

CRIMINOPHOBIA AND THE FEELING OF INSECURITY IN MODERN COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This study explores the multifaceted phenomenon of criminophobia by examining how fear of crime manifests differently across rural and urban environments. The research emphasizes the subjective dimension of insecurity, shaped by sociocultural factors, media exposure, and institutional presence. In rural areas, structural disadvantages such as depopulation, limited access to protective services, and infrastructural deficiencies contribute to an amplified perception of vulnerability. In contrast, urban communities face media-driven anxiety and an intensified sense of risk due to environmental complexity and social anonymity. The study is based on mixed methods, including a field survey conducted in the Republic of Moldova and comparative content analysis of institutional reports. Results indicate that while actual crime rates may be lower in rural settings, the perceived threat is higher, especially among women. Gender-based violence emerges as a particularly salient trigger for criminophobic reactions. The paper argues for the need to develop differentiated public safety policies that consider local contexts, with special attention to gendered perceptions of risk. Moreover, it suggests integrating criminophobia as a research and policy priority within public security planning. Addressing this phenomenon proactively may enhance community resilience, restore institutional trust, and reduce the psychological and social costs associated with fear-driven behaviors.

Keywords: criminophobia, insecurity, gender-based violence, rural, urban settings, public, trust

Introduction.

Addressing crime levels in rural communities provides only a partial understanding of the broader dynamics of criminality. The experience of crime differs significantly between rural and urban settings, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Consequently, this study seeks to explore elements that go beyond mere statistical measures, shedding light on unique challenges encountered in rural areas.

It is important to highlight that fear of crime can significantly affect quality of life. Many individuals, even those who have not been direct victims of crime, live in a state of continuous fear and heightened vigilance. This persistent anxiety has a profound

psychological impact, leading to long-term stress, a reality well-documented in criminological literature (Gabriel and Greve 2003, p. 614).

The rural environment, characterized by silence, darkness, and often sparse populations, exacerbates feelings of vulnerability. Rapid urbanization has led to depopulation in villages, leaving numerous households unsupervised, which increases their exposure to criminal activity. The lack of infrastructure, such as paved roads or adequate public lighting, alongside the absence of essential community services, further compounds the general sense of insecurity.

Additionally, abandoned homes frequently become targets for criminal activity, shelters for offenders, or even spaces for individuals leading parasitic lifestyles. This situation complicates security management efforts, enabling conditions favorable to crime, including gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence, in particular, represents a distinct form of crime with effects felt more acutely in rural areas. Here, stigmatization and limited access to support resources exacerbate the risks and consequences for victims (Perkins and Taylor 1996, p. 107).

To investigate these dynamics, rigorous research methods were employed, including systemic and comparative analyses, which offer deeper insights into the differences between rural and urban contexts. Surveys provided direct perspectives on perceptions of fear, while data synthesis was grounded in criminological literature, both domestic and international, with a focus on Western studies (Gabriel and Greve 2003, p. 614).

The purpose of this article lies in a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between criminophobia and the general perception of insecurity in contemporary societies, emphasizing their impact on social cohesion, quality of life, and public safety policies. The study aims to identify the factors contributing to the amplification of insecurity, highlight the role of the media in shaping perceptions of victimization risk, and propose specific measures to reduce social anxiety and strengthen community resilience.

Materials and methods.

Materials

The empirical foundation of the study is based on a mixed set of data sources and documentation tools. Primary materials included international and national scientific literature in criminology and sociology, legal frameworks relevant to public security, and recent statistical records regarding crime perception and victimization risk. A central empirical element was a structured sociological survey conducted between April 25 and May 9, 2022, in several rural areas of the Republic of Moldova. The questionnaire, applied anonymously to a sample of 451 individuals (213 men and 238 women), aimed to identify levels of criminological anxiety, perceived insecurity, and gender-specific vulnerabilities. Complementary documentation included institutional reports, national crime registers, and regulatory analyses from public authorities such as ANSA and local police departments. This corpus of materials supported a comprehensive understanding of criminophobia and its socio-psychological dimensions.

