



CANADA – UNITED STATES TRADE CENTER OCCASIONAL PAPER NO. 34

**Perceptions of Border Security Along
the Canada – U.S. Border, Grand Island, New York**

By Michael F. Ziolkowski

**Canada-United States Trade Center
Department of Geography
State University of New York
Buffalo, New York 14261, USA**

December 2006

*The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s), and are in no way policy statements of the
Canada-U.S. Trade Center or the State University of New York at Buffalo*

Perceptions of Border Security Along the Canada – U.S. Border, Grand Island, New York.
Michael F. Ziolkowski, Canada-United States Trade Center, Department of Geography,
University at Buffalo, Buffalo NY 14261, USA.

Abstract

This paper investigates perceptions of security among residents of the Canada – US border at the west branch of the upper Niagara River, Grand Island, New York. The results of a survey of residents are presented. The data suggest that some residents perceive security to be a concern yet have not witnessed illegal activity nor changed their personal security practices to any great extent. A key finding is that male and female perspectives on border security differ. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of the empirical findings for future work on border security.

Key Words: Canada – US relations, security, terrorism, gender, risk

A special thanks is extended to the West River Homeowners Association (WRHOA) for their financial support on the survey mailing.

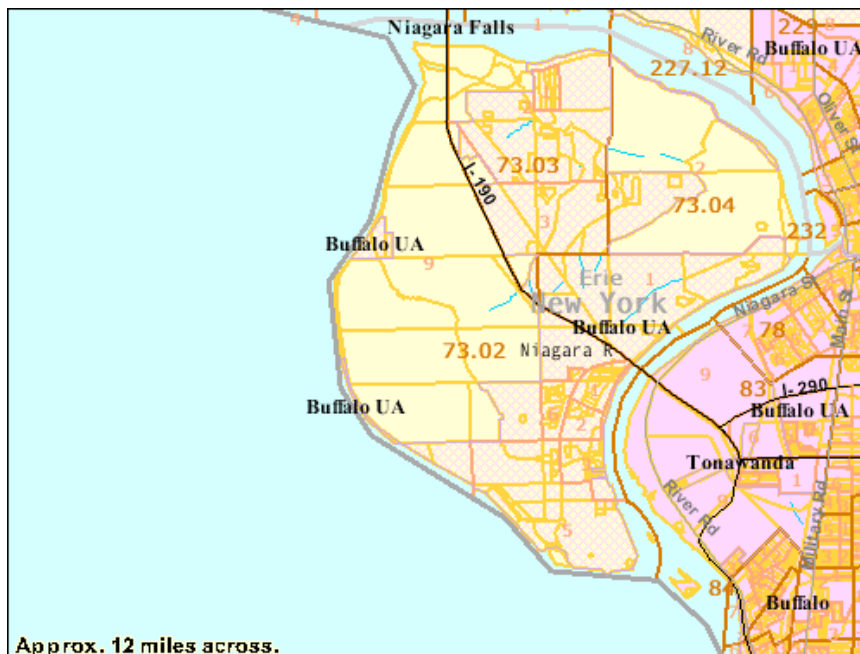
Introduction

This research explores perceptions of border security among residents of the US who live on the US border with Canada. Specifically, residents who live on the West River Parkway on Grand Island, New York were surveyed on border security. The findings are summarized below and analyzed. Future directions for this research are proposed.

The location of the border

The northern border between the United States and Canada is thousands of miles long and is largely unguarded. The Western New York and Southern Ontario region of the Canada – USA border is one of the most populated areas. The international border in this region lies in Lakes Erie and Ontario as well as the Niagara River. There are four auto crossings and two train bridges across the Niagara River between Ontario and New York State.

Grand Island lies in the upper Niagara River just north of Buffalo, New York and south of Niagara Falls. The named river in reference to the Niagara is a misnomer because the body of water is by definition a strait. The West River Parkway is a strip of land controlled by New York State Department of Parks and Recreation and follows the west branch of the Niagara River in Erie County, New York. See maps.



