterised by processes of ‘othering’; and pollution – the contamination of an area by activities such as street drinking and illegal drug use, performing bodily functions in public, and street sleeping – collectively “regarded as an aberration in affluent Britain”

(ibid). This is apparent in policy approaches to such phenomena as street drinking and begging (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2010), both of which were highlighted and directly linked to homeless populations in *Respect and Responsibility – Taking a Stand against Anti-Social Behaviour* (Home Office, 2003), the basis for the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003.

Whilst some European countries have re-visited their punitive position regarding public displays of homeless ‘lifestyles’ (Flint, 2009), the picture in England and Wales arguably remains one within which ‘homeless’ and ‘criminal’ are interchangeable terms (Tosi, 2005) and rough sleepers in particular are, as a result, denied the benefits of welfare policy (Kinsella, 2011). Frequently, this punitive pattern is a reflection of the contemporary dual agenda of advancing economic growth, in the form of private entrepreneurialism, and halting anti-social behaviour (the latter being constructed as a hindrance to the former), a function of what has come to be known as governance (Coleman *et al.*, 2005; Crawford and Flint, 2009). For street homeless people, this effectively amounts to a criminalisation of culture (Ericson, 2007), leading to the creation in the popular imagination of the rough sleeper as the archetypal ‘feared subject’. In the next section I will make the case that this is a grave flaw in both academic and policy understandings of fear of crime, and argue that a reversal, i.e., the re-imagining of rough sleepers as ‘fearing subjects’, is required.

### **(Re) Constructing Street Homeless People as Fearing Subjects**

... it [is] not unreasonable to see the street-life people as victims themselves – often of sexual abuse when children, of marital disharmony, of mental illness, of drug and alcohol dependency – rather than necessarily as aggressive trouble-makers (Moore, 2008, p.194)

In spite of the plethora of research and subsequent literature in existence on fear of crime, there is actually little attention paid to the fear of crime experienced by homeless people. This is ironic, given that research continually finds that the lives of homeless people are often characterised by fear and/or anxiety (Hagan and McCarthy, 1997; Crane and Warnes, 2005; Newburn and Rock, 2005; Baron, 2011; Huey, 2012).

In many cases, fear of crime is a key characteristic of the lives of rough sleepers *before* they become homeless. In fact, criminal victimisation as a feature of home life is frequently a push factor in terms of people leaving an existing place of residence. Young people who are homeless regularly cite violence within the home, including sexual assault, at the hands of family members and step-parents as a key reason for leaving home in the first instance (Hagan and McCarthy, 1997; Centrepoint, 2005; Hyde, 2005; Mallet *et al.*, 2005; Alvi *et al.*, 2010). Fear of repeat victimisation frequently renders rough sleeping preferable to the risks present in

the home; as Hagan and McCarthy (1997, p.36) put it, "... it is difficult to accept the notion that most youth would choose this lifestyle without some sort of dread, desperation or despair about returning home". Similarly, Newburn and Rock (2005) identify 'domestic' violence as a causal factor in homelessness. Meanwhile, fear and anxiety can also continue to be problems *after* people have been re-housed (Tosi, 2005). Commonly, people for whom a home has been found after a period of rough sleeping struggle to 'settle' and continue to spend long periods on the streets as they did before, subject to many of the same problems, circumstances and fears (Randall and Brown, 2006).

However, it is fear of crime as a feature of life *during* periods of rough sleeping that I am most concerned with here. For example, Newburn and Rock (2005) found that homeless people who took part in their research frequently experienced fear of the anti-social behaviour and 'hate crimes' of the general public. Similar to the regular low level intimidation and harassment experienced by women as described by Stanko (1985), these homeless people were routinely subjected to insults and incivility by passers-by, increasing their feelings of vulnerability to crime. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that some homeless people fear each other. Hagan and McCarthy (1997) found that younger homeless people reported fear of older homeless people, particularly in hostels, who appeared intimidatory – a source of fear which can lead young people to choose to sleep rough rather than take up a hostel place (Centrepoint, 2002). Conversely, however, Crane and Warnes (2005, p.141) encountered older homeless people who were reluctant to avail themselves of services "... for fear of violence, intimidation and disturbance from younger clients". Meanwhile both Newburn and Rock (2005) and Huey (2012) identified homeless women as being fearful of homeless men both in hostel settings and on the streets.

Thus, the popular understanding of street homeless people as a homogenous group that are feared rather than fearful is misleading. In fact, fear on the streets can extend further than fear of crime generally or fear of victimisation specifically. Homeless people report fear and anxiety concerning a range of disparate issues including health, hygiene, food, clothing and shelter (Hagan and McCarthy, 1997), all of which are exacerbated by feelings of loneliness and isolation (Rokach, 2005) and, in some cases, substance misuse (Randall and Brown, 2006). As Newburn and Rock (2005, p.15) put it:

The homeless... are forced to experience the world as an insecure, uncertain and troubled place where they are required to be wary.