Methods

The methodological approach combined quantitative and qualitative strategies to ensure triangulation and in-depth interpretation of the phenomenon under study. Quantitatively,

descriptive statistics were generated from questionnaire responses, focusing on variables such as perceived safety in public and private spaces, fear of victimization, and avoidance behaviors. Gender-based disaggregation of data allowed for a comparative analysis of vulnerability perceptions between men and women. Qualitatively, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected respondents from the surveyed rural communities, providing narrative insights into personal experiences and risk interpretation patterns. Furthermore, a comparative content analysis was performed on media coverage and institutional communication related to crime events, to contextualize the impact of media-induced fear. Data interpretation was carried out using thematic coding and systemic analysis to identify patterns and correlations relevant to the expression and consequences of criminophobia.

Results and discussion. Firstly, we may speculate that the previously described situation could lead to various negative circumstances that facilitate the commission of illegal acts. This state of vulnerability intensifies the sense of insecurity in rural communities, creating conditions for a persistent climate of unease. In this regard, several authors argue that fear of crime is paradoxically more pronounced in rural areas compared to urban settings, even though actual crime rates are lower (Lawtley and Deane 2000).

Under a study carried out from April 25 to May 9, 2022, in rural regions of the Republic of Moldova, key insights were revealed concerning levels of anxiety and criminological vulnerability among residents. A total of 451 individuals, consisting of 213 men and 238 women, participated in an anonymous survey (Sutton and Farrall 2005, p. 213).

When asked, "How secure do you feel walking on the street during the day?", 76.9% of women indicated feeling safe or very safe, while 15.5% expressed feelings of insecurity, and 7.6% were undecided. Comparatively, 85.4% of men reported feeling safe, with 8.5% admitting they felt unsafe and 6.1% expressing uncertainty. These findings highlight that, even during daylight hours, a notable level of unease persists, especially among women.

Regarding perceptions of safety at home during the day, 83.2% of women stated they felt secure, while 10.5% indicated feelings of insecurity, and 6.3% were uncertain. Among men, 90.1% felt safe, 7.5% reported feeling unsafe, and 2.3% were undecided. Although home environments are generally considered safer than public spaces, a degree of anxiety remains, particularly for women.

At night, the survey uncovered a marked shift in perceptions of insecurity. For the question, "How secure do you feel walking on the street at night?", only 47.1% of women reported feeling safe or very safe, 39.9% stated they felt unsafe or very unsafe, and 13% were unsure how to answer. Meanwhile, 74.2% of men felt safe, 15% unsafe, and 10.8% could not provide a clear response.

The question, "Do you fear walking on the street at night?" revealed significant gender disparities. Among women, 50.4% claimed they were not afraid, 43.3% acknowledged feeling fearful, and 6.3% were uncertain. In contrast, 77% of men reported no fear, 18.3% admitted to feeling afraid, and 4.7% were undecided. (Nastas A. Cernomoreț S. 2024, p. 291).

The findings reveal a heightened perception of vulnerability and unease in rural areas, with women being particularly affected. This reflects the profound influence of crime-related fear on quality of life, emphasizing the need for targeted preventive measures to improve safety, especially in addressing gender-based violence.

The discomfort experienced within the home during nighttime is also notable. When asked about feeling secure at home at night, 66.8% of women reported feeling safe or very safe, whereas 21.4% expressed feelings of insecurity, and 11.8% gave no definitive response. Among men, 84.5% felt secure, 9.4% reported feeling unsafe, and 6.1% did not respond. These responses suggest that, although the home is typically regarded as a place of refuge, a certain level of anxiety remains, particularly for women.

This ongoing anxiety is partly driven by previous victimization experiences. Some respondents reported having been victims of crimes or minor infractions and expressed fears of reoccurrence. Additionally, perceptions of the current criminological environment further contribute to a sense of vulnerability, as individuals consider the likelihood of becoming victims themselves.

