

**PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC SECURITY IN POST-REFORM  
URBAN CHINA: A ROUTINE ACTIVITY ANALYSIS**

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates perceptions of public security across 32 Chinese cities and examines the effects of personal and environmental determinants of these perceptions within the risk/opportunity framework of Cohen and Felson's (1979) routine activity theory. Structural path analysis reveals that public security perceptions in China are informed by similar personal and environment characteristics to those reported as important in extant research within Western contexts. However, the frequently reported influence of gender on crime perceptions in the West do not appear to extend to post-reform urban China. The results provide support for the routine activity approach in terms of understanding the fear of crime in a non-Western context.

*We thank Joanna Nikopoulos for research assistance on this project*

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# PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC SECURITY IN POST-REFORM URBAN CHINA: A ROUTINE ACTIVITY ANALYSIS

## INTRODUCTION

Public opinion polls have consistently shown that public security is an important concern for people all over the world (Pradhan & Ravillion, 2003). Perceptions of adequate public security are important because they reduce people's perceived risk of crime victimization and hence improve subjective quality of life. Public security has been a major issue in China for over a decade. In 1991, results from a national survey of 15,000 people in China showed that two-thirds of respondents were seriously worried about the level of public security (Research Institute of Ministry of Public Security, 1991). A sharp increase in the crime rate in the early 1990s further fuelled government and public concerns. As Ma (1995: 247) observed, "the government leadership [considers] China [is] currently experiencing a period of criminal 'high-tide'".

While recent rates of crime against the person and against property in China remain relatively low by international standards (Friday, 1998; Jensen 2003), according to official statistics the number of cases against public order accepted for prosecution in China rose by some 8 per cent from 2001 to 2002 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2003). Given Dutton and Tianfu's (1993: 318) claim that government official statistics on crime in China have "grossly underestimated the situation", crime in China – and the public's perceptions of public security – should be high on the social research agenda.

Of particular significance to China is Jensen's (2003: 20) recent observation of the "universal rule" of criminology that crime waves regularly follow socio-economic development and that public reactions to crime can be seen as reactions to the dangers of modernity. As China continues her surge into the global economic market, resulting in large-scale social and economic change along the Eastern seaboard, it is hence an apt time to undertake a comprehensive study of public security perceptions<sup>1</sup> among the Chinese urban population.

The paper is set out as follows. In section 2 we present a risk/opportunity model to explain the fear of crime victimization, which we apply in section 3 to perceptions of public security in urban China. Section 4 outlines the data to be used in the empirical study. Section 5 contains the results of the structural path analysis and section 6 discusses our main findings, policy implications, limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

## UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC SECURITY PERCEPTIONS: THE ROUTINE ACTIVITY APPROACH

In their seminal paper outlining the routine activity approach, Cohen and Felson (1979) argued that crime rates are directly influenced by changes in the structure of the 'routine activities' of everyday life. Routine activities, defined by Cohen and Felson (1979: 593) as "recurrent and prevalent activities [that] make them a part of everyday life", may occur in the home, in places of employment away from the home, or in other places away from the home. Cohen and Felson argued that changes in the structure, or pattern, of people's routine activities can provide efficacious conditions for crime to occur by optimizing criminal opportunity. In this sense, crime is not a random phenomenon, but rather one in which victims indeed participate, albeit unwittingly, through behavioral change (Hipp, Bauer, Curran & Bollen 2004; Garofalo 1987; Massey et al. 1989).

Cohen and Felson (1979: 589) argued that patterns of crime will be affected if changes in routine activities influence "the convergence in space and time" of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians against violation. The existence of motivated offenders, or those who have "both the criminal inclination and the ability to carry out those inclinations" (Caywood 1998: 64) is taken as given by the routine activity approach (Caywood 1998; Cohen &

Felson 1979; Massey et al. 1989). As Massey et al. (1989: 383) explained, “one cannot predict predatory crime without positing the existence of criminals”. The aim of the routine activity theory hence lies in its quest to explain how day-to-day activities assist in the translation of criminal inclination into criminal action (Messner & Tardiff 1985); and the process of crime incidence is hence explained in terms of the presence of suitable targets and the absence of suitable guardians.

Depending on the nature of the crime, suitable targets may either be people or property. According to Felson and Cohen (1980), suitable targets for crime are those which are valuable, visible and easily accessible. Suitable guardians may be either formal or informal and may be people and/or property guardians, such as, respectively, police and government or family and neighbors. According to Cohen and Felson (1979), the absence of suitable guardians of suitable targets increases the likelihood of crime. Since motivated offenders are assumed, and since many routine activities separate people from their own suitable people and property targets, rates of crime are highly dependent on the presence, and the actions, of suitable guardians. As Kennedy and Baron (1993: 92) put it, it is “criminogenic potential” that accounts for “victimogenic potential”.