Map of Grand Island, New York Courtesy of US Census Bureau.



Maps Courtesy of United States Geological Survey (USGS).



Residential housing is located on the east side of the parkway and is predominantly owner occupied with a median home value of \$104,000 for the entire census tract, year 2000. The value of homes along the river is generally higher than the median value of the entire tract. The median household income for these residents is \$54,025 in 2000. Some such as Pain (2000, p365) have cited that fear of crime is inseparable "...from a range of social and economic problems concerned with housing, employment, environmental planning and social exclusion..." Even though West River Road residents may enjoy strong home values and good incomes there may be other factors that contribute to the fear along the West River.

The development of the parkway can be traced back to the 1940s when New York State began to plan for the development of a scenic parkway along the west branch of the Niagara River. On March 17, 1944 the State Assembly passed a bill granting \$500,000 to the Niagara Frontier Authority for the purchase of property and preliminary survey for the West River Parkway and that grant, added to \$250,000 already spent by Erie County, would result in a loss to the town of accumulated taxes on about-quarters of a million dollars worth of property. Today after inflation this loss of property value is equal to about \$30,000,000¹.

The homeowners formed the West River Homeowners Association (WRHOA) about twenty years ago to represent their interests in dealings with the various governmental agencies that play a part in managing the area. WRHOA is a nonprofit membership association open to all homeowners and residents living along the West Branch of the Niagara River on Grand Island. The purpose of the Association is to promote and protect the welfare and interest of the West River residents.

There exists a myriad of agencies of multiple levels with functional control in the area: the Town of Grand Island, Erie County (Sheriff's Patrol), New York State (NYS Parks; NYS Department of Transportation and the Federal Government (Homeland Security, Army Corp of Engineers). The WRHOA assisted in this research by including the survey instrument in their spring newsletter that is mailed to 271 households. There are an additional 38

¹ Calculated at 300 parcels at an average of \$100,000 each. \$100,000 is said to be the incremental value that lots with riparian rights have over those without riparian rights.

households that are not members of the WRHOA and they were contacted via the WRHOA as well.

Literature Review of the Geography of Fear

There is a growing body of literature on the geography of fear. For example, Davis' (2005) research explored perceptions of safety on the Marshall Islands and Brownlow's (2005) research on perceptions of safety in a Philadelphia park are but very recent examples of this. Davis (2005) notes that the probabilistic nature of risk, coupled with the subjectivity that safety is defined, make this line of research difficult. Cutter (1993) measured risk in a realist's quantitative perspective while Jasanof's (1999) constructivist research notes the risk perception does not always reflect the reality of the place as defined by the beholder of a place. The riskiness of a place is an amalgam of science and beliefs.

Pain (2000 and 1991) and Smith (1987b) have written comprehensive reviews of the literature regarding the geography of fear. Brownlow (2005), Day, et. al. (2003), Pain (2001), Lagrange and Ferraro (1989) have published the results of work highlighting differences in men's and women's fear across space.

The Survey Instrument

In order to better understand perceptions of border security the author worked with WRHOA who sent out a border security survey in the Spring 2005 newsletter. The one page survey was mailed to 309 addresses 271 of which are residents of the West River Road and the following questions were asked:

- Are you a citizen of the USA, Canada, both or other?
- Are you female or male?
- Do you have children living with you?
- How long have you lived on the border?
- On average do you believe the border is, or has potential to be, a dangerous place (answer 1 if very dangerous to 5 not very dangerous).

- The police presence (border patrol, state, county, etc...) on the border is (answer 1 if too little to 5 much too much).
- How safe do you feel on the border? (answer 1 if very unsafe to 5 very safe)
- Have you witnessed illegal activity on the border?
- If yes, please explain:
- Have you changed your personal security because of border threats?
- If yes, please describe:
- What changes, recommendations or other thoughts, if any, would you like to share?

