UNDERSTANDING WHY WE ARE AFRAID OF CRIME
A rundown building. A tipped-over trash can. An abandoned car. Unappealing neighborhood characteristics may not be able to pull a gun on you, but a graffiti-tagged wall may be more damaging to a community than the crime that actually occurs in it.

Although crime rates in the U.S. have been dropping—dramatically—for more than 15 years, fear of crime itself remains high. In fact, some experts have said that the most damaging effect of homicides, robbery, or assault is fear, which affects far more people in the United States than does violent crime.

For that reason, Elizabeth Dansie, a graduate student researcher at Utah State University, examined what it is that makes people afraid, what predictors exacerbate people’s anxiety about being victimized, and what can be done to mitigate their fears.

“People will hear about crime on the news, and all of a sudden, they think it’s everywhere,” said Dansie, who will graduate with a PhD in psychology this year. “My mom is that way. She’ll hear one crime story, and then she won’t ever walk outside at night. I wanted to understand what different factors were predictive of this kind of fear.”

To do this, Dansie conducted a secondary data analysis of results of the National Crime Victimization Survey, which included responses from nearly 13,000 people from 12 major cities across the country. She used a statistical procedure called structural equation modeling to determine what factors contribute to people’s fear of crime.

Using data from the survey, Dansie examined responses to individual factors and created constructs, or groups of those factors, that described responders’ situation in five areas: law enforcement activities in their community, their neighborhood environment, crime in the area, their level of fear of crime, and crime prevention measures they had taken. From these constructs, she looked for trends among the different variables.

“We found in our model that many factors could contribute to a person’s fear of victimization,” said Dansie. “A lack of law enforcement presence, an unsavory neighborhood environment, and a knowledge of neighborhood crime are all positively associated with fear.”
Three of those constructs, Dansie found, were predictive of fear. Negative neighborhood characteristics and knowledge of local crime increased a responder’s level of concern, while increased law enforcement activities made people feel safer. A higher level of fear often led to a higher level of crime prevention measures taken, such as installing extra locks and lighting or participating in a neighborhood watch program.

Even if people are happy with the neighborhood where they live, a large percentage of survey responders—close to 50 percent in some areas—was fearful of local crime. Dansie’s study showed that visual characteristics of the neighborhood, such as trash and graffiti, and the activities going on there, like public drinking and panhandling, had an effect on fear.

There were some surprises in the study, though, said Dansie. She found that a police presence in a neighborhood, though it could be associated with the need for law enforcement in the area, actually made people feel less afraid. And, although knowledge of law enforcement and greater neighborhood crime led to responder’s taking more crime prevention measures, an unkempt neighborhood actually led to fewer measures. Also, though some of those measures, like installing a home security system, made people feel safer, others, such as owning a weapon or a watchdog, did not.

And it’s those findings and surprises that make this study so important to Dansie. “The only way that serious attempts can be made to manage and reduce fear of victimization is by accurately measuring and identifying which factors most strongly predict that fear.”

Although law enforcement and community officials cannot deter all criminal activity in their neighborhoods, Dansie said that attempts to alter the neighborhood environment, such as removing trash, tearing down abandoned buildings, or discouraging loitering may help to reduce the fear of crime.

“Fear impacts everyone,” said Dansie. “With a general construct that is predictive of those factors, community members can direct their attention to curtail that fear. Some of those factors are simple, such as graffiti. We can easily remedy that. It may be hard to stop crime itself, but we can do things to reduce fear.”

A poor neighborhood environment can lead to greater fear of violent crime. These are factors Dansie found that contribute to fear:

- Abandoned cars and buildings
- Rundown and neglected buildings
- Trash
- Public drinking and drug use
- Public drug sales
- Vandalism and graffiti
- Prostitution
- Panhandling and begging
- Loitering
- Transients and homeless people
Dansie, a native of East Carbon, Utah, earned her bachelor’s degree in psychology with a minor in biology at Southern Utah University. While there, she participated in undergraduate research, and was looking for more research opportunities for her graduate work.

“As an undergraduate, I became very interested in research on emotions, and I found that Utah State has a strong program in experimental and applied psychological science,” said Dansie. “When I found Professors Tamara Ferguson, who focused on emotion research, and Jamison Fargo, a statistician who became a huge influence and support for me, I made my decision.”

At Utah State, Dansie had the opportunity to learn, teach, and dive head-on into emotion research, including her study on fear. She is continuing her work as a research associate at the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University.

In her master’s thesis and doctoral dissertation, Dansie has examined another powerful emotion: shame.

“There is a general sentiment that saying sorry isn’t enough; you have to be sorry,” said Dansie. “And there are cues that people give in their body language that suggest whether they are apologizing out of real shame or simply guilt.”

“Human behavior is really interesting, especially emotions,” said Dansie. “I look at this through an evolutionary paradigm. Shame is more than just a sad feeling; it is an adaptive strategy we have evolved to bring a social interaction or a relationship back into harmony.”

One situation in which Dansie examined the effectiveness of shame was a job interview. Research subjects were asked to interview several candidates, each of whom made planned mistakes in their interactions. The way they responded to those mistakes varied.

Shame, said Dansie, was conveyed through non-verbal body language, such as lowering the eyes and stooping the shoulders. Guilt was conveyed only verbally, through a spoken apology. Some candidates conveyed one or both of these emotions, while others made no response to their mistakes. A control group made no mistakes at all.

“When the interviewers scored the candidates’ performance, they indicated that those who made mistakes and conveyed shame were rated nearly as high as those who made no mistakes,” said Dansie. “This means that shame is an effective adaptation and can successfully repair a misstep.”

Dansie is now applying this theory of shame to another arena—prison.

“There’s a new paradigm gaining popularity called restorative justice,” said Dansie. “It brings together victim and offender, and there is a chance for apology and forgiveness. I’m going to investigate if a shameful apology is as satisfying to a victim as seeing the defendant in court.”

Restorative justice, though, isn’t a theory Dansie is going to let rest once her dissertation is completed. She hopes to continue working with communities to study the impact of crime on victims and opportunities for them to be made whole again.