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EVALUATING THE CHANGING DEFINITION OF A POLICY ISSUE IN CONGRESS: CRIME AGAINST THE ELDERLY

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I. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of research in political science and in mass communications on agenda-setting—that is, on the question of how social conditions come to be defined as social problems and political issues (e.g., Cobb and Elder, 1971, 1972; Cobb, Ross, and Ross, 1976; Eyestone, 1978; McCombs and Shaw, 1972, 1977; Roberts and Bachen, 1981). Much political science research examines how particular problems, in the form of specific legislative proposals, are placed on the formal political agenda and then are processed further in the legislative arena. Much mass communication research examines how the mass media influence the salience of issues on the public and the governmental policy agendas. Less attention has been paid to how social conditions are perceived and framed as social problems in the first place. In addition to understanding how a bill becomes a law and how the media keep a policy problem high in salience on the agenda, we need to know how condi-

tions become defined as specific problems for which redress is then sought.

This chapter suggests that the framing of political issues is not a cut-and-dried process. Events in the world do not clearly fall into slots with a problem label, and problems do not always have clear policy implications. Rather, complex and ill-understood conditions can be defined as a problem in various ways and emerge as a political issue taking on any of a variety of formulations. As it then competes for a place on the policy agenda, this issue can form and re-form itself yet further, reflecting the fact that it was not solely molded by a clear mandate concerning the nature of the problem.

The research reported here examines the changing definitions of one social problem in the criminal justice field—crime against the elderly. Concern about this problem emerged as an issue on the Congressional policy agenda in the early 1970s and achieved relatively high public salience. But during the decade in which it has remained an active concern of many Americans, the problem has been defined in several different ways. The first half of this chapter describes these problem metamorphoses—what we call the "life course" of the crime-and-the-elderly problem. The second half examines how each of the problem formulations stands up to tests of how well it fits the social conditions it presumably represented. Often it does not. This does not mean the elderly do not have a crime problem—our data clearly indicate otherwise. Rather, it means that the claims in this area were not often on the mark with regard to identifying the problem. This analysis indicates that the crime problems facing the elderly mostly resemble those plaguing all Americans. Victimization and fear of crime are high for city dwellers, the poor, racial minorities, and a number of other identifiable categories of people. However, it does not appear that an age-based definition of the problem—however politically attractive it may be—serves as well to identify a key group for tackling crime. Americans are clearly committed to serving the needs of the elderly (Cook, 1979), but the needs-identification process has not served them well in this case.

II. THE LIFE COURSE OF A POLICY ISSUE, 1970-81

In order to examine the life course of an issue on the policy agenda, we must first ask *which* policy agenda? Cobb, Ross, and Ross (1976) have distinguished between two—public agendas and formal agendas. By formal agendas they mean the set of issues discussed by government bodies, such as the U.S. Congress, that can decide on courses of action to be

followed. By public agendas, they mean the set of issues which capture some degree of public attention at a particular time. The mass media are variously assumed to reflect or form this set, as well as to reflect or form the saliency of a particular issue on the agenda at a particular time. Such public agendas can then feed into formal agendas by influencing what is on them, how salient specific issues are, and how the issues are defined.

Since the number of potential policy issues far exceeds the capabilities of decision makers and members of the public to process them, issues must compete for a place on the policy agenda. In the competition, some issues achieve visibility and others do not. The issue of crime against the elderly is one that made it onto both the public agenda and the formal agenda. The issue received attention from the mass media and the U.S. Congress as well as from agencies within the federal bureaucracy and elderly interest groups. This attention grew from the early 1970s to 1978 when issue concern seemed to peak. Since 1978, much—though not all—of this attention has sharply decreased.

To operationalize the life course of the crime-and-the-elderly issue on the public agenda, we conducted a content analysis of articles on the subject that appeared in the *New York Times* between 1970 and 1981. Since research has shown that the mass media affect the policy priorities of the general public (e.g., Cook et al., 1983; see review of literature in Roberts and Bachen, 1981), it seems valid to use a widely read national newspaper such as the *New York Times* as a proxy for the public agenda. Figure 1 shows the life course of the crime and the elderly issue there. The number of articles in the *New York Times* increased from nine in the period from 1970-72 to 160 from 1973-75. The number remained high from 1976 to 1978 but dropped steadily after 1978.

Figure 2 shows the life course of the crime and the elderly issue in the U.S. Congress over this same time period. Before 1970 there had never been a Congressional hearing on the topic. Between 1970-72 there were six; between 1976-78 there were 15. After 1978, there were only five. The dash line in Figure 2 shows the number of times in Congress that there was mention made—through a speech or the introduction of legislation—on the topic of criminal victimization of the elderly. These increased from seven between 1970-72 to 17 between 1973-75 to a high of 49 between 1976-78. After 1978, Congressmen introduced legislation and discussed the issue on the floor of Congress much less frequently.

Clearly, it appears that in the space of one decade, we have seen the salience of the crime and the elderly issue rise and fall on both the public and the formal policy agendas. The life course of this issue prompts us to ask: Is it "right" that it should be decreasing in salience on the policy agenda?

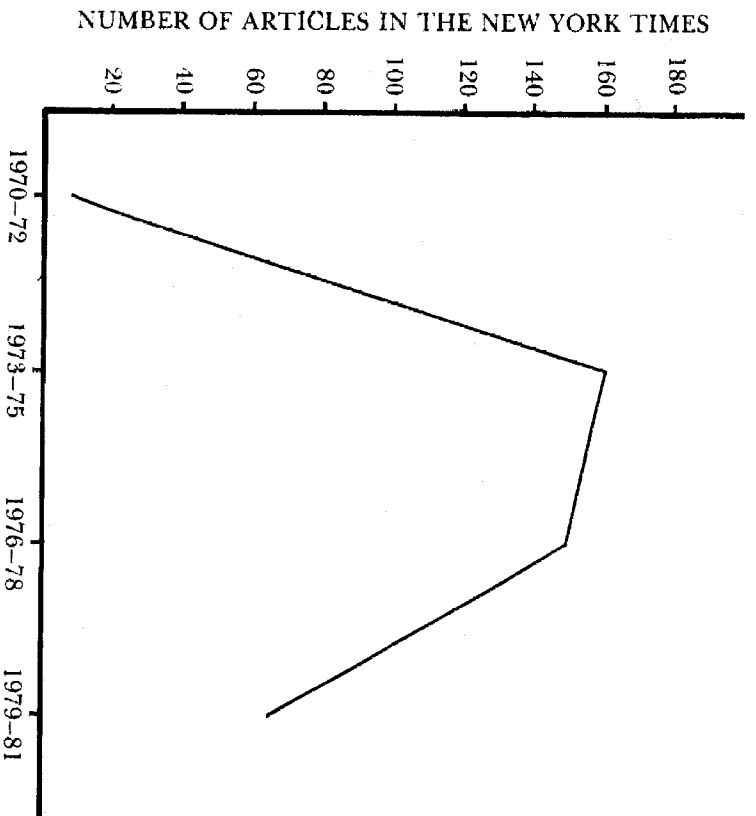


Figure 1. The Life Course of the Crime and the Elderly Issue on the Mass Media Agenda, 1970-81

Source: Compiled by the authors from a content analysis of the *New York Times*. The authors relied on the *New York Times Index* as a locator of the articles and then read each article to verify that it should be included.

The first step toward answering this question is to dissect the issue and understand exactly what it was about the problem of criminal victimization of the elderly that concerned the public and policymakers. We conducted a content analysis of every mention that was made about crime and the elderly in Congress. The analysis included reading every speech, proposed bill, etc. that was on the topic and recording how each defined the problem. That analysis revealed the problem was defined in at least four ways, having to do with rates of criminal victimization, economic and physical consequences of victimization, fear of crime, and consequences of fear:

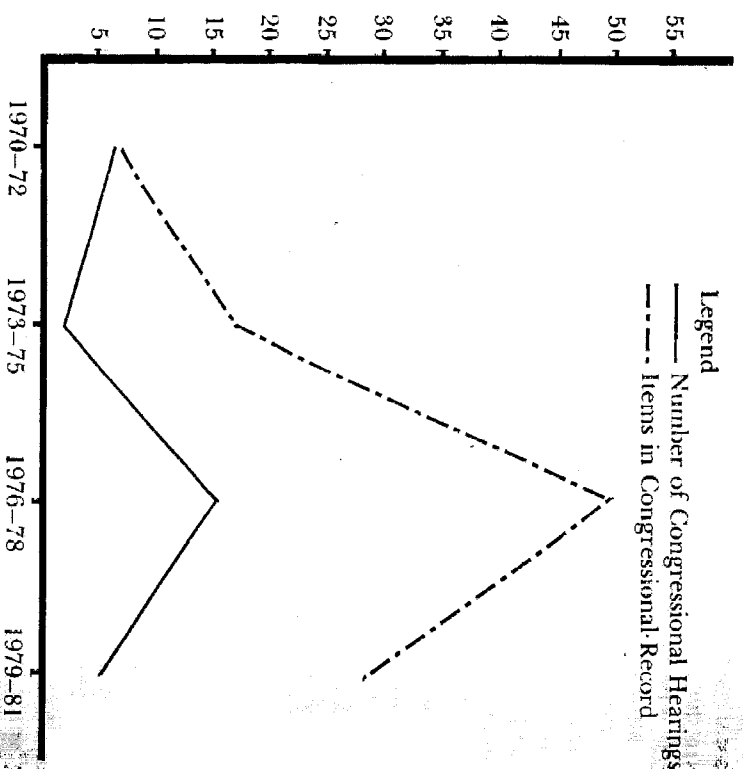


Figure 2. The Life Course of the Crime and the Elderly Issue on the Congressional Agenda, 1970-81

Source: Compiled by the authors from content analyses of the *Congressional Record* and from Congressional Hearings found through the *Congressional Information Service Index* (CIS). The *Congressional Record Index* and the *CIS Index* were used as locators of items, but all items were then read to verify that they should be included.

1. The elderly are "more likely than other age groups to be criminally victimized."
2. When victimized, they are more likely than other age groups to suffer severe economic and physical consequences.
3. They are more likely than others to be fearful of crime.
4. The consequences of fear are more severe for them; i.e., fear causes them to be "prisoners in their own homes."

In addition, the content analysis of the *Congressional Record* revealed that the way in which the problem of crime and the elderly was defined

lated shifted over the 1970-1981 period. Figure 3 shows the pattern of these shifts in formulations. In the early years, 1970-72, the preponderance of the definitions of the problem were about rates of victimization (the elderly are more likely to be victimized than other age groups) and fear of crime (these high rates make the elderly more fearful of crime than other age groups). In the period 1973-75, the definition of the problem as one of higher crime rates for the elderly diminished somewhat, while the claim that the elderly were more likely than younger adults to be physically and economically injured by criminal attacks increased.

