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Tough on crime

The rhetoric and reality of property crime and feeling safe in Australia

Policy Brief No. 56
August 2013
ISSN 1836-9014

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TAI

Policy Brief

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the constructive feedback received from Dr Nadine Smith on a draft of this paper and the reflections of an anonymous reviewer. Gratitude is also extended to Dr Richard Denniss for his guidance and Susanna Nelson for editing the paper.

This paper uses unit record data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. The HILDA Project was initiated and is funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and is managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (Melbourne Institute). The findings and views reported in this paper, however, are those of the author and should not be attributed to either FaHCSIA or the Melbourne Institute.

Summary

Contrary to public perception, the property crime rate in Australia actually declined between 2001 and 2010. There is a reality gap between declining crime rates and the popular rhetoric of ‘tough on crime’ media stories and political policies. Campaigning in the recent West Australian, New South Wales and Victorian state elections saw both sides of politics rely on tried and tested ‘tough on crime’ approaches to justice policies. Despite the falling rate of property crime, a ‘tough on crime’ approach to property crime continues to be promoted and pursued in some jurisdictions. An example of this is the use of mandatory sentencing for property crimes in Western Australia.

As the property crime rate has fallen, there has been a corresponding increase in reported feelings of safety. There was a smaller increase in reported safety levels in Western Australia compared with the national average, which suggests that mandatory sentencing has not provided a greater sense of safety.

Perceptions of social disorder had the greatest overall influence on people's reported feelings of safety, followed by reported levels of nervousness. This finding suggests the ‘tough on crime’ rhetoric still used by some politicians and sections of the media may have had a counter influence on recorded increases in feelings of safety.

Whenever politicians talk about getting ‘tough on crime’, or the media selectively reports criminal justice stories, there is the potential for an increase in public nervousness and perceptions of social disorder. Such an increase is going to reduce feelings of safety among some Australians. Alternatively, balanced reporting and considered policy proposals from politicians have the potential to improve feelings of safety.

Localised crime prevention programs are an opportunity to demonstrate to the community that steps are being taken to address crime. Such initiatives have the potential to change how a neighbourhood is perceived and may affect people’s tendencies to feel nervous. Although community engagement policies have the potential to increase reported feelings of safety, improvements could be made to how such programs are implemented.

This paper provides evidence that will support politicians who wish to propose constructive policy responses to criminal behaviour and people’s fears of crime, rather than falling back on well-worn ‘tough on crime’ responses. Similarly, balanced reporting that includes positive stories about declining crime rates is likely to influence how people perceive disorder in their neighbourhood and the amount of time they spend feeling nervous, with the potential to positively affect how safe they feel.

The facts are that property crime rates in Australia fell between 2001 and 2010 and Australians reported feeling safer. There is a good news story in this paper.

Introduction

'Getting tough on crime' is a regular campaign platform in state and territory elections for both the Liberal-National coalition and the Labor party. At the same time getting tough generally remains a regular issue in the media. Politically, incumbents and oppositions alike regularly adopt crime policies that will demonstrate the strength of their resolve to act on the tough issues. Announcements and policy platforms that purport to get 'tough on crime' reduce the policy debate to seeing who is tougher. In the process any consideration of the evidence and complexity of criminal justice policies is abandoned. In reality, the crime rate for many crimes has been trending downwards in Australia – including property crimes, the focus of this paper, which have been declining since 2001.

The reporting of crime, political rhetoric and public opinions can all influence the direction of criminal justice policy.[1] Many of the biggest media headlines are reserved for extraordinary crimes and this unduly influences public perceptions of the crime rate. Disproportionate reporting of crime is not a new phenomenon, with examples in the United States documented as far back as 1922.[2] The implementation of mandatory sentencing for property crimes in Western Australia and, for a period, in the Northern Territory illustrates that getting tough on property crime has also been popular.

This paper considers the falling rate of property crime alongside reported feelings of safety by Australians as a contributor to policy development. Consideration is given to how the representation of crime in the media and policies promoted by politicians may influence how safe people feel. The reported experiences of Australians and factors that may inform their reported feelings of safety are taken from analysed data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey. This paper examines factors including being a victim of property crime, social disorder, social capital and nervousness, in order to discover how these influence feelings of safety.

Rhetoric and reality

There is a reality gap between declining crime rates and the rhetoric of 'tough on crime' media stories and political policies. For example, a public inquiry in 2004 found "a significant mismatch between the levels of fear of crime and the actual levels of crime".[3] To address this imbalance the inquiry concluded that up-to-date statistical evidence was required to counter media bias on this issue.

Crime is falling

The rate of property crime in Australia is declining. This trend is the reversal of an increase that began in the 1970s and continued through the 1980s before steadying in the 1990s.[4] The ABS releases data on victims of crime annually. The most recent estimate of household crime victimisation is for the year to 2011-12. Table 1 provides an estimate for the number of break-ins, attempted break-ins and property damage experienced by Australia's 8.7 million households.

[1] Brenton, S and Hanley, N (2010), 'Using Fear to Win Votes: Representations of law and order in contemporary political campaigns in Australia and Britain' citing Monerosso, S (2009).

[2] Wisehart, M (1922). Cited by Davis, J (1952), 'Crime News in Colorado Newspapers' p.325.

[3] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (2004), *Crime in the Community: Victims, offenders and fear of crime*, p.25.

[4] Indermaur, D, et al (2003), *Penal Populism and Public Opinion*, p.12.

