

# Crimes Against the Elderly: Is the Criminal Justice System Doing All We Can?

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## *Abstract*

*This paper examines the growing elderly population in the United States and its future impact on law enforcement. It also compares the correlation of the elderly population and victimization. Despite the fact that the elderly are not high-risk crime victims, their perceptions often create apprehension. To alleviate these fears, programs currently being used to aid and educate the elderly about increased safety and protection against victimization in their communities, are described.*

## Introduction

It has generally been accepted that with the growing elderly population there will be increased victimization of the elderly. Is this perception correct? What is the criminal justice system doing to prepare itself and the elderly population for the future?

Law enforcement will play an important role in developing a comprehensive strategy that will meet the needs of the growing number of elderly in this country. Older citizens in our communities deserve and require a tailored law enforcement response to provide them with effective services. Law enforcement must understand the problems, characteristics, and needs of the burgeoning elderly population.

All states have legislation that in some way affects the elderly, whether it is mandatory reporting laws, adult protection services laws, enhanced penalties for crimes against the elderly, or domestic violence laws. Law enforcement agencies across the country are shifting toward a community oriented approach to policing. A quality response to the needs of the elderly is going to be an integral part of any community policing effort.

## Demographics

The United States' demographics on aging show a startling trend. In 1900, only 4% of the American population were aged 65 and older, with 3.1 million people over 65. In 1930, those over 65 grew to 6.7 million, which represented 5% of the total U. S. population. By 1960, the elderly population had grown to 16.7 million people which represented 9% of the total population, with a doubling of the elderly population during this 30-year period. In the last 30 years, this older generation has again nearly doubled. Today 31 million people in the U. S. are over 65 years of age and represent 12% of the current total U. S. population (Longine, 1994). Since the beginning of this century the percentage of Americans that are 65 years or older has grown from 4% to 12%, with a doubling every 30 years since 1900. The U. S. Census Bureau now predicts that by the year 2020 there will be 62 million Americans over 65 years of age which will represent 1 in 5 Americans, 20% of the total U. S. population (Longine 1994). The elderly population is not only growing rapidly, it's also getting older. The oldest old (aged 85 and older) are increasing at a faster rate than the total elderly population. In 1990, fewer than 1 in 10 elderly were aged 85 or older. By 2045, the U. S. Census predicts this figure to be 1 in 5 (Longine, 1994).

These demographics are more burdensome to Florida than any other state. Nine of the top 10 U. S. counties with the highest share of population aged 65 and older are located in Florida (Crispell, 1993). The top 10 counties in the U. S. are (U. S. Department of Commerce, 1990):

1. Hernando County, FL
2. Charlotte County, FL
3. Highlands County, FL
4. Citrus County, FL
5. Llano County, TX
6. Flagler County, FL
7. Pasco County, FL
8. Sarasota County, FL
9. Indian River County, FL
10. Martin County, FL

Thirty-one percent of the population in Florida are over 65 years old compared with the national average of 12%. (U. S. Department of Commerce, 1990).

#### Victimization and the Moving Spotlight

The criminal justice system has been slow to respond to problems directed towards women and children. The widespread recognition of crimes against children in the past decade resulted in allocation of resources and the establishment of legal remedies that would serve the best interest of children. Similarly, spousal abuse has been a highly debated topic in the past decade. A series of studies on this topic as well as increased public attention led to the assessment of the police role in domestic violence.

With the growing elderly population, the nation should also be experiencing a growing number of elderly victims. Since the elderly population has doubled since 1960, has the victimization of the elderly doubled as well? A study done by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found the following to be true. Persons age 65 or older are the least likely of all age groups in the nation to experience either lethal or nonlethal forms of criminal victimization; the elderly in this study comprised less than 2% of all victimization (Bachman, 1993). If the elderly comprise 13% of the population but only 2% of the victimization, then the rise in population has not been equal to the rate of victimization.

Crime victimization rates among the elderly have been declining during the 1980's. Household crimes against the elderly in 1981 were 123 per 1000 households with heads of households over 65. In 1990 this figure dropped to 75 in 1000 (Bachman, 1993).

Many people believe that elderly Americans are especially vulnerable to crime. It is also believed that they are the preferred target of criminals. Data gathered by the National Crime Survey during the 1970's and 80's show that the elderly are the least likely to be victims of crime in all the age groups. Persons 12 to 25 make up a disproportionately large number of the nation's victims. The rate of crime against persons 65 and over are comparatively low; the overall victimization rate for crimes of violence was nearly 16 times higher for persons under 25 than for persons over age 65 (64 per 1000 persons versus 4 per 1000 persons for each group). Household crimes showed a similar pattern (Bachman, 1993). The trend among victimization of the elderly

generally declined during the 1980's. The 1990 victimization rates for age 65 or older were significantly lower than earlier highs. Theft victimization experienced by the elderly peaked in 1976 with a rate of 18.3 per thousand victims for the elderly. Theft victimization rates in 1990 were about 22% lower than rates in the mid 1970's (Bachman, 1993).

### The Elderly Perception of Victimization

The Polk County Sheriff's Office conducted a survey of persons 55 and older as to what they perceived as their major concerns with regards to crime. Over 2,753 questionnaires were completed by seniors in the Polk County area. The crimes that these 2,753 elderly thought were a major concern are:

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|------------------------|-----|
| 1. purse snatching     | 45% |
| 2. rape                | 72% |
| 3. murder              | 47% |
| 4. frauds/scams        | 37% |
| 5. home theft/burglary | 70% |

The survey indicates that a high percentage of the seniors who were surveyed in Polk County feel most crimes are a major concern to them personally. These results were compared with a summary done by the Polk County Sheriff's Office that compiled actual victimization rate of seniors in Polk County for 1993. When the survey answers were compared to the actual reported victims of crime, the fears of becoming a victim are unwarranted.

<u>Survey Responses</u>		<u>Reported Crimes for Polk Countians (over 65)</u>	
Purse Snatching	45%		3
Rape	72%		4
Murder	47%		3
Thefts	70%		1083
Burglary	70%		1036

In a county with over 240,000 persons, there is a very small percentage of victims over 65 that are actual victims of the crimes they fear the most. This is in a county with 40% of the residents over 55 years of age. The data suggest that law enforcement is doing an outstanding job, at least in Polk County, of protecting the elderly population. The data also show that law enforcement needs to do a lot more to make the elderly feel safer. The public, particularly the elderly, must be educated on these facts.

This research has made it clear the perception that the growing elderly population is experiencing growing victimization is untrue. The victimization has not kept pace with the exploding elderly population but has, in fact, been going down. Those over 65 represent over 13% of the total U. S. population, but only account for 2% of all crime victims (Bachman 1992). Law enforcement must understand the fear of crime the elderly have and how it affects them. This fear of crime often reduces the quality of life more than the actual threat of crime itself. Fear, whether justified or not, contains an element of terror from a mix of real and imagined dangers. Because of media attention

perpetually directed to sensational violent crimes, the elderly view the news and develop an unwarranted fear of crime victimization. Fear of crime in extreme cases can immobilize the elderly who may shut themselves in their residences and shun all outside contact with people. In isolated cases, they may go hungry rather than venture out into what they consider to be a dangerous world. These cases are extreme and only a small portion of elderly are victimized by this extreme case of fear. The elderly have traditionally been victims of standard confidence games. These types of crimes are especially serious because of their overall economic, social and psychological impact on the victim.

### Programs as an Outgrowth of Community Policing

The conclusion of this research is that there is a perception in this country of growing victimization of the elderly. This research indicates this is not correct. However, if someone believes something is true, whether it is true or not doesn't matter.

The law enforcement approach needs to be directed toward addressing the fears of the elderly and increasing their sense of security. This can best be achieved by law enforcement presenting programs directed to the elderly that help them feel safe in their own neighborhood. The programs that are currently being conducted around the state of Florida are received enthusiastically by the elderly participants. These programs range from the informational to officers making routine checks of elderly residences within their patrol areas. Some of these programs are described as follows.

#### Triad Program

The Triad concept emerged in 1987 when several members of the International Chief of Police, National Sheriffs Association, and members of the American Association of Retired Persons met to consider crime prevention concerns of the elderly. They agreed that the growing number of the nation's elderly would require that the law enforcement community begin addressing ways to combat the problems confronted by the elderly segment of the population.

Triads are formed when the local police departments agree to work cooperatively with senior citizens to prevent the victimization of the elderly in their community. The three groups share ideas and resources to provide programs and training for fearful elderly citizens. Triads inform law enforcement about the fears of the elderly.

It was clear the problems that senior citizens were experiencing could best be dealt with in a cooperative effort between law enforcement and the senior citizen community. Triad represents the three way effort between sheriff, police, and the American Association of Retired Persons. A Triad usually begins when a sheriff, police chief, or elderly community contacts the other two essential participants to discuss a combined effort. The three way involvement of Triad adds strength, resources, and credibility to already existing programs. Triads include representatives from agencies that serve the elderly. These representatives, law enforcement and the elderly, serve on an advisory council called Seniors and Lawmen Together (SALT). Once established, SALT councils usually meet monthly. The council's primary strategies focus on crime prevention and victim assistance. Triad programs are based on the particular needs of those involved. The SALT council is usually the first time seniors have to interact with

law enforcement. Seniors serving on SALT councils come away with a better understanding of the problems facing a modern law enforcement agency.

### Community Awareness Programs

It is important that the atmosphere between law enforcement agencies and communities they serve consists of mutual concerns for each other's problems and a willingness by the police and citizens to cooperate in promoting law enforcement. Law enforcement needs community involvement and citizen cooperation in block clubs, neighborhood watch programs, and other crime prevention plans. Citizens are needed who are willing to support such activities in their communities.

In most cities and counties, there are approximately two law enforcement officers for each thousand citizens. In the unincorporated areas of Polk County, the ratio is 1:4 deputies per 1,000 citizens. The sheriff's office must utilize its resources for patrol services, selective traffic enforcement, accident and criminal investigations, security for the courthouse, court bailiffs, and the responsibility for over 18,000 arrest warrants, capias, and numerous support personnel.

The full complement of manpower for the agency is always diminished due to injuries, sick leaves, vacations, training, and other special functions. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to have citizens assist in reporting suspicious activities as well as obvious criminal acts in progress.

Being aware of the aforementioned, and knowing that Polk County has the third largest number of mobile home residents in the state of Florida, it became apparent to the Polk County Sheriff's Office that mobile home parks offered the perfect setting for developing crime prevention programs. A contributing element in the decision to develop such programs, was the fact that senior citizens, who comprise a large segment of the mobile home population, are community minded and actively participate in many volunteer services. Also, many mobile home parks have clubhouse facilities for meetings.

The Polk County Sheriff's Office initiated the following steps:

- a) Increased mobile home park patrols for visibility and crime prevention purposes as manpower was available.
- b) Appointed a liaison office to work with the mobile home park communities and their representatives in order to establish lines of communication between the people and law enforcement.
- c) Instructed the liaison officer to attend formal meetings, coffee hours and other functions at the parks in a marked patrol unit and to answer any questions the residents might have.

The implementation of the liaison program was designed to create an atmosphere of awareness of the many effective services the sheriff's office could provide to help eliminate some animosities toward law enforcement, and to earn the respect and support from the community.

In 1993, the Community Awareness Program was expanded to include any group of senior citizens in Polk County in addition to mobile home park residents. Since the

program's inception, there have been 45 CAP programs presented in Polk County. The Mobile Home Park Liaison has become the Elder Services Officer in order to serve the entire senior population of Polk County.

A variety of other programs have been instituted to inform and aid the elderly. These programs are:

1. **Neighborhood Watch** which familiarizes the communities with the process of setting up and maintaining a Neighborhood Watch and the benefits that go along with it.
2. **Home Security Program** which makes citizens aware of the steps they can take to make their home and surroundings safer and more secure.
3. **Program** which explains the procedures involved in the 911 system.
4. **Vial of Life Program** which facilitates the delivery of essential medical information to emergency personnel.
5. **Personal Awareness Program** which informs citizens of what they can do to protect themselves and to reduce the chances of becoming a victim.
6. **Frauds and Scams Program** which informs citizens of confidence artists and consumer fraud.

#### Conclusion

There must be priority in the policy making process of the criminal justice system for prevention, detention, and prosecution for crimes against the elderly. As more of this nation's population passes their 65th birthday, law enforcement will be forced to respond to the demand of the elderly. With the media's attention on this crime problem, the public will continue to believe they are in grave danger. Law enforcement response to this problem should focus on education, crime prevention, and instilling a sense of security to a very apprehensive elderly population.

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