

This study explores the social context in which crimes against the elderly occur. It attempts to understand whether features of the context might account for elderly persons' special fear of crime. Data from a national survey of 375,000 persons show that, when only victims are considered, elderly victims are more likely than victims of other ages to suffer from predatory crimes and to be attacked by unarmed, young black male strangers. Several strategies to reduce the availability, vulnerability, and desirability of elderly victims to these criminals are compared.

Patterns of Personal Crime Against the Elderly

Findings from a National Survey¹

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Concern about the criminal victimization of elderly Americans currently seems to be very high. A recent book by Goldsmith and Goldsmith (1976) suggests two reasons for this. First, elderly persons may be victimized more often than others or may suffer more serious consequences as a result of being victimized; second, many surveys show that elderly persons are more fearful of crime than younger persons. This concern with the victimization of elderly Americans is also reflected in the recent agreement between the Administration on Aging and the Law Enforcement and Assistance Administration to launch cooperative efforts aimed at understanding and alleviating problems associated with the criminal victimization of older Americans. Behind these efforts is the explicit assumption that criminal victimization of the elderly is "special," but we do not yet know in which ways such victimization is indeed special.

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 snatchings seem to be as frequently targeted against the elderly as other age groups (Cook & Cook, 1976; Hindelang, 1976). But there is no indication that personal larceny affects older persons more than younger ones.

The evidence on crime rates has to be balanced against the fact that elderly persons' fear of crime is greater than the fear of younger persons. This is one area where criminal victimization of the elderly is truly special (Clemente & Kleinman, 1976). An important research task is to solve the apparent puzzle of why the elderly are more fearful of crime even though they are less likely than others to be victimized. In this paper, we shall investigate whether there is something special about the social context in which crimes against the elderly occur and whether any special features of the context might account for the elderly being especially afraid of crime.

Specifically, this paper addresses the following questions:

(1) Are elderly victims more likely than other victims to suffer from crimes of violence?

(2) Are elderly victims more likely than others to be in or near their homes when crimes are committed against them?

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(3) Are elderly victims more likely than others to be attacked by gangs of youths rather than individuals, as Conklin (1976) has suggested?

(4) Are elderly victims more likely than others to be attacked by strangers rather than persons they know?

(5) Are elderly victims more likely than others to be attacked by persons with weapons?

Research Data and Design

A major problem in trying to answer questions about criminal victimization of the aged has been the absence of valid data on topics other than crime rates and fear of crime. Until recently, scholars interested in other questions had to rely on small-scale, localized victim surveys. The resulting studies about crime and the elderly were deficient in terms of both generalizability and the comprehensiveness and validity of the raw data (Skogan, 1975, 1976).

The data for this report are based upon self-reports of victimization gathered from individuals interviewed between February, 1973, and July, 1974 as part of a survey program financed by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. Each month the Census Bureau interviews all persons 12 years of age and older in a national panel sample of 10,000 households, asking them about their experiences with crime during the preceding 6 months. The data about crimes in 1973 thus are based on interviews with nearly 375,000 respondents. The sample is large because only a minority of persons have such experiences to report. During the interview, respondents who have been victimized are asked about those events, and detailed data are collected about the circumstances surrounding each. It is these data that form the basis for the present report. The survey is particularly useful because it provides information about crimes which were not

reported to the police. These are often 50% of the total in some major categories. While the Crime Panel data are subject to some methodological limitations (National Academy of Sciences, 1976), they nonetheless provide rich and novel information about our national experience with crime and the process of victimization (for a further description of the survey, see Skogan, 1976).

In the analysis which follows we categorize respondents to the survey in eight age categories, focusing our discussion on the oldest of these, persons over 65 years of age. These categories were assigned to reflect some major stages in the life cycle and, more importantly, to balance the number of crime victims in each. Since victimization rates begin to drop markedly before middle age, older groups tend to span longer periods than those containing high-risk individuals.

