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U.S. Department of Justice
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U.S. Department of Justice
Bureau of Justice Statistics

Bureau of Justice Statistics
Bulletin

Crime and the Elderly

December 1981

Using data from the National Crime Survey, the Bureau of Justice Statistics has examined crime against the elderly in several studies. From our early report dealing with "Myths and Realities About Crime" to our recent White House briefing materials, the finding has been the same—the elderly are less likely than other age groups in American society to be victims of crime. But behind this statistical conclusion of our victimization studies is the inescapable realization that the trauma and economic impact of crime may weigh far more heavily on the elderly, leading them to take precautionary measures that can only impoverish their lives. By altering their lifestyles to minimize a special vulnerability to crimes of theft, the elderly are forced to accept unwarranted limits on their freedom because of the fear of violence. What is true for all segments of our population is clearly true for the elderly—the rate of crime in the United States is unacceptably high.

Benjamin H. Renshaw III
Acting Director

Many people believe that elderly Americans are especially vulnerable to crime—that they are the preferred targets of criminals.

Yet, data gathered by the National Crime Survey (NCS) over the past 8 years (1973-80) show that younger persons (under age 65 and especially those 12 to 25) make up a disproportionately large number of the Nation's victims. The rates of crime against the elderly (age 65 and over) are comparatively low. (See Figure 1 and Table 1.)

What then accounts for the widespread belief that the elderly are disproportionately victimized?

The answer appears to lie in part not in the number but in the kinds of crime against the elderly.

When the elderly are touched by crime they appear to be relatively more susceptible to crime that is motivated by economic gain. Although these crimes are not violent, they may cause considerable fear in victims. For example, when a purse is snatched or a pocket is picked, the direct contact with the offender may be very frightening even though it results in no injury. And the economic loss involved may be particularly upsetting to a person who is living on a fixed income.

During 1973-80, elderly Americans were victims of about 168,500 rapes, robberies, or assaults a year, but they were victims of a far greater number of crimes against their personal and household property: roughly 1.4 million personal or household larcenies, some 748,600 residential burglaries, and about 77,000 motor vehicle thefts.

During the 8 years, few significant changes in numbers or rates could be detected in crime against the elderly. (See Figure 2 and Table 2.)

This report highlights the relative incidence of selected lesser and more serious crimes against the Nation's 24 million elderly residents, who make up a rapidly increasing segment of our population.[1]

Recent drop in rate of violent crime against the elderly

About a fourth of all personal crimes against the elderly were violent (assaults, robberies, or rapes). As a group, these

[1] 1980 data are preliminary.

