

19

Convergent and Divergent Voice Models of the Rise and Fall of Policy Issues*

Fay Lomax Cook
 Wesley G. Skogan

A growing literature in the policy sciences and in mass communications focuses on agenda-setting (i.e., how issues come to receive serious attention by authoritative decision makers). Far less attention has been given to understanding the life course of policy issues, especially the question of why issues move off policy agendas.

The number of potential policy issues far exceeds the capabilities of Congress to process them. Thus, issues must compete for a place on the policy agenda. In the competition, some issues achieve visibility and others do not. Between 1970 and 1978, the issue of crime against the elderly made it onto the Congressional agenda, also receiving attention from the news media, the federal bureaucracy, elderly interest groups, and some academic and professional publications.

Figure 1 depicts the life course of the crime against the elderly issue within (a) the news media (as exemplified by a content analysis of *The New York Times*); (b) the bureaucracy (as exemplified by the number of grants on the topic funded by Law Enforcement Assistance Administration); and (c) 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

*This is a revised version of an article appearing in the November 1990 issue of *Government and Politics*. Reprinted by permission of the authors.

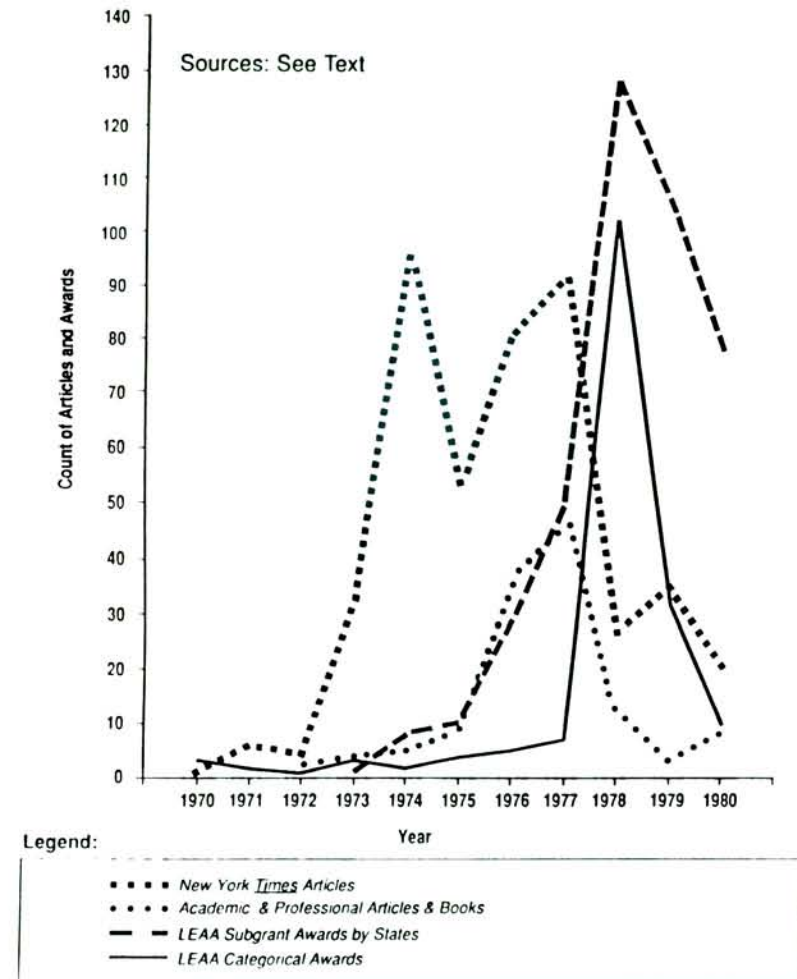


FIGURE 1. Attention to crime and the elderly by the media, the bureaucracy, and academic/professional publications.

