# A Cross-National Multilevel Analysis of Fear of Crime: Exploring the Roles of Institutional Confidence and Institutional Performance


## Abstract

Drawing upon Wave 7 of the World Value Survey, this study performed multilevel analysis on fear of crime among 47,996 residents from 36 diverse nations. Confidence in the government and perceived government performance were identified as significant predictors of crime fear. Further analysis showed the effect of confidence in the government stemmed primarily from between-country variation, whereas both within-country and between-country variation in perceived government performance shaped fear of crime. In addition, macroeconomic factors and the proportion of urban population were found to be salient country-level predictors. The findings contextualize the elevated fear of crime in some countries despite declining crime rates and inform the recommendation that institutional confidence and performance be prioritized in crime fear reduction efforts.


## Introduction

Fear of crime research first emerged in the United States in the mid-1960s and proliferated in the next three decades (Doran & Burgess, 2012, p. 3; Farrall et al., 2000), extending to other countries including the UK (e.g., Brunton-Smith, 2011; Hale, 1990), Australia (e.g., Borooah & Carcach, 1997), and more recently, various developing nations (e.g., Boateng, 2019; Martínez-Ferrer et al., 2018; Zhang, Messner, Liu, and Zhuo, 2009). While there is an abundance of research on fear of crime at the individual and neighborhood levels within different countries, very little research, in contrast, has been devoted to unveiling the factors and mechanisms influencing the variation of fear of crime across nations. The only comparative study on this topic focused on countries within the same region of Europe (e.g., Antonsson, 2018); no known attempt has been made to assess the patterns of variation across a wider range of countries with diverse economic, social, political, and cultural characteristics.

There are several reasons why exploring the factors and mechanisms driving the variation of fear of crime across nations is a meaningful research question. First, while numerous studies have identified individual and neighborhood level predictors of fear of crime, it remains unclear

whether these predictors are generalizable across national contexts. Furthermore, limited by regional confines, past studies have not been able to illuminate how macro-level forces at the national level, such as the disparate levels of economic development and varying performance of public institutions around the world, influence fear of crime. A cross-national, multilevel study on fear of crime not only allows for a thorough investigation into both the individual-level as well as national-level factors and mechanisms on fear of crime, but also enables the accurate attribution of any individual-level influences to variations within or between countries and will thus further our existing understanding of some of these well-researched micro-and-meso-level predictors.

In addition, this study pays special attention to the role of public institutions in shaping fear of crime. Past individual-level studies have shown mixed findings on the efficacy of the presence and quality of law enforcement as well as confidence in the police on fear of crime (Hauser & Kleck, 2017; Lee, et al., 2020; Marsman, 2007; Renauer, 2007; Wire, 2019), and a handful have shown that the availability of quality governmental services beyond those provided by the criminal justice system (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Lewis & Salem, 1986; McGarell et. al., 1997) predict a reduction in crime fear. When comparing across countries, the role of public institutions is, conceivably, of even greater significance, as the organization and performance of public institutions vary drastically across nations, and institutional performance may be evaluated with different criteria by citizens of different countries. It is thus one of the main goals of this study to launch a more thorough investigation into the effects of multiple public institutions, including the criminal justice institutions and the government more broadly conceived, on fear of crime.

In the latest wave (Wave 7) of the World Value Survey published in the summer of 2020, researchers were afforded, for the first time, the opportunity to empirically explore the mechanisms of fear of crime among dozens of nations across several continents. Drawing upon the existing literature on fear of crime, this study explores the multilevel mechanisms of fear of crime among 47,996 residents across 36 economically and culturally diverse nations. In addition to the multilevel design, this study is focused on unpacking the effects of institutional confidence and institutional performance on fear of crime both within and across nations.

## Literature Review

### Explaining Fear of Crime

One of the most widely accepted definitions of fear of crime conceptualizes it as "negative emotional reactions generated by crime or symbols associated with crime (Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987, p. 72)." This definition considers both the emotional responses to fear-producing situations and circumstances as well as the cognitive assessments of risk for victimization (Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987; Ferraro, 1995; Rountree & Land, 1996). Some researchers have found that individuals with greater fear of crime are more likely to engage in defensive and avoidance behaviors than individuals who exhibit little fear (DuBow, McCabe, & Kaplan, 1979; Ferraro, 1995; Garofalo, 1981; Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978; Liska, Sanchirico, & Reed, 1988; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981), which leads to lower levels of violence involvement and reduces the risks of victimization (Jackson & Gray, 2010; Melde, Berg, & Esbensen, 2016). However, other researchers have found that excessive fear of crime is detrimental to the mental wellbeing of the individual (e.g., Pearson & Breetzke, 2014; Stafford, Chandola, & Marmot, 2007). In addition, the undue focus on the fear of "street crimes" misdirects public attention from white-collar crimes that may exert more negative economic and

social impacts (Hale, 1996). Regarding the origin of fear of crime, the existing literature does not provide a coherent theoretical perspective. However, three domains of predictors have been identified in the literature to explain the etiology of fear of crime: idiosyncratic risk of victimization and vulnerability to victimization, disorderly neighborhood characteristics, and institutional confidence and institutional performance.

