Changes in the Fear of Crime in the United States by Gender and by Race

By

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Abstract

The authors elaborate on Lawton and Clark's (2015) earlier finding that women's fear of crime declined much more than men's fear in the 40-year period between the 1970s and the 2010s in the United States. They introduce race as a variable and find that white women's, Black women's and Black men's fear of walking in their neighborhoods at night have declined substantially during this time frame, while white men's fear has not declined much at all. In an attempt to explain this finding, the authors examine the relationship between the variables of (change in) fear of walking in the neighborhood at night (the conventional measure of fear of crime) and change in the rape rate. The findings indicate that the relationship is very strong for white women, Black women and Black men, although it is essentially nonexistent for white men. The authors interpret their findings.

Keywords: fear of crime, gender, race, rape rate, fear of men

Literature Review

The fear of crime literature finds that women report higher levels of fear than men (Ferraro 1995; Skogan & Maxfield 1981; Snedker 2012; Warr 1984; Lawton & Clark 2015) and that Blacks report higher levels of fear than whites (e.g., Scarborough et al. 2010). The case of gender is somewhat paradoxical insofar as women are less likely to be victimized by crime than men (Snedker 2012). The case of race is less puzzling: Blacks, for instance, are eight times more likely to be homicide victims than whites (QuickStats 2017).

Others have examined the relationships between the fear of crime, on the one hand, and gender and race, on the other. In a study using data from a Kansas City survey, Scarborough et al. (2010) found that all of Blacks' excess fear of crime could be explained away if one controlled for the respondent's perception of neighborhood disorder, but that none of women's fear could be accounted for in these terms. To the authors' knowledge, no study has examined the interactive effects of gender and race *over time*. And no study known to the authors has examined the possibility that changes in crime rates over time has affected change in the fear of crime by both gender and race.

Theories that have attempted to explain the "fear victimization paradox"—i.e., that women fear crime more than men despite being less victimized by it—have been divided into four categories (Lawton & Clark 2015). The first, an *evolutionary approach*, argues that, because the maximum number of offspring women can have is lower than it is for men, women are more likely to avoid putting the children they do have, and themselves, into harm's way and therefore have more fearfulness (Fetchenberger & Buunk 2005). A second theory, a *vulnerability thesis*, suggests that because women tend to be physically weaker than men, they are more fearful because defending themselves from attackers is more difficult (e.g., Warr 1984; Killias & Clerici 2000). A third perspective, a *socialization theory*, suggests that boys and girls are socialized to entertain different levels of fear (Fetchenhauer & Buunk 2005). And a fourth theory suggests that *women's fear of crime is in large part "a fear of men"* (Stanko 1995:46) *and men's tendency to commit various forms of sexual violence*—e.g., rape, sexual harassment, intimate partner violence and sexual

assault (e.g., Warr 1984; Pain 2001).

These theories, of course, are not mutually exclusive, but Lawton & Clark (2015) found it useful to focus on the "fear of men" thesis in their attempt to explain change over time in the differences between men's and women's fear of crime in the United States. Using General Social Survey data, they found that women were about 2.9 times as likely to report a fear of crime as men in 1973 but were 1.8 times as likely to do so in 2014. Women's fear of crime dropped considerably over this time period, while men's fear did not. Moreover, Lawton and Clark (2015) found that the drop in women's fear was very highly correlated with the drop in the rape rate over this time frame, while men's fear of crime was *not* substantially associated with the rape rate. Rather, fluctuation in men's fear was correlated with the variation in the violent crime rate. In contrast, women's fear was *not* substantially correlated with the violent crime rate.