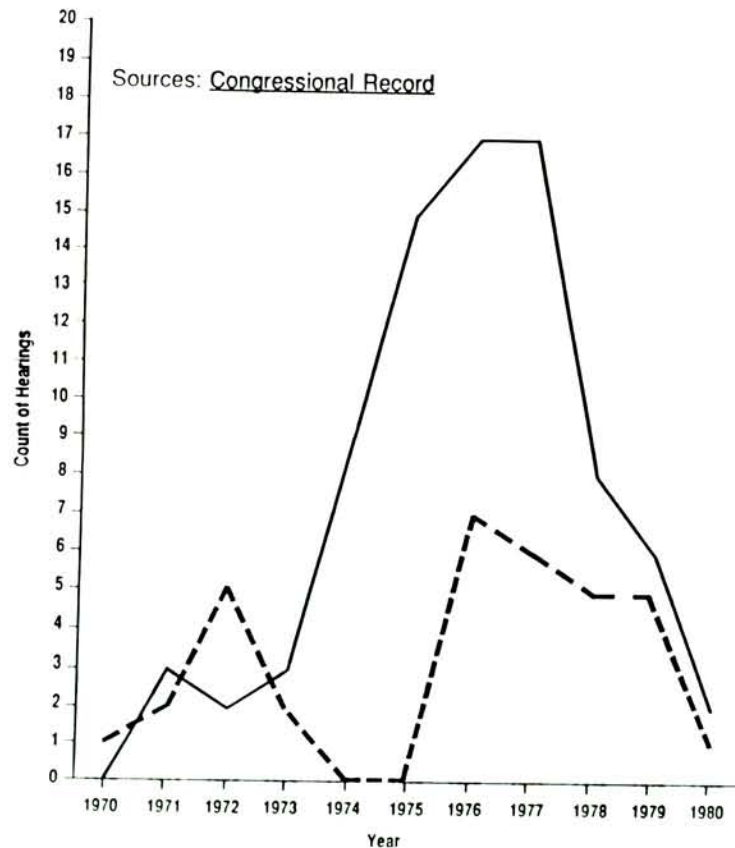
1975 to 1977, but began to drop in 1978, although not quite to the level of 1970-1972.

The numbers of Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (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.

Figure 1 also shows the rise and fall in the number of articles in academic

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

Figure 2 illustrates the course of the crime and the elderly issue in the U.S. 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, 5; in 1979, 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 victimization of the elderly in a speech or in introducing legislation. Ranging between 0 and 3 for the years 1970–1974, Congressional mentions increased to 15 in



Legend:

— # of Accounts of Crime and the Elderly in the Congressional Record
 - - # of Congressional Hearings on Crime and the Elderly

FIGURE 2. Congressional attention to crime and the elderly.

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 crime and the elderly issue 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 opinion data 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 Americans thought that "fear of crime" constituted a "very serious problem" for the elderly (National Council on the Aging, 1975), whereas 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 & 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.

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 America. Crime against the elderly neatly encompassed all these concerns in a single issue. Moreover, in Nelson's (1984) terms, the issue seemed to be a "valence" issue, one that elicits a "single, fairly uniform emotional response" (p. 27) from all audiences and allows only one position to be taken.

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" (Toward a National Policy on Aging, p. 74). At about the same time—and independently of the White House Conference—a Special Committee of the U.S. Senate held hearings on housing needs of older Americans. In 1971, and extending into 1972, these hearings became re-focused 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 Williams' 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?" (U.S. Congress, 1972b, p. 481). The news media helped 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. 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 1972–1975 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 crime against the elderly stories shows a dramatic increase, from 1 story in 1970 to 95 stories in 1974 about criminal victimization of the elderly. Attention to the issue by the media anticipated that by the other sectors described by Figures 1 and 2. Second, several key officials within the legislative and executive branches of government helped 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 Administration on Aging (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 that examined crimes against elderly persons in Kansas City. Despite the fact that only older victims were studied, the report's conclusions made comparative statements such as, "of all persons who become targets of a criminal act, the elderly suffer most" (Cunningham, 1975, p. 6). These findings were used to back the claim that crimes against the elderly were a "crisis." This claim appeared in print (e.g., *Chicago Sun Times*, June 6, 1975, p. 1; Goldsmith & 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 required that states receiving LEAA discretionary grant funds include plans for projects assisting the elderly in their state's comprehensive law enforcement plan—unless a state found the requirement inappropriate. The Victims of Crime Act of 1978 (defeated but repeatedly reintroduced) 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 Social Security and Supplemental Security Income recipients.