***Risk of Victimization and Vulnerability to Victimization***

Researchers have long argued that the physical risks of victimization, which seem intuitive in explaining the fear of victimization, may not be in and of itself a robust predictor of fear, as young males who are at the greatest risk of criminal victimization were found to exhibit the least degrees of fear (Goodey, 1994; Stanko & Hobdell, 1993; Walklate, 1994). Recent research on delinquent youths has unveiled more complicated mechanisms between actual risks, perceptions of risks, and the fear of victimization. While proximity and exposure to motivated offenders, such as being associated with delinquent peers, greatly increased one's actual and perceived odds of being victimized, Gialopsos (2011) found that it did not predict a higher level of fear of victimization. Melde and Esbensen (2009) even reported a greater decrease in school-based fear of victimization among youths who became involved in a more delinquent lifestyle than more prosocial youth, although the greater perceived risk of victimization did predict a higher level of fear. This finding was further contextualized in another study by Melde and colleagues (2016) on gang members, which showed that while gang membership predicted an increased risk of victimization and greater perceived risk, it corresponded to lower levels of emotional fear of crime. The authors explained that gang members were expected to appear tough and fearless to maintain their place in the gang as part of the subculture and identity of gang life, which translated into being able to control their emotional fear. Furthermore, a sense of

belonging and solidarity from gang affiliation may have also reduced emotional fear despite heightened risks.

Related to, but distinct from the risk of victimization is an individual's vulnerability to victimization. According to Killias (1990), the presence of risk alone is not adequate in generating fear; the inability to defend oneself from the risks and the severity of the consequence (e.g., death or severe injury) are also necessary. Research has consistently shown that women, individuals with low socioeconomic status, individuals with disabilities, and the elderly exhibit higher levels of fear of crime due to their vulnerability to criminal victimization (Clemente & Kleiman, 1976, 1977; Hale, 1996; Killias & Clerici, 2000; Pantazis, 2000; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981; Warr, 1994). Another aspect of the vulnerability thesis considers the impact of prior victimization on fear. Research has repeatedly shown that prior experiences of victimization or witnessing victimization predict elevated levels of fear (Lee, et al., 2020; Nalla et al., 2011).

Furthermore, self-perceived vulnerability does not simply stem from the actual physical vulnerability against victimization, but also the social-psychological mechanisms that exacerbate the *perceptions* of vulnerability. Jackson (2009), for instance, found that women worry more frequently about crime than men not only because they feel less able to physically defend themselves, but also because they have lower perceived self-efficacy (i.e., the capacity to mobilize resources and exercise control over given events) and higher perceived negative impact from victimization. In a similar vein, while the perception that one is in the racial minority in one's neighborhood influences one's fear of victimization, the perception only elevates fear among whites but not among blacks (Chiricos, Hogan, & Gertz, 1997).

***Disorderly Neighborhood Characteristics***

At the neighborhood level, neighborhood characteristics such as physical and social disorder, collective efficacy, and street code also predict higher levels of fear of crime. Studies have documented that neighborhoods with signs of physical and social disorder (Ferraro, 1995; LaGrange et al., 1992; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981; Taylor & Covington, 1993; Yuan, Dong, & Melde, 2017) and neighborhoods with lower levels of collective efficacy report higher levels of fear of crime (Brunton-Smith, Jackson, & Sutherland, 2014; Gibson, Zhao, Lovrich, & Gaffney, 2002). The subcultural practices emanating from these structural conditions of disorder also elevate fear of crime. McNeely and Yuan's (2017) study found that individual belief in the code of the street was positively related to emotional fear of violent crime; at the neighborhood level, the code of the street was associated with higher perceived risk.

***Institutional Performance and Institutional Confidence***

Crime is public harm and the provision of public safety falls on the shoulders of public institutions. Thus, institutional confidence and the quality of institutional performance are crucial to managing ordinary people's fear of crime[i]. A preponderance of the research on public institutions has been focused on criminal justice institutions. Criminal justice responses and various attitudes toward the criminal justice system have been investigated as predictors of fear of crime within different nations, although the evidence is mixed as to whether these effects exist and in what direction. In the US, research has shown that neither police force size and productivity (Hauser & Kleck, 2017) nor police proactivity (Wire, 2019) has an effect on citizens' fear of crime. Citizens' perceived quality of police services (Dietz, 1997) was found to have little effect on fear of crime in a study conducted in Austin, Texas, whereas a more recent study of residents in five Western US states found a significant reductive effect of perceived quality police service on fear of crime (Lee, et al., 2020). A study in Portland, in contrast, has

