Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy, 1990, volume 8, pages 395 - 415

Agenda setting and the rise and fall of policy issues: the case of criminal victimization of the elderly

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Received 19 April 1990

Abstract. In nearly all studies of federal agenda-setting processes, the focus is on how issues achieve prominence on policy agendas. Seldom dealt with is how some of those issues then disappear, without any substantial action being taken on them. In this paper the life course of a single policy issue—criminal victimization of the elderly—is examined, and the forces that caused this issue to rise and fall on the Congressional policy agenda are analyzed. Abstracted models of those processes—entitled the convergent-voice and the divergent-voice models of issue ascendence and decline—may prove fruitful for understanding the complete life course of many similar issues.

Introduction

Although political scientists have long been interested in power and control in the policy process, a focus on agenda setting—how issues come to receive serious attention by the public and policymakers—did not emerge until the 1970s. By the end of that decade the term had appeared in several books and articles, especially those dealing with public policy (for example, Edwards and Sharkansky, 1978; Eyestone, 1978; Kingdon, 1973; Lindblom, 1980; Lineberry, 1978; Starling, 1979). In the same period, an interest in agenda setting also developed within mass-communications research, where the emphasis was on how the mass media communicate the relative importance of various issues to the public and policymakers (for example, McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Shaw and McCombs, 1977). Case studies have principally been used to provide empirical contexts for theoretical attempts to integrate research findings (for example, in political science, Kellman, 1987; Kingdon, 1984; Nelson, 1984; Polsby, 1984; Walker, 1977; in mass communication, Cook et al, 1983; Lang and Lang, 1981; 1983; Protess et al, 1987).

Cobb and Elder (1971; 1972) were perhaps the first to point out how neither traditional democratic theory nor the modern pluralist democratic elitism (for example, Dahl, 1967) give us clear insight into how and why some issues make it to the policy proposal stage. They suggested that more attention needed to be paid to agenda setting—not how groups gain access to decisionmakers but rather how issues gain access to an institutional agenda and how groups and institutions play a role in that process. In line with this, Cobb et al (1976) proposed three different models of agenda setting. Their *outside-initiative* model describes how groups outside government articulate grievances and pressure decisionmakers to place issues onto formal agendas; their *mobilization* model describes a process in which political leaders initiate a policy and attempt to mobilize the necessary interest, support, and compliance of mass publics; and their *inside-initiative* model describes how policy initiators and supporters seek a 'private' decision within the government and generally fear defeat if the salience of the issue increases. Cook (1981) later

proposed a fourth, *convergent-voice*, model which depends upon the same issue being independently articulated by different groups inside and outside government at about the same time, within the context of a ripe issue climate. This model has considerable overlap with Kingdon's (1984) theory of agenda setting which, in turn, draws from the 'garbage-can' model of Cohen et al (1972). Kingdon's theory, buttressed by his own comparative case studies and interviews, posits that issues rise on policy agendas when three separate 'streams' join together at a time when a window of opportunity develops. The streams are of problems (we agree that X is a problem), of policy solutions (X can be solved by Y), and of politics (contending groups can somehow reach consensus about dealing with X by doing Y).

Most of the theoretical work and case studies on agenda processes deal with agenda *setting*. They examine how issues 'make it', ending once issues have achieved prominence or died an early death. But many issues achieve prominence and then decline in policy salience without anything substantial happening. To date, little empirical or theoretical attention has been paid to this process of coming off policy agendas, and the agenda setting literature offers only a set of casual, ad hoc explanations for the denouement of many seemingly important issues. A rare exception is the work of Downs (1972), who deals with the decline of issues on the general public's agenda. He describes a five-stage cycle of public interest which highlights how discouraging it is to learn of the difficulty and expense of dealing with serious problems and which also emphasizes how short the attention span of the general public is, especially when a problem has few inherently exciting qualities. Some of these factors may influence actors in the agenda-setting process other than the general public. Indeed, Kingdon (1984), Light (1982), and Walker (1977) all note that *anticipation of failure* is an important reason for the disappearance of issues from the governmental agenda. After an initial burst of enthusiasm from select quarters has pushed them to prominence, some issues turn out not to look very promising over the long haul and fade from sight. However, the resilience of experienced political actors may be greater than that of the general public discussed in Down's theory, for it is the business of interest groups and bureaucracies to sustain interest in issues, and it is the job of legislatures and executives to frame solutions and spend money.

Other commentators have noted that issues *must* decline because the agendas of particular institutional actors are finite—some must slide off if others are to take their place. Light (1982) argues that the agenda of the US president, for example, is fixed by the size of the staff and the time, energy, and expertise that staff members can bring to bear. Consequently, issues have to move off the president's 'must list' all the time, even if they have not been satisfactorily resolved. Light also argues that Congress can be overloaded for similar reasons, so much so that the inability of Congress members to process additional input has served as a major impediment to activist presidents. Nelson (1984) points out that issues need 'recurring maintenance' to keep them on active agendas while the often laborious policymaking process is acted out, and that "the governmental agenda would be incredibly crowded if there were no mechanism for removing from public consideration the myriad of horse-and-buggy issues which no longer evoke general interest" (page 23). The notion that there is a structurally determined 'agenda size' is an interesting concept which may prove useful in policy studies. However, in any *particular* instance there probably is always 'room for one more' specific issue, as suggested by the fact that the number of bills introduced in the US House and Senate has increased markedly since the 1950s. Thus, it would seem hard to make a persuasive case that the decline of any particular issue of reasonable scope was caused by the low vacancy rate of that system.

Kellman (1987) suggests a second structural explanation for issue decline. He characterizes US politics as providing multiple access points at which an issue can gain entry to the agenda, but also as providing a multiple-veto system which increases the likelihood that some party or other will veto the issue. But because *all* issues must run this gauntlet, Kellman's theory cannot serve by itself as an explanation of why some issues do or do not decline. It is the search for a general and more independently observable explanation for issue decline which motivates us here.

To this end, we first present a case study of how criminal victimization of the elderly arrived on the Congressional policy agenda in the early 1970s and then assumed a lower profile in the late 1970s. Next we try to explain that rise and the fall; then we propose a more general model of issue decline which meets the data for this case study and can be independently tested in subsequent research. In the concluding sections, we explore alternative explanations for the pattern of issue decline that we observed, and we highlight the implications of this case for the role of social research in the policy process.

Describing the rise and fall of the issue

Since the number of potential policy issues far exceeds the capabilities of Congress to process them, some issues achieve visibility on the policy agenda, while others do not. Between 1970 and 1978, the issue of crime against the elderly made it onto the Congressional agenda and also received attention from the news media, the federal bureaucracy, elderly interest groups, and some academic and professional publications.

To describe the rise and fall of the issue, we employed a variety of research strategies. To measure attention to crime and the elderly in the mass media, the bureaucracy, the academic and professional community, and Congress, we counted entries having to do with the issue each year from 1970 to 1980 in the *New York Times Index*, the grant records of the Department of Justice's Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), the *Social Science Citation Index*, and the *Congressional Record Index*. To examine how the crime and the elderly issue was defined over time, we conducted content analyses of each entry in the *Congressional Record*. Finally, we interviewed thirty-five key actors in the life of the crime and the elderly issue located in the Administration on Aging (AoA), the LEAA, aging interest groups, the academic research community, and Congressional staff members of the House Select Committee on Aging and the Senate Special Committee on Aging.

