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National Organizations Launch Crime Prevention Programs

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Almost every statement about criminal victimization of the elderly, should include the caveat—"It depends." Far too many people speak in generalities and while this may not lead to harmful conclusions, it does result in the spread of misinformation.

Some recent victimization surveys, and especially the mammoth National Crime Panel Surveys, have led to urgings that more attention be directed toward that age group *most* often victimized by crime, and less toward the over-65 age group, which is the *least* often victimized. The most insidious of these statements are made by those having vested interests in programs, and who see some of the finite resources being siphoned off for the elderly. The use of a *fair* portion of available funds for the protection of older persons has been a long time in coming, and in a way, the lack of such funding has been another form of age discrimination.

Some individuals, who have merely looked at statistics, are speaking or writing without any knowledge of what is happening on the street. There are those who equate one aggravated assault against a teen-ager with one aggravated assault against an elderly person. Since the numbers in the teenage column are greater, the conclusion is drawn that the problem is more severe for the young. These are the flat figures, but they fail to measure the *impact*. Victimization of the elderly is far more likely to bring about a radical change in their lifestyle and to cause an elevation of fear of crime.

Although general statements about crime can serve a purpose, they often result in erroneous conclusions and

misconceptions. We must begin to talk more about *specific* crimes, *specific* locations, and other *specific* factors. Traditional bases for study, such as the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, may lead some to report that serious crime is up or down, or that there is more, or less, frequent victimization of one group or another. But only some of the major crimes listed in Part I of the UCR are of concern to older persons, and some which are of great concern are not included in Part I.

- Generally—and again, it depends upon locality and other factors—the older age group has *very low* victimization rates in the three most serious crimes—homicide, rape, and aggravated assault.

- Older persons are the primary targets of bunco artists committing criminal fraud.

- Older persons generally are not very much concerned about being victimized by criminal fraud, but they should be.

- Older persons have *high* victimization rates in the crimes of purse-snatching and strong-arm robbery.

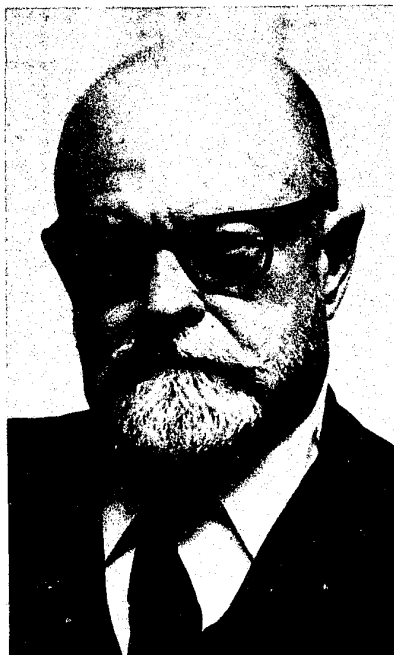
- There is no clear age correlation in the crime of burglary. Since burglary is the most frequently committed of the major crimes, all age groups suffer high victimization rates.

If we examine police offense reports, it becomes clear that most crimes committed against the elderly can be avoided by using simple prevention techniques—such as those taught by the National Crime Prevention Institute at the University of Louisville.

Police Had Compassion But Little Training

In 1972, NRTA and AARP instituted a Crime Prevention Program to help older persons reduce criminal opportunity and the risk of being victimized, to alert them to real dangers and help them dispel imagined ones. The program provided practical advice about actions older persons can take to reduce crime. The program is available free of charge to interested organizations or community agencies.

As the program developed, it became apparent that law enforcement officers had a compassionate interest in the elderly, but little specialized training in dealing effectively with them. Most officers were well informed



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about the "technical" aspects of their profession but had difficulty communicating with older persons or working effectively with them.

We found that relatively little research had been done. Major conferences of sociologists, gerontologists and behavioral scientists had been held with no presentations on this important issue. A continuing examination of the entire criminal justice system disclosed little progress in identifying achievable ways to meet the needs of law enforcement personnel for specialized training.

