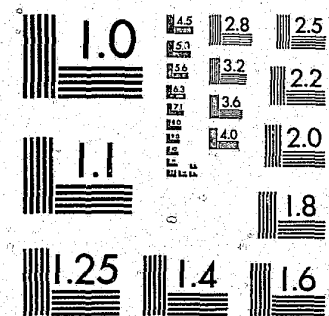


National Criminal Justice Reference Service

**ncjrs**

This microfiche was produced from documents received for inclusion in the NCJRS data base. Since NCJRS cannot exercise control over the physical condition of the documents submitted, the individual frame quality will vary. The resolution chart on this frame may be used to evaluate the document quality.



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART  
NATIONAL BUREAU OF STANDARDS-1963-A

Microfilming procedures used to create this fiche comply with the standards set forth in 41CFR 101-11.504.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the author(s) and do not represent the official position or policies of the U. S. Department of Justice.

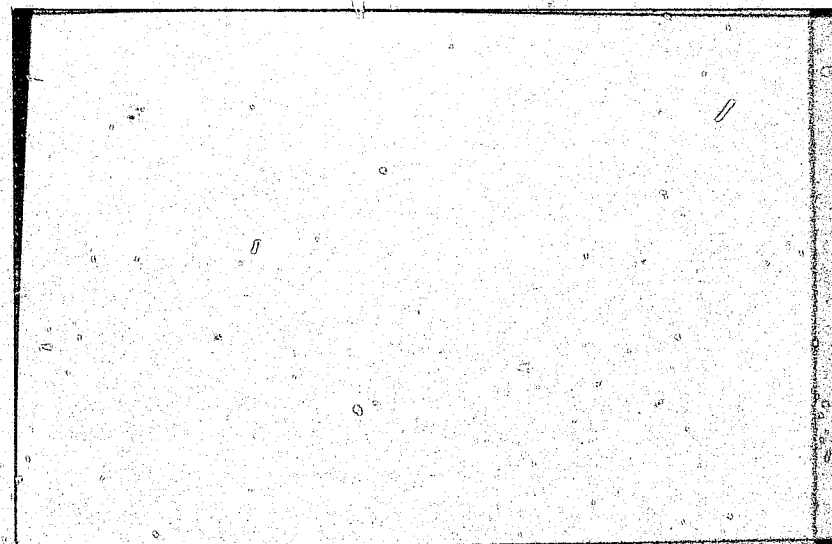
National Institute of Justice  
United States Department of Justice  
Washington, D.C. 20531

11/21/83

U.S. Department of Justice  
to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS).  
Further reproduction outside of the NCJRS system requires permission of the copyright owner.

**POLICE SERVICE DELIVERY  
TO THE ELDERLY**

90048



U.S. Department of Justice  
National Institute of Justice

This document has been reproduced exactly as received from the person or organization originating it. Points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the National Institute of Justice.

Permission to reproduce this copyrighted material has been granted by  
Public Domain/LEAA/NIJ  
U.S. Department of Justice

to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS).

Further reproduction outside of the NCJRS system requires permission of the copyright owner.



77263

**POLICE SERVICE DELIVERY**

**TO THE ELDERLY**

By:

Stephen Schack  
Grant Grisson  
Saul Barry Wax

Submitted to:

Office of Research Programs  
National Institute of Justice  
Office of Justice Administration, Research and Statistics  
U.S. Department of Justice  
(Grant #76-NI-99-0137)

Submitted by:

University City Science Center  
1717 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.  
Suite 101  
Washington, D.C. 20036

March 1980



This project was supported by Grant Number 76-NI-99-0137 awarded to the University City Science Center, Washington, D.C. by the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, U.S. Department of Justice, under the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, as amended. Points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

POLICE SERVICE DELIVERY TO THE ELDERLY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Executive Summary.....	5
The Elderly's Need for Special Police Attention.....	5
A Community Survey of Older Persons.....	9
A Survey of Police Officer Attitudes Toward the Elderly.....	11
Police Service Provision to the Elderly and the Non-Elderly....	12
Police Programs for the Elderly.....	13
Policy Implications.....	14

Copies of the complete report can be ordered for \$12.00 from the University City Science Center, 1717 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Suite 101, Washington, D.C. 20036.