While the routine activity approach was originally elucidated as an explanation for changes in actual rates of crimes<sup>2</sup> – and can well account for variation in crime rates (eg., see Bennett 1981; Messner & Blau 1987; Roneck & Maier 1991), Bernberg & Thorlindsson (1999) observed that the routine activity theory is often regarded as a theory of victimization. Miethe and Meier (1990), Miethe and McDowall (1993), Madriz (1996) and Kanan and Pruitt (2002) have argued that the routine activity framework can be extended to explain people’s perceptions of crime, and, we argue, their perceptions of public security, because lower levels of guardianship and higher levels of target attractiveness increase victimization risk, which in turn points logically to increases in concern about criminal victimization, or perceptions of public security.

In urban China, property theft is the crime feared most by the populace (Situ & Liu 1996). Since Cohen and Felson (1979) argued that changes in routine activities will affect, in particular, direct contact predatory violations, in which “someone definitely and intentionally takes or damages the person or property of another” (Glaser 1971: 4), this framework would appear to be a particularly apt one in which to understand people’s concerns about public security. Furthermore, despite no previous applications in the Chinese context, the routine activity theory has been demonstrated to have truly cross-national applications (Bennett 1991; Vazsonyi, Pickering, Belliston, Hessing & Junger 2002), and its utility has been demonstrated in non-Western contexts (eg., Appiahene-Gyamfi 2002; Weir-Smith 2004).

We turn now to a discussion of motivated offenders, suitable targets and the lack of suitable guardians in the context of contemporary urban China.

## **MOTIVATED OFFENDERS, SUITABLE TARGETS AND THE LACK OF SUITABLE GUARDIANS IN URBAN CHINA**

The fear of crime is generally higher among those residing in urban, rather than rural, areas (Ball 2001; Davis 1990; Lee 1982). According to Louw (1997), urban development may both directly ripen the environment for criminal activity, as well as exacerbate inequalities that perpetuate crime. From a routine activity perspective, urban development affects crime because it affects the structures that determine people’s routine activities (Anderson & Bennett 1993). Perceptions of public security also play a part in the heightened crime perceptions of urbanites, and this is reflected in the priorities of urban planners. As Raco (2003: 1870) observed, among the main priorities for urban developers is “ensuring that new urban spaces are safe and *are seen to be safe*” (italics added).

As we will argue, China’s economic reform process, which currently sees her with the most rapidly expanding economy in the world and a rapid rate of urban development, has precipitated changes in the routine activities of Chinese urbanites. In response to the structural changes effected by

marketization, actual criminal opportunity has been made more optimal and the perception of criminal opportunity has been exacerbated. In Cohen and Felson's (1979) terms, urban prosperity and promise has seen a huge influx of rural migrants to China's cities, providing a large pool of perceived 'motivated offenders'. Simultaneously, market reform has led to increased wealth and property ownership for many urban residents, providing an increase in 'suitable targets'. However, an 'absence of suitable guardians' remains, since urbanization and economic prosperity have not provided increased measures of policing nor confidence in public offices. We now turn to these three components in detail.

### **Motivated Offenders**

Rountree and Land (1996) and Austin, Furr and Spine (2002) observed that the social dynamics and demographic composition of urban centres affect residents' attitudes towards crime and their perceptions of public safety. Taylor and Covington (1993) and Lane (2000) reported higher levels of fear in environments that had undergone recent demographic change. China's urban centres have undergone substantial changes in demographic composition over the last few decades. The most significant change has been the influx of millions of perceived 'motivated offenders' in the form of migrants from the rural provinces of China who have taken up temporary residence in the main urban centres in response to the growing economic disequilibrium between urban and rural regions (Roberts 2002). It has been conservatively estimated that some 120 million migrants have entered the major cities along China's Eastern seaboard since the beginning of the economic reforms in 1978 (Roberts, 2002). These rural to urban, or off-farm, migrants are termed the 'floating population' (*liudong renkou*) (Fan 2003; Roberts 2002; Zhang & Song 2003), because their stays are typically temporary and follow work opportunities within and between locations.

The predominant attitude towards the floating migrant population is one of suspicion (Roberts 2002). Chai and Chai (1997) noted that there is often outright hostility towards migrants and that this perception seems to have translated into the development of broad negative attitudes towards temporary migrants. Solinger (1999) noted that in a survey conducted in the mid 1990s, 74% of Shanghainese blamed migrant workers for at least three of the following four problems: crime, transportation problems, unemployment and environmental degradation. Another survey, also in the mid-1990s, of residents in Beijing, Guangzhou and Shanghai found that poor social order has become the "number one public enemy" and that respondents considered migrants to be the "root cause" of their insecurity and rising crime rates (Solinger, 1999: 131). Wang and Zuo (1999: 278) observed the "the stereotype of rural migrants is that they ... have high propensities to be criminals".

Since many urbanites hold migrants responsible for increased crime – that is, in Cohen and Felson's (1979) terms, they view them as 'given' motivated offenders<sup>3</sup>, it would be expected that perceptions of public security among urban Chinese would be related to their views about the floating population. In particular, it would be expected that those indigenous urban residents who are less welcoming of migrants would have less favorable perceptions about the current state of public security in their city.