In figure 1 the life course of the issue is depicted (1) within the news media (as exemplified by a content analysis of the *New York Times*); (2) within the bureaucracy (as exemplified by the number of grants on the topic funded by the LEAA; and (3) within the relevant academic and professional communities (as indexed by publications). First to peak were accounts of crimes against the elderly in the *New York Times*. These increased from 1 in 1970, to 33 in 1973, and to 95 in 1974. The number of accounts dealing with the issue remained at about this level from 1975 to 1977 but began to drop in 1978, although not quite to the level of the period 1970–72.

The numbers of LEAA categorical awards on crime and the elderly remained low between 1970 and 1977, as did subgrant awards to states. However, in 1978 there was a tremendous spurt to 102 categorical and 128 subgrant awards related to crime and the elderly. By 1980 the number of awards granted had substantially decreased.

The number of articles in academic and professional publications also rose and fell. They ranged between 0 and 9 from 1970 to 1975. Then there was a sharp increase to 35 in 1976 and to 47 in 1977. In 1978 the number tapered off to 13, in 1979 to 3; and in 1980 there were 8 articles.

In figure 2, we illustrate the course of the crime and the elderly issue in the US Congress during the 1970s. The number of hearings ranged between 0 and 5 from 1970 to 1975. In 1976 they increased to 7; in 1977 there were 6; in 1978 there were 5; in 1979 the figure was 5; in 1980 only 1. The solid line in figure 2 shows the number of times in Congress that a legislator mentioned the topic of criminal

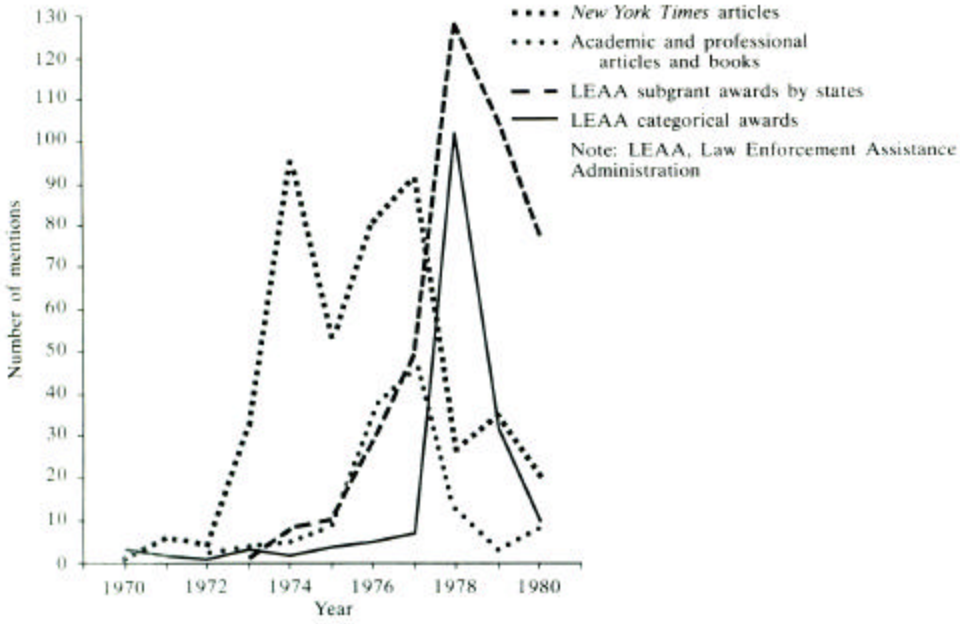

Figure 1. Attention to crime and the elderly by the media, the bureaucracy, and academic and/or professional publications.

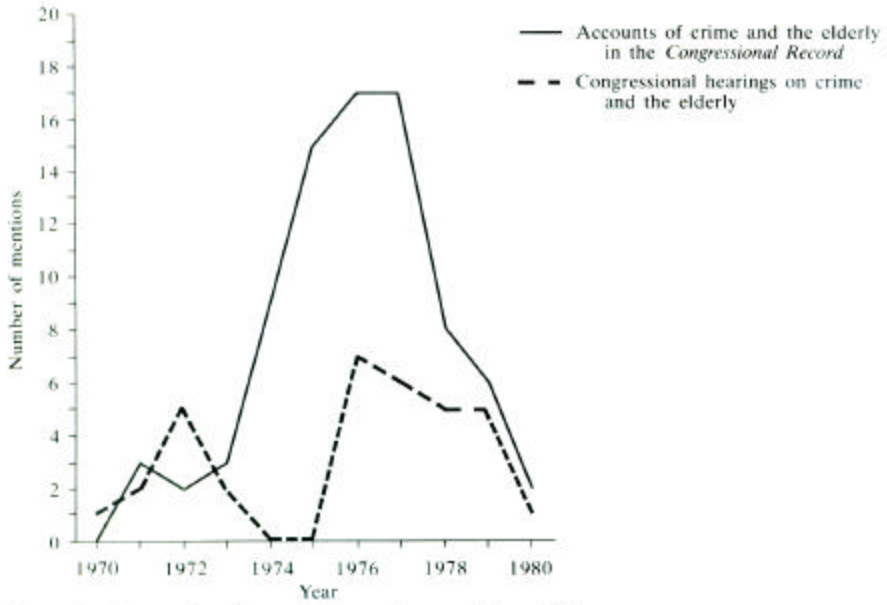

Figure 2. Congressional attention to crime and the elderly.

victimization of the elderly in a speech or in introducing legislation. Ranging between 0 and 3 for the years 1970 to 1974, Congressional mentions increased to 15 in 1975, 17 in 1976, and 17 in 1977. They then began to drop somewhat: 8 in 1978, 6 in 1979, and 2 in 1980.

Thus, within one decade, the salience of the issue of crime and the elderly rose *and* fell on the formal policy agenda of Congress, and the same is true for some agency, media, and scholarly agendas. The decline was not due to public resistance to the issue, for data on opinions suggest that there was a favorable 'climate' for the issue throughout this period. Indeed, a national survey conducted in 1974 for the National Council on the Aging found that 50% of all US citizens thought that 'fear of crime' constituted a 'very serious problem' for the elderly (National Council on the Aging, 1975), and the same question asked in 1981 showed that 74% of the public thought fear of crime was a major concern for the elderly (National Council on the Aging, 1981). Nor was the decline due to the decrease in crimes against the elderly. Indeed, Census Bureau indicators suggest that the real level of victimization did not change for the elderly at all in the 1970s. During the period described by figures 1 and 2, rates of criminal victimization of the elderly remained virtually unchanged (Cook and Skogan, 1984). There is no evidence that concern in Washington over this issue waned because of decreasing public concern, nor that it was driven by shifts in the actual level of the problem at hand. Rather, the dramatic ups and downs in attention and activity depicted in figures 1 and 2 appear to be due to agenda-setting processes that are little understood. The next sections deal with why these oscillations took place.