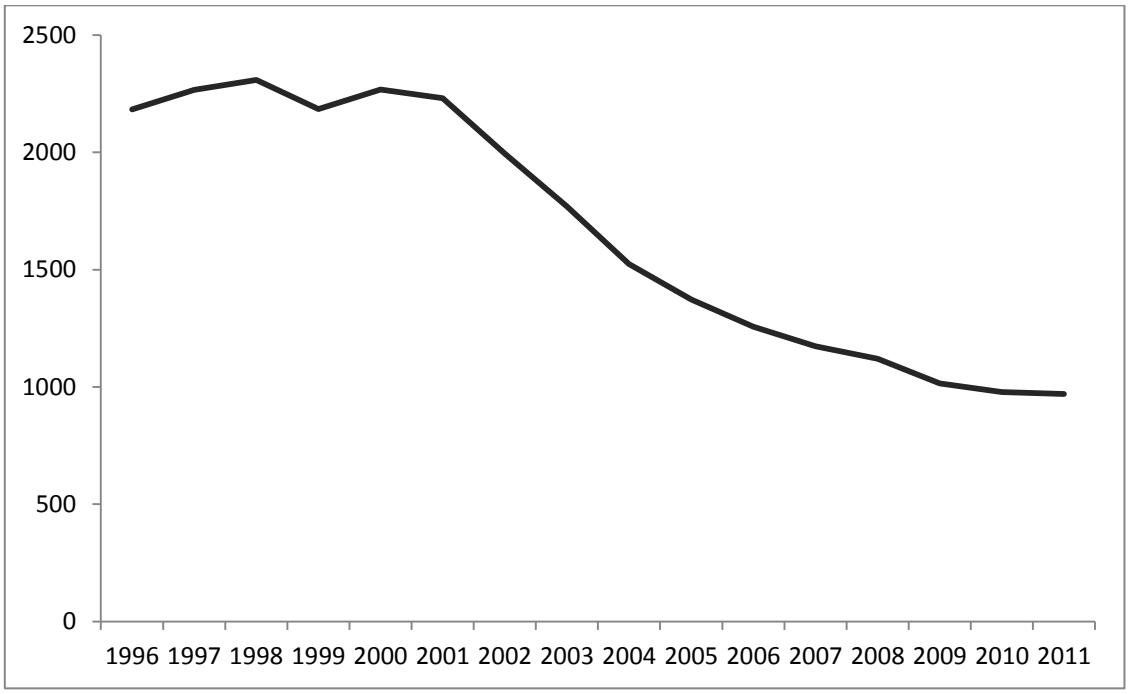
Table 1 Household property crime 2010-11

	Victim of at least one incident	Victim of only one incident	Reported incident to police
Break-in	2.9%	80%	79%
Attempted break-in	2.3%	78%	41%
Malicious property damage	7.5%	77%	46%

Source: ABS (2013), Crime Victimisation, Australia, 2011-12.
Note: Household break-in data includes homes, garages and sheds.

Table 1 shows the incidence of property damage is almost three times as high as household break-ins. Inversely households are almost twice as likely to report a break-in to police as they are property damage. In the majority of cases the experience of property crime was a one-off event. The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) also reports crime data and Figure 1 shows a decline in property crime since 2001.

Figure 1 Victims of property crime (per 100,000 persons) 1996-2011



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology (2012). *Australian crime: facts and figures*.

A relatively small proportion of Australian households are the victims of property crime and the incident rate is decreasing. Despite the falling rate of property crime, a 'tough on crime' approach to property crime continues to be promoted and pursued in some jurisdictions. An example of this is the use of mandatory sentencing for property crimes in Western Australia and, for a period during the 1990s, in the Northern Territory. Table 2 lists the proportion of household break-ins by state from 2008-09 and 2011-12.

Table 2 Proportion of households that were victim to a break-in

State	2008-09	2011-12	Change
New South Wales	3.0%	2.8%	-0.2
Victoria	2.8%	2.3%	-0.5
Queensland	3.4%	3.0%	-0.4
South Australia	3.2%	2.3%	-0.9
Western Australia	5.1%	4.5%	-0.6
Tasmania	2.6%	2.8%	0.2
Northern Territory	7.7%	6.0%	-1.7
Australian Capital Territory	4.2%	1.7%	-2.5
Australia	3.3%	2.9%	-0.4

Source: ABS (2010), Crime Victimisation, Australia, 2008-09; ABS (2013), Crime Victimisation, Australia, 2011-12.

The decrease in property crime between 2008-09 and 2011-12 was only small – as discussed above, the greatest decrease was in the first few years from 2001. Table 2 shows a change across the country of 0.4 of a percentage point. A similar decrease was evident in the larger states of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia. The improvement recorded in Western Australia was not noticeably larger for having implemented 'tough on crime' policies for property crimes. This suggests that other policy options are as effective or more so in addressing property crime.

Perceptions of crime

Australians regularly overestimate the crime rate. In Australia, men, younger people and those with higher levels of education have been found to more accurately perceive trends in the crime rate.[5]The degree of mismatch between actual and perceived crime rates "varies according to the main source of media" a person accesses.[6] The role played by the media in defining perceptions of crime cannot be understated. It has been argued that people:[7]

> *… have very little accurate knowledge of crime and criminal justice and rely almost solely on the mass media for information on these matters.*

Perceptions of crime have been divided into two perspectives. Crime as: (1) a part of everyday life; and (2) something committed by others.[8] These opposite perspectives generate opposite responses to crime. When crime is recognised as a part of everyday life, policy development will be focused on prevention, including addressing the public's fear of crime; isolating criminal behaviour and those who commit crime results in 'tough on crime' policies, which are likely to heighten fear of crime.

This dual perspective of crime summarises the apparent contradiction between media coverage of criminal justice issues and people's perceptions of their own immediate experiences. Previous research into the perceptions and reality of crime found that "most

[5] Indermaur, D and Roberts, L (2005), 'Perceptions of Crime and Justice', p.146.

[6] Indermaur, D and Roberts, L (2005), p.148.

[7] Hoel, A and Gelb, K (2008), *Sentencing Matters: Mandatory sentencing*, p.15.

[8] Garland, D (1996), 'The Limits of the Sovereign State: Strategies of crime control in contemporary society'.

people do not express great concern about crime in their neighbourhood".[9] This finding suggests that perceptions of inflated crime rates may be informed by reporting of events outside an individual's own experience which can neither be validated nor reflect their own experience. In many cases people misperceive the reality of crime rates in Australia, a situation that, some have argued, requires addressing through more balanced media reporting of criminal justice issues.

Social disorder

A link between social disorder, and in particular vandalism, and more serious crime was originally theorised in the *broken windows theory*.[10] A number of researchers have found that social disorder is a determinant of how individuals perceive their risk of being a victim of crime and feelings of safety.[11] The ABS has reported that:[12]

> *A significantly larger proportion of victims of selected personal crimes perceived at least one social disorder issue in their local area (81 per cent) compared to persons who did not report experiencing an incident of selected personal crimes (60 per cent).*

General acceptance of this emphasis on social disorder has influenced policy, and this has in turn been challenged by some researchers who cite a lack of empirical evidence.[13] Critics argue that the link between social disorder and a fear of crime is insufficient – direct questions about fear are required. The argument is also countered somewhat by the finding that people generally do not express great concern about crime in their neighbourhood. The HILDA survey asks respondents about how common a range of things are in their local neighbourhood. The availability of eleven consecutive years of data makes this a useful resource for analysing perceptions of social disorder and provides insights into feelings of safety among the public.