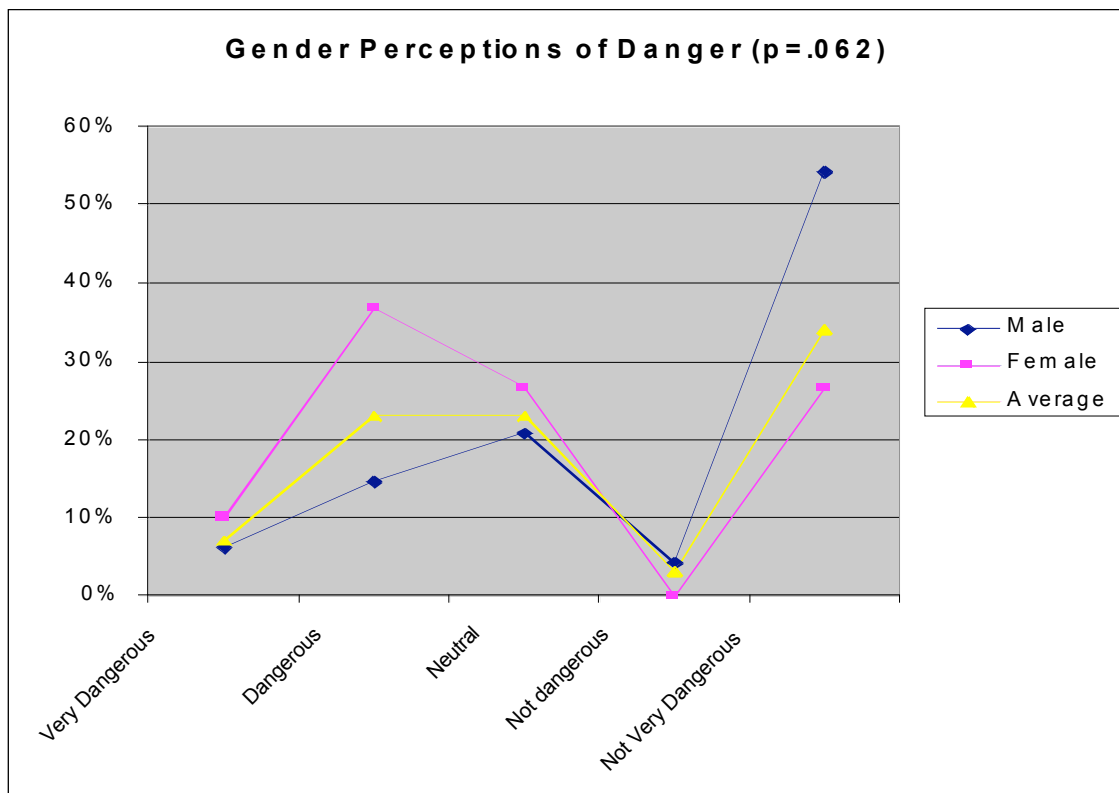
Survey Results

Some surveys were returned unusable either because the respondent did not live on the border or the survey was not filled out. Nevertheless, the response rate was nearly 30 percent of the border residents. Nearly all (92 percent; 76 responses) of respondents reported being citizens of the United States of America (USA). 2.5 percent (two responses) reported that they held dual Canadian/USA citizenship. One percent (one response) reported “other” citizenship. Two percent (three respondents) were Canadian citizens.

Of those responding, 61 percent are male, 39 percent are females. The survey has an obvious male bias and so it may warrant a look at normalizing the female responses to see if the outcomes change. 72 percent of respondents reported not having children living with them. No variables corresponded significantly with the presence of children in the home.