Clearly, the issue of criminal victimization of the elderly reached formal agenda status on the Congressional policy agenda as it moved through the stages of agenda-setting from 1970 to 1978. It emerged as an issue at a time when the elderly, crime, and victims were all "hot" topics and brought them together in one neat issue "package." It was articulated as an issue by delegates to the White House Conference on Aging, by commentators who testified at hearings before the Senate Select Committee on Aging, and by the senators at those hearings. The final spark that put the issue on the Congressional agenda was the legitimization of the issue's importance by multiple actors whose voices converged in agreeing on crimes against the elderly as an important issue about which the federal government should be concerned and act. These actors included the media, officials in federal agencies, influential Congressmembers, the President, and scholars.

After 1977, the issue declined in salience almost to the level it had prior to reaching formal agenda status. The question is why?"

GOING OFF THE AGENDA

An important feature of the decline of elderly victimization on the Congressional agenda was the breakdown of an 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 of crime against the elderly, thus creating opportunities for advocates to define the terms of the debate. Whatever knowledge there was came from media reports, testimonials by victims, and studies of samples of elderly victims. All left the impression that

rates of victimization against the elderly were high when compared to other age groups.

The first systematic empirical evidence on the issue came from the National Crime Surveys (NCS), conducted by the Census Bureau to measure the yearly level of crime victimization in the United States. Although begun in 1973, it was not until November 1974, that an advance report on its findings for the first 6 months of 1973 was released and not until 1976 that the first full report on all of 1973 was released to the public. These data 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 in question did not come from police reports but from many thousands of in-person interviews conducted by Census Bureau interviewers with a random sample of Americans. As one highly placed staff member for the Select Committee on Aging said of the NCS in one of our interviews, "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 [i.e., that the data couldn't 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. Given the robustness of the data and their ability to withstand critical scrutiny, it was difficult for advocates to argue that criminal victimization of the elderly was a significant national problem.

An early stage in Downs' (1972) "issue-attention cycle" is one of alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm. At this stage, the public becomes aware of a particular problem and alarmed about it. This alarm is accompanied by an enthusiasm to solve the problem. Downs did not speculate about what might happen if, during the "alarmed discovery" stage, the public and other participants in the policymaking process are informed that the problem is not quite what they 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 (a) each speech that a member of Congress gave and (b) 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 (a) rates of crime, (b) the