Social capital

The concept of social capital was popularised by Robert Putman in his book, *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American Community*. Putman argued that a decline in community participation (including neighbourliness and active membership of community groups) led to devalued social capital and might result in higher crime. Australian research has found mixed evidence of the role social capital plays, with one study concluding that "social process variables were not robust predictors of fear of crime".[14] By contrast, a 2007 US study found neighbourhood satisfaction and civic participation did have a significant influence on reported levels of fear.[15] A more recent US study found that: "Neighbourhood trust was a significant predictor of fear, but organizational participation was not statistically related to fear."[16] The existing evidence is inconclusive, so further research will make a contribution towards understanding the role social capital plays in shaping people's feelings of safety.

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[9] Weatherburn, D, Matka, E and Lind, B (1996). 'Crime Perception and Reality: Public perceptions of the risk of criminal victimisation in Australia', p.1.

[10] Sutton, A, Cherney, A and White, R (2008). *Crime Prevention: Principles, perspectives and practices*, p.141.

[11] See Brunton-Smith, I and Sturgis, P (2011). 'Do Neighbourhoods Generate Fear of Crime? An Empirical Test Using the British Crime Survey; Alpher, M, Chappell, A and Gainey, R (2011), 'Fear of Crime Revisited: Examining the direct and indirect effects of disorder, risk perception, and social capital'; Alarid, L et al (2010), 'Assessing the relationship between individual characteristics, neighbourhood context, and fear of crime'.

[12] ABS (2011), *In Focus: Crime and Justice Statistics*.

[13] Doran, B (2012). *Putting Fear of Crime on the Map*, p.12.

[14] McCrea, R et al (2005), 'Fear of Crime in Brisbane: Individual, social and neighbourhood factors in perspective', p.22.

[15] Ferguson, K and Mindel, C (2007), 'Modelling Fear of Crime in Dallas Neighbourhoods: A test of social capital theory'.

[16] Alper, M et al (2011), p.130.

Changes in household income

A link between improved living standards and increased safety has previously been reported. The New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) has reported that "a 10 per cent increase in household income could produce a 19 per cent drop in property crime over the long term and a 14.6 per cent fall in violent crime".[17] Findings like this present a strong case for analysing the role of improved standards of living in shaping a person's perception of crime rates and feelings of safety. This paper analyses changes in household income in relation to changes in reported feelings of safety.

Nervousness

A distinction has been made between dysfunctional and functional responses to nervousness about crime. A dysfunctional response negatively affects quality of life whereas a positive response leads people to take precautions and subsequently feel safer.[18] Nervousness is analysed to measure what effect this self-reported disposition has on an individual's feeling of safety. Although the HILDA survey includes the question: "How much of the time during the past four weeks have you been a nervous person?", it cannot be determined whether or not nervousness – as it relates to crime and feelings of safety – generated a functional response.

This paper will examine all of these factors to determine how they might be influencing reported feelings of safety.

Politicising crime

The political importance of criminal justice policies is not new given they can have "considerable electoral significance".[19] The political significance is evident in the terms routinely used in the media and by politicians, such as 'tough on crime' and 'law and order'. As long as politicians and media commentators continue to use criminal justice as an issue in the electorate and among their audiences, the gap between reality and rhetoric will remain.

The rise in rhetorical claims around elections constructs a policy contradiction between short-term populism and long-term social benefits that may be achieved beyond the election cycle. Political agendas that drive 'tough on crime' rhetoric actually make it harder for governments to consider or implement policies that "conflict with this imperative" but may work to reduce the incidence of crime or rehabilitate offenders.[20] Nevertheless, recent state elections in Western Australia, New South Wales and Victoria have again seen politicians rely upon 'tough on crime' policies.

Campaigning on crime

During the March 2013 West Australian state election campaign there was bi-partisan support for the continuation of mandatory sentencing. The Labor opposition leader, Mark McGowan, indicated at the time that a Labor government would produce sentencing guidelines for judges.[21] Matching the rhetoric, John McGrath MLA applauded government policy, saying, "[p]eople in my community are living in fear".[22]

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[17] Cited by Milliken, R (2012), 'Ending Sydney's law-and-order auction'.

[18] Jackson, J and Gray, E (2009), 'Functional Fear and Public Insecurities about Crime'.

[19] Cited by McGovern, A (2011). 'State of NSW: Setting the agenda of crime in NSW'.

[20] Weatherburn, D (2004), *Law and Order in Australia: Rhetoric and reality*, pp.45-6.

[21] West Australian, The (2013), 'Promises shift to law and order'.

[22] McGrath, J, (2013), 'Mandatory sentencing laws welcomed'.

In the lead up to the March 2011 New South Wales election, former Premier Kristina Keneally played the 'tough on crime' policy card, promising more police. Although the opposition leader and now Premier, Barry O'Farrell, was initially not drawn into the "law and order auction[s]" of previous elections,[23] he too eventually promised more police as part of a 'blitz on crime'.[24] The success of such political manoeuvring in NSW had been proven by former Premier Bob Carr, who shored up his political constituency on the Right by:[25]

> *… embracing harsh law and order rhetoric and, when forced by what he saw as political necessity, implementing populist measures to demonstrate his "tough on crime" credentials.*

A similar 'policy auction' had taken place prior to the November 2010 Victorian election. A new Coalition government was elected whose stated policy was "to ensure more offenders are jailed".[26] Interestingly, since the election in NSW there has been a push to reduce the rate of incarceration. This policy has drawn criticism from the *Daily Telegraph* which has accused the Attorney-General Greg Smith – 'Marshmallow Smith' – of going 'soft on crime'.[27] Smith's approach is a product of his experience in the criminal justice system as a crown prosecutor – the media on the other hand appear to have different motivations.

Manipulating audiences

Journalists have a responsibility to report the news honestly and fairly. The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the various media formats and news agencies are governed by reporting guidelines. Examples of expected reporting practices from these codes include statements like:

> *Report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts.*[28]

> *The purpose of this Code is to promote accuracy and fairness in news and current affairs programs.*[29]

The presentation of crime in the media has been found to influence public perceptions of criminal justice issues. The media is a primary source of information about crime rates for many people and can, therefore, have a marked influence on public perceptions.[30] Despite large falls in property crime since 2001, the media has largely been silent on this improvement and the benefits for society. Writing on *The Drum* in 2011, Greg Barns, national president of the Australian Lawyers Alliance commented that the lack of prominence given to this story in the Sydney media "says much about the cynical way in which they manipulate those who are their audience".[31] Others have been more critical of the media's manipulation of audiences around criminal justice issues.[32]

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[23] Aston, H (2011), 'ALP's challenge: cop this'.