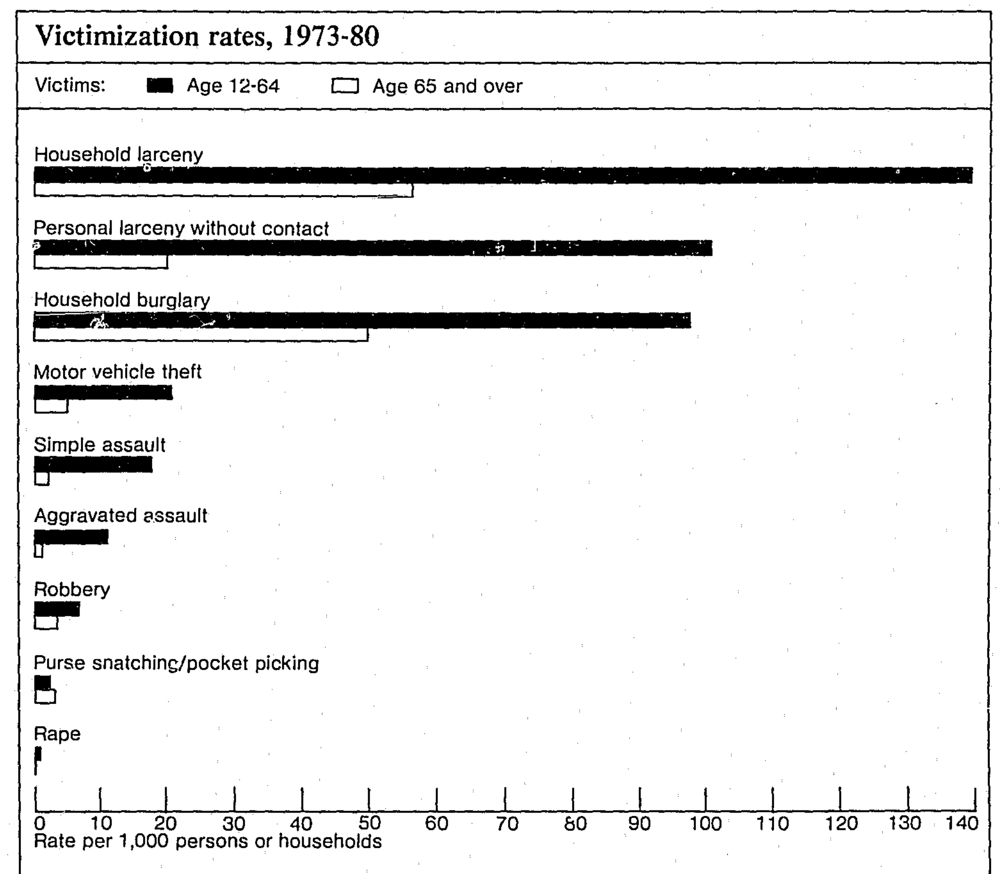

Figure 1

crimes happened at a rate of about 8 per 1,000 elderly persons—about a fifth of the rate against younger persons.

During 1973-80, there were no significant year-to-year changes in the overall rate of violent crime against the elderly, but the rate for 1979 was lower than that for several earlier years.[2] The robbery rate for 1979 was also lower than that for certain earlier years, but the provisional 1980 rate was about average. In contrast, there were no significant changes in the rate of assault, which averaged about 4 victimizations per 1,000 elderly persons.

About half of all violent crimes against the elderly were assaults (physical attacks, including attempts and threats, with or without a weapon). The simple form of assault (incidents without a weapon and not resulting in serious injury) outnumbered aggravated assaults by roughly 2 to 1.

About 47 percent were robberies (attempted or completed thefts directly from the victim through the threat or use of force).[3]

About 1 percent were rapes.[4]

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[2]Some of the differences in the violent crime rate between 1979 and earlier years were marginally significant.

[3]The difference in the proportions of assaults (51.5 percent) and robberies (47.2 percent) is not statistically significant.

[4]There were too few sample cases of rape to permit statistically valid examination of this crime.

The National Crime Survey (NCS) measures crimes reported to interviewers by persons age 12 and over in a representative sample of approximately 60,000 U.S. households. Victims living in those households report three general categories of crime (both attempted and completed):

- Personal crimes of violence, which include rape, robbery, and assault (simple and aggravated). Murder, a crime that is well reported to the police, is not measured by the NCS.
- Personal crimes of theft, which include larceny without contact between victim and offender and larceny with contact (purse snatching and pocket picking).
- Household crimes, which include burglary, household larceny, and motor vehicle theft.

NCS crime rates are based on the number of crimes per 1,000 persons or households.

The interviews for NCS are conducted for the Bureau of Justice Statistics by the U.S. Census Bureau in an ongoing program of data collection. The NCS methodology (with definitions, questionnaires, technical notes, and a discussion of sampling error) is described in Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1979, NCS-N-19, NCJ-76710, December 1981, available from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Washington, D.C. 20531.

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Special threat from serious economic crimes

The ratio of certain more serious crimes to less harmful crimes has been higher among the elderly than among younger persons. This may stem from differences between the two groups in occupation, lifestyle, exposure to threatening situations, and patterns of property ownership.