documented the fear-elevating effect of the police: fear of police encounters, along with police effectiveness, is found to be *positively* associated with emotional fear of crime (Renauer, 2007). A recent study in South Korea (Han & Connell, 2020) documented a null effect of the presence of school police on adolescent students' fear of school violence. One study in Ghana, in comparison, reported a reductive effect from police effectiveness and police visibility in the neighborhood on fear of crime (Boateng, 2019). The effects of confidence in the police on fear of crime are also mixed. A study in the US (Hauser & Kleck, 2017) and the aforementioned study in Ghana (Boateng, 2019) both found a modest effect between police confidence and fear of crime, and a study in Mexico (Martínez-Ferrer et al., 2018) revealed interactive effects between trust in police and demographic variables such as gender and age, suggesting that trust in police is a salient predictor of lower fear of crime only among women, adolescents, and young people. Another study in the Netherlands (Marsman, 2007), however, showed no effect from trust in the police on citizens' fear of crime.

Beyond the criminal justice institutions, confidence in the government as a whole and the performance of the government may be just as important in shaping fear of crime. The criminal justice system only responds to crimes as they occur, but the government, broadly conceived, is responsible for minimizing the conditions of deprivation that cause crimes and allocating resources to fighting crimes. The government assumes an equally (if not more) substantial role in crime prevention and crime control. In contrast to the largely insignificant effect of the performance of and confidence in the criminal justice institutions, the limited research on other branches of the government seems to consistently suggest that the availability and quality of municipal (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993) and other governmental services (Lewis & Salem, 1986; McGarell et. al., 1997) have a reduction effect on fear of crime. This promising yet still

underdeveloped avenue of research requires further probing with up-to-date data and analytic techniques.

## Potential Cross-National Predictors of Fear of Crime

Although we have a robust understanding of the factors that influence fear of crime at the individual and neighborhood levels, little research has been conducted to study how the characteristics of society as a whole affect a nation's level of fear of crime. To this end, Nisbett and Cohen's (1996) "culture of honor" thesis may offer some insight. In explaining the influence of macro-factors on the etiology of violence, the pair argued that in societies where economic conditions are precarious and social control is believed to be ineffective in protecting its citizens, the people are more likely to engage in violence as a way to defend what they deem as their legitimate rights (i.e., a culture of honor). A couple of empirical studies have tested the culture of honor thesis and found that the culture of honor significantly predicts crime rate variation across countries (Altheimer, 2013; Corcoran & Stark, 2018). Casting this theoretical perspective upon fear of crime, it is conceivable that individuals in these societies are also likely to develop an elevated fear of crime, which may be what leads to defensive behaviors such as violence. Following this line of reasoning, I will review, in the next section, several potential national-level factors (measuring economic precarity and ineffective social control) posited to predict fear of crime: violent crime rates, economic deprivation, and institutional performance and institutional confidence.

### *Violent Crime Rates and Economic Deprivation*

Building upon the risk of victimization thesis of fear of crime, it is conceivable that in countries where national crime rates are higher, fear of crime may also be elevated, as the risk of exposure to victimization increases. Another national-level factor that may contribute to fear of

crime is economic deprivation, which has been repeatedly identified as the most salient predictor of cross-national variation of violent crime rates (see Nivette, 2011 and Trent & Pridemore, 2012 for a comprehensive review of this literature), and is congruent with the conceptual element of economic precarity in the culture of honor thesis. Absolute deprivation is often measured by low average national income, high poverty and unemployment rates, low levels of education, poor health outcome, difficult access to health care, or an index of several of these factors, such as the United Nation's Human Development Index. Relative deprivation refers to the high level of economic inequality in a society and is typically measured by the Gini Index. Economic deprivation engenders a sense of insecurity and precarity, which are likely to intensify vulnerability and fear. Indeed, one of the very few cross-national studies on fear of crime analyzed data from 29 countries in the European Social Survey and the findings confirmed that individuals in societies with greater income inequalities are more fearful of crime (Vauclair & Bratanova, 2017).

***Institutional Performance and Institutional Confidence***

Institutional performance and institutional confidence reflect the efficacy of social control in society. In the cross-national context, the role of public institutions in shaping fear of crime is likely to be more significant, as the organization and performance of public institutions vary drastically across nations, and institutions of a similar level of performance may be perceived very differently by residents of different countries due to broader cultural factors. Furthermore, the influence of public institutions beyond just the criminal justice institutions should also be considered more closely, as different political configurations may place varying degrees of crime-control accountability upon different public institutions: in countries where the administration of justice is more clearly separate from the executive branch, the criminal justice

institutions may be held to a greater degree of accountability than in countries where justice is less independent from executive influence.

Empirically, only one study that the author is aware of has examined the effect of public institutions beyond criminal justice on fear of crime. Antonsson (2018) investigated the effect of perceived quality of governance on fear of crime across 18 European countries and found that it was one of the most significant and strongest predictors of fear of crime in his multilevel analyses. This finding suggests that the performance of and confidence in the government may be a more important factor in shaping fear of crime at the national level, as compared to those of the criminal justice institutions. Given that countries in the European Union are more similar to each other than to those outside of the EU, it remains unclear whether and to what extent confidence in the government and the quality of government performance influence fear of crime across a larger and more diverse group of nations.