### **Suitable targets**

#### **Gender**

Research undertaken in Western nations has typically found that women experience a heightened fear of crime relative to men (Austin et al. 2002; Borooah & Carcach 1997; Perkins & Taylor 1996; Taylor & Covington 1993; Weinrath & Gartrell 1996). One explanation for this gender difference may be, as Garofalo (1979) and Taub, Taylor and Dunham (1981) have observed, the positive relationship between fear and the potential for victimization. As Silverman and Della-Guistina (2001) pointed out, women's fear of crime is fundamentally connected to their vulnerability to rape and sexual harassment. Warr (1984) found that the possibility of rape is the primary fear of most women and Ferraro (1995) found that once the effects of the fear of rape were removed, that women did not fear crime any more than did men. In this study, we use a general measure of the

perception of public safety, which we expect will include dimensions of the fear of sexual predation for women. Given that we are unable to statistically control for the effects of fear of rape per se, we expect that women will perceive public safety as significantly less adequate than men.

### **Age**

Western studies are generally consistent in their conclusions that older people are more fearful of crime than younger people and express lower levels of perceived safety (Austin et. al 2002; Baba & Austin 1989; Skogan & Maxfield 1981). In terms of the routine activity theory, these perceptions may reflect a belief among older people that they are suitable targets for criminal behavior. Consistent with this interpretation, Kanan and Pruitt (2002) argued that older people are more fearful of crime because they are less able to resist attack. O'Bryant, Donnermeyer and Stafford (1991) argued that since older people have relatively less available time, and often less health, than younger people in which to recoup any personal loss from crime, older people can be seen as more personally vulnerable to the negative effects of crime.

While the literature from Western studies is generally supportive of the view that older people are particularly fearful of crime, findings have been equivocal in the context of urban China. Curran and Cook (1993), citing data from the Chinese Ministry of Public Security, concluded that those aged 16 to 28 years were more fearful of crime than those aged over the age of 28. However when the nature of the crime was delineated, this younger cohort was less worried about robbery than the older cohort. Given that robbery has been observed to be the crime of greatest concern in urban China, and given that our measure is non-specific and hence likely to tap into the most contextually salient dimension of fear, we expect age to be positively related to perceptions of inadequate public security.

### **Income**

The changes that have accompanied marketization in China have benefited – economically - many urban residents, giving them increased income with which to purchase suitable property targets. However, the manner in which household income levels should impact on perceptions of public security is *ex ante* unclear. On the one hand those on higher incomes will be more desirable targets for motivated offenders, which might make those on higher incomes less satisfied with public security. This interpretation is consistent with the economic model of crime following Ehrlich (1973), which proxies returns to illegitimate earning activities using household income where household income is a measure of “the availability of thievable property” (Witt, Clarke & Fielding 1999: 391). On the other hand, those with higher incomes should be better able to purchase private protection (Gaviria & Pages 2002) to protect their suitable property targets. If this is the case, those with higher incomes should have better perceptions of public security.

The empirical evidence from existing studies for income is mixed. Two studies using data for the United States (Skogan & Maxfield 1981; Toseland 1982) as well as a study employing Australian data (Borooah & Carcach 1997) found that a higher income was associated with a reduced fear of crime. On the other hand, Hraba, Bao, Lorenz & Pechacova (1998: 239) found that wealth was positively related to perceived risk of crime in the Czech Republic, arguing that this reflected the fact that “the wealthy may feel vulnerable to crime, particularly property crime”. We will explore the nature of the income / public security perception relationship to see which effect, if either, dominates in urban China.

### **The Absence of Suitable Guardians**

Other than the self as a guardian of one's self and one's property, protection against criminal victimization can come in the form of officially sanctioned protection from the police or from government, and from informal sources, such as friends, family and one's community. Guardianship is an important factor to motivated offenders in their choice of suitable targets (Mukherjee & Carach 1998), hence it follows that the perception of guardian availability would likely increase people's perceptions of public safety.

### ***Informal Guardians: Household Composition***

The routine activity theory suggests that the presence of a person, or guardian, in the home lessens the risk of property crime victimization (Felson & Cohen 1980). According to Clark (1988), there is a direct negative relationship between burglary risk and the number of people in the home; and households comprised of a married couple are at less risk of burglary victimization than single-person households (Mukherjee and Carach 1998). Hence, following Mukherjee and Carach, we expect married people to perceive public safety more favorably; and following Clark (1998), we expect perceptions of public safety to increase with increases in the number of people living in the household.

### ***Informal Guardians: Community Involvement***

Borooah and Carcach (1997) found that the fear of crime was directly related to deficits in neighborhood cohesion and several studies have found that people with larger social networks and stronger bonds to their communities experience reduced fears about criminal victimization (Kanan and Pruitt 2002; Lee 1983; Rountree and Land 1996). In terms of the routine activity theory, such bonds to, and integration with, the community may lead to feelings of increased safety to the extent that the community is seen as a suitable informal guardian both of its citizens and of its citizens' property. We have included a measure of community participation in this study that asks respondents about their level of involvement with neighbors and the community. We expect that people who are more involved with their community will have reduced fears about public security.

