

Penal Issues

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Feelings of insecurity and fear of crime: Dimensions and trends

Philippe Robert and **Renée Zauberman**, who head the *Observatoire scientifique du crime et de la Justice (OSCJ)* (www.oscj.cesdip.fr), have recently published an overview of feelings of insecurity and fear of crime in France. The present paper describes the various dimensions of the subject and its trends over the last few decades. Statistical analysis was performed by *Sophie Peaucellier* for the national survey and by *Fadoua Jouwahri* for the Paris Region survey.

Since the 1983 municipal election campaign, feelings of insecurity and fear of crime have been a basic component of the extreme right wing's stock-in-trade. For even longer, ever since the 1978 and 1981 laws known as the Peyrefitte Acts, they are also central to the road map of the right wing in general. What about the left? It too swung over to the theme, more or less willingly, from the 1997 Villepinte colloquium¹ on. So here we are: it has taken one third of a century for the theme of unsafety related to crime to completely invade public debate... And at present, the terrorist attacks have brought the subject to the ignition point. It is not enough, however, to observe fear of crime in the political/media arena, we must begin by plotting its distribution throughout society. Many academic essays, in recent years, have tried to account for its success, but they often suffer from the use of partial or monographic data as well as from a lack of chronological depth.

As for us, we began our work in 1980 with an inventory of the research conducted in the United States, which was practically unknown in France at the time². We then mustered the rare dependable data at our disposal, so that by the 1990s we were able to emphasize the many facets of feelings of insecurity and fear of crime³. We explored them again in the early 2000s, to point up the gradual shifts in the social groups concerned with safety⁴. In 2002, we published an overview of available evidence⁵. We have now decided to return to this endeavour presently because new data are again available. However imperfect, they do enable us to document the various aspects of insecurity and above all, to track the current trends. Indeed, the development of victimisation surveys, repeated at regular intervals, allows for more systematic study of feelings of insecurity.

Data

In addition to some local campaigns conducted at the municipal level, we have used surveys on victimisation and insecurity covering all of metropolitan France, as well as those for the Paris Region.

The national series – at least for metropolitan France – is characterised by a number of schemes, varying over time, successively:

*a seminal survey by the CESDIP (Centre de recherches sociologiques sur le droit et les institutions pénales) in the mid-1980s,

*from the mid-90s to the mid-2000s, annual surveys by the INSEE (Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques) on the living conditions of households (EPVC), containing a short module on victimisation and insecurity,

* for the last decade, more or less, the INSEE has been doing an annual survey of living conditions and safety (CVS).

Since 2001, the Institut d'aménagement et d'urbanisme d'Île-de-France (IAU-IdF) has been conducting surveys every other year on victimisation and feelings of insecurity in Paris Region.

The CESDIP conducted several local surveys in 2005, in Aubervilliers, Aulnay-sous-bois, Gonesse, Lyons, and Saint-Denis, at the request of the FFSU (Forum français pour la sécurité urbaine).

In the national studies, the questions pertaining to feelings of insecurity were often affected by fluctuating formulations. These French surveys have, at least, the merit of understanding that feelings of insecurity are not an elementary dimension susceptible of measurement by any single item. These national findings are consolidated by the existence of data from the Paris Region, which, although they cover a somewhat shorter lapse of time (since 2001), are based on very stable questions. While French victimisation surveys generally address the need to distinguish between various

¹ The A colloquium on « Safe cities for free citizens » organised by the socialist government of the time and its Minister of the Interior, J.-P. Chevènement.

² R. Zauberman, La peur du crime et la recherche, *L'Année sociologique*, 1982, 32, 415-438.

³ Ph. Robert, M.-L. Pottier, 'On ne se sent plus en sécurité', *Délinquance et insécurité, une enquête sur deux décennies*, *Revue française de science politique*, 1997, 47, 6, 707-740.

⁴ Ph. Robert, M.-L. Pottier, Les préoccupations sécuritaires : une mutation ?, *Revue française de sociologie*, 2004, 45, 2, 211-242.

⁵ Ph. Robert, *L'insécurité en France*, La Découverte, 2002.

circumstances and places generating insecurity, and also offer respondents a range of graduated responses, conversely, they do not explore those emotional reactions that differ from fear and do not differentiate the various sorts of victimisation experiences. They are, at any rate, the only precise findings documenting insecurity in France, and we use them here to etch out a picture of fears and concern with crime.