Lawton and Clark (2015) were tempted to look at the relationship between women's fear of crime and the rape rate because they had read Steven Pinker's (2011) ***The Better Angels of Our Nature***, in which Pinker points out that the rape rate in the United States had dropped nearly 80 percent between 1980 and 2010. To many of us, this fact comes as a surprise. The media, if anything, often gives the impression that rape and sexual assault are as prevalent today as ever, if not more so. But media coverage of these crimes and the fact that they have declined is not a coincidence. Pinker points out that the second wave of feminism raised people's consciousness about sexual crimes that had once been swept under the rug—or at least kept out of the light. Susan Brownmiller's (1975*)* ***Against Our Will*** helped to mobilize feminist activists to establish rape crisis centers and push for new laws and judicial decisions. Police now take charges of sexual assault more seriously than they did before this movement, women have become more comfortable with reporting it and media often convey the message that sexual predators are "contemptible scum" (Pinker 2011:401).

The question addressed in the current paper, however, is whether Lawton and Clark's (2015) findings hold equally for both Blacks and whites. There is some reason to believe they might not. Scarborough et al.'s (2010) findings suggest that Black women's fear may have as much to do with neighborhood characteristics as it does with fear of men and, therefore, that as violent crimes, maybe especially crimes like homicide, decline, their fear of crime may also decline. Thus, we expect a positive association between change in Black women's fear of crime and change in the murder rate as well as the positive association between change in that fear and change in the rape rate that exists for white women. We want to emphasize, though, that we do expect that, as the rape rate dropped, and as what Rachel Pain (1993:117) has called the "sharp end" of patriarchy has been blunted, Black women, as well as white women, will have been more likely to report less fear of crime.

We were frankly unsure of how change in Black men's fear of crime might be associated over time with changes in the two major crime rates examined in this paper: the murder and rape rates. As with white men, we expected Black men's fear to be positively associated over time with the murder rate. But since Americans have long viewed rape in racialized terms—e.g., stereotyping black men, for instance, as "having an uncontrolled and violent sexuality" (Pain 2001:906)—we can imagine that Black men's fear of walking in the neighborhoods at night (the measure fear of crime used in this paper) might be positively associated with the rape rate too. Black men, we imagine, might have avoided the out of doors at night when rape rates were high simply for fear of harassment by the police, and conceivably others. As Bell Hooks (2004:4) observes, "Nonviolent black males daily face a world that sees them as violent. Black men who are not sexual harassers or rapists confront a pubic that relates to them as though this is who they are underneath the skin." If true, a hesitancy to go out at night, in this case, might not reflect a fear of crime as much as it would a fear of the effects of racist beliefs that Black men are more likely to commit sexual crimes against women.

Methods Section

Using data from the U.S. since 1973, the authors employ a trend design to examine how changes in two crime rates—the murder and rape rates—are associated with changes in white men's, white women's, Black men's, and Black women's fear of crime. The primary data set the authors employ is the General Social Survey (GSS). The big advantage of the GSS measure is that data are available for white and Black respondents for many years. Since 1973, the GSS has asked the following question in 29 iterations: "Is there any area right around here—that is, within a mile—where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?" A response of "yes" is taken as an indication of a fear of crime. The percentage of people answering "yes" is our main indicator of the fear of crime in each year.

Our assumption is that the sources of white men's,

white women's, Black men's, and Black women's fear will have been affected by variation in some form of violent crime. The "fear of men" perspective leads us to think that both white and Blacks women's fear will have been sensitive to change in cross-gender crimes of violence. To test this perspective, it would be ideal to have a comprehensive measure of crimes involving cross-sexual assault. Since we do not have this measure, we use the Bureau of Justice (BJS) annual estimate of the level of rape, based on the National Crime Victim Survey. This measure is believed to be more reliable than reports of the rape rate produced in the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (UCR) because the latter are based on reports made to police departments-- something relatively few women did, especially before the 1990s. Also, the BJS rape rates are highly correlated with its own intimate partner assault rates, at least for the period from 1993 to 2009 (BJS, 2013). The last year for which we used BJS rape rate in this paper is 2012, since the BJS noticeably changed how it measured this crime in 2013.