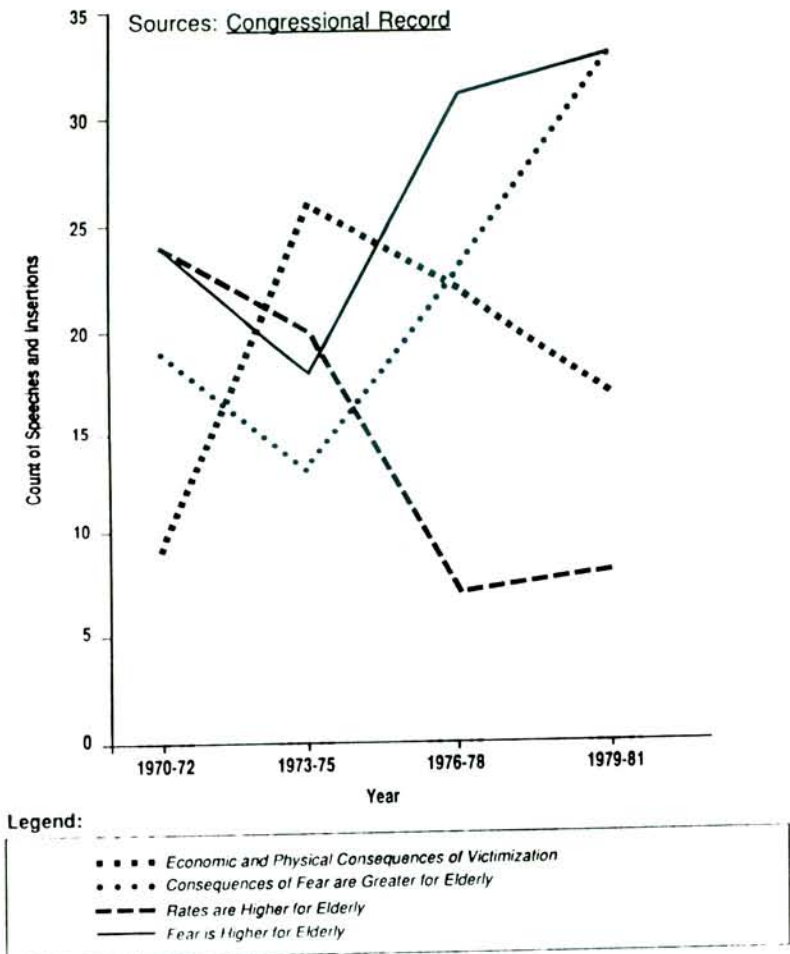


FIGURE 3. Problem formulation and reformulation about crimes against the elderly.

economic and physical consequences of crime, (c) fear of crime, and (d) 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, 1970-1972, the preponderance of the claims were about rates (the elderly are more likely to be victimized than other age groups) and fear (these high rates of crime make the elderly more fearful of crime than other age groups). In the period 1973-1975, 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 (1980) 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 its support. 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. Congressman Morgan Murphy's address on the floor of Congress in 1977 illustrates a frank acknowledgment that the problem was not one of high crime rates for older Americans, but rather—as he argued—fear of crime and the possibility that crimes against the elderly have more severe physical and economic consequences:

Crime against the elderly is a problem of growing concern to senior citizens, policy officials, and legislators. *The reason is not that older persons are victimized more than other age groups or that crime against the elderly is dramatically increasing.* Rather, as a recent house study noted, it is the recognition that older Americans are financially, physically and emotionally the least able to cope with the effects of crime. Perhaps the most devastating impact of crime against the elderly is that fear that it creates (*Congressional Record*, August 2, 1977, p. E5066; italics added)

However, those who accepted the “consequences” 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 & Cook, 1976), it was not until 1978 that they began gaining visibility. At the hearings held by the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Aging in January of that year, 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 other age groups.

As figure 3 indicated, by the 1976–1978 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. In fact, the statistics tend to dilute emphasis and urgency for affirmative action in this area. (U.S. Congress, June 3, 1978, pp. 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 not intuitively as important as rationales for action based either on uniquely high victimization rates or on 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 obvious effective remedy. Short of accomplishing the seemingly impossible task of significantly reducing the crime rate, how does one reduce the elderly's fear of crime?

We have seen that over the decade of the 1970s, the problem of crime and the elderly was given at least three different formulations, each emphasized at a different time. One major impetus for these reformulations was descriptive research results coming from a government-financed national data collection system (the NCS) that provided the capacity to test claims being made to justify attention to the problem. NCS data suggested that important elements in the “common consensus” about crime were wrong, indicating that the problem for the elderly was neither one of rates nor of physical or economic consequences. Thus, the sands of the debate shifted, with the shifts serving to make the problem of crime and the elderly seem less important.

Bureaucratic Involvement Declined

An often overlooked factor in the Congressional agenda-setting literature is executive agency involvement in an issue (for an exception see Nelson, 1978, 1984). For an issue to remain salient on the legislative agenda, it can be important that one or more agencies give it special attention (e.g., by funding research or demonstration projects, preparing information for distribution to the public or Congress, and providing testimony in Congressional hearings). This is a form of “recurring maintenance” described by Nelson (1984) that helps sustain interest in an emerging problem.

The two relevant agencies for crime against the elderly were the Administration on Aging (AoA) and the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA). They were each interested enough in the crime and the elderly issue that in 1976 they collaborated in funding 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 crime and elderly issue as well as major national conferences on crime and the elderly.