By the period 1976-78, the problem definition that was most often heard was that the elderly were more fearful of crime than others. The

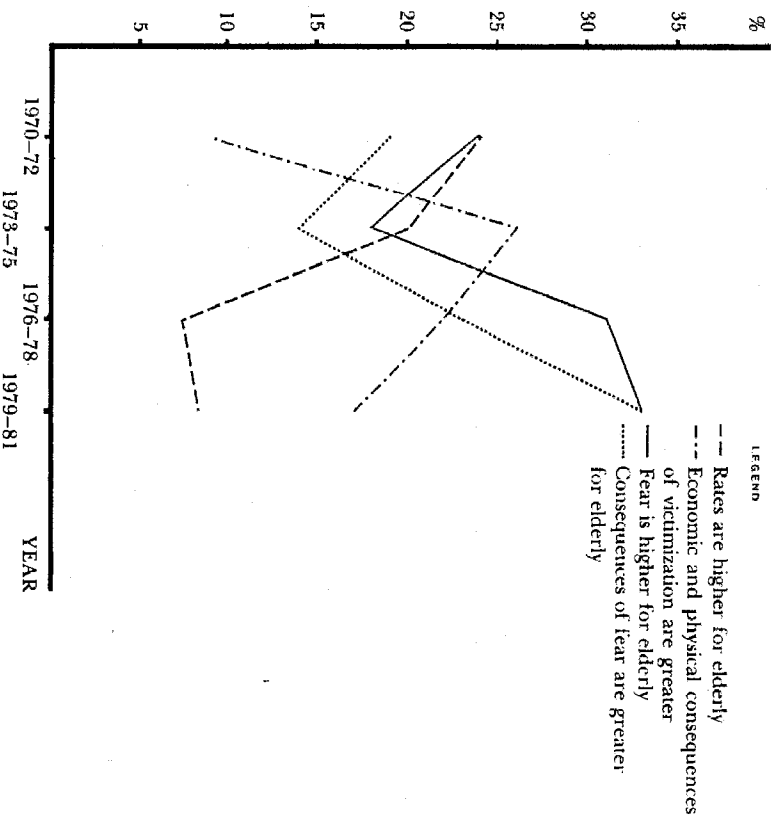


Figure 3. Problem Formulation and Reformulation about Crimes Against the Elderly

definition of fear as a problem was linked with its presumed consequences of being a "prisoner in one's own home." That definition of the problem remained salient in the 1979-81 period as well. Clearly, between 1970-81, the formal agenda in Congress concerning crime and the elderly was reformulated.

III. EMERGENCE ONTO THE POLICY AGENDA: A PROBLEM OF HIGH CRIME RATES

Issues emerge on the formal policy agenda in different ways. Cobb, Ross, and Ross (1976) have proposed three models for understanding different conditions under which this occurs. Their models are based on whether critical actors are inside or outside government and on the extent to which these actors attempt to engage the support of the general public as well as government bureaucrats: the outside initiative model, the mobilization model, and the inside initiative model. A model of agenda-setting developed recently by Cook (1981)—the convergent voice model—more accurately portrays the emergence of the issue of crimes against the elderly onto the policy agenda.

The convergent voice model describes issues that are independently and similarly articulated by several different groups at the same time. In the case of criminal victimization of the elderly, the 1971 White House Conference on Aging, Hearings of the House Select Committee on Aging, and the mass media all focused attention on the victimization problems of the elderly in 1971. All seemed to have operated independently, and all converged on the same definition of the problem. The issue was then legitimized through social science data, media attention, discussion by high officials, and endorsement by appropriate interest groups. In addition, what we call the issue climate was ripe for such a problem to achieve public visibility; that is, the issue of criminals victimizing senior citizens brought together in one package three themes that were already very visible: crime, victims, and the elderly (Cook, 1981).

In this early process of the issue coming onto the policy agenda, the "converging voices" initially identified the problem as one of higher rates of victimization for older people. The news media, some academic experts, and political spokesmen suggested or implied that the elderly were more victimized than other groups in the population. For a variety of reasons, some of which we speculate about below, many believed that rates of victimization of the elderly were distinctively high, certainly above those for other adults. This was seen as a particular problem in big cities where, as most people know, violent crime is heavily overcon-

trated. It was assumed that criminals there were particularly prone to victimize the vulnerable elderly. It also was widely asserted that this high rate of criminal victimization of the elderly was a special problem requiring a unique policy response, not simply a reflection of a general crime problem calling for a general solution. For example, according to Senator Harrison Williams:

Elderly tenants in private and public housing in many of our big cities are the most vulnerable victims of theft, violence, rowdiness, and outright terrorism. . . . Many older persons lock themselves within their apartments night and day and dread every knock on the door. Do we need any more reason to act on an emergency basis? (U.S. Congress, 1972, p. 481)

How accurate were such claims about the elderly's crime problem? In this section, we shall see that most claims about rates were in fact misleading. Perceptions or assumptions about the nature of the crime problem facing the elderly were at variance with what we now know about their actual condition. How could this have happened? Issues get onto policy agendas based upon some type of definition of the problem or the public need. The specification can come from various sources—observations of reputed experts, investigative reports by the news media, testimonials by people who have been afflicted by the problem, compilations of case studies, and social science research.

In the case of criminal victimization of the elderly, the early definition of the problem was on the basis of newspaper accounts, testimonials of elderly victims, and social science research based upon samples consisting exclusively of elderly persons. The problem with using newspaper accounts as the basis for understanding social problems is one of selection bias. Newspaper journalists and their editors feature dramatic, eye-catching events with a prominence which depends upon whatever other events which may have occurred and are considered "bigger news."

The problem with using testimonials of elderly victims was that they were carefully chosen to testify because they were articulate and because they were terribly brutalized. They were not representative of all elderly victims. Since only elderly victims were chosen, one got no sense of whether the elderly were so differently victimized from other age groups that different policies should be developed to aid them.

The problem with social science research using samples just of elderly persons was that the data could only be used to generalize to them. When properly conducted such research *can* describe the rate at which elderly persons are victimized, the kinds of crimes they experience, and the manner in which they are victimized. However, most of these studies were haphazard or used very limited samples of older people, or they were limited to only a few neighborhoods, and even the higher-quality

studies generally did not result in data which could be used to compare elderly victims to those of other ages. Thus, from such research, it was impossible to document that the elderly were the age group most vulnerable to crime, that the crimes that were committed against them were different from those committed against other groups, or that the process of their being victimized was different from that by which other groups were victimized.

In short, research using only elderly respondents, testimonials of elderly victims, and newspaper accounts cannot validly be used to discern the problem of crimes against the elderly for policy making purposes. Nonetheless it was, for no other data were available in the early 1970s. This condition changed in the mid-1970s. The Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 established the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) within the United States Department of Justice. LEAA was charged with the responsibility of developing statistical information regarding crime and criminal justice in the United States. To develop statistical information about crime, LEAA established the National Criminal Justice Information and Statistical Service, now the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). BJS began methodological planning in 1969 and field tests in 1970, to conduct a nationwide survey of households that would provide data on personal and household victimizations (Skogan, 1981).

Beginning in 1973, large-scale national victimization surveys have been conducted continuously for the Bureau of Justice Statistics by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, in person-to-person interviews in respondents' homes. In the survey about 136,000 persons are interviewed twice in a year. They are the residents who are 12 years and older of about 60,000 sample housing units. Each month, residents of a separate probability sample of 10,000 households (about 22,000 individuals) are interviewed. The survey has a panel design: these respondents are re-interviewed every six months for up to three years. After six interviews the monthly sample is "rotated out" and a new independent probability sample of 10,000 households replaces them.

For each crime incident that occurred, the respondent is asked questions about the events surrounding the victimization—when, where, and how it occurred; the characteristics of the offender; and threats and/or weapons used in the incident. Victims are asked about the physical consequences of each crime incident—what injuries were suffered, whether medical attention was needed, whether medical insurance covered the treatment. Finally, victims are asked about the economic impact of victimization—the amount of cash taken; the value of the property taken; how much, if anything, was recovered by the police or through insurance. In addition to examining the absolute amount lost, the data allow

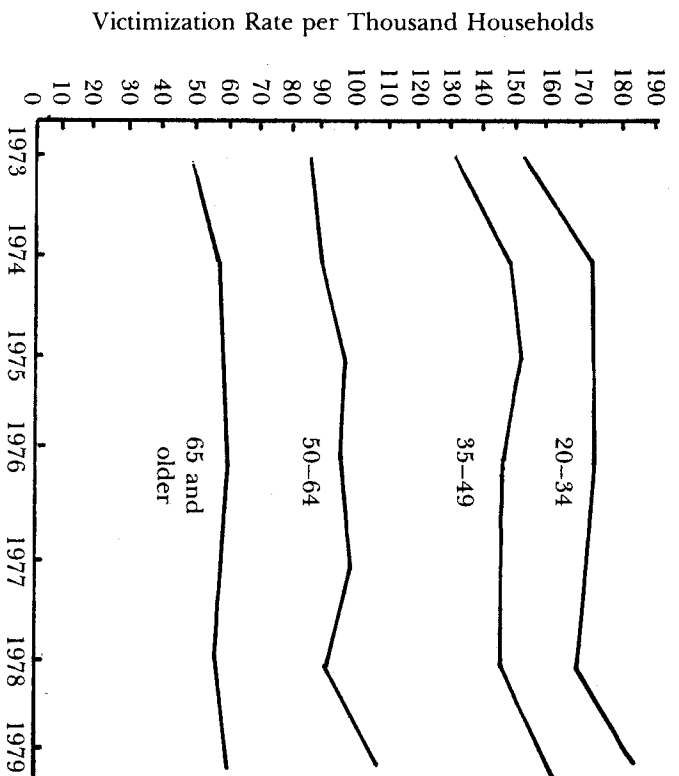


Figure 4A. Trends in Household Theft By Age of Head of Household

one to compare that figure to family income. Information is collected from both victims and non-victims on such subjects as education, migration, labor force status, occupation, and marital status. In this section and the sections to follow, we will report on our analyses of these data to assess the accuracy of the various formulations in which the problem of the elderly with crime was cast.

Crimes may be categorized as household crimes (burglary, simple theft without illegal entry into a house—also known as household theft, and motor vehicle theft) and personal crimes (rape, robbery, assault, and personal theft—i.e., usually purse-snatching and pocket picking). These incidents vary greatly in frequency. The non-violent property crimes of burglary and household theft occur much more often than the violent crimes of rape, robbery, and assault. For example, together, burglary and household theft constituted 89 percent of all the incidents covered in the victim survey in 1976 and 1977.

Looking at this point another way, 15.7 percent of those interviewed in 1976 and 1977 reported something in their household was stolen in

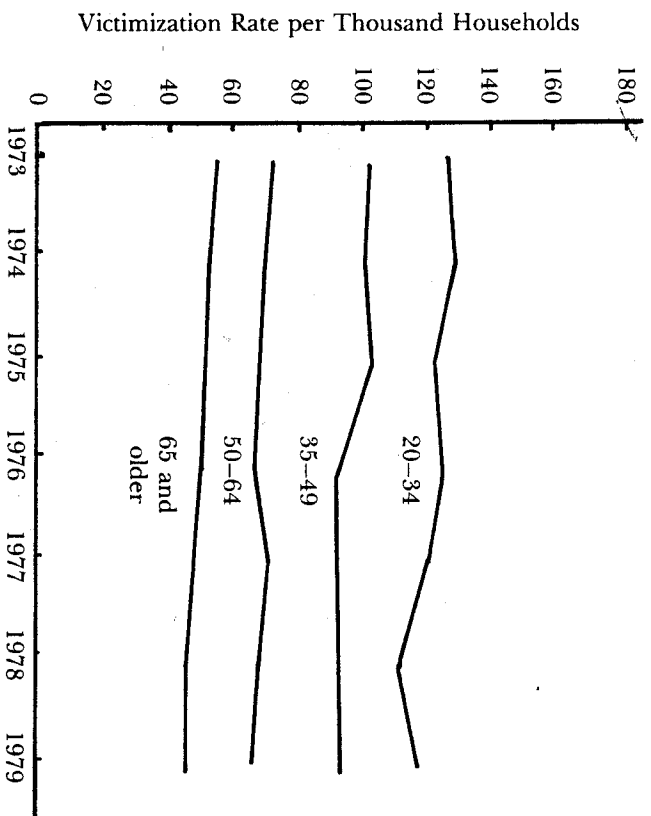


Figure 4B. Trends in Burglary By Age of Head of Household

Source: Criminal Victimization in the United States, yearly

the last 6 months and 3.95 percent of respondents reported that their household was burglarized, while far fewer reported a personal victimization. Only 1.25 percent reported an assault, .30 percent reported a robbery, .07 percent reported a rape, and .10 percent reported a personal theft such as pocket picking or purse snatching. Thus, it should be clear that while crime may be a frequent topic of conversation, it is a relatively low frequency event. The fact that it is such a low frequency event explains why we need extremely large numbers of respondents to locate a large enough sample of persons who have been criminally victimized, especially if we want to categorize victims by age groups.