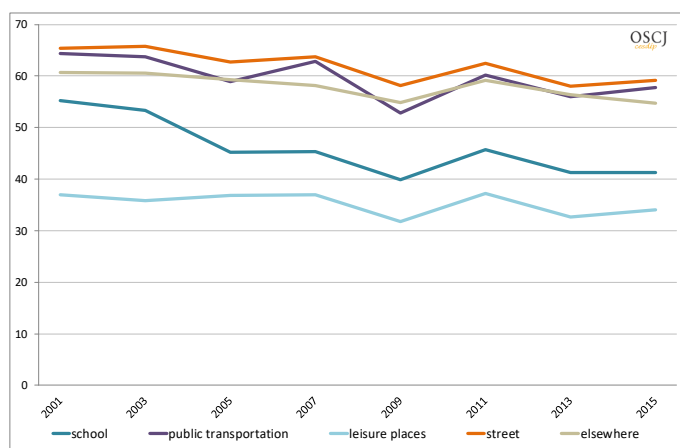
1. On various fears

As a rule, fear of crime is measured by asking respondents whether they feel safe when they walk alone on the streets in their neighbourhood after dark. And yet, it is not for themselves that people are usually the most fearful, but for their children. And they are more often anxious in public transportation than in their neighbourhood or their home.

People are mostly afraid for their children

One of the main findings of regional and local surveys was the discovery of the importance of fears pertaining to children. Such fears for others are much more frequent – at least for those respondents who have children living with them – than any fear for oneself. The proportion of those who are afraid for their offspring varies considerably with the place mentioned: it peaks in references to the streets, followed by public transportation. Anxiety is lesser with respect to schools, and above all, places of leisure (see figure 1). However, in the inner northern Parisian suburban districts (not shown on figure 1), anxiety about children may also be quite frequent when they are at school or when they take public transportation.

Figure 1: Trends in fears concerning children in the Paris Region (%), 2001-2015



Source: IAU-IdF

Coverage: Paris Region

The rates are calculated here only for those respondents who have children living with them.

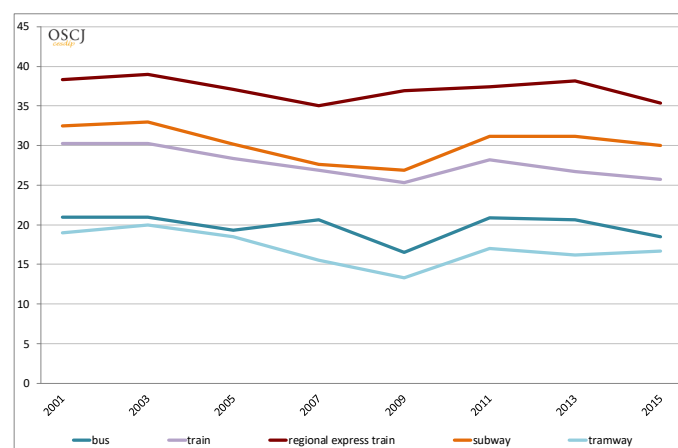
A fear-provoking place: urban public transportation

If we look at fears for oneself, now, we find that the most widespread pertain to public transportation. The only utilisable data cover the large metropolitan areas – the Paris Region or the Lyons area – where the problem is particularly acute. It may not be legitimate to extrapolate these findings to the country as a whole. Nonetheless, this widespread fear should not be neglected. Public transportation is seen to crystalize anxiety, with the RER [regional express system] ranking highest in the Paris Region (about 40% of respondents), followed by the subway (around 35 %), trains (called Transilien, about 30 %), followed by buses (around 20 %) and last, trams (about 15%) (see figure 2). Fear is even more marked among residents of the northern suburbs than for the Region's population as a whole. The ranking of fears pertaining to public transportation probably differs in each metropolitan area depending on the available modes: in Ly-

ons, for instance, the ranking differed in 2005 from that in the Paris Region at the same time: buses were viewed as more frightening in Lyons than in the Paris Region, whereas local trains there elicited less fear than the *Transilien*.

Why is public transportation so apt to produce feelings of insecurity? Travellers are in contact with people they would not be likely to meet elsewhere, who they actually have no desire to brush shoulders with, and who sometimes elicit embarrassment, fear, disgust, etc. Moreover, the lack of space often turns encounters into promiscuity, in very close quarters, to boot. Circulating underground sometimes represents an oppressive context. If an incident occurs it is difficult, or even impossible, to get out. Last, public transportation also entails transfers, possibly through train and subway stations, which can undoubtedly be frightening places: one need only think of a nearly-deserted station in the wee hours of the night. The reduction of the personnel present within vehicles and the sparsely staffed stations since the mid-1970s have probably contributed enormously to the rise in feelings of insecurity⁶.