## The Current Study

The current study is one of the first to perform a multilevel analysis on fear of crime across a wide range of countries from several continents. The significance of the current study does not simply rest on the fact that multilevel cross-national research has not been conducted on this topic, but that such a research design makes possible a more in-depth investigation of important institutional variables previously under-examined in the empirical literature on fear of crime. Building on previous research on fear of crime, the current study is intended to explore the roles of institutional confidence and institutional performance on fear of crime at both the individual and national levels, and investigate the effects of macro, national-level social and economic characteristics on fear of crime while controlling for other individual-level factors. In particular, the following hypotheses were developed and tested:

Hypothesis 1: Confidence in criminal justice institutions reduce fear of crime at the individual level, net of other factors.

Hypothesis 2: Confidence in non-criminal-justice public institutions reduce fear of crime at the individual level, net of other factors.

Hypothesis 3: Higher perceived quality of institutional performance reduce fear of crime at the individual level, net of other factors.

Hypothesis 4: The effects specified in Hypothesis 1 through 3, if present, result primarily from between-country variation as opposed to within-country variation.

Hypothesis 5: National-level social and economic factors influence individual-level fear of crime, net of other factors.

## Methods

### Data

The data for this study came from Wave 7 (2017-2020) of the World Value Survey (WVS). The WVS is a repeated, cross-sectional survey distributed across over 70 countries since 1981. In Wave 7, 129,000 respondents from 77 countries and societies on all inhabited continents around the globe were interviewed. As not all modules of survey questions were asked in every country, the final sample for analysis consists of 47,996 cases from 36 countries across several continents, after selecting the relevant variables. Missing data were handled using listwise deletion. Table 1 contains a list of the participating countries, sampling information in each country, as well as their respective levels of crime fear. As is demonstrated in Table 1, the participating countries represent a wide range of economic development levels, cultural traditions, and political systems.

### Variables

### *Dependent Variable*

The dependent variable, "fear of crime," was measured by a single survey item from Wave 7 of the WVS. The respondents were asked the frequency in the past 12 months that they or their family felt unsafe from crime in their own home. The response categories were 1 "Never" (29,945 respondents, or 62.39% of all respondents), 2 "Rarely" (8,713 respondents, or 18.15% of all respondents), 3 "Sometimes" (6,562 respondents, or 13.67% of all respondents), and 4 "Often" (2,776 respondents, or 5.78% of all respondents).

### *Independent Variables*

**Individual-Level Variables.** The demographic and socioeconomic variables included at the individual level include sex (1= "male" and 0= "female"), age (in years), highest education (1= "elementary," 2= "secondary," 3= "post-secondary," and 4= "tertiary and above"), employment status (1= "unemployed," and 0= "employed"), household income (1= "low," 2= "medium," 3= "high"), and location of residence (1= "urban" and 0= "rural"). Confidence in public institutions was measured by respondents' reported confidence in the government, confidence in the police, and confidence in the judiciary. The response categories ranged from 1, "None at all" to 4, "A great deal." Satisfaction with the political system was measured by a 10-point scale ranging from 1, "Not satisfied at all" to 10, "Completely satisfied." To be consistent with other ordinal scales in the study, the variable was recast into a 4-point scale. Trust in others in society was measured by whether the respondent agreed that "most people can be trusted" (1= "yes" and 0= "no"). Trust in one's neighborhood were also measured by respondents' self-reported trust, ranging from 1, "None at all" to 4, "A great deal." Prior history of victimization was measured by two binary items (0= "No," and 1= "Yes") of the respondents' reported criminal victimization in the past year experienced by themselves or their family.

**Country-Level Variables.** The Human Development Index (HDI) was used to measure absolute economic deprivation. It is a composite index (ranging from 0 to 1) of life expectancy at birth, expected years of schooling, mean years of schooling, and GNI per capita (PPP dollar). The HDI used in this study was drawn from the 2018 Human Development Reports compiled by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)[ii]. The homicide rates variable in this study was constructed using UNDP's global homicide estimates. The homicide rates per 100, 000 people over a six-year span, from 2012 to 2018, were averaged to minimize fluctuations due to year-to-year anomalies, which is also common practice in macro-level research (e.g., Borg and Parker 2001; Krivo and Peterson 1996; Morenoff et al. 2001). Gini Index is a measure of income inequality on a scale from 0 to 100 and is used in this study to control for relative economic deprivation. Scores of 0 indicate complete equality and scores of 100 indicate complete inequality. In this study, the latest available Gini Index between 2012 and 2019 estimated by the World Bank was adopted. The percentage of the urban population in the total population was taken from the World Bank's 2019 estimates. Global Freedom Status is a rating developed by the Freedom House. It ranges from a minimal freedom rating of 0 to a maximum of 10. 2020 estimates were used in this study. Corruption Perceptions Index or the CPI, developed by Transparency International, scores and ranks countries/territories based on how corrupt a country's public sector is perceived to be by experts and business executives. It is a composite index ranging from 0 "highly corrupt" to 100 "very clean." The 2019 estimates were used in this study. Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics of all variables included in the data analysis.

