

7. Public perceptions of crime and safety

Key Findings

- Most of the respondents to the survey (48.5%) indicated that they believed that crime in their areas of residence had increased in the past three years. However 38.3% believed that crime had actually decreased.
- More than half of the respondents (54.7%) said they believed violent crime had decreased over the past three years, with 26.8% believing that violent crime had increased. There was no correlation between those who had themselves been victims of violent crime and those who thought violent crime had increased.
- However, public opinion on property crime was more closely divided: 42% of the respondents thought that property crime had decreased over the past three years, 45.2% of the respondents felt that property crime had in fact increased.
- A significant relationship exists between the region in which respondents live, and the type of crime the respondents fear most : in the Northern Region, people are most afraid of crop theft (35.1%), and then murder (23%); in the Central Region, murder poses the greatest fear for residents (35.1%), followed by robbery (17.3%), and only then crop theft (15.8%) and in the Southern Region, robbery is the most feared crime (26.7% of the respondents), followed by housebreaking (20%) and then murder (17.2%)
- In the urban areas, people are most afraid of robberies (39%), house-breaking (21.8%) and theft of personal property (16.8%), while in the rural areas, people are most afraid of murder (27.3%), crop theft (21%) and robbery (17%).
- However, a relatively accurate perception exists amongst Malawians of what the most common crimes are, with most people citing crop theft followed by theft of livestock and housebreakings, together with theft of personal property as the most common crimes.

- Given the widespread public perception that there has not been a significant increase in crime and the even wider public perception that violent crime has decreased, most Malawians feel safe.
- Nevertheless, 44% of the respondents indicated that they changed their behaviour, albeit sometimes in very small ways, because of crime over the past three years

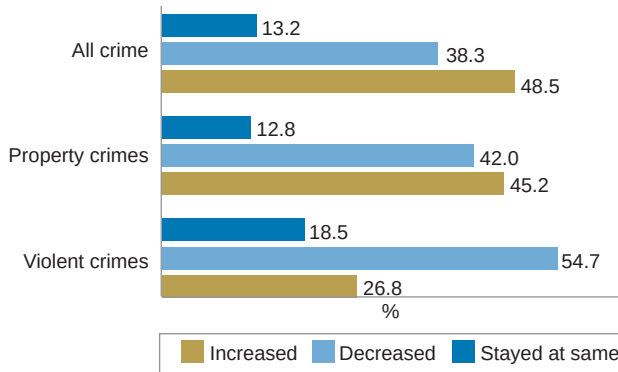
Crime impacts on societies on a variety of levels regardless of whether individuals or households have themselves been victims of crime. People and communities that live in fear of crime tend to change their behaviours and often attempt to insulate themselves from outsiders. In addition, people turn to sometimes expensive target hardening security measures or secure weapons to protect themselves. This fear is known as secondary victimisation, and refers specifically to the indirect victimisation of individuals and households – such a process is a direct result of a perception, real or otherwise, of increased crime, and therefore of an increased vulnerability to crime.

The Malawi Crime and Victimisation Survey therefore also included a series of questions regarding public perceptions of crime, feelings of safety, and the extent to which (if any) behavioural change had occurred as a result of these feelings.

7.1 Public perceptions of crime

Perceptions of crime may be informed by personal experience of crime, or by general media portrayal and word of mouth reports of crime incidents. In many instances, perceptions may differ significantly from the reality.

Most of the respondents to the survey (48.5%) indicated that they believed that crime in their areas of residence had increased in the past three years. However 38.3% believed that crime had actually decreased. Figure 30 below outlines public perceptions of crime.

Figure 30 Public perceptions of crime (n=6,744)

The majority of respondents to the survey (54.7%) indicated that they believed violent crime had decreased over the past three years, with 26.8% believing that violent crime had increased. There was no correlation between those who had themselves been victims of violent crime and those who thought violent crime had increased.

However, public opinion on property crime was more closely divided: 42% of the respondents thought that property crime had decreased over the past three years, 45.2% of the respondents felt that property crime had in fact increased. In all likelihood, this would be related to the prevalence of crimes such as crop and stock theft, as well as housebreaking and theft of personal property.

Public opinion on crime in Malawi takes on an interesting regional profile. In the Southern and Central Regions the majority of respondents felt that violent crime had decreased (67.7%, and 45% respectively) with respondents in the Northern Region believing that there had been no noticeable change (43.6%). With regard to property crime, in the Northern and Central Regions, more respondents believed that it had increased (41.5% and 50.1% respectively), while in the Southern Region, where these crimes are most prevalent, more respondents believed it had decreased (48.9%)³⁸

³⁸ In each case, the region was statistically significant in determining public perceptions of crime over the three year period ($p=0.000$)

