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IACP Executive Director  
Talks About  
Crime and the Elderly

glen d. king shares  
his views on ways  
that police departments  
and the elderly can work  
to combat crime.



**G**len King has been involved with police work for over three decades. Now executive director of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, Mr. King began his career as a police reporter with the *Dallas Morning News* in 1946. Two years later he was working directly with the Dallas Police Department where he rose to the rank of Assistant Chief of Police. Since his retirement in 1969, Mr. King has served as a consultant to the Field Operations division and as Director of Public Affairs with IACP.

He holds a B.S. degree in journalism from Southern Methodist University and an M.A. in Law Enforcement from Sam Houston State University.

**AGING:** Let's talk about police departments, as we begin, because police departments are usually a first line of help for older people. Do police departments around the country really care about the elderly? Don't they have enough to do without having to worry about older persons, too?

**MR. KING:** I think when you pick any segment of your society and say the police department is too busy to be concerned with them, you've automatically made a mistake. The unique nature of the group makes them dependent to a greater degree on the police agency. It creates a greater need, and I think most police agencies respond to this very positively. In my view, law enforcement agencies, rather than feeling that the aged are a burden, feel that they have the first claim.

**AGING:** Well, our whole society seems bent on simply ignoring older people. We have discrimination of all kinds, but we also have age discrimination, and it's rather typical of a tendency in our country to push them off and forget about them. How do police departments escape that tendency?

**MR. KING:** Well, you don't totally escape it, I guess, because police agencies themselves, insofar as their own employees are concerned, have to be concerned with the younger person more than in most jobs. The police-

man's job is one that requires physical stamina. And we have earlier retirement for police than for most people. Most of the people who are employees of police agencies are at the younger age levels. But that's not the case, of course, of the public at large. We get more telephone calls, I would suspect, per capita, from older people, because their needs are greater. And I think the departments respond to this relatively well. I know from my own experience in a police department, that we had older persons we could regularly rely on for calls. And we'd know that there was not any direct need for police service. There was a need for human companionship and conversation and there was a need for a visit, but there was not a direct offense or a need for the police in that regard. This is played out daily, I think, in any department in the country.

**AGING:** That brings up another question which I was going to ask you later, but I'll ask you now. Police departments obviously have one job to do first, and that isn't to provide



companionship to anybody, older people or younger. Are you satisfied, or are police departments generally satisfied, with the cooperation that they get from other community agencies or groups, or is there something to be desired in the matter of cooperation from other groups in the country?

**MR. KING:** My experience doesn't indicate this. I think there is an interest on the part of the agencies. There may not be agencies set up with adequate resources to give the kind of assistance that's honestly needed. But I didn't find, in the city in which I worked and in the department of which I was a member, any lack of interest. I didn't find any unwillingness to become involved. I frequently found people who didn't have the answers, who weren't able to provide a totally satisfactory response. But I think this was not generally caused by a lack of interest or a lack of willingness to do what needed to be done.

**AGING:** What about those younger police officers on the beat that you

mentioned? Are police departments able to provide them with training in the specific problems of older people and in dealing with older people, and do they?

**MR. KING:** Yes, it's covered by most departments in recruit training. Of course it's only been within very recent years that a large number of departments in the country were able to provide training for their officers. The advent of the minimum standards commissions in the state, mandating training for law enforcement agencies, has created the ability of agencies to train their officers before they are put on the street. So in recent years I think the level of training has improved because the availability of training has improved. It's still going to be addressed in relatively minor detail when you take into consideration the total instruction that comes in a department, but I think most departments and most law enforcement officers now have some understanding of the unique problems of the older person.

**AGING:** What kinds of crimes are a threat to older people in your experience, and where do these crimes take place?

**MR. KING:** Well, obviously you name a crime and it's a threat to the older person.

I think they are vulnerable to almost all crime, and then in additional degree to some of the crimes that the rest of society is. They are more vulnerable, I think, to the swindle than most members of the public, and a large number of fraud and swindle cases involve older persons.

**AGING:** Do you find, as far as older people are concerned, that the fear of crime—being victimized, being hit on the head—is as big a problem as the actual crime itself?

**MR. KING:** I think at times it's a bigger problem than the actual threat of the offense itself. I think older people stay at home more. They expose themselves to the possibility of danger less. They become prisoners in their own homes. They create a for-

tress-like situation.

**AGING:** Well, what can police departments do to protect older people that they're not doing for the population as a whole?

**MR. KING:** Well, you have a number of programs that are in operation across the country. Most major departments have a specialized program they've developed. As you know, we did a study here, funded by your office, and we corresponded with a large number of departments in the country and identified and gave information on 50 programs that were being used in a variety of ways by different departments. Most major departments, as I say, have the program. They vary a little bit, but more in detail than they do in the overall, basic concept.

I really believe that effectiveness in this area, though, lies not in specialized programs. I think you need these because there are unique needs that have to be met. You can involve them in the crime prevention activities. They can be sort of eyes and ears for a police department. You can help them protect themselves by crime prevention techniques, crime resistance techniques. But I think the overall benefit has to come from normal, routine, operational police activities. There have to be, built into the routine of law enforcement, procedures that provide adequate protection for the citizen. And this group of citizens, because of the unique nature of the group, has some unique needs. But if you rely on specialized programs, you have access to such a limited number of specialized programs that you really don't get the kind of benefit that you need.