**Analytic Strategy**

Due to the multilevel nature of the data and the ordinal structure of the dependent variable, two-level, random-intercept ordered logistic models and two-level, random-coefficient

models were estimated. Level 1 consists of individual level variables characterizing the 47,996 individual responses, and Level 2 consists of national level variables characterizing the 36 country "clusters" among the 47,996 individual responses. Multilevel modeling is appropriate for this study as it accounts for nonindependence of individuals within national clusters above and beyond traditional regression techniques (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). The first random-intercept model, which only included the individual level variables, partitions residual variance into a between-country component (i.e., the random intercept) and a within-country component. The second random-intercept model included both individual and national level variables, which, in addition to partitioning the within-country and between-country variation, allows for the attribution of variation in individual attitudes (i.e., fear of crime) to country-level characteristics. It also improves statistical estimation of individual-level effects by adjusting the standard errors of the coefficients of the national-level factors (RabeHesketh & Skrondal, 2008). Finally, the random-coefficient models enabled a closer investigation into the between-country variation by expanding the form of variation from intercept only to the linear coefficients as well. Since the analysis does not require a meaningful interpretation of the model intercepts, mean centering was not performed prior to the analysis. Checks for multicollinearity indicated no problems; the highest variance inflation factor was 2.12.

**Results**

Before running the multilevel models, an intercept-only, unconditional model was first estimated (not presented in the tables). The likelihood ratio test against the one-level ordered logistic regression model ($\chi^2 = 7765.43$, $p < .00001$) suggested that there was a substantial amount of variation nested between countries, justifying the following multilevel analysis to further partition the within-country and between-country variation. The interclass correlation

coefficient (ICC) registered .22 for the unconditional model, suggesting that 22% of the variation in fear of crime resulted from variation between countries.

Table 3 summarizes the results from estimating two random intercept models. Model 1 included only individual-level predictors, and Model 2 included both individual-level and country-level predictors. The chi-squared tests against the unconditional model indicated that both models significantly improved upon the unconditional model (Model 1 $\chi^2 = 2007.68$, $p < .00001$; Model 2 $\chi^2 = 2026.08$, $p < .00001$). In Model 1, the ICC registered .18, suggesting that 18% of the variation in fear of crime can be accounted for by which country the respondent lived in. In other words, 4% of the between-country variation has been reflected in the random intercept, reducing the unspecified between-country variation to 18%. Considering specific predictors, all the individual demographic and socioeconomic characteristics significantly predicted fear of crime. In particular, being male, more educated, and having a higher income predicted lower log odds of experiencing a higher level of fear of crime, while being older, unemployed, and residing in urban areas predicted higher log odds of experiencing a higher level of fear of crime. Considering institutional trust and perceived institutional performance, only trust in government and satisfaction with the political system were significant predictors of higher log odds of fear of crime; trust in court or police were not significant predictors. General social trust was also found to be non-significant, compared to the significant effect of trust in the neighborhood. Prior experience of criminal victimization by oneself or family members also predicted higher log odds of fear of crime. In Model 2, the corresponding ICC registered .11, suggesting that 11% of the variation in fear of crime can be explained by which country the respondent was from. In other words, 7% of the unspecified between-country variation in fear of crime from Model 1 was successfully explained by the national level predictors added to Model

2, reducing the unspecified between-country variation to only 11%. All the significant individual-level predictors in Model 1 remained significant and none of the previously insignificant variables registered statistical significance. Furthermore, a higher Gini Index and a higher proportion of urban population predicted higher log odds of fear of crime, whereas a higher HDI predicted lower log odds.

Table 4 summarizes the results from estimating the random coefficient models. Model 3 included all the variables from Model 2, a random intercept estimate, plus a random coefficient estimate for confidence in the government. Likelihood ratio test ($\chi^2 = 119.35$, $p < .00001$) indicated that Model 3 significantly improved upon Model 2 by explaining more variability in the dependent variable. All the significant variables in Model 2 remained significant in Model 3, with the exception of confidence in the government, which was no longer significant after the inclusion of a random coefficient. Model 4 estimated the random coefficient of satisfaction with the political system, and while the model significantly improved upon Model 2 as indicated by the likelihood ratio test ($\chi^2 = 139.60$, $p < .00001$), it did not substantially change the significance level of the previously significant predictors in Model 2.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study represents one of the very first to examine how fear of crime is shaped by factors at multiple levels and across a diverse range of countries from several continents. While many of the well-established individual-level factors remain significant predictors of fear of crime across national contexts, the findings of this study shed a new light on the effects of institutional perceptions on fear of crime: confidence in criminal justice institutions was not found to be a significant predictor of fear, contrary to the significant effects of confidence in the government and perceived government performance (and thus Hypothesis 1 is rejected, and

Hypotheses 2 and 3 are accepted). Moreover, this study found that between-country difference accounted for all the predictive effect of confidence in the government on fear of crime, whereas perceived government performance, measured by satisfaction with the political system, is predictive of fear of crime both within a country and between them (and thus Hypothesis 4 regarding institutional confidence is accepted, and rejected regarding institutional performance). In addition, several country-level factors, such as economic development and deprivation, economic inequality, and the proportion of the urban population, were also found to be salient predictors of fear of crime (and thus Hypothesis 5 is accepted).

