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Reduce Crime Against The Elderly: A Western Australia Police Perspective

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Surveys carried out throughout the world, seem to confirm that many older people are unduly fearful of being a victim of crime. It is generally accepted that although the elderly are victims of the same kinds of crime as the general population they are thankfully 'under victimised' in violent offences and theft, but are over victimised in fraud related offences. Though recent studies of victims of crime in Australia have shown that senior citizens represent only 4 per cent of victims of crime there is continuing evidence that elderly people feel particularly vulnerable to crime and this impacts on their quality of life. This paper attempts to put this matter into perspective through drawing on information that is available and hopefully develop recommendations that will enable our senior citizens the right to live in dignity and without fear.

Definition

The enormous amount of anxiety created within the community by attacks on the elderly and the large amount of publicity surrounding these events has led to the perception of many elderly people to believe:

they are an easy target for criminals;

they will suffer break-ins should they leave their homes during the day;

they will be a victim of personal assault during night time hours.

These attacks can be divided into two broad categories. The first of which includes conventional crimes such as assault, robbery, burglary, fraud, homicide and rape. The other category comprises of causes such as ill-treatment through acts of abuse or neglect.

Situation

In the foreseeable future Australia will continue to have an ageing population and a low and declining birth rate, thereby producing proportionately fewer youth at risk of becoming criminals and reducing crime rates as well.

Offences and incidents based on the physical, psychological or intellectual infirmities of the elderly will increase proportionately with their numbers, such as driving offences and incidents related to Alzheimer's disease, while others will become victims of abuse by spouses, children and care-givers. While older Australians have the lowest statistical risk of being victims of crime generally, they usually have the highest fear of personal victimisation; hence fear of crime generally will increase among older Australians, who increasingly will be single or widowed women living alone.

Faced with the perception of becoming a victim of crime many elderly people have the potential to isolate themselves from the rest of the community.

Their restricted mobility, strength and in some cases deteriorating sight only adds to some seniors' vulnerability with the perception that it is the police force's responsibility to provide greater protection for these people. The community's solution to this problem has been to call for more police, more patrols, and more police stations. With police resources often spread thinly and media reports creating an impression that crime may be out of control what is left is a perception of the increased fear of crime.

Solutions

In addressing the needs of an ageing population police in Western Australia are adopting a 'holistic' approach; a community based approach gives confidence and empowers seniors to maintain control over their lives. The pro-active strategies are aimed at reducing the fear of crime and reducing the number of offences.

These strategies include:

- Linking Community Based Crime Prevention Programs;
- Decentralisation of the Police Command, making the Police Officer on the street more responsible for his patch;
- Re-orientation of police patrols to emphasise pro-active servicing of the community;
- Development of accountability to local communities.

The approach taken in Western Australia has been to analyse the social determinants of crime, looking to its highest correlates and devise appropriate methods of dealing with these problems. We have opened up the Police Force and allowed our customers to guide us on their perceptions of the causes and determinants of crime and together we have devised strategies, programs and initiatives for dealing with them. The community is now working very closely with the police through a policy known as Community Policing which Commissioner Brian Bull introduced in November 1987.

There have been many positive initiatives developed under community policing which auger well for the future of the Western Australian community. One crime prevention program having great success is Neighbourhood Watch. A scheme coordinated by the police that encourages residents to observe and report suspicious activity, increase the security of their home, and identify and mark their property. A recent analysis of the scheme in Western Australia showed that a large number (42 per cent) of the 320 000 members are aged over sixty. They feel the scheme is reasonably successful in preventing

crime, providing a sense of security, improving police/public relations and improving community spirit. The results demonstrate Neighbourhood Watch is successful in preventing crime and reducing the fear of crime in a population group which we have recognised as having the greatest fear of crime.

The Community Policing Branch who coordinate Neighbourhood Watch have also developed a *Safety for Seniors* booklet on preventative measures for reducing crime against seniors, it is written in Braille, slow audio tape format, Chinese, Vietnamese and Mandarin to assist groups limited in reading or literary skills. The Crime Prevention section of the Community Policing Unit also conducts the Operation Identification property marking scheme, lectures on personal safety and home security to seniors organisations.

Other community policing programs coordinated by the police that prevent crime are:

- Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) Part of the Community Policing City Safe strategies.

Closed circuit cameras have been strategically located within the Perth