Nonetheless, their initial involvement in the issue did not persist. LEAA was the federal agency with the most resources for dealing with crimes against the elderly. But LEAA 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. Knowledge of the negative relationship between age and the likelihood of victimization served to slow the momentum toward action. So, too, did widespread belief within the agency that targeting the elderly might not have much impact on crime and, moreover, that the business of the federal government was to prevent crime and improve the criminal justice system for all Americans, 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 declined because countervailing agency priorities emerged in each of the agencies reducing 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 Secretary of HEW Joseph Califano, Benedict's primary concern was reducing health-care costs, and the priority issue on his mind was home health care. One former official reminded us laughingly in an interview, "Remember, also, that the crime issue was an NIH issue for the new commissioner [NIH means Not Invented Here], and incoming administrators want to deal with new issues." Resources were not "slack" in either AoA or LEAA (Nelson, 1978; Walker, 1977). Alone, these facts may not have caused AoA to relegate criminal victimization of the elderly to a lower priority, for civil servants there continued to be interested in the issue. However, combined with the NCS data showing that the elderly did not have a special problem in regard to crime, these events 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 defendants, rather than continuing to try to get the national crime rate down. One result of this re-focus would be that the police, prosecutors, and judges would become the principal "targets" of the agency's money (then approaching \$1 billion 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 have witnessed the formation of communities of experts around problems such as vocational education, water pollution control, or judicial administration (Hecklo, 1978).

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 crime and the elderly issue never developed into a cohesive community. This was not due to lack of available opportunities. The 1975 National Conference on Crimes Against the Elderly brought together agency officials from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration and the Administration on Aging, members of the U. S. 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 hooked up 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—at the street level, by increasing the number of policemen on the beat in areas with a higher percentage of elderly persons? In courtrooms, by having elderly "court watchers" monitor each case of a person accused of victimizing an elderly person? At the sentencing and prison levels, by enacting mandatory stiff sentences for criminals who victimized an elderly person? Or should the federal government push crime prevention education programs for the elderly? Or is the proper focus to work on target-hardening strategies (i.e., 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.

The second, and related, roadblock to the development of a policy community was the widely perceived intractability of the problem of crime against the elderly to any practical solution. We do not have ways of combating crime that 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 aging policy arena, problems such as home health care for which solutions apparently are clear and the divisive issues are money and personnel. A truly cohesive policy community for the crime and the elderly

issue 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 beginning in 1978. Why did this occur? Crime news is "easy news" (Gordon & Heath, 1981). 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, cited in Gordon & Heath, 1981, p. 232).

Crime against 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 (e.g., 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.

The Legislative Fate of the Issue

By the early 1980s, proponents of a legislative attack on the problem of crime against the elderly realized that it was difficult to make a valid case that elderly adults were "special" victims. Advocates for older adults believed that fear of crime was a special problem but realized the difficulty of devising credible policies and programs directed toward fear. As a result, representatives of aging interest groups (National Council of Senior Citizens and the National Retired Teachers Association/American Association of Retired Persons) began to work with the staff of the Senate Special Committee on Aging to develop age-neutral legislation that focused on all victims, regardless of their

age—the Victim's Protection (S. 2420) and the Victim's Compensation Bill (S. 704). The idea was that victim protection and compensation programs aimed at all victims would "trickle down" to help elderly adults in need. Some observers also thought that focusing on all victims would mobilize broader based support for action.

The Victim's Compensation Bill did not pass, but the Victim's Protection Bill became the Omnibus Victim's Protection Act of 1982 (PL 97-291). It amends Rule 32 of the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure to (a) require that pre-sentence reports contain information assessing the impact on and cost to any person who was a victim of a federal offense and (b) authorize federal courts to order the defendant to make restitution for any offense. Further, it directs the Attorney General to develop federal guidelines for the fair treatment of crime victims and witnesses, including ensuring that victims receive prompt social and medical services. In contrast to the rhetoric associated with the crime and the elderly issue, and in comparison to the programs that were suggested along the way, this was—to say the least—a minor legislative response.

GOING OFF THE AGENDA: A DIVERGENT VOICE MODEL

Based on this analysis of the decreasing salience of the crime against the elderly issue, we propose a general model of issue decline on the Congressional policy agenda. Figure 4 summarizes the divergent voice model of issue decline.