The null effect of confidence in criminal justice institutions on fear of crime is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Marsman, 2007), and the significant effect of confidence in the government and perceived political performance of the government found in this study reinvigorates findings from dated research conducted in the domestic context of the US (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Lewis & Salem, 1986; McGarell et. al., 1997), extending this lesson to the international arena. Indeed, variation in perceived quality of government performance within a country *and* between countries explains a substantial variation of fear of crime, suggesting that the government as a whole, as opposed to the criminal justice system alone, is a more critical institution in the management of public fear. As speculated, crime-control accountability may fall more heavily on the executive branch of the government in countries where the administration of justice is not fully independent from executive influence. As most countries included in the current study are developing countries, it is conceivable that the government may assume a greater degree of responsibility in crime-control than criminal justice institutions, and confidence in the government may be more sensitive to fear of crime as compared to confidence in criminal justice institutions.

In contrast to satisfaction with the political system, the effect on fear of crime from confidence in the government was mostly explained by between-country variation only, which was demonstrated in the random coefficient model. One possible explanation may be that compared to institutional performance, institutional confidence is more easily influenced by factors specific to the national cultural contexts of a country: while the evaluation of performance is a rational, cognitive task, confidence and trust appeal to a sentimentality that may have more to do with a sense of historically cumulated and culturally specific identity (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Past studies on police legitimacy, for instance, have shown that while police procedural justice improves citizens' perceptions of police legitimacy, such an improvement is slow and gradual, due to the historically and culturally developed mistrust of police in some communities (see Nagin & Telep, 2020 for a comprehensive review). Furthermore, the strength of the very connection between institutional performance and institutional trust may differ across countries too. For instance, studies have documented that Chinese citizens' trust in government is very sensitive to their perception of the government's actual performance (e.g., Han, Lin, & Tao, 2019), given the specific state-society relations in China. Such a historically cultivated and culturally specific moral economy (Perry, 2008), however, should not be assumed to automatically exist in other developing countries as well.

Considering the country-level predictors, while it is unsurprising that social and economic indicators such as the HDI, Gini Index, and urbanization are correlated with fear, as these factors are all saliently criminogenic at the macro-level (Nivette, 2011; Trend & Pridemore, 2012), it is bewildering, at least at first glance, that national homicide rate is unrelated to fear of crime. However, upon closer scrutinization, this finding is consistent with the trends we witness in the US, the UK, as well as other developed countries around the world.

Despite the officially documented decline in crime rates since the mid-1990s, pervasive public concerns over "rising crime rates" persist in these developed countries (Flatley, 2017; Gramlich, 2018). Such a cognitive dissonance between the public perception and the empirical reality of crime has been attributed by some to the sensationalization of crime by the domestic mass media (e.g., Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018; Hale, 1996), but as this study illustrated, economic and political vulnerabilities at both the individual and national levels constitute, at the minimum, an indispensable background against which fears may be amplified and manipulated by the mass media and calculated politicians. Indeed, this interpretation of the finding is consistent with previous research in the UK demonstrating that the perceptions and interpretations of media content are more important in shaping fear of crime than the sheer frequency of media consumption and/or any objective characteristics of media material (Ditton et al., 2004).

It is also interesting to note that while the subjective perception of the performance of the political system significantly predicts fear of crime, an objective indicator of government performance, namely, corruption, is unrelated. Fear of crime also seems indifferent to the style of a political system characterized by the level of civil and political freedoms. Considering these findings together, it seems that the structural conditions of the political system do not matter as much as the subjective trust and satisfaction with the government or the structural conditions of the economy. This, along with the salient effect of the macro-economic factors, is congruent with the theoretical framework of the "culture of honor" (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996), which places a strong emphasis on the government's ability to provide economic security as well as effective social control, and a less rigid restriction on how political power should be acquired and wielded to achieve these goals (e.g., by way of democratically derived due processes or authoritarianism).

In other words, it is the *totality* of the quality of governance, of which political style is only one facet, that predicts citizen fear of crime.

As the findings of this study suggest, at the national level, fear of crime is closely connected to institutional confidence and institutional performance, and not so much to violent crime rates or media sensationalization of crime. People seem more likely to hold the government accountable, rather than the media or the police. One policy recommendation based on these findings is that public efforts aimed at reducing crime fear should prioritize strengthening public confidence in the government and satisfaction with the government over narrowly focusing on the criminal justice institutions or the mass media.