As we pointed out previously, the frequency of rape has dropped by nearly 80% since 1980. The solid black line in Figure 1 is based on the BJS survey data. The dashed line reported in Figure 1 is based on data reported to the police—i.e., UCR data. Even today most rapes are *not* reported to police; however, victims are more likely to report rapes *if* they are treated well rather than stigmatized (Clay-Warner & Burt 2005:150). The number of rapes reported to police nearly doubled between 1973 and 1992, as women became more willing to make reports. However, since then they have dropped in near parallel fashion to those reported to the BJS. Most other crimes have dropped since the early 1990s too. The dotted line shows the murder rate, which fell by about 50% between the 1970s and our end date for collecting crime data—2012. (See Figure 1 in Appendix A.)

Lawton and Clark (2015) used the violent crime rate from the UCR as their measure of variation of violent crime. But we use the UCR murder rate, instead of the more general violent crime rate, in the belief, generally agreed to by criminologists (see, e.g., Messner 1999:313), that official statistics on homicide are not as susceptible to underreporting to police as are other violent crimes.

Findings

Lawton and Clark (2015) found that, after 1973, women's fear of crime decreased fairly dramatically over the next 40 years, while men's fear fluctuated but, in the end, changed very little. In this context, Figure 2 reveals some slightly surprising results which we will identify shortly. One of its least surprising revelations we discovered, however, given what the literature reports about racial differences in the fear of crime, however, is that Black women's fear of crime was higher than white women's fear, throughout the 45-year period between 1973 and 2018, and that Black men's fear was always higher than white men's fear. More interesting are the facts that the overall decline in Black women's fear (about 33%) slightly outstripped white women's fear (about 30%) and that the overall decline in Black men's fear (about 27%) greatly outpaced that of white men's (only about 5%). (See Figure 2 in Appendix A.)

We attempt to gain some insight into why these different patterns have occurred by examining the relationship between change in the fear of crime of different groups and change in both murder and rape rates over time in Table 1. (See Table 1 in Appendix B.) Of the four groups defined by gender and race, only white males' fear of crime is significantly correlated with just one of the crime rates examined here; its change is positively, strongly and significantly associated ($r = .57$) with change the murder rate, about three years earlier. In fact, for instance, if one looks carefully at the graph of white men's fear in Figure 2, one can see that its highest points occur in 1982 and 1994, two and three years, respectively, after the highest points in the graph of the murder rate in Figure 1.

The three other groups, defined by gender and race, however, all display fear levels whose change is at least fairly strongly correlated with change in both the murder and rape rates, about three years earlier. Change in white women's fear, for instance, is strongly associated with change in the murder rate ($r = .66$) and extremely strongly correlated with change in the rape rate ($r = .93$). Change in Black women's fear is also strongly associated with change in the murder rate ($r = .64$) and change in the rape rate ($r = .82$). The correlation pattern for Black men is much more similar to what it is for both groups of women than it is for white men. Change in Black men's fear of crime is significantly associated with change in the murder rate ($r = .46$), and substantially and significantly associated with the rape rate ($r = .65$).

Table 1 also suggests that, when we focus on all men, rather than white or Black men alone, the association between changes in their fear of crime and changes in the murder rate is the only one that appears substantial ($r = .52$). For men as a whole, there is virtually no association between change in the level of fear and the rape rate ($r = .03$). But this is probably due to the fact that white men constitute the vast majority of all men

reporting in all years, and the differences between white and Black men are masked when they are combined. For all women, however, the association between both changes in the murder rate (r = .69) and changes in the rape rate (r = .93) remain strong and statistically significant at the .001 level.

Although the GSS provides measures of male and female fear of crime (by race) back to 1973, they did *not* do so every year. Consequently, we have only 26 data points for our analysis. Clearly, it would have been preferable to control even very strong relationships for possible confounding variables. However, with few data points, the number of controls that are possible is limited. Therefore, we have limited our analyses to two control variables: the other focal crime rate (for each of our focal crimes) and age. Age is measured as the percentage of the appropriate race/sex group that is over 50 years of age.

The Standardized Regression Coefficients in Table 2 show the relationship between changes in the murder rate and changes in white men's fear of crime, about three years later. When the percentage of white male respondents who are 50 years or older and the rape rate are controlled, the association between change in the murder rates and change in white men's fear (beta =.89) is greater than the zero-order correlation (r =.57). This result suggests that variation in the rape rate acts as a *suppressor variable* for the relationship between murder and white men's fear. It appears, then, that change in white men's fear is indeed strongly related to change in the murder rate. The amount of variation explained in change in men's fear by the three independent variables (adjusted R square = .36) is about 36%, a substantial, but not overwhelming, amount. (See Table 2 in Appendix B.)