## POLICE SERVICE DELIVERY TO THE ELDERLY

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent years have seen a dramatic growth of interest in the problem of criminal victimization of the elderly. Since the late 1960's, rising crime rates, the growing number of elderly in the population, and the increasing militancy of senior citizens have led to a heightened awareness of the vulnerability of the elderly to crime, the impact of victimization and fear of crime upon their lives, and the need for special police efforts to protect the elderly and to provide effective services to them. Indeed, what was not long ago an almost completely neglected issue has now become a national concern.

This report presents a brief review of current knowledge and opinion about the elderly's need for police service, discusses the findings of a study of police service delivery to the elderly, and assesses the implications of these findings for police operations.

### THE ELDERLY'S NEED FOR SPECIAL POLICE ATTENTION

Interest in the quality of police services provided to the elderly has been motivated primarily by a widespread concern about the effects of criminal victimization upon elderly citizens. There is an almost hysterical ring to much of the commentary on this issue. For example, the author of a highly regarded book on aging asserts (on the basis of only the most meager and incomplete statistics), "Old people are victims of violent crime more than any other age group."<sup>1</sup> Others have described crime against the elderly as a "continuing national crisis",<sup>2</sup> and stated, "The hard fact is that crime is devastating the lives of thousands of relatively defenseless older Americans."<sup>3</sup> However, data drawn from national victimization surveys have consistently shown that the elderly (defined in different surveys as either age sixty and above or age sixty-five and above) have a lower level of victimization than citizens in other age groups and that victimization rates decline with advancing age.<sup>4</sup> These data have led some observers to argue

<sup>1</sup>Robert N. Butler, *Why Survive? Being Old in America* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975), p. 300.

<sup>2</sup>Jack Goldsmith and Noel E. Tomas, "Crimes Against the Elderly: A Continuing National Crisis," *Aging*, 235-237 (June-July, 1974), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Carl L. Cunningham, "Pattern and Effect of Crime Against the Aging: The Kansas City Study" in *Crime and the Elderly: Challenge and Response*, ed. Jack Goldsmith and Sharon S. Goldsmith (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1976), p. 31.

<sup>4</sup>See: Philip H. Ennis, *Criminal Victimization in the United States: A Report of a National Survey* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, May 1967 and U.S. Department of Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, *Criminal Victimization in the United States: A National Crime Panel Survey Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, May 1975). The findings of these surveys concerning criminal victimization of the elderly are summarized in Fay Lomax Cook and Thomas D. Cook, "Evaluating the Rhetoric of Crisis: A Case Study of Criminal Victimization of the Elderly," *Social Service Review*, 50 (December 1976), pp. 632-646.

that the elderly do not warrant the status of a group deserving special attention from the police.<sup>5</sup> It has been said that the growing attention paid to the problem of victimization of the elderly is a classic example of how a lack of solid information can merge with a sincere concern for the plight of older Americans to create the impression of a serious social problem when, in fact, one does not exist.<sup>6</sup> However, to date, most students of the problem, while acknowledging that the findings of victimization surveys contradict some of the rhetorical excesses of the past, still believe that the quality of law enforcement services provided to this segment of the population is a legitimate national and local concern. This contention is based upon the following observations:

- Impact of Victimization Upon the Elderly

There is circumstantial evidence indicating that the impact of criminal victimization upon the elderly may be substantially greater than for citizens in younger age groups. The physical changes that occur with advancing age, while not as debilitating as commonly supposed, can still impair the ability of the elderly to cope with the effects of victimization. Eighty-five percent of the population over the age of 65 suffers from one or more chronic illnesses which can heighten the impact of physical injury, and age-related changes in sight, hearing, strength and coordination can affect the older person's ability to handle crime-related situations.<sup>7</sup> The fact that many of the elderly live alone or with non-relatives (31.5% of the population age 65 or over) means that they may lack the social support which can help them to overcome many of the consequences of victimization experiences. And, finally, many of the elderly are forced to live on fairly small, fixed incomes which means that the loss of even relatively small amounts of money or property can be difficult to bear. In short, it can be argued that to be old and victimized may often be to undergo an experience which is quantitatively different from what it might have been for the same person at a younger age.