[24] Aston, H (2011), 'O'Farrell aims to arrest crime'.

[25] Aarons, M (2011), 'Comment: NSW Labor'.

[26] Mullins, M (2011), 'NSW and Victoria's 'tough on crime' confusion'.

[27] Milliken, R (2012).

[28] Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, *Journalists' Code of Ethics*.

[29] Commercial Radio Australia (2011), *Codes of Practice and Guidelines*.

[30] Davis, B and Dossetor, K (2010), '(Mis)perceptions of crime in Australia'.

[31] Barns, G (2011), 'Crime report: good news is no news'.

[32] Indermaur, D, et al (2003), p.92; McGovern, A (2011).

The weight of such concerns is evident in the warning from recently retired Director of Public Prosecutions Mr Nicholas Cowdery (NSW) that "talk back 'entertainers' create a completely improper foundation from which to develop policies for law reform".[33]

The degree of media influence may, however, be restricted to violent crimes rather than property crimes, the focus of this paper. Previous Australian research has found that intensive local media coverage of violent crimes has a 'multiplier effect', giving the "impression that a given crime incident is more serious than otherwise felt" but that this did not extend to the reporting of property crime.[34] This may be due to a disproportionate level of reporting on violent crime compared with property crime.

Mandatory sentencing

Mandatory sentencing laws stipulate a fixed penalty for a criminal offence. The rationale for mandatory sentencing includes an emphasis on deterrence, incapacitation and greater consistency in sentencing. Mandatory sentencing was introduced in Western Australia in 1996 for a third conviction of home burglary and in the Northern Territory in 1997 for certain property offences. Although mandatory sentencing is a working example of 'tough on crime' policies, the public has a limited understanding of how mandatory sentencing works and its possible problems.[35] Critics of mandatory sentencing claim the policy does not work[36] and have asked whether its purpose is to "help politicians win elections".[37] In a submission to the United Nations Human Rights Committee in 2001, the Australian Human Rights Commission highlighted concerns with Australia's human rights obligations in relation to a number of issues including mandatory sentencing.

Mandatory sentencing of adults and juveniles aged 15 or older for property offences in the Northern Territory was repealed on 22 October 2001. Following the change to mandatory sentencing in the Northern Territory, the West Australian government reiterated its intention to retain its more general mandatory sentencing laws pertaining to property crime.[38] The effectiveness of mandatory sentencing policies has been challenged though – peak legal bodies in Western Australia claim that such policies do not deter offenders.[39]

Talking facts

The issues considered above highlight the argument that more facts on actual crime rates are needed in the public debate on criminal justice. It has been argued that up-to-date facts would help address imbalance in media reporting of criminal justice stories.[40] This paper makes a contribution to the identified need to collect and analyse data relating to criminal justice. More data alone will not change the situation unless politicians are more responsible – especially during election campaigns – and the media provide more balanced reporting. The next section discusses the data analysed in this paper.

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[33] Cited by McGovern, A (2011).

[34] Cornagila, F and Leigh, A (2011), 'Crime and Mental Wellbeing', p.18.

[35] Law Institute Victoria (2011), *Mandatory Minimum Sentencing*, p.14.

[36] Hoel, A and Gelb, K (2008); Zdenkowski, G (1999), 'Mandatory Imprisonment of Property Offenders in the Northern Territory'; Hoel, A and Gelb, K (2008), citing Ulmer, J, Kurlychek, M and Kramer, J (2007), p.18.

[37] Morgan, N (1999), 'Capturing Crims or Capturing Votes? The Aims and Effects of Mandatories', p.279.

[38] Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee (2002), *Inquiry in the Human Rights (Mandatory Sentencing for Property Offences) Bill 2000*, p.18.

[39] Law Society (WA), The, (2009), 'Peak Legal Bodies Unite Against Mandatory Sentencing'.

[40] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (2004), p.25.

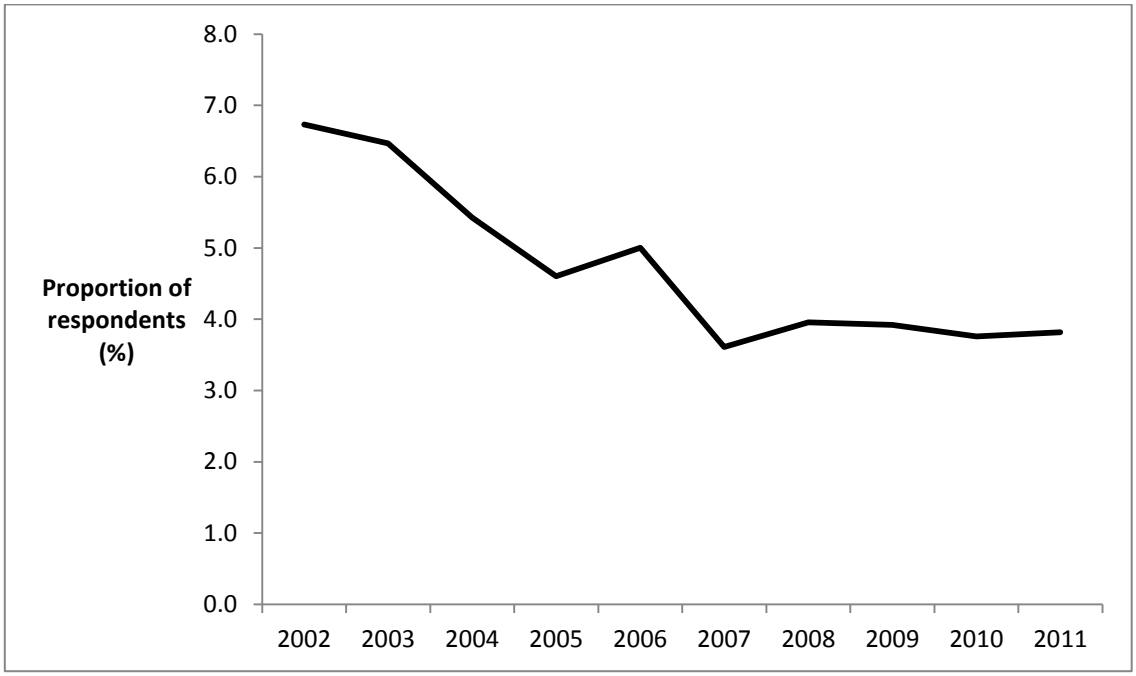
How safe do people feel?