Concededly, there are two major limitations to this study. First, the current study remains largely exploratory, and as such did not consider all the possible causal mechanisms at the macro-level, nor did it examine any potential interaction effects between variables. Future research should exceed these parameters of the current study. Second, while the study considered 36 countries from several continents, a large number of countries remain missing. Future cross-national data collection efforts may be able to help overcome this structural limitation of the dataset. Despite these limitations, this study represents one of the first to examine how fear of crime is shaped by factors at multiple levels across a diverse range of countries and has revealed several criminologically meaningful insights into the roles of public institutions in shaping fear of crime cross-nationally.

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Table 1 Fear of Crime in Participating Countries (Level-1 N=47996; Level 2 N=36)

| Country (Year Surveyed) | N | % in the sample | Fear of crime* | % feeling often or sometimes unsafe from crime |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Argentina (2017) | 843 | 1.76 | 2.10 | 42.7 |
| Australia (2018) | 1,592 | 3.32 | 1.51 | 12.75 |
| Bangladesh (2018) | 1,165 | 2.43 | 1.38 | 12.62 |
| Bolivia (2017) | 1,831 | 3.81 | 1.83 | 25.40 |
| Brazil (2018) | 1,430 | 2.98 | 2.04 | 38.25 |
| Myanmar (2020) | 1,198 | 2.5 | 1.21 | 8.68 |
| Chile (2018) | 859 | 1.79 | 1.13 | 54.48 |
| China (2018) | 2,897 | 6.04 | 1.31 | 7.53 |
| Colombia (2018) | 1,498 | 3.12 | 1.57 | 17.49 |
| Cyprus (2019) | 761 | 1.59 | 1.39 | 11.04 |
| Ecuador (2018) | 1,128 | 2.35 | 1.77 | 22.52 |
| Germany (2018) | 1,333 | 2.78 | 1.32 | 8.40 |
| Greece (2017) | 1,088 | 2.27 | 1.75 | 24.17 |
| Indonesia (2018) | 3,088 | 6.43 | 1.44 | 13.21 |
| Iran (2020) | 1,421 | 2.96 | 1.48 | 1.56 |
| Iraq (2018) | 1,033 | 2.15 | 1.12 | 36.01 |
| Japan (2019) | 857 | 1.79 | 1.43 | 4.90 |
| Kazakhstan (2018) | 1,006 | 2.1 | 1.29 | 6.16 |
| South Korea (2018) | 1,245 | 2.59 | 1.07 | 1.85 |
| Kyrgyzstan (2020) | 1,066 | 2.22 | 1.16 | 5.16 |
| Lebanon (2018) | 1,163 | 2.42 | 1.39 | 1.58 |
| Malaysia (2018) | 1,312 | 2.73 | 1.95 | 28.35 |
| Mexico (2018) | 1,670 | 3.48 | 2.50 | 52.16 |
| Nicaragua (2019-2020) | 1,199 | 2.5 | 1.82 | 27.11 |
| Pakistan (2018) | 1,681 | 3.5 | 1.70 | 22.61 |
| Peru (2018) | 1,321 | 2.75 | 2.59 | 57.76 |
| Philippines (2019) | 1,196 | 2.49 | 1.83 | 23.41 |
| Romania (2018) | 918 | 1.91 | 1.36 | 9.69 |
| Russia (2017) | 1,427 | 2.97 | 1.28 | 6.66 |
| Serbia (2017) | 866 | 1.8 | 1.25 | 5.08 |
| Vietnam (2020) | 1,165 | 2.43 | 1.42 | 9.79 |
| Zimbabwe (2020) | 1,163 | 2.42 | 1.83 | 24.25 |
| Tajikistan (2020) | 1,101 | 2.29 | 1.20 | 5.81 |
| Thailand (2018) | 1,218 | 2.54 | 1.86 | 3.13 |
| Tunisia (2019) | 1,074 | 2.24 | 1.65 | 2.30 |
| Turkey (2018) | 2,183 | 4.55 | 1.63 | 16.12 |
| Total | 47996 | 100 | - | - |

* Response categories were 1 “Never,” 2 “Rarely,” 3 “Sometimes,” and 4 “Often.”

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics (Level-1 N=47996; Level 2 N=36)