During 1973-80, the ratio of robberies to assaults was 92 to 100 among the elderly but only about 24 to 100 among younger persons. In other words, the elderly suffered about as many robberies as assaults.[5] This may suggest that the elderly—despite their comparatively low victimization rates—are particularly susceptible to personal crime that is motivated by the opportunity for economic gain.[6]

This possibility appears to be supported by the ratio of purse snatchings/pocket pickings (crimes that involve victim-offender contact and the danger of escalating to robbery) to personal larcenies without contact. The ratio among the elderly was 16 to 100, but only about 3 to 100 among younger persons.

It also appears to be supported by the ratio of burglary (the most serious NCS household crime) to larceny (a less serious household crime).[7] The ratio among households headed by the elderly was 89 to 100 but only 70 to 100 for households headed by younger persons.

Three-fourths of all personal crimes against the elderly were common thefts

An average of about 521,300 such thefts (attempted or completed) occurred each year. About 86 percent of these thefts were personal larcenies without contact between victim and offender. The other 14 percent were divided between purse snatchings and pocket pickings.

The overall rate for purse snatching/pocket picking against the elderly did not change significantly during 1973-80. This crime category is the only one for which the elderly and younger persons have rates that don't differ significantly, averaging 3 per 1,000 for both populations.[8]

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[5]The difference between the average number of robberies (79,500) and assaults (86,800) is not statistically significant.

[6]The disparity in the ratio of more serious to less harmful crimes does not apply to the subcategories of assault, neither of which entails attempted or completed theft. Persons age 12-64 had 62 aggravated assaults per 100 simple assaults, but the ratio among the elderly was 52 to 100.

[7]The difference between the average rates of burglary (50.0) and household larceny (56.3) is not statistically significant.

