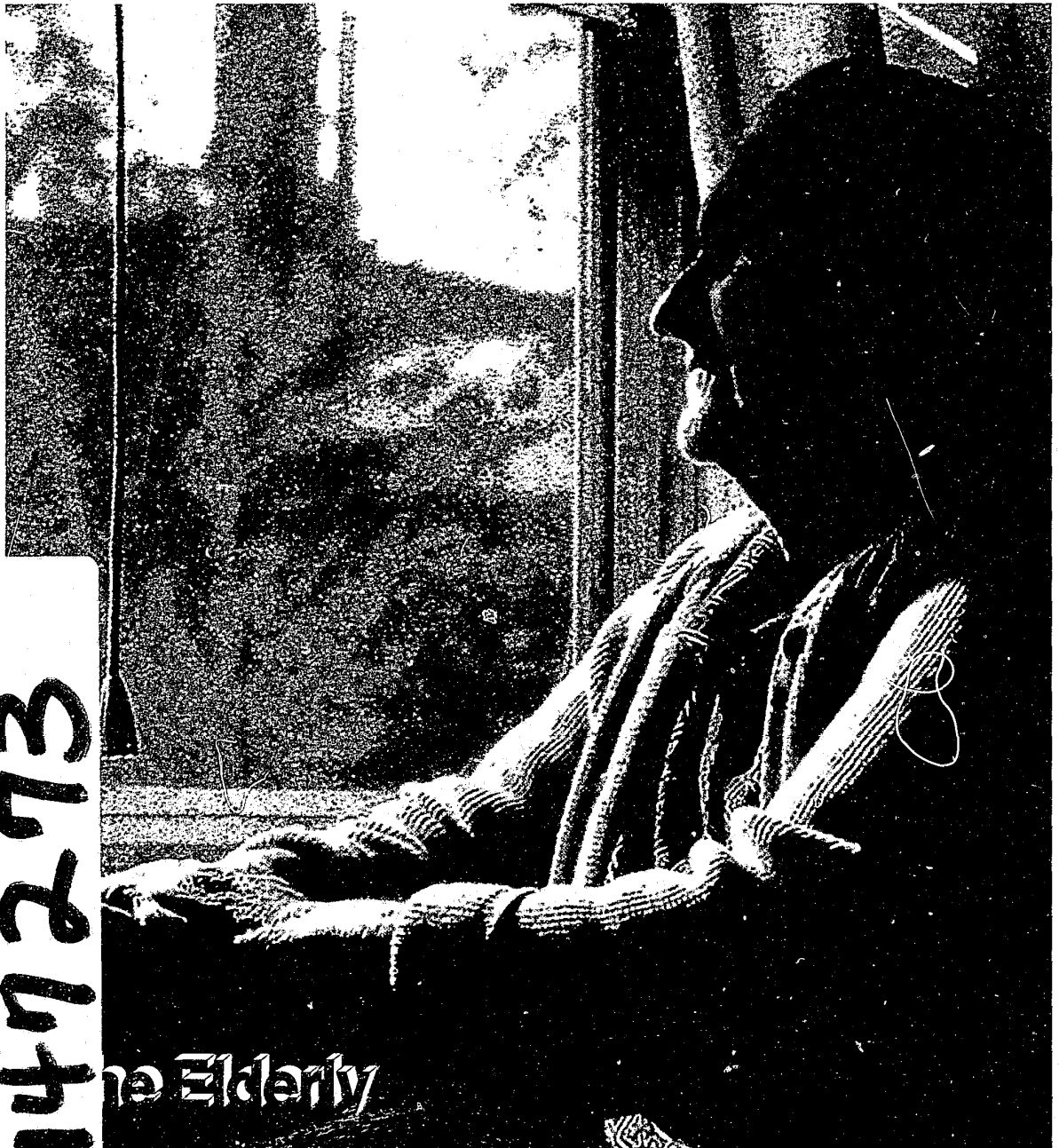


U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION



147270-
147273

The Elderly

February 1994
Volume 62
Number 2

United States
Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of
Investigation
Washington, DC 20535

Louis J. Freeh,
Director

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The Attorney General has
determined that the
publication of this periodical
is necessary in the
transaction of the public
business required by law.
Use of funds for printing this
periodical has been
approved by the Director of
the Office of Management
and Budget.

The *FBI Law Enforcement
Bulletin* (ISSN-0014-5688)
is published monthly by the
Federal Bureau of
Investigation, 10th and
Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.,
Washington, D.C. 20535.
Second-Class postage paid
at Washington, D.C., and
additional mailing offices.
Postmaster: Send address
changes to *FBI Law
Enforcement Bulletin*,
Federal Bureau of
Investigation, Washington,
D.C. 20535.

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Law Enforcement Gerontology

By
WILBUR L. RYKERT, Ph.D.



Photo by K.L. Morrison

In today's troubled society, crime is a major concern of the elderly. Clearly, victimization of the elderly severely impacts their economic, physical, and mental health. In turn, it diminishes their quality of life.

Still, gerontologists give little attention to the *crime* problems of

this socioeconomic group. Instead, they focus the bulk of their research on explaining the aging process and discovering solutions to the physical and mental problems of the elderly.

Police administrators, on the other hand, recognize that crimes against the elderly require ardent

attention by law enforcement. In response, some administrators have created an innovative, specialized position within their agencies—the law enforcement gerontologist. Law enforcement gerontology is the branch of law enforcement science concerned with aging, the crime- and abuse-related problems of aged persons, and the opportunity for older persons to contribute to the crime prevention mission.¹

In the past, law enforcement addressed youth crimes by creating specialized juvenile units. Now, law enforcement administrators must make similar contributions to the overall good of America by specifically addressing the crime problems of our aging society. Law enforcement gerontologists can do this by melding existing gerontological research with the law enforcement mission.

This article discusses the role and responsibilities of gerontologists within police departments. It also addresses the type of training those in this position should receive, how the fear continuum affects the elderly, and what types of crime the elderly often experience.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Law enforcement gerontologists work cooperatively with senior citizen communities. By developing a rapport with the elderly, officers assigned to this position can pinpoint specific problems that impact that segment of the population and then recommend ways to minimize the risk of victimization. Law enforcement gerontologists can also alert the senior citizen community to ongoing scams being committed against the elderly.

Finally, law enforcement gerontologists can involve the elderly

in volunteer projects. Involving senior citizens in the fight against crime serves a two-fold purpose. It allows them to feel that they can impact on the crimes being committed against their peer group, and it allows the law enforcement community to benefit from the valuable services this group can offer.

In order to fulfill their responsibilities effectively, law enforcement gerontologists need to understand the process of aging, as well as the many types of crime and abuse elderly persons experience. They must also know how to communicate with senior citizens. Specific knowledge in these areas allows law enforcement gerontologists to guide department policy and to train law enforcement generalists on how to improve their delivery of law enforcement services to older persons.

TRAINING

In March 1993, the State of Illinois became the first State in the Nation to train officers to become specialists in law enforcement gerontology. Several other States, including Rhode Island, Florida, and Delaware, are currently developing this type of training.

In addition, the National Crime Prevention Institute in Louisville, Kentucky, offers a 40-hour training program for law enforcement gerontologists. Its course on crime and abuse against the elderly offers information on developing and implementing a law enforcement gerontologist program and communicating with the elderly. The course also addresses the demographics, myths, and facts of aging; assault and abuse by family, health care providers, and others; and guardianship, fiduciary, and health care fraud.

Further, the course educates attendees on traditional con games and street crimes that target the elderly, such as roof repairs and telemarketing schemes, legislative issues (defining crimes of abuse and neglect), and senior volunteer services. A special focus is placed on the methods criminals use to enter residences of the elderly and ways to prevent situations conducive to elderly rapes and assaults.

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) is also a training resource for those departments interested in instituting a law enforcement gerontologist program. AARP has developed programs designed to reduce older persons' vulnerability to crime, as well as to sensitize law enforcement personnel at every level to the criminal victimization of older persons.

The amount of training required in the field of law enforcement gerontology is as yet unknown. What is certain, however, is that department gerontologists must understand how the fear continuum impacts the elderly, and they must familiarize themselves with the leading types of crime committed against the elderly.

FEAR CONTINUUM

In order to work effectively, law enforcement gerontologists must understand the fear continuum and how it impacts the elderly population. The fear of crime often reduces the quality of life more than the actual threat of crime, but a lack of fear by members of any age group can prevent the effective development and use of crime prevention programs. Once these



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gerontologists familiarize themselves with the fear continuum, they can apply that information to the types of crimes committed against the elderly. The following terms demonstrate the progressive nature of fear levels: Apathy, concern, apprehension, alarm, tormenting fear, and terroristic fear.²

Apathy

Crime prevention practitioners consistently report apathy as their most severe problem in obtaining support for crime prevention activities. Apathy about crime may be exhibited in a number of ways. For example, individuals may show a lack of concern for crime prevention by not attending neighborhood watch meetings, failing to take steps to protect their property, or neglecting to change personal behavior.

The causes for apathy vary according to age, personal experience, and individual personality. Youths often exhibit behavior in the face of danger that suggests immortal attitudes. Conversely, mature adults may take comfort from the fact that nothing has happened in the past, or they may believe that there is little they can do to protect themselves.

Concern

One of the goals of crime prevention is to move individuals from apathy to concern about crime. Another is to instill the belief in citizens that they can work cooperatively with law enforcement and with one another to reduce crime.

Often, the concerns of crime prevention officials are not the same

as those of potential victims. For example, elderly persons may not attend an evening meeting to discuss frauds and con games because of television reports of night-time violence and a concern about the safety risks of driving after dark.

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Apprehension

Some level of apprehension may stimulate individuals to get involved in their own protection and the protection of the community. At this level of fear, individuals recognize that a strong possibility exists for encountering future difficulties. Accordingly, they may employ crime prevention techniques, join a neighborhood watch, refuse to deal with potential con artists, and call the police regarding suspicious persons. At this point, effective law enforcement response to the needs of seniors is critical. Absent this, fear may move to unhealthy levels.

Alarm

Individuals become alarmed when they suddenly realize that

danger is imminent. They may feel this type of alarm during a robbery or upon discovering that their homes have been burglarized. While the alarm felt by the elderly may raise their consciousness, it can also impact the quality of their lives. For example, if they are robbed outside their homes, they may fear leaving their homes for any reason. On the other hand, if their homes are burglarized, they may believe that they must remain at home to protect their belongings.

Law enforcement gerontologists should be aware that alarming citizens through factual presentations and demonstrations may produce similar negative results. They must find ways to educate the elderly without alarming them.

Tormenting Fear

Tormenting fear contains an element of terror from a mix of real and imagined dangers. At this level of fear, the elderly develop an unwarranted fear of crimes that more often impact other age groups. For example, media attention to sensational violent crimes can draw the attention of the elderly away from crimes of fraud and financial exploitation, which are crimes they are more likely to experience. Unfortunately, the social segregation of many retirees serves to increase their imagined danger.

Tormenting fear can also stimulate political activism to bring about radical change in services. Based on actual dangers, such activity can benefit the entire community. However, action based on imagined fears can pit age groups against one

another in destructive battles over scarce public resources.

Even more tragic is the possibility of personal disaster as a result of tormenting fear. Older persons may resort to violent defense at improper times, such as shooting at youths in response to their taunts, insults, and destruction of property. It is not unusual for injury and death to result from the fear generated by this type of behavior. Crime prevention and community policing tactics can help to alleviate these problems, saving lives and reputations while enhancing community life.

Terroristic Fear

Terroristic fear of crime is the most damaging level of fear to all age groups. It can actually immobilize the elderly, who may shut themselves in their own homes, shun all but their closest friends and relatives, and go hungry and without medical care rather than venture out into what they consider to be a dangerous world. In most cases, the extreme danger felt by the elderly is imagined. However, real or imagined, the result is the same—a loss of freedom and quality of life.

Fortunately, only a small portion of the elderly are victimized by terroristic fear. Yet, in an attempt to demonstrate the problems of crime against the elderly, the term "terroristic fear" is often inappropriately applied to the majority of older persons. Nonetheless, citizens who live in areas where real or imagined fears keep them imprisoned in their own homes deserve a specialized law enforcement response.

CRIMES AGAINST THE ELDERLY

Predatory Crimes

Of utmost importance to all American citizens is their quality of life. One measurement of life quality is victimization by strangers and attacks in or around victims' homes. Individuals assaulted or robbed on their properties or in their homes experience a level of fear that continues to affect their quality of life. The home is the place of last retreat—there is no other place left to hide.

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Unfortunately, elderly individuals are almost twice as likely as younger individuals to be victimized at or near their homes.³ This type of predatory crime may be responsible for much of the terroristic fear older persons experience.

Abuse in Long-Term Care Facilities

Many States require that injuries at long-term care facilities be

reported to social service agencies. However, injuries of a criminal nature are often reported as accidents due to lack of investigative expertise, unreliable victims and witnesses, or outright coverups by abusers. Although formal research in this area is lacking, there are reports of victimization of the elderly in these types of facilities.

As the elderly population grows in the United States, the number of residents in long-term care increases. Today, children of these residents may even be approaching senior citizen age, and the stories of criminal assault and neglect on dependent elderly raise their own fears of the future.

Economic Crimes

The elderly have traditionally been victims of standard con games. These types of crime are especially serious because of their overall economic, social, and psychological impact on the victims. Even more frightening to the elderly is the possibility of financial exploitation by family members, official guardians, or others with whom they may have a fiduciary relationship.

CONCLUSION

As the number of senior citizens in the United States increases, the need for law enforcement gerontologists becomes more apparent. Law enforcement gerontologists can take advantage of gerontological research by melding it with the law enforcement mission. By familiarizing themselves with how the elderly react to different levels of fear and then applying this knowledge to the types of crime committed against the elderly and

how to prevent these crimes, law enforcement gerontologists can improve the quality of life for senior citizens across the country.

Finally, while past research focused on the problems of older persons, it also identified the significant abilities of older persons to make positive social contributions. Thus, in addressing the problems of the elderly, law enforcement gerontologists can incorporate into any developing programs opportunities for volunteer service by

older individuals. Through these types of programs, the elderly can actively participate in reducing the rate of crime against their peers. At the same time, they can give back to the communities in which they live.

Law enforcement gerontologist may well be a critical position in the next decade. These gerontologists can provide police administrators with valuable information on which to base department policy regarding the elderly.

Police administrators should plan now for the changing demographics of tomorrow. America is an aging society. ♦

Endnotes

¹ *Random House College Dictionary* (New York, New York: Random House Publishing Co.).

² Evell J. Younger, "The California Experience: Prevention of Criminal Victimization of the Elderly," *Police Chief*, February 1976, 30.

³ Ronet Bachman, "Elderly Victims," *Bureau of Justice Statistics, Special Report*, U.S. Department of Justice, October 1992, 1.

Crime Data

Crime Trends: January-June 1993

According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program, the volume of serious crimes reported to law enforcement agencies declined 5 percent in the first 6 months of 1993, compared to the same period of 1992. As a group, violent crime declined 3 percent, while property crime collectively decreased 5 percent.

Among the violent crimes, robbery decreased 5 percent; forcible rape, 4 percent; and aggravated assault, 1 percent. The murder volume showed no change from the same 6-month period of the previous year.

All property crimes registered declines from January-June 1993. Arson was down 15 percent; burglary, 8 percent; motor vehicle theft, 5 percent; and larceny-theft, 4 percent.

Geographically, the Northeast experienced an 8-percent decrease; the Midwest, 7 percent; the South, 4 percent; and the West, 2 percent. There were also decreases in all population groupings. The greatest decline (7 percent) was recorded in cities with populations over 1 million, and rural and suburban county law enforcement agencies reported declines of 4 and 5 percent, respectively.