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Senior Citizen Assault Prevention Unit

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Even though the elderly in our society are less likely than the young to fall victim to crime, the offenses to which older persons tend to succumb are relatively serious in nature.¹ When purse snatchings and strong-arm robberies occur, the consequences for older victims are usually far more severe than for their younger counterparts. And, the inability of the elderly to rebound from the physical and financial effects of victimization make the psychological impact of crime more profound.

It is not surprising, therefore, that law enforcement in recent years has responded to a demand for police service to this age

group. Several agencies have formed special units designed to deal more effectively with the crime-related problems of older people. Police personnel assigned to these units add a new dimension to police work. Not only have they developed expertise in investigating crimes against senior citizens, but they have also sensitized their agencies to the police service needs of the elderly in their communities.

Establishing the Unit

In 1980, the Milwaukee Police Department created the Senior Citizen Assault Prevention Unit. Initially, five detectives were assigned to work full-time

conducting followup investigations on all larcenies involving elderly victims. Since then, the "Gray Squad," as it came to be called, has grown in size and responsibilities. The unit now investigates all serious crimes against seniors, not just assaults, and its work involves deterrence and crime prevention activities, as well as community relations.

During the past 8 years, officers assigned to the Gray Squad developed a multifaceted approach to the problem of reducing criminal victimization of senior citizens. This approach aims to: 1) Identify and apprehend offenders of the elderly, 2) deter would-be offenders of the elderly, 3) lessen the exposure of the elderly to criminal victimization, and 4) promote the elderly's cooperation and favorable relations with the police.

Apprehension Efforts

Each day, copies of all offense reports, as well as all interoffice memoranda involving elderly victims, are forwarded to the Gray Squad. Each report or communication is reviewed by at least one detective or uniformed officer assigned to the unit. Followup investigations by the unit depend on one or more of the following criteria:

- 1) A request for assistance is made to the Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB) by the original investigating officer;
- 2) Gray Squad personnel or their CIB superiors determine after reviewing reports that the victim or complainant is in need of the unit's specialized services;² and/or
- 3) An older victim is known to have been a victim of a

similar offense in the past. In the course of a followup investigation, Gray Squad personnel work with detectives and uniformed officers from other units and districts.

Because their focus is on the elderly crime victim rather than on any specific crime category, Gray Squad investigators encounter a wide array of cases, ranging from such street crimes as robbery, purse snatching, or pocket picking to domestic abuse cases, to consumer fraud and confidence games, to nursing home and healthcare rip-offs. Also, they find themselves dealing with suspects who differ from one another in terms of socioeconomic charac-

high rates of crime against the elderly. High-crime area saturation and distributing patrol resources according to an ongoing data-based needs assessment allow deployment at those times and places where a visible police presence is likely to have its greatest deterrent effect.

The assigned patrol activities of the Gray Squad bear an important relationship to the overall mission of the unit. By being able to respond quickly to crimes in progress, as well as other calls for assistance, patrol officers hope to reduce the amount of elderly victimization occurring in a given area. Even if intensive patrol activity does not reduce the crime rate, it reduces citizen fear of

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teristics, educational background, and criminal motivation. Regardless, the detective must be sensitive and compassionate when dealing with the victim. The extent of physical injuries and the victim's emotional state must always be taken into consideration.

Deterrence Activities

From the 35 or so offense reports received daily, data are collected and categorized to determine, through comparison and analysis, patterns and trends of elderly victimization. This information is related to demographic data which indicate where high concentrations of the elderly reside. Based on what is learned, the unit's uniformed contingent is sent to those locations showing

crime and increases citizen satisfaction with the police.

The fear-reduction factor may be more important than initially realized. As one researcher observed,³ the elderly's perceived vulnerability to crime causes many to restrict their lifestyles in order to reduce their exposure to possible victimization. This withdrawal from community involvement occurs to such a degree that for many, the satisfaction derived from social interaction has almost completely disappeared from their lives. The resulting isolation may even increase their risk of victimization.⁴ While recognizing the importance of alerting seniors to the real dangers of crime, Gray Squad officers go to great lengths to dispel unfounded fears. They are all too aware that crime pre-



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vention, if not done properly, may have unintended consequences, such as heightened anxiety, imagined threats, and preoccupation with possible victimization.