In Table 3, we examine the relationship between change in white women's fear of crime and change in, mainly, the rape rate when change in the murder rate and change in the percentage of white women over 50 are controlled. What we find is that the relationship between change in white women's fear and change in the rape rate (three years earlier) remains very strong (beta = .82), when the two others are controlled. As a whole, this model explains a very large percentage (87%) of the change in white women's fear over time. Clearly, while the rape rate is the dominant element in this model's explanatory power, the murder rate and age do add something to our understanding of change in white women's aggregate fear of crime. (See Table 3 in Appendix B.)

Table 4 examines the relationship between changes in Black men's fear of going out into the neighborhood at night and change in the rape rate, while controlling for changes in the murder rate and their age structure. What is interesting in Table 4 is that is that changes in the rape rate retain a strong and significant relationship with Black men's fear, even when changes in the murder rate and changes in age structure are controlled. We will discuss alternative explanations for this relationship below. Here we will point out that, even with other variables controlled, for white men the results suggest the crime rate with the strongest correlation is the murder rate, while for black men they suggest the crime rate with the strongest correlations is the rape rate (See Table 4 in Appendix B.)

Table 5 focuses on the relationship between changes in Black women's fear and changes in the rape rate, while controlling for changes in the murder rate and changes in age structure. As is true for white women, changes in Black women's fear have their strongest controlled association with changes in the rape rate (beta = .71), but this relationship is not as strong as it was for white women (beta = .82). Furthermore, as is true with white women, the association between changes in the murder rate with changes in Black women's fear is not statistically significantly related to changes in fear for Black women, when changes in the rape rate are controlled, but they are more strongly related to changes in the murder rate (beta = .20) than they were for white women (beta = .10). Moreover, as with whites, the model for Black women explains much more variance (66%) than it does for Black men (37%), but the difference in explained variance (29%) is much lower than it is for whites (51%). But the biggest difference between white and Blacks is that, for whites, different crimes seem to be the primary correlates of fear for men and women (murder for men; rape for women). For Blacks, the same crime (rape) is the primary correlate of fear for both men and women. (See Table 5 in Appendix B.)

We considered whether the relationship between the change in Black men's fear and change in the rape rate might be coincidental—the result of change in the rape rate and some other variable whose values have also declined since 1973 being highly correlated and the latter being really responsible for the decline in Black men's fear. For instance, Pinker (2011: 392ff.) points to evidence that there has been a decline in dehumanizing beliefs since the 1980s. Using GSS data, we find that the proportion of Americans attributing racial inequality to a lack of will on the part of Blacks dropped from about 65% in 1977 to about 50% in 2012

and the proportion attributing it to a lack of ability dropped from about 26% in 1977 to about 10% in 2012. These changes largely reflect changes in the attitudes of whites towards Blacks. Moreover, the Economist (2021), and the GSS, give us reason to believe that Blacks' attitudes towards whites have also improved: the percentage of Blacks who attribute racial differences to discrimination dropped from about 78% in 1985 to 47% in 2012. Moreover, many more Blacks are now attaining a high school education than did in 1973. In 1973, only about 60% of adult Blacks reported to the GSS said they had a high school diploma. By 2014, this figure was close to 87%. Assuming education, and the consequent access to better jobs, can help people move away from "disordered" neighborhoods, this might also account for a decline in Black men's fear of going out at night. And the correlations between all four of these declines and changes in Black men's fear are in fact positive, strong (r = .72, .70, .60, and .56, respectively, for the order in which they are presented above) and statistically significant.

