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# The Fear of Crime among Older Adults in Austria

An urban-rural comparison of the influence of social disorder on the fear of crime in public spaces



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So far, little is known about the fear of crime among older adults (65+) in Austria. Based on the comparison of an urban, semi-rural and rural region, the present study therefore examines the security perception of older men and women in public spaces. Starting from the great importance that the immediate living environment has for older people, the question of how the phenomena of social and physical disorder in the living environment influence the feeling of security and what role individual attitude towards such phenomena plays is examined. At the same time, in the SI-ALT project (Police and age: Fostering the subjective sense of security of older and very old men and women in public spaces), 756 older Austrians in the three pilot regions were interviewed face-to-face using a standardised questionnaire. The binary-logistic regression analysis shows that older women and people in urban areas, as well as people who have noticed social disorder in their neighbourhood and see it as a problem, take security measures and thus demonstrate a higher level of fear.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Older men and women's (65+) fear of crime and the related subjective feeling of security is a research topic that has received little attention in Austria to date. Apart from one large-scale study in 2012 (Studer 2014), there are hardly any quantitative contributions that explicitly deal with the feeling of security among older (65–79) and very old adults (80+). Internationally, on the other hand, the investigation of the fear of crime among older people has been an integral part of crime fear research since the 1980s (Beaulieu et al. 2004).

Of interest is the preoccupation with the sense of security of older adults (65+), if only because of their relatively large share of the population of 18.5 %, which

is expected to increase to 22.8 % by 2030 (Statistik Austria 2016). The fear of crime among older adults is a relevant research topic not only for demographic, but also for empirical and socio-political reasons.

From an empirical point of view, the fear of crime among older people is characterised by the so-called “fear of crime paradox”. Based on US studies from the 1970s and 1980s, in which older people had the highest level of fear (Yin 1980), older adults have repeatedly been said to have a paradoxical level of fear of crime in view of their lower objective risk of victimisation compared to other age groups (Greve et al. 1996; Ditton/Farral 2000; Hale 1996). In many ways, however, this thesis is now considered to be too undifferentiated (Greve 2004; Moore 2010).

Basically, it should be noted that most studies on the differences between the different age groups, with few exceptions (Beaulieu et al. 2007; De Donder et al. 2005; De Donder et al. 2012), do not differentiate between older people (65–79) and very old people (80+). This research gap was one of the main interests of this present study. It is assumed that older people do not form a homogenous group and therefore the diversity, but also the intersectionality of various characteristics (such as gender, social position and place of residence) must be taken into account, especially with regard to any differences between the group of older people and the group of very old people.

The sense of security of older people relating to questions of social participation in public space is socio-politically relevant. Empirical studies show that older people spend less time in public spaces (Wahl et al. 1999; Ziegler 2010). There are a number of reasons for this withdrawal, such as loss of social contacts or functional restrictions, one of which could also be a lower feeling of security. Finally, a change in mobility behaviour is generally a common reaction to fear of crime (Miehte 1995; Pain/Townshend 2002; Ross 1993; Whitley/Prince 2005). As a result, a particularly high level of fear can make social participation and integration more difficult in old age.

Given the relevance of the research topic and the rather modest data situation in Austria, the project SI-ALT (Police and age: Fostering the subjective sense of security of older and very old men and women in public spaces), the fear of crime in people aged 65 and over in the public space was examined in three pilot regions in Austria (Vienna, Bruck an der Mur and Tamsweg im Lungau) as part of the SI-ALT project. The research institute “queraum. cultural and social research” carried out quantita-

tive and qualitative surveys in cooperation with the University of Vienna (Department of Sociology) and the Vienna University of Economics and Business (Competence Centre for Empirical Research Methods). The project was funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology in the security research funding programme KIRAS. The Federal Ministry of the Interior is involved in the study as a public agency in order to meet the requirement of being application-oriented. This article focuses on the question of how security perceptions and security behaviour differ in public spaces in these three regions and how these differences can be explained and is therefore only a section of the complete analysis (cf. Kolland et al. 2018).