### ***Formal Guardians: Perceptions of the Government***

While the routine activity theory posits the importance of informal guardians to actual and perceived victimization risk, the plethora of social psychological studies that emerged in the wake of the well-documented murder of Catherine "Kitty" Genovese indicates overwhelmingly that bystander intervention in the event of crime is low (eg., see Latane and Darley 1976). This "Kitty Genovese Syndrome" has been explained in terms of a bystander effect that operates in public places. The bystander effect manifests such that in the event of a witnessed crime or public disturbance, increases in the number of bystanders present decreases the likelihood of any one bystander helping another. The phenomenon can be attributed to a process of 'diffusion of responsibility'. This is simply a decrease in the feeling of personal responsibility that one feels to take action against a witnessed crime when in the presence of several other people. In the event of a witnessed crime or public disturbance, the greater the number of bystanders, the less responsibility the individual feels. In large cities where there are many people, the likelihood that any one individual will act to prevent an impending crime or intervene in a crime is likely to be very low. In large cities then, where residents may not have confidence in non-familial informal guardians, confidence in public security organs should be paramount to their feelings of public security.

To assess the impact of perceptions of formal guardianship on perceptions of public security, we include three measures to tap into urban Chinese residents' perceptions of confidence in the government: government effectiveness, government efficiency and government corruption. We expect that increased feelings of security will be associated with favorable perceptions of the government along these three axes.

### **Contribution of the Current Study**

The current study represents an important contribution to the literature in several ways. Firstly, studies of crime perceptions in China, and in particular studies of the perception of public security in urban China, are scant. There are a few surveys of perceptions of public security in China conducted by government agencies (see eg. Research Institute of Ministry of Public Security 1991), but those which exist present simple descriptive statistics within a theoretical framework. Curiously, this scarcity of literature is despite the Chinese economy currently being the most rapidly expanding in the world, and despite the growing body of literature that links urbanization to increased crime. This study addresses this gap in the literature at a time when traditionally low rates of crime are beginning to escalate in urban China, heralding a similar escalation in

perceptions of personal vulnerability to crime and perceptions of inadequate public security. Secondly, this study is the first to operationalize the routine activity framework in the Chinese context, adding to the few non-Western studies using this framework and hence contributing to the ecological validity of this theory in a non-Western context. China also provides an ideal natural laboratory in which to test the routine activity theory as its major urban centres house many millions of temporary migrants who, in terms of the routine activity framework, are perceived by the local population as a cohort of motivated offenders. Finally, this study uses a large and representative data base of Chinese residents across 32 urban locales, ensuring the wide applicability of the findings to urban China.

## DATA

The data used in this study were provided by the China Mainland Marketing Research Company (CMMRC), which conducts an annual survey of approximately 10,000 urban Chinese residents covering a range of questions relating to respondents' perceptions of living standards, economic circumstances, and public safety. Data is also gathered on a number of demographic characteristics, including gender, age, marital status and income.

CMMRC employs multistage stratified random sampling to ensure a representative sample in terms of age, gender and income. The current sample numbering 10,716 Chinese residents across 32 urban Chinese locations was collected in September 2003. For our purposes, data for 8152 cases were used, after filtering of cases containing missing observations. This final sample was evenly split on gender (50.2% female) and was of mean age 39.11 years ( $SD=13.90$ ) in a range of 14 to 88 years. Table 1 presents descriptive data for all variables used in the study.

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Table 1 about here  
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The respondents were interviewed in person in shopping districts of each city by a trained CMMRC interviewer. In each city there were four individuals conducting the survey in different shopping districts. All responses were checked for accuracy three times prior to being entered into the database; initially by a supervisor on location, then by a supervisor for the city and finally at the CMMRC offices in Beijing. All respondents who participated in the survey were aged 18 years or above and had an urban registration. Since 2001 when the Chinese government commenced reform of the urban registration system, it has been possible for migrants in some of China's cities to purchase an urban registration if certain conditions are met such as owning a house and/or investing a minimum amount in the city. There is, however, no-one in our sample in this category who was a migrant who had purchased an urban registration.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with current public security on a five point scale (1=extremely satisfied to 5=extremely dissatisfied). The mean satisfaction rating was 2.93 ( $SD = 1.03$ ). The distribution of scores on this item was positively skewed (Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic = .197,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that respondents tended to be satisfied, rather than dissatisfied with public security. Such a skewed distribution is to be expected though, in light of Cummins and Gullone's (2000) evidence that subjective quality of life assessments – which in-part comprise subjective assessments of public security – are typically skewed in terms of favorable assessments. When asked about their current level of satisfaction with public security, 35.1% of the sample indicated that they were 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'. A little over five percent (5.3%) were 'extremely satisfied' with public security, while 31.8% were 'satisfied'. A little over eight per-cent (8.2%) of the sample were 'extremely dissatisfied' with current levels of public security, while 19.6% were 'dissatisfied'.

Structural equation modelling using Amos (version 5) was conducted to predict level of satisfaction with public security based on the routine activity theory. Data were first examined for missing values, univariate and multivariate outliers, normality and linearity. There were less than 5% missing data and as there was no evidence of systematic omission amongst this missing data, all missing values were substituted with columnwise mean values, which is the preferred method according to Tabachnick and Fidell (1996). While this method allows for retention of the entire sample, it does reduce the variance and might possibly attenuate results.