Since it could be argued that any one year might represent an aberration, we present in the figures to follow breakdowns in crime rates by crime and by age categories for each year between 1973 and 1979. Figures 4A and 4B show trends in household theft and burglary for households headed by persons in different age brackets, from 1973 until 1979. Losses most frequently hit households headed by younger adults. In each year, victimization declined with age. With regard to burglary,

people of various age cohorts also retained the same relative position over time. There were few changes in rates of victimization between 1973 and 1979 for burglary, and households headed by those over 65 were the least likely to be involved.

In regard to theft, in 1974 and again in 1979, household rates generally rose, but least of all for persons 65 and over. Victimization rates for motor vehicle theft, the other household crime discussed in the National Crime Survey, are not shown in the figures due to space limitations, but they displayed the same relationship to age as well as the same stability over time.

Figures 5A and B and Figure 6 show the relationship between age and crimes against persons for every year between 1973 and 1979. Figure 5A shows teenagers and young adults to be most likely to be victims of assault. The likelihood of assault then declines with age. Victimization by

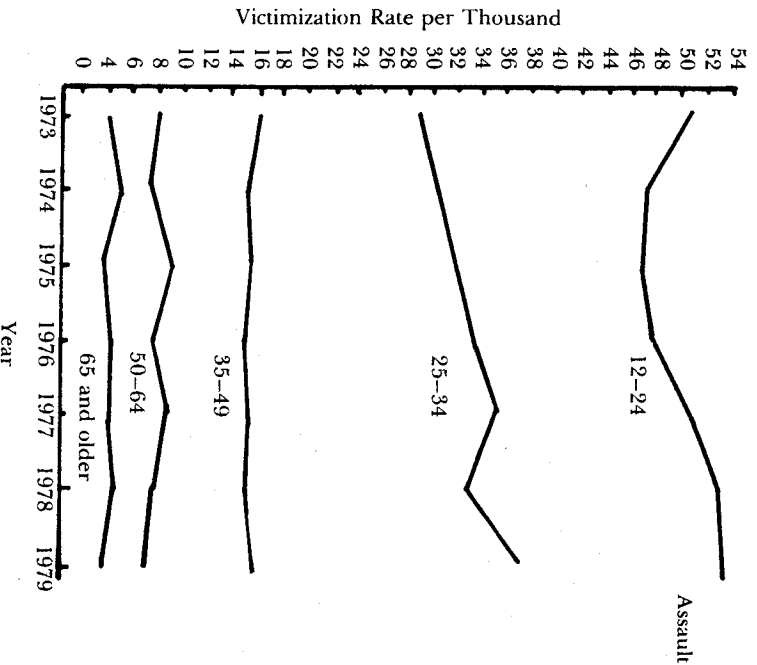


Figure 5A. Trends in Assault by Age, 1973-79

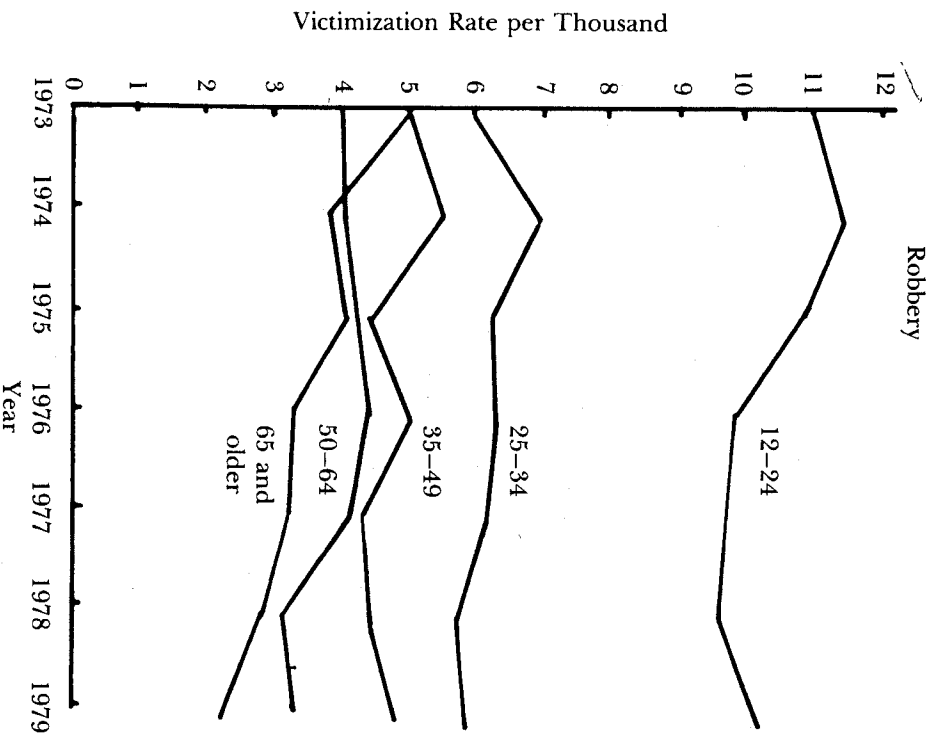


Figure 5B. Trends in Robbery by Age, 1973-79

assault drops off very sharply in middle age. For those in their teens, twenties, and early thirties, the frequency of assault has been on the upswing. However rates of assault against the 35 and older set have been low and stable since 1973.

Robbery is theft or an attempted theft during which the victim is confronted by an offender who uses or threatens to use violence. Because force or threat of force is involved and because robbery is usually committed by persons who are strangers to the victim, it is a particularly

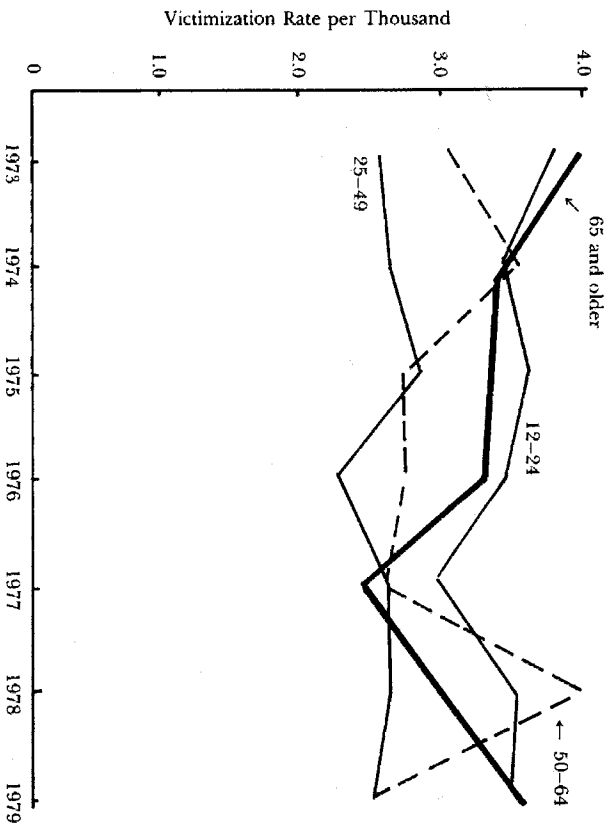


Figure 6. Trends in Personal Theft by Age, 1973-79

Source: Criminal Victimization in the United States, yearly

fear-provoking crime (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981). Figure 5B documents that the proportion of persons indicating they have been robbed in the NCS declines with age. Respondents in the youngest age categories were most likely to experience a robbery, while those in the oldest category were least likely to be robbed in all years except 1973. There appeared to be a small upturn in national robbery rates in 1979, but rates for adults 65 and older continued to decline.

Purse snatching and pocket-picking together make up a crime category we have dubbed "personal theft." Both involve limited victim-offender contact, and are defined in part by the absence of the use of force. Since in the United States few men carry purses or pocketbooks, the pool of persons who are at risk for purse snatching is composed almost exclusively of women. On the other hand, a significant number of women report having their pocketbooks "picked," so in that case they are numbered along with males as potential victims.

Women are most likely to report doing things which would minimize their chances of victimization by these crimes, by exercising a great deal of caution in their everyday activities (Skogan and Maxfield, 1981).

However, since many of those criminals engaged in purse snatching in particular prey opportunistically on passers-by, it is a crime which cannot be avoided completely through the exercise of common sense by potential victims. Elderly women, because of both their age and sex, are thought to be among those least capable of offering resistance to purse snatchers and nimble-fingered "pickers," and thus may be especially vulnerable to those crimes.

Figure 6 reports for each year between 1973 and 1979 the rate at which people in several age categories experienced a purse snatching or pocket picking. For the first time, the story about what happens to the elderly is not simple. In 1973, the oldest along with the youngest respondents experienced the highest rates of victimization, while by 1977 those 65 and older had dropped *below* everyone else. Then, in 1979 rates for the elderly jumped again to the highest position, a place shared again with the youngest respondents. Of course, low overall rates for such thefts result in instability in the data. This makes it difficult to draw any clear conclusions about the trends in personal theft from older people. The best summary of the data is that, overall, the elderly are essentially the same as other adults in regard to their experiences with purse snatching and pocket picking.

In summary, the prevalence of victimization turned out to be much lower among the elderly than for others in almost every category of crime. This finding was the same for each year between 1973 and 1979. Although it is not reported here, we also broke the data down into five-year age intervals. The story continued to be the same: the frequency of experiences with crime decreased with the passing years, and those under 25 were by far the most likely to report being victimized. Only in one category—personal theft—was this general decline tempered in any significant way. For purse snatchings and pickpocketing, older adults report levels of victimization which—although still usually below that threatening high-risk younger persons—put them on a par with other mature adults.

Thus, social science data alone would not confirm the validity of positioning the criminal victimization of the elderly issue on the formal governmental policy agenda as a problem of rates of crime being higher for them than for other groups. However, it must be remembered that it was during the years 1970-72 when these claims were most frequently made and it was not until 1973 that the Department of Justice implemented the National Crime Survey (NCS) which could be used to test such claims. Although news of the NCS results began to slip out in 1974, the first published report of the 1973 results did not appear until 1975 and the final report did not appear until 1976. These data showed the elderly to be the group least likely to experience crime. The decline in the number of claims in the *Congressional Record* that the problem was

one of rates parallels the years in which the NCS data were made available. As can be seen in Figure 3, the number of claims about rates being the primary problem dropped in 1973-75 and dropped even more dramatically in 1976-78. The drop in these claims was clearly justified by the data.

IV. DEFINING THE PROBLEM AS SEVERE ECONOMIC AND PHYSICAL CONSEQUENCES

As the definition of the problem as one of rates decreased in frequency, the claim emerged that the elderly's problem was that they suffered more severe physical and economic consequences than younger age groups. According to Clarence Kelly, the director of the FBI, in testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee on Aging: "Physically, no group of citizens suffers more than our nation's elderly do at the hands of America's criminal predators" (April 12, 1976, p. 24). Later, he went further and stated, "Psychologically, financially, and physically, no group of citizens suffers more painful losses than our nation's elderly do at the hands of America's criminal predators."

Such claims were also made by journalists and political actors. Very rarely were systematic data reported to validate the claims. Individual case histories of victims provided the primary source of evidence, all of which featured the most heinous crimes and the most serious consequences. The frequency of such extreme consequences was not probed in the reports, and graphic detail prevailed over any sense of what was typical.