## 2. SOCIAL SPACES AND FEAR OF CRIME – STARTING POINTS

### Public spaces in older adulthood

In everyday speech, the term public space mostly refers to streets, pavements, squares, parks and the like, which are generally accessible and useable. The way people use public spaces depends of various factors, including age. A number of studies suggest the increasing importance of the immediate living environment or neighbourhood with older adulthood, i.e. most activities take place there (Claßen et al. 2014; Oswald/Konopik 2015). In the present study, the immediate living environment and the neighbourhood were therefore used synonymously with public spaces.

### Fear of crime and the theory of social disorder

So-called “disorder” and “incivility” approaches are very often used to explain the fear of crime in public spaces (Häfele 2013). These concepts have their origin

in the theory of social disorganisation of the Chicago School – especially Shaw and McKay (Shaw/McKay 1942) –, whereby the “broken windows theory” developed by Wilson and Kelling (Wilson/Kelling 1982) contributed significantly to its spread (Lüdemann 2006). The central idea is that “incivilities”, i.e. characteristics of social and physical disorder, such as drunks and young people loitering or derelict buildings and vandalism, increase the feeling of insecurity in a certain space (Hohage 2004). The connection between the perceived physical and social disorder within a social space and the existing fear of crime has been proved repeatedly in research on the fear of crime (Gerber et al. 2010; Hale 1996; Häfele 2013; LaGrange et al. 1992; Lüdemann 2006). However, the present article is not limited to the connection between existing or perceived incivilities and fear of crime. Subsequent to Lüdemann (Lüdemann 2006) and Studer (Studer 2014), the influence of personal attitudes and assessment of the respondents regarding such phenomena are also taken into account. In this way, the aim is to test what influence individual attitudes towards incivilities have in explaining fear of crime.

### **Fear of crime in urban-rural comparison**

The present survey was carried out in three regions (Vienna, Bruck an der Mur and Tamsweg im Lungau), which differ from each other primarily in terms of population density and degree of urbanisation. Previous studies on the urban-rural comparison of fear of crime show that fear of crime is lower in rural regions than in densely populated regions (cf. Kury/Obergfell-Fuchs 2003; Furian et al. 2012; Studer 2014). In this respect, it is not surprising that a glance at the research landscape shows that fear of crime is seen as a problem in

urban areas and that rural areas are rather neglected (Pleggenkuhle/Schafer 2017). The possible consequence of this focus is a theoretical bias, i.e. that for the explanation of fear of crime as a whole, those theoretical approaches which seem appropriate for explaining the fear of crime in urban areas are considered significant. At the macro level, for example, there may be no clear findings for the relationship between the objective crime rate and the level of fear of crime (Hale 1996; Hirtenlehner 2009); however, a study from Germany shows there is certainly a relationship here in rural areas (Völschow/Helms 2014). In any case, the influence of the degree of urbanisation is important for the present article. Finally, the lower degree of social disorganisation in rural areas (Kury/Obergfell-Fuchs 2003) is a relevant differentiator for the question of the connection between the assessment of incivilities and the degree of fear of crime.

## **2.1 MEASUREMENT OF THE FEAR OF CRIME AND CURRENT DATA SITUATION**

### **Measurement of the fear of crime**

Much attention has been paid to academic research on the issue of adequate measurement of fear of crime. The key factor here is to what extent the so-called “standard indicator”<sup>1</sup> represents an adequate measurement tool. Finally, just to mention a few criticisms; it is questionable whether a single question is sufficient to comprehend the complex phenomenon of fear of crime – particularly if this question does not explicitly mention crime and is also formulated hypothetically (Ferraro/LaGrange 1987; Hale 1996; Noack 2015).