The Context of Victimization

Any assessment of crimes against the elderly must begin with an analysis of how frequently crimes are committed against the elderly compared to other age groups. Table 1 gives the appropriate data from the 1973 national survey. *Assault* was the most frequent personal crime reported in the survey, with 1.4% of those interviewed reporting an attack of some type in the preceding 6 months. However, assault victims were concentrated in the younger age categories, and persons 65 and older were victimized least frequently of all. Indeed, their victimization rate was 1/7 that of the total sample and 1/24 that of persons aged 17-20. *Robbery* (theft with threat or use of force) was also concentrated in the youngest age categories. The proportion of the total sample reporting a robbery was 0.4%, while the figure for those 65 and older was half that. In contrast, the crime of *personal larceny* (purse snatchings and picked pockets—simple thefts involving personal contact) was less frequent than robbery and

Table 1. Percentage of Sample Victimized by Age and Type of Crime.

Age of Victim	12-16	17-20	21-26	27-32	33-39	40-49	50-64	65+	Sample Average
<i>Type of Crime</i>									
Assault	2.5	2.8	2.4	1.4	1.0	0.8	0.5	0.2	(1.4)
Robbery	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	(0.4)
Personal larceny	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	(0.2)
Rape	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	(0.1)
Weighted N*	37,715	27,884	35,433	29,380	30,254	42,312	56,836	40,133	299,947

*These weights were generated by the Census Bureau to produce U. S. population estimates of the frequency of criminal victimizations. The data in the table are for interviews conducted during 1973.

was distributed more or less evenly across age groups.⁶ The proportion of the total sample reporting a personal larceny was 0.2%, the same as that reported by those age 65 and older. Finally, *rape* was the least frequent personal crime and was reported by only 0.1% of the total sample. Rape is a crime primarily afflicting the young, and almost none were reported by older respondents. There is in all these data about crime rates no indication that the elderly are special because they are victimized more frequently than others.

(1) *Age of victim and type of victimization.*—An examination of persons in each age group who have reported a victimization will allow us to describe the “mix” of victimization experiences in each age category and whether that experience is different for elderly persons. In other words, *when they are victimized*, what types of crime are people in each age group most likely to experience?

The data in Table 2 show that the mix of crime inflicted on the aged is strikingly different from that affecting adolescents and younger adults. Elderly victims are less likely to be raped or assaulted than they are to be robbed or to suffer from personal larceny, while the reverse is true for adolescents. Robbery and larceny can be characterized as “predatory crimes” since their object is to obtain another’s property with or without the threat of force. Rape and assault, on the other hand, are crimes which can be classified as “violent,” since their purpose is to injure or

harm another. The contrast between the victimization experiences of the aged and younger persons is most vividly seen at the bottom of Table 2, where summary figures on “predatory” and “violent” victimizations are presented. Elderly victims are more likely to be preyed upon than treated violently, while younger victims are more likely to be treated violently than preyed upon.

(2) *Age of victim and location of violent and predatory victimization.*—The relative safety or danger of various locations can have important effects on human behavior and the perceived quality of life. For instance, crimes committed in the home or near it (in doorways, alleys, or elevators that are functionally part of the building in which the home is located) may be especially disconcerting, for they represent a penetration of one’s personal life space. This is a zone that most people believe should be a source of unquestioned safety (Rainwater, 1966), especially from strangers.

Table 3 shows noteworthy differences between the aged and other adults in terms of the proportion of *violent crimes* committed in various locations. For elderly persons, over half the violent victimizations occurred in or near their homes, and less than 30% took place on the street. For other adults the percentages tended to be reversed, and younger adults were more likely to suffer from violent crimes on public streets and in commercial establishments than in or near their homes.

This age difference in the location of violent crimes may be very important. Many violent crimes are committed against persons who place themselves in potentially dangerous situations (e.g., bars), or who become involved in arguments with family

⁶The distinction between robbery and personal larceny may be somewhat artificial. When someone takes property from another by force or the threat of force the crime is classified as a robbery; if there is no threat or use of force it is recorded as a personal larceny. However, as Repetto notes in his discussion of residential robbery (1974, p. 29), the victims of personal larceny are predominantly women who are purse snatch victims, whereas residential robbery victims are predominantly men who, having no purse to be snatched must be threatened or forced to hand over their wallets.

