Every policy problem has inherent value dimensions. It is on the basis of values that a state of affairs is perceived as undesirable, and thus acknowledged as a problem. This makes the process of defining and negotiating the meaning of a problem an essentially political process. Despite this, bureaucracy and expertise have a strong, if not increasing, influence over the formation of policy problems. An objectivist knowledge view predominates within the public managerial realm, which obscures the political dimension of problem formulation, while policy problems tend to be approached as a matter of efficiency.

This thesis provides an account of the mechanisms that shape and constrain the way the policy problem of public unsafety is understood and addressed. It explores the interrelationship between policy and research and between definitions of problems and institutional settings. It does so by analysing how policy actors make sense of the problem of feelings of unsafety, by drawing on different discourses (scientific, institutional, popular or media).

The thesis suggests that to effectively govern complex policy problems there is a need to pay closer attention to how the problem is defined and how its meaning is constrained. It is crucial to make transparent the values inherent in problem definitions as well as research claims. By acknowledging the entwinement of policy and research the policy formation process may become characterized by greater reflexivity, and the possibility of resolving wicked problems may enlarge.