The regularity with which 'tough on crime' rhetoric is raised by politicians and the media suggests there must be an underlying fear within the community. Respondents to the HILDA survey were asked how safe they felt and whether they had been a victim of a property crime in the past year. This paper finds that perceptions of safety have increased while reported property crime rates have fallen.

Reported incidence of property crime

Official figures show the rate of property crime in Australia has been declining since 2001. The largest reduction was between 2001 and 2004, followed by a more steady reduction up to 2010. A similar pattern in reported property crime was found in the HILDA data – with the exception of 2006.

Figure 2 Respondents who reported being a victim of property crime in past year



Source: HILDA survey 2002-2011, age 18 and over.

Figure 2 shows property crimes declined sharply from 2002 to 2005 and, following an increase against trend in 2006, have largely remained steady. With the exception of 2006, this trend resembles the decline in property crime rates reported by the AIC in Figure 1. This decline in reported property crime has corresponded with an increase in reported feelings of safety.

Reported safety levels

Australians reported feeling safer in 2011 than in 2001. The average increase reported by HILDA survey respondents over this period was 0.24 of a point. Table 3 lists the change in average reported feelings by state.

Table 3 Change in how safe people feel by state and territory

State	2001	2011	Change	(95% CI)
New South Wales	7.80	8.11	+0.32	(0.29, 0.34)
Victoria	8.05	8.20	+0.15	(0.12, 0.18)
Queensland	7.94	8.21	+0.28	(0.24, 0.31)
South Australia	7.95	7.98	+0.03	(-0.01, 0.08)
Western Australia	7.63	7.82	+0.19	(0.14, 0.24)
Tasmania	7.77	8.42	+0.66	(0.58, 0.74)
Northern Territory	8.20	8.05	-0.15	(-0.38, 0.09)
Australian Capital Territory	7.78	8.11	+0.33	(0.23, 0.43)
Australia	7.88	8.12	0.24	(0.23, 0.26)

Source: HILDA survey 2001 and 2011, age 18 and over.

Table 3 shows an increase in reported feelings of safety in all states and territories – however, there is a degree of statistical uncertainty regarding the average increase in South Australia and the Northern Territory. There was a smaller increase in reported safety levels in Western Australia compared with the national average, which suggests that mandatory sentencing has not provided the public with a greater sense of safety. Because the Northern Territory rescinded mandatory sentencing laws for property crimes prior to 2001, the effect of this change cannot be assessed from the data in Table 3.

The data tells a positive story: property crime is down and Australians report feeling safer. The correlation between increased safety and declining property crime is small,[41] therefore, other factors are also likely to have had an influence. The HILDA survey asks respondents about a range of other factors that research has linked with feelings of safety. The next section considers some of the factors that might be influencing feelings of safety reported by Australians.

Factors influencing people's perceptions

Understanding how different factors might be informing public perceptions is the focus of this section of the paper. If particular factors have influenced feelings of safety this could provide direction for the development of policies that would further improve public feelings of safety. The factors analysed were:

- being a victim of property crime
- demographics
- perceived social disorder
- social capital
- a change in household income
- reported nervousness.

Each of these factors is now discussed in turn to understand how they affected reported feelings of safety. Data was analysed biennially due to the irregular frequency with which questions were asked in the survey.

[41] Spearman correlation ranges from -.05 to -.10.

Property crime

There was a reported decrease in property crime rates among survey respondents. The experience of property crime halved between 2002 and 2007. The crime rate then increased slightly but remained largely constant at an average of 4.8 per cent of households.

Being the victim of a property crime had a large effect on an individual's reported feelings of safety. The reported safety score (out of ten) was largest in 2002, with scores 0.59 of a point lower for respondents who had reported being a victim of a property crime in the previous year. This effect was smaller in 2004 and smaller still in 2006 before rising in 2008. If you were a victim of a property crime in the year before being surveyed (in 2010) your safety score was likely to be 0.38 of a point lower. It is not surprising that being a victim of property crime would have an effect on feelings of safety. However, the relatively small number of households experiencing property crime means the general effect on reported feelings of safety among the wider survey sample was smaller (see Table 5 for full results).

Demographics

A range of demographic variables were analysed to see what effect they had on the safety scores of respondents. Previous Australian research has found that accurate perceptions of crime trends are informed by a person's sex, age and education. The average age of survey respondents was 46 years. A brief summary of the average demographic breakdown of the HILDA respondents is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Average demographic breakdown

Demographic variable	Per cent
Male	47%
In a couple relationship	65%
Bachelor degree or higher	22%
Home owner or mortgagee*	73%
Speak a language other than English at home	10%

Source: HILDA survey 2002 to 2010 (even years), age 18 and over.
* Sample excluded housing not owned, mortgaged or incurring rental payments.

Table 4 shows the HILDA sample consisted of slightly more women than men. A majority of respondents were living in couple relationships and either owned their home or were mortgagees. Approximately one fifth of respondents had completed a bachelor degree or higher qualification. One in ten households spoke a language other than English at home.

The demographic variable found to have the most effect on a person's reported feelings of safety was speaking a language other than English at home. In each year analysed, speaking a language other than English at home resulted in a lower safety score of between 0.32 and 0.51 of a point. The overall effect of language on safety scores when all variables were considered was lower at less than 0.10 of a point.

Social disorder

How common various aspects of social disorder are perceived to be in a respondent's neighbourhood is surveyed in the HILDA survey. The responses for these variables were

compiled for this research paper to create a social disorder variable. The component variables were:

- Vandalism and deliberate damage to property
- People being hostile and aggressive
- Teenagers hanging around on the streets
- Rubbish and litter lying around
- Burglary and theft
- Homes and gardens in bad condition

Reported concern with the component variables of social disorder factors varied.[42] The most common factor was vandalism and hostility. The next three factors (teenagers hanging around, rubbish and litter, property crime) were closely clustered together and the least emphasis was placed on how common unkempt properties were.

Response options to how common each variable was were: Never happens; very rare; not common; fairly common; very common. The scores for each question were aggregated to obtain an overall score for perceived social disorder. The score range was six to 30, where a lower score indicated social disorder was less common. The average aggregate social disorder score was 14.8, indicating that social disorder was not common.

Perceived social disorder was found to have a small effect on an individual's reported feelings of safety. A greater effect was evident, however, on general feelings of safety. The safety score of respondents who reported social disorder was more common in their neighbourhood was between 0.19 and 0.21 of a point lower. Social disorder had the greatest overall influence on people's reported feelings of safety of all the variables analysed.

