

Are Victims of Crime Mostly Angry or Mostly Afraid?¹

Dainis Ignatans *University of Huddersfield*

Ken Pease *University of Derby*

Abstract

Analysis of the Crime Survey for England and Wales identifies anger and annoyance rather than fear as the most common emotional responses to victimisation by crime, despite fear's pre-eminence in the criminological literature. While the trend since 2003 shows an increase in fear relative to anger, anger remains more common for all crime categories and all levels of victim-rated offence seriousness. The writers contend that the mismatch between the preponderance of anger in victim accounts and the preponderance of fear in the academic literature is convenient for government and police. Subtly setting fear as the default 'appropriate' emotion to be evoked by victimisation makes for a populace less inclined to 'take matters into its own hands'. Plans to develop research on victim anger are outlined.

Introduction

Compliant victims are necessary to the (relatively) smooth operation of criminal justice. Compliance is acquired by a variety of means. Media report of successful police operations and court outcomes are amongst the most obvious. More subtle methods include the notion of police presence to 'reassure the public', a mantra routinely uttered by senior officers after a serious crime. Google offers as a definition of reassurance an action that "removes doubts or fears".

One of academic criminology's useful roles is to present data-based information, especially when such information is inconveniently at odds with official or conventional accounts. Any disconnect between victimisation data and practice is important and worthy of analysis. The purpose of the present paper is to document one such disconnect, concerning the frequency of victim emotions in the wake of victimisation by crime, assessing whether that frequency is reflected in attention paid by the literature of criminology. It is concluded that victim anger and annoyance is vastly under-represented in the literature relative to its expression by crime victims.

The sharp focus in this paper is on what is *missing from*, rather than what is to be found in extant literature. Discussion of the victimology literature in general is thus irrelevant. This brief introduction outlines what emotion is for and how it connects with cognition in responses to victimisation.

¹ The writers are grateful to Elizabeth Bourgeois JP for her insights into victim participation in court process and miscellaneous wise advice.

Emotion confers evolutionary advantage by physiologically preparing organisms for fight or flight (see Teatero and Penney (2015) for a review). How that general state of preparedness is shaped into an emotional label and resulting action is a question with a long history (see Torre and Lieberman (2018) for a recent perspective on the issue). It seems that arousal is labelled according to cognitions about the perceived threat. 'He is bigger than me. I am afraid. I am bigger than him. I am angry.' Manipulating features of a situation leads identically pharmacologically primed people to express different emotions depending on the situation (see eg Schachter and Singer 1962; Schachter and Wheeler 1962; Sherer and Moors 2019; McLeod 1999).

While the lexicon of affect labels is more nuanced than the simple dichotomy between preparation for fight or flight suggests, it remains relatively easy to distinguish emotions which imply hostile movement towards and defensive movement away from whatever evokes the arousal. Anger is clearly a fight precursor, fear a flight precursor. In this paper, we will be concentrating on anger and fear responses to victimisation by crime.

To rehearse the two central points made so far

1. Physiological arousal is converted into affect labels by reference to cognitions about the presenting situation.
2. Affect label applied can be manipulated by changing aspects of the situation.

Let us consider the same issue with the starting point of an affect label already applied by an external agency. There is an implicit invitation to search for features of the situation which elicit the labelled affect. 'Aren't you afraid?' directs attention towards situational inducements to flee. 'Aren't you angry?' induces consideration of situational elements to confront.

This latter way of addressing the issue encapsulates the writers' concern. A criminological discourse about the effects of crime victimisation with fear at its centre may well have malign effects on victim wellbeing. Characterisations of external locus of control (Strudler-Wallston and Wallston 1979) and learned helplessness (Overmeir 2002) to be found in the literature of clinical psychology speak to these issues, as (in a different way) did Nils Christie's (1977) famous critique of criminal law as the denial of victim ownership of problems. The link is that all are concerned with the disempowerment of victims, which affect them.