In 1972 NRTA-AARP mailed out 2,000 requests for information, in an effort to ascertain what was currently being taught to law enforcement officers. Having found almost no available resources in this field, the Associations began a series of training seminars in 1973 for police trainers, administrators, and other high level professionals in the law enforcement community. The seminars were designed to impart specialized knowledge about all aspects of aging, and to show how law enforcement officers can help the elderly as well as how the elderly can serve as resources to law enforcement. The ultimate objective was the development of course materials to be offered to agencies and institutions involved in training law enforcement officers. More than 200 of these seminars have been held to date.

In April 1976, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration awarded NRTA and AARP some \$225,000 for the development of a training course based upon our experiences in conducting the seminars. The result of this grant was the *Law Enforcement and Older Persons* training course, for use



Maricopa County senior volunteers take part in a search and rescue exercise in the desert area north of Sun City, Ariz.

by law enforcement agencies throughout the United States.

The course covers fundamental information on the processes of aging and translates certain facts about aging into practical application by law enforcement officers to help them increase their efficiency. The course

reviews criminal victimization of older persons. One of the principal objectives is to encourage the officer to look beyond statistics to consider the varying impact of crimes on the elderly. It also deals with communicating with older persons and using older persons as community resources.

Each segment of the course is self-contained so that the police trainer has considerable freedom to select those segments best suited to his training needs. The course can be for entry-service level personnel, in-service training, or for supervisory and executive level indoctrination.

While protection of the elderly by a law enforcement agency is of paramount importance, great emphasis is also placed on trying to improve the police officer's effectiveness through better communications. This can be achieved if the training course leads law enforcement agencies to view the older segment of society as their most supportive asset and as one of the most useful resources available. Since our earliest discussion in 1972, this principle has been the major thrust of the NRTA-AARP police training seminars.

Older Residents Work With Police

On-site inspections have shown that the potential of older persons as a resource is virtually unlimited. In Sun City, Arizona, a retired Navy captain directs a force of older volunteers performing important police services for the Sheriff's department. At San Diego, California, older persons conduct crime analyses to provide more information which is useful to the patrol and detective divisions of the Police Department; one of these older workers described her job as "the most exciting I have ever had."

Both young and old in Jacksonville, Fla., work together to perform such police support functions as search-and-rescue, traffic control, ceremonial escorts, water safety, and a variety of educational programs, including the

delivery of crime prevention presentations to the community.

We believe that rather than devoting all of our attention to an examination of the massive social ills contributing to the crime phenomenon, we can best serve older Americans by disseminating information to help them cope with specific crime problems in their localities. Some of the most successful crime prevention programs that we have observed have either been instituted without funding, or with very little financial support. The Associations' position is that a continuing public educational program on crime prevention must be pursued vigorously through both private and public channels.

It is gratifying to see the increased attention to the victimization of older persons and to note the increasing numbers of surveys and studies upon which programs and activities can be developed. It is equally gratifying to note increasing signs of acceptance on the part of law enforcement officers, even though it constitutes the imposi-

tion of yet another specialty upon their areas of responsibility.

Statewide anti-crime programs are coming into being. An outstanding model is the Florida program which was developed following enactment of a Federal statute (PL 94-503) requiring States to provide for the development of programs and projects for the prevention of crimes against the elderly. Florida has established a five-year plan, and created a Task Force which will have continuing oversight responsibilities. One of the earliest efforts of the Task Force, supported by the professional staff of the Florida Bureau of Criminal Justice Planning and Assistance, was to hold public hearings throughout the State, and conduct statewide victimization surveys. In our view, other States should consider basing their programs on the Florida model.

In a few short years, law enforcement officers, State and area agencies on aging, local aging and social service organizations, and the academic community have moved toward the initiation of programs to ameliorate some of these problems. Improvements can still be made, however, especially in ascertaining the facts and dispelling some of the myths surrounding elderly victimization. Specialists in aging can serve as an important link and catalyst between older persons willing and capable of rendering support services to their law enforcement agencies and the agencies themselves. They can help show law enforcement officials that older Americans are more active and involved than is generally assumed and intent upon helping themselves and their communities.

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A PARTNERSHIP EFFORT THAT
PRESERVES THE COMMON BURGLAR
L ITEMS OF VALUE ON THESE PREMISES
BEEN MARKED FOR READY IDENTIFICATION

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