No univariate or multivariate outliers were present. Univariate normality of the dependent variable was confirmed using a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Normality of residuals for the independent variables was assessed by examination of residuals plots for each variable. All residuals were normally distributed. The linearity of the independent variables was assessed by the examination of scatterplots for item pairs. All the data demonstrated acceptable linearity. A correlation matrix is presented in Table 2.

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Table 2 about here  
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An independent t test revealed no gender differences in perceptions of public security ( $t = .115$ ,  $p > .05$ ), so data for both males and females were pooled for further analysis. The independence model indicated the suitability of the data for modeling ( $\chi^2_{10} = 10,589.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The data provided a reasonable fit to the proposed model ( $\chi^2_{38} = 198.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 5.21$ ; NFI=.97; IFI=.96; CFI=.94), though the ratio of  $\chi^2$  to its associated degrees of freedom was higher than desired. Model respecifications were examined following the recommendation that the criteria for change be made on substantive grounds rather than for statistical advantage (Schumaker & Lomax 1996), and according to MacCallum, Browne and Sugawara (1996), paths were added before deleting parameters. Modifications allowed perceptions of government corruption to load onto perceptions of government efficiency and onto perceptions of government effectiveness. In addition, perceptions of government efficiency was allowed to load directly onto perceptions of government effectiveness. Community involvement was allowed to load onto perceptions of migrants as well as onto household income. Four non-significant paths, from gender to perceptions of public security, from age to perceptions of public security, from community involvement to perceptions of public security and from number of people in the home to perceptions of public security were progressively removed. The data provided a good fit to the revised model ( $\chi^2_{35} = 36.65$ ,  $p > .01$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.83$ ; GFI=.99, NFI=.99; IFI=.99; TLI=.99, CFI=.99).

Eleven percent of the variance in perceptions of public security was explained by variables in the model (see Figure 1). In accordance with our expectations, dissatisfaction with public security in urban China was significantly predicted by each of the three components of the routine activity theory: having a negative perception of migrants (presence of motivated offenders), having a higher household income (presence of suitable target) being unmarried (absence of informal guardians) and perceiving local government officials to be corrupt, inefficient and ineffective (absence of formal guardians).

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Figure 1 about here  
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The strongest direct effects on public security perceptions were made by the government perceptions variables (corruption  $\beta = -.11$ ; efficiency  $\beta = .11$ ; effectiveness  $\beta = .12$ ). There were also significant direct effects on public security perceptions of household income ( $\beta = -.04$ ), marital status ( $\beta = .02$ ) and perceptions of migrants ( $\beta = .07$ ). While age, number of people in the home and community involvement did not have significant direct effects on perceptions of public security, they each contributed significantly to public security perceptions through their effects on other variables in the model. Age affected public security perceptions through its impact on income ( $\beta = -$

.17), migrant perceptions ( $\beta = .06$ ) and marital status ( $\beta = .39$ ). Number of people in the home affected public security perceptions though its impact on household income ( $\beta = .19$ ), while community involvement affected perceptions of public security through its impact on household income ( $\beta = .02$ ) and perceptions of migrants ( $\beta = -.04$ ). Table 3 provides an overview of all direct effects, indirect effects and total effects from the model.

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Table 3 about here  
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## DISCUSSION

### Major Findings

This study has employed Cohen and Felson's (1979) routine activity theory to model determinants of Chinese urban residents' perceptions of public security. Results of the structural path analysis provide support for the theory in the context of urban China.

As expected those urban Chinese with less favorable views of the floating population perceived public security to be less adequate. This finding confirms the 'scapegoating' of internal migrants in China who, in terms of the routine activity theory, appear to be perceived as the 'given' motivated offenders necessary to the escalation of criminal activity. Taken in conjunction with Tang's (2001) observation that many Chinese urbanites oppose further marketization, it may be that many urbanites in fact view market reform as the mechanism through which increased numbers of motivated offenders enter the cities. While migrants continue to be perceived as "a thorn in governance and a threat to social stability" (Wong 1994: 336), and while formal social structures such as the *hukou* (registration) system and segregated housing continue to operate to ensure the physical segregation of urban locals and migrants, such negative perceptions of migrants are unlikely to change. Interestingly, it was our sample's perception of government effectiveness that most strongly predicted perceptions of migrants. Those urban residents who felt the government was not effective in fulfilling its duties were more negative about migrants. It may be that urban Chinese view the government as responsible for the policing of migrants, yet have little confidence in their ability to do so.

While much of the Western literature has reported significant effects of gender (being female) on heightened crime perceptions, gender was not significantly related to perceptions of public security in our urban Chinese sample. One explanation for this finding may be, as Ferarro (1995) observed, that gender differences in perceived vulnerability to crime disappear when differences for perceptions of vulnerability specifically to sexual predation are controlled for. Our measure of public security perception was generic, and did not differentiate between personal and property threat, hence it is likely that respondents answered the question in terms of their community's most salient threat perception, which in the case of urban China, is theft of property.