A search on Google Scholar for the years 2010-2018 yielded the following distribution of items which had anger *or* fear (*or both*) *and* crime in their titles. Clearly there is now a massive literature on fear in relation to crime and a sparse one on anger in relation to crime.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Fear	109	135	142	125	102	117	96	111	43
Anger	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Both	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0

Such searches are never entirely straightforward and this one is no exception. However, the magnitude of the difference in attention paid to anger and fear is so great as to render effectively irrelevant the decisions as to what to exclude. Fear is overwhelmingly the emotion semantically linked to crime in the criminological literature. The predominance of fear over anger came early (see Hale 1996). In Britain the emphasis on fear (and to a lesser extent its close cousin worry) was especially marked in government publications (eg Mayhew 1985; Hough 1995). It must also be noted that the literature search done this way will yield much of literature related to the general concerns about crime and not emotional reactions of the victims.

Research published some twenty years ago (Ditton, Farrall, Bannister, Gilchrist and Pease 1999) examined crime victims' emotional reactions, as captured in a then recent Scottish victimisation survey. They found anger to be the most prevalent emotional reaction. A flurry of Scottish research around the turn of the millennium by the same team, led by the late and sadly missed Jason Ditton, provided a more balanced view of victim emotions (Ditton, Bannister and Gilchrist 1999; Farrall, Bannister, Ditton and Gilchrist 1997; Gilchrist, Farrall, Bannister and Ditton 1998) but did not herald a substantial literature on victim emotions other than fear. Yet conversations in pubs and on buses, fanned by social media and the tabloid press, would suggest anger the default emotion of the crime victim. It is perhaps instructive that the website of the charity Victim Support now begins its section "how can crime affect you" as follows (emphasis added).

"After you experience a crime you may find that:

1. *You feel angry, upset or experience other strong emotions..*"²

The three questions to be addressed here are as follows:

1. What are now the most prevalent victim emotional responses to crime in England and Wales?
2. What have been the trends in the profile of victims' emotional reactions since the turn of the century?
3. What is the relationship between emotional response to victimisation and victim rated seriousness of the crime suffered?

² <https://www.victimsupport.org.uk/help-and-support/coping-crime/how-can-crime-affect-you> Accessed July 2nd 2018.

The distinction on which we concentrate is that between anger (the fight precursor) and fear (the flight precursor). The data analysed later comes from the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

The data analysed here are taken from the fifteen most recent sweeps of the national victimisation survey, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) hitherto titled the British Crime Survey. CSEW is a large-scale victimisation survey running from 1981 (annually from 2000). In each yearly sweep of the survey representatives from up to 35000 households are asked about their experiences of crime and attitudes towards the criminal justice system. All respondents complete screener questions identifying who has been a victim of crime in (roughly) the preceding year. Those identified as suffering one or more crimes then complete additional forms gleaning details of the crimes suffered. Data for the present study are drawn from over 100000 CSEW *victim forms* from 2003-2017 sweeps. Amongst the details which are contained on victim forms are the emotions experienced at the time of the victimisation. The key variables necessary for this research have been coded consistently over the period or can be reconciled to render them equivalent across sweeps. Data prior to 2003 are not utilised due to inconsistencies in coding practices and answer categories that preclude reliable comparison.