First, a strong and credible counter voice emerges that challenges the accepted formulation of the issue. For an issue that is already on an institutional agenda, seems universally supported, and offers obvious symbolic political advantages to then decline in salience, something must happen that convincingly redefines the issue, undermines the consensus, and makes problematic its apparent political advantage. There are a variety of potential "voices" in the policy process. Interest group theory would have us look for the reactive mobilization of elites and organizations whose interests are threatened by the progress of an issue or who want to capture for their own purposes those resources that are targeted at some other issue. Americans' recent affection for "investigative journalism" suggests that prominent negative attention by the media may 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 of government interests (Cook et al., 1983). In the present case study, the divergent voice was provided by the circulation of research findings. The data were collected by the U. S. Census Bureau for a research arm of the Justice Department. The results of these surveys were widely available in technical reports, were cited

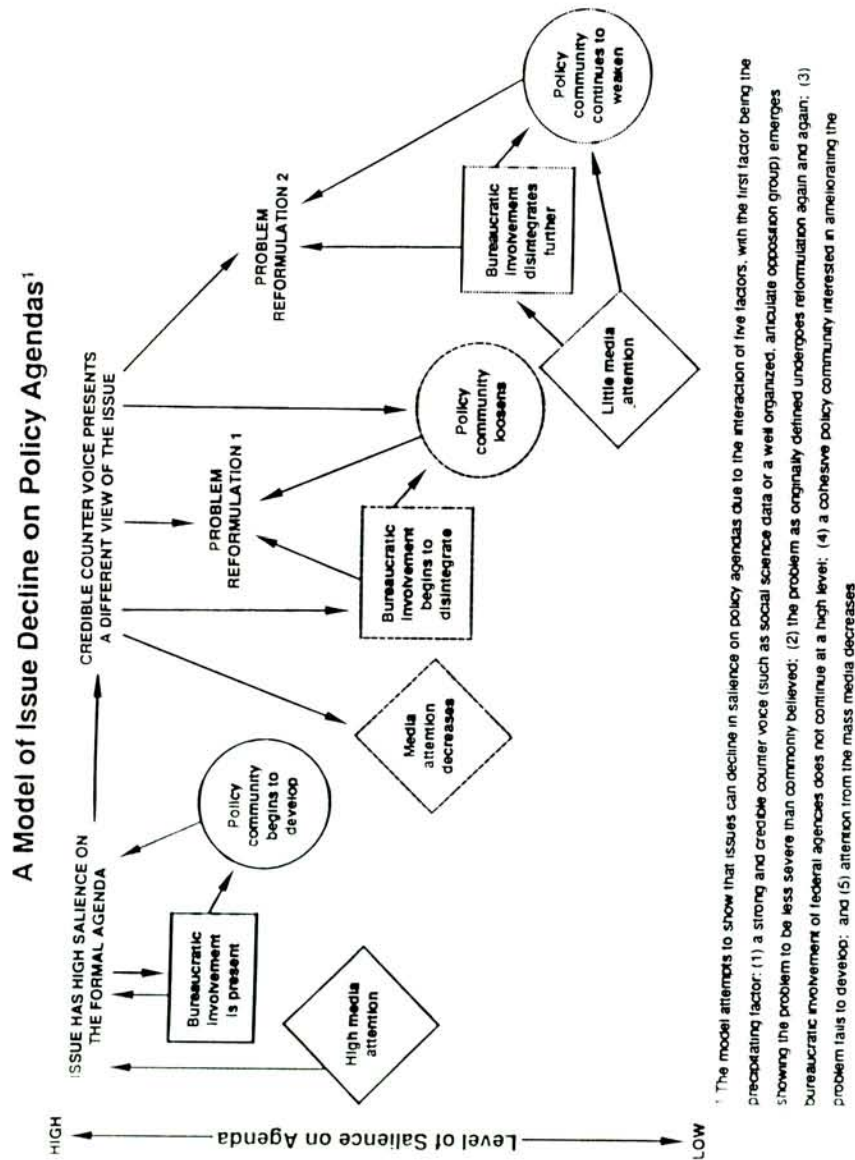


FIGURE 4. A Model of Issue Decline on Policy Agendas.

heavily by researchers, and came to the attention of the media. What they revealed did not square with the succession of definitions of "the problem."

The critical issue is what happens next. The key actors are the executive branch agencies, participants in the policy community, and the media. If the involvement of the relevant bureaucratic agencies begins to disintegrate in the face of the attack on the problem; if policy community interest in ameliorating the problem loses its cohesiveness or does not develop; and if media attention declines, thus not continuing to fuel public and political interest in the issue, it will begin to die. One response of those who want action taken on the issue usually will be to reformulate the problem. This will work only if that new formulation closes the fatal wound opened by the counter voice. Most issues go through some redefinition as they are tested in the heat of the policy debate, but they survive only if they can retain or rekindle bureaucratic agency, policy community, and media interest.