A second argument about crime and the elderly was theoretical, based on unstated assumptions. If the elderly are poorer, frailer and less resilient than others—as demographic statistics and popular stereotypes suggest—then it seems to follow that, when victimized, the elderly suffer more than younger victims. This chain of reasoning depends on several assumptions whose validity has not been demonstrated. One assumption is that criminals use force to the same extent with elderly as younger victims. However, criminals could just as easily use less force with elderly victims, and it is not difficult to imagine why. They may think that less force is needed since less resistance will be offered; alternatively, criminals may fear stiffer legal penalties if they use force against senior citizens. Of course, if they *do* use less force, it may mean less severe consequences for them.

A second assumption was that criminals who rob the elderly are as systematic in "cleaning them out" as they are with younger victims.

Should this assumption be wrong, then it is also possible that the financial consequences of crime may be less for the elderly than others. In fact we have shown elsewhere that the modal perpetrator of predatory crimes against the elderly is an inexperienced juvenile acting alone who snatches a purse (Antunes et al., 1977). It is not an adult professional who knows how "to clean out the mark" or a gang whose members can physically detain victims and systematically rob them of all their possessions, who typically prey on the elderly.

A third assumption was the elderly are frailer, poorer, and more psychologically brittle in ways that affect the consequences of crime. But frailty, poverty, and psychic withdrawal increase with age even among the elderly, so those with these conditions in their most chronic form are likely to be the "old-old," the least numerous subpopulation within the elderly. Since such persons are likely to be home-bound because of their condition, they are least likely to be exposed to crime on the street and most likely to be at home to deter burglars. Those among the elderly whose condition might make them most vulnerable to severe consequences may be the persons least likely to encounter crime and to show up in crime statistics. The enhanced frailty, poverty, and psychic withdrawal and depression of the elderly need not inevitably lead to more severe consequences for them.

In the analyses to follow, we examine data from the National Crime Surveys for 1973 to 1977. We combine the data for all these years to aggregate enough crime incidents to break them down by age, type of crime, type of consequences, etc. There is a great deal of stability in crime rates by year for each age group (seen in Figures 4-6), and these data should present no problems of bias in interpretations.

Financial Consequences

Monetary loss can be incurred from the household crimes of burglary or simple theft (i.e., household larceny). It can also result from the personal crimes of robbery and purse-snatching and pocketpicking.

Figure 7 shows the median amount taken by burglars from homes with household heads of different ages. The data are based on the amount of cash reported stolen and the estimated value of goods removed. They are for "successful" crimes only—those in which something of value actually was stolen. Because there were a few very large losses, medians are presented here.

Figure 7 suggests the relationship between age and the value of goods burglarized is curvilinear. Loss increases from age 25 to 49, but decreases thereafter. There is no sign of greater absolute loss by the elderly. Age is related in much the same way to the median amount taken

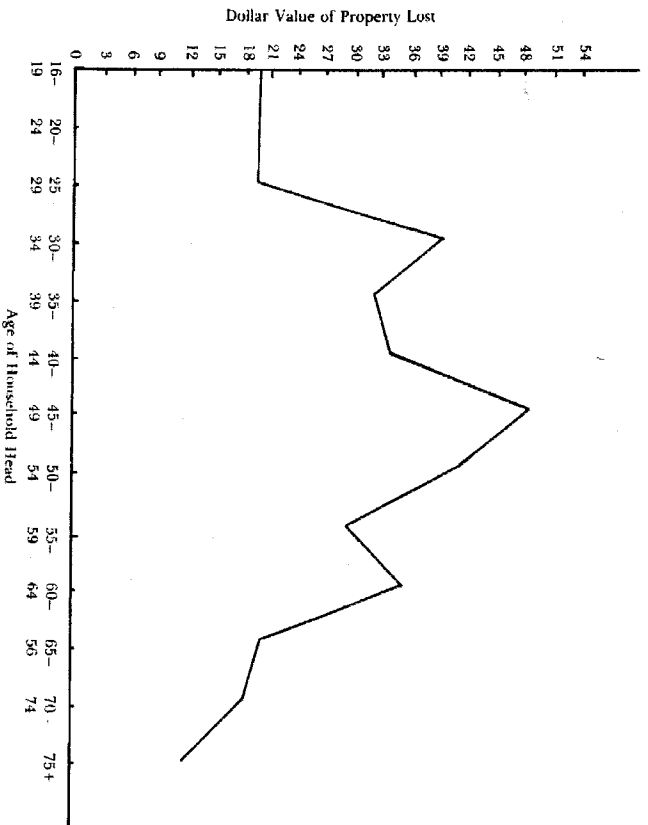


Figure 7. Median Value of Property Lost for Burglary for Households with a Head of 16 and over, 1973-77

in household thefts (not shown), which constitute about two-thirds of the property crimes against senior citizens. The major difference between burglary and household theft occurs for households with heads under 20 years of age, a very small group. They have among the lowest losses from burglary but the highest from simple theft. After age 30 the burglary and theft data are similar, showing that dollar losses are lower for households with elderly heads than for households with heads between 30 and 60.

However, it is important to note that households with elderly heads also tend to have lower family incomes. Thus, in 1976 and 1977 the reported median income of burglarized families with a head between 20 and 24 was \$6,272; while for families with a head between 45 and 49 it was \$13,611; and for families with a head between 65 and 69 it was \$6,593. Since the ultimate impact of dollar losses depends in part on one's income, it is useful to express the amount lost in crime relative to total family income.

One simple way to do this is by expressing net dollar losses as a percentage of estimated monthly income. Net dollar loss is defined as the sum of the dollar value of goods taken and the property damage incurred during a crime minus the value of the goods recovered and insurance reimbursements for property loss and physical damage to the premises. NCS income measures cover the previous year. We divided these estimates by 12 to yield an average monthly income estimate. This form of measurement does not deal with the value of non-market goods and services received by families, and for our purposes we assume here that any age biases in income reporting are constant.

Figure 8 illustrates how age is related to net loss from burglaries expressed as a percentage of household income. The relationship is almost identical for household thefts (not shown). In each case, the highest relative losses are found in households with younger heads, and the level of loss falls precipitously until about age 25. After age 25, income-adjusted losses rise with age but only to a small degree. This rise is strongest with household theft, where the increase is from a net loss of about 1% of monthly income at age 30 (the lowest point) to just over 2% by age 75 and above (the highest point).

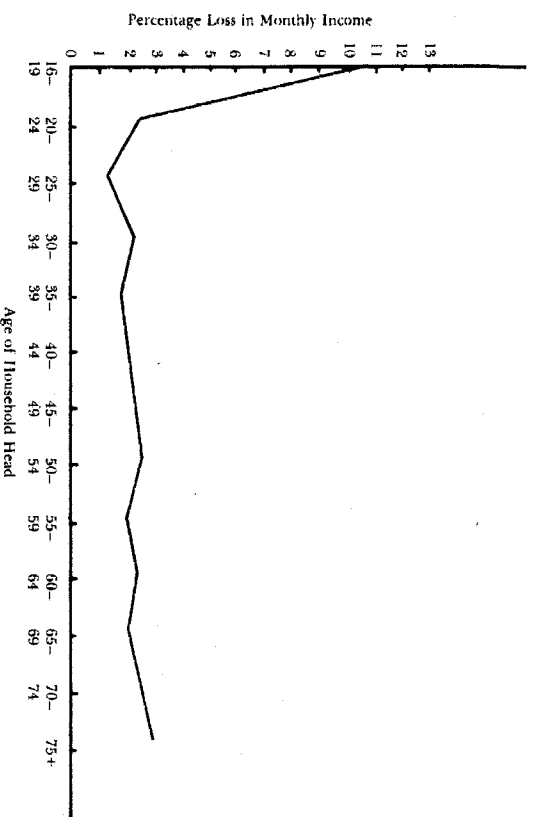


Figure 8. Net Loss from Burglary as a Percentage of Household Monthly Income, 1973-77

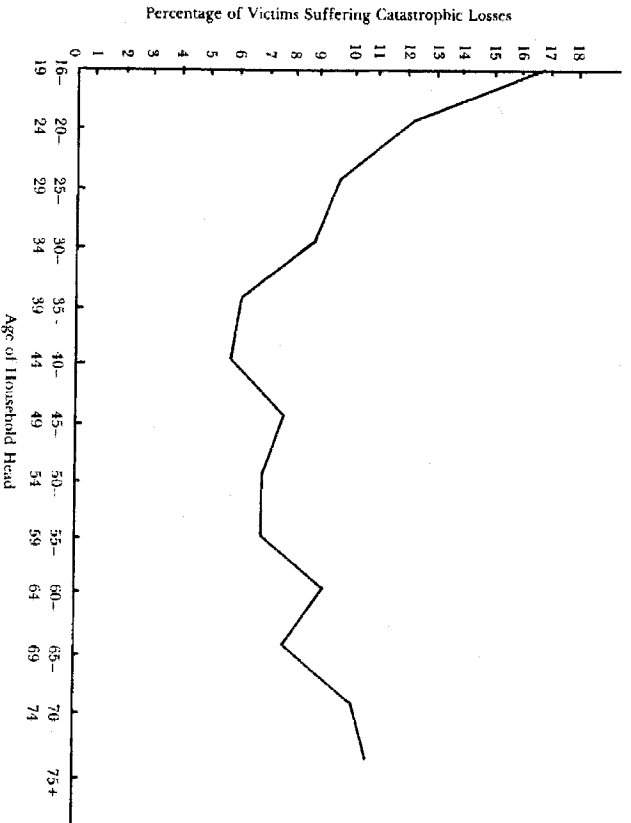


Figure 9. Percentage of Burglary Victims Who Suffered Catastrophic Losses in 1973-77

Another way of relating dollar losses to household income is to consider only "catastrophic" losses, defined here as losses totaling at least one month's income. We ask: Are net losses of this magnitude more common among elderly victims than others? Figure 9 provides the answer for burglary. The victims most prone to catastrophic losses are in households with younger heads (and lower incomes). However, victimized households with elderly heads are somewhat more likely to suffer catastrophic losses than households headed by other mature adults. Thus, about 9% of victims 60 and older suffer catastrophic losses compared to between 6.5% and 7% for households with heads between 35 and 59. The pattern is comparable for larceny where about 0.75% of the victims aged 30-59 suffer catastrophic losses and about 1.5% of the victims 60 and over do. It seems, then, that the net losses suffered by elderly victims are somewhat more likely to be catastrophic when compared to the losses of adults 30-59. But they are noticeably less likely to be catastrophic when compared to the losses incurred in households with heads younger than 30, and especially those with teenage heads.

Personal Crimes

Unlike household crimes, in which about 80% result in something being stolen, the majority of personal crimes do not involve the loss of objects of financial value. Indeed, most of the predatory crimes that survey respondents mentioned were attempted but not completed. The ratio of successful to attempted personal thefts is systematically related to age, with crimes against older people being more successful. When victims are under 40, less than 20% of the personal crimes involve loss, but by age 60 it is just under 40% and by 75 and above it is just over 50%. The criminal's success in gaining money or valuables from older victims reflects a lower level of resistance to criminals by senior citizens (Block, 1983). It seems unlikely, given the profile of typical offenders against older adults, that the higher ratio of success is due to more professional criminals. The typical offender against the elderly is a young black teenager acting alone who does not have a weapon.

Because not all attempts at personal theft are successful, we shall restrict the analysis of the median number of dollars lost to those incidents where a loss occurred. The unbroken line in Figure 10 shows that the median amount lost increases with age until about 40-49, and decreases thereafter. This is similar to the case with burglary (see Figure 7) where losses were also lower for persons 60 and over when compared to other mature adults.

The relationship changes once we compute net loss as a percentage of monthly income. Figure 10 shows that the relative loss is approximately constant from age 20 to 69, implying that persons between 60 and 69 are much like younger victims of mature age. But after age 70 loss relative to income increases. This is due to a sharp decrease in income of the 70+ age group.