In order to take account of the criticism and the newer approaches developed in response to it, the conative dimension of the fear of crime is analysed in this article

following the 3-dimensional model, which distinguishes between the affective (refers to the frequency of fear), cognitive (refers to the risk assessment) and the conative level of fear of crime (Hohage 2004). (The analysis and comparison of all five fear of crime indicators<sup>2</sup> can be found in the report on the Kolland et al. 2018 study.) The conative dimension denotes the behavioural level of fear of crime i.e. it encompasses behaviours which are based on fear of crime. A distinction is made between avoidance behaviour (e.g. bypassing certain areas) and preventive measures (e.g. security doors and locks) (Hohage 2004). The following question was asked to measure the conative level: “Have you taken any of the following measures to prevent crime or act in response to a crime?” Respondents were asked to choose items that applied to them from a list of 13 in total.<sup>3</sup> This approach also seems appropriate in view of the well-documented relationship between older age and (thus increasing) security behaviour (Kappes et al. 2013).

### **Current data situation on the fear of older adults**

A quick look at the data situation in Austria shows that around 30 % of older adults say they feel unsafe (23 %) or very unsafe (7 %) when asked how safe they are walking alone in their home environment at night (cf. Studer 2014, 167). The results of the prevention monitor are slightly above those values, in which 38 % of respondents who were 65 years and older stated that they felt unsafe when they are walking alone in the neighbourhood after dark (cf. Furian et al. 2012, 50).

## **3. SAMPLING AND DESCRIPTION**

### **Description of the population**

The central distinguishing criterion of the three selected regions is the size of the

population. Tamsweg with approx. 5,640 inhabitants is referred to below as a rural area, Bruck and der Mur with 15,800 people as a semi-rural area and Vienna with approx. 1.8 million people as an urban area (Statistik Austria 2017a; id. 2017b; id. 2017c). The population in the present study is all people over the age of 65 in these three regions.

### **Sampling**

In addition to older adults who live in private households, people in retirement homes who still use public spaces regularly were also taken into account. This approach required a combination of different sampling methods. The random route procedure was used to select people in private households. People in retirement homes were selected by cluster sampling. In Vienna, sampling had to be supplemented by a snowball procedure in order to achieve the desired number of interviews. As a result, it is strictly speaking no longer possible to draw conclusions about distributions in the Vienna population. The samples in Tamsweg and Bruck an der Mur are not affected. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the people selected.

### **Description of the sample**

Table 1 (see page 58) shows the sample distributions by place of residence and type of housing as well as by gender, age and highest level of education obtained.

The sample consists of a total of 756 people. 458 older and very old people were surveyed in Vienna, 184 in Bruck an der Mur and 114 in Tamsweg. Across the entire sample, 60 % of respondents are female and 25 % are over 80 years old. Almost 60 % have a low level of formal education (compulsory schooling/apprenticeship/mid-level vocational education) and a further 25 % have middle level

Source: Rohner/Hopf/Obex

	Vienna	Bruck/Mur	Tamsweg	Total
<b>Type of housing</b>				
- Private household	90%	89%	90%	90%
- Retirement home	10%	11%	10%	10%
<b>Gender</b>				
- Male	40%	40%	38%	40%
- Female	60%	60%	62%	60%
<b>Age</b>				
- 65 to 79	78%	66%	75%	75%
- 80+	22%	34%	25%	25%
<b>Educational background</b>				
- Compulsory schooling/ apprenticeship/mid-level vocational education	53%	69%	74%	60%
- General secondary education/ high-level vocational education/ master craftsman	28%	19%	18%	25%
- University degree	19%	12%	8%	15%
	<b>458</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>756</b>

**Table 1: Sample description by place of residence and socio-demographic characteristics**

education (general secondary education/high-level vocational education), while 15 % have a university degree.

#### 4. FINDINGS

##### General feeling of security – overview of the results of different fear indicators

In general, it can be seen that older respondents mostly feel safe in their respective region and are only slightly afraid of victimisation. Older people in Vienna, Tamsweg and Bruck an der Mur indicate a high level of security in their answer to the question “How safe do you feel when you are walking alone in your neighbourhood during the day?” In Tamsweg and Bruck an der Mur, generally only 3 to 5 % state that they feel rather or very unsafe. In Vienna, however, almost every eighth person feels rather or very unsafe on the street during the day. The respondents are most often afraid of falling victim to burglary or theft (20 % stated “often” to “almost daily” at the affective level). In contrast, far fewer respondents are afraid of becoming victims of fraud or assault (7–8 % stated “often” to “almost daily”). Comparable to the results of the affective level, respondents also as-

essed the likelihood of falling victim to burglary or theft (cognitive level: 21 to 25 % very likely).