Table 2. Distribution of Victims by Crime Category and Age of Victim.

Age of Victim	12-16	17-20	21-26	27-32	33-39	40-49	50-64	65+
<i>Type of Crime</i>								
Assault	74.8	73.3	70.8	72.2	71.4	65.6	50.2	28.1
Robbery	17.4	15.7	16.9	16.3	19.2	22.3	27.0	39.1
Personal larceny	5.0	7.2	7.3	9.2	7.1	10.9	21.9	31.3
Rape	2.8	3.8	5.0	2.3	2.3	1.2	.9	1.5
Violent crime (rape and assault combined)	77.6	77.1	75.8	74.5	73.7	66.8	51.1	29.6
Predatory crime (robbery and personal larceny combined)	22.4	22.9	24.2	25.5	26.3	33.2	48.9	70.4
(N)	(1155)	(973)	(1075)	(567)	(369)	(463)	(473)	(236)

Table 3. Location of Violent Personal Crime by Age of Victim.*

Violent Crime	Age of Victim							
	12-16	17-20	21-26	27-32	33-39	40-49	50-64	65+
Occurred:								
In dwelling or home	3	9	15	17	18	19	17	32
Near home	7	6	8	9	14	17	18	20
On street	58	52	37	37	35	31	42	29
In commercial establishments or offices	3	13	23	23	20	20	14	9
In school	20	5	3	2	1	2	3	0
Other	9	15	13	12	12	11	7	10
(N)	(896)	(751)	(814)	(423)	(272)		(241)	(70)

*"In dwelling or hotel" combines incidents which took place in houses or apartments, vacation homes, or residential rooms in hotels. "Near home" refers to the victim's own home, and encompasses the yard, sidewalk, driveway, carport, and hallway (in apartment buildings) adjacent to the home. "Commercial establishments or offices" includes stores, gas stations, stations, office buildings, factories, warehouses, and the like. "On the street" includes crimes which took place in parks, fields or playgrounds, or on school grounds. "In school" and "other" are self-explanatory.

Table 4. Location of Predatory Personal Crime by Age of Victim.

Predatory Crime	Age of Victim							
	12-16	17-20	21-26	27-32	33-39	40-49	50-64	65+
Occurred:								
In dwelling or home	1	6	11	15	16	5	8	12
Near home	2	4	6	3	9	9	8	13
On street	54	48	50	41	46	53	52	51
In commercial establishments or offices	6	28	22	34	25	24	27	16
Schools	31	4	2	1	0	1	0	0
Other	6	10	10	7	4	8	5	9
(N)	(259)	(233)	(259)	(144)	(97)	(154)	(230)	(166)

members or close acquaintances (Curtis, 1974). In contrast, the elderly typically live alone and so have fewer opportunities to become involved in rancorous intrafamilial disputes. When they do get into disputes, the elderly are also less likely than younger persons to resort to violence. In addition, the aged can (and presumably do) stay away from dangerous places, avoid neighborhood bars, and even restrict their use of the public streets. However, whatever precautions one takes, one has to be at home at some time and use the doorways, elevators, and alleys of the building. It is precisely in such locations that the elderly tend to be victimized—their last refuge penetrated, despite their best precautions.

Concerning the location of predatory crimes, Table 4 indicates that about half of all predatory victimizations took place on public streets, regardless of the age of the victim. The aged were somewhat less likely to be victimized in an office building or commercial

establishment and were somewhat more likely to be victimized in or near their homes. However, the magnitude of these effects is rather small, and there seems to be little justification for claiming that the elderly are in any way special victims of predatory crime. Indeed, the only major locational difference in predatory crime involved adolescents who tended to be victimized more often than others in schools and on the streets (this last category includes school grounds).

(3) *Age of victim and characteristics of offenders who commit violent and predatory crimes.*—A variety of offender variables might give the victimization experiences of the aged a more fearful quality than the victimization experiences of other adults. We consider the extent to which violent and predatory crimes against persons of different age groups are committed by youths, by gangs, by offenders employing weapons, by assailants who are strangers, and by offenders

Table 5. Percentage of Violent Crime by Age of Victim and Various Offender Variables.