- Elderly Fear of Crime

The elderly also suffer from a pervasive fear of crime. A nationwide survey of the attitudes and concerns of the elderly, by Louis Harris and his associates, found that more of the respondents pointed to fear of crime as their most serious personal problem (23%). It was selected more frequently than poor health, lack of financial resources, loneliness, and many other complaints commonly associated with advancing age.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Richard D. Kundten, et. al., *Victims and Witnesses: Their Experiences with Crime and the Criminal Justice System* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>For example, see: Cook and Cook, *Op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup>M. Powell Lawton, et. al., "Psychological Aspects of Crime and Fear of Crime," in Goldsmith and Goldsmith, eds., *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup>Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., *The Myth and Reality of Aging in America* (Washington, D.C.: The National Council on the Aging, 1975), p. 29.

Other surveys have shown that fear of crime increases with age,<sup>9</sup> and that fear of crime is increasing at a faster rate among elderly citizens than among younger citizens.<sup>10</sup>

It has been frequently stated that fear of crime may represent a form of indirect victimization which can lead to serious restrictions on the elderly's daily activities and greatly diminish the quality of their lives. It has also been suggested that the precautions taken by older persons in response to their fear may have a major influence on their level of victimization, i.e., the fear of crime leads to self-imposed confinement, resulting in a reduction in the number of victimizations which might have otherwise occurred.<sup>11</sup>

- Elderly's Need for Noncrime-Related Police Services

The same factors that may increase the impact of criminal victimization upon the elderly (health problems, low income, social isolation, etc.) may also contribute to a heightened need for police assistance with noncrime-related problems. The majority of the calls for service received by the police are noncrime-related and the elderly, much like everyone else, tend to rely upon the police in times of trouble and need. In fact, one recent study of police/elderly interactions found that older persons requested noncrime-related services from the police approximately twice as often as would be expected on the basis of their proportion of the total population.<sup>12</sup> The reason that many older persons tend to turn to the police for help with noncrime problems is fairly obvious. The police are the principal 24-hour emergency response service in virtually all jurisdictions, and they will respond to most requests for service whether or not the requests are related to law enforcement. In many instances, there is simply no other person or agency to which an elderly citizen can turn.

- The Growing Proportion of Elderly in the Population

The proportion of elderly citizens in the country's population is growing rapidly, and the relative growth rate of this segment of the population is also increasing. Currently, growth in the number of individuals 65 years of age and older is almost twice that for younger age groups. As of 1970, the elderly comprised 9.9% of the population. It is estimated that by

<sup>9</sup>Michael J. Hindelang, *Public Opinion Regarding Crime, Criminal Justice and Related Topics* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup>Cook and Cook, *Op. cit.*, p. 642.

<sup>11</sup>See: Brian J. Madden, "The Effect of Crime in a New York Community: The Elderly and the Role of the Police," paper presented to the National Conference on Crime Against the Elderly (Washington, D.C.: The American University, College of Public Affairs, June 5-7, 1975), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup>Richard E. Sykes, "The Urban Police Function in Regard to the Elderly: A Special Case of Police Community Relations," in Goldsmith and Goldsmith, eds., *Op. cit.*, p. 129.

2020 the percent will have increased to 13.1%.<sup>13</sup> Thus, to the extent that the elderly have special needs for police services, these needs are likely to continue to increase for the foreseeable future.

#### • Elderly's Right for Special Services

There is a widespread belief that the elderly, simply because they are old, have earned the right to lead their lives in relative comfort, security and dignity. It is a feeling that society owes a debt and has a responsibility to those who have made a major contribution to its development. As one patrol officer expressed it to a project staff member, "I think it is important for the police to go out of their way to help old people. After all, they've paid their dues."