Trends in victimization rates against the elderly, 1973-80

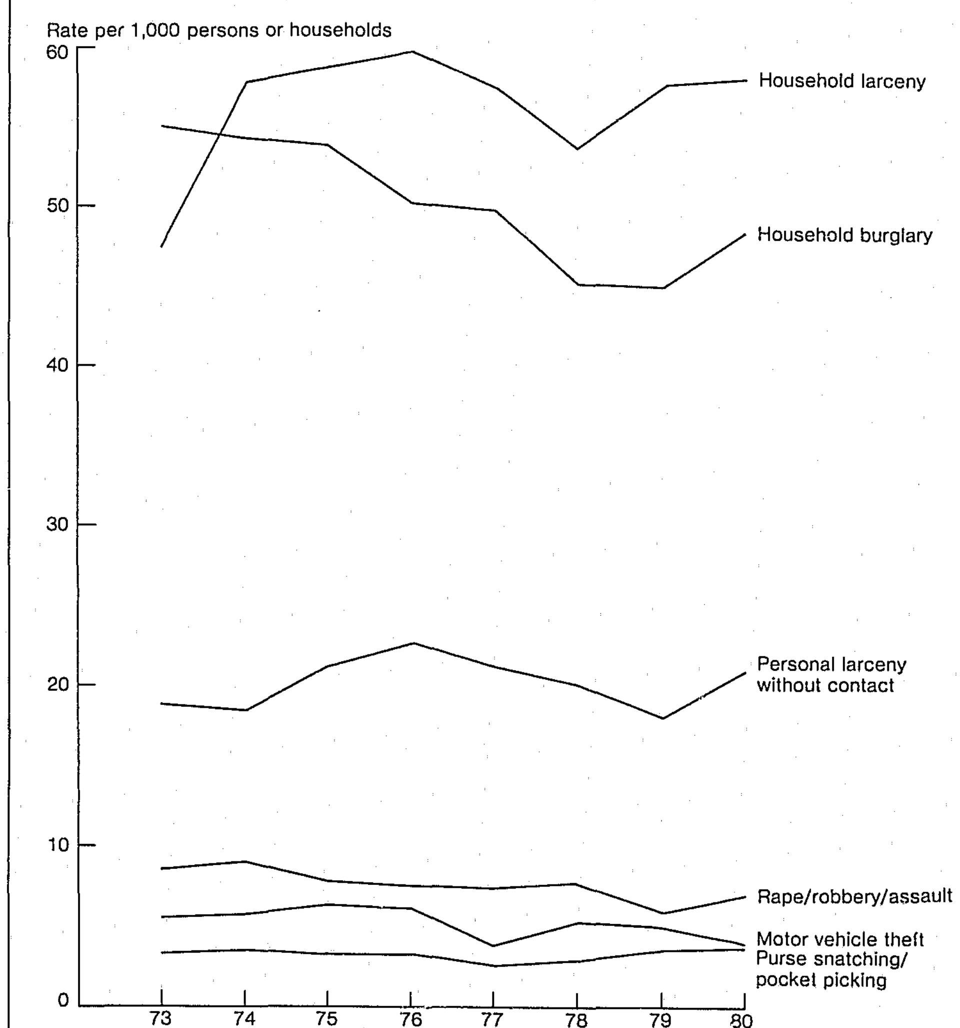

Figure 2

Burglary rate for households headed by the elderly down in late 70's

During 1973-80, the rate of burglary for households headed by the elderly did not keep pace with the increase (about 3 percent per year) in the number of such households. During the 8 years, changes in the number of burglaries against such households were not significant. Between 1973 and 1979, however, the rate fell by some 18 percent (from 55 to 45 burglaries per 1,000 households), although year-to-year declines were not necessarily significant. By 1980, however, the rate had returned to about average.[9]

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[8]The observation excludes rape.

[9]The 1979-80 increase in the burglary rate was not significant.

Table 1. Personal and household crimes: Victimization number and rates for persons age 65 and older, by type of crime, 1973-1980

Sector and type of crime	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980
Personal sector[1]								
Crimes of violence								
Number	173,000	188,300	166,800	166,900	168,300	180,600	138,900	165,000
Rate	8.5	9.0	7.8	7.6	7.5	7.9	5.9	6.9
Rape								
Number	2,400	4,100	1,200	1,000	2,700	2,400	900	2,600
Rate	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	(Z)	0.1
Robbery								
Number	101,300	81,300	92,300	75,100	75,800	69,500	58,000	82,900
Rate	5.0	3.9	4.3	3.4	3.4	3.0	2.5	3.5
Assault								
Number	69,300	102,900	73,300	90,800	89,800	108,600	79,900	79,500
Rate	3.4	4.9	3.4	4.1	4.0	4.7	3.4	3.3
Aggravated assault								
Number	21,800	32,400	31,100	32,200	26,800	40,200	25,300	31,200
Rate	1.1	1.6	1.5	1.5	1.2	1.8	1.1	1.3
Simple assault								
Number	47,500	70,500	42,100	58,600	63,000	68,500	54,600	48,300
Rate	2.3	3.4	2.0	2.7	2.8	3.0	2.3	2.0
Crimes of theft								
Number	452,800	458,000	526,400	570,600	530,400	528,700	509,200	594,000
Rate	22.2	21.9	24.5	26.0	23.6	23.0	21.6	24.7
Personal larceny with contact								
Number	66,900	71,400	70,100	71,400	54,600	66,600	83,100	88,500
Rate	3.3	3.4	3.3	3.3	2.4	2.9	3.5	3.7
Purse snatching								
Number	29,800	29,900	38,800	26,300	24,100	29,400	38,500	32,600
Rate	1.5	1.4	1.8	1.2	1.1	1.3	1.6	1.4
Pocket picking								
Number	37,100	41,500	31,300	45,100	30,400	37,200	44,600	55,800
Rate	1.8	2.0	1.5	2.1	1.4	1.6	1.9	2.3
Personal larceny without contact								
Number	385,900	386,600	456,300	499,200	475,800	462,100	426,100	505,500
Rate	18.9	18.5	21.2	22.8	21.2	20.1	18.1	21.0
Total population age 65 and over	20,401,600	20,906,000	21,451,500	21,926,100	22,441,400	22,947,800	23,533,200	24,063,900
Household sector[2]								
Household burglary								
Number	748,800	761,200	774,100	742,400	754,200	703,900	718,700	785,100
Rate	55.1	54.3	53.8	50.2	49.7	45.2	45.0	48.3
Household larceny								
Number	644,800	812,000	844,800	880,500	871,000	833,900	917,600	942,200
Rate	47.4	57.9	58.7	59.5	57.4	53.6	57.5	58.0
Motor vehicle theft								
Number	73,600	80,200	88,600	90,400	58,200	81,000	79,900	64,100
Rate	5.4	5.7	6.2	6.1	3.8	5.2	5.0	4.0
Total number of households	13,591,900	14,022,800	14,393,100	14,789,100	15,168,000	15,566,400	15,972,400	16,252,700