Despite the insignificant effect of gender, our other two measures of target suitability were significantly related to perceptions of public security. Both older Chinese urban residents and those with higher household incomes were less satisfied with current public security. Our results for age are consistent with the Western literature and in terms of the routine activity theory, suggest that older people may view themselves as less resistant to crime. Also in terms of the routine activity theory, these results indicate that those with higher incomes see themselves as suitable targets for crime. This result supports Ehrlich's (1973) economic model of crime, indicating that those with higher incomes perceive themselves as vulnerable to crime as they have more valuable property targets. While market reform continues to simultaneously attract rural migrants to the cities and economically benefit select groups of urban Chinese, the perception that suitable targets will continue to be available for motivated offenders in urban China is likely to persist.

While we detected significant effects on public security perception of both our informal and formal guardianship variables, effects were much stronger for the latter. Our results indicated that those urban Chinese who perceive government officials as more neglectful of their duties, inefficient and corrupt are also less satisfied with current public security. This finding was expected, and in terms of the routine activity theory indicates that when formal guardians are perceived as inadequate, people perceive their risk of victimization to be greater. This finding is of some concern, given the relatively weak effects of the informal guardian variables 'community involvement, 'marital status' and 'number of people in the home'. At present in urban China, it appears that residents have both little confidence in formal guardians and see informal guardians as largely irrelevant. This interpretation may point to the need for alternative policing strategies in urban China, such as formal community policing strategies (see eg., Wong 2001).

## **Policy Implications**

While it is certainly not the case that all Chinese urban crime can be attributed to migrants, there is some empirical evidence to suggest that migrants may be responsible for a disproportionate amount of city crime (Solinger, 1999). That migrants might commit a disproportionate amount of crime is not necessarily surprising. While most migrants to China's cities do find work, many still live a very economically bleak existence as without an urban *hukou* they are denied the provisions automatically enjoyed by those with an urban registration. Furthermore, while some skilled migrants are seen as key workers by organisations and are hence relatively well placed in the labour market, for most migrant workers, wages are often lower than those of their local counterparts, and access to social protection for migrants is at best patchy. In reality then, it may be that many migrants are simply faced with no choice other than petty crime as a means to supplement their low incomes. Thus in reality, China's urban migrants may in fact be a disproportionately motivated group of motivated offenders. In these terms, addressing the public's poor perception of public security requires structural change to improve the economic position of migrants and decrease both migrants' motivation to offend, and urban residents' perceptions of migrants as potential offenders. Such changes must include ensuring equitable access to the full range of social security provisions, wage equity, and equitable labour market access.

However, even with the advent of optimal economic conditions for migrants, there will still be migrant crime. The effect of structural change is likely to be a short-run reduction in the level of crime with crime returning to its equilibrium 'natural rate' in the long-run (see eg., Buck, Hakim & Spiegel 1985). The notion of a natural rate of crime rests on the assertion that there is a pool of potential migrant criminals in China's cities who experience decreasing marginal returns to legitimate work because of segmented labour markets and increasing marginal benefits of illegitimate activity as time passes (Cameron 1988). Addressing poor perceptions of public security based on the perception of migrants as motivated offenders thus requires a two-pronged approach: the first instituting structural change, as discussed above, and the second instituting attitudinal change towards migrants. While migrants continue to be perceived as vagrant or hooligans<sup>4</sup>, the perception of migrants as motivated offenders – irrespective of their objective motivation to offend or their objective incidence of offending – is unlikely to change. Altering perceptions of migrants will only be achieved by breaking down the social barriers that divide migrants and urban locals through the institutionalization of social programs aimed at drawing the groups together. Such programs might best be aimed at the integration of migrant and urban children, with the view to preventing the development of negative stereotypes about off-farm migrants among future generations of urban Chinese.

## **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

While this study has provided a timely investigation into perceptions of public security in urban China within an era of rapid economic, and hence environmental, change, the modest proportion of overall variance explained by our model indicates that there are further important factors at work that we have not identified. Future studies should endeavour to include a more diverse range of

target and guardianship variables, as well as explore other potential pools of perceived motivated offenders.

A further limitation of our results may be the broad geographic unit of analysis that we have employed in this study. For instance, it is possible that significant within-city variation exists with respect to public security perceptions (see Parkes, Kearns & Atkinson 2002; Pradhan & Ravallion 2003). Future research is required to decompose neighborhood effects on these perceptions within China's major urban centres. Such analysis will further add to our understanding of the effects that economic development has on security perceptions through its effects on the presence of motivated offenders and suitable targets coupled with the relative absence of suitable guardians in different locales within urban China.

Finally, an interesting story to emerge from our consideration of the model respecification indices is the interrelationships between the government perceptions variables. Our results indicated that perceptions of the effectiveness of the government, which itself was significantly related to perceptions of migrant motivated offenders, was significantly predicted by perceptions of corruption and efficiency. While it is beyond the scope of the current paper to do so, future research might further model the effects that this recursive model of government perceptions has on the public's perception of other contemporary economic and social issues, such as support for further market reform and changes to the household registration system.