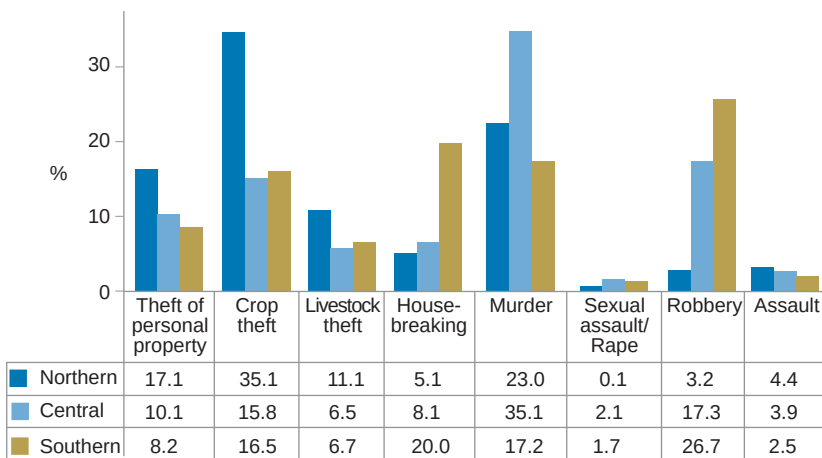
Residents of the urban areas were more likely to believe that violent crime had increased than those living in the rural areas (35% as opposed to 25%).

7.2 Public fear of crime

Also of note is that a significant relationship exists between the region in which respondents live, and the type of crime the respondents fear most:

- In the Northern Region, people are most afraid of crop theft (35.1%), and then murder (23%)
 - In the Central Region, murder poses the greatest fear for residents (35.1%), followed by robbery (17.3%), and only then crop theft (15.8%)
 - In the Southern Region, robbery is the most feared crime (26.7% of the respondents), followed by housebreaking (20%) and then murder (17.2%)
- Figure 31 below outlines the crimes the public is most afraid of.

Figure 31 Crime Most Feared by Region (n=6,767)

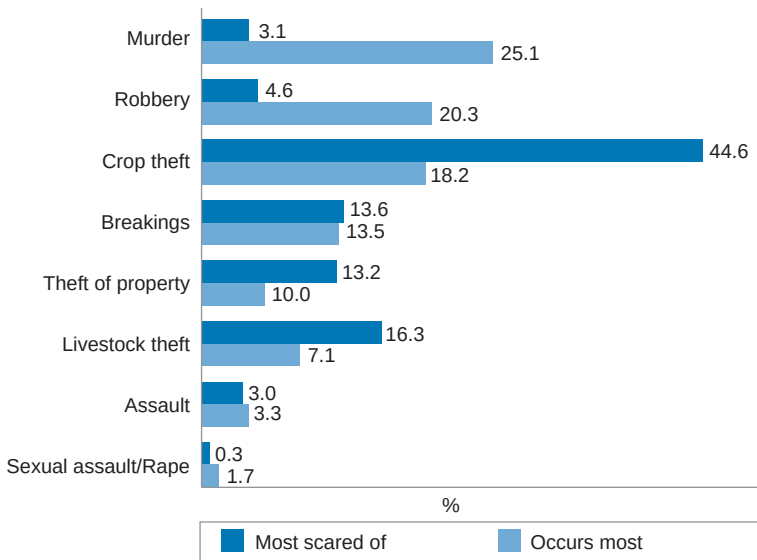


The divide between what people living in the urban areas fear most and what people living in the rural areas fear is also interesting – in the urban areas, people are most afraid of robberies (39%), housebreaking (21.8%) and

theft of personal property (16.8%), while in the rural areas, people are most afraid of murder (27.3%), crop theft (21%) and robbery (17%).

Another useful comparison is that between the crime that respondents are most afraid of, and the crime which respondents believe occurs most in their area. This is indicated in Figure 32 below.

Figure 32 Crimes respondents fear most, and crimes respondents believe occur most (n=6,850)³⁹



The figure above indicates that the respondents were, unsurprisingly, most likely to fear those crimes that would result in death or potentially serious harm (murder and robbery) and then the crime that would have the most impact on their livelihoods (crop theft). However, respondents did not believe that murder and robbery occurred very often, indicating that they believed (correctly) that crop theft and livestock occurred far more often.

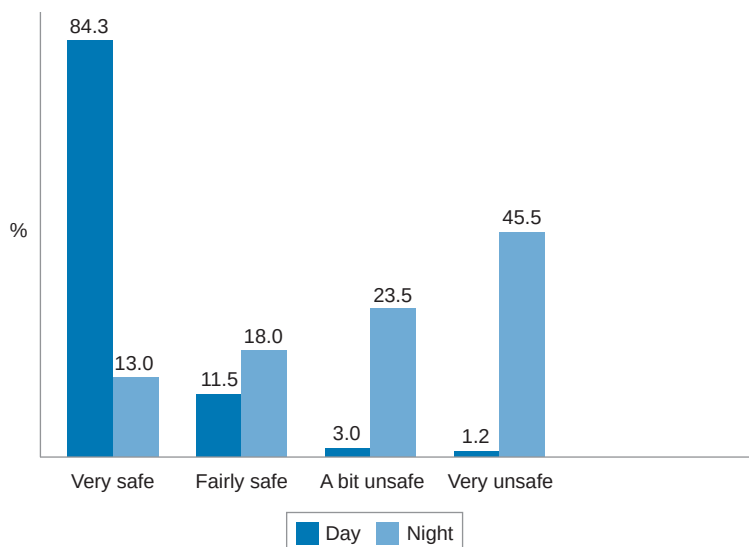
³⁹ Values less than 1% have been excluded