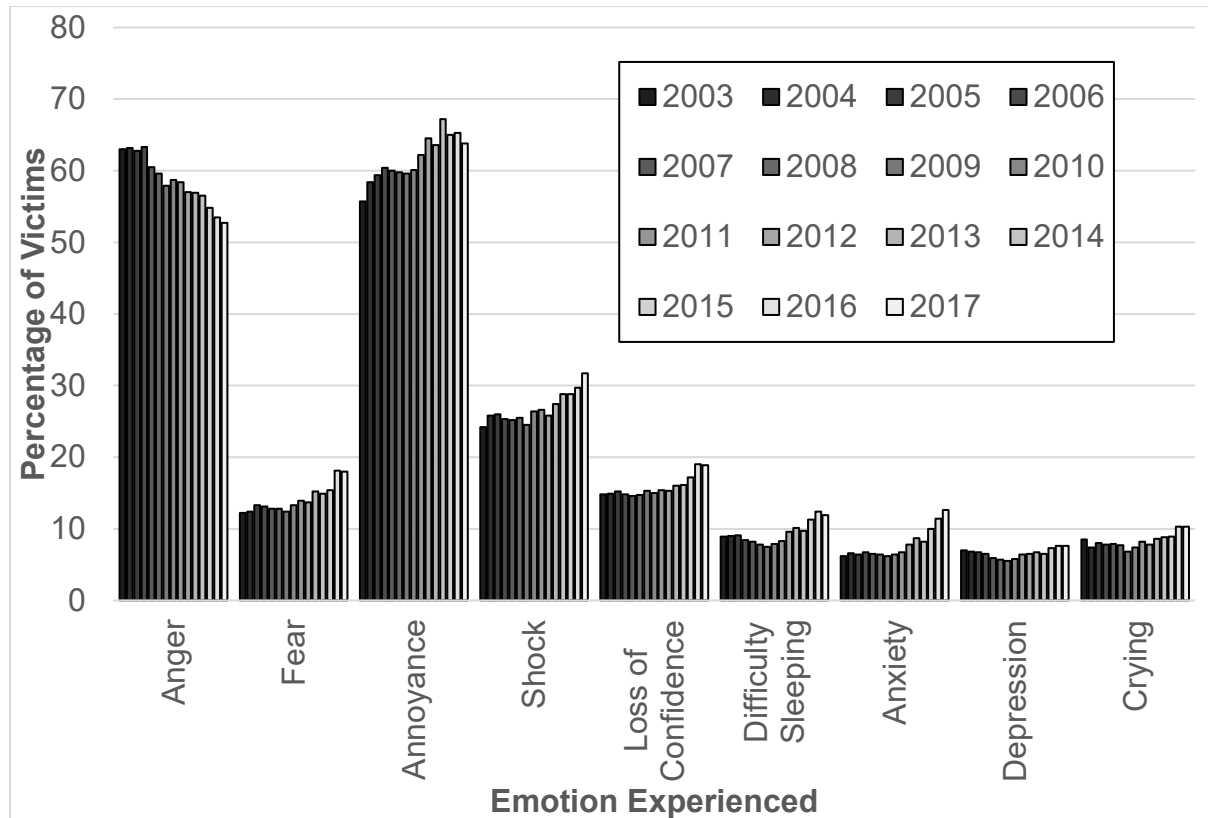
Analyses presented are constrained by a limit of six victim forms per victim. In the case of events reported as a series (ie events of the same type under the same circumstances and probably by the same offender), the victim form is completed in respect of the last event in the series. These constraints have been identified and criticised in respect of both CSEW and its equivalent in the USA (eg Farrell and Pease 2007; Planty and Strom 2007). This convention is changing in response to these criticisms. Emotions experienced in the last event of the series and in a one-off incident are understood as not being comparable due to the escalation of seriousness experienced by repeat victims (Ignatans and Pease, 2016a).

Results

The first point of interest concerns the emotions from which the survey invites victims to choose in the survey, in other words the repertoire of emotions from which the survey designers invite victims to select. These are “anger, annoyance, fear, shock, loss of confidence, difficulty sleeping, anxiety, depression and crying.” Of these only anger and annoyance are outward-facing (fight) responses, and the remainder more or less inward-facing, (flight) responses. Does the set of emotions (from which the victim has to select) reflect the literature’s emphasis on flight responses? Or, in constructing the survey instrument, were people asked to express emotions which were then incorporated in the survey questions. If the latter, the possibility remains that this was social desirability responding, (with hostile, vengeful and murderous excluded). For whatever reason, the emotional options offered to survey respondents were predominantly inward-facing.

Figure 1 displays the proportion of victims reporting each of the emotional responses offered as alternatives in CSEW. The data are summed across crime types experienced. It will be seen that the two emotions most reported are anger and its less intense cousin annoyance.

Figure 1. Percentage of victims reporting an emotion on victim form.

