THEORY: Crime is a social phenomenon which evokes fear as a consequence, and this fear of crime affects people not only at their place of residence or work, but also while travelling. Traditional methods for measuring fear of crime employ static household survey questionnaires. This limits the type of information that can be gathered on the times and spaces when people feel fearful. What’s more, the surveys do not capture actual experiences, but rely on recall, which is known for being affected by issues with memory.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this data collection technique is to collect data that will provide insight into when and where fear of crime is experienced, and by whom. This allows for a holistic understanding of perceptions of security covering people’s entire activity space (i.e. all places people interact with day-to-day). Collecting data on people’s perceptions and experiences as they occur in space and time allows us to identify, at the micro-level, what areas are perceived as safe and unsafe, and know precisely how that changes with different demographic groups, times of the day, days of the week, or other variables. This knowledge can be used to design targeted, efficient and effective situational interventions to enhance perceptions of safety in the built environment.

METHOD: The Fear of Crime Application (FOCA) is deployed as a questionnaire on a mobile device. It is a powerful way of seeking information from people during (and about) their daily activities. Utilising in-built sensors of phones allows for real-time collection of spatial (GPS) and temporal (time and date) information about the report. This means that when a participant answers the question “In this moment how worried are you about becoming a victim of crime?” information is collected about their characteristics, when and where they feel worried, as well as their answer. Participants download the application from an app store onto their own mobile devices before filling out a quick demographic survey. Participants are subsequently sent reminders or “ping”s to complete the questionnaire. This can be set to remind them at certain times (e.g. during morning peak travel times and evening peak travel times) or in certain locations (e.g. when they come within 50 meters of Camden Town Station). Participants can either complete the survey questionnaire about their fear of crime levels when the ping is sent, or at a non-ping time (if they want to record an experience outside of this time). Retrospective annotation option is also offered for participants if they would prefer to remove themselves from a dangerous situation before using their (potentially) valuable phones. The data collected contains demographic information (who sent the report), GPS (where it was sent from), date and time (when it was sent), what the person felt (fear of crime), which option they used to send the report (responding to a ping, voluntarily, or retrospectively), and any additional questions put to participants (in this case whether they are on public transport or not).

APPLICATION: To determine the feasibility of this method, a pilot study was conducted. We recruited a convenience sample of 27 people. Participants submitted a total of 467 data points over the course of two weeks. Number of reports per person varied from a minimum of 2 (one a week) and a maximum of 44 (over 3 a day). On average, people submitted 16 reports (over 1 each day) which, it can be argued, give a good insight into how people experience fear of crime in the day-to-day.