Bureaucratic involvement in nascent issues is important to an issue's life but is sometimes fickle. Agency officials want to be seen as working on important problems, and typically many issues are jockeying for a finite amount of attention. Consequently, their attention has to be selective. Some problems are never treated in serious fashion, or the initial interest in them wanes as other issues come to command attention due to (a) media pressures, (b) the responsiveness of the bureaucracy to the legislative agenda, or (c) the need new senior bureaucrats often feel to impose their own agendas and to neglect the agendas of their predecessors. If, in the face of a divergent voice, the relevant agencies treat the problem in less serious fashion, 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 an issue's prominence on the legislative agenda as well.

A credible counter voice may be a necessary condition for an issue to decline on agency "must" lists, but it is not sufficient. For example, in the early 1970s much concern existed about teenage drinking, and spokespersons of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) claimed that drinking of alcohol 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 10 years, NIAAA maintained its rhetoric about the severity of the problem because the "problem" was important to the mission of the agency (Chauncy, 1980). On the other hand, agency reorganization and political considerations quite unrelated to the substance of its mission can divert bureaucratic attention from an issue and undermine its agenda status for reasons having nothing to do with the problem at hand (Nelson, 1984). But for an issue to remain high on the national policy agenda, the federal agencies must be interested and concerned about the issue.

Next, policy communities also are important in maintaining issues on the agenda. It is among the networks of group representatives, interested legislative and agency staff, editors of journals and magazines, hardware vendors, potential contract recipients, consultants employed by research and development firms, and academic specialists that form around issues that the relevant evidence is distributed and debated and policy alternatives are worked out. They play an important role in defining the credibility of the emergent counter voice, and when it undermines their interest in a particular issue, its days on the policy agenda are numbered.

The interest of federal agencies can have an independent effect on the development of policy communities, as well as vice versa. For example, agencies can fuel issues by funding research carried out by academics and by funding demonstration programs overseen by interest groups. In fact, in a survey of 564 interest groups, Walker (1983) found that government agencies are important patrons of many interest groups—including groups of interested academics whose welfare depends on a particular problem—and that after 1945 the proportion of groups in the not-for-profit sector started up 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” (p. 401). If bureaucratic support decreases, actors within the policy community often begin to lose interest in a particular policy issue, especially if they have other issues to which they can turn their attention.

Finally, the role of the mass media is important to the extended life course of policy issues. During the last decade, interest has developed among mass communication researchers in the influence of the print and electronic media on policy agendas (Cook et al., 1983; Lang & Lang, 1981; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Prosser et al., 1987; Shaw & McCombs, 1977; also see review of literature in Roberts & Bachen, 1981). There appear to be important linkages—of debatable magnitude, to be sure—between the mass media and the development of the legislative agenda. However, less attention has been paid by communication researchers to the linkage between media attention and issue decline.

The mass media always are on the alert for dramatic, personalized stories that will command public attention. There is an ample supply of potential stories of this nature nestled in almost any social problem, ranging from malnutrition to emergency-room malfeasance; as a result, portraits of individual miseries provide them with “easy news.” The frequency with which these human interest stories appear is affected by such factors as organizational needs (to fill empty space), the cost of gathering them (which is lower when they appear in the wire services), and fashion (what are the “quality papers” carrying?). Studies of the varying frequency with which newspaper and television crime stories appear over time or across jurisdictions document that

crime coverage has little to do with the frequency or nature of local crime *problems* at all (Antunes & Hurley, 1977; Cohen & Young, 1973; Dolminick, 1973; Fishman, 1978; Jones, 1976).

However, to link together individual instances of a problem in order to document a major trend, or to peg them to incipient policy responses, the media need to reach out to “experts” and politicians 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. If competing topics do seem to admit to clear conclusions and apparent policy consensus, those stories will be easier to tell. The divergent voice model of issue decline posits that, just as the media can play a role in increasing the salience of issues on the policy agenda, so it can have a role in the declining salience of issues.