The above observations are commonly presented in support of the contention that the police should provide special services to the elderly. It should be noted that, while there is a certain, even compelling logic to these observations and their implications for police service delivery to the elderly, they have not yet been thoroughly examined through careful research. The serious study of the elderly's need for police services and the problems involved in effectively providing these services is still in its infancy. Several large-scale research projects have examined the incidence and impact of crime against the elderly and have recommended various crime prevention techniques, many of which involve police participation.<sup>14</sup> However, rather little effort has been devoted to exploring the nature of police/elderly interactions, i.e., the types of police services requested by the elderly, their attitudes toward and expectations of the police, police attitudes toward the elderly, and the problems encountered by the police in providing services to the aged.<sup>15</sup>

The study summarized in this report represents an attempt to fill this vacuum. The following sections of the report present a brief synopsis of an in-depth examination of police service delivery to the elderly. Each component of the study is discussed separately; then an assessment is made of the study's overall policy implications.

<sup>13</sup>Neal E. Cutler, "Demographic, Social-Psychological, and Political Factors in the Politics of Aging: A Foundation for Research in Political Gerontology," *The American Political Science Review*, 71:1 (September 1977), p. 1012.

<sup>14</sup>For examples, see: Carl Cunningham, et. al., *Crimes Against the Aging: Patterns and Prevention* (Kansas City, Missouri: Midwest Research Institute, 1977), and Marlene A. Young Rifai, *Older Americans' Crime Prevention Research Project: Final Report* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah County Division of Public Safety, 1976).

<sup>15</sup>There are at least three limited, but extremely interesting, exceptions to this observation. See: Phyllis Mensh Brostoff, *District of Columbia Report to the 1971 White House Conference on Aging, Appendix II, Metropolitan Police Contacts with the Elderly* (Washington, D.C.: The Washington School of Psychiatry, 1971); Phyllis Mensh Brostoff, "The Police Connection: A New Way to Get Information and Referral Services to the Elderly," in Goldsmith and Goldsmith, eds., *Op. cit.*, p. 139-151; and Sykes, *Op. cit.*, in Goldsmith and Goldsmith, eds., *Op. cit.*, p. 127-137.

#### A COMMUNITY SURVEY OF OLDER PERSONS

This part of the study examined the views of 913 elderly residents of two American cities regarding police services. Their responses indicate that the urban elderly's anxieties concerning crime impose several limitations upon their life styles and contribute to feelings of depression and loneliness. However, despite the physical, financial and emotional suffering caused by victimization and fear of crime, the elderly expressed extremely favorable attitudes toward the police.

Fear is especially strong concerning street crime. Public areas are regarded as far less safe than the home and adjacent grounds; location (public or private) is a more important determinant of feelings of safety than the time of day or night. Nearly two-thirds of those interviewed felt that it is at least somewhat likely that they will be robbed while outside their homes. More than half thought it somewhat likely that they would be physically assaulted on the streets. Harassment by teenagers on the street was the most frequently reported type of victimization. Such experiences contribute to the anxieties and helpless rage which frequently impoverish the quality of life for the urban elderly.

Among the symptoms of this impoverishment are the severe restrictions upon social activities which are imposed in the hope of avoiding victimization. Most of the elderly are afraid to go out alone at night, and many will not use mass transit. In all, three-fourths limit their activities as a safety measure. The net result is a serious limitation upon the social lives of individuals who may have a special need for comradeship and social support.

In order to protect their homes, the elderly install window bars and locks, burn extra lights, purchase dogs and take other measures which impose added burdens upon tight budgets. The expense of these precautions can be significant for persons who frequently must live on low, fixed incomes (60% of those interviewed live on an annual income of less than \$5,000). The locks and window bars are also constant reminders that one must always be on guard, even in the home.