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**Table 1: Variables in the study**

<b>Variable Name</b>	<b>Description of Variable</b>	<b>Means and frequencies</b>
Perception of migrants	“Do you welcome migrants to live and work in your city” (1=welcome very much to 5=do not welcome at all)	Mean = 2.57 ( <u>SD</u> = .89)
Gender	A binary variable where 1=female, 0=male	50.2% female
Age	Age of respondent (years)	Mean = 39.11 ( <u>SD</u> =13.90) in a range of 14-88
Household Income	Average monthly income of household (1=RMB260 and above, 2=RMB261-500, 3=RMB501-750, 4=RMB751=1000, 5=RMB1001-1250, 6=RMB1251-1500, 7=RMB1501-1750, 8=RMB1751-2000, 9=RMB2001-2250, 10=RMB2251-2500, 11=RMB2501-2750, 12=RMB2751-3000, 13=RMB3001-3500, 14=RMB3501-4000, 15=RMB4001-5000, 16=RMB5001-7500, 17=RMB7501-10000, 18=RMB10001-15000, 19=RMB15001-20000, 20=RMB20001 and above)	Median = 9
Marital status	A binary dummy variable where 1=married, 0 otherwise	69.8% married
Number of people in the home	Number of people living in the respondent’s home	Mean = 3.21 ( <u>SD</u> =1.44) in a range of 1-13
Community involvement	Level of involvement with neighbors and the community (1=least community participation to 5=most community participation)	Mean = 3.52 ( <u>SD</u> = 1.30)
Perception of government corruption	“Do you think local government officials are free from corruption” (1=they are extremely corrupt to 5=they are extremely honest)	Mean = 2.94 ( <u>SD</u> = .84)
Perception of government efficiency	“What do you think about the efficiency of local government officials” (1=extremely efficient to 5=extremely inefficient)	Mean = 2.77 ( <u>SD</u> = .76)
Perception of government effectiveness	“Do you think local government officials do their best to fulfil their duties” (1=they do their very best to 5=they are very neglectful of their duties)	Mean = 2.63 ( <u>SD</u> = .76)

**Table 2: Correlation matrix of variables in the path analysis**

	Percep- tion of public security	Age	Household income	Comm- unity particip- ation	Government effective- ness	Government efficiency	Govern- ment corrupt- tion	Percep- tion of migrants	Number in house- hold
Perception of public security	1	-.004	-.070(**)	-.013	.259(**)	.257(**)	-.225(**)	.110(**)	.018
Age		1	-.153(**)	-.017	-.022(*)	-.040(**)	.000	.056(**)	-.015
Household income			1	.031(**)	-.106(**)	-.078(**)	.079(**)	-.058(**)	.196(**)
Community participation				1	-.049(**)	-.044(**)	.072(**)	-.053(**)	.004
Government effectiveness					1	.695(**)	-.454(**)	.125(**)	.034(**)
Government efficiency						1	-.450(**)	.132(**)	.026(*)
Government corruption							1	-.086(**)	-.013
Perception of migrants								1	-.023(*)
Number in household									1