Summarizing the financial consequences, households with elderly heads lose less from burglaries and simple thefts than do households with younger heads when we consider only absolute dollar losses. When we compute losses as a percent of monthly income, households with an elderly head tend to lose about the same or slightly more than other adults over age 20. With respect to personal crimes, again the elderly lose less absolutely. Relatively, however, the loss is higher for older persons over 70.

Physical Consequences

The physical consequences of victimization can be described in terms of a sequence of contingencies: Is the victim attacked? Does the attack

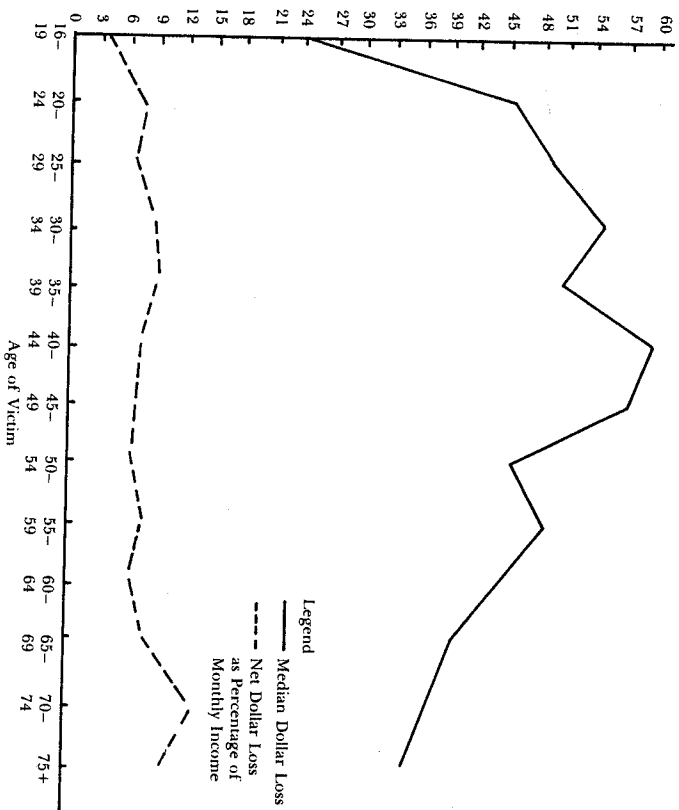


Figure 10. Median Dollar Losses, and Income Adjusted Net Dollar Losses, from All Incidents of Personal Crime with Loss, 1973-77

lead to injuries? Is the injury serious enough to warrant medical attention? Is the attention protracted and costly? We shall deal with each of these issues in the same sequence, progressively narrowing the sample base as we go along. That is, any analysis of injuries is restricted to victims who have been attacked; an analysis of whether medical attention is called for is restricted to victims who have been attacked and injured, etc. Since the number of persons who are injured by criminals and require hospitalization is quite small, the data we present are merged from 1973 through 1977.

The unbroken line in Figure 11 shows the percentage of victims 12 years and over in the nation who were physically attacked while a crime of physical contact was committed (note that we are *only* focusing on victims here). The trend declines rapidly for victims age 12 to 34, then stays fairly constant until age 60-64. Victims age 60-64 are less likely to be attacked than younger victims—in fact, they are the least likely age group to be attacked. Those aged 65-69 and 70-74 are about as likely to

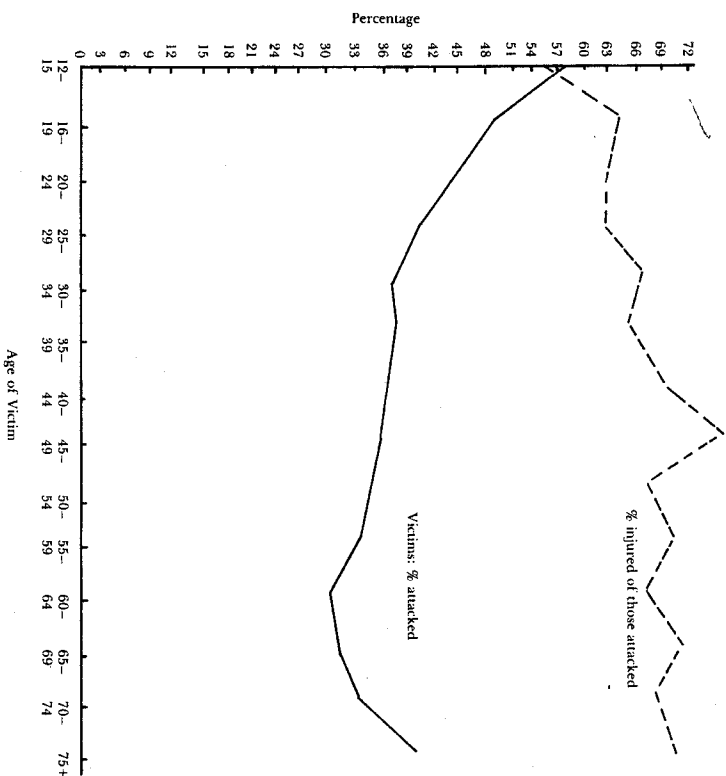


Figure 11. Patterns of Personal Attack and Injury, 1973-77 Age 12 and Over

be attacked as victims 30-59, whereas those aged 75 and over are attacked more frequently—at the rate at which 25-29 year olds are attacked.

Are these attacks more likely to result in injuries to the elderly than to others? The broken line in Figure 11 indicates the percentage of those attacked who reported injuries. It does not appear that older adults are more likely to be injured when they are attacked. This raises the issue of how much force criminals use against the elderly.

Are the injuries to senior citizens more likely to result in a need for medical care? The answer is clearly no. The results show that the likelihood of medical care increases from age 12 to about age 30, stabilizes at 45% by age 30, but drops again at age 60. The implication is that the crimes committed against the elderly typically involve less force when contact occurs.

This interpretation would be nearly corroborated if age were also related to the percentage of injuries serious enough to require medical care for which financial charges were made. But while the percentage of such injuries is approximately constant at 54% for victims between ages 20 and 59, it is somewhat lower for both the 60-64 and 75+ groups (50% and 42% respectively) but is higher for victims aged between 65 and 74 (about 60%). Similar instability is apparent in examining the medical dollar costs per injury. This instability probably arises because the base sample of reports is low. Indeed, when we collapse the age categories beyond 60 to create a single group of persons over 60 and consider the percentage needing medical care at some expense, we find that the data for seniors are like those for other adults. But the medical dollar costs tend to be highest in the group of persons over 60, both before and after they are expressed as a percentage of reported monthly income. Injuries to the elderly cost more, but we cannot be sure to what extent these expenses were out-of-pocket or met by insurance, Medicare, or Medicaid.

In summary, the overall physical consequences of victimizations are no more severe for elderly adults than for younger adults. The elderly are not the most likely to be attacked, and when attacked they are not more likely to suffer injuries. Moreover, their injuries are no more likely to require medical care than those of younger adults. However, their injuries are slightly more likely to result in medical care for which charges are made and the median dollar costs of medical care are slightly higher than for younger adults. Nonetheless, we cannot be sure to what extent these latter differences are due to the fact that they are more likely to be covered by some form of government supported insurance (Medicare and Medicaid) than younger adults.

Based on the evidence presented above, it is clear that the re-definition of the crime problem facing the elderly as one of *more severe physical and economic consequences* also does not correspond with our best data on their actual problems. Claims about this definition of the problem were most frequent from 1973-75. During the 1976-78 period they declined. This was the period when NCS findings were gaining widespread attention. As with rates, the drop in volume in these claims was justified by the data.

V. DEFINING THE PROBLEM AS FEAR AND CONSEQUENCES OF FEAR

From the time when the crime and the elderly issue first emerged onto the policy agenda, claims about the problem of fear of crime were numerous. During the 1976-78 and 1979-81 periods when other claims

about the elderly's special crime problems diminished, these increased. If one re-examines Figure 3, it is clear that within the U.S. Congress fear of crime and consequences of fear for the elderly were the major concerns within this issue area. How accurate were these concerns?

Researchers who have examined both victimization rates and the concerns expressed by older persons agree that high levels of fear are more frequently reported and seem to have a great effect upon senior citizens (Clemente and Kleinman, 1976; Sundeen and Mahieu, 1976). A national survey conducted in 1974 asked people to rate the seriousness of a number of specific problems in their own lives. More elderly persons (23%) ranked "fear of crime" as a very serious problem than ranked poor health (21%), "not having enough money to live on" (15%), loneliness (12%), and "not enough medical care" (10%) as very serious problems (National Council on the Aging, 1975, p. 31). Interestingly, for those under 65 fear of crime was also among the two most highly-ranked personal problems, standing just below "not enough money." Overall, 23 per cent of the elderly and 15 per cent of those under 65 indicated that fear of crime was a "very serious" problem for them personally. Between 1974 and 1981 these percentages rose very slightly for the elderly (to 25 per cent), and somewhat more for those under 65 (to 20 per cent) (National Council on Aging, 1981).

These data are frequently cited to support the contention that the fear of crime is a problem which disproportionately affects the elderly (for example, Curtis, 1978), although the differences—while statistically significant—are not overwhelming. These observations led Cook and Cook (1976, p. 643) in an early article to conclude that "the major policy problem associated with the elderly and crime is probably not crime *per se*. Rather, the problem is related to the elderly person's fear of crime and the restrictions to daily mobility that this fear may impose." They concluded that "the policy response to victimization of the elderly should be targeted to alleviating fear" (p. 644). The National Council on Aging (1975) survey also indicated this was the popular perception of the issue. In that survey respondents under 65 were asked what they *thought* were the serious problems facing the elderly; 50 per cent indicated "fear of crime" was a very serious problem in old age. By 1981 this figure had risen to 74 per cent (National Council on Aging, 1981).

Previous research has not been specific about the content of the elderly's fear of crime. Are the elderly fearful of every sort of crime or only of selected offenses? Are they fearful under all conditions and in every aspect of their daily lives or are they fearful only under selected circumstances and at specific times? Does fear mean that the elderly see a great deal of crime around them or do they believe that whatever crime there is is likely to involve them—that they are special targets? Do

the elderly think that the things they do to protect themselves from crime actually work or do they believe that they are completely vulnerable? These and other questions remained unanswered.

There have been a number of efforts by researchers to clarify the meaning of the concept of "fear of crime" (DuBow, 1979). While there is no clear consensus on what "fear of crime" means or how it is best measured, there are three dimensions along which many specific fear-related perceptions can be described: concern, personal risk, and threat of crime. By societal concern about crime we mean the assessment that crime is a serious problem for a community. This distinction follows that made by Furstenberg (1971). Concern is a judgment about the seriousness of events and conditions in one's environment. The second common meaning of fear (Furstenberg's other meaning) is the perception that one is likely to fall victim. Since the first surveys sponsored by the Crime Commission (Biderman, et al., 1967), researchers have been asking people to rate their chances of being victimized. For example, respondents may be asked to rate "how likely" they are to be attacked or burglarized, on a scale ranging from "not very likely" to "very likely." Those ratings of risk have been used as measures of fear. The concept of *threat* of crime lies at the nexus between concern and personal risk. People feel threatened when they believe that something *could* happen to them, even though for a variety of reasons—including that they may have done a great deal to protect themselves—they may not necessarily feel that it is likely to happen to them. Threat is measured by questions that ask "How safe *would* you feel if you were out alone?" or "How would you feel if you were approached by a stranger on the street or heard footsteps in the night?"

The concepts of concern, personal risk, and threat cover most of the assertions which have been made about the distinctive fear problems facing the elderly. It also is often claimed the urban elderly are overconcentrated in bad neighborhoods and are concerned about conditions and crime in their neighborhood. And it is claimed that the elderly feel hopelessly vulnerable to crime, which can be evaluated using measures of self-diagnosed risk. Finally, it is claimed the elderly are "prisoners of fear," traumatized by the thought of venturing out because of the risks they would face. This assertion can be tested using data on perceived threat of crime.