Despite their perceptions that their neighborhoods are not safe, the elderly expressed very positive attitudes toward the police. A strong majority felt that the police are doing their best at one of society's most difficult jobs, and three-fourths said that they could turn to the police with any kind of problem. While there is a fairly common (45% of the respondents) feeling that the police don't understand the problems of the elderly, there is nearly unanimous agreement (89%) that the police treat the elderly as well or better than other citizens.

Confidence in the police is strong. For example, of the 149 persons who said that they had been victimized during the past three years, 75% (N=110) reported the crime to police. Although only 11% (N=12) of these victims said that the police were able to solve the crime, practically all (N=105) said that they would report the crime to the police if it happened again. Apparently, the ability to solve crimes is only a minor component of the standard by which the elderly measure police performance.



Indeed, there are several dimensions of the police role which the elderly regard as more important than the ability to solve crimes. In decreasing order of importance, these include fast response to calls for service, honesty, response to all calls regardless of whether or not a crime has been committed, and understanding problems of the aged. When the issue of satisfaction with crime-related police services was examined, it was found that the elderly's level of satisfaction was strongly related to response time and the responding officers' concern for the victim. There was no relationship between satisfaction with police services and success in solving the crime.

The elderly citizen who calls the police seldom does so for trivial reasons. Very few interviewees felt that it was appropriate to request assistance for noncrime or nonmedical problems. (The only exception involved the loss of a pet, an event which may be especially serious for elderly citizens who rely on their pets for protection and/or companionship). There is thus little evidence from the survey that the elderly burden the police with nuisance calls.

Elderly service recipients are frequently very upset and fearful and, in many instances, suffering from physical abuse and/or financial loss. They often have fewer available resources than other citizens to help them cope with the effects of crime or other emergencies. It is important that police officers be aware of the difficulties facing elderly citizens and express their concern when responding to calls for assistance. However, it must be recognized that police effectiveness will be severely limited unless they take responsibility for putting elderly clients in contact with social service agencies which can provide ongoing support. The elderly regard this as an important dimension of the police role (more than 90% said that it was important that police officers "know where people can turn for assistance with all kinds of problems"), but there is little evidence that the police currently consider such referrals to be their responsibility - less than three percent of the elderly victims interviewed were referred by police to social service agencies. This lack of coordination and cooperation between the police and agencies providing medical, financial and counseling services appears to be a significant problem for the urban elderly, and represents one of the most critical areas in which police service delivery to the elderly could be improved.

Beyond taking a more active role in referring elderly police service recipients to appropriate sources of help for their crime and noncrime-related needs, the data from this survey provide relatively little support for the contention that major efforts are needed to improve the quality of police services to older persons. The elderly have quite positive attitudes toward the police, and they appear to be reasonably well satisfied with the quality of police services provided to them. From their perspective, the need to tailor police services to fit the particular needs and requirements of the elderly does not appear to be as pressing as it is sometimes depicted. This is not meant to suggest that the police should not be sensitive to the concerns and problems of older persons. However, the findings of this survey do indicate that careful thought should be given to proposals for investing large amounts of scarce resources in police programs designed solely for older persons. Efforts to improve overall police effectiveness might do more to assist the elderly, and the entire community, than programs directed solely toward the older segment of the population.

#### A SURVEY OF POLICE OFFICER ATTITUDES TOWARD THE ELDERLY

All the sworn officers in the two departments participating in this study were surveyed about their attitudes toward the elderly and experiences working with them. A total of 893 officers completed the written questionnaire survey: 461 in Southville and 432 in Northville. The overall response rate was 48%: 69% for Southville and 36% for Northville.

The results of the survey indicate that the responding officers have a generally positive image of the elderly. When asked to rate the elderly and the "average citizen" on a number of characteristics, the respondents tended to see the elderly in a substantially more positive light. For example, more than 73% of the officers felt that older persons are very respectful of authority, while only 25% gave the average citizen such a positive evaluation. The elderly were also rated, by roughly similar margins, as being substantially more cooperative than the non-elderly; more pleasant; more respectful of the police; more law abiding; more trustworthy; and more concerned about crime. Analysis of the data also indicates that while the police do differentiate between the elderly and the average citizen, they do not stereotype the elderly (see them as being "nearly all alike") anymore than they stereotype the non-elderly.