##### Reactions to fear of crime – the conative level

The conative level was also assessed in addition to the standard indicator and the affective and cognitive levels. The conative level represents the behavioural level, i.e. it refers to security measures and avoidance strategies that are taken because of fear of and to prevent crime.

Respondents stated avoidance behaviour most often. In order to prevent crimes or in response to a crime they have experienced, 73 % of older adults avoid opening the door to strangers, 67 % cross to the other side of the street when passers-by seem threatening, 66 % avoid certain areas at night and 51% generally avoid leaving the house at night. Half of respondents also avoid being approached by strangers and have fitted their house or flat with additional security measures. With the exception of the housing-related security precautions, protective measures that could be used in the event of an attack are mentioned much less frequently than the various avoidance strategies. Only a tenth of older women and men carry a pocket alarm or pepper spray out of fear of an assault, and just under seven percent have taken a self-defence course or possess a weapon. These results show that older adults focus primarily on self-protection behaviours that aim to avoid or circumvent dangerous situations, while little preparation is made for the event of an actual attack.

In further analysis, the security measures were added up in a sum index (0 to 12): a higher number means more measures taken and thus a higher feeling of insecurity on the conative dimension.

There are differences in crime-related avoidance and security behaviour between

men and women and between regions. On average, men take fewer security measures than women<sup>4</sup> and people in semi-rural and rural areas report fewer security measures on average than people who live in urban areas.<sup>5</sup> The difference between men and women is independent of where the respondent lives. However, no differences were found at the cognitive level between older and very old respondents.

**Social and physical disorder**

Why do older people feel more secure in rural and semi-urban areas than in urban areas? A possible explanatory factor could be an increased awareness of social and physical disorder phenomena; after all, the degree of social disorder tends to be lower in rural areas than in urban areas (Kury/Obergfell-Fuchs 2003). In order to investigate these regional differences, the existence of social and physical decline in the neighbourhoods was surveyed. On the other hand, respondents were asked to indicate whether such phenomena, if present in the neighbourhood, would pose a problem for them personally, regardless of whether they had already noticed such signs of social and physical disorder or not.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of existing disorder phenomena in lines, while the bars represent the mean values of the problem assessment of disorder phenomena. The left Y axis shows the level of the problem assessment, with “1” for the answer “no problem” and “4” for “big problem”. The right Y axis shows the percentage of the lines.

Most of the mean values of the problem assessments fluctuate around the answers “minor to moderate problem” (MV= 2.1 to 2.6), whereby foreigners/refugees and unkempt front gardens are classified as a minor problem (MV=2.1 to 2.6). In contrast, drug addicts (MV= 3.4 to 3.5) and

Source: Rohner/Hopf/Obex

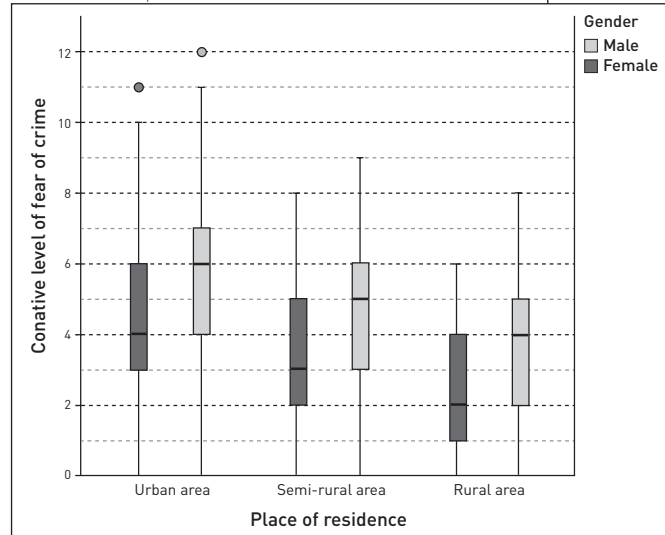


Figure 1: Cognitive level of fear based on place of residence and gender (n=693)