Social capital

Social capital was analysed using two variables; membership of a club or community organisation and how common it was for neighbours to help each other out. On average a third (34 per cent) of survey respondents were a member of a club or community organisation; and people indicated that neighbours helping each other out was “not common”[43] in their neighbourhood. This low level of neighbourliness resulted in this variable having a smaller effect on feelings of safety whereas higher levels of membership of a community organisation or sporting club resulted in a bigger effect, although it was still on the small side.

Previous investigations into the role social capital has on feelings of safety have proven inconclusive. The results of this research suggest that membership of a club or community organisation influenced a small increase in reported feelings of safety but that neighbourliness did not have a notable effect on safety scores.

Increase in household income

To examine whether an increase in household income affects safety perceptions, households were divided into two groups: those with an increase of 10 per cent or more and those without. Despite between a third and 40 per cent of households reporting an increase of more than ten per cent in each of the years analysed, no evidence was found to verify that such an increase resulted in an immediate increase in feelings of safety. Further longitudinal

[42] The factor loading each of the component variables has on perceived social disorder is in Table 12 (in the Appendix).

[43] Response options were: Never happens; very rare; not common; fairly common; very common.

research using HILDA data would provide evidence of the strength of the link between increased household income and safety over the longer term.

Nervousness

HILDA respondents were asked how much of the time during the past four weeks they had been a nervous person. There were six response options ranging from 'all of the time' (1) to 'none of the time' (6). The majority of respondents replied that they were nervous somewhere between some of the time and none of the time. This finding was stable in each of the survey years analysed. A respondent's safety score was 0.27 of a point higher in 2002 if they felt nervous less of the time, a result that remained consistent for each year the data was analysed. When all variables are considered, the effect of nervousness was consistent – between 0.16 and 0.17 of a point.

The finding that reporting more time spent feeling nervous resulted in a lower safety score indicates that a functional response was unlikely to have manifested. While more certainty is not possible from the HILDA data analysed, this does not prevent the implementation of policies designed to facilitate functional responses.

Summary

The total influence on feelings of safety attributable to the six factors analysed increased from 8.9 per cent in 2002 to 12.1 per cent in 2010. Table 5 lists changes in influence in this period.

Table 5: Ability to explain reported feelings of safety

	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010
Effect on feelings of safety	9.4%	10.5%	10.0%	10.6%	12.1%

Source: HILDA survey 2002 to 2010 (even years), age 18 and over

Of the four variables that had the greatest effect (see Table 6), the influence that being a victim of crime had on feelings of safety decreased between 2002 and 2010, reflecting the decrease in reported experiences of property crime. The influence of speaking a language other than English at home varied in each of the years analysed. A consistent influence was found for social disorder and the amount of time a person reported being nervous.

Table 6: Factors that have the greatest influence on reported feelings of safety after all factors had been analysed

	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010
Victim of a property crime	-.59 (-.08)	-.33 (-.04)	-.27 (-.03)	-.49 (-.06)	-.38 (-.04)
Speak a language other than English at home	-.51 (-.09)	-.41 (-.07)	-.41 (-.08)	-.32 (-.06)	-.48 (-.09)
Time spent feeling nervous	.27 (.16)	.27 (.17)	.26 (.17)	.25 (.16)	.25 (.16)
Social disorder	-.08 (-.17)	-.08 (-.19)	-.08 (-.19)	-.08 (-.19)	-.09 (-.21)

Source: HILDA survey 2002 to 2010 (even years), age 18 and over.
Note: The figure in brackets is the standardised effect.

Policy discussion

There has been a sustained decline in property crime in Australia since 2001. This change is evident in reported improvements in feelings of safety. Despite the property crime rate falling, the finding that nervousness and social disorder influence how safe people feel suggests the 'tough on crime' rhetoric still used by some politicians and in sections of the media may be having a counter influence.

Factors influencing reported feelings of safety

Two factors, perceived social disorder, and how nervous a person feels influence the reported feelings of safety of Australians. When politicians talk about getting 'tough on crime' or the media selectively reports criminal justice stories, there is the potential for an increase in perceptions of disorder and nervous feelings. Such an increase is going to reduce feelings of safety among some Australians. Alternatively, balanced reporting and considered policy proposals from politicians have the potential to improve feelings of safety.

The Victoria Police have said that:[44]

> *… the perception and fear of crime is as great as the actualisation of crime. As such, the underpinning philosophy is that projects must not only be aimed at crime prevention, but also at reducing fear.*

Recognising the importance of addressing fear of crime supports the need to pursue policies that will generate improved feelings of safety rather than greater fear. The challenge of shifting the policy focus cannot be underestimated. One starting point that has been previously identified is the importance of using data or, more specifically, facts to inform politicians about criminal justice issues, followed by informing the public and media.

The complexity of criminal justice policy cannot be reduced to a single approach or response. Opting for simple answers is part of the attraction of 'tough on crime' policies. This paper is part of an alternative policy discussion about safety and crime prevention based on evidence that politicians can use to move beyond knee-jerk policy responses.

Perceived social disorder

Perceived social disorder was found to have the greatest influence of the factors analysed on reported feelings of safety. Disorder does not necessarily mean actual crime or criminal behaviour, but nevertheless many people appear to make a link between disorder and crime. This link is made when talk turns to getting 'tough on crime'. That property crime has fallen in Australia while perceptions of safety have improved indicates that policies which address 'order' rather than 'law' may be needed to ensure falling crime rates lead to increased feelings of safety.

Being nervous

Being a nervous person has also been identified as a factor influencing how safe people feel. Previous research into the emotional response to safety has identified positive as well as negative effects. For example, a proactive response might be a note at the front door to remind oneself to check that all the windows are shut when leaving the house. Promoting involvement in community engagement programs in a person's local area may also address the negative effects of nervousness related to feelings of insecurity about crime. In the absence of community engagement or other functional responses, nervousness may

[44] House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs (2004), p.36.

manifest in greater responsiveness to calls to get 'tough on crime', which may inadvertently increase the amount of time spent feeling nervous.

Policy directions

The significance of social disorder and nervousness on how safe people feel at a time when property crime is declining provides direction for politicians looking to address criminal justice issues in the electorate. Existing policies focused on community engagement and localised responses to property crime, while having had some success, have also faced implementation hurdles. This paper will now briefly consider four options to address perceptions of social disorder, time spent feeling nervous and the role of responsibility for politicians and the media.