In short, these attitudinal data provide considerable evidence that:

- 1) The police differentiate between the elderly and the average citizen on a number of important dimensions;
- 2) Overall, the police appear to view the elderly as "better" citizens than the non-elderly;
- 3) The police do not seem to stereotype older persons; and
- 4) The elderly are considered to be less of a police problem than their younger counterparts.

In addition to attitudinal questions, the officers were asked to evaluate the elderly as service recipients. The respondents reported that in comparison with the non-elderly older persons are perceived as making proportionately fewer demands for police service and fewer unnecessary requests for service. Forty-one percent of the respondents felt that the elderly make fewer unnecessary service requests for service compared with twenty percent who disagreed. The officers also did not believe that it generally requires more time to provide services to the elderly than to citizens in other age groups. Finally, very few respondents (10%) indicated that they had encountered any special problems in their recent efforts to assist the elderly.

These findings suggest that, from the police perspective, the elderly do not represent much of a problem. The single, most prominent area of difficulty that emerged from the analysis concerns the role of the police in referring older persons to appropriate sources of help for their noncrime-related problems. The officers reported that they have rather meager knowledge about the availability of various types of social services, and



on the whole, they felt that the level of cooperation between the police and social service agencies was quite low. However, they expressed the belief that increased cooperation between the police and social service agencies could be of considerable benefit to the elderly, and they indicated a willingness to accept additional referral activity as an important part of their official responsibilities. Thus, both the police and the elderly appear to agree that increased emphasis on police referrals would do much to improve the quality of services provided to older persons.

#### POLICE SERVICE PROVISION TO THE ELDERLY AND NON-ELDERLY

In an effort to develop an empirical picture of the types and volume of police services provided to the elderly in comparison with those provided to younger citizens, the Southville officers were asked to complete a special service delivery profile form for each citizen contact activity they undertook during two eight-day periods. The forms requested information concerning: the age, sex, and race of the service recipient(s); the service need, actions taken, time required to provide the service, and difficulties encountered. Special forms were used to collect this information because the department's incident report forms do not record the age of service recipients, and because it was deemed to be important to collect data on all police/citizen interactions whether or not they led to the completion of a formal report.

As a research tool, these self-reporting data collection instruments turned out to be problematical. Despite the complete backing of the department's command-level personnel, the officers simply did not cooperate in completing the forms. The response pattern (2,727 completed forms during the first data collection wave and 916 during the second wave) provides evidence of this problem. In addition, many of the completed forms contained missing data and had to be eliminated from analysis. Thus, the principal conclusion to be drawn from this part of the study must be regarded with caution.

The results indicate that the elderly do not make a disproportionate number of demands for police services. Less than 13% of the completed reports identified the service recipient as being elderly, whereas the elderly comprise 15% of Southville's population (1970 Census). There were no significant differences in the difficulties reported in providing services to the elderly and the non-elderly, nor was there any appreciable difference in the time required to provide services to older persons compared to younger counterparts. The only noteworthy difference to emerge from analysis of the data concerned service needs: the elderly were reported to request assistance with social service problems almost four times as often as the non-elderly (11% vs. 3%). Yet, despite this difference, both the elderly and the non-elderly were referred to non-law enforcement sources of help at about the same and rather low rate (3%). In spite of the methodological problems encountered in administering the service delivery profile, it must be noted that the findings are generally consistent with the results of the community survey and the officer survey. In each instance, there is little evidence that the elderly make excessive or especially difficult demands upon the police or that there are any severe strains in police/elderly interactions.

#### POLICE PROGRAMS FOR THE ELDERLY

The principal purpose of this part of the study was to identify and briefly review police-related programs which focus primarily on an elderly clientele. It was considered useful to develop a fairly comprehensive inventory of on-going programs in order to facilitate an assessment of the policy implications of this study.