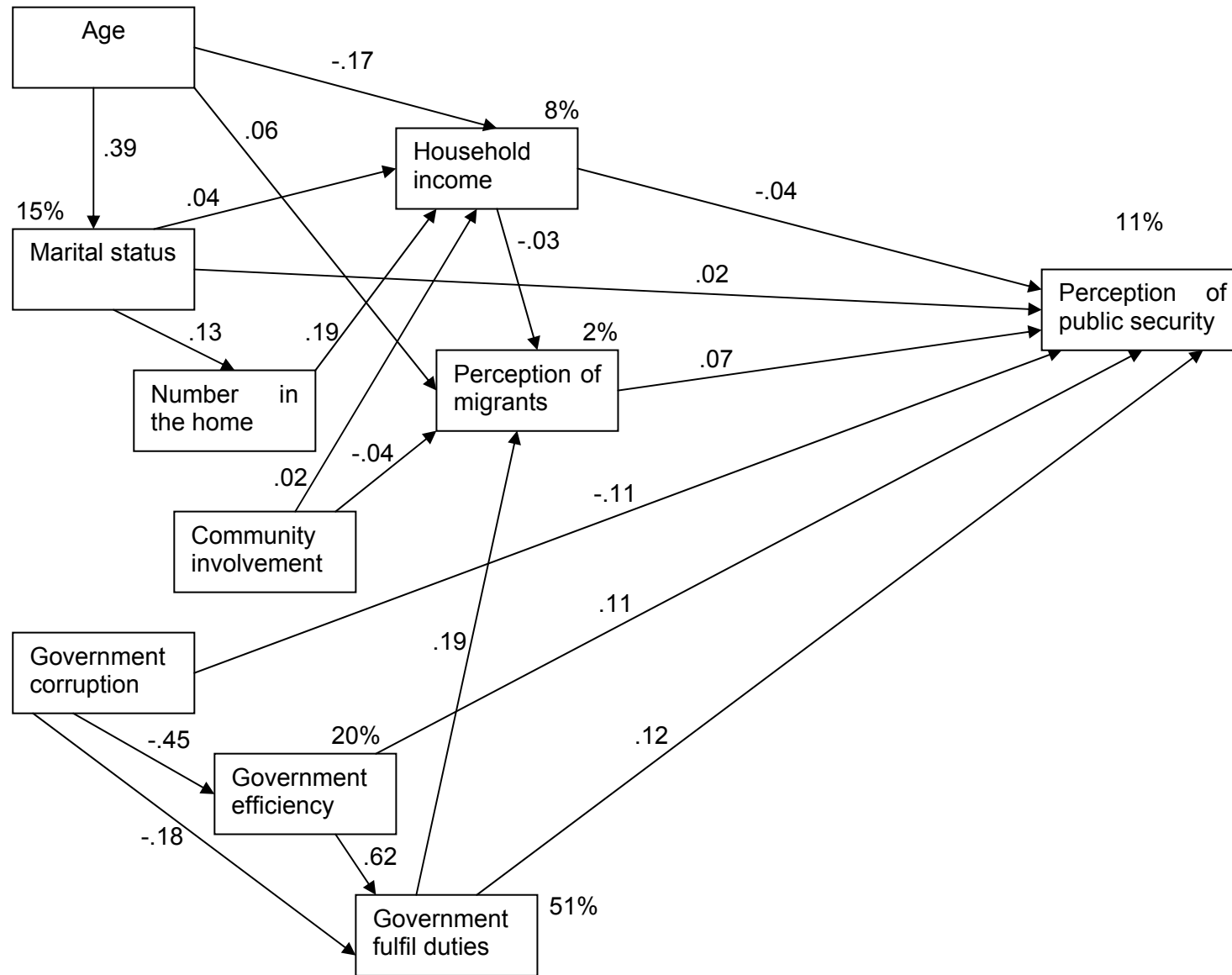
\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Table 3: Standardised Direct Effects, Indirect Effects and Total Effects**

<b>Effect</b>	<b>Direct effect</b>	<b>Indirect effect</b>	<b>Total effect</b>
On perceptions of public security			
Of perceptions of migrants	.07	.00	.07
Of age	.00	.02	.02
Of household income	-.04	-.01	-.05
Of marital status	.02	-.01	.02
Of number in the home	.00	-.01	-.01
Of community involvement	.00	-.01	-.01
Of government corruption	-.11	-.11	-.22
Of government efficiency	.11	.08	.19
Of government effectiveness	.12	.02	.14
On perceptions of migrants			
Of age	.06	.03	.09
Of household income	-.03	-.01	-.04
Of marital status	.00	-.01	-.01
Of number in the home	.00	-.01	-.01
Of community involvement	-.04	-.01	-.05
Of government corruption	.00	-.09	-.09
Of government efficiency	.00	.12	.12
Of government effectiveness	.19	.02	.21
On household income			
Of age	-.17	.03	-.14
Of marital status	.04	.02	.06
Of number in the home	.19	.00	.19
Of community involvement	.02	.00	.02
On marital status			
Of age	.39	.00	.39
On number in the home			
Of age	.00	.05	.05
Of marital status	.13	.00	.13
On government efficiency			
Of government corruption	-.45	.00	-.45
On government effectiveness			
Of government corruption	-.18	-.28	-.46
Of government efficiency	.62	.00	.62

Figure 1: Significant beta weights and squared multiple correlations in a routine activity model of perceptions of public security



## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> While perceptions of public security represent one dimension of the fear of crime, we do not assume that they encompass a comprehensive set of cognitive and affective reactions to crime. Rather, our measure is a more general evaluation of neighbourhood safety, and is in line with recent work by Kanan and Pruitt (2002) that more accurately addresses one's perceived risk of victimization. In the context of victimization in urban locales, public disorder problems are of greater concern to residents than criminal law violation. In the particular context of urban China, one of the most salient dimensions of victimization risk may be the fear of theft, since Situ and Liu (1996) reported that urban Chinese are most disturbed by the possibility of house burglary and bicycle theft.
- <sup>2</sup> In particular, the routine activity theory was posited to explain "direct-contact predatory violations" (Cohen & Felson 1979: 589), which involve direct physical encounters between offenders and victims – where victims may be people or property.
- <sup>3</sup> While not all crime in urban China can be attributed to the floating population, there is some evidence to support the validity of the perception of migrants as motivated offenders. For instance, Xu (1995, cited in Solinger 1999) observed that in Shanghai, crimes recorded as committed by transients increased from 10 per cent in the mid-1980s to 60 per cent in the mid-1990s with the figure as high as 90 per cent in some districts. In Guangzhou 80 per cent of burglaries in the mid-1990s were recorded as being committed by transients and in Guangdong as a whole, 90 per cent of those charged with drug trafficking and prostitution were recorded as temporary residents (Solinger 1999).
- <sup>4</sup> Cheng and Selden (1994) pointed out, the term *mangliu*, which is used to describe the floating population, is a play on the word *liumang*, which means vagrant or hooligan.