For each claim there are two research questions: are the elderly fearful, and are they distinctively more fearful? In this section, we define the elderly population as persons sixty years of age and older. A close examination of age-specific levels of fear indicates this is an optimal cutting point, and it is one which defines a pool of elderly respondents large enough to examine accurately in some of the smaller surveys we use. To

examine fear of crime and its behavioral implications we turn to a number of surveys of large American cities which have employed identical or similar questions about those topics. Being big cities, they are all places where problems of fear and victimization are significant. By examining surveys which have been conducted in a number of cities, we hope for some generality in our conclusions. No single national survey duplicates the data we needed; rather, we rely upon multiple replications across time, cities, and surveys to gain the same end.

Concern About Crime

A number of claims have been advanced that the elderly are more concerned than other age groups about the level of crime and disorder around them. The best data for evaluating these claims may be the reports of elderly persons themselves. We have examined four sample surveys in which residents were asked to rate a variety of crime conditions in their own neighborhoods, conducted in Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Hartford, Connecticut. By examining responses by age groups we can assess the possibility that, while the elderly may report adverse local conditions, other city dwellers also face the same problems.

Our first comparison is the assessments of crime-related neighborhood deterioration and deviant behavior. These include ratings of the extent to which respondents in these four surveys were concerned about youthful harassment, unseemly public behavior, and building abandonment. In each case they were asked "how much of a problem" each of these conditions was in their neighborhood. Respondents could indicate each was a "big problem," "some problem," or "almost no problem." The ratings of these conditions are presented in Table 1.

Few of the petty "incivilities" which plague many urban residents seemed to be problems significantly related to age. In Table 1 the incidence of concern about teenagers, vandalism, "people using illegal drugs," "drunken men on the street," and "prostitutes on the street" is summarized. The only significant differences fall to the disadvantage of younger, not older, residents. These forms of deviant public behavior are violations of what James Q. Wilson (1975) called "standards of right and seemly conduct." He argued that they are read by "proper" citizens as signs that the social order is in disarray. While over one-fifth of those interviewed in these cities seemed bothered by these activities, neither youths, drugs, prostitution, nor public intoxication seemed to particularly plague the neighborhoods of elderly residents. If anything, those under sixty are more likely to report that they represent major neighborhood problems. This negative relation between old age and perceptions of neighborhood deterioration obtains even when we control for race.

Table 1. Perceptions of Neighborhood Deterioration as a Neighborhood Problem, by Age

Problem Area	Age Group	Percent Think a "Big Problem" in Their Neighborhood			
		Hartford (1975)	Philadelphia (1977)	Chicago (1977)	San Francisco (1977)
Teenagers Hanging Around	under 60	32*	22	22	12
	over 60	21	20	30	12
Vandalism	under 60		20	20	10
	over 60		21	21	11
Drug Use	under 60	29*	24	25	15
	over 60	16	14	27	6
Drunks on Street	under 60	22*			
	over 60	10			
Prostitution	under 60	17*			
	over 60	9			
Abandoned Buildings	under 60		14	12	3
	over 60		8	10	1
(Number of cases)		(537)	(479)	(417)	(447)

Note: Asterisks indicate differences significant at the $P < .05$ level. Blank entry indicates no comparable question. The number of cases varies slightly from question to question; averages are given here.

These are neither white elderly nor black elderly problems in these cities. Blacks (and another population subgroup, women) were more likely than their counterparts to sense neighborhood decline, but within racial groups and sexes the elderly still were less likely to report that these conditions constituted a "big problem."

When we turn to concern about serious crimes, some distinctive concerns of the elderly begin to emerge. In these four cities survey respondents were asked to rate "how much of a problem" three types of crimes presented in their neighborhood. The crimes were burglary, robbery, and assault. Each of these crimes involves the threat of serious injury or financial loss. Each is relatively frequent and potentially could strike any urban dweller. Neighborhoods in which they are rated big problems are fearsome places indeed. The data on these ratings are summarized in Table 2.

Overall, burglary was the crime most frequently rated a "big problem." For that crime the only significant age difference in ratings was in Hartford, where those under sixty were more likely to be concerned. However, in all three cities surveyed in 1977, "people being robbed or having their purses or wallets taken on the street" was more frequently cited as a big problem by the elderly. Those differences were quite substantial, and point to concern about neighborhood "mugging" as a special problem for the elderly. The only remaining significant age dif-

Table 2. Perceptions of Major Crimes as Neighborhood Problems, by Age

Major Crime Problem	Age Group	Percent Think a "Big Problem" in Their Neighborhood			
		Hartford (1975)	Philadelphia (1977)	Chicago (1977)	San Francisco (1977)
Burglary	under 60	32*	16	19	20
	over 60	16	18	23	20
Robbery	under 60	20	12	23	15
	over 60	20	24*	39*	27*
Assault	under 60	16	6	9	7
	over 60	14	8	13	19*
(Number of cases)		(537)	(433)	(401)	(452)

Note: Asterisks indicate differences significant at the $P < .05$ level. The number of cases varies slightly from question-to-question; averages are given here.

ference reported in Table 2 was for assault, but that difference appeared for only one city.

Perceived Risk of Victimization

The concerns about crime analyzed above were ratings of neighborhood problems. Those ratings reflected assessments about "what's going on" there. Assessments of risk, on the other hand, are perceptions of the likelihood of things "happening to me." Perceptions of risk often are recommended as measures of "fear" (Yin, 1980; Biderman, et al., 1967), for they reflect the perceived probability of personal involvement in victimization situations. If they are realistic reflections of patterns of victimization, they generally should be lower than risks perceived by younger persons; on the other hand, if they are a source of distinctive concern among the elderly and an indicator that senior citizens are plagued by fear, they should be higher.

In this analysis we report upon five city surveys which gathered people's assessments to their risk of victimization, the four utilized above and a survey conducted in Kansas City, Missouri. In each study respondents were asked to estimate how likely it was selected crimes would involve them. In Kansas City, respondents were asked to rate their chances of victimization on a six-point scale ranging from "very improbable" to "very probable." In the other cities they were asked to choose a position on a zero-to-ten scale which was not labeled at each point; respondents were told to "let the zero stand for no possibility at all of something happening," and the ten for it being "extremely likely that something could happen" and to choose a value in that range.

Table 3. Estimates of Risk of Victimization For Major Crimes, by Age

Type of Crime	Age Group	Average "Risk Estimate" for Major Crime Types				
		Hartford (1973)	Philadelphia (1977)	Chicago (1977)	San Francisco (1977)	Kansas City (1973)
Burglary	under 60	4.9*	3.6	4.1	3.9	4.8
	over 60	3.7	3.8	4.2	3.4	4.6
Robbery	under 60	3.7	3.2	4.2	3.2	4.4
	over 60	4.0	3.0	4.4	3.8	4.5
Assault	under 60	3.2	2.5	3.2	2.6	4.1
	over 60	3.7	3.0	3.6	3.7*	4.4*
Purse or Wallet Snatched	under 60	4.2				
	over 60	4.9*				
(Number of cases)		(537)	(453)	(428)	(430)	(1160)

Note: Asterisks indicate differences significant at the $P < .05$ level. In Kansas City, respondents were asked to rate their risks on a one ("very improbable") to six ("very probable") scale. All others employed a one-to-ten scale without labels for each scale position. The number of cases varies from question to question; averages are given here.

Source: Computed by the authors from original data.

Table 3 presents the distribution of these estimates of risk of victimization, by age, for each of the five cities. On the whole, residents of these cities gave the highest ratings of risk to burglary. This is congruent with the frequency of burglary in contrast to personal crimes. However, burglary is numerically almost four times as frequent as any of these personal crimes, and this great difference in rates of victimization is not accurately reflected in these assessments of risk. In each of these cities, residents of all ages overestimate the relative risk of violent crime.

There are few significant differences between those under sixty and those sixty and older apparent in Table 3. Only one of those differences is replicated in more than one city. Those under sixty in Hartford were more likely to perceive high risks of burglary, and the elderly in the same city were more fearful (by this measure) of purse snatching. The most consistent relationship between age and estimates of risk of victimization involved the crime of assault. In the three cities surveyed in 1977 the wording of this crime question referred to attacks by a stranger in a public place in the respondent's neighborhood, while in the other cities it was somewhat less explicit. In all five communities older persons reported higher-than-average risk estimates for assault. However, only two of those differences were significant.

While these risk estimates point to the conclusion that the elderly perceive somewhat higher levels of risk for street crimes, the differences reported in Table 3 are not large and not often significant. Note also the

elderly do not see themselves as particularly likely to fall victim to the one major crime which they consistently rated a "big neighborhood problem." Perhaps the most interesting point to be made of Table 3 is that these estimates of risk all are relatively low, in absolute terms. For assault and robbery they average near the lower third on the "zero-to-ten" scale that was proffered. Despite widespread discussion of rising crime rates during the decade that preceded these surveys, on the "no probability" to "extremely likely" response dimension that was employed in the questions, both of these groups of adults appeared to be quite similar and to consider themselves relatively safe.

Threat of Crime

In addition to concern and perceptions of risk, there is a third aspect of fear of crime which may distinguish the elderly from other adults—the threat of crime. By threat we meant the *potential* for harm which people feel crime holds for them. The concept of threat is distinct from those of risk and concern. Because people may adopt tactics to reduce their vulnerability to victimization, the threat of crime may not be reflected in assessments of the actual probability that something will happen. Because many people may believe that they are capable of dealing with crime in their neighborhood or that it will not strike them personally, the threat of crime also is distinct from concern about the issue as a community problem. Threat, on the other hand, is a perception that something untoward could happen when (and if) one is exposed to risk of victimization. Data from numerous surveys indicate that the threat of crime is felt most strongly by the elderly, and in comparison to measures of risk or concern, questions measuring threat clearly differentiate senior citizens from the remainder of the adult population.

There are, of course, a number of potential risks that people face. Available survey data dwell upon one threat, personal violence. Numerous surveys have inquired about how afraid or unsafe people would feel if they were exposed to personal attacks. Virtually all of them employ one of two questions to measure that threat. They are:

How safe do you feel if you feel out alone in your neighborhood at night?

and

Is there any area right around here—that is, within one mile—where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?

The respondents in these surveys are asked to choose among four answers in reply to the first question, alternatives that range from "very

safe" to "very unsafe." The latter question usually demands a "yes-or-no" response. The first item has been included in all of the city victimization surveys conducted by the Census Bureau and in various surveys by other organizations. The latter question is employed by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in their yearly national survey, and by the Gallup Poll organization.

This chapter employs city and national surveys which have used these items in order to assess the extent to which the threat of personal violence differentiates the elderly from the remainder of the adult population. The national survey data was collected by NORC over the period 1973-1978, which bridges the time-span of all of the surveys analyzed in this volume. Here we will also report the results of five Census Bureau surveys conducted in 1973 in the nation's largest cities. Another was fielded in 1974 in Portland, Oregon. Finally, we combine the results of parallel surveys conducted in Chicago, San Francisco, and Philadelphia in 1977, which were reported upon earlier in this chapter. Because of the large size of these surveys we will refine the age categories used to examine the distribution of the threat to five-year age intervals. The relationship between age and the threat of crime in all of these surveys is summarized in Figure 12.

These surveys all point to the same general conclusion: the perceived threat of personal attack in a public place is relatively low among younger respondents, then climbs in frequency. In each survey there is a tendency for those under fifty or so to report similar perceptions of threat and for threat to then grow more rapidly with age.