Regarding experiences of victimization, 70.2% of women stated they had never been victims, 23.9% reported having been victims, and 5.9% did not provide an answer. Among men, 70.4% indicated they had not been victims, 28.6% had experienced victimization, and 0.9% gave no response (Sutton and Farrall 2005, p. 213).

Perceptions of the likelihood of crime within one's home also revealed distinct gender differences. When asked, "Is there a probability that someone could break into your home and commit theft or another crime?", 12.7% of men considered this probability high, 67.1% assessed it as low, and 12.7% did not provide an answer. Conversely, 31.9% of women evaluated the probability as high, another 31.9% as low, while 14.7% did not offer a response. (Cernomoreț S., Nastas A. 2023, p.56).

Similarly, when asked about the likelihood of becoming a victim of crime in public spaces, the responses highlighted substantial concerns. Among women, 42.9% perceived a high probability of falling victim to crimes such as theft, robbery, or hooliganism, while 24.8% considered the risk low, and 32.4% expressed uncertainty. In contrast, 37.6% of men regarded the risk as high, 30.5% assessed it as low, and 31.9% did not provide a conclusive answer (Sutton and Farrall 2005, p. 214).

These findings indicate a sustained sense of insecurity within rural communities, affecting both private and public domains, with women being disproportionately impacted. Nevertheless, it is essential to approach the survey results with caution, as factors such as the respondents' comprehension of the questions, their overall level of awareness, and subjective perceptions of crime may influence the accuracy of the data collected.

The specialized literature presents significant debates regarding the best approach to define and measure fear of crime (Farrall et al. 1997, pp. 658–679).

For instance, Ferraro and LaGrange suggest differentiating between fear associated with specific criminal acts and a generalized anxiety about victimization risk (Ferraro and LaGrange 1987, p. 85).

In contrast, Williams and his collaborators advocate for replacing the term "fear of crime" with "worry about victimization" until a precise and universally accepted definition of fear of crime is established (Williams, McShane, and Akers 2000).

It is crucial to note that individuals may experience profound fear of a potential threat even when the perceived probability of its occurrence is low. While these elements are not always directly correlated, it is reasonable to assume that perceptions of victimization risk

significantly influence an individual's fear and anxiety, thereby affecting their quality of life (Jackson 2004, pp. 946–966).

In this context, criminophobia emerges as a relatively new concept within criminological research. This phenomenon has gained increasing relevance in the Republic of Moldova and has been thoroughly explored in Western criminological studies. These investigations have provided insights into the definitions, characteristics, theoretical frameworks, and preventive strategies associated with this complex syndrome.

Criminophobia, defined as a pathological condition characterized by anxiety and an obsessive fear of crime, is widely regarded as a phenomenon rooted in Western cultural contexts, where it first emerged (Pearson 1983, p. 236). Its varied expressions have led to the development of multiple theories and attitudes concerning the risk of victimization. Moreover, criminophobia amplifies the perception of specific situations as particularly hazardous, thereby enhancing the socio-cultural significance of crime in everyday life (Gabriel and Greve 2003, pp. 600–614). These perceptions and attitudes can influence both individual and collective behavior, with substantial implications for social cohesion. For example, labeling a rural area as a "no-go zone" may result in its avoidance, which can erode trust among neighbors and disrupt community stability (Hale 1996, pp. 79–150).

Interestingly, the behavioral responses triggered by criminophobia are not solely negative. Some psychologists argue that the anxiety stemming from this condition can motivate individuals to adopt protective measures and engage in proactive problem-solving. This distinction highlights the line between practical, cautious behaviors and those driven by excessive fear, which can undermine overall well-being (Gray, Jackson, and Farrall 2011, pp. 75–94).