Source: Rohner/Hopf/Obex

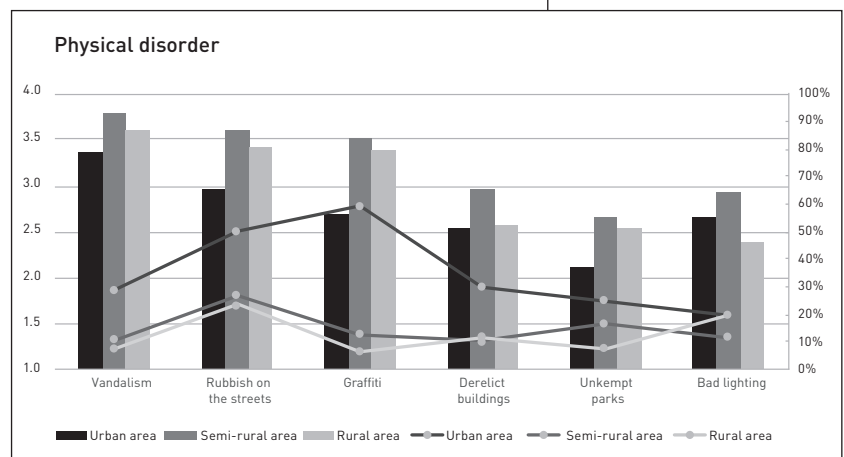
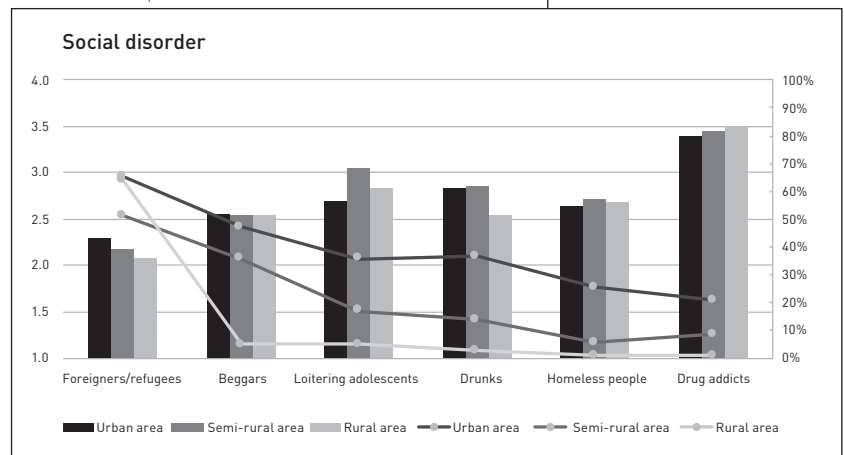


Figure 2: Presence (line in %) and problem assessment (1 “no problem” to 4 “big problem”) of social and physical disorder by place of residence

vandalism (MV= 3.4 to 3.8) are rated as a moderate to big problem on average.

The importance of differentiating between problem assessment and existence/perception can be seen from the fact that between 51 % and 65 % of respondents in all three regions have foreigners/refugees in the neighbourhood, but on average classify them as a minor problem. In contrast, far fewer respondents have drug addicts in their neighbourhood (1 to 21 %), but classify them a moderate to big problem on average. Likewise, the assessment of physical disorder (such as rubbish) is generally more negative than the assessment of social disorder. Unsurprisingly, most of the disorder phenomena are perceived in urban areas, but, interestingly, they are least classified as problematic. However,

this does not apply to foreigners/refugees, as they are rated more negatively in urban areas than in rural areas.