This expression of fear is very much confined to *nighttime* risks. When contrasted with the daylight hours, it is clear that for most people the threat of crime rises as the sun goes down. For example, in the Census Bureau's surveys in five cities about 48 percent of all residents indicated some degree of concern about going out alone after dark, but only 11 percent had any hesitation about their daytime safety. The elderly were more likely than others to express uneasiness about their safety during the day (17 percent as opposed to 9 percent under sixty years of age.) In the survey in Hartford, 28 percent of those over sixty expressed at least some worry about "street crime" during the day, but that figure stood at more than 60 percent after dark. A Texas survey using similar measures also indicates that this fear is confined to on-street as opposed to at-home risks. In that study (a statewide mail questionnaire with a reasonable rate of return) older people were more likely than others to indicate fear of walking alone, but were *less* likely to express fear about being home alone at night (Jeffords, 1980).

The relationships between age and perceptions of threat documented in Figure 12 are all extremely strong, especially in contrast to the sometimes significant but rarely impressive differences between the elderly

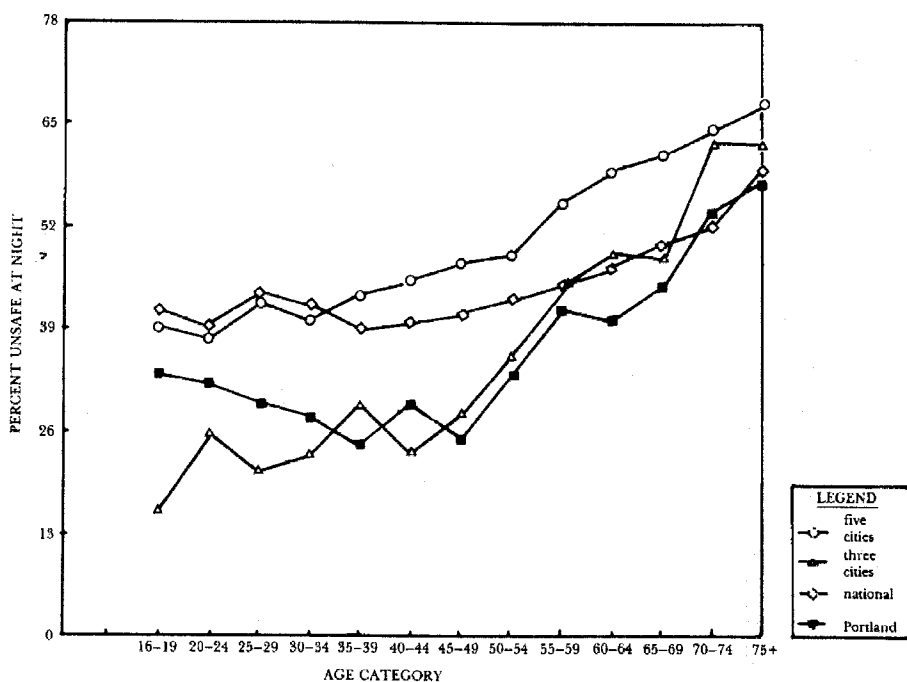


Figure 12. Age and Threat of Crime

and others on measures of concern and risk. The age-threat linkage has been replicated across cities, across most of the 1970s, and across nations as well (Sparks, et al., 1977). It is an extremely robust correspondence, suggesting that it reflects powerful social and psychological forces which are not idiosyncratic to individual jurisdictions or particular events.

Are the Elderly More Fearful?

There have been numerous claims advanced concerning the fears of the elderly with regard to crime. We find that a quarter of the urban population is concerned about crime and their general level of assessed risk is only moderate, but their perceived threat of after-dark violence in public places is quite high. Many of the concerns and risks we investigated proved to be general ones, however. On those dimensions the elderly were distinctive only in two regards: they were significantly more likely to report higher levels of risk of assault, and they were substantially (as well as significantly in a statistical sense) more likely to report street robbery was a big problem in their community. In most ways the elderly closely resembled other urban dwellers. In particular, it did not seem they were disproportionately concentrated in "bad neighborhoods" or more threatened by minor crimes and incivilities not otherwise reflected in victimization studies.

The concern of the elderly with street predation was mirrored in our data on potential, rather than realized, threats of crime. We found extremely strong and distinctive relationships between age and the threat of personal violence after dark. Even during the daylight hours many elderly reported that they were fearful, and they were distinctive in this regard as well. However, the level of threat that was registered in these surveys was far more substantial for "after dark" risks. We interpret those as expressions of concern about potential victimization because they do not strongly parallel age differences in victimization or assessments of risk. Rather, the elderly seem distinctively to fear what *could* happen to them if they were exposed at places and times that would put them at risk. Using this quite restricted definition of fear, the elderly are indeed distinctively threatened by crime, both in big cities and for the nation as a whole.

VI. THE CONSEQUENCES OF FEAR

Here we turn to another important aspect of the "fear of crime" problem, what people *do* about it. It is widely claimed the elderly are the prisoners of their own fear, with adverse consequences for the quality of

their lives. The high level of perceived threat of victimization among the elderly documented above makes it tempting to identify those actions as reactions to crime. However, it is likely that at least some portion of this reduced risk is derivative rather than conscious in origin. It may simply be attributable to problems attendant to old age. One should not only look to crime to account for the limited exposure to risk of personal crime of many elderly persons. The "prisoners of fear" concept implies that the daily activities of older persons are significantly shaped by their perceived threat of victimization, a conscious strategy.

This analysis deals with two general classes of responses to crime: those which serve to limit people's risk of personal attack and those which reduce the vulnerability of households to property crime, burglary, and home invasion. The former involve either taking positive "risk management" measures when exposed to risk, or more passively limiting one's exposure to risk in the first place. Household protection measures include "target hardening" tactics designed to make a dwelling more difficult or risky to enter and routine measures intended to increase the actual or apparent level of surveillance protecting a residence.

Table 4 presents findings concerning the age distribution of such activities in a number of cities. It indicates the percentage of respondents above and below the age of sixty who reported taking various household surveillance and target hardening measures. The statistically significant comparisons reported there indicate no particular tendency for older respondents to live in better-protected places. There were no age-related differences in the frequency of leaving lights on, and younger respondents more often reported living in households with dogs ("because of crime" in Kansas City, as a "watch dog" in Portland). The elderly were more likely than others to report having outside lights in Kansas City, but less likely in Portland: the same sort of reversal characterizes the data on light timers in Kansas City and Cincinnati. In two cities, seniors were more likely to report installing special door locks (but in Portland it went the other way by the same margin), and in Kansas City they more often mentioned installing window bars or special locks—but there were no differences across age in other places. Other indicators revealed no significant differences among age groups.

Personal Precautions

Rather than taking measures to reduce their risk of property crime, it may be that older people are more likely to try to reduce their likelihood of victimization on the street. For example, they may go out less frequently during the day and at night than do younger adults. If it is true that they feel they cannot go out, crime exacts a heavy toll on the quality

Table 4. Frequency of Efforts to Reduce Household Victimization, by Age

Activity	Community				
	Cincinnati	Kansas City	Portland	Three-City	Chicago-Metro
Surveillance					
Outside Lights					
Under 60		35	52*		29
Over 60		45*	41		26
Light timer					
Under 60	17	16			
Over 60	11	26*			
Have a dog/watch dog					
Under 60		31*	41*		
Over 60		23	21		
Leave lights on when gone					
Under 60			79	82	
Over 60			81	80	
Target Hardening					
Special door locks					
Under 60	39	40	36*		51
Over 60	39	49*	27		59
Special window locks or bars					
Under 60		23		44	38*
Over 60		30*		46	27
Peephole at door					
Under 60		12		62	
Over 60		12		63	
Burglar Alarm					
Under 60	3	7	6		
Over 60	1	7	7		
Fence					
Under 60		28			
Over 60		30			

*Difference significant at $P < .05$ level.

Note: Wording of questions varies somewhat in different surveys. The items are quite comparable, however. "Over 60" category includes sixty-year-olds.

Source: Computed by the authors from original data.

of their life. Survey data probing the fear behavior nexus is presented in Figure 13. It examines the relationship between fear and two different forms of social activity for those in various age brackets. Figure 13a employs responses to a question in surveys conducted in the nation's five largest cities, about "going out" for entertainment. Average responses

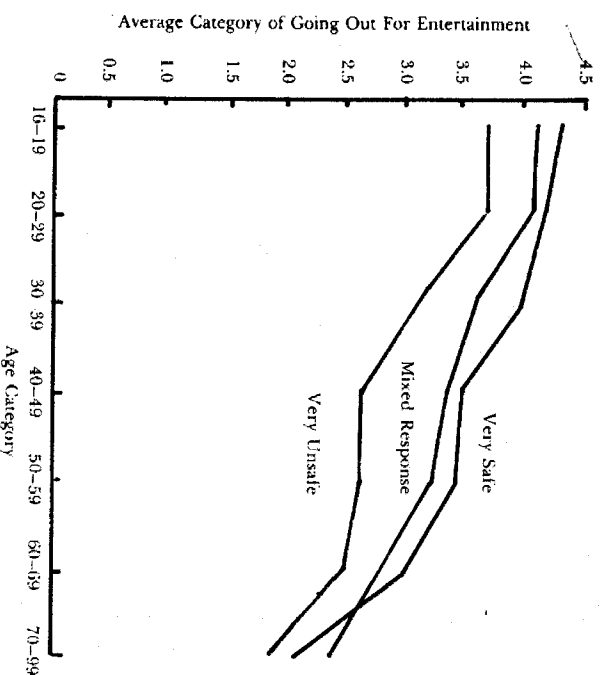


Figure 13a. Age, Fear, and Recreational Activity

Source: Computed from Census Bureau Surveys in Five Largest Cities

concerning how frequently respondents went out for entertainment are presented for those reporting varying levels of perceived threat of crime, in ten-year age categories. In general, this form of mobility decreased with age and fear. Those indicating they were "very unsafe" were particularly likely to report going out less frequently. Differences across age appear to be greater than differences between those reporting different levels of fear, a conclusion supported by a multivariate analysis (not shown) examining the comparative impact of both measures on behavior.

A similar pattern, but one suggesting even greater fear-related differences in behavior, is found in Figure 13b. It links age, fear, and another form of activity—"going out after dark"—among respondents to surveys in Chicago, Philadelphia and San Francisco. Again, average exposure levels (measured as reports of the number of times people went out after dark during the week before the survey) declined with age and fear. What is more apparent in this figure than in the last is there also is less variation among the elderly—and particularly among those 70 and older—with regard to their behavior. In comparison to

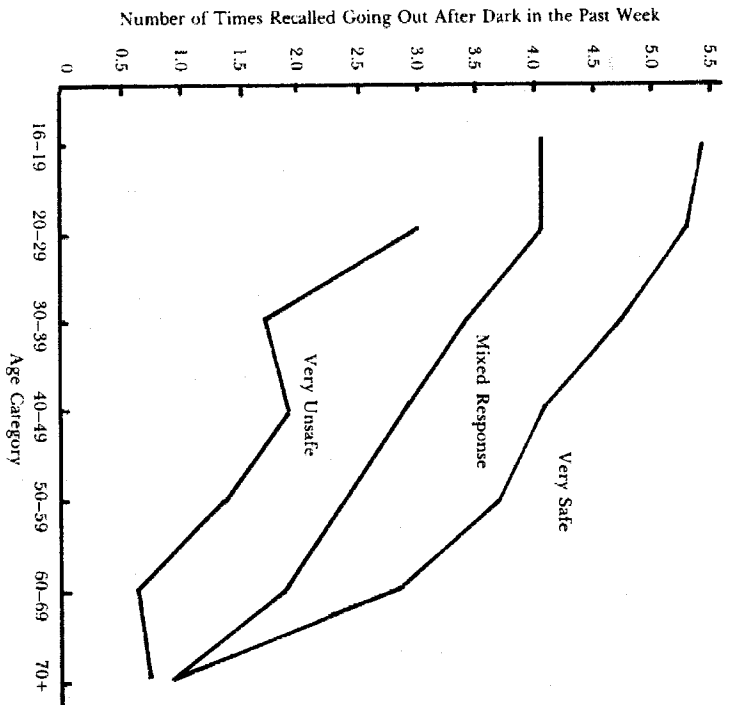


Figure 13b. Age, Fear, and Routine Neighborhood Activity

Note: Too few cases in the "very unsafe" 16-19 age category
Source: Computed by the authors from three-city data

others, senior's activities seem to be dominated by their age and less affected by differences in their level of fear.