Several factors contribute to the exacerbation of criminophobia, including:

- risk psychology (Jackson 2009, pp. 365–390);
- media depictions of victimization;
- public perceptions of neighborhood and familial relations (Stapel, Reicher, and Spears 1994, p. 3);
- anxieties related to public order, set against broader concerns about social stability and safety (Pearson 1983, p. 236; Innes 2004, p. 320).

The specialized literature emphasizes the role of cultural conditioning in heightening public sensitivity to issues of security and insecurity, a phenomenon closely tied to the dynamics of modern society (Lee 1999, pp. 227–246).

Within this framework, a key element of criminophobia is its capacity to evoke intense emotional responses, which, in turn, heighten perceptions of victimization. Although international studies estimate that criminophobia affects 30% to 50% of individuals in England and Wales, recent surveys indicate that a significant portion of people still feel unsafe in public spaces or even within their own homes (Farrall and Gadd 2004, pp. 127–132).

This persistent insecurity underscores the importance of differentiating between "fear," an immediate emotional reaction, and "anxiety," a prolonged state of unease, an essential distinction when examining fear of victimization, particularly in cases of gender-based violence (Warr 2000, pp. 451–489).

Research demonstrates that some individuals are more likely than others to recognize personal vulnerabilities, thereby intensifying their sense of insecurity (Sutton and Farrall 2005, pp. 212–224).

In the context of criminophobia, perceptions of victimization are shaped by public opinion and cultural narratives surrounding risk, which often exacerbate feelings of anxiety. For instance, even in areas where crime rates for certain offenses have decreased, many individuals continue to perceive a substantial likelihood of victimization, negatively impacting their quality of life and personal autonomy. Those who feel especially vulnerable to becoming victims are, paradoxically, more likely to be targeted, as their perception of an inability to manage risky situations increases their susceptibility (Jackson 2009, pp. 365–390).

This dynamic is particularly pronounced in cases of gender-based violent crime, where the psychological aftermath of victimization can be severe, and the interplay between perceived risk and emotional response is significantly intensified (Warr 1987, pp. 29–46).

An alternative framework for evaluating criminophobia focuses on avoidance behaviors and the adoption of self-defense strategies in response to areas perceived as unsafe. This approach is particularly relevant in cases of gender-based violence, where individuals often avoid certain locations or navigate public spaces with heightened caution. Behavioral responses to perceived risks frequently involve investments in protective measures, such as alarm systems, reinforced windows, or personal defense tools. For example, a survey conducted in the Republic of Moldova found that 12.7% of men and 4.6% of women reported owning items such as firearms, pepper spray, knives, or stun guns, while 5.6% of men and 2.9% of women hired private security services to safeguard their homes (Sutton and Farrall 2005, p. 215). These results highlight how perceptions of insecurity vary by gender, with women being more likely to feel vulnerable to gender-based violence.

Additionally, criminophobia is strongly shaped by public perceptions of local security, community cohesion, and the effectiveness of safety measures. An exaggerated perception of victimization risk can skew views on social stability, undermining the sense of moral consensus and the informal relationships that maintain social order in neighborhoods or rural communities (Bannister 1993, pp. 69–84). In cases of gender-based violence, these perceptions disproportionately affect women, contributing to a climate of fear and eroding trust in state institutions tasked with protecting their rights (Skogan and Maxfield 1981, pp. 63–107).

These everyday challenges, exacerbated by media influence, can generate a pervasive sense of insecurity that impacts both community dynamics and trust in authorities. This distortion of crime-related information promotes a culture of isolation and avoidance of public spaces, further deepening societal divides (Innes 2004, pp. 317–334). In summary, criminophobia shapes not only individual perceptions and protective behaviors but also disrupts the broader structure of social security, especially in cases of gender-based violence. Here, the fear and anxiety surrounding victimization exert profound effects on quality of life and the cohesion of communities.