Therefore, it is not only relevant for the effects of disorder whether they were perceived in the neighbourhood, but also whether they are considered problematic. After all, it seems hardly comprehensible how a social phenomenon that is subjectively considered unproblematic should influence people's sense of security. In order to take both aspects into account in the further analysis, both questions were combined into a total of six indices and three groups each for physical and social disorder. A variable was created with people who perceived social or physical disorder but did not consider it problematic. The second variable comprises people who perceived social disorder and consider it problematic, and the third variable comprises people who have not noticed disorder but would consider it problematic.

Source: Rohner/Hopf/Obex

	Model 1			Model 2		
	OR	p	SE	OR	p	SE
Age in years	1,000		0.012	1.012		0.013
Gender (1=f)	<b>2.699</b>	<b>**</b>	<b>0.175</b>	<b>2.669</b>	<b>**</b>	<b>0.184</b>
Place (ref: rural area)						
- Semi-rural area	<b>2.246</b>	<b>**</b>	<b>0.308</b>	<b>1.918</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>0.318</b>
- Urban area	<b>4.439</b>	<b>**</b>	<b>0.277</b>	<b>2.875</b>	<b>**</b>	<b>0.301</b>
Physical disorder perceived, not problematic				1,355		0,136
Physical disorder not perceived, problematic				1,047		0,080
Physical disorder perceived, problematic				1,204		0,096
Social disorder perceived, not problematic				1,146		0,112
Social disorder not perceived, problematic				<b>1,188</b>	<b>*</b>	<b>0,076</b>
Social disorder perceived, problematic				<b>1,523</b>	<b>**</b>	<b>0,095</b>
*p<0,05, ** p<0,01; Nagelkerke's r <sup>2</sup> = 0,140			0,239			
<b>Interpretation:</b> OR=1 → no connection; OR>1 → positive conn.; OR<1 → negative conn. E.g. OR=2.427 → If the independents are increased by one unit and all other independents are kept constant, the chances (odds) that Y=1 occurs is 2.5 times higher.						

**Multivariate analysis**

The relationship between security behaviour and social and physical disorder phenomena is subsequently examined in more detail. A binary-logistic regression analysis was carried out with the dichotomised fear of crime variable<sup>6</sup>.

The regression analysis initially shows that age does not affect the number of security measures taken, but there are significant differences according to the gender and place of residence of the respondents. For example, the odds or the chance of women specifying more than five security measures are more than 2.7 times higher than those of men. Older women are more afraid than men, regardless of their place of residence and age.

The degree of urbanisation of the place of residence also increases the security measures taken, regardless of the number of disorder phenomena perceived and their

**Table 2: Binary logical regression: Dependent b: conative level of fear of crime (n=609)**



assessment. Thus, the odds of taking more than five security measures are almost three times higher in urban areas than in rural areas. Taking into account the assessment and perception of social and physical disorder in the neighbourhood, the differences between semi-rural and rural areas are only marginally significant; however, people in the region with more inhabitants indicate greater fear in this case.

If one considers the influence of the disorder phenomena on the conative level of fear, it becomes clear that physical disorder phenomena, such as derelict buildings or rubbish on the street, have no significant explanatory content in the overall model when all other variables are kept constant. Even social disorder, which is perceived in the neighbourhood but is not considered problematic, has no effect on the security measures taken.

In contrast, unperceived social disorder, which (if present) would be a problem, leads to an increase in the odds. This means that the more social disorder phenomena are judged as problematic, the greater the likelihood that a person will take more security measures regardless of whether they are actually present in the neighbourhood. Social disorder, which is perceived in the neighbourhood and rated as problematic, also has a significant effect on fear of crime. The odds of taking more than five avoidance strategies and security measures increase 1.5 times with every further social disorder in the neighbourhood.