Homeless people are adept at developing strategies to minimise both fear of crime and the likelihood of victimisation. Like the coping mechanisms and personal safety strategies employed by women to manage fear and mitigate against vulnerability (Stanko, 1985; Kelly, 1988; Walklate, 2001), people who live on the streets devise

methods to maximise their feelings of safety. A good example is the 'street families' identified by Hagan and McCarthy (1997). Here young people form bonds and trust relationships with others like themselves in a 'safety in numbers' approach, establishing relationships based on mutual concern in an attempt to defend themselves against potential aggressors. In other cases, homeless people will turn to drugs and/or alcohol to lessen feelings of fear and anxiety (Hagan and McCarthy, 1997; Johnson *et al.*, 1997; Dashora *et al.*, 2011), and also to gain access to a peer group to minimise feelings of isolation (Rowe, 2005). Thus, homeless people, rather than being a distinct 'other' to be feared, both experience and manage fear of crime in a similar way to more 'traditional' fearful groups.

In spite of successive research projects repeatedly finding that fear of crime is a common feature among rough sleepers, popular discourse around rough sleepers continually casts them in the role of sources of fear – a public incivility which gives public spaces an air of danger and risk. Arguably, labelling rough sleepers as a key cause of fear results in them being denied, as a collective, the label of 'fearing subject' – in terms of research into fear of crime, they are eternally presented as the 'other', which is feared, rather than the 'us' that is fearful (Killias and Clerici, 2000). It is possible that these repeated constructions of rough sleepers as always feared and never fearful stem from conceptualisations of victimhood apparent in victimological theory.

Since the emergence of academic interest in the victims of crime, a preoccupation with the status of the victim has, either explicitly or implicitly, been a feature of victimology in all its forms. More specifically, academics exploring victimisation have prioritised establishing who is to blame for victimisation, and who is worthy, or deserving, of support, respect, and dignity – who is in the 'right'. From the positivist approaches of Von Hentig, who attempted to identify proneness in victims via the development of victim typologies (Mawby and Walklate, 1994), and Mendelsohn, who categorised crime victims "from the 'completely innocent' to the 'most guilty victim'" (ibid, p.12); through feminist critiques of victimology, which highlighted women as the forgotten victims of crime and sought to absolve them from 'blame' (Wolhuter *et al.*, 2009); and radical victimology, which shifted blame by shining a light on the crimes of the powerful (Quinney, 1972); to critical victimology, and its concern with who has the power to attribute victim/perpetrator status – the notion of who is at fault, who is in the 'wrong', is key. Within each of these victimological frameworks, the demarcation between who the victims are and who is to blame for their victimhood is clearly established according to the standpoint and political motivation of those academics developing the theory. Be it the traditional approach of the positivists focussing on the crimes of the street, or the radical approach of those drawing attention to more abstract understandings of criminal 'harm', there are always symbolic conceptions of 'good' and 'evil' at play (Weisstub, 1986).

However, when considering the victim status of those who conduct their lives wholly or mostly on the streets, applying a straight-forward good/bad, victim/aggressor binary analysis becomes trickier. Cohen and Felson (1979, cited in Garofalo, 1986) posit that, for certain crimes to take place, a particular dynamic between three types of actors has to occur: “motivated offenders, suitable targets, and absence of capable guardians – must converge in space and time” (ibid, p.138). In terms, however, of the victimisation of rough sleepers, the presence of ‘capable guardians’, for example, the police, may not reduce or negate the possibility of becoming a victim, not least because, in many cases, the police are more inclined to respond to rough sleepers as offenders rather than victims (Newburn and Rock, 2005). Further, it is not always easy or even possible to categorise rough sleepers into distinct groups of perpetrators and victims, or ‘motivated offenders’ and ‘suitable targets’, as the boundaries move and blur frequently (Hagan and McCarthy, 1997; Ballintyne, 1999; Newburn and Rock, 2005; Rowe, 2005; Grover, 2008) – the state of being homeless is, as Hagan and McCarthy (1997, p.103) put it, a “criminogenic situation”.

In terms of both fear and the risk of victimisation generally, some academics refer to lifestyle models to theorise the likelihood of becoming a victim of crime (see e.g. Walklate, 1989 for further discussion). Here, the chances of becoming a victim of crime are closely linked to the circumstances and routine activities that characterise people’s daily lives:

... criminal victimisation is not randomly distributed across time and space and because offenders in personal crimes are not representative of the general population – but rather there are high-risk times, places and people – this implies that lifestyle differences are associated with differences in *exposure* to situations that have a high victimisation risk (Hindelang, 2009, p.29; emphasis in original).