Nevertheless, about half of females and roughly a quarter of the males thought the border is, or has the potential to be, a dangerous place. Apparently, males and females view the danger potential of the border in an inverted way. This was statistically significant to the 90th percentile ($p=.062$). 58 percent of the males and a 25 percent of the females believe the border is a relatively safe place. A very large percentage of women (46 percent) feel the border is very or somewhat dangerous. A roughly equal proportion, about 20-25 percent, of males and females score the border area to be an average danger. Clearly residents of this portion of the international border feel as though they are in danger.

The average length of time that a resident has lived on the border is 24 years. A startling fact when you consider they believe the border to be a dangerous place. Respondents lived at this location a minimum of one year and a maximum of 80 years. Given the longevity of the border’s residents, coupled with a relative absence of border related crime as reported by residents (83 percent said they had witnessed no crime), the area of study appears to be very safe. Of the 17 percent of respondents who did report some “illegal activity” half of activity was rather benign of simply suspicious to the person who reported it. For example, two instances of empty boats being found were reported. It’s not clear if that constitutes illegal activity but was reported as such. Other reports of trespassing, boaters operating in a hazardous manner, and possible drug activity were reported. Serious (about half of the responses of reported activity) concerns included several cases of illegal aliens coming to shore as well as a report of an “assault rifle” being found and turned over to the police. It is not clear if the reports of illegal immigration are redundant or not, but five residents reported six cases of illegal activity. Some of the reported illegal activity was not witnessed first hand, but rather, is based upon knowledge garnered from the communication amongst their neighbors. Several of the reported incidents were decades old.



- Males feel the border is less dangerous than females ($p=.062$)
- 58 percent of males, and 25 percent of the females, believe the border is a relatively safe place.
- 46 percent of females feel the border is very or somewhat dangerous
- 20-25 percent of males and females score the border area to be of an average danger

The residents reported that the police presence on the border is just right 60 percent of the time. 14 percent felt there as too little police presence and an additional 1 percent believing there was much too little police presence on this border area. 14 percent believed there was too much police and 11 percent believed there was much too much presence of police. No statistically significant difference in perception occurred between men and women for the police presence variable.

With regard to the question inquiring if the respondent has changed their personal security because of border concerns 86 percent said they had not. Of those respondents who made a comment about how they changed their personal security, 50 percent said they were more observant than in the past. 33 percent noted that they locked their doors and windows and 17 percent said they turn lights on as a security precaution.

Remarkable is the fact that 64 percent of respondents who witnessed illegal activity on the border have not changed their personal security because of border threats. These two variables are significant to $p=.008$. Only 14 percent of the respondents reported having changed their personal security. Either respondents were already implementing security measures regardless of border threats or border threats were not of such a concern as to warrant a change in behavior by border residents. Women were more likely to have reported changing their personal security than men. Most reported locking doors more often (10 times), watching out for suspicious activity (6 times), and turning on the lights (3 times).

92 percent of the respondents reported that they felt about right, safe or very safe regarding their safety on the border, yet 29 percent of the 92 percent responded that they believe the border has the potential to be a dangerous place. The 30 percent of respondents who said it was an “about right” safe place, also said it was a dangerous place 35 percent of the time and 17 percent said the border is, or has the potential to be, a very dangerous place. Ten percent of respondents who believe the border to be a dangerous place feel safe or very safe. This begs the question: have people been conditioned to feel safe in situations that are perceived to be dangerous? Chi square tests on these two variables resulted in a $P=.000$. The good news is that 37 percent of all respondents feel the border is not very dangerous and very safe.

Of the 14 respondents who said they had witnessed illegal activity, half still felt the border was very safe. Of the 64 respondents who had reported not witnessing illegal activity, 28 percent still felt that the area was either a dangerous or a very dangerous place. The people who thought the area was most dangerous and witnessed illegal activity, reported the least serious illegal types of activity if any real illegal activity at all. One in six who witnessed illegal activity and believed the area was dangerous or very dangerous witnessed an illegal border crossing. On the other hand, of those seven respondents who witnessed illegal activity and that believed the area was not very dangerous, only one reported not actually witnessing an illegal border crossing. The people who actually witness serious border threats believe the area is not very dangerous.

