

ARE FEELINGS ABOUT CRIME CHANGING ?

In a previous issue (1999, 10), Philippe ROBERT, senior researcher, and Marie-Lys POTTIER, researcher, analyzed fear of crime during the period extending from the mid-1970s to the mid 1990s. This time their findings are for recent years, and suggest a possible serious change in feelings about crime.

During the 2001 election campaign for municipal officials, the press unanimously proclaimed that insecurity due to crime ranked high among the haunting preoccupations of the citizenry. As long as people were completely haunted by the concern about unemployment, many of those who were "crime concerned" had hesitated to voice their concern too loudly ; one had to be truly obsessed with it to consider it more important than unemployment. When apprehension about the job situation began to subside somewhat, more people felt they could legitimately admit their concern about crime to pollsters. Incidental reasons may perhaps have further encouraged that upsurge. In local elections, broad societal issues such as unemployment and poverty tend to fade into the background, to be replaced by local concerns such as the protection of persons and property. Furthermore, the link between concern for security and right and extreme-right wing political positions is no secret ; people with those leanings, who are generally dissatisfied with the political parties that supposedly represent them, may have used the heated expression of their feelings about insecurity as a legitimate means of expressing themselves. Lastly, a snowball effect was produced by the eagerness of candidates to echo concerns with security, if only for no other reason than to better be silent on what polls showed to be the other major issue : the environment. Irrespective of the possible role of these incidental reasons in accounting for the importance of fear of crime in the municipal election campaign, politicians, journalists and essayists all seem convinced that the issue will play an equally important role in public debate during the 2002 presidential and legislative election campaigns.

However, close scrutiny of the material available leads us to postulate that under cover of all the agitation in the mass media, substantial changes are taking place.

Fear of crime or concern with crime ?

Some semantics are required here, as a preamble. The term used in public debate in France, *le sentiment d'insécurité*, falls apart on closer inspection. On the one hand we have the fear, for oneself and one's loved ones, of falling victim to some offender ; on the other hand, there is concern with offending as a social problem. The two are easily confused, since the "fearful" are also often "concerned", and vice versa. The two facets do differ considerably nonetheless. Fear seems to be a sort of anticipation of a risk, whence its link with local indicators of recorded offending or victimization, and of violence in particular. However, this perception of a danger depends on how vulnerable one feels. The prospect of being attacked is more frightening at an age when a broken bone does not heal as well. Women for

whom the possibility of being raped lurks behind any physical violence tend to panic more easily. And again, it is all the more frightening to fall victim to an offense that seems to be linked to living conditions in a neighborhood one cannot leave for lack of financial resources. Fear of crime may be broken down, then : within a given population, during a single survey, scores may vary considerably and a number of patterns be seen, depending on whether the question is asked about fear in the evening, on the streets, or in people's homes, or in the various types of public transportation, fear for one's self or for one's children. Fear is not the only element involved, however. Fearing offending for oneself or for one's loved ones is one thing, while viewing it as a serious societal problem, or even as the foremost problem, is something else. As opposed to fear, concern of this sort is usually less connected to exposure to a risk, but conversely, it seems to be relatively dependent on the person's educational background and adaptability.

In a previous study¹ we concentrated on fear and concern with crime ; we will return to the subject shortly, with new findings. For the time being, however, we will focus exclusively on concern, to determine whether the present trends are incidental or reflect some more structural transformations.

Concern about crime, xenophobia, punitiveness

In 1998 a Figaro-SOFRES "barometer", in use between 1974 and 1987, was reinstated. It asks those polled which issue they thought should be given priority by the government. The first year, 1998, "combating violence and crime" was on a par with its averages for the earlier period, after which it doubled, reaching 32 % in December 2000 (and a much higher figure subsequently). The annual survey financed by the *Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme* (National Consultative Committee on Human Rights), tends to find concern with crime relatively stable. Its protocol is quite different, however : the idea is to se-

¹ROBERT (Ph.), POTTIER (M.L.), On ne se sent plus en sécurité; délinquance et insécurité : une enquête sur deux décennies, *Revue Française de Science Politique*, 1997, 47, 6 pp. 707-740. Shorter versions may be found in the above-mentioned issue of Penal Issues as well as in ROBERT (Ph.), POTTIER (M.L.), Le sentiment d'insécurité, in the collective work: *L'État de la France, un panorama unique et complet de la France*, Paris, la Découverte, 1999, pp. 96-98 ; ROBERT (Ph.), Insécurité et sentiment d'insécurité, *Revue de la Gendarmerie Nationale*, 1999, 190-191, pp. 80-82 ; a contextualization may be found in ROBERT (Ph.), *Le citoyen, le crime et l'Etat*, Genève-Paris, Droz, 1999.