Coming on the agenda: a convergent-voice model

Cook (1981) developed the convergent-voice model to depict how this particular policy issue arose. The model describes the rise of issues that are independently and similarly articulated by several different groups or notables, both within and outside of government at about the same time. First, the model requires a ripe issue climate for the issue to gain salience. It is not difficult to see that criminal victimization of the elderly emerged in a ripe issue climate. The issue is fundamentally composed of three subthemes: crime, victims, and the elderly. By the early 1970s, each of these separately commanded attention. There was concern about increasing crime rates, about an undue emphasis on the rights of criminals rather than their victims, and about the health and welfare of the ever-growing number of elderly persons in the USA. Crime against the elderly neatly encompassed all these concerns in a single issue. Moreover, in Nelson's (1984, page 27) terms, the issue seemed to be a 'valence' issue: one that elicits a "single, fairly uniform emotional response" from all audiences and allows only one position to be taken (see also Campbell et al, 1966, pages 170–174).

The second stage in the convergent-voice model requires that multiple sources voice concern about the issue. In the case of criminal victimization of the elderly, this process of articulation occurred during 1971 and 1972. In 1971, the White House Conference on Aging recommended that "police protection of the elderly should become a top priority" (USGPO, 1971, page 74). At about the same time—and independently of the White House Conference—a special committee of the US Senate held hearings on housing needs of older US citizens. In 1971, and extending into 1972, these hearings became refocused on problems of crime against senior citizens, first in public housing, then in public *and* private housing, and finally on crimes in general against elderly people. The consensus of those who testified and those senators who participated in the hearings was expressed in Senator Harrison Williams's rhetorical questions: "Do we need any more proof that a crisis in

crime exists? Do we need any more reason to act on an emergency basis?" (US Congress, 1972, page 481). The news media helped to push the issue onto the policy agenda in a series of stories appearing in the *Boston Herald*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Hartford Courant* which focused on crimes against elderly persons in federally funded housing.[1] These stories were one of the impetuses to White House Conference planners to add a Special Concerns Session on "Legal Aid and the Urban Aged" and were widely quoted in the Congressional hearings.

The third stage in the convergent-voice model of agenda setting requires the legitimization of the issue. This occurred during the 1972–75 period. First, the news media covered the issue of criminal victimization of the elderly extensively. Our content analysis of the *New York Times* coverage of stories about crime against the elderly shows a dramatic increase, from one story in 1970 to 95 stories in 1974. Attention to the issue by the media preceded that by the other sectors described by figures 1 and 2. Second, several key officials within the legislative and executive branches of government helped to legitimize the issue by speaking out publicly about the elderly's problem of criminal victimization. These key officials included the president, senators, representatives, and the directors of the FBI, LEAA, and the AoA. Third, organizations of elderly persons spoke publicly about the problem and began to think about how best to attack it. Fourth, the legitimacy of the issue was enhanced by documentation of the problem. The AoA funded a study which examined crimes against elderly persons in Kansas City. Despite the fact that only older victims were studied, the conclusions in the report made comparative statements such as, "of all persons who become targets of a criminal act, the elderly suffer most" (Cunningham, 1975, page 6). These findings were used to back the claim that crimes against the elderly were a 'crisis'. This claim appeared in print (for example, *Chicago Sun Times* 1975, page 1; Goldsmith and Tomas, 1974) and was widely cited at the 1975 National Conference on Crimes Against the Elderly.

The fourth stage in the model requires policy specification and program development. Beginning in 1975, and continuing through 1978, policies and programs were proposed to deal with the problem. For example, the Crime Control Act of 1976 (Public Law 94-503) required that states receiving LEAA discretionary grant funds include plans for projects assisting the elderly in the comprehensive law enforcement plan of their state—unless a state found the requirement inappropriate. The Victims of Crime Act of 1978 (HR 7010) (defeated but reintroduced again and again) included special entitlements for elderly victims, and several bills were introduced (but not passed) calling for stiffer sentences for criminals who victimized older persons. In addition, a National Bicentennial Conference on Justice and Older Americans brought together researchers, advocates, and practitioners in 1976. The national FBI Academy added a course on the topic to its curriculum. The International Association of Chiefs of Police used LEAA funds to develop model projects to fight crime against the elderly. AoA and LEAA contributed $200 000 to demonstration projects in six cities, and both agencies sponsored pamphlets on elderly crime prevention and victim assistance. The only other positive federal action was the creation of a direct bank-deposit program for recipients of Social Security and Supplemental Security Income.

Clearly, the issue of criminal victimization of the elderly reached formal agenda status on the Congressional policy agenda. It emerged at a time when the elderly, crime, and victims were each 'hot' topics and brought them together in one neat issue package. In its early stage, it was articulated as an issue by delegates to the

[1] The newspaper articles and the reports from the *Congressional Record* mentioned in text are available from the authors.

White House Conference on Aging, by commentators who testified at hearings before the Senate Special Committee on Aging, and by the senators at those hearings. Then, other voices converged in agreeing that crimes against the elderly constituted an important issue about which the federal government should be concerned and act. Among these convergent voices were those of the media, officials in federal agencies, influential Congress members, the President, and scholars. The question is: why did the issue decline in salience after 1977?

Going off the agenda

A credible competing voice emerged

An important feature of the decline of elderly victimization on the Congressional agenda was a breakdown of the early consensus about the nature of the problem. In the early 1970s no reliable evidence was available to identify the relative magnitude and nature of the problem, creating opportunities for advocates to define the terms of the debate. Whatever knowledge there was came from media reports of individual elderly victims, testimonials by victims, and studies of small samples of elderly victims. All left the impression that rates of victimization against the elderly were high when compared with other age-groups.

The first systematic empirical evidence on the issue came from the National Crime Surveys (NCS), begun by the Census Bureau in 1973 to measure the yearly level of crime victimization in the USA. An advance report on its findings for the first six months of 1973 was released in November, 1974, and it was not until 1976 that the first full report on the 1973 data was released. It revealed that the elderly were *not* the most likely age-group to be victimized. In fact, the opposite seemed true, for in nearly all crime categories they were the least likely age-group to be victimized.

These survey-based conclusions about crime rates could not be readily ignored. It could not be claimed, for example, that the victimizations only appeared to be lower for the elderly because older persons were less likely to report crimes to the police, for the data came from many thousands of in-person interviews conducted by Census Bureau interviewers with a random sample of US citizens. As one highly placed staff member for the House Select Committee on Aging said of the NCS in one of our interviews in 1980, "We didn't want to believe the data about rates ... We talked to several very respected criminologists and social scientists to be sure we could trust the data. They didn't tell us what we wanted to hear [that is, that the data could not be trusted] ... They said it was good data." Thus, the highly credible and increasingly visible social science evidence undercut all the individual case studies of elderly crime victims, leaving the impression that the elderly were uniquely spared from crime rather than uniquely exposed to it.

The problem was repeatedly reformulated

In Downs's 'issue-attention cycle', the public first becomes aware of a particular problem, then alarmed about it, and then enthusiastic to solve it (Downs, 1972, page 39). Downs does not speculate about what might happen if, during the 'alarmed-discovery' stage, credible information becomes available showing that the problem is not what people thought it was and should be redefined. Yet, this is what happened with criminal victimization of the elderly.