Programs were identified by contacting the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, the Administration on Aging, interest groups and associations, and by surveying over 500 area agencies on aging. In all, useable information was obtained on 119 programs. While these programs cannot be considered statistically representative of all efforts to assist the elderly with their police-related problems, information about them does provide a broad overview of programmatic activity in 37 states and the District of Columbia.

The survey respondents pointed out several areas of difficulty in delivering effective police-related services to the elderly. Primary among these were:

- Confusion Regarding Police Roles and Procedures - including how and when to report incidents; requesting services that the police are unable to provide; unrealistic expectations about police performance; and lack of understanding of the criminal justice system in general.
- Poor Communication - including cases of police officers' impatience; insensitivity; inflexibility; stereotyping; and patronizing attitudes in dealing with older persons.
- Service Delivery Problems - including slow police response time and/or unwillingness or inability to provide necessary services and make appropriate referrals to other available service agencies.

The results of the survey indicate that in response to perceived problems such as these, jurisdictions across the country have undertaken a wide variety of programs designed to improve the quality of services provided to the elderly. The most commonly mentioned programs involved organized efforts to provide: victim/witness assistance; crime prevention assistance; police officer training; and increased cooperation between law enforcement agencies and social service organizations. The survey generated a great deal of descriptive material about these and other attempts to assist the elderly; however, very little hard information was provided about program effectiveness. Most of the respondents gave their programs extremely positive ratings, but fewer than one-quarter of the respondents indicated that any type of formal evaluation of their programs had taken place, was in progress, or was planned, and only twelve of the 119 programs included an external "independent" evaluation component. As a result, there remains considerable uncertainty about whether these programs are addressing significant problems and successfully meeting their stated objectives.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings summarized in this report have two principal and possibly controversial policy implications for police operations. First, the dominant theme that emerges from the analysis of the survey data is that the elderly, at least in the two cities included in this study, have quite favorable attitudes toward the police and are generally satisfied with the quality of police services they receive, and that the police have a generally positive image of the elderly and appear to encounter few special difficulties in providing services to them. These findings raise serious questions about the advisability of undertaking major programs designed specifically to improve the quality of police services provided to the elderly without first carefully establishing that such programs represent the most effective use of limited police resources.

Widely publicized media accounts of the victimization of older citizens in combination with a widespread sympathy for the plight of the elderly whose lives often appear to be impoverished by victimization and fear of crime have led to growing demands that the police take special steps to protect and serve the elderly more effectively. The result has been the development and implementation of numerous programs to: provide special assistance to elderly crime victims; train police officers to be more sensitive and understanding in their dealings with the elderly; instruct older persons in crime prevention techniques; and establish special police units to concentrate on the elderly's crime and noncrime-related problems. On the surface, it is hard to fault these well meaning programs. However, when considered in light of the results of this and other studies and in light of the operational realities and budgetary constraints facing most departments, there are indications that in many cases such programs may not constitute the most effective use of limited police resources.

This cautionary statement is based on the following observations:

- National victimization surveys have consistently shown that the elderly have a lower level of criminal victimization than citizens in any other age group and that victimization rates decline with advancing age.<sup>16</sup> Thus, from an age-comparison perspective, victimization of the elderly is not as prevalent as it is often depicted in the media.
- Data from this and other studies indicate that older persons have extremely favorable attitudes toward the police - in fact, more favorable than citizens

<sup>16</sup>See: Phillip H. Ennis, *Criminal Victimization in the United States: A Report of a National Survey* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, May 1967), and U.S. Department of Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, *Criminal Victimization in the United States: A National Crime Panel Survey Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, May 1975). The findings of these surveys concerning criminal victimization of the elderly are summarized in Fay Lomax Cook and Thomas D. Cook, "Evaluating the Rhetoric of Crisis: A Case Study of Criminal Victimization of the Elderly," *Social Service Review* (December 1976), pp. 632-646.

in younger age groups.<sup>17</sup> In the most general sense, they express a high level of satisfaction with the performance of their local police departments and, while fear of crime is an important problem for many older persons, they do not appear to view this as the consequence of inadequate police performance.