In multivariate analyses, shown in Table 6, we found that the control for none of these other variables substantially diminished the association between changes in rape rates and changes in Black men's fear. Moreover, the associations between change in these other variables and change in Black men's fear were all diminished substantially to the point where they were *not* statistically significant, when changes in the rape rate were controlled. In other words, none of the variables for which we had measures *and* that we thought might explain why change in Black men's fear was so strongly associated with change in the rape rate accounted for this association. (See Table 6 in Appendix B.)

CONCLUSION

The analysis reported here elaborated on Lawton and Clark's (2015) findings that women's fear of crime declined much more than men's fear of crime between 1970s and 2010s. To do this, we introduced race as a variable, and found that the only group that did *not* experience a substantial drop in the fear of crime over the decades examined was white men. We also found that white men were the only group whose fear of crime was *not* strongly, positively and significantly associated with the decline in the rape rate since the 1970s. White men's fear of crime seems strongly related to the murder rate, but the three other groups' fear seems most strongly related to the declines in the rape rate. Most surprising, perhaps, is the strong relationship between the decline in Black men's fear of crime and the decline in the rape rate.

We believe that the relationship between the rape rate and the fear of crime for both white and Black women, individually, adds credence to Lawton and Clark's (2015) conclusion that women's fear of crime has been in large part "a fear of men" (Stanko, 1995: 46). What our analysis adds to Lawton and Clark's earlier finding is that changes in women's fear (both white and Black women's fear) have also been strongly correlated with changes in the murder rate, though this correlation pales when controls are made for changes in the rape rate.

It does not make sense to us to interpret the correlation between the decline in the rape rate and the decline in Black men's fear of crime as simply resulting from a fear of men. Our analysis leads us to focus, instead, on the commonly-used measure of fear of crime which centers on the fear of going out in one's neighborhood at night. It may be this more literal interpretation of the conventional measure of "fear of crime"—being afraid to walk in certain parts of one's neighborhood— that is appropriate when we discuss Black men. Black men may not be so much in fear being victimized by crime generally as they are of being victimized by police and other people who might harass them-- people who buy into stereotypes of Black men as sexual predators. Their concern about walking in their neighborhoods may have reflected this concern—a concern that has declined as a decline in the rape rate has conceivably led to less harassment. We know of no data, currently available, that track the degree to which Black men have experienced harassment by, say, police over time, so this line of thinking remains open to future research.

Finally, we considered the possibility that the relationship between change in Black men's fear of going out at night and the rape rate might be a coincidental effect of change in the rape rate with other variables, closely associated with Black men's fear. We looked specifically at several measures of racial discrimination, both as expressed by the total population and as perceived by Black men, and their level of education. The relationship between change in each of these alternative variables and change in Black men's fear, however, washes out when we control for change in the rape rate.

Limitations of Our Theorizing

Our explanations assume that, somehow, people sense what is happening to the crime rates, but we are unsure

of how aware they were of this shift. It is plausible that people, especially women in the case of the rape rate, get to know of fewer people in their immediate social circles experiencing rape as the general rape rate drops, and, therefore, become less anxious about walking in their neighborhoods at night.

Regarding the relationship between the decline in the rape rate and the decline in Black men's fear of walking in their neighborhoods at night, we speculate that the drop in the rape rate may have led to a decline in harassment of Black men, sometimes stereotyped as sexual predators, at night by police or other individuals. However, this theory remains to be tested by future research.

Future Research

This article has turned out to be as much an exercise in theory building as in theory testing. By this we mean that we are not only testing a theory by examining the "fear of men" thesis, but we are also implicitly advancing speculative theories that testing by other researchers can refute or support. We speculate that the decline in the rape rate has made walking in their neighborhoods more attractive to white women, Black women and men. However, we are not sure why this might be the case. A better understanding of these relationships awaits further research.