Public perceptions of crime are heavily influenced by media narratives, which can occasionally be driven by manipulative agendas. At the individual level, these perceptions are shaped by interpersonal interactions, entrenched social stereotypes, and the methods by which media campaigns are presented on mainstream platforms. The concept of "impulsive

similarity," as described in the specialized literature, suggests that individuals who identify with victims portrayed in the media or recall similar personal experiences develop an acute sense of danger, perceiving the threat as imminent (Winkel and Vrij 1990, pp. 251–265).

For instance, research demonstrates that people exposed to news about traffic accidents who identify socially with the victims exhibit a heightened ability to assess risks compared to those lacking such associations (Stapel, Reicher, and Spears 1994, pp. 1–17). This dynamic is even more pronounced in cases of gender-based violence, where women may perceive an amplified risk of victimization through identification with widely publicized crime victims. This perception often leads to the adoption of additional protective measures, even in situations where the immediate risk is negligible.

The relationship between criminophobia and media influence is unmistakable. A key question arises in this context: does the public's fear of crime grow because of the media's constant focus on criminal incidents, or is it due to the way this information shapes behavioral tendencies, encouraging reactions to each reported case? The multifaceted nature of criminal events offers opportunities for interest groups to exploit media coverage, either to conceal specific issues or manipulate public opinion. This manipulation fosters a climate of fear, driven more by perception and suggestion than by the actual statistical prevalence of crime (Ferraro and LaGrange 1987, p. 96).

This dynamic is particularly significant in cases of gender-based violence. Fear generated by media portrayals can lead to exaggerated responses, undermining women's confidence in the safety of their surroundings. Consequently, such coverage not only heightens feelings of vulnerability but also contributes to a growing mistrust in community security structures.

Conclusions. In rural areas, residents frequently experience a pervasive sense of unease and heightened alertness, even in the absence of direct victimization. This persistent fear not only undermines their quality of life but also disrupts social structures and erodes trust among neighbors, leading to a diminished sense of community safety. Criminophobia in these settings often manifests through avoidance of public spaces, reduced social engagement, and a constant anxiety over potential victimization, particularly in environments lacking adequate protective measures. Women, in particular, are disproportionately affected by this fear, as the perception of ever-present crime further restricts their mobility and increases their vulnerability.

Conversely, in urban environments, criminophobia takes on a different form, frequently driven by media saturation of violent crime coverage. For women and other vulnerable groups, crowded urban areas often evoke an intensified sense of insecurity due to the interplay of anonymity and heightened social interactions. This generalized fear and persistent vigilance, compounded by the absence of comprehensive preventive policies, compel individuals to adopt self-defense measures such as avoiding certain areas, limiting nighttime activities, and maintaining an excessive level of caution. Over time, these behaviors contribute to chronic stress and further isolate individuals from public life.

In both rural and urban contexts, the impact of criminophobia extends beyond the immediate harm of direct victimization, fostering a constant state of apprehension and diminishing public trust in institutions responsible for maintaining order. This anxiety has particularly adverse effects on women, who frequently perceive gender-based violent crime as an omnipresent threat. Amplified by media portrayals, this fear often becomes a barrier to

women's active participation in society, significantly restricting their mobility and independence.

While criminophobia may have certain constructive outcomes, such as promoting self-protection and preventive actions, its long-term effects often erode these potential benefits. The chronic stress associated with criminophobia undermines its constructive aspects, highlighting the necessity of integrating this phenomenon into public security strategies. Engaging criminologists and experts to analyze and interpret relevant data is vital for developing effective responses. By examining the differences in perceptions of safety across rural and urban settings, authorities can create customized social defense programs tailored to the unique vulnerabilities of each community. This targeted approach can foster a stronger sense of actual and perceived security, alleviate victimization anxiety, and establish proactive measures to protect at-risk populations.

In the specific context of gender-based violent crime, policymakers should prioritize the implementation of prevention initiatives and victim support systems. Strengthening such frameworks can boost women's confidence in the protective measures provided by the state. By addressing the root causes and mitigating the effects of criminophobia, these interventions would pave the way for a safer society where individuals, irrespective of gender, can live their lives free from overwhelming fears of victimization.

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