Whilst various critiques can be made of the lifestyle approach (Garofalo, 1986), it is arguably useful when considering the victim/offender status of rough sleepers. Mitchell (2003; cited in Cochrane, 2007) notes that rough sleepers, by virtue simply of their circumstances, are compelled to spend much of their daily lives in public space – evidence suggests that this renders them vulnerable to victimisation by other rough sleepers (Ballintyne, 1999; Newburn and Rock, 2005; Huey, 2012). As Hindelang (2009, p.35) puts it, “[a]n individual’s chances of personal victimisation are dependent upon the extent to which the individual shares demographic characteristics with offenders”. In this context particularly, there is a fine line between the victim and the offender (Miers, 2000). Perhaps because of this, a grey area exists in terms of academic, ‘victimological’ knowledge about rough sleepers:

Victims and offenders overlap in such groups, but criminologists know only too little about how patterns, moralities and narratives of offending and victimisation intertwine and co-exist (Rock, 2002, p.21)

In any event, rough sleepers are victimised by other rough sleepers. However, this is not to say that rough sleepers do not suffer criminal acts at the hands of other people. Ballintyne (1999) identifies the general public as perpetrators of crime towards rough sleepers in significant numbers. Newburn and Rock (2005) established that the greatest risk of crimes such as theft, burglary and acts of violence comes from the public, not other rough sleepers. Further, they are routinely subjected to negative comments, looks and derogatory behaviour indicative of a general lack of respect from the 'respectable' non-rough sleeping population (ibid). Grover (2008) understands this to be a function of what Young (cited in Grover, 2008, p.160) calls a 'sociology of vindictiveness', whereby the working class appraises those 'below' them, and

... the group gazed down upon is seen as making a disproportionate, compared to its actual, contribution to the problems of society and its members are represented as the main players in the creation of social problems (ibid, p.161).

Thus the conceptualisation of rough sleepers as *never* victims, unless they are *victims of each other*, is erroneous. It is perhaps easy, however, to understand how this faulty conceptualisation has emerged and developed. Traditional victimologists and policy-makers alike start from the premise of an 'us' and 'them' binary split which "cast[s] victims as the invariably affronted 'Us' and criminals as the alien 'Other' who are locked into a state of warfare" (Rock, 2002, p.22), where images of good and bad are invoked and attached to victim and offender respectively, and actors who do not fit this mould disrupt victimological understanding (Christie, 1986). Whilst the community – the 'us' in this binary – is inherently 'good' (Rock, 1986), rough sleepers are immediately and inherently 'bad' – outsiders who threaten the community and constitute a significant threat to order (Grover, 2008). Questions of *who are* the victims and *who are* the aggressors depend on "the political and ethical values according to which we fashion our victimology maps" (Weisstub, 1986, p.317). Particularly from a policy perspective, it appears difficult to re-imagine rough sleepers as potential victims and simultaneously fearing subjects. Instead, rough sleepers are always and already attributed the status of feared subject (Lee, 2007).

## **Rethinking Street Homelessness and Fear of Crime Discourse**

"Academic criminology in the UK has fallen out of love with the fear of crime" (Farrall and Lee, 2009, p.3).

Fear of crime as an academic discipline and a 'strand' of criminology has done much to advance criminological knowledge of victimisation and the impact of the threat/risk of crime. Further, it has resulted in the development of praxis by influencing policy and establishing the need to take fear seriously. However, the devel-



opment of fear of crime discourse as a means of securing social change and empowering those who are disempowered by crime has arguably withered on the vine, in that it only goes so far; some groups disadvantaged through their fear of crime are prioritised whilst others are, to a large extent, ignored.

It must be noted that the well-established dynamics of fear of crime as identified within traditional discourse, i.e., that women are fearing and men are feared, are reflected within the street homeless community, and that the street operates as a microcosm of public life more broadly in terms of fear of crime. Huey and Quirouette (2010) identify homeless women's perceived vulnerability to crime and, subsequently, fear of crime, as both wholly acknowledged by homeless men and justification for alerting the police to victimisation. Constructions of hegemonic masculinity and appropriate femininity are at play within the rough sleeping setting as much as they are elsewhere, and dictate that women are allowed to respond to (fear of) crime in a way wholly different to that of men. Whilst Huey and Quirouette uncover the reality that the "chivalry exception" (ibid, p.279) constitutes a façade in many cases, in that it frequently does little to protect women from harm, the façade remains intact as an ideal regarding street life. Thus, constructions of women as holding the monopoly on personal fear of crime, and men as holding the monopoly on altruistic fear of crime for women (Warr, 1992; Warr and Ellison, 2000; Snedker, 2006; Kinsella, 2007; Rader, 2010) pervade all aspects of social life, including life within rough sleeper communities.