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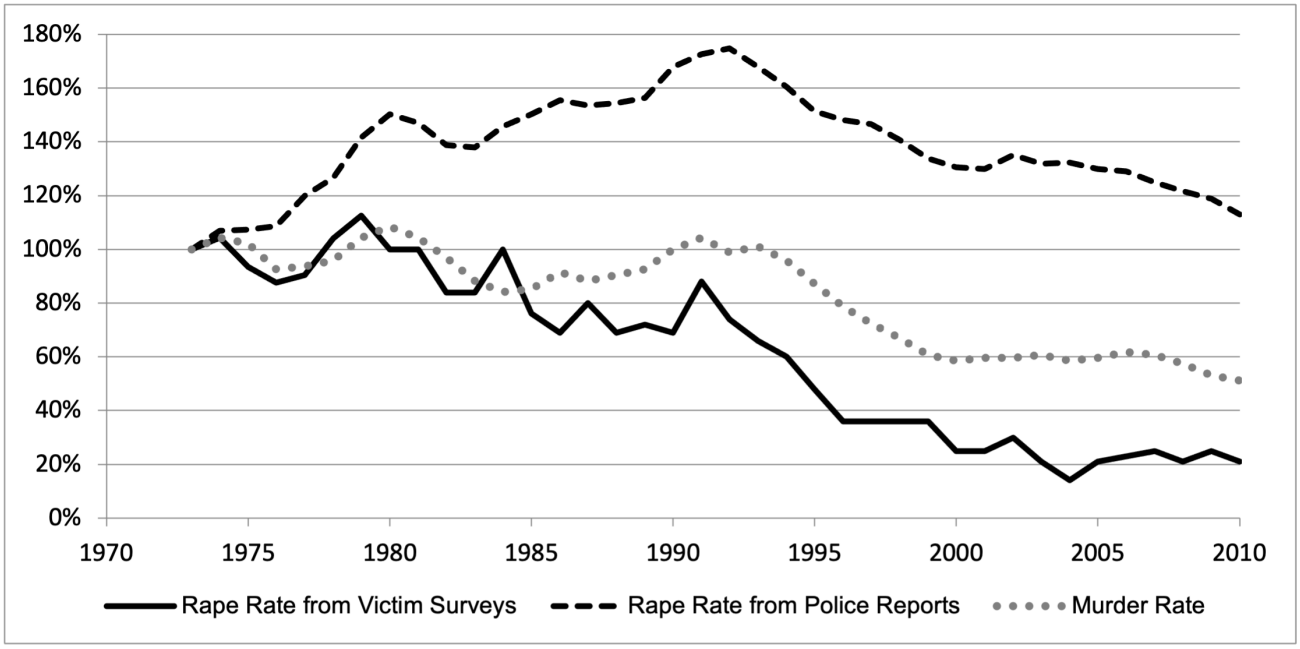
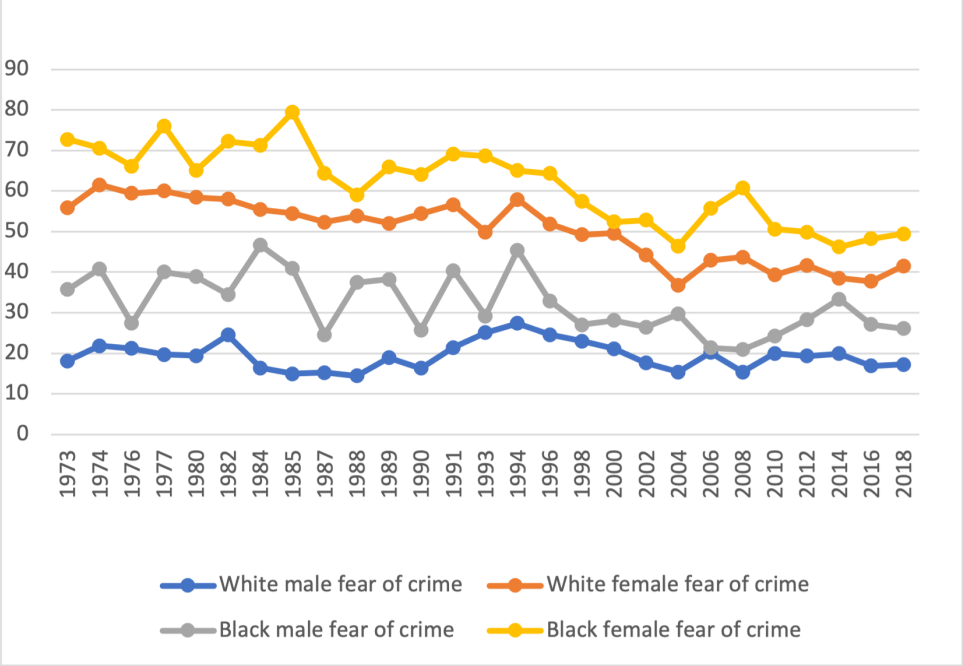
Appendix A. Figures 1 and 2