To examine how the issue of crime against the elderly was defined in Congress between 1970 and 1981, we used the *Congressional Record*. We coded how the problem was defined in (1) each speech that a member of Congress gave and (2) each news article or editorial that was inserted into the *Record*. At least two researchers coded each *Record* entry and revealed high levels of intercoder agreement (90%).

Figure 3 shows what percentages of all discussions of crime and the elderly were about rates of crime, the economic and physical consequences of crime, fear of crime, and the behavioral consequences of such fear. Thus, the figure depicts the way the problem of criminal victimization of the elderly was formulated and reformulated in Congress.

In the early years (1970–72) the preponderance of the claims were about rates (the elderly are more likely to be victimized than people in other age-groups) and fear (these high rates of crime make the elderly more fearful of crime than those in other age-groups). In the period 1973–75, early findings from the NCS began to circulate in research and policy circles, making it difficult to claim that the rates of crimes were higher against the elderly. Instead, the economic *consequences* of victimization experiences came to be stressed.

Steiner (1981) has noted how conflicting claims about the magnitude of a problem can make it difficult to solidify support for policy and can enable its detractors to chip away at the support base. One can see that process at work in this case as policy entrepreneurs sought to redefine the nature of the problem they were seeking to solve. The terms of the policy debate shifted. In an address on the floor of Congress in 1977, Congressman Morgan Murphy frankly acknowledged that the problem was not one of high rates of crime against older US citizens but rather, as he argued, fear of crime and the possibility that crimes against the elderly have more severe physical and economic consequences (*Congressional Record* 1977, page E5066).

However, those who accepted the consequence rationale were soon on the defensive as well. Although doubts about the differential severity of consequences of victimization for the elderly had been raised earlier (Cook and Cook, 1976), it was not until 1978 that they began gaining visibility. At the hearings held in

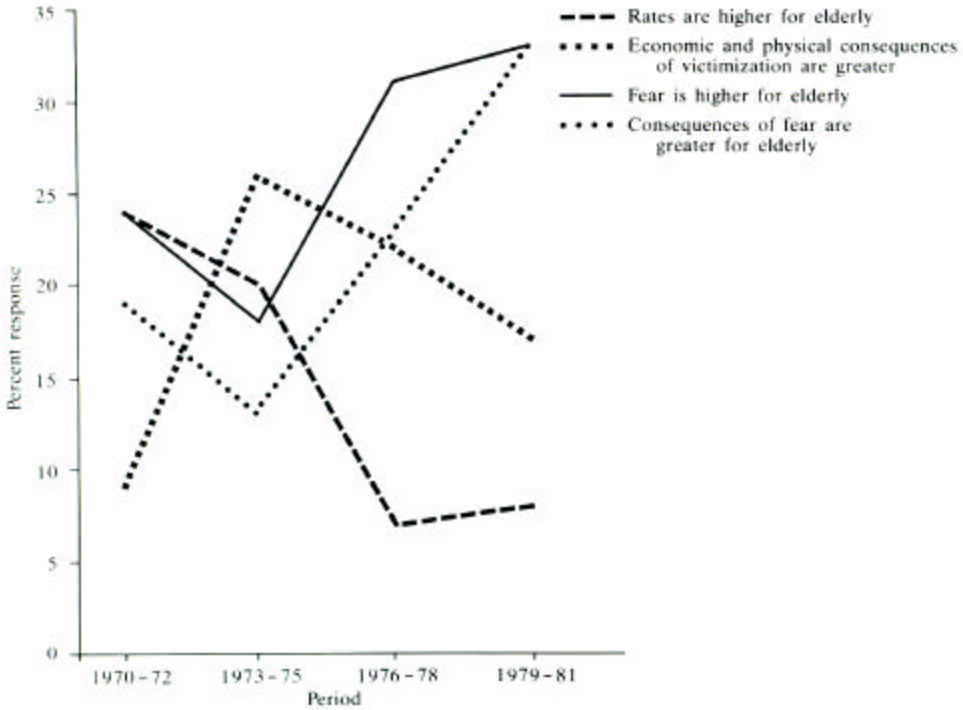

Figure 3. Problem formulation and reformulation about crimes against the elderly.

January of that year by the US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Aging, research results were presented that further questioned the conventional wisdom. It was revealed that the elderly do not suffer more severe physical and economic consequences than people in other age-groups. An example of the difficulties involved in changing the traditional view is found in the following interchange in January 1978 between two congressmen, James H Scheuer and Edward Roybal, and Dr Michael Hindelang, a well known criminologist who had conducted extensive analyses of the NCS, during a Congressional Hearing by the House Select Committee on Aging.

> Scheuer: I think you are probably aware that you have taken us all a little aback; we are breathless here in disbelief at your feeling that the impact of crime against the elderly is not disproportionate to the impact of crime against the rest of the population.
> Hindelang: That's right.
> Scheuer: Now, we discussed before that we know as a statistical matter—in numerical terms—crime against the elderly is somewhat less than crimes against young people.
> Hindelang: Very substantially less ...
> Scheuer: I know when I go back to my district if I told them, look you are undervictimized, you are not overvictimized, why, they would be hanging me in effigy in my district.
> Roybal: In my district, too. That's for sure.
>
> (US Congress, 1978a, pages 35–36).

Scheuer then, almost plaintively, asked Hindelang how public perceptions could be so different from the facts. In response, Hindelang gave what amounted to a short lecture on probability versus nonprobability sampling. He pointed out that Congressional Committees often hear testimony from very unrepresentative persons, even though they have heartrending experiences to describe. Often, they have been assembled by staff members to represent constituencies, to make predetermined points, or to capture media attention for the hearings. On the other hand, Hindelang explained that the NCS provides a representative portrait of the entire population.

As indicated by figure 3, by the 1976–78 period the problem most often mentioned in connection with crime against the elderly was not the problem of rates or consequences; rather it was that the elderly were believed to be the group most fearful of crime. In testimony before the House Select Committee on Aging in 1978, the Associate Administrator of LEAA noted this and its effects on the policy debate: "While statistics indicate that the elderly are victimized less frequently than other age groups, such statistics do not convey the effect of crime on older persons—their despair, depression, worry, and fear" (US Congress, 1978b, page 103).

The fear rationale was on a firmer footing than others, for many surveys available in 1975 showed higher fear levels among the elderly. The major difficulty with the fear formulation was that it was less intuitively important as a rationale for action when compared either with uniquely high victimization rates or with victims suffering a disproportionate degree of financial and physical harm. Indeed, the lower rates of victimization among the elderly made the fear rationale vulnerable to the charge that the fear in question was 'irrational'. Although the fear rationale has remained salient to this day and little disconfirming evidence has been widely circulated, it is a rationale without an obviously effective remedy. Short of accomplishing the seemingly impossible task of significantly reducing the crime rate, how does one reduce fear of crime among the elderly?