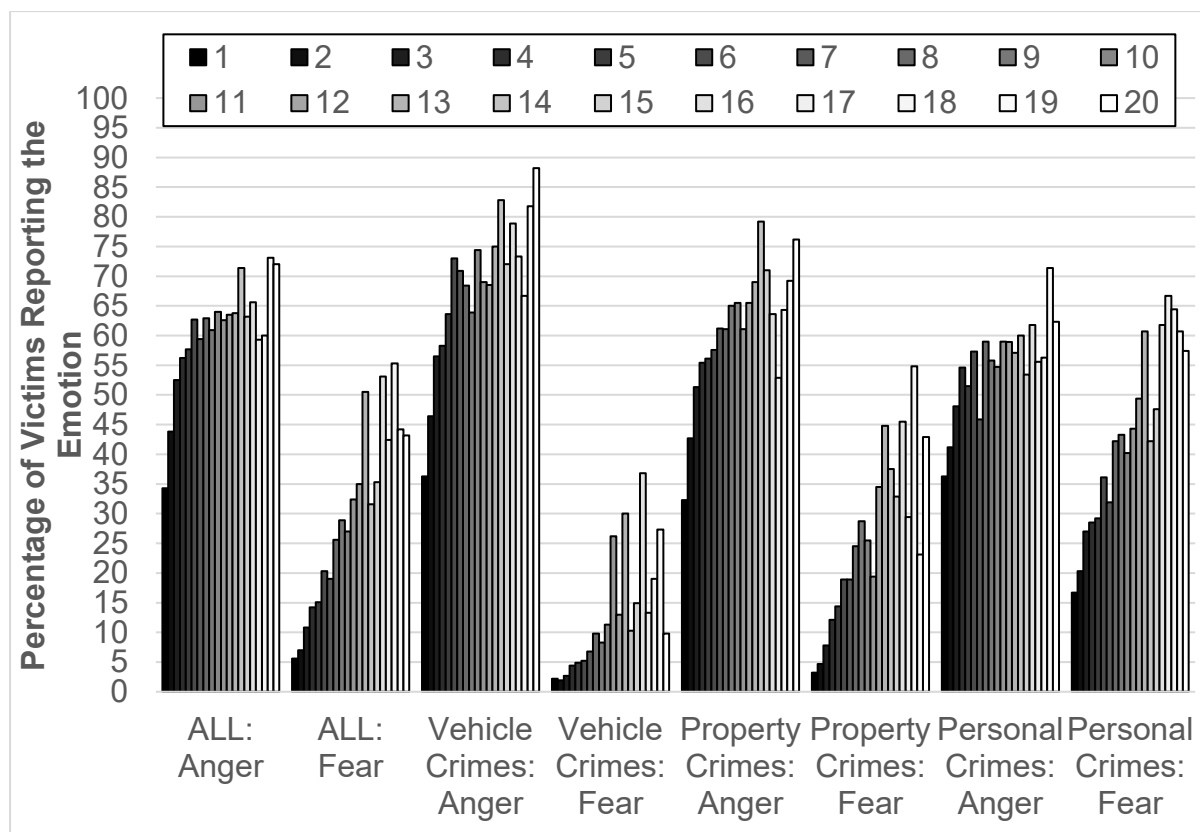


While the proportion of victims expressing fear and shock have risen over the period, anger and annoyance remain by far the predominant emotions. Fear and shock are trending upwards but are still only one quarter to one third as prevalent as anger or annoyance.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between emotion (fear or anger) expressed and the rated seriousness of the offence suffered, using data from only the three most recent sweeps of the survey. Seriousness judgements were elicited on a scale of 1-20, 20 being the most serious.

It will be seen that for all crime types and both emotions, the rated seriousness of crime is strongly associated with an emotional response to it. Anger is a more frequent response than fear for all crime types and all levels of seriousness. The closest the two emotions get in frequency comes after the most serious crimes against the person.

Figure 2. Percentage of victims who reported anger and/or fear, by seriousness, 2015-2017 pooled.³



To this point we have concentrated on anger and fear simply because these are the two emotions on which attention has been placed but it is time to stand back and look at the data outside the anger-fear frame. As a transition, Table 1 shows the co-occurrence of other emotions with those of anger or fear within the most recent three CSEW sweeps. A full co-occurrence matrix is available on request. The two columns show the proportion of those expressing anger or fear also expressing the other listed emotions/symptoms. It will be noted that only 19% of all those expressing anger also expressed fear, and only 19% of the much smaller total of those expressing fear also expressed anger. Anger and fear appear to be substantially independent in use.