Both of these analyses suggest the same conclusions. Age and this measure of threat of crime seem to be independently related to reduced mobility among persons of all age groups. Within each fear category mobility continued to decline with age. This decline in mobility with age independent of levels of threat remains substantial. In eight other cities surveyed by the Census Bureau using the same questionnaire the correlation between age and this measure of going out for entertainment was $-.41$, and controlling for perceived threat of crime reduced the partial age-mobility correlation only to $-.38$ (Garofalo, 1980). The figures for the five city surveys used here are the same to two decimal places. A great deal of reduced mobility among the elderly (and others)

may be attributable to constraints or conditions other than crime or fear. Age differences appear greater than differences across levels of fear in both cases. Relative to other age groups, fear seems to make less of a difference for the elderly.

Risk Management

While many older Americans report greatly limited mobility, those who do venture forth seem to do so with considerable boldness. When we examine the ways in which they act to manage their risks when they are in what are often thought to be more risky situations, the elderly do not seem to be especially cautious.

Table 5 documents the frequency with which those over and under sixty in these city surveys indicated taking each course of action. The most common strategy turns out to be resorting to the automobile. Across the four cities where residents were quizzed about this strategy, the elderly were more likely to report this action in two of them. While this places the elderly squarely among other adults, it should be noted that they take to the road with some frequency despite generally low levels of automobile ownership. Over 20 percent of those over 60 who were interviewed in the NCS lived in households without a car.

Table 5. Frequency of Efforts to Reduce Personal Victimization, by Age

Protective Measure	Community				
	Philadelphia	Chicago	San Francisco	Hartford	Kansas City
Take escort					
Under 60	38	38	31		30
Over 60	35	53*	52*		24
Drive rather than walk					
Under 60	62	62	51		66
Over 60	55	58	82*		69
Take protection when walk ^a					
Under 60	30	31	20		8
Over 60	25	24	27		17
Avoid areas of neighborhood					
Under 60	36*	44	32		
Over 60	20	44	28		

Note: Asterisks indicate differences significant at the $<.05$ level. "Over 60" category includes sixty-year olds.

Source: Computed by the authors from original data.

The next most common defensive strategy employed by residents of these cities was to walk with others when out after dark. In two of the four cities in which people were quizzed about this strategy the elderly more often indicated they had adopted it at least "sometimes." But in the remaining cities nonsignificant differences favored younger respondents instead. "Avoiding dangerous areas" also is a strategy commonly adopted by residents of these cities to avoid crime. In Philadelphia and San Francisco younger persons were more likely to report trying this, but there were no age-linked differences in describing this kind of maneuver in Chicago. Finally, in four cities respondents were asked about carrying "things" for protection on the streets at night. Taking protection was (on a hopeful note) the least commonly employed defensive strategy in each of the cities surveyed. There were no clear age-related differences in the frequency with which people questioned in these surveys did so.

These data suggest that when they do go out after dark the elderly are not distinctively more likely than other adults to employ defensive strategies which greatly limit their freedom of action. They do so too often, to be sure: when a fifth of the urban population is "taking protection," and two-thirds are no longer walking the streets of their own neighborhoods, it is clear that crime is having a tremendous impact on their lives. The elderly simply are not unique in their response to neighborhood crime. It also must be remembered that for older Americans these "normal" levels of caution serve to further reduce the exposure to risk of a population which already does not venture forth very often. The two factors taken in combination result in a "net exposure level" for the elderly which is very low.

Fear and Behavior

In many ways the attitudes and behaviors explored in the last two sections of this chapter have been consistent. In large areas of concern they have pointed to a surprisingly *undistinctive* salience of crime among senior citizens. There is considerable evidence that the distinctive concerns of the elderly are few and clearly focused upon personal attack, primarily after dark. They did not report disproportionate concern about household burglary or property crime, nor did they perceive their neighborhoods as excessively plagued by the minor "incivilities" of urban life. This is congruent with the generally typical behavior of elders toward those problems. There is a correspondence between at least one crime which does hit the urban elderly with average frequency—predatory street crimes—and their concerns and behaviors. Predatory street crime, which seems to have the strongest effect upon its victims, is

among the most important threats facing the elderly. This seems quite consistent with their perceptions of those threats. As we saw above, street robbery and purse snatching were the major crimes which the urban elderly were significantly more likely to identify as "big problems" in their neighborhood. And this is also consistent with their higher levels of perceived threat of personal attack after dark.

In this light it is surprising how limited the behavioral component of that concern seems to be. In this chapter we have seen that among the elderly only behavioral restrictions seem to be distinctively frequent. They report not going out very often, relative to their younger counterparts. However, much of this restricted behavior appears to be derivative rather than conscious in origin. Much of the limited mobility which protects them stems from health, age, and other concerns. Even in the larger cities which have been surveyed many elderly report doing relatively little about crime. It is unsurprising that more of the elderly report not going out after dark because of crime, but that only 9 percent of them fell in this category was unexpected.

Others have come to the same conclusion. M. Powell Lawton (in press, p. 21) notes:

Repeatedly, in looking at the research in this area one is struck by the contrast between the extreme anxiety over crime as expressed by older people, and on the other hand, the smaller-than-expected effects of crime on their behavior or psychological wellbeing . . .

In his study of elderly in public housing Lawton could find no significant impact of crime or fear on their behavior. Fear was not related to the frequency of either on-site or off-site activity, nor to the frequency with which the elderly visited with friends or relatives, walked their area, or other self-reported measures of personal mobility. He concluded that the findings:

[G]ive no support to the idea that elderly tenants respond to victimization, high crime risk, or even fear of crime, by becoming housebound (Lawton and Yaffe, 1980, p. 778).

In its national survey, the National Council on Aging (1975) found that in a number of major areas of life the general public seemed to have an exaggerated view of the importance of the problems facing the elderly. In several issue areas—including crime—those under 65 gave "aging problems" a higher significance rating than did the elderly themselves. The "prisoners of fear" issue may be another example of this phenomenon. While their perceived threat of crime is high, in many ways the elderly take no more precautions than the rest of us, even in big

cities where that threat is presumably more realistic. Perhaps the aged "... are not as easily daunted as our stereotypes of the 'vulnerable elderly' might have thought them to be" (Lawton and Yaffe, 1980, p. 778).

VII. SPECIFICATION AND RE-SPECIFICATION OF A POLICY ISSUE

We have seen that over the span of one decade the crime and the elderly problem has been re-specified in the U.S. Congress at least three times—from a problem of especially high rates of crime to a problem of especially severe physical and economic consequences from criminal victimization, and then to problems of especially high levels of fear of crime and severe consequences resulting from that fear. Based on our analyses of the data, we concluded that most of these definitions of the problem were inappropriate. Those who serve the elderly face a surprisingly heterogeneous constituency. Their constituents voice a variety of concerns, and in addition the media, other practitioners, and the views of the general public on what the "real" problems facing the elderly are become mixed into the brew. Most of the resulting formulations of those crime problems which were cast into the congressional hopper were off the mark.

Rather than older persons being the most likely age group to be victimized, they are the least likely group to be the victims of most household and personal crimes. For the crimes of purse snatching and pocket picking, they are no different from other age groups in the rate of victimizations they suffer.

When the definition of the problem switched from one of high rates to one of severe consequences, it seemed a logical re-specification. But when researchers began to probe the National Crime Survey for an understanding of crime's consequences, it soon became clear that the consequences it measures were no greater for older persons than for others.

The final specification of the crime and the elderly problem was one of especially high levels of fear and consequences of that fear. In this chapter, we examined three different conceptualizations of fear of crime—concern about neighborhood crime, personal feelings of being at risk, and perceptions of threats of crime lurking in wait. Our data for this analysis were not national, but were drawn from studies replicated in a number (up to eight) of major U.S. cities. Of these conceptions of fear of crime, the elderly's special fear seems to be most concentrated in the third. Older city dwellers are more likely to report feeling threatened by potential personal violence after dark. Even during daylight

hours many older persons reported they felt threatened. Thus, older people seem especially to fear what could happen if they were at risk. However, in terms of consequences of fear, the elderly do not seem unique. Although there is a decline in mobility for older persons in cities, this decline does not seem to be due to fear of crime.

According to Wildavsky (1979, p. 36), the art of policy analysis consists in finding problems worth solving. But the translation of social conditions into clearly defined social problems for which policy solutions are available is often difficult. In the case reported here, a variety of definitions of "the problem" emerged, and none of them appears on the basis of our analysis to represent those social conditions adequately. The best-fitting specification of the issue is one of fear of crime among the urban elderly. However, claims that the elderly are widely held prisoner by their fear are misleading. Rather, the crime problems of the elderly are the same as the crime problems of the rest of us, albeit with some special expression of concern about street robbery and purse snatching. Measured by their behavior and most of their expressed concerns, the impact of crime upon the quality of their lives is about the same as that of other city dwellers.

There are ample reasons for placing crime near the top of the policy agenda, if only because opinion polls throughout the 1970s and early 1980s indicate that Americans of all ages would have it there. However, it appears that *need-based* rather than *age-based* criteria should decide at whom crime policies and programs are targeted. In a number of policy areas there is growing recognition that "needs" criteria which cross-cut age-based qualifications for benefits may more efficiently address particular problems. Often more of the elderly than others may qualify on the basis of those criteria, but that does not make them "elderly problems."

In the case of crime, even this "age-based" view of the problem does not seem to be particularly appropriate. The elderly have many real and serious problems that are in fact more severe for them than for younger adults. Scarce resources can probably best be targeted at alleviating those problems. Defining every problem that elderly persons face as a distinctive problem for the elderly may seem to be a useful political strategy. As Cook (1979) has documented, there is deep public support for serving the elderly. Linking them to neighborhood or urban problems or to broad and widespread social problems like crime might seem a useful strategy for tackling those issues. However, if every problem that Congress considers is claimed to be more severe for the elderly, then the possibility exists that an opinion backlash against the elderly could occur and that we could reinforce the misperception of "the old" as a problem group and run the risk "of stigmatizing rather than liberating older people from the negative effects of the label 'old'" (Neugearten, 1982, p.

27). Our analyses and those by others indicate crime and fear of crime are indeed problems, for city dwellers, declining urban regions, the poor, racial minorities, teenagers attending bad schools, women living alone, public housing residents, and a variety of others. But that list is so broad that the crime problem is a generic one and should be understood—and dealt with—as such.

In *Speaking Truth to Power*, Wildavsky says "Always, we must be prepared to learn that we are wrong" (p. 59). For if the problem as perceived does not really exist, then time and money are likely to be wasted in action. And as Popper (1972) tells us, "It is through the falsification of our suppositions that we actually get in touch with 'reality.' It is the discovery and elimination of our errors which alone constitute that 'positive' experience we gain from reality" (p. 361). Such falsification of suppositions in the policy arena is more difficult than it sounds, for the "facts of the case" are not the only basis for political action. Values, beliefs, and multiple problem definitions compete in the cauldron from which political decisions emerge. However, in this chapter we have seen a case in which a social problem underwent multiple redefinitions in the U.S. Congress and then declined in salience on the policy agenda . . . and the evidence presented here would suggest rightly so.

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