The total model thus shows that the perception or existence of social disorder contributes to the explanation of fear of crime, but the decisive factor is whether these perceived disorder phenomena are also considered a problem. Thus, existing social disorder that is also seen as a problem leads to a significant increase in the conative level of fear of crime, meaning that, due to fear of criminal assault, older

people adapt their behaviour to the situation they perceive as subjectively problematic and threatening. In contrast, existing social disorder which is not considered a problem does not appear to affect the fear indicator. Existing physical disorder no longer influences the fear of crime – after checking for alternative explanatory approaches.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was, on the one hand, to help clarify the situation of older and very old people with regard to their subjective sense of security in an urban-rural comparison and, on the other, to investigate the extent to which the personal problem assessment of disorder explains the fear of crime. The analysis shows that there are clear differences between the urban and rural population, with increasing security measures being taken with an increasing degree of urbanisation. A quite remarkable difference was established when considering gender. In most studies, the level of fear of women is significantly higher than that of men, as was also shown in our analysis of the situation in all three regions. Although the generally low level of fear has to be indicated here in a restrictive manner, this result can, in any case, give rise to further research in this direction.

One of the central results of the present study relates to the investigation of the influence of (supposed) disorder phenomena on the fear of crime among older adults. It is important to emphasise here that the perception and assessment of disorder phenomena must be strictly separated from each other, since the existence of disorder phenomena alone cannot be used to infer their influence on the fear of crime.

There is also a difference between social and physical disorder phenomena. In line with previous studies (Spelman 2004), the importance of physical disorder phe-

nomena for fear of crime is far less than the impact of social disorder phenomena. In the present study, the former have no effect whatsoever.

The social disorder phenomena only become a relevant influencing factor when the problem assessment is taken into account. Attitudes towards disorder phenomena thus prove to be a central criterion for analysing the fear of crime among older people. Those older adults who are confronted with different aspects of social disorder in their living environment and for whom these disorder phenomena pose a problem have an increased fear of crime. This increased fear is expressed not only in

an increased, abstract sense of insecurity, but also in concrete behavioural adjustments. Thus, in response to an increased fear of crime, for example, they avoid certain areas at night or no longer leave the house or apartment at all. The fear of crime, therefore, appears to be accompanied by a reduction in mobility. It cannot be determined empirically on the basis of the present study whether and to what extent this has consequences for participation in public space and life. However, this question requires further investigation, especially for urban areas, where a not insignificant proportion of older respondents feel less safe during the day.

<sup>1</sup> The “standard indicator” is one of the most frequently used questions to ascertain the feeling of security (Reuband 2000). Classic forms are: “How safe do you feel being out alone in your neighbourhood at night” (Noack 2015, 86) or “How safe do you feel or would you feel if you were alone in this area at night” (Kreuter 2002, 47).

<sup>2</sup> Standard indicator during the day and at night, cognitive level and conative level.

<sup>3</sup> (1) Avoiding opening the front door to strangers, (2) crossing to the other side of the street in the event of passers-by who appear threatening, (3) avoiding visiting certain areas at night, (4) avoiding leaving the house alone at night, (5) avoiding being approached by strangers, (6) avoiding certain areas in general, (7) installing security precautions (e.g. locks, etc.), (8) leaving a light on when you are out in the evening, (9) taking an item

with you for protection, (10) possessing a pocket alarm, (11) possessing a pepper spray, (12) taking a self-defence course, (13) possessing a weapon.

<sup>4</sup> Men:  $MV=4.0$   $SD=2.4$ ; women:  $MV=5.3$   $SD=2.3$ ;  $U$  test:  $p<0.001$ .

<sup>5</sup> Urban area:  $MV=5.2$   $SD=2.5$ ; semi-rural area:  $MV=4.3$   $SD=2.1$ ; rural area:  $MV=3.3$   $SD=2.0$ ;  $U$  test:  $p<0.001$ .

<sup>6</sup> The selection of the value that was used for the dichotomisation (cut-off point) was based on the mean of the dependents  $\rightarrow 0$  = fewer than 4 security measures, 1 = at least 5 security measures. Dichotomisation was necessary because the standardised residuals are not normally distributed in linear regression.

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