We have seen that the problem of crime and the elderly was given at least three different formulations during the 1970s, each emphasized at a different time. One major impetus for the reformulations was that descriptive research findings from a government-financed national data collection system (the NCS) refuted the more general and fundamental claims being made to justify attention to the problem. The problem for the elderly was not one of disproportionately high rates of victimization or disproportionately serious physical or economic consequences. As the sands of the debate shifted, crimes against the elderly seemed less important with each shift. Our interviews, in 1980, with major policy entrepreneurs who had once actively promoted the importance of crime against the elderly corroborated this shift. One staff member in the House Select Committee on Aging said, "If it had not been for the National Crime Survey, we would have taken the position that the elderly were over-victimized. That would have been a much stronger position to take, and that's surely what we believed before we looked at the data." Similarly, a high official in the AoA said, "It simply became a dead issue. We were convinced by the data that showed it wasn't such a hot problem."

Similar corroboration came from people outside of government. A senior staff member of a key aging interest group commented, "The NCS data put us on the defensive. We had to explain them. We had to spend time showing that the crime and aging issue shouldn't be dropped." A research staff member of a contract research company which studied uses of the NCS said, "I think there's less attention to crime and the elderly now because of the impact of the National Crime Surveys done in the mid-1970s which showed there wasn't so much victimization of the elderly Americans. These studies were a real inhibitor of the crime and the elderly issue continuing to receive attention."

The issue was not central to a federal agency's mandate or budget

An often overlooked factor in the Congressional agenda-setting literature is executive agency involvement in an issue (for an exception see Nelson, 1978; 1984). To remain salient on the legislative agenda, it helps an issue if one or more agencies provide 'recurring maintenance' (Nelson, 1984) through, for example, the funding of research or demonstration projects, the preparing of information for distribution to the public or Congress, and the providing of testimony in Congressional hearings.

The two relevant agencies for crime against the elderly were the AoA and the LEAA. They were each interested enough in the issue of crime and the elderly that in 1976 they collaborated in the funding of demonstration projects in six cities in an attempt to reduce the impact of crime against the elderly. Each agency also independently funded research studies and demonstration programs related to the issue of crime and the elderly as well as major national conferences on crime and the elderly.

Nonetheless, their initial involvement in the issue did not persist. The federal agency with the most resources for dealing with crimes against the elderly was LEAA. But this was also the agency with the most intimate knowledge of the findings of the NCS. As early as 1975, LEAA and FBI officials were saying in public that crime rates against the elderly were lower than against other groups. Also, slowing the momentum towards action were the widespread beliefs within the agency that to target crime-reduction services at the elderly might not have much impact on crime, and that it was the business of the federal government to prevent crime and to improve the criminal justice system for all citizens, not just for the elderly. Figure 1 documented how sharply LEAA state-level and federal categorical grants dropped off after their peak in 1978.

Bureaucratic involvement in the issue of crimes against the elderly also declined because countervailing agency priorities emerged in each of the agencies, and these reduced the motivation to fight for this issue. Arthur Fleming, the Commissioner of Aging from the early 1970s to 1976, was extremely interested in the problem of crime against older people. But in 1977 a new commissioner on aging, Robert Benedict, was appointed by recently elected President Carter. Like the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Joseph Califano, Benedict's primary concern was to reduce health-care costs, and the priority issue on his mind was health care in the home. One former official reminded us laughingly in an interview, "Remember, also, that the crime issue was an NIH [not invented here] issue for the new commissioner, and incoming administrators want to deal with new issues" (1980). Also, resources were not so slack in either AoA or LEAA (Nelson, 1978; Walker, 1977) that they could be devoted to criminal victimization of the elderly if it were tagged as a minor issue. Alone, none of these facts may have caused AoA to relegate criminal victimization of the elderly to a lower priority, for there were some civil servants who continued to be interested in the issue. However, when combined with the NCS data showing that the elderly did not have a special problem in regard to crime, the realities within AoA made it easier to give higher priority to other issues.

Countervailing priorities also existed within LEAA. By the mid-1970s, efforts were afoot to shift the focus of the agency in the direction of emphasizing efficiency and fairness in the processing of criminal defendents, rather than continuing to try to get the national crime rate down. One result of this refocus would be that the police, prosecutors, and judges would become the principal targets of the agency's money (then approaching one billion dollars a year). With this new direction, agency officials believed they would be more able to demonstrate measurable accomplishments than they did while pursuing their previous goal of reducing crime.

A cohesive policy community failed to develop

Active policy communities are important in maintaining an issue on the agenda. The last two decades in the United States of America have witnessed the formation of communities of experts around problems such as vocational education, control of water pollution, and judicial administration (Heclo, 1978; Sabatier, 1988). Policy communities are made up of persons involved in the politics and policymaking of a restricted policy area (Walker, 1977). It is among such networks that policy issues tend to be defined, the relevant evidence debated, and alternative options worked out.

The loose policy grouping around the issue of crime and the elderly never developed into a cohesive community. This was not owing to lack of available opportunities. The 1975 National Conference on Crimes Against the Elderly brought together agency officials from the LEAA and the AoA, members of the US Congress, practitioners in the aging and law enforcement areas, and social scientists; so did the 1976 Conference on Justice and Older Americans. Yet these different persons and relevant groups never joined forces in any meaningful way. Why was this?

There seemed to be two major and related reasons. First, there was little agreement about a solution to the problem; the shifting issue of crime and the elderly never got linked in a realistic way to a limited set of plausible federal policy alternatives on which all could reach consensus. It was not clear where the federal government could target the problem. Could it be at the street level, by increasing the number of policemen on the beat in areas with a higher percentage of elderly persons? Could it be in courtrooms, by having elderly 'court watchers' monitor each case of a person accused of victimizing an elderly person? Would it

be possible at the sentencing and prison levels, by enacting mandatory stiff sentences for criminals who victimized an elderly person? Should the federal government push crime-prevention education programs for the elderly? Should the proper focus be to work on target-hardening strategies—that is, by installing locks and bars on elderly persons' homes? Or should there be legislation to compensate financially the elderly victim of crime?

All of these proposals were made by members of what could be called the policy community. However, advocates for the elderly could never join in supporting one or two specific and seemingly substantial programs. Thus, a dizzying number of alternative actions was proposed, around which no consensus emerged, while the problem which they were to solve did not stay firmly anchored. Proposals for harsher sentences ran foul of civil liberties concerns; discussions of compensation for property thefts mired down in concern about fraud and did not deal with the 'rates' and 'fear' formulations of the problem. Some of the proposed solutions—such as court watching and mandating the allocation of police personnel—threatened the operating routines of powerful local bureaucracies. In the end, the federal policy response consisted of some minor tinkering with procedures in federal criminal cases, the direct-bank-deposit program, and regulations requiring that the states plan programs to attack crimes against the elderly. (With the demise of LEAA in the early 1980s, the latter requirement disappeared.) In his discussion of the White House policy process, Light (1982) indicates that executive attention always is focused upon a single policy alternative (often the first which 'satisfices'), which is refined into its final form through internal debate. In the case of crime and the elderly, no galvanizing proposal ever was on the table.

The second, and related, roadblock to the development of a policy community was the widely perceived intractibility of the problem of crime against the elderly to any practical solution. We do not have ways of combating crime which are simple, demonstrably effective, and congruent with democratic values. It could not be documented that any of the proposed programs for the elderly actually would work, although that might not have been fatal had any of the proposed programs seemed plausible enough to make a significant dent in any of the shifting definitions of the issue. In this respect, criminal victimization of the elderly was quite different from other 'technically solvable' problems in the policy arena on the aging, problems such as health care in the home for which solutions apparently are clear and the divisive issues are money and personnel. A truly cohesive policy community for the issue of crime and the elderly never emerged to coordinate activities, to press for one policy alternative, or to advocate continued study of the problem.