Community engagement

Community engagement programs involve individuals and organisations in the development and implementation of localised policing strategies. Public involvement is going to improve participants' understanding of the reality of actual crime rates and the steps being taken to address the issue. Improved knowledge of the facts around criminal justice – particularly in an individual's local neighbourhood – has the potential to positively refocus preconceptions about social disorder and mitigate personal levels of nervousness, which in turn will be likely to increase feelings of safety. Analysis of the processes and outcomes of past and present community engagement programs has found "widespread dissatisfaction" among both police and the community, which has impeded the implementation of such initiatives.[45] The objectives of community engagement can be too broad and do not always address public concerns about crime and safety. Future success of community engagement will require the addressing of organisational and managerial constraints.[46] Although community engagement policies have the potential to increase reported feelings of safety, improvements could be made to how such programs are implemented.

Localised crime prevention

Localised crime prevention programs are an opportunity to demonstrate to the community that steps are being taken to address crime. Such initiatives have the potential to change how a neighbourhood is perceived and may affect people's tendencies to feel nervous. The emphasis on linking crime prevention and the local context has led to the increased involvement of local authorities and communities in these programs. The link can be problematic, as criminal justice policy has historically been a state government responsibility – meaning that local government does not have the same level of experience. For example, the attraction of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) for local authorities has in part been attributed to the increased authority it brings in planning and development processes and that it costs less than social programs.[47] The risk that social programs may be overlooked means that localised crime prevention should form part of a wider strategy. Proponents of local involvement need to recognise the cultural adjustment this presents for communities and local government, including the additional administrative burdens of delivering such programs. A recent evaluation of localised crime prevention

[45] Casey J and Pike, D (2007), 'Fit for Purpose: Working with the community to strengthen policing in Victoria, Australia', p.373.

[46] Fleming, J and O'Reilly, J (2007), 'The 'Small-scale Initiative'; the rhetoric and the reality of community policing in Australia'.; Casey J and Pike, D (2007).

[47] Sutton, A, Cherney, A and White, R (2008), p.68.

programs recommended more attention be paid to the evaluation of programs in order to improve them.[48]

Responsible politicians

The potential for perceptions of social disorder and nervousness to influence reported feelings of safety provides an opportunity for politicians. This opportunity has been exploited in the past for political gain. Realising the potential social benefits will require a responsible approach from politicians. This paper provides evidence that will support politicians who wish to propose constructive policy responses to criminal behaviour and people's fears of crime rather than falling back on 'tough on crime' responses. The ability to make a connection between improved feelings of safety with a falling property crime rate should give politicians the political capital to promote the development and implementation of positive criminal justice policies.

A responsible media

Balanced reporting of criminal justice issues also has the potential to address perceptions of social disorder and time spent feeling nervous, leading to increased feelings of safety. There is a responsibility for the media to report that property crime has fallen and feelings of safety have increased. The media can have a strong influence over people's perceptions of criminal justice issues. Balanced reporting that includes positive stories about declining crime rates are likely to influence how a person perceives disorder in their neighbourhood and the amount of time they spend feeling nervous, thereby affecting how safe they feel.

Conclusion

Criminal justice policies are often politicised, especially during election campaigns. The politicising of policy proposals can also be influenced by media reporting of criminal justice stories. These influences have been previously found to exert an influence on the public's perceptions of crime rates. The fact remains that property crime rates in Australia have been falling since 2001 and Australians report feeling safer. There is a good news story in this paper.

Alongside a fall in the property crime rate, the improvement in how safe Australians report feeling is informed by how people perceive their local neighbourhood and how nervous they feel. Between 2001 and 2011 the average safety score increased from 7.9 out of ten to 8.1. Over this time the influence of perceived social disorder and time spent feeling nervous remained fairly consistent. How criminal justice issues are reported in the media or addressed by campaigning politicians is likely to affect people's perceptions of how safe they feel.

With the incidence of property crime having declined and people feeling safer, there is an opportunity to develop policies that address lingering concerns about social disorder and the levels of nervousness felt by some people. Examples include community engagement programs to inform and involve local residents in programs and policies that promote localised crime prevention. There is also a responsibility for politicians to promote policies that reflect the falling crime rate and for the media to provide balanced reporting including positive criminal justice stories.

[48] Morgan, A and Homel, P (2013), 'Evaluating crime prevention: Lessons from large-scale community crime prevention programs'.

Methodology

This paper uses data collected in the annual Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey. An additional 2,153 households were added to the panel for the 2011 survey. For this paper the sample was restricted to respondents aged 18 years and over. The paper looked at responses regarding how safe people feel, whether they were victims of a property crime in the previous year and a range of factors that may influence reported feelings of safety.

The average safety score out of ten for the question: 'How safe you feel?' is reported in Table 7. The response options were: (0) Totally dissatisfied; (5) Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied); and (10) Totally satisfied. The proportion of survey respondents who reported being a victim of a property crime in the year prior to being surveyed is shown in Table 8. The correlation between feelings of safety and being a victim of crime are reported in

Further analysis of what might influence reported feelings of safety were also undertaken for this report. A description of these variables can be found in Table 10 and Table 11. Due to the irregular frequency of questions relating to social disorder, the analysis of variables influencing reported feelings of safety analysis was conducted for every second year (2002, 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2010).

The social disorder variable was calculated from questions that asked: 'How common are the following things in your local neighbourhood?' The list of neighbourhood aspects was:

- Vandalism and deliberate damage to property
- People being hostile and aggressive
- Teenagers hanging around on the streets
- Rubbish and litter lying around
- Burglary and theft
- Homes and gardens in bad condition

The response options were: Never happens (1); very rare; not common; fairly common; very common (5). The new social disorder variable was a sum of reported values for these six aspects. See Table 12 for a factor analysis of the new social disorder variable.

Linear regression analysis was used to identify the degree of variance there was in reported feelings of safety when controlling for a range of variables. Data was analysed biennially due to the irregular frequency with which questions were asked in the survey. Output for alternate years 2002 to 2010 is reported in Table 13.

Appendix

The appendix shows results generated from the HILDA survey dataset.

Table 7 Average reported feelings of safety

Year	n	M	Standard Deviation
2001	13,183	7.86	2.02
2002	12,292	7.89	1.85
2003	12,013	8.06	1.72
2004	11,683	8.12	1.68
2005	11,994	8.06	1.63
2006	12,100	8.06	1.63
2007	12,006	8.15	1.58
2008	11,977	8.13	1.56
2009	12,488	8.19	1.56
2010	12,706	8.16	1.56
2011	16,660	8.21	1.58

Source: HILDA survey, age 18 and over.

