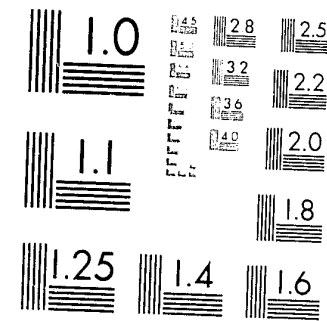


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Police-Community Relations



The Police and the Elderly (Conclusion)

The Elderly Offender

Unfortunately, some elderly individuals become perpetrators of crime. In fact, the increasing number of elderly people in our population has resulted in a corresponding increase in the amount of crime committed by this segment of the population.⁴⁴

Two types of elderly offenders have been distinguished—lifetime criminals grown old and individuals who have turned to crime late in life.⁴⁵ It is this latter group that warrants concern since their special problems (e.g., diminished hearing and sight) may be a potential catalyst of their lawbreaking activities. The deterioration of sensory organ functions common to the elderly can be extremely aggravating and frustrating because of the difficulties it imposes upon interpersonal communication.

Job discrimination, restricted educational opportunities, and inadequate Social Security payments are additional sources of stress and frustration. If these emotions are ignored or misunderstood, they can easily lead to violence or criminal activity.⁴⁶

Any future research concerning criminality and criminal behavior among the elderly must take into account treatment given them by police, court, and correctional personnel. Their actions and discretionary powers can have a tremendous impact on crime statistics and can often be influenced by the overall characteristics of older persons. Research in ethology has shown that signs of helplessness tend to inhibit aggressive attack.⁴⁷ In a similar vein, the police in the past might have viewed the elderly as weak and less than fully responsible for their acts. It is likely that these factors have an attitudinal impact upon criminal justice personnel. Consequently, the police might be limited in their ability to exer-

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cise their discretionary authority appropriately, unless they possess a sound understanding of the elderly.

The Elderly Victim

Understanding the elderly also aids police officers in their interactions with victims. The physical deterioration which can be so frustrating to aged individuals can also be a source of frustration for their caretakers. As the aged might resort to violence to vent their emotions, so too might those caring for them. An indepth discussion concerning the various reasons for elder abuse is beyond the scope of this article; however, it is important for police officers to know that the elderly are highly vulnerable due to their possible physical, social, emotional, or economic needs. It has been estimated that 10 percent of dependent elderly are at risk.⁴⁸ Abuse might take the form of direct beatings, verbal assaults, misuse of money or property, as well as forcing an individual into a nursing home.⁴⁹ The situation is complicated by the fact that the abuser might be anyone—a close or distant relative, friend, neighbor, paid caretaker, or stranger, and the aged victim might be unable or too fearful to tell anyone what has happened. In addition, the elderly person might be engaging in self-abuse, such as excessive use of alcohol, drugs, improper diet, or refusing to accept medical care.⁵⁰ There also exists the possibility of abuse by elders. As described by Steinmetz, "The authoritarian father who ruled his children with an iron fist and met a loss of authority or control by beating them apparently still resorts to these techniques at age 90, especially when he finds controlling the 'children' more difficult."⁵¹

Fear of Crime

The fear of crime among many elderly individuals is a consuming emotion. As a consequence, many of these individuals imprison themselves in their home.⁵² However, various crime surveys indicate that those individuals 65 and older are generally victimized less than any other age group.⁵³ Further examination of the data indicates that they are no more likely than any other age group to be subject to personal larceny with contact (i.e., pocket picking and purse snatching).⁵⁴ Due to all the problems inherent in collecting crime statistics (e.g., nonreporting of crimes, the victim's failure to recognize a crime has been committed), it is difficult to ascertain the actual rate of victimization among the elderly. However, it seems that when the elderly are victimized, they usually suffer greater economic and physical consequences than younger victims. Since nearly half of the population 65 and over are retired and live on fixed incomes at or below the poverty level, they generally do not have the financial capability to replace or repair property, and the biological changes which occur with age can make recovery from a physical injury a lengthy process, if recovery does occur.⁵⁵

“. . . police officers can be key figures in reducing the stress of elderly individuals in both crime and noncrime situations.”

Emphasis has been placed upon the interactions police officers have with the elderly in their crime-related duties. However, police officers typically spend less than 20 percent of their time in crime-related activities. The majority of their time involves a wide variety of community services. The elderly can especially profit from the community-service functions that police officers carry out because of their many vulnerabilities. Armed with a solid understanding of the elderly person's special characteristics, as well as the relevant laws, police officers can be key figures in reducing the stress of elderly individuals in both crime and noncrime situations.