Media attention declined

As was shown in figure 1, media attention to the problem of crimes against older adults declined markedly from 1978. Why did this occur? Crime news is 'easy news' (Gordon and Heath, 1981, page 230). It is cheap to obtain and can be turned up predictably whenever an exciting filler story is needed. Information about individual crimes is readily available; the basic facts are contained in records conveniently available to reporters from the police; and police officers are accepted by reporters' editors as credible, reliable sources. Crime news sells newspapers because it is dramatic and exciting. As one intern was told, "bad news, good story; good news, bad story" (Tuck, as quoted by Gordon and Heath, 1981, page 232).

Crime and the elderly has, therefore, the potential to generate press coverage of dramatic *individual incidents* of crime that can become interesting brief stories or dramatic features, even if crime against the elderly is not on the increase. All that is required are dramatic criminal events with elderly victims. However, as it became

more widely known that the Census Bureau found low rates of victimization and no distinctive consequences of crime for the elderly, stories about crime and the elderly became less clear and easy to tell. There were still dramatic individual stories, but when reporters called participants in the policy community for material (for example, to help them document a 'national trend'), they often got mixed signals. Both the current authors (and other researchers they know) can personally attest to the confusion of reporters and television editors who called us for background information and for help in identifying 'what the story is'. Journalists' confusion about the large facts surely contributed to some of them devoting less attention to criminal victimization of the elderly and made the issue harder to depict in responsible media outlets.

Going off the agenda: a divergent-voice model

Basing our argument on this analysis of the decreasing salience of the issue of crime against the elderly, we propose what we hope will be shown by future research to be a general model of one pattern of the fate of certain issues on the Congressional policy agenda. In figure 4 the elements of the divergent-voice model of issue decline are summarized. No element by itself would have been sufficient to lower significantly the saliency of the issue of crime against the elderly on the policy agenda. It was only when all the elements came together that the issue went off the active policy agenda. This model advances some midrange theoretical explanations for issue decline which might inform future research on agenda processes. It is in line with the contextually dependent theory of policy decisionmaking suggested by Cobb and Elder (1981) and Elder and Cobb (1984) (see also Cohen et al, 1972). They argue that policy processes vary in their degree of 'structuredness' and that the dynamics involved may be understood in terms of the factors that structure and constrain the flow of participants, problems, solutions, and choice opportunities in any given decisional context.

First, a strong and credible countervoice emerges which challenges the accepted formulation of the issue. For a popular issue that is already on an institutional agenda and offers obvious political advantages to decline, something must happen which convincingly redefines the issue, undermines the consensus, and makes problematic its apparent political advantage. There are a variety of potential 'voices' that might achieve this. Interest-group theory would have us look to the reactive mobilization of elites and powerful organizations whose interests are threatened by the progress of an issue. Experience with investigative journalism suggests that prominant negative attention by the media may also serve as an effective divergent voice, although some research on how the journalistic enterprise really works in this regard suggests that such investigations are not necessarily independent

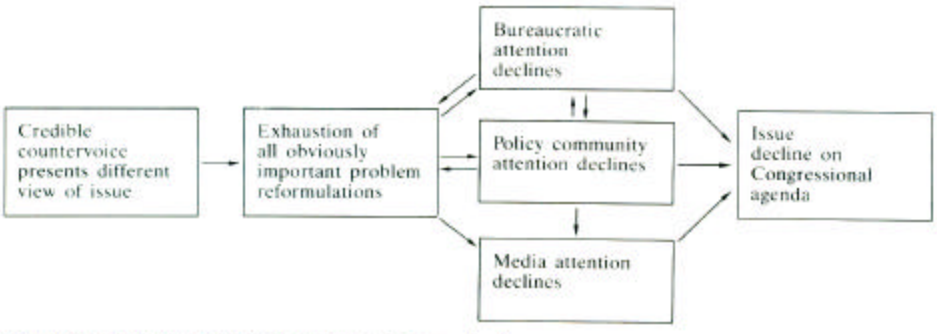

Figure 4. The divergent-voice model of issue decline.

of government interests (Cook et al, 1983). In the present study, the divergent voice came from another source—from the circulation of research findings collected by the Census Bureau for the Justice Department. Results from the victimization surveys were widely available in technical reports, were heavily cited by researchers, and were widely cited in the media. What they revealed did not square with the succession of definitions offered of 'the problem' of criminal victimization of the elderly.

The critical issue is what happens next, for a credible countervoice alone is not sufficient to cause an issue to decline in salience. In line with theories of micro-mediation (Cook and Campbell, 1979, page 34), a number of factors must intervene between the countervoice and the decline in salience of an issue; thus, it is the credible countervoice *in combination with* several micromediating factors which have the power to cause the sharp drop in the salience of an issue. The key actors in the process are executive branch agencies, participants in the policy community, and the media.

The first micromediating factor shown in figure 4 is that all obviously important reformulations of the problem are exhausted. If the definition of a problem is challenged, advocates of action on the issue seek to reformulate it to achieve a construction of the problem that secures widespread public support and that is not at odds with the divergent voice. But this strategy will work only if that new formulation closes the fatal wound opened by the countervoice. Most issues go through some redefinition as they are tested in the heat of the policy debate, but they survive only if the reformulations can retain or rekindle some combination of interest among bureaucratic agencies, the policy community, and the mass media.

The second of these micromediating factors is that the affected federal agencies accept the adverse reformulation of the problem and do not continue to reincarnate it. In the case of crime against the elderly, AoA and LEAA officials were convinced of the correctness of the reformulated problem because of the consensus of experts in the field. Moreover, crime against the elderly was not central to the mission of either AoA or LEAA and thus was not needed to justify their budgets. Last, neither agency was in need of issues to work on; both had other problems to which they could turn.

Clearly, bureaucratic involvement in nascent issues is important to the life of an issue, but it is sometimes fickle. Because agency officials want to be seen as working on important problems and because many issues jockey for their attention, their attention has to be selective. Some problems are never treated seriously, or initial interest in them wanes as other issues come to command attention owing to media pressures, the responsiveness of the bureaucracy to the legislative agenda, or the need often felt by new senior bureaucrats to impose their own agendas and escape from those of their predecessors. If, in the face of a divergent voice, the relevant agencies treat the problem less seriously, lose some of their interest in it, and reduce their level of involvement in the issue, this declining bureaucratic attention will contribute to a decline of the prominence of an issue on the legislative agenda as well.