Twenty subjects from nineteen responses were noted for question ten which asked: what changes, recommendations or other thoughts, if any, would you like to share? Thirty percent of the responses indicated concern for the cost of border security operations. The connotation is that the money was not well spent. The cost of border security is the top ranked category of comment. Next in frequency, 15 percent of the commentators wanted more police and felt reassured by their presence.

Ten percent of the respondents each responded in the following categories: that they would like to organize a neighborhood watch; that they have negative opinions of the government

and/or politicians; and, that engaging in this border security research is either dangerous to international relations or useless.

Five percent of respondents commented that:

- Underbrush should be cleared;
- Boaters are disrespectful and drive hazardous;
- More information is needed about border security efforts, and;
- They were concerned about terrorists targeting a specific point.

Some respondents question the need to discuss borders at all. Said one respondent, “Question 5 – question is presumptuous – [it] is dangerous in itself. I do not look upon boundaries, per se in a sense, as existing. I live next door to my neighbors & friends i.e. Mexicans & Canadians & do not wish to impose a barrier to our friendship.”

While other respondents question the validity of any data gathered via this survey instrument stating, “hard for someone to answer [question seven] without any facts. I hope you are not seriously going to take the opinion of those of us who only see a small part of the effort involved. This question is best answered by real data from police records, etc...”

One reason that men and women feel differently about the potential for danger on the west river may be that the river itself is intimidating (an environmental determinative line of reasoning). Perhaps it is that men feel more comfortable on or near the river given the high level of men’s interaction with the river. Higher levels of males fishing and hunting as well as recreational activities such as boating may lead to a higher comfort level for men in proximity to the river.

- The west branch of the upper Niagara River is safe
- Residents do fear crime but little has been reported
- Women fear crime more than men
- Differences between Danger and Safety

Future Directions for this Research include surveying:

- Canadian Residents
- Non-Border Residents
- Other Borders: Mexico – US?
- Longitudinal
- Police Agencies
- How have people come to fear the border?

Conclusion

This research uncovered some fascinating information about border resident's perceptions of security some of which require a deeper analysis to understand more fully. Chiefly, the gender differences were directionally the most significant area of potential future exploration. Regardless of gender, first hand witness of crime, and perceptions of safety, residents believe the area is, or has the potential to be, dangerous. Better understanding what drives this sense of danger (environmental vs. behavioral) may be a rich area for future study. Concerns about border security continue to grow and this research is but a first small step in understanding the dynamics of the topic.

References

- Brownlow, A. 2005. A geography of men's fear. *Geoforum*. 36: 581-592.
- Cutter, S. 1993. Living with risk: The geography of technological hazards. New York: Routledge.
- Day, K., Stump, C. Carreon, D., 2003. Confrontation and loss of control: masculinity and men's fear in public space. *Environmental Psychology* 23: 311-322.
- Entrikin, J.N. 1991. The betweenness of place: Towards a geography of modernity. London: Macmillan.
- Jasanoff, S. 1999. The songlines of risk: environmental values 8(2): 135-52.
- Lagrange, R.L., Ferraro, K.F., 1989. Assessing age and gender differences in perceived risk and fear of crime. *Criminology* 27: 697-718.
- Lefebvre, H. 1991. *The production of space*, Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell
- Pain, R 2000. Place, social relations and the fear of crime: a review. *Progress in Human Geography* 24 (3): 365-387.
- Pain, R. 2001. Gender, race, age, fear in the city. *Urban Studies* 38: 899-913.
- Smith, S.J. 1987. Fear of crime: beyond a geography of deviance. *Progress in Human Geography* 11, 1-23.
- Soja, E.W. 1996. Thirdspace: Journeys to Las Angeles and other real and imagined places. Malden, MA: Blackwell.