Role of the Police

The current and future police role in cases involving the elderly can be addressed by considering the techniques which police can use in order to fulfill their five mandates—law enforcement, order maintenance, crime prevention, delivery of services, and protection of civil rights and liberties.

Law Enforcement

There exist many architectural and psychological barriers to disabled people who are victims or witnesses of crimes. Ideally, the police would coordinate efforts with other law enforcement personnel to insure that their disabled clients feel comfortable within the environment of the criminal justice system (e.g., police stations, courtrooms, and attorney's offices).



The disabled elderly person might require transportation to court, assistance in testifying (e.g., providing interpreters for the deaf), and at times, referrals to other appropriate social service agencies. The progress of a criminal case through the criminal justice system might be dependent upon fulfilling these services.

Due to the disproportionate number of low-income elderly individuals, they are overrepresented in high-crime areas. Such decoy tactics as masquerading as disabled and aged persons in these areas would cause many potential offenders to reconsider their crime plots. Consequently, the victimization of the elderly would be reduced.

Police officers should be especially careful to avoid errors in carrying out arrests, searches, and seizures when crimes involve the elderly. The dismissal of cases due to technicalities will only serve to reinforce any belief suggesting that the police have no impact on crime. Establishing a

case review system with the assistance of the prosecutor in order to determine the legal sufficiency of a case prior to its formal submission for prosecution would reduce police officers' errors and would serve as continuing education for police and prosecutors regarding situations which might lead to errors. When the elderly see offenders being prosecuted, it is likely that their consuming fear of victimization would be reduced and their willingness to report crime would be increased.

The elderly would greatly benefit from the consolidation of police dispatch services. Agencies that operate independently could pool their radio dispatch resources, thereby eliminating confusion and duplication. In this way, the public would have one number to dial and the police could use less dispatch personnel.

Order Maintenance

Senior citizens have much to contribute to society, if only their talents and abilities are recognized. Recruiting senior citizens for auxiliary and reserve police units can provide benefits to the community and police departments. These older volunteers would be able to patrol less hazardous areas, perform clerical duties, enforce safety regulations, search for physical evidence, counsel distressed persons and their families, as well as render victim assistance services. Moreover, these police volunteers could make periodic visits to ascertain the current needs of their less mobile peers. Such use of the elderly would provide the police with extra time to perform more demanding duties, while simultaneously recognizing the elderly person's worth. Consequently, these older people would feel needed, wanted, and less isolated.

Police officers and/or police volunteers could inspect nursing homes and other licensed elderly residences, as well as render other adult protective services in compliance with local and State laws. Through the use of informal arbitration, such visits could serve to eliminate the need for more serious interventions. Also by compiling and maintaining directories of local service organizations, such as battered client shelters, hotels, and other public facilities which have accommodations to service disabled persons, police might be better able to cope with crises involving the elderly as well as other individuals.



Crime Prevention

There are several ways in which police departments can increase their crime prevention efforts for the elderly. Police training manuals and audio visual programs which specifically deal with crime prevention and the elderly are available. The materials contain information which can educate the elderly and orient police officers on safety techniques and methods used to train older persons to assist law enforcement efforts.⁵⁴ Also, com-

"Senior citizens have much to contribute to society, if only their talents and abilities are recognized."

municating with community crime prevention groups and those throughout the Nation not only augments the variety of techniques but also substantially upgrades the act of crime prevention at the least possible expense.

Dissemination of senior crime prevention information through the mass media is another viable approach. Radio and television presentations, as well as the distribution of crime prevention literature at nutrition sites and senior centers, are ideal delivery modes for the older age group.

The expertise of local organizations and agencies within the public and private sectors for the purpose of developing special safety devices and plans for the elderly should not be overlooked. Possible innovations to assist the elderly could include low-

cost burglar alarms for homes and apartments, safety standards for doors and windows, and new environmental designs for public housing and other residential developments.

Delivery of Services

What can the police do to reduce the automobile, pedestrian, and home accident rate among the elderly? Responses to this question are infinite; however, there are several steps which can be taken, including:

- 1) Present workshops which focus on techniques to compensate for biological changes which come with age;⁵⁷
- 2) Publicize available victim compensation programs.
- 3) Advertise special telephone numbers to obtain assistance during emergencies.
- 4) Operate through volunteers a "survival mobile" to help senior citizens who have not been able to solve transportation problems through usual channels.
- 5) Establish a senior "call-line network" by which volunteers would help the disabled contend with fear, loneliness, and desperation. If a mobility-impaired person does not call the volunteer at a given set time, the volunteer would attempt to establish contact, and
- 6) Make available the services of volunteers to check on status of older persons and report back to concerned out-of-town relations, ensuring that any problem discovered would be resolved before the volunteer departs.