In this sense, fear of crime discourse that revolves around gender divisions can be used as a model to understand both academic and policy responses to rough sleeping and fear of crime. As noted, the vast majority of academic discussion on fear of crime concludes that women are more fearful than men, and that men are, almost universally, both the root cause and the target of women's fear (Hale, 1996). Further, women experience fear of crime most in connection with the potential for crimes to occur outside of the home, i.e., in public space rather than within the home (Stanko, 1985, 1990). Returning to classic feminist discourse around access to and use of space (Walby, 1990), the public, 'outside' domain is traditionally understood as male space, whilst the private, 'indoor' domain is constructed as female space. Arguably, these long-established notions of male dominated and female dominated spaces influence conceptualisations of rough sleepers – the street is an inherently masculine arena (Huey and Quirouette, 2010), and rough sleeping is an overwhelmingly male phenomenon (Shelter, 2006); therefore, the rough sleepers who occupy this public space are immediately constructed as non-fearing. To put it another way, the masculine nature of rough sleeping, and the inherent masculinity of the domain within which it occurs, render it difficult, if not impossible, for it to be constructed within fear of crime discourse as anything other than a cause of fear of crime for non- or minimal-street users, as opposed to a

cause of fear of crime for those it effects most – the rough sleepers themselves. Fear of crime as a result of the existence of rough sleeping is constructed solely as the preserve of those most associated with *indoor* life, assimilated with the traditional crime-related fears of women. Ultimately, rough sleepers as a group – the feared subjects or latter-day *flaneurs* as conceptualised by Lee (2007) – cannot be constructed as fearing subjects, as they share too few characteristics with the group most identified as fearing – women.

## Conclusion

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“Victimisation, even more than beauty, is in the eye of the beholder” (Weisstub, 1986, p.318).

It is important to contextualise fear of crime, including fear experienced by homeless people, within broader current ideas surrounding the concept of fear. Fear of crime, fear of terrorism (Lee, 2007), fear of social change (Delanty, 2008) and ideologies of risk (Beck, 1992) have become so enmeshed that fear is the context for modern life (Johnston, 2001). Strategies employed by homeless people to minimise feelings of anxiety, fear and social isolation, such as begging and street drinking, are criminalised (Randall and Brown, 2006) under the guise of minimising the fear of crime, and maximising the spending power (Kinsella, 2011), of the ‘acceptable’ public. Huey (2012, p.19) notes that both the media (in terms of selling stories) and the state (in terms of individualising responsibility for security) profit directly from fear of crime; indeed for the state “... the message that people should look after their own security interests... has had at least three significant net effects”: first, public fear is stirred up; second, this fear is harnessed by “ambitious politicians... [seizing] opportunities to capture power through electoral platforms that promise to placate fears” (ibid); third, individuals financially able to do so feel compelled, as a result of fear, to purchase forms of private security over and above that provided by the public sector. In this sense, fear of crime is used as a justification for increased governance, social control and management of the marginalised, legitimated by discourse around social inclusion (Johnston, 2001; Coleman, 2004; Lee, 2007), and as a lever for promoting the purchasing of private security (Loader, 1999). As Huey (2012, p.20) puts it:

... the homeless citizen frequently becomes the target of public demands for exclusion-oriented and extra-legal practices aimed at erasing their visible presence from public space.

Meanwhile, the notion that groups like rough sleepers are unaffected by the fear of crime, in that they do not themselves experience it, is a serious flaw in both the development of policy and the development of academic discourse. To deny rough sleepers the status of fearing subject is to narrow the focus of the field erroneously. As Ballintyne (1999, p.20) puts it:

Rough sleepers' fear of crime appears to differ from the wider population in two significant ways – in the overall level of fear (rough sleepers are more fearful) and in the crimes which give rise to that fear (rough sleepers' fear reflects their experiences and is more likely to be a fear of personal rather than property crime.) In this instance, fear of crime would seem to reflect experience and reality.

Given this, a fruitful and indeed more academically rigorous approach might be to attempt to re-theorize the actors within fear of crime discourse by moving away from binary, oppositional ideals whereby 'bad' always equals 'feared' and 'good' always equals 'fearing'. A re-imagining of street homeless people, which recognises the reality of their subordinate position in the fear of crime hierarchy, would provide the opportunity to re-establish homeless people as deserving of welfare policy that is designed to alleviate both their fear of crime and their victimisation, whilst diminishing the impact of the 'feared subject' label. Further, a revised approach to locating homeless people within the spectrum of fear of crime might act as a springboard for the overdue re-invigoration of its academic study, instilling in it the potential to uncover the hidden victims of fear of crime rather than simply re-visiting its traditional targets.

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