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CRIMES AGAINST THE ELDERLY

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CRIMES AGAINST THE ELDERLY

ACQUISITIONS

Older people in this country face a number of problems, such as health care and low income, most of which have received considerable attention. Recently, attention has turned to yet another problem faced by older people--criminal victimization of the elderly. Although crimes against the elderly are in a sense just part of the total crime problem in this country, in many respects there is a distinctiveness about the elderly as crime victims. Some of these distinctive features are:

- Because of the high incidence of low income among the elderly, the economic impact on elderly victims is generally greater.
- Older people are more likely to live alone, to live in high crime neighborhoods, and to rely on walking and public transportation to get around.
- Elderly people are generally less able to defend themselves because of their diminished strength and physical ailments.
- The dates of receipt of pension and other benefits checks are widely known.
- The elderly are particularly susceptible to fraud and confidence games.

Unfortunately, traditional crime statistics do not adequately reflect the extent of the problem of elderly victimization. Many local police and law enforcement agencies do not collect data on the age of victims, and therefore, the FBI Uniform Crime Reports also do not include this information. However, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) recently conducted victimization surveys in 26 of the nation's largest cities ("Crime in the Nation's Five Largest Cities," April 1974; "Crime in Eight American Cities," July 1974; "Criminal Victimization Surveys in 13 American Cities," June 1975). These studies were conducted through random sample interviews of households in each of the cities surveyed.

The findings of these surveys indicated that victimization rates are generally lower among the elderly than among other age groups. Concerning these findings, a spokesman for the American Association of Retired Persons testified at recent hearings held by Senator J. Glenn Beall of Maryland that:

This low victimization rate is simply due to the fact that elderly persons have imposed self-imprisonment on themselves during high risk times.

It is also significant to note that despite the overall lower victimization rate for the elderly, the rate of "personal larceny with contact" (which includes purse snatching and pocket picking) was higher for victims over the age of 50 in 19 of the 26 cities surveyed.

A three-year study of robberies in Oakland, Calif., released in 1974 by the Center on Administration of Criminal Justice at the University of California at Davis, concluded that older persons, especially women, are the group most vulnerable to robberies in our society. The likelihood of any individual being a victim of robbery in Oakland was found to be one in 146, but the rate for females over 65 was one in 24. More than half of the female victims were over the age 55, and more than one-third were over age 65.

A study conducted by the Midwest Research Institute of crimes committed against persons over age 60 in Kansas City, Missouri, found that the most frequent crimes against the aged there were burglary, robbery, larceny, assault, fraud and rape, in that order. Half of the victims suffered physical injury.

A recently released report of a survey conducted by Louis Harris and Associates, "The Myth and Reality of Aging in America," indicates that the elderly rank "fear of crime" as the most serious problem confronting them. Twenty-three percent of those over 65 interviewed said that fear of crime is a "very serious problem" for them personally, and 24% more termed it a "somewhat serious problem". Twenty-four percent

said that "danger of being robbed or attacked on the street" is a serious problem for them.

The 1971 White House Conference on Aging in its report "Towards a New Attitude on Aging," offered a series of recommendations for dealing more effectively with the problem of crimes against the elderly:

...making physical protection and crime prevention an element of the planning of facilities for the elderly; expanding police protection of minority neighborhoods; establishing formal liaison between social service agencies and police departments so that elderly (who are) victims of crime can obtain all necessary assistance; providing better street lighting; making training grants available to police officers and others to acquaint them with the special situation of the elderly and their special susceptibility to particular types of crime; and granting Federal funds to State and local prosecuting officers to expand or establish fraud units which are well acquainted with schemes used to deceive the elderly (p. 78).

In the 94th Congress, legislation has been introduced which would require States receiving grants from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration to include provisions in their State plans for the prevention of crimes against the elderly. This measure has been introduced by Mr. Beall (S. 1875), Mr. Lehman (H.R. 8011), and Mr. Gude (H.R.8640). Mr. Bell of California has introduced H. Res. 783, requesting all Federal agencies which administer programs for older Americans to study the causes of crime against the elderly and to recommend programs to reduce the frequency of such crimes.

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