7.3 Public feelings of safety

Given the widespread public perception that, while there has been an increase in crime, it has not been significant, and the even wider public perception that violent crime has decreased, it was not surprising to find that most Malawians feel safe.

The vast majority of respondents reported that they feel very safe walking in their area during the day (84.3%), and another 11.5% reported they felt safe. However, these figures drop dramatically when respondents indicate how safe they feel walking in their areas at night. This is indicated in Figure 33 below.

Figure 33 Public feelings of safety walking in residential area (n=6,858)



The figure above indicates that less than one in three respondents (31%) felt either very safe or safe walking in their areas at night. While the differences between feelings of safety in the day and those at night is a feature of public perceptions the world over, the percentage of Malawians who feel safe walking in their areas at night is significantly lower than those of the pub-

lic in other transitional countries (46.5%), Asia (75.2%) or Latin America (51.4%).⁴⁰

Interestingly, there is little difference between men and women in Malawi in terms of their perceptions of safety, either during the day or the night. This differs from other countries, where feelings of safety are likely to be lower amongst women than for men.

7.4 The impact of feelings of safety on individual behaviour

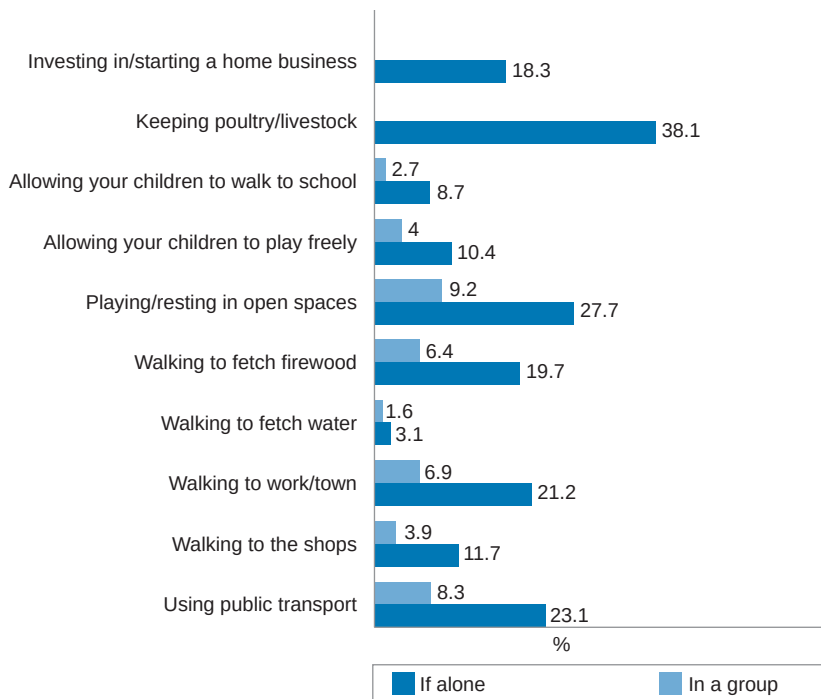
Despite the widespread feelings of safety, fear of crime does appear to have an impact on significant number of Malawians. For instance:

- 38.9% of all the people interviewed reported that their fear of crime prevents them from keeping livestock or poultry outside in their kraal
- 27.7% reported that they would not play or rest in open spaces for fear of crime, and 9.2% would not do so even if in a group.
- 23.1% would not use public transport, if they were alone
- 21.2% would not walk to town or to work for fear of crime
- 19.7% would not walk to fetch firewood by themselves

The impact of the fear of crime is outlined in Figure 34 below.

40 Alvazzi del Frate, op cit.

Figure 34 Activities negatively impacted by fear of crime



The figure above indicates a fairly general fear of conducting activities in open spaces – indeed, open, bushy areas were most commonly identified as places where the respondents felt unsafe (39% of respondents). Other areas the respondents said made them feel unsafe were riverside and dam areas (16% of respondents), bridges (12.9%) and shortcuts or footpaths (12.6% respectively).

Given this, it is interesting to note that 44% of all those interviewed reported that they had changed their behaviour over the past three years as a direct result of crime:

- most respondents indicated that they had stopped walking in their areas at night (71%);
- some respondents were keeping their property more carefully hidden (11%);

- others were not associating with people they did not know (11%); and
- in fewer instances, some respondents had joined a neighbourhood watch (2.6%).