³ Offences were categorised in categories consistent with previous papers on the subject (Ignatans and Pease 2015a, 2016b) choosing to view all crimes that involve direct contact with the victim to the personal crime category. Categories were constructed in the following way. Vehicle crimes: car theft, theft from car, damage to vehicle, motor vehicle theft, bicycle theft. Property crimes: burglary, attempted burglary, theft from garage. Personal crimes: robbery, personal theft, sexual offences, assault.

Table 1. Co-Occurrence of Emotions/Symptoms

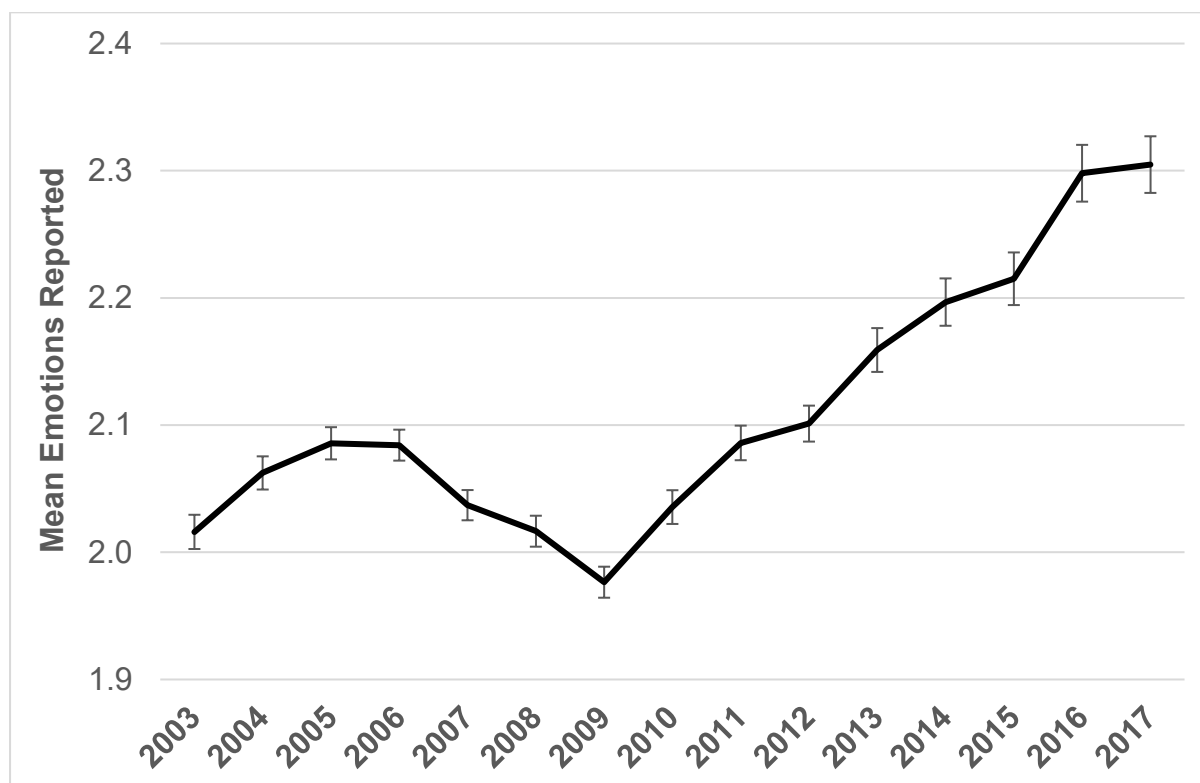
Anger	Fear
Annoyance 62%	Loss of Confidence 51%
Shock 35%	Annoyance 47%
Loss of Confidence 20%	Difficulty Sleeping 39%
Fear 19%	Anxiety 36%
Difficulty Sleeping 14%	Shock 35%
Anxiety 12%	Crying 31%
Crying 12%	Depression 25%
Depression 9%	Anger 19%

Stepping back entirely from anger-fear centrality, Table 2 shows the frequency of all the emotions offered by the Crime Survey, and Figure 3 shows the mean number of emotions reported, which trended upwards throughout the period covered, suggesting a more complex pattern of emotions in recent years.

Table 2. Frequency of Emotional/Symptom Expression

Emotion/Symptom	Frequency	Percentage
Annoyance	11343	29
Anger	9407	24
Shock	5267	13
Loss of Confidence	3200	8
Fear	3007	8
Difficulty Sleeping	2078	5
Anxiety	1985	5
Crying	1726	4
Depression	1316	3
Total N	39329	

Figure 3. Mean and standard error of the number of emotions reported.



Discussion and Conclusions

Does it really matter that victim anger has remained relatively neglected in the criminological literature, and that fear has remained centre stage? There is after all enough penological discussion of anger, mostly linked with forgiveness (e.g. Nussbaum 2016) including restorative justice (Strang 2003). The writers' contention is simply that research should deal with phenomena as they present themselves in the world and that representation of fear as the primary emotional label to be applied by victims is potentially malign in its consequences. The current paper is a very modest attempt to contribute to that process. Plans for the next step are described at the end of this section.

There are many contexts in which victim emotions do matter. One is how victim impact statements are framed. The use of the word 'impact' in the title suggests that only inward-facing emotions are to be included. This view is confirmed in an advice sheet prepared by Victim Support Services⁴ we read that "Your goal is to help the court feel

⁴<http://victimssupportservices.org/help-for-victims/victim-impact-statements/> Accessed July 3rd 2018.

your trauma” which we read as “Don’t directly express your anger toward the court or the offender. Your goal is to express your hurt and your pain”. The literature on victim impact statements looked at by the writers does not address the effects in terms of its implicit victim characterisation, and does not appear to affect victim wellbeing (Davis and Smith 1994). The bulk of the reviewed literature deals with effects on sentencing (or the lack thereof).

The continued, albeit diminishing, predominance of anger over fear as the emotional response of crime victims has persisted up to and including the most recent CSEW sweep. In the three most recent sweeps, all crime types were more often met by anger than by fear. The predominance of angry responses declines as rated seriousness of the experienced crime increased. More emotional words per event were used in recent years. Victims responding with both anger and fear represent only around one fifth of those reporting either emotion. Fear is only the fifth most common of the nine emotional responses to victimization offered by the survey.

The advice to victims to eschew anger in their victim impact statements to court revives in the writers the suspicion that flight emotions are more convenient to crime and justice authorities. Fear is a flight emotion, and fearful citizens are less likely than those fueled by anger to take to the streets as rioters or vigilantes. The prevalence of victim anger is for government and police, an inconvenient truth. It is perhaps telling that in the wake of a serious crime, police embark upon ‘reassurance policing’ and police are deployed to reassure the public. Ask yourself what feelings are appropriately assuaged by reassurance. It is not anger. Thus, after a serious crime, local people are subtly invited to see flight emotions as the appropriate feelings to express. The data to test the speculative account above are not readily available and perhaps not available at all, since the thought processes involved are not likely to be fully conscious. Academics are socialized into concentration on fear by criminology presented in the books and from the podia of lecture theatres. One would also wish to know the fate of funding applications to study anger (if any) compared to applications to study crime fear. One would wish to know the success in acceptance by peer-reviewed journals of papers (if any) on crime victims’ anger.

The writers have three pieces of work in hand to take forward the study of crime anger. The first will examine age, gender and country of birth of victims as determinants of emotions expressed in the wake of victimization (see Los, Ignatans and Pease, 2017 for the reasoning), and how that varies by rated offence seriousness. The second study will look at whether and how emotion decays over time, and to compare decay curves by emotion. We will be mindful of the possibility that anger turns into fear over time with victims experiencing a disproportionate number of incidents being fearful (Ignatans and Pease, 2015), and whether fear is more prevalent amongst those whose offenders have not been identified.

The last projected work concerns the route to the present mismatch and was alluded to above. Are there more applications for research funding in relation to fear than anger? Is a higher proportion of fear research applications awarded funds? Do journals accept a higher proportion of fear papers than anger papers? The mismatch between what victims report and what criminologists study is probably manifested in many topic areas. The adherence of the discipline to its source data may conveniently studied in the fear-anger mismatch.

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