Although a credible countervoice may be necessary for an issue to decline on an agency agenda, it is definitely not sufficient. For example, in the early 1970s there was much concern about teenage drinking, and spokespersons of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) claimed that alcohol consumption among teenagers was increasing at a faster rate than ever before and that it constituted a severe problem. Even when credible social science data emerged showing that the prevalence of alcohol use among teenagers had remained stable over the past ten years, NIAAA maintained its rhetoric about the severity of the problem because the 'problem' was important to the mission of the agency (Chauncy, 1980)—a

the 'problem' was important to the mission of the agency (Chauncy, 1980)—a situation not true of criminal victimization of the elderly for either AoA or LEAA. For an issue to remain high on the national policy agenda, federal agencies must be interested and concerned about the issue. They can fuel issues by funding research carried out by academics and demonstration programs overseen by interest groups. In fact, in a survey of 564 interest groups, Walker (1983) found that government agencies are important as their patrons and that after 1945 the proportion of groups in the not-for-profit sector that were begun with government grants more than tripled. He noted that "patrons are not likely to support groups for any purposes that do not share their general approach to public policy" (page 401). If bureaucratic support decreases, a large body of actors tied to bureaucrats within the policy community can begin to lose interest in an issue, the more so if there are other issues to which they can turn their attention.

The third micromediating factor sketched in figure 4 is that the policy community outside the government accepts that the problem cannot be reformulated to one with more important and direct links to action. Around any issue of importance there congregate interest group representatives, legislative and agency staff, editors of journals and magazines, potential contract recipients, consultants employed by R&D firms, and academic specialists. It is within this network that issue-relevant evidence is distributed and debated and policy alternatives are worked out. Policy communities play an important role in debating the credibility of the emergent countervoice, and when the voice gains legitimacy, the issue's days on the policy agenda are numbered. In the case of criminal victimization of the elderly, the issue was fairly new and there were not many people professionally organized around it. Those who were could find other projects concerned with the elderly or with crime on which to work.

The final micromediating factor is that media attention to the issue declines. In the case of crime and the elderly, the problem as it had been reformulated made it more complicated to communicate to the general public. That is, in order to discuss fear (to which the then available data indicated the elderly were particularly vulnerable), one would have to discuss the fact that crime rates against the elderly were comparatively low and that consequences to them were not more severe than for those in other age-groups, facts which seemed to reduce the importance of the fear issue.

Certainly then, the role of the mass media is important to the life course of policy issues. During the 1980s, interest developed among mass-communication researchers on how the print and electronic media influence policy agendas; there appear to be important linkages—of debatable magnitude, to be sure—between the mass media and the development of the legislative agenda (Cook et al, 1983; Lang and Lang, 1981; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Protess et al, 1987; Shaw and McCombs, 1977; also, see the review of literature in Roberts and Bachen, 1981). However, less attention has been paid to the role of the media in explaining the decline of issues.

The mass media always are on the alert for dramatic, personalized stories which will command public attention. There is an ample supply of such stories nestled within almost all social problems, ranging from malnutrition to emergency-room malfeasance. As a result, portraits of individual miseries are 'easy news'. The frequency with which these human interest stories appear is affected by such factors as organizational needs (to fill empty space), the financial cost of gathering them (which is lower when stories are carried on the wire services), and fashion (what the 'quality papers' are carrying). Studies of the frequency of newspaper and television crime stories show that crime coverage has little to do with the frequency

or nature of local crime *problems* (Antunes and Hurley, 1977; Cohen and Young, 1973; Dolminick, 1973; Fishman, 1978; Jones, 1976). However, to link individual stories with major social problems or with national policy responses requires that the media reach out to 'experts' in policy communities. It is at this point that the existence of a credible divergent voice can matter. It makes it more difficult for reporters to cite 'authorities', cast broad generalizations, and draw conclusions with the simple clarity that their audience requires. Copy is easier to write when a topic seems to permit clear conclusions and apparent policy consensus. Without such copy, the salience of a policy issue on a media agenda is likely to decline.

From the above we can abstract three factors which can help to specify under what conditions a divergent voice will or will not facilitate the process of going off the agenda. They include the age of the issue, the size of the agenda of possible issues to which key actors can turn, and the credibility of the divergent voice. If the issue is new and has not stayed long in a high position of salience on policy agendas, a divergent voice is more likely to affect the demise of the issue. The issue of crime against the elderly rose precipitously, peaked, and dropped almost as precipitously. This meant that few bureaucratic or professional interests had time to organize around the issue in such a way as to protect their interest in it. Second, if the bureaucratic agencies and interest groups have other issues to which they can turn without jeopardizing their budgets, a divergent voice is more likely to facilitate the movement of an issue off the agenda. There were not offices of crime against the elderly in AoA or LEAA that wanted to keep the issue on the agenda to preserve their power. Third, if the divergent voice is credible, it is more likely to have an effect on the demise of an issue. In this case, it came from an especially large national sample replicated over several years following the state of the art in survey research. In our interviews with scholars and Congressional staff, we discovered no instances of technical criticism of the multiply replicated survey results. There was apparently universal acceptance.

We have here a case of what Heclo (1974, page 306) and later Sabatier (1988) describe as policy learning—changing understandings concerning policy problems that have an eventual impact on policy analysis and development. Sabatier (1988) says that, "'knowledge' does not suddenly appear, become universally accepted, and suggest unequivocal changes" in policy (page 154). Instead, he observes, findings which challenge the conventional wisdom about the magnitude of a problem usually emerge gradually over time, are questioned by those who see their interests to be undermined, and thus give rise to analytical debate and rethinking about policy problems. In the case of crimes against the elderly, it is striking how relatively quickly and profoundly new information in the form of the NCS data affected the policy debate. Thus, we see that policy learning—for elites, at least—is not always a slow, gradual process.

Alternative explanations

Are there alternative explanations of the decline of the issue concerning crime and the elderly, other than the model we have described? One possibility is that all problems concerning the elderly received less attention in the late 1970s, so that the decline in salience of the crime topic was merely part of a more general phenomenon. However, several indicators of general attention to the aged showed an *increase* in concern during the period. The budgets of the Administration on Aging and the National Institute on Aging increased, as did the number of speeches, resolutions, and legislative proposals from the US Congress. Moreover, an analysis of *New York Times* stories devoted to the aged shows these to be increasing as well.

A second possibility is that crime became a less important issue in the late 1970s compared with earlier, making the decline in concern with crime and the elderly part of this more general phenomenon. Certainly it is true that in the presidential campaign of 1980, the crime problem was not addressed in the prepared speeches of the candidates, and relatively little mention was made of it in party platforms. However, this is not to say that crime as an issue has decreased in public salience. The General Social Survey of the National Opinion Research Center indicates that the public's concern about crime remained high through the decade of the 1970s. In that yearly survey, members of the public are presented with a number of social problems (for example, crime, drug addiction, environment, health, education, welfare, the military, etc) and asked whether they think the nation is spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount. For each year from 1971 through 1980, the largest percentage of survey respondents (ranging between 70% and 75%) said the USA was spending 'too little' money on the problem of crime (NORC, 1985). And, as noted earlier, public perceptions of how much of a problem crime was for the elderly showed a dramatic *increase* over the period (compare with National Council on the Aging, 1975; 1981). Last, an analysis of *New York Times* stories dealing with crime *in general* and mentions of crime in the *Congressional Record* reveal no decrease in their frequency. In short, the decline of the issue of crime and the elderly seems specific and not a by-product of the decline in its constitutive components.