| Variables | N | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Dependent variable* | | | | | |
| Fear of crime | 47996 | 1.63 | .92 | 1 | 4 |
| *Independent variables (individual level)* | | | | | |
| Male | | .48 | .50 | 0 | 1 |
| Age | | 42.19 | 15.85 | 16 | 103 |
| Education level | | 2.38 | 1.02 | 1 | 4 |
| Unemployed | | .08 | .27 | 0 | 1 |
| Income | | 1.81 | .57 | 1 | 3 |
| Urban | | .62 | .49 | 0 | 1 |
| Confidence in police | 47996 | 2.63 | .96 | 1 | 4 |
| Confidence in government | | 2.45 | 1.02 | 1 | 4 |
| Confidence in court | | 2.57 | .96 | 1 | 4 |
| Satisfaction with political system | | 2.47 | .97 | 1 | 4 |
| Trust in neighborhood | | 2.76 | .82 | 1 | 4 |
| Trust in others | | .19 | .40 | 0 | 1 |
| Crime victim | | .10 | .29 | 0 | 1 |
| Family crime victim | | .13 | .33 | 0 | 1 |
| *Independent variables (country level)* | | | | | |
| Homicide rate (per 100,000) | | 5.66 | 7.35 | .20 | 3.50 |
| HDI | | .76 | .10 | .56 | .94 |
| Gini Index | 36 | 38.33 | 6.15 | 27.50 | 53.90 |
| Global Freedom Status | | 52.06 | 26.58 | 9 | 97 |
| Corruption Perception Index | | 39.59 | 14.45 | 20 | 80 |
| Percentage of urban population | | 64.74 | 18.11 | 27.31 | 91.99 |

Table 3 Random Intercept Models (Level-1 N=47996; Level 2 N=36)

| Variables | Model 1 | | Model 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | OR | SE | OR | SE |
| Level-1 variables | | | | |
| Male | .94** | .02 | .94** | .02 |
| Age | 1.00** | .00 | 1.00** | .00 |
| Education level | .97** | .01 | .97** | .01 |
| Unemployed | 1.10** | .04 | 1.10** | .04 |
| Income | .80** | .02 | .80** | .02 |
| Urban | 1.21** | .02 | 1.21** | .02 |
| Confidence in police | .99 | .01 | .99 | .01 |
| Confidence in government | .95** | .01 | .95** | .01 |
| Confidence in court | .99 | .02 | .99 | .02 |
| Satisfaction with political system | .92** | .01 | .92** | .01 |
| Trust in neighborhood | .88** | .01 | .88** | .01 |
| Trust in others | .97 | .03 | .97 | .03 |
| Crime victim | 1.94** | .03 | 1.94** | .03 |
| Family crime victim | 1.87** | .03 | 1.86** | .03 |
| Level-2 variables | | | | |
| Homicide rate (per 100,000) | - | - | .98 | .02 |
| HDI | - | - | .01* | 2.53 |
| Gini Index | - | - | 1.06** | .02 |
| Global Freedom Status | - | - | 1.00 | .01 |
| Corruption Perception Index | - | - | 1.00 | .02 |
| Percentage of urban population | - | - | 1.02* | .01 |
| Variance component | .71 | .17 | .42 | .10 |
| LR $\chi^2$ test vs. unconditional model | 2007.86** | | 2026.08** | |
| Intraclass correlation | .18 | | .11 | |

*p<.05, ** p<.01

Table 4 Random Coefficient Models (Level-1 N=47996; Level 2 N=36)

| Variables | Model 3 | | Model 4 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | OR | SE | OR | SE |
| Level-1 variables | | | | |
| Male | .93** | .02 | .94** | .02 |
| Age | 1.00** | .00 | 1.00** | .00 |
| Education level | .97** | .01 | .97** | .01 |
| Unemployed | 1.10** | .04 | 1.10** | .04 |
| Income | .80** | .01 | .80** | .01 |
| Urban | 1.21** | .03 | 1.21** | .03 |
| Confidence in police | 1.00 | .01 | 1.00 | .01 |
| Confidence in government | .97 | .03 | .96** | .01 |
| Confidence in court | .99 | .02 | .99 | .01 |
| Satisfaction with political system | .93** | .01 | .90** | .03 |
| Trust in neighborhood | .88** | .01 | .89** | .01 |
| Trust in others | .97 | .03 | .98 | .03 |
| Crime victim | 1.93** | .06 | 1.93** | .06 |
| Family crime victim | 1.86** | .06 | 1.87** | .06 |
| Level-2 variables | | | | |
| Homicide rate (per 100,000) | .99 | .02 | .99 | .02 |
| HDI | .00* | .01 | .00* | .01 |
| Gini Index | 1.05* | .03 | 1.06* | .03 |
| Global Freedom Status | 1.00 | .01 | 1.00 | .01 |
| Corruption Perception Index | 1.00 | .02 | 1.01 | .02 |
| Percentage of urban population | 1.03* | .01 | 1.03* | .01 |
| Variance components | | | | |
| Random intercept | .62 | .18 | .71 | .20 |
| Confidence in government | .03 | .01 | – | – |
| Satisfaction with political system | – | – | .03 | .01 |
| LR $\chi^2$ test vs. random intercept model | 119.35** | | 139.60** | |

*p<.05, ** p<.01

[i] Institutional confidence and institutional performance are connected yet separate concepts. While institutional confidence may arise in the objective reality and/or subjective perception of quality institutional performance, it may also originate from other domains of collective life such as local or national culture where the relations paradigm between citizens and public authorities vary from area to area (Mishler & Rose, 2001).

[ii] To access the HDI estimates for participating countries and country ranking, please visit: http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking