

November 1978

## The Fear of Crime by the Elderly: Issues and Consequences

Mark Pogrebin  
*University of Colorado, Denver*

G. Nicholas Pijoan  
*University of Colorado, Denver*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Criminology Commons, Gerontology Commons, and the Social Work Commons

### Recommended Citation

Pogrebin, Mark and Pijoan, G. Nicholas (1978) "The Fear of Crime by the Elderly: Issues and Consequences," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 5: Iss. 6, Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.1325>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol5/iss6/11>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).

THE FEAR OF CRIME BY THE ELDERLY: ISSUES  
AND CONSEQUENCES

by

Mark Pogrebin  
Associate Professor of Criminal Justice  
Graduate School of Public Affairs  
University of Colorado at Denver

and

G. Nicholas Pijoan  
Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice  
Graduate School of Public Affairs  
University of Colorado at Denver

Most of the recent literature concerning the elderly and crime has been concentrated in the area of victimization. Such subjects as the elderly's vulnerability to crime, types of crimes committed against older members of the community, income level of the victims, and residential indicators, are some of the important variables that have been studied in order to better understand the patterns of crime as it affects older citizens.

Although it is believed that the foregoing factors are essential in order to gain knowledge which will inform us as to the nature of criminal victimization against the elderly, it also seems critical to discuss the effects of the fear of crime. This will permit further insight into such subject concerns as how the fear of criminal victimization relates to the life style of the aged, self perception, lack of control over their everyday life, and the feeling of possessing little political strength in attaining help through criminal justice programs to help eliminate their fears.

For the elderly, fear of crime is just one of many problems this age group has to contend with in their daily existence. Too often those who research and publish in the field of criminology tend to focus attention in research endeavors on victimization statistics without regard for the part that fear of criminal victimization plays as one of the many problems facing elderly people in our society. Those in the field of gerontology have recognized the importance of such problems for some time.

The issues this paper will attempt to address are: (1) the elderly's perception of the extent of crime, (2) their vulnerability to crime, (3) low income elderly as the majority of criminal victims among the older population, (4) and most importantly, the effects of the fear of crime as it relates to the everyday life style of older individuals.

Further, it must be stated from the onset, that when crimes against the elderly are discussed, attention is being directed to that population of aged citizens who often reside in low income areas of cities. Therefore, as the limited research indicates, the elderly population in this country are viewed to be among the major recipients of crimes.

#### THE ELDERLY'S PERCEPTION OF CRIME

There has been much supportive evidence in recent years that strongly indicates criminal victimization decreases dramatically with age. This is seen in Table 1. Persons over the age of 65 are least likely to be victims of property and personal crimes as compared with all age groups (Cook, 1976).

TABLE 1. CRIMES AGAINST PERSONS BY AGE OF VICTIM PER 1,000 POPULATION

Both Sexes, Age	Total	Rape	<u>Robbery</u>		<u>Assault</u>		Personal Larceny
			With Injury	Without Injury	Aggravated	Simple	
12-15	126.4	0.7	1.6	4.8	7.7	18.3	93.4
16-19	122.1	1.4	1.9	3.2	11.9	17.2	86.5
20-24	98.0	1.4	1.9	3.9	10.3	13.8	66.7
25-34	67.0	0.6	1.2	2.3	5.9	8.1	48.8
35-49	46.7	X	0.9	1.6	3.3	5.1	35.6
50-64	30.0	X	0.6	1.1	1.4	2.5	24.3
65 & Over	15.1	X	1.0	1.5	0.8	1.1	10.6

Criminal Victimization in the United States, January-June, 1973: A National Crime Panel Survey Report. U. S. Department of Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration.

We already know one way in which the criminal victimization of older Americans is not special. Evidence from National (Cook & Cook, 1976) and city-wide (Hindelang, 1976) surveys shows that the elderly are less likely to be victimized than younger persons in all crime categories that have been studied to date. The only exception is personal larceny, for purse and wallet snatchers seems to be as frequently targeted against the elderly as other age groups. (Antones, 1977: 321).

Given this revealing evidence which has been supported by research, why is there so great an emphasis on the subject of crimes perpetrated against senior citizens? There are many explanations. Perhaps, though, the most logical answer appears to be a general one which accounts for the overall population's perceptions of crime. It appears that the vast majority of perceptions of crime and genuine fears of victimization come from a variety of sources: television programs, newspapers, and communications with others concerning reports of criminal activity near their residence. Although there have been attempts to diminish the high incidence of the fear of crime, there is little change of any successful policy or program. It seems apparent that controlling much of the fear of crime by citizens in the community is beyond the ability of the criminal justice system (Skogan, 1977). Thus, citizens of all age groups do, to some extent, perceive criminal activity to be much worse than actually exists. However, according to Hindelang's (1976) victimization studies, older people fear crime more than any other age category.

Older people feel more vulnerable to crime than other age groups. The following are just some of the reasons for this perception.

1. Because of the high incidence of low income among the elderly, the economic impact on elderly victims of crime is generally greater.
2. Older people are more likely to live alone, to live in high crime neighborhoods, and to rely on walking and public transportation.
3. Elderly people are generally less able to defend themselves because of their diminished strength and their physical ailments.
4. The dates of receipt of pensions and other benefit checks are widely known by citizens in the residential area where older people reside.
5. The elderly are particularly susceptible to fraud and confidence games.

In sum, it becomes irrelevant to discuss the actual crime statistics of various age categories with people who perceive themselves as extremely vulnerable to criminal victimization. The effects of the perception of crime for the aged limits their life style in many ways, but of all the socio-economic groups among this age population, the impoverished urban dweller's perception of crime is more reality than perception.

#### THE ELDERLY AND CRIME IN IMPOVERISHED URBAN AREAS

The only extensive study of the elderly and crime was conducted by the Midwest Research Institute in Kansas City, Kansas (1975). Their findings concluded that the elderly had a special vulnerability to crime. The study involved research over 18 months on 1,800 victims of crimes who were 60 years or over. The study found that older persons living in lower economic, high crime areas of this city were victimized in 1973 by burglary and robbery at a rate three to four times higher than that of the city's overall population. Social scientists who study crime causation are knowledgeable to the fact that families whose income level is less than \$3,000 are most likely to be the victims of robbery and assaults, while families whose income level is over \$15,000 are more likely to be the victims of larceny. It cannot be generally stated that people who are poor are more likely to be victimized, but the research data does indicate that the poor are more likely to be the recipients of crimes that threaten bodily harm (Marmer and Kurdle, 1975).

In effect, this means that older people living in impoverished areas have a justifiable fear of being physically hurt by those who commit illegal acts. The Kansas City study, being the only one of its type to date, can be to some extent generalized to the plight of the elderly in impoverished urban areas of this country. It appears that what most citizens fear is physical retaliation in the commission of a crime. The genuine fear of the criminal who commits larcenies (property crimes) is not so much due to the loss of property, although for the elderly poor this can be devastating, but physical harm to themselves by the perpetrator. In this instance, older people suffer the most. When their residence and security have been violated, it is difficult not to live in fear.

#### RESULTS OF THE FEAR OF CRIME

In 1975 Louis Harris conducted a survey under the auspices of the National Council on The Aging. Harris found that the fear of crime was the most serious problem perceived by older citizens, particularly among elderly blacks. Victim surveys by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration found that older persons are more likely to report fear of crime even though they are generally the least likely to be victimized. The fear of crime among the aged is more debilitating than the criminal act itself (Lawton et al., 1976; Clemente and Kleiman, 1976; Hahn, 1976; Rodstein, 1975; Sundeen and Mathiew, 1976). What then are the results of actual victimization or perceived fear of becoming a crime victim among the elderly?

Awareness of increased vulnerability to criminal behavior has a chilling effect upon the freedom of movement of older Americans. Fear of criminal victimization causes self-imposed house arrest among older people who may refuse to venture out of doors. Furthermore, even in those situations where the fear of being victimized may be somewhat exaggerated or unwarranted by local conditions, the effect on older persons is just as severe as when fears are justified. (Goldsmith and Thomas, 1974: 236-237).

Goldsmith and Thomas (1974) go on to discuss the plight of the older people as not just victims of crime but victims of our society's neglect of our aged citizens. They point out that the elderly are victims of the landlord who raises the rent when it can least be afforded by those on fixed incomes, the salesman who exploits, the deception of the health quack, and the con man who operates a scam for money and who generally preys on older people. All these types, and others, inflict wounds to pride and dignity as well as to finances and personal safety.

Violence injures not only the physical self, but reinforces feelings of helplessness. Even a small loss may be the most recent in a series of insults, though superficially trivial, it may represent the proverbial last straw, or restimulate previous experiences of losses with their attendant painful emotions. (Goldsmith and Thomas, 1974: 236-237).

Being elderly and being an easy victim of various injustices does have its psychological consequences. To be categorized in the lower socioeconomic strata is to be left out of what this nation values. The combination of being defined as too old to be of worth to society, coupled with the plight of impoverishment, presents one with a dual stigma that perhaps never can be disavowed. What this affluent society minimally owes its elderly citizens is the opportunity to live out their final years without the fear of becoming a victim of crime. There are no easy solutions as to how this can be accomplished. It is believed that all levels of government, as well as neighborhood associations and the like, should make the problems of the elderly a top priority. Efforts should be made to decrease both the fear of crime and the actual crime against this age group.

## REFERENCES

- Antunes, G. et al., (1977) "Patterns of Personal Crime Against the Elderly." The Gerontologist, 17, (August): 321-327.
- Clemente, F. and M. Klienman. (1976) "Fear of Crime Among the Aged." The Gerontologist, 16 (June): 207-210.
- Cook, F. (1976) "Criminal Victimization of the Elderly: A New National Problem?" pp. 130-143 in E. Viano (ed.) Victims and Society. Washington, D. C.: Visage Press.
- Cook, F. and T. Cook. (1976) "Evaluating the Rhetoric of Crisis: A Case Study of Criminal Victimization of the Elderly." (Fall): 632-646.
- Goldsmith, J. and N. Thomas. (1974) "Crimes Against the Elderly: A Continuing National Crisis." Aging, (July): 236-237.
- Hahn, P. (1976) Crimes Against the Elderly: A Study in Victimology. Santa Cruz: Davis Publishing Co.
- Harris, L. (1975) The Myth and Reality of Aging in America. Washington, D. C.: National Council on Aging.
- Hindelang, M. (1976) Criminal Victimization in Eight American Cities. Cambridge: Ballinger.
- Lawtin, M. et al., "Psychological Aspects of Crime and Fear of Crime," pp. 21-30, in Goldsmith (ed.) Crime and the Elderly, Lexington: Lexington Books.
- Marmor, T. and R. Kurdie. (1975) "The Health Care Crisis," paper delivered at the symposium on Political and Community Health Care. Northern Illinois University.
- Midwest Research Institute - Interim Report (1975) "Crimes Against Aging Americans," Kansas City Study, Kansas City, Kansas.
- Puis, B. (1975) Crimes Against the Elderly. Education and Public Welfare Division. Washington, D. C.: Library of Congress.
- Rodstein, M. (1975) "Crime and the Aged: The Victims," Journal of the American Medical Association, 234, (533-534).

Skogan, W. (1977) "Public Policy and the Fear of Crime in Large American Cities," pp. 1-17 in J. Gardiner (ed.) Public Law and Public Policy. New York: Praeger.

Sundeen, R. and J. Mathier. (1976) "The Urban Elderly: Environments of Fear." pp. 51-66 in Goldsmith (ed.) Crime and the Elderly. Lexington: Lexington Books.