²LAGRANGE (H.), La perception de la violence par l'opinion publique, *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 1984, XXV, pp. 636-657 - has shown that this barometer is extremely sensitive to short-term fluctuations in public debate, but that those incidental oscillations then smooth out and must therefore be carefully distinguished from long-term trends.

lect three main concerns for French society. Nonetheless, its campaign for 2000 ascribes a figure of 28 % – barely lower than the barometer – to concern about crime. The December 2000 Agoramétrie survey finds a similar figure (32 %) for people who agree entirely with the statement "one doesn't feel safe any more".

Aside from the fact that it has been conducted yearly since 1977³, the latter survey has the further advantage of showing the existence, alongside of the assertively concerned, of another equally large group of less rabidly concerned, a sort of reserve army of concern about crime. In a previous study we did a second-level analysis of those surveys for the 1977-1996 period, showing that concern about crime generally went hand in hand with the claim that there are too many foreigners (xenophobia) and nostalgia for the death penalty (punitive attitude). The strong correlation between these three opinions seemed to demonstrate the existence of a solid, stable, structured attitude.

However, an examination of recent surveys has led us to wonder whether concern about crime is still as firmly patterned in the same way, since scores for those three questions actually diverge increasingly.

An overall downward trend is evidenced for all three questions during the recent period, but particularly so for indicators of xenophobia and punitive attitudes and less for concern about crime. Moreover, the decline began earlier and is more clear-cut for the former two indicators than for the latter one. In 2000, concern about crime gained the points it had lost between 1996 and 1999⁴, whereas the downward trend in the xenophobia indicator simply faltered and nostalgia for capital punishment plummeted.

We then visualized the possibility that the syndrome composed of these three attitudes would cease to prevail, despite the correlations between them.

At first glance, there was not much in favor of that hypothesis.

Between 1996 and 2000, concern about crime⁵ still has the same features as in previous years. Four variables cause a 50 per cent increment : gender (female), old age (age 65 or over), self-designation as politically right-wing and lastly – and less consistently – less-than-intense affiliation with the main religion (non-practicing or occasionally church-going Catholics). Conversely, self-positioning on the left, especially for high school graduates or beyond, makes one quite immune against concern about crime, since such feelings may be up to four to five times less frequent among college graduates. Secondly, during the same period, the characteristics positively or negatively affecting the belief

that there are too many foreign workers or nostalgia for capital punishment are not seriously different from those that contribute to concern about crime, although gender is more of a factor here than in the former opinion, and conversely, living in the metropolitan Paris area still makes for less xenophobia, whereas Parisians are no longer less concerned with their security, all else being equal.

Annual correspondence analyses⁶ consistently show a definite link between concern about crime, xenophobia and punitive attitude, forming the first factor. Unsurprisingly, the usual criteria are closely correlated. First of all, there is educational level, sometimes age over 65, but also, more spottily, residence in the Paris area, attitude toward religion, some socio-economic categories (teachers and students, the retired, some executives), seriously overlapping with age and education, and again, definitely, political positioning. Of all of the risks (including offending, pollution and accidents) offending is most correlated with that first factor, and with no other one. From 1997 on, opinions on the efficiency of the administration become a part of the same structure as concern about crime/xenophobia/punitiveness. Here too, there is nothing unusual about this : whenever the left is in the majority in Parliament, as was the case in 1997 following the dissolution of the National Assembly, that opinion variable integrates the first factor. This is still true today. It is as if the concerned, well known to be politically right-wing, avoid incriminating the government when it is on their side but unhesitatingly accuse it when their sympathies diverge. To put it otherwise : concerned view crime as a societal problem when their side is governing, but as a political problem when their opponents are in power.

By and large, this analysis seems to corroborate earlier findings : concern about crime is definitely part of an attitudinal syndrome including a punitive dimension along with xenophobia.

Is concern about crime becoming uncoupled ?

These preliminary tests are not necessarily satisfying, however, and a more thorough analysis may be pursued. We have classed interviewees on the basis of a dichotomy of beliefs for each of the three dimensions. The note 1 was given for answers *definitely agree* or *entirely agree*, and 0 for the others.

This yields a three-figure note for each person, ranging from 111 (concerned, xenophobic, punitive) to 000 (none of the three). Each interviewee is therefore classed in one of the eight resulting groups. These combinations represent the modes of a variable we will call "the trio".

If the distributions were uniform, each mode would represent about 12 % ; this is clearly not the case. The extremes – 111, concerned, xenophobic, punitive and 000, non-concerned, non-xenophobic, non-punitive – constitute the largest groups. Only in three instances – in 1986, 1988 and 1989 – were they equal ; since 1996-1997, a scissor effect has led 000 to increasingly exceed 111 for the first time.

Combinations in which xenophobia and/or punitiveness are not coupled with concern about crime are rare : 001, 010 and 011 are the most infrequent cases, and remain

³Except in 1978, 1979 and 1990. Agoramétrie conducts surveys of small nation-wide samples (about 1,000 people questioned), stratified on the basis of three criteria (age, gender, socio-occupational status). The field work has been done by BVA from the outset. We are grateful to Jean-Pierre Pagès and Agoramétrie for giving us access to their survey findings.

⁴The person interviewed is asked how much he or she agrees with the statements: *there are too many foreign workers* and *the death penalty should be reinstated*.

⁵This is mostly true for the moderately "fearful", whereas the number of assertively "fearful" people remains lower than in 1996.

⁶Unless otherwise specified, the term is used hereafter to designate those people who "definitely agreed" or "completely agreed" with the opinion *one doesn't feel safe any more*.

⁷These findings were obtained by logistic regression analysis and measured by the odds ratio of those variables significant at the 5 % confidence level.

⁸In these analyses, opinions are the active variables; the interviewees' characteristics as well as the risks are introduced as supplementary variables.

practically level throughout the period. Similarly, the combinations concern about crime/xenophobia (110) and concern about crime/punitiveness (101) have remained practically stable, but are slightly more frequent.

Concern about crime only (100), on the other hand, is encountered more often, and was actually a rapidly growing mode at the end of the period. This upsurge, from 1994 on, led it to distance 111 for the last year investigated.

Each year, a simple cross-tabulation of the trio variable with the characteristics of the interviewees indicates the sociological composition of each group. A look at cross-tabulations for the three groups whose weight and structure have tended to change tells us what has happened to them.

Positions favoring 000 are gaining weight, while those favoring 111 are dwindling. A scissor effect may even be seen in between, with people going from 111 to 000. In the last years this is true for women as well as for men. Similar, the leanings of the under-35 group are increasingly towards 000, whereas people over 65 express an increasingly moderate preference for 111. A scissor effect is evidenced for the age 50-64 group in the late years, precipitating a majority of them into the 000 camp for the first time. Other examples : people with at least a high school degree are increasingly massively 000, whereas the least educated are apt to moderate their traditional allegiance to the 111 group. Or again, right-wingers and the politically indifferent are much less massively 111, whereas the left increasingly professes to be 000 ; as for the center, the scissor sends it in the same direction... The 111 bastions are crumbling, the 000s are growing stronger.

Whereas the concern about crime/xenophobia/punitiveness trio is losing ground in all attributes, for all relevant criteria, the same is not quite true for people who are simply concerned about crime.

Let us take a look at this latter group (the 100 trio). It grew rapidly, percentage-wise, in the last years, for men as well as among women. It grew markedly for all age groups, but especially among the very young. Similarly, an increase was found for all educational levels, but more particularly for high school graduates. An increment is seen for all attitudes toward religion, but more saliently for practicing Catholics, despite that group's ill-disposition toward the concern about crime/xenophobia/punitiveness trio. Lastly, the most striking increase in fear of crime is to be found among those interviewees who define themselves as middle-of-the-road, politically speaking.

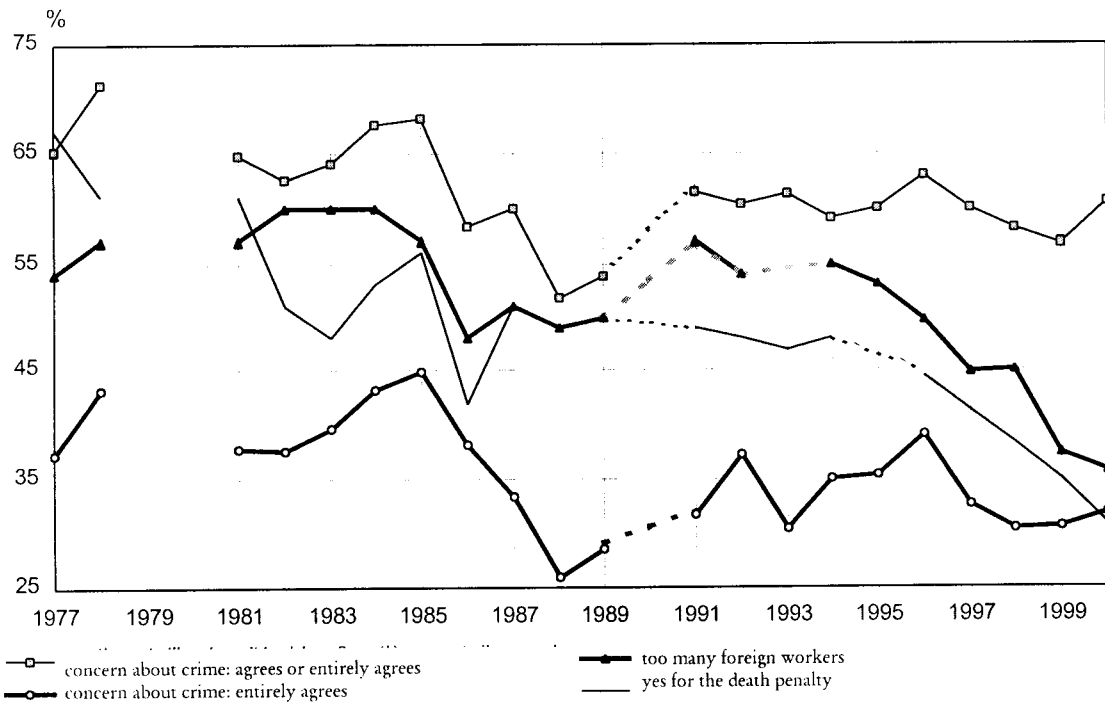
In the last analysis, a new pattern seems to be emerging for the *concerned*, one which expands as the old vision of *concerned* people as xenophobic and nostalgic of capital punishment fades away. Concern about crime is no longer exclusively one of a number of elements of a more all-inclusive tension, it increasingly appears to be an independent concern.

The drop in concern about crime between 1996 and 1999 reflected the loss of substance registered in the concern about crime/xenophobia/punitiveness trio, found in attitudes favoring the extreme-right or ultra-rightist positions. The across-the-board rise in 2000 indicates the emergence of concern about crime as a new, independent concern.

Our conclusion, at least momentarily, is :

- i) people admit their concern with crime more readily ;
- ii) above all, such concern is no longer affected with what used to be a systematic link with xenophobia and punitiveness, which two opinions have experienced a much more serious decline. Admitting one's concern with crime thus becomes more acceptable in that form for some categories of people who formerly hesitated to proclaim it.

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Note : The dotted lines show linear interpolations for gaps in data

Figure 1 : Trends in opinions: concern about crime, xenophobia and punitiveness (1977-2000)

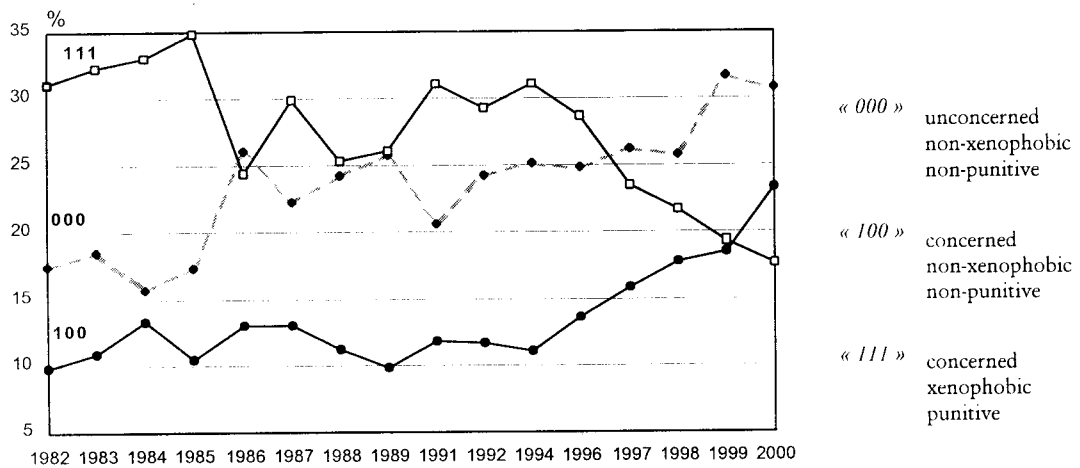


Figure 2 : Trends in the main « trio » groups (between 1982 and 2000)