Table 8 Proportion of survey sample who reported being a victim of property crime

Year	Number of respondents	%
2002	755	6.7%
2003	706	6.5%
2004	575	5.4%
2005	489	4.6%
2006	540	5.0%
2007	381	3.6%
2008	408	4.0%
2009	421	3.9%
2010	422	3.8%
2011	551	3.8%

Source: HILDA survey, age 18 and over.

Table 9 Correlation between reported feelings of safety and being a victim of property crime

Year	Correlation
2002	-.095
2003	-.096
2004	-.074
2005	-.062
2006	-.052
2007	-.065
2008	-.068
2009	-.067
2010	-.059
2011	-.076

Source: HILDA survey, age 18 and over.
All results: Spearman correlations; $p<.0001$

Data outputs for linear regression analysis.

Table 10 Categorical variables

	Sample (n)	Sex (Female)	Marital status (were single)	Education (Bach deg or higher)	Home ownership* (renting)	Speak a language other than English at home (Yes)	Club member (Yes)	Increase in household income of 10% or more (Yes)	Reported being a victim of a property crime (Yes)
2002	12292	52%	34%	20%	25%	12%	36%	38%	6.1%
2004	11683	53%	35%	21%	26%	10%	36%	39%	4.9%
2006	12100	53%	35%	22%	27%	10%	33%	40%	4.5%
2008	11977	53%	35%	22%	27%	9%	34%	39%	3.4%
2010	12706	53%	36%	23%	29%	10%	32%	33%	3.3%

Source: HILDA survey 2002 to 2010 (even years), age 18 and over.
* An average of 2.8% of survey respondents neither rented nor owned their place of residence.

Table 11 Ranked variables

Variable	Year	n	M	SD	Range
Age	2002	12292	45	17	18-92
	2004	11683	46	17	18-92
	2006	12100	46	18	18-93
	2008	11977	46	18	18-93
	2010	12706	46	18	18-93
Feel safe	2002	12292	7.89	1.85	0-10
(0= Totally dissatisfied; 10 = Totally satisfied)	2004	11683	8.12	1.67	0-10
	2006	12100	8.06	1.63	0-10
	2008	11977	8.13	1.56	0-10
	2010	12706	8.16	1.56	0-10
Social disorder (Constructed variable see Table 12)	2002	10047	14.86	4.41	6-30
	2004	9482	14.79	4.37	6-30
	2006	9706	14.69	4.33	6-30
	2008	9188	14.71	4.40	6-30
	2010	9997	14.71	4.37	6-30
Neighbourliness	2002	10169	2.93	1.14	1-5
(1=Never happens; 5=Very common)	2004	9635	2.93	1.13	1-5
	2006	9798	2.96	1.13	1-5
	2008	9354	2.96	1.11	1-5
	2010	10076	3.02	1.10	1-5
Nervous person	2002	11328	4.98	1.12	1-6
(1=All of the time; 6=None of the time)	2004	10646	4.99	1.11	1-6
	2006	10879	4.99	1.11	1-6
	2008	10355	5.00	1.08	1-6
	2010	11255	4.98	1.08	1-6

Source: HILDA survey 2002 – 2010 (even years), age 18 and over.

Table 12 Factor analysis of neighbourhood aspects of social disorder variable

Description	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010
Vandalism and deliberate damage to property	0.68	0.69	0.69	0.72	0.70
People being hostile and aggressive	0.56	0.60	0.62	0.61	0.64
Teenagers hanging around on the streets	0.54	0.55	0.53	0.56	0.54
Rubbish and litter lying around	0.51	0.54	0.52	0.56	0.55
Burglary and theft	0.45	0.47	0.48	0.51	0.51
Homes and gardens in bad condition	0.31	0.30	0.33	0.34	0.35
Eigenvalues	3.04	3.16	3.17	3.29	3.30
Variance (%)	50.69	52.59	52.79	54.79	54.95

Source: HILDA survey 2002 – 2010 (even years), age 18 and over.
Response options (1=Never happens; 5=Very common)

Table 13 Linear regression analysis

Variable	2002		2004		2006		2008		2010	
	B (SE)	Beta	B (SE)	Beta	B (SE)	Beta	B (SE)	Beta	B (SE)	Beta
Victim	-.59 (.07)	-.08***	-.33 (07)	-.04***	-.27 (07)	-.03***	-.49 (.08)	-.06***	-.38 (.07)	-.04***
Age	.00 (.00)	-.03***	.00 (.00)	-.04***	.00 (.00)	-.05***	.00 (.00)	-.04***	-.01 (.00)	-.10***
Gender	-.14 (.03)	-.04***	-.11 (.03)	-.03***	-.12 (.03)	-.04***	-.11 (.03)	-.04***	-.09 (.03)	-.03***
Marital status	-.10 (.04)	-.02*	-.16 (.03)	-.04***	-.07 (.03)	-.02	-.08 (.03)	-.02**	-.10 (.03)	-.03**
Language	-.51 (.05)	-.09***	-.41 (.05)	-.07***	-.41 (.05)	-.08***	-.32 (.05)	-.06***	-.48 (.04)	-.09***
Education	.04 (.04)	.01	.04 (.04)	.01	.07 (.04)	.02	.12 (.03)	.03***	.10 (.03)	.03***
Home	-.15 (.04)	-.03***	-.09 (.04)	-.02	-.13 (.03)	-.03***	-.13 (.03)	-.04***	-.14 (.03)	-.04***
Social disorder	-.08 (.00)	-.17***	-.08 (.00)	-.19***	-.08 (.00)	-.19***	-.08 (.00)	-.19***	-.09 (.00)	-.21***
Neighbourliness	.10 (.02)	.06***	.14 (.01)	.09***	.12 (.01)	.08***	.15 (.01)	.09***	.14 (.01)	.09***
Member	.14 (.04)	.04***	.13 (.03)	.04***	.14 (.03)	.04***	.14 (.03)	.04***	.14 (.03)	.04***
Household income	.08 (.03)	.02	.05 (.03)	.01	.05 (.03)	.01	.02 (.03)	.01	.05 (.03)	.02
Nervousness	.27 (.02)	.16***	.27 (.01)	.17***	.26 (.01)	.17***	.25 (.01)	.16***	.25 (.01)	.16***
Constant	7.7 (.13)***		7.86 (.12)***		7.1 (.12)***		7.84 (.11)***		8.22 (.11)***	
R-square	0.094		0.105		0.121		0.106		0.121	

Source: HILDA survey 2002 to 2010 (even years), age 18 and over.
B= regression coefficient, Beta= standardised regression coefficient
*** $p<.0001$; ** $p<.001$; * $p<.01$

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