The successful formulation and dispensation of police services to this population greatly depends on the human element. The development of inservice training in order to sensitize police personnel to the characteristics of the elderly is vital. Police departments could institute such courses at minimal cost by using the services of local practitioners and teachers in the fields of disability and gerontology.

Protection of Civil Rights and Liberties

After arresting an elderly person, it is important that the police officer makes a general assessment of the aged person's characteristics. Special accommodations should be made in response to any apparent disability. For example, if it appears that the person has an intellectual impairment, care must be taken when advising this person of his or her rights. It would be wise to have this person repeat his/her understanding of these rights to insure that they are not unintentionally waived.

Many cases involving the older offender involve problems of self-abuse or petty theft. Police could use the help of volunteers to divert such cases with the cooperation of the prosecutor. Such a procedure would save police time and contribute to the rehabilitation of the offender.

Police could safeguard the legal rights of the elderly in cases involving guardianship, civil commitments, and the implementation of related adult protective legislation. Many elderly persons do not really need such "protections," and alert police officers using informal arbitration procedures

"All police departments need to undertake their own local assessments in order to discover how they might best fulfill their role in cases involving [the] elderly. . . ."

could forestall any injustice in this regard. The services of practitioners and teachers expert in health institutions' law could be used for police in-service workshops in order to give police officers the means with which to mediate.

Elderly victims who live at or below the poverty level and are on fixed incomes might be unaware of the programs publicly financed to assist them. Police personnel could disseminate information about the benefits available to them. Also, representatives from the Social Security Administration and other agencies engaged in direct service activities for this age group could be used for consultation. Police could also use the System of Federal Information Centers which has been established to answer questions about Federal programs.⁵⁸

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 79) deals with equal access rights for disabled persons. Agencies receiving Federal funds must accommodate this population, which includes many elderly persons. Police departments should be accessible to the disabled, have telephone amplifiers for hard-of-hearing persons, and teletypewriters for the deaf, as well as provide qualified sign language interpreters for communication with hearing-impaired persons who rely on sign language. The installation of a telecommunication device (TDD or TTY) at a police station can help to protect the lives and property of the hearing-impaired citizens of a community. Moreover, the general public is also benefited by the ability of an additional segment of the local population to make police reports by telephone.⁵⁹



Conclusion

In the final analysis, the police need to be responsive to the needs and concerns of the communities in which they work. When approximately 80 people representing areas within the East San Gabriel Valley in Los Angeles County were caucused on the plight of the elderly and the issue of crime, they ranked their concerns as increased residential burglaries, inability to afford home safety devices, harassment from juveniles, ineligibility of lower middle-class seniors to receive services reserved for the lower income population, general lack of awareness of what can be done to prevent becoming a crime victim, lack of multilingual police officers, lack of police officers who can communicate with the hearing impaired, and abuses



committed against seniors by nursing home staff, their own children, or other persons. They also had much to say about the lack of legal aid, inadequate housing, availability of transportation, and other health and social service issues.⁶⁰

The chief of the Baltimore County, Md., Police Department has authorized police officers to interview neighborhood residents in order to identify their fears. He has learned that the high frequency of specific crimes does not necessarily coincide with the people's fears as stated in a recent interview:

"They're worried about vandalism, they're worried about the larceny of their autos, they're worried about the destruction of their homes and their property, or their ability to walk down the street safely. It's a more personalized thing. It's rather close to home, what they're afraid of, as opposed to the broader crimes that we deal with, which are the Part I crimes, [e.g., homicide or burglary]"⁶¹

All police departments need to undertake their own local assessments in order to discover how they might best fulfill their role in cases involving elderly community residents, crime victims, and crime witnesses.

Many social service agencies are involved in programs that address the safety and security of the elderly. However, while other community agencies may choose to undertake responsibilities in cases involving the elderly, the police alone must handle all cases of social need that come to them.⁶² Consequently, the police represent society's foremost source of aid for this group. The obligations such a responsibility entails can be met with the development of effective programs which take into account the needs and attitudes of the elderly.

Footnotes

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(Photographs courtesy of the American Association of Retired Persons)

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