Figure 2: Trends in fears in public transportation in the Paris Region (%), 2001-2015



Source: IAU-IdF

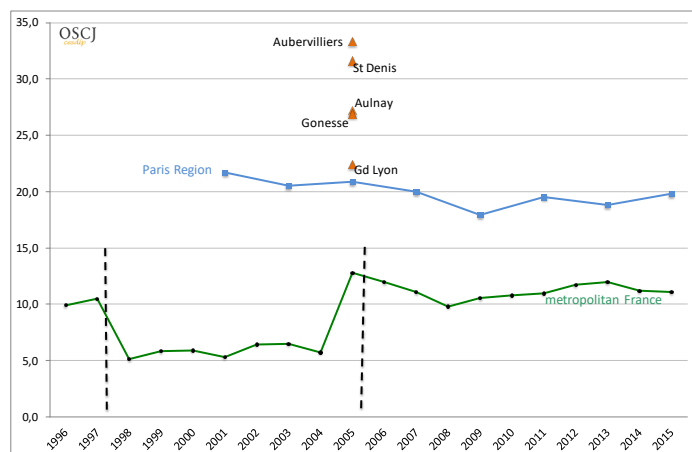
Coverage: Paris Region

Fear varies considerably depending on neighbourhood

Setting aside from these special cases, let us look at the type of feelings of insecurity most usually measured; that is, fear in one's neighbourhood. Unfortunately, the question used to measure it has been greatly modified over the years of national surveying, making the observation of trends thorny. For the 1998-2004 period, for instance, there is an artificial underestimation. The question was not put to those respondents who claimed they did not go out in the evening. But you can be afraid to go out even if you never do, and in fact that fear may be the reason why you stay at home. The size of the group affected by fear in the neighbourhood is stable, on the whole, between 10 and 13%. The rise recorded between 2009 and 2013 did not persist thereafter; in any event, the order of magnitude remained the same. In the Paris Region, there was an overall downward trend until 2009, with a slight upturn thereafter. But fear in the neighbourhood is much greater there (around 20%) than for metropolitan France as a whole. This sort of fear is seen to be just as frequent in the Lyons area as in the Paris Region. More widespread fear is specific, then, to highly urbanised areas. The same surveys conducted in the suburban districts north of Paris show that it may be still more prevalent there, with fear affecting 25 to 33% of respondents, depending on the area (see figure 3).

⁶ On the latter analyses, see J. Noble, L'insécurité personnelle dans les transports en commun, *Déviante et Société*, 39, 3, 343-364, 2015.

Figure 3: Trends in fear in the neighbourhood (%), 1996-2015



Sources : INSEE, IAU-IdF, CESDIP Coverage: variable according to survey

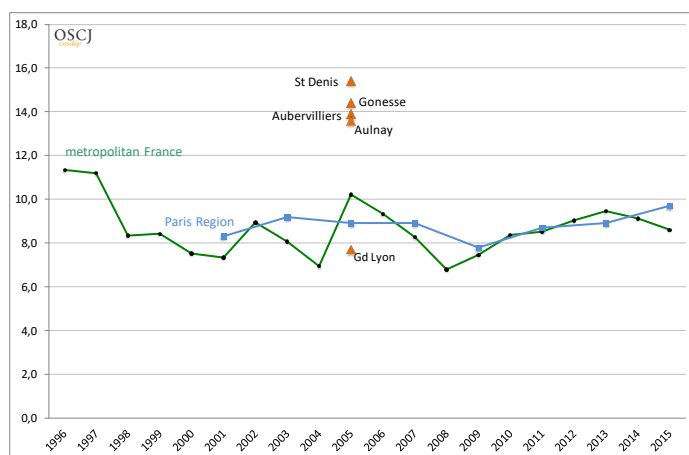
Note : the hatched bar indicates a major change in the way the item was formulated in the national survey.

Fear at home is less frequent

Almost all French victimization surveys also ask questions about fear at home, almost always with a formulation such as: *Do you, personally, ever feel you are not safe at home?* At least since the turn of the 21st century, the magnitude of fear at home has remained more or less the same, be it in Metropolitan France as a whole (between 7 and 10% of respondents), in the Paris Region (between 8 and 10%) or in the Lyons metropolitan area. There is no difference corresponding to what was found for fear in the neighbourhood, between highly urbanized areas and the country as a whole. However, some surveys find a much higher level of fear at home in some suburban districts in the northern Paris area.