- The resources available to most police departments are severely limited and appear likely to remain that way for the foreseeable future. The desirability of any program to provide special services to the elderly must be assessed not only in terms of their apparent needs, but also in terms of its opportunity costs for the department - that is, in terms of other possible operational changes and improvements that would have to be foregone in order to provide resources for an elderly-specific program. For many departments, it seems likely that careful analysis might show that efforts to improve overall performance, such as redeployment of the patrol force to more closely meet workload requirements; development of more sophisticated crime analysis capabilities; creation of an improved investigative case-load management system; etc., should rationally take precedence over special programs to assist the elderly. In fact, such general operational changes might do more to aid the elderly, along with the rest of the population, than the adoption of programs that are directed solely at police related concerns of the elderly.

This is not meant to argue that the police can safely ignore the needs of the elderly. It is only intended as a caution that the implementation of special, and possibly expensive programs to assist the elderly should be preceded by a careful, detailed analysis of their particular problems and consideration of how such a program fits in the department's overall priorities for improving operational effectiveness. The commitment of scarce resources should be based on a realistic assessment of needs, rather than a sympathetic response to a few widely-publicized incidents involving older persons.

Second, analysis of the data points to one important area in which the police could take positive steps to improve the quality of services provided to the elderly. The findings strongly suggest that the police could play a much more active role in referring elderly citizens with either crime or noncrime-related problems to other social service agencies that are better equipped to handle these problems. The survey data revealed that only a very small percentage of the police service recipients were referred to other sources for help. This is surprising, because the police are often called to

<sup>17</sup>Michael J. Hindelag, *Public Opinion Regarding Crime, Criminal Justice and Related Topics* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 10.



handle noncrime-related problems which fall outside their field of expertise, and because they encounter elderly crime victims who may have problems coping with the physical, economic, and psychological effects of victimization.

Because the public tends to turn to the police for help with such a wide variety of problems, the police are in an excellent position to serve as a referral or finding agency, linking older persons to more appropriate sources of help for their non-crime related enforcement problems. The role of the police in this regard has been mentioned in the literature;<sup>18</sup> however, few departments have placed much emphasis on it.<sup>19</sup> Part of the reason for this is simply long-term neglect. However, it is also a function of the traditional animosity that exists between the police and social workers, and the fact that many social service agencies are unavailable when their assistance is needed - after 5 P.M. and on weekends. But, whatever the cause of the current lack of coordination between the police and other social service agencies, establishing formal ties between them, and explicitly recognizing the role of the police as a linking mechanism between older persons with problems and the appropriate sources of help could represent one of the most important contributions that the police could make to improving the quality of elderly citizens' lives.

---

<sup>18</sup>Toward a National Policy of Aging, Final Report of the White House Conference on Aging, Volume II (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973), p. 235.

<sup>19</sup>Brostoff, in what is, perhaps, the only serious examination of the police referral function for the elderly notes that aside from one very limited project, "no attempt has been made to link up elderly victims of crime, or older people who come to the police for help when no crime has been committed, with services that might help them with the social problems that they bring to the police." Phyllis Mench Brostoff, "The Police Connection: A New Way to Get Information and Referral Services to the Elderly," Jack Goldsmith and Sharon S. Goldsmith, eds., *Crime and the Elderly: Challenge and Response* (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1976), p. 149.

#### ABOUT THE SCIENCE CENTER

The University City Science Center is a non-profit research and service organization affiliated with twenty-eight colleges, universities and hospitals in the Delaware Valley. The Science Center has worked with public service agencies to plan, implement and evaluate a broad range of social service systems. For more than a decade, the goal of the Science Center has been to help public administrators improve the management capabilities of their organizations. The unique structure of the Science Center, with its resident staff of professionals and its close association with university faculty, has enabled the Center to provide clients with a wide range of expertise.

**END**