Crime Prevention Work

Many criminal incidents involving older victims can be avoided through heightened awareness. Every detective in the Gray Squad devotes at least 10 hours per month speaking to groups of senior citizens on how to avoid becoming a crime victim.

Through seminars held at various sites throughout the community, Gray Squad personnel inform senior citizens about precautionary measures that may reduce criminal opportunity and the risk of being victimized. These target-hardening methods range from assisting the elderly in burglar proofing their homes to making older persons aware of how to reduce vulnerability to pocket pickers and purse snatchers. Public awareness lectures are presented to senior citizen groups who are frequent targets of consumer fraud and confidence games. At these sessions, lecturers describe typical fraudulent schemes and instruct seniors in the various "come-ons" associated with these crimes.

Community Relations

The Gray Squad works hard at fostering favorable police relations with the city's elderly community by focusing on the problems and special security needs. From the very inception of the unit, much work has gone into improving the lines of communi-

cation between Milwaukee's elderly population and the criminal justice system. As a result, the senior community and the police remain well informed about each other's problems.

Some indication of improved relations can be seen in the greater willingness of senior citizens to report incidents to the police. Even though victimization surveys indicate only about one-half of the offenses against the elderly are reported,⁵ Milwaukee seniors are reporting crimes at an increasing rate. In 1982, there were 1,090 personal larceny, robbery, and battery offenses reported to the Milwaukee Police Department. By 1986, the figure for these crimes had risen to 2,132, despite a reduction in the city's overall crime rate.

Not only are elderly crime victims more likely now to call the police, but they seem more willing to work in other ways with the police in the detection, apprehension, and prosecution of their victimizers. Prior to the formation of the Gray Squad, the elderly in Milwaukee were the most likely age group to drop charges or not press charges against their suspected offenders.

Part of the problem was the criminal justice system's insensitivity to the concerns of older people. To counter this situation, Gray Squad personnel sought ways to alleviate the anxiety often experienced by elderly crime victims. By providing pertinent information about the court process and patiently explaining what is expected of them, the unit has suc-

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ceeded in achieving a higher level of cooperation from larger numbers of elderly crime victims and witnesses.

The Gray Squad's efforts at improving police relations with the city's senior population also include instructing other police officers how to better respond to the needs of the elderly. Inservice training to other detectives within the Criminal Investigation Bureau and recruit training at the police academy cover not only the special problems encountered by police in dealing with elderly victims and witnesses but also instruction on the various methods of operation used by offenders who prey upon the elderly.

Improved skills in working with the elderly will ultimately translate into increased efficiency

and effectiveness in responding to crimes against this age group. Interviewing and communication techniques that have proved effective with older persons are stressed. Officers are taught to be alert for any barriers caused by old age which might hinder effective communication. They are also instructed on the various social service agencies in the community which help older persons locate housing, food, transportation, medical care, and peer group support.

Conclusion

There are no easy solutions to the problem of crime against the elderly. As older persons become a larger proportion of the population, law enforcement officers will be increasingly called upon to ren-

der assistance to this segment of society. Committing a relatively small amount of agency resources in order to significantly improve the quality of police service to senior citizens is consistent with modern police practice. It is a sign of the accelerating professionalization of the field. **FBI**

Footnotes

¹U. S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Special Report, Elderly Victims, NCJ 107676 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987).

²Owing to an overabundance of cases involving the city's elderly, the unit has found it necessary to limit its followup investigations to only those offenses where the elderly victim was actually confronted by the offender (contact offenses), i.e., robbery, purse snatchings, etc., and those offenses clearly committed against the victims because of their age, i.e., confidence crimes, frauds, etc.

³D. Jones, *Elderly Victimization: A Survey Report* (Ottawa, Ontario: Royal Canadian Mounted Police Prevention Center, 1980).

⁴M. Sengstock and J. Liang, responses of the elderly to criminal victimization, paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, Philadelphia, PA, November 1979.

⁵U.S. Department of Justice, *Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1985, National Crime Survey*, NCJ104273 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987).