Age of Victim	12-16	17-20	21-26	27-32	33-39	40-49	50-64	65+
<i>Violent Offender Variables</i>								
% by youths	86	50	20	15	24	23	28	28
% by gangs	23	18	12	11	15	16	17	16
% unarmed	71	63	65	68	67	67	74	74
% with gun	3	11	15	12	15	15	12	10
% by strangers	52	61	64	62	56	55	64	71
% of whites by blacks	18	18	19	20	20	17	29	29

Table 6. Percentage of Predatory Crimes by Age of Victim and Various Offender Variables.

Age of Victim	12-16	17-20	21-26	27-32	33-39	40-49	50-64	65+
<i>Predatory Offender Variables</i>								
% by youths	89	46	34	32	37	33	45	51
% by gangs	37	20	23	11	27	24	28	21
% unarmed	74	50	45	45	45	42	55	60
% by gun	4	26	30	24	25	19	17	16
% by strangers	81	86	88	89	86	94	94	92
% of whites by blacks	46	39	50	58	45	49	61	65

who are black. (The phenomenon of whites attacking blacks will not be considered here. Blacks, who as a group suffer *higher* rates of victimization, almost never reported being victimized by whites.)

The data on violent crimes are in Table 5. There was no indication that the elderly were any more likely than other age groups to be attacked by gangs. When compared to persons 21 to 49, aged victims were more likely to have been attacked by youths than by older criminals. But the elderly were much less likely to have been attacked by youths when compared to persons under 21. The data show that most violent crime was committed by youths and was inflicted upon their peers.

Table 5 also indicates that violence against the elderly was more likely to be committed by strangers. In fact, almost three-quarters of the crimes against the elderly were committed by strangers. In addition, elderly whites were more likely to be attacked by black offenders than were white victims under 50. Almost 30% of the white victims of violent crime over 50 years of age had black attackers, as opposed to between 17 and 20% of younger victims. However fear-inducing these attacks may have been, they were less likely to involve weapons than were attacks on younger victims.

Table 6 presents data on the relationship of age to offender variables for predatory crimes. The elderly were more likely than

others to be victimized by individuals as opposed to gangs, and elderly whites' assailants were more likely to be young, unarmed strangers of a different race.

Summary

The preceding analyses allow us to answer the five descriptive questions about victimization of the elderly that were listed in the introduction. First, the elderly were less likely than others to be victimized, and, when only victims are considered, they were less likely than others to be subjected to violent crimes but were more likely to suffer from predatory incidents. Second, while on the street, senior citizens were no more likely than others to be victims of predatory crimes and were less likely to be victims of violent incidents. Attacks on the elderly which involved violence were more likely to occur in or near the home than was the case for other age groups. Third, the elderly were no more likely than other age groups to be victimized by gangs. Fourth, they were more likely than younger victims to have been attacked by black youths acting alone who were strangers to them. And finally, their assailants were less likely to be armed than were the assailants of younger victims.

These findings may have implications for understanding why the elderly fear crime more than younger persons though they are victimized less frequently. Young black male

strangers can be seen on the streets in many areas. Since this is the profile of persons who usually attack the elderly, each person who conforms to this physical profile may restate in elderly persons the fear of being victimized, even though the young black male stranger may be merely an innocent passerby. If it is true that the elderly stay at home more than younger persons, fear of meeting strangers on the street might be partly responsible for this. If so, our data suggest that the elderly are not likely to have *all* their fears stilled by staying at home, for when they are victimized they are more likely than others to be attacked in their homes or its immediate surroundings.

Alternative Solutions

What is to be done in order to prevent the elderly being victimized by young criminals engaged in unplanned low-skill endeavors, and thereby to reduce levels of fear among the elderly? Skogan and Klecka (1976) have suggested that it might be useful to consider victimization in terms of three factors, each of which may be positively related to victimization. These factors are *availability, vulnerability, and desirability*.