For metropolitan France as a whole, fear at home began to rise again in 2009, like fear in the neighbourhood, but without any change, for either, in the order of magnitude. In this case, however, the upturn is also found for the Paris Region (see figure 4).

Figure 4: Trends in fear at home (%), 1996-2015



Sources : INSEE, IAU-IdF, CESDIP Coverage: variable according to survey

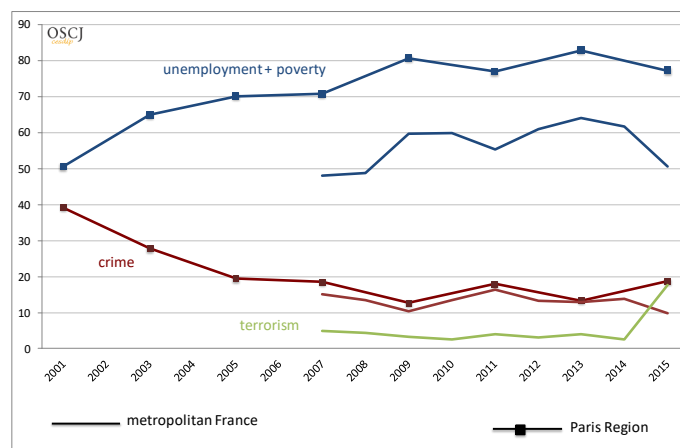
2. Concern with crime: some flare-ups

The various aspects of fear of crime reviewed above hardly vary in magnitude. The same is not true for concern, which has shown much greater fluctuations.

Recent national surveys ask respondents to choose *the most worrisome problem within French society* from a list of issues⁷. Unemployment is increasingly overwhelmingly predominant; crime

comes third, following poverty. Paris Region surveys, in turn, ask which of a list of problems facing French society *should be addressed first and foremost by the government right now*. The list of problems provided here is shorter than that used for national surveys⁸. Nonetheless, the trends in concerns are remarkably parallel at the two levels, national and Paris Region. The degree of concern with crime is comparable at the two geographical scales observed, whereas concerns about other social problems (unemployment and poverty) reach much higher levels in the Paris Region than for metropolitan France as a whole (see figure 5).

Figure 5: Trends in concerns (%) in France and Paris Region, 2001-2015



Sources : INSEE, IAU-IdF Coverage: metropolitan France and Paris Region

Since 2001, the rising concern with unemployment and poverty contrasts with the curve for concern with crime. The Paris Region findings show a drop. Nationwide, other longitudinal studies have suggested a flare-up of concern in the early 2000s, followed by the return to the customary magnitude: since the mid 1970s, in fact, and aside from spectacular crises such as September 11, 2001, crime tends to be a public political priority for more or less 15% of the population. The findings of national victimisation surveys – available only from 2007 on – corroborate the usual order of magnitude of 10 to 20%.

Did the January 2015 terror attacks have the same impact as earlier terrorist episodes, pushing figures upward? The insertion of the item “terrorism” in the national survey question on top-priority concerns enables us to observe the evolution of these two responses separately. In the early 2015 survey, concern with terrorism, which had been fluctuating between 3 and 5% since 2007, rose to 17.6%, whereas concern with crime dropped from 13.8 to 9.7%. The poll by the Commission nationale consultative des droits de l’homme (CNCDDH) in March of the same year also showed a flare-up of anxiety over terrorism, but that did not bring it up to the level of concern with ordinary crime. So the bursts of anxiety elicited by terror attacks do not necessarily contaminate concerns with ordinary crime.

3. The secure, the insecure, the obsessed

So far, we have looked at the trends of different aspects of feelings of insecurity, taken individually. But do people who are afraid for their children’s safety also fear being robbed or assaulted in public transportation? Do they feel threatened at home or in their neighbourhood? Do they feel that crime is our society’s main problem? In other words, how do the different, scattered pieces of the puzzle at our disposal fit together?

⁷ Possible responses are health (food, AIDS, flu and other epidemics...); environment (air pollution, soil pollution, water quality...); terrorism, unemployment, crime, poverty, road safety, racism, discrimination.

⁸ Possible responses are unemployment, crime, poverty, pollution, and AIDS.