Downs's (1972) theory of the issue-attention cycle offers a third explanation for issue decline, but it also does not seem to apply in this case. Downs is concerned only with the issue agenda of the mass public and not political elites. He argues that most policy issues follow a five-stage cycle: the preproblem stage, alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm, realizing the cost of significant progress, gradual decline of intense public interest, and the postproblem stage. However, he acknowledges that some major social issues go through only part of this cycle and remain on the agenda. To ensure longevity in the issue-attention cycle, Downs posits that issues must affect the majority or an important minority of the persons in society; the suffering caused by the problem must not be generated by social arrangements that provide benefits to a majority or powerful minority of the population; and the problem must have intrinsically exciting qualities. Criminal victimization of the elderly exhibited all three of these features. First, it affected what is perceived to be a powerful and deserving minority of the population—senior citizens. Second, as described in an earlier section, it had intrinsically exciting qualities. Third, it had no benefits for any segment of legitimate society. Moreover, it evoked no organized group opposition. But Downs's theory of agenda permanence to the contrary, the agenda salience of criminal victimization of the elderly did decline.

Downs may be correct about the *public's* agenda. Indeed, our best measures of public opinion concerning crimes against the elderly do not point to any changes in public attitudes that could have contributed to the decline of the problem on the Congressional agenda. Also, all the evidence on actual crime rates indicates that the character of the problem itself stayed remarkably stable throughout the period over which attention waxed and waned. Clearly, Downs's theory does not apply to the case of Congressional agenda salience we are examining, for the salience of criminal victimization of the elderly did decline on the Congressional agenda.

The divergent-voice model detailed here lends specificity to some of the ad hoc explanations for issue decline described at the onset of this paper. For example, Kingdon (1984), Light (1982), and Walker (1977) all point to anticipation of failure

as an important reason for the demise of apparently vital issues. In the present study, failure loomed on the horizon because the issue could not be successfully redefined to deal with blows dealt by the countervoice.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have examined the life course of a policy issue as it rose and fell on the US Congressional agenda. Although a growing literature in the policy sciences focuses on agenda setting, less attention has been paid to why issues move off policy agendas. Perhaps that is because to do studies of policy dynamics requires analyses that track issues over a decade or more (Hogwood and Peters, 1983; Jones and Baumgartner, 1989; Sabatier, 1988). Our analysis does so. We attempt to explain why crime against the elderly rose and fell on the Congressional agenda and to develop a more abstract model of this process which may prove useful in understanding the life course of certain other issues.

The emergence of the issue on the Congressional agenda seems best explained by a convergent-voice model which stresses the importance of independently articulated concerns both within and outside of government in the context of an issue climate characterized by public attention and support. On the other hand, the disappearance of this issue from the Congressional agenda suggests a related divergent-voice model of issue decline.

The divergent voice which emerged was grounded in research. As noted earlier, a countervoice can emerge from a number of quarters and claim various grounds for legitimacy. Its emergence tests the credibility of the consensus about facts and values within which the debate is taking place. When the countervoice can neither be ignored nor accommodated, it provides a necessary, but not sufficient, basis for issue decline. Whether it can be ignored depends upon the interests of the key actors in the process—bureaucratic agencies, the policy community, and the media. Whether it can be accommodated depends upon the malleability of the issue; that is, whether it can be successfully reformulated to absorb the credible claims advanced by the countervoice.

In this case, the countervoice could neither be ignored nor be accommodated. In the early days of this issue, when claims about the magnitude of the problem were first asserted, there was little systematic information available on the topic. What there was came from case studies, testimonials by victims, and research projects with data only on the elderly. Such types of information are often all that is available when social conditions are quickly transformed into social problems by politicians, the media, and interest groups. However, when researchers began circulating the results of the National Crime Survey, which showed that the issue as originally specified was wrong, attempts to rebut the new findings failed. The technical quality of the survey made it difficult for participants in the policy process to disavow its relevance. The issue was then reconceptualized as one of consequences, rather than magnitude. This reformulation appeared to some to be less serious, but it kept the issue alive. However, this version of the issue also proved to be discrepant with the next round of findings from the survey, leading to a third formulation of the problem. This version of the problem (that fear is greater among the elderly) was less concrete and seemingly less tractable, enabling interest in the issue to decline in executive branch agencies, the policy community, and the media.

In the divergent-voice model, four micromediating factors intervene between the counter voice and the fate of the issue, as illustrated in figure 4. In the case of crime and the elderly, the mediating factors all served to dampen enthusiasm for the issue, and it dropped off the Congressional agenda. In other cases, one or

more linkages could have gone the other way, presaging persistence rather than decline. The first of these factors is that *all obviously important reformulations of the problem are exhausted*. Problems often get reformulated in the policy process. If the reformulated problem is shown to be just as important as the problem as originally defined, then the issue may well persist on the agenda. In the case of crime and the elderly, the reformulated problem of fear was seen as less important by the key actors.

The second micromediating factor is that *the affected federal agencies respond by accepting the reformulated problem and do not attempt to refute it*. In the case of the teenage alcohol-consumption issue described earlier, NIAAA officials maintained their rhetoric about the severity of the problem despite the data to the contrary, but just the opposite occurred in the case of crime and the elderly. LEAA and AoA were convinced of the correctness of the reformulation because of the consensus of the experts. Moreover, because the issue of crime against the elderly was still a relatively new issue, it was not central to the mission of either AoA or LEAA and thus not needed to justify their budgets. Instead, the issue called for interagency cooperation, a requirement which increases the difficulty of dealing with any problem by an order of magnitude. Last, neither agency was having difficulties finding issues to work on; both had other issues to which they could turn.

The third micromediating factor is that *the policy community responds by accepting the fact that the problem cannot be reformulated* to one with more important and direct links to action. As criminal victimization of the elderly was a fairly new issue, members of the policy community were not deeply wedded to it. An infrastructure linking client organizations, the vendors of products, research centers, and legislative committees had not become entrenched around a set of solutions to any of the formulations of the problem. The final factor is that *the media let it drop*. The problem as it had been reformulated made it seem both less important and more complicated to tell responsibly. Journalists value discovering new problems, not continuing to put new twists to old issues. It was difficult to interpret as a 'national trend'; there were no exciting programs to report or success stories to tell.

This model accommodates a number of ad hoc explanations which have been advanced to account for issue decline. It clarifies how some issues begin to 'look like failures' or 'run out of steam'. It also focuses on factors already of interest to those attempting to understand agenda-setting processes. The seeds of issue decline are found among the forces which bring the issue to agenda status in the first place. In this case, politicians, agency officials, and the media first converged on the issue and then were shaken loose by a credible divergent voice which undermined the accepted understanding of the problem.

Research which tracks other issues over a substantial period of time may also observe this process of challenge and accommodation and further clarify the factors which account for the persistence or decline of issues on agency, media, and policy community agendas. Divergent voices testing the credibility of current consensuses provide opportunities to observe agendas form and reform and thus illuminate the policy process.

Acknowledgements. We are grateful to Thomas D Cook, Herbert Jacob, Jane Mansbridge, Bernice L Neugarten, and Paul A Sabatier for their comments on previous drafts of this paper, and to Desmond S King for his help in the content analysis of the Congressional Record and his work on the problem reformulation aspect of the article reflected in figure 3.

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