Note: Detail may not add to total shown because of rounding. Figures for 1980 are provisional. The yearly estimates for rape are based on fewer than 10 sample cases and are statistically unreliable.

Z Less than 0.05 per 1,000.
[1]Rate per 1,000 population age 65 and over.
[2]Rate per 1,000 households headed by persons age 65 and over.

Stability marked 1973-80 larceny rate for households headed by the elderly

Except in 1973, when there were 47 larcenies per 1,000 households, none of the more recent rates has differed appreciably from the 8-year average (56 larcenies per 1,000 households headed by the elderly).

No trends evident in rate of motor vehicle thefts for households headed by elderly

The 8-year average rate—5 per 1,000 households headed by the elderly—was about a fourth that against households headed by younger persons. A lower proportion of motor vehicle ownership among the elderly no doubt contributed to this difference.

What changes will the future bring in the profile of crime against the elderly?

Today, about 24 million elderly persons live in the United States. They make up about a tenth of our population, and their absolute and relative numbers are increasing rapidly.

This major shift in the age structure of our population is likely to bring gradual but profound changes in the future pattern of crime. It is too early to predict trends precisely, but many useful insights into the dynamics of crime are beginning to emerge from data already gathered by the National Crime Survey.

Other findings about the impact of crime on the elderly are published in Crime Against the Elderly in 26 Cities, SD-VAD-10, NCJ-76706, 1981.

Table 2. Personal and household crimes: Victimization numbers and rates for persons under age 65 and 65 and over, 1973-80 yearly average

Sector and type of crime	Under 65 Number	Under 65 Rate	65 and over Number	65 and over Rate	Percent difference between rates[1]
Personal sector					
Crimes of violence	5,582,700	37.1	168,500	7.6	-79.5
Rape	160,800	1.1	[2]2,200	[2]0.1	—
Robbery	1,043,100	6.9	79,500	3.6	-48.3
Assault	4,378,700	29.1	86,800	3.9	-86.6
Aggravated assault	1,668,900	11.1	30,100	1.4	-87.7
Simple assault	2,709,900	18.0	56,600	2.6	-85.8
Crimes of theft	15,600,500	103.6	521,300	23.5	-77.4
Personal larceny with contact	442,400	2.9	71,600	3.2	+9.5
Personal larceny without contact	15,157,900	100.7	449,700	20.2	-79.9
Household sector					
Household burglary	5,946,200	97.8	748,600	50.0	-48.9
Household larceny	8,486,800	139.6	843,400	56.3	-59.7
Motor vehicle theft	1,270,400	20.9	77,000	5.1	-75.4

NOTE: Provisional 1980 data are included in the averages.
[1]All of the differences are statistically significant at the 95-percent confidence level, except that for personal larceny with contact, which is not significant.
[2]Estimate, based on a yearly average of fewer than 10 sample cases, is statistically unreliable. Percent difference not shown.

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