For Metropolitan France as a whole, five patterns, of widely differing size, arise (see figure 6):

- the first group contains over half of the population: fear of crime is not noteworthy and unemployment is designated as the main social problem;

- an additional 16% are mainly concerned with poverty; but these respondents too have a less-than-average tendency to express fear about crime. In all, we have over two-thirds of the population for whom fear of crime and concern with safety are hardly relevant issues. Then there are the others.

- a group of 11% combines fears of crime for other people and for themselves, under all circumstances. They experience multi-faceted insecurity;

- another group of similar size (10%) shows a rather similar profile, and differs from the previous one only by one trait: they feel less often frightened at home. Taken together, then, these two groups subjected to multi-faceted insecurity represent about one-fifth of the population. In both cases, the anxiety felt personally regarding the risk of victimisation is attended by a denunciation of crime as a serious social problem. The two aspects of feelings of insecurity are found here;

- this conjunction is not necessarily present: there is, indeed, a last little group of 8%, who do not feel particularly threatened personally by crime, but nonetheless rank it first among social problems.

Surveys conducted in the Paris Region during the same period (2007-2013) draw a rather comparable picture. For fully half of respondents, insecurity and crime are not a concern; they are only anxious about the labour situation. A second group contains a good third of respondents: half of them express strong personal fear, the other half adds fear for their children; both mention great concern with insecurity, along, in the first group, with a denunciation of the incoming flow of immigrants. This leaves slightly under ten percent of respondents who are not very afraid of crime but who are prey to great concern with safety, combined with xenophobia, and for whom crime is caused by the presence of too many foreigners. So we always find a three-sided pattern: there are people who are not concerned about insecurity, those who are, and those for whom insecurity represents a social ob-

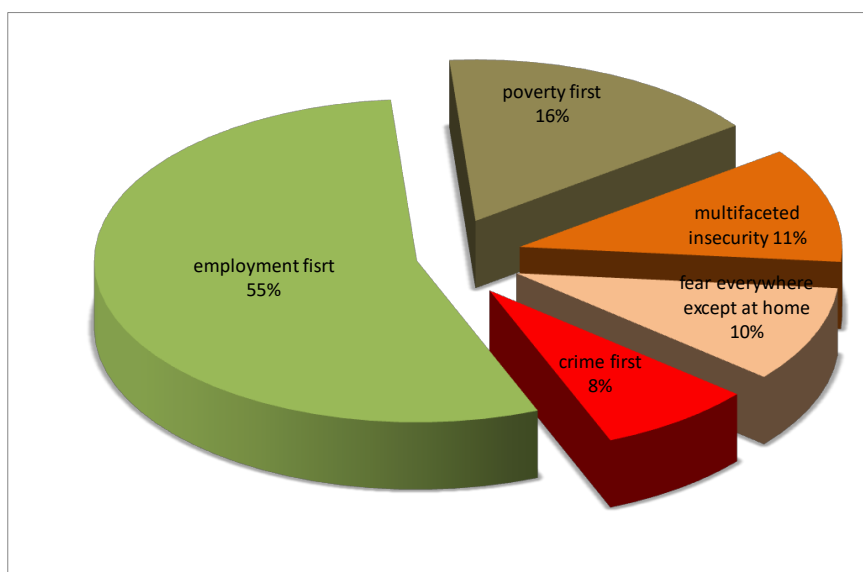
session rather than a personal threat. However, the proportions are not the same in the two population groups. Those who are not sensitive to insecurity represent two-thirds of the inhabitants of metropolitan France but only slightly more than half of those in the Paris Region. Conversely, one third of people in the Paris Region suffer from insecurity as opposed to only one fifth of the overall metropolitan French population. Only the small group of the obsessively insecure is more or less the same size in both. Ultimately, sensitivity to insecurity is more marked in the Paris Region than in the country at large.

Thanks to the surveys available, then, we are able to provide an empirical description of the two facets of feelings of insecurity, with an abstract concern on the one hand, and concrete fears for oneself and one's loved ones on the other. These findings enabled us to study how feelings of insecurity are distributed in different portions of society; public security policies over the last half-century are the subject of another chapter of this synthesis.

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Find out more by reading Robert Ph., Zauberman R., 2017, *Du sentiment d'insécurité à l'État sécuritaire*, Lormont, Éditions Le Bord de l'Eau

Figure 6: A typology of fears and concern about crime in French society (2007-2012)



Source: CESDIP based on INSEE findings (CVS)

Coverage: metropolitan France