In terms of *availability*, we found that violent crimes were differently related to location for the elderly, while predatory crimes were not. Violent crimes were especially prevalent for the elderly in or near their homes, but less prevalent on the street than for other age groups. An obvious way to make the elderly less available for violent crimes would be to segregate them into security-intensive retirement communities or high-rise apartment buildings. This recommendation has been put forward by Sherman, Newman, Nelson, & Van Buren (1975), who interviewed 169 residents of public housing projects in the Albany-Troy, New York area. Their study suggested that residents of age-segregated housing may experience fewer crimes and have less fear of crime within their building than is the case with elderly residents of age-integrated housing or age-segregated housing within age-integrated projects. However, the policy of segregating the elderly, though seductively simple, may have many undesirable, unintended social consequences. First, it may increase the isolation of the elderly. Second, it may give no opportunity for age-related stereotypes to be dis-

confirmed in casual everyday encounters. Third, the effects are restricted to crimes and fear of crime *within the building*, for Sherman et al.'s findings suggested that residents in age-segregated housing were somewhat more fearful of crime in their neighborhoods than residents in age-integrated or mixed housing. And finally, the strategy of segregated housing is only relevant to crimes of violence from which the elderly are less likely to suffer than predatory crimes (see Table 2).

The elderly would be victimized less often if they could be made less *desirable* as targets of crime. This could be accomplished by increasing the penalties for victimizing them. For instance, the desirability of victimizing the aged would decrease if there were an improvement in the system for detecting criminals and for sentencing them swiftly and harshly. However, we found that the elderly are disproportionately victimized by young males acting alone who do not threaten with weapons or carry guns. According to some criminologists (Morris & Hawkins, 1970), youths of this type should be prime targets for supervision or community-based treatment, for the fear is that prolonged contact with the social life of jails and prisons may confirm them as criminals and put them beyond "rehabilitation." Alternatively, the desirability of the elderly as victims might be reduced by decreasing the apparent profitability of the criminal venture. This might be achieved by encouraging elderly women not to carry their money in purses that can be easily snatched. The principle here is similar to the practice of taxicab drivers who prominently advertise that they do not carry more than \$5.00 in change.

Finally, the elderly can be made to appear less *vulnerable* as targets of crime. We found that elderly victims were easily intimidated. They were attacked, often successfully, by offenders without weapons, working alone. There are at least three general strategies for reducing this apparent vulnerability. The first would be to increase police surveillance of places the elderly frequent. However, it is not clear whether this could be done to an extent that significantly reduces crime without depleting the treasury. A second strategy would be for the elderly to take self-defensive measures, including physical resistance to offenders. However, Hindelang's (1976) analysis indicates that such measures may backfire and increase the chances of being injured dur-

ing the course of a crime.⁷ Finally, there are a set of self-help activities which may well be of some utility in reducing the victimization of the elderly. "Buddy systems" and other group activities which make it more difficult to accost the elderly on the street are in this category, as are "escort programs" which join the elderly with youths who accompany the elderly on their daily rounds.

A more general approach to breaking the present pattern of victimizations against the elderly involves finding employment for young males with low education, particularly in the cities. The aim is to get the young people off the streets and to give them money and a stake in the very social order that they threaten by their criminal acts. This strategy would not protect any one group of victims but rather would be targeted at the overall problem of criminal victimization. It is not clear whether this strategy, if implemented, would be effective. Nor is it clear whether the political will exists to finance the creation of millions of jobs for urban youths.

We do not yet know the policies that are most likely to reduce crimes against the elderly and to still some of their fears. None of the alternatives we have considered strikes us as being of sufficient scope or probability of success that we could confidently recommend it as a general policy. However, some of the alternatives appear promising, especially those related to self-help activities including

group support for the elderly, making it more difficult for offenders to accost them. What is needed now is research aimed at adding to the list of alternatives and at empirically deciding which is the most effective among them.

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⁷Facing an unarmed assailant may work to the detriment of victims. Several studies have reported that those who fall victim to unarmed robbers are more likely to be injured than those robbed by an armed assailant (Conklin, 1972; Hindelang, 1976; Repetto, 1974). The reasons for this are unclear, although the sources cited articulate several hypotheses. However, it should be noted that victims are likely to suffer most of all if they offer resistance to armed attackers.