Figure 1: Incidence of Rape and Murder as a Percentage of the Incidence in 1973



Sources: Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics, 2013; Rand et al.1997; Planty et al. 2013; Pinker 2011

Figure 2. Fear of Crime by Gender and Race



Source: BJS 2019; University of California, Berkeley 2020.

Appendix B. Tables 1-6

Table 1. Correlations of Fear of Crime by Gender and Race by Year with UCR Murder Rate (Three Years Earlier) and NCVS Rape Rate (Three Years Earlier)

	Murder Rate	Rape Rate
White Men's Fear of Crime	.57**	.09
White Women's Fear of Crime	.66***	.93***
Black Men's Fear of Crime	.46*	.65***
Black Women's Fear of Crime	.64***	.82***
Total Men's Fear of Crime	.52**	.03
Total Women's Fear of Crime	.69***	.93***

Notes: * indicates coefficient significant at .05 level; **, at .01 level; *, at .001 level.**
Sources: BJS 2019; QuickStats 2017; University of California, Berkeley 2020.

Table 2. Regression of White Men's Fear of Crime on Rape Rate, Murder Rate and Percentage of White Men Over 50 Years of Age

	Standardized Regression Coefficients
Rape Rate	-.43
Murder Rate	.89***
Over 50	.08
N	26
Adjusted R Square	.36

Notes: * indicates coefficient significant at .05 level; **, at .01 level; *, at .001 level.**
Sources: BJS 2019; QuickStats 2017; University of California, Berkeley 2020.

Table 3. Regression of White Women's Fear of Crime on Rape Rate, Murder Rate and Percentage of White Women over 50 Year of Age

	Standardized Regression Coefficients
Rape Rate	.82***
Murder Rate	.10
Over 50	-.09
N	26
Adjusted R Square	.87

Notes: * indicates coefficient significant at .05 level; **, at .01 level; *, at .001 level.**
Sources: BJS 2019; QuickStats 2017; University of California, Berkeley 2020.

Table 4. Regression of Black Men's Fear of Crime on Rape Rate, Murder Rate and Percentage of Black Men over 50 Year of Age

	Standardized Regression Coefficients
Rape Rate	**.54****
Murder Rate	**.11**
Over 50	**.16**
N	**26**
Adjusted R Square	**.37**

Notes: * indicates coefficient significant at .05 level; **, at .01 level; *, at .001 level.**

Table 5. Regression of Black Women's Fear of Crime on Rape Rate, Murder Rate and Percentage of Black Women over 50 Year of Age

	Standardized Regression Coefficients
Rape Rate	**.71*****
Murder Rate	**.20**
Over 50	**-.05**
N	**26**
Adjusted R Square	**.66**

Notes: * indicates coefficient significant at .05 level; **, at .01 level; *, at .001 level.**
Sources: BJS 2019; QuickStats 2017; University of California, Berkeley 2020.

Table 6. Regression of Change in Black Men's Fear on Change in the Rape Rate, on the one Hand, and Four "Competing" Variables, on the Other

	Betas			
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**
Rape rate	**.53**	**.60**	**.90***	**.74***
Racial differences due to will	**.24**			
Racial differences due to ability		**.17**		
Racial differences due to discrimination (View of Blacks only)			**-.20**	
Percentage of Blacks with High School Diploma				**-.10**
N	**20**	**20**	**19**	**26**

Notes: * indicates coefficient significant at .05 level; **, at .01 level; *, at .001 level.**
Sources: BJS 2019; QuickStats 2017; University of California, Berkeley 2020.