The overall police program itself has to provide you with the major kind of benefit.

**AGING:** Alright, let's assume that there are some special needs. What would your advice be to professionals who are working for and with older people in a community? What can they do to help reduce the susceptibility of older people to crime?

**MR. KING:** I think they can inform

older people about the nature of crime that occurs most frequently with the older person—thefts from persons, purse snatching, bunko schemes, swindles, burglaries that occur because older people sometimes forget to lock their doors. I think they can inform the older person about the nature of the offenses to which they are most susceptible, and they can talk to them about procedures and things they themselves can do to reduce their vulnerability.

Now, this calls for a direct relationship with them. This calls for representatives of a police agency meeting with groups of the elderly, the older citizen, and instruction programs. I think you can also involve them in law enforcement activities. There's a wealth of talent there. There's a wealth of experience. There's a wealth of knowledge that's looking for an outlet.

I know that when Paul Blubaum was the sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona, he used groups of older citizens to work directly with the police department, and he derived, I think, a very real benefit from it, and they did too.

**AGING:** So you're saying that older people themselves can play a role in crime prevention for the community at large, not only for themselves.

**MR. KING:** Certainly they can, and a lot of departments are utilizing them.

**AGING:** Police departments are able and willing to meet with older people and talk to them about those things they should be careful of, right?

**MR. KING:** Most departments, of any size, have that activity underway in their department. They have community services or a community relations unit, and they're looking for ways to increase their contact with the public, and their dialogue with the public, and so in the larger departments I think this is generally not a problem. If a group of older citizens want this, they can usually get in touch with their police department and it can be arranged for them.

**AGING:** Are you and are police

departments generally satisfied with the reaction of prosecutors to crimes against older people, or do they tend to slough them off?

**MR. KING:** I think police are not all that thrilled about the prosecution and conviction rates of the criminal generally. I believe we're seeing a reversal of a trend. I think we're beginning to see more public demand that offenses be prosecuted and that criminals be sentenced and that sentences be executed. And I think this is highly desirable. I think it's only to the degree, honestly, that this public pressure exists, that you're going to find adequacy in any of your criminal justice systems.

**AGING:** It seems that right here in the Washington area we have a constant stream of stories in the paper about a crime being committed by somebody who has been let out without bail or on his own recognizance, and is back on the street committing another crime, before he can even be tried and convicted for the first one.

**MR. KING:** There have been studies in some jurisdictions, some I can recall in California, that showed that more than 50 percent of the offenses in the major categories were committed by people who were awaiting trial on other charges.

**AGING:** What can older people do to reverse this trend?

**MR. KING:** I really believe that what they can do is the same that any citizen can do. And I also see more optimism about their doing it. They have more time, usually, and they want to become involved in productive kinds of activities. They do have a vote, and as voters, if they are organized and if they are directed, I think they can do quite a bit. I think they can communicate with their police chief their demands that enforcement be vigorous. And I think they can communicate to the prosecutors their demands that the cases come to trial, and that the sentences are reasonable and are carried out.

**AGING:** Let's go back for a moment to the problem, or concept, of the fortress city.

**MR. KING:** We have become a society of fortress cities and we don't have to do that.

**AGING:** This seems to be especially true for older people. Retirement communities around the country more and more are advertising not so much that their housing is good, but that they've got strong security measures, and somebody at the gate to keep undesirables out.

**MR. KING:** I have seen surveys that have shown that the number one problem in the mind of the older citizen is crime, beyond economics, beyond any other thing. The one concern that he has more frequently than any other is crime.

**AGING:** Older people sometimes feel that, if they were victimized, they had better not carry it to the point of prosecution or testifying, because the criminal will retaliate. Are police departments able to help them in that regard, by protection or whatever?

**MR. KING:** You can't sometimes. You know, in honesty, you have to say that you can't. Just as you can't convince the older person who will not walk out on the street in a residential area where a criminal offense has not occurred in two months. You can't convince them sometimes that crime doesn't exist at the level that they think it does.

**AGING:** Well, what about testifying? Do you find that that's a problem around the country, that older people really don't want to go to court and testify against somebody who's victimized them, for any number of reasons?

**MR. KING:** I honestly have not heard police officials talk about this. I think if it were a major problem it would be discussed and well known. And I don't honestly know if police have greater trouble—or if courts and prosecutors have greater trouble getting the older citizen to testify.

**AGING:** Well, what about housing? What about the so-called fortress

city? Would you recommend that older people live in segregated housing to help cut down on crime? And if so, how do we make those complexes safe for older people?

**MR. KING:** I'm not honestly sure that if they did live in that kind of city you would solve the problem completely, because I'm not sure that you could really cut down on crime to that extent in these areas. I think that the needs of the older citizen, a very great number of them, are not met by living in retirement communities. They don't want to do that. They feel that this abridges too much the nature of the life they live, and that they need to be more actively involved in society in general, and that they get a greater return from it. I think what we need to do is make our cities generally safer. We need to be concentrating on solving the general problem to a greater degree.

**AGING:** I guess the statistics bear me out that in urban areas where you've got a large population of older people and a large population of fairly young people, teenagers and so on, that's where you have the highest rate of crime against older people.

**MR. KING:** Yes, because the very old are very frequently victimized by the very young. It's the kind of offense that, generally, the older person is most subjected to.

**AGING:** What you're saying is that to solve that problem we have to solve the problems of crime as a whole. But, is that true? Here we have a situation where we've got a large number of communities all over this country but, in the urban areas, we've got a special situation. Crime for older people, if you include it in the overall crime statistics, is not really a big problem. Older people aren't victimized, aren't brutalized, aren't susceptible to crime, statistically, any more than any other element of our population, but in urban areas, the incidence of crime against older people seems to rise. You have one volatile group, at least, the younger person, and the older person, living in proximity to one another.

Doesn't that call for specific measures on the part of police departments?

**MR. KING:** I can see how you address that problem by the segregation of the older person into areas where the people who are most likely to victimize the elderly don't live. But I think at least a very substantial percentage of older citizens don't want to do that.

Most of them go into retirement communities or into care facilities or into something other than the ordinary day to day, routine kinds of environment, only when the necessity for it is unavoidable, when they can't do anything else. So I don't know what you do, really, to solve this problem. I think many senior citizens live in a heterogeneous kind of environment, because that's what they want to live in. And you may be paying too much if you say that the solution to the problem is isolation from it, because you can isolate yourself too much.

**AGING:** We've now got crime victim compensation in 24 states. Do you find that older people are taking advantage of these programs, and should we have such a program in all states, or should we federalize it?

**MR. KING:** This is something that we have addressed over several years. We have urged that there be victim compensation. Crime is a social phenomenon, and the major cost of it ought to be borne by society. If the nature of the offense is a crime against an individual, it's difficult to share the load. If there's an assault or a homicide, then that's directed specifically towards an individual, and there's not an awful lot society can do to help that person share the load. But with crimes against property, there is a growing belief, I think, that you ought not to be, simply because you happened to be the immediate target of the thief or of the burglar, called upon to bear that total load. There ought to be a sharing of it, and this is a point of view that we have officially adopted, in resolution by our members, and we have urged it in Federal legislation. We have urged it in state legislation, and I think it's a



completely valid approach.

**AGING:** Do you find that the direct deposit of social security checks has made a difference?

**MR. KING:** It must be having some effect. That's one thing that everyone knows, every mailbox thief knows that on a certain number of days before the first of the month, or within a certain number of days, two working days in a jurisdiction, or something like that, the checks are going to be mailed. And this is well known, and that's the time in which the mailbox thief is the most active. And if the deposit or the delivery is made to a financial institution rather than to the residence of the individual, then there's a greater protection against it. There's lessening of vulnerability there. I think it's a good thing.

**AGING:** What are police departments learning from the demonstration projects which the Administra-

tion on Aging has funded with several of them through the IACP?

**MR. KING:** I think they really are looking for programs that have been effective. They're looking for ways they can supplement their own activities. They're looking for approaches that they can take. I think that there are characteristics of cities that require you to adapt something, sometimes, before you can move it from one to the other. But I think the projects that you have funded have a much wider impact than the narrow jurisdiction that receives the original funding. I think the benefits can be transferred, and I think that they are. We have, for the last two years, one full issue of our professional publication here, our in-house publication, devoted solely to crimes against the elderly. And a very major part of that has been a description of programs that have worked. Very few people want to write about

the programs that haven't worked, and sometimes they do like to exaggerate the degree to which they have worked. But most of the time, if they are willing to write about it, it has some elements that can be used by other departments. And I think this is good.

**AGING:** I imagine police departments in all communities would welcome a more or less organized effort to make sure that prosecutors and judges understood that older people expect them to do as good a job as the police departments are doing.

**MR. KING:** I think we are coming to the belief again that the safety of society is very important, and that it needs to be addressed. I would not want to abridge any of the honest rights of the criminal. But it is not the right of the criminal to be immune from prosecution, and it is not a right of a criminal to be immune from imprisonment.

**AGING:** We went through a period in the last 20 or 30 years when nothing was anybody's fault. It wasn't the criminal's fault. It was society's fault. Do you think the pendulum's swinging the other way?

**MR. KING:** I honestly believe it is. I think that crime has become sufficiently prevalent that the public has begun to realize that it simply isn't willing to accept that kind of behavior. And it's going to be more and more insistent that whatever reasonably needs to be done to control the behavior of the criminal be done.

**AGING:** Maybe older people can function in some ways as assistants to police departments. Do you think that's feasible?

**MR. KING:** I think they can function in a great many ways as assistants to the police departments, and I think the police departments ought to utilize them more. But there's a lot of difference between the citizen working in direct concert with his police agency and the citizen operating as the vigilante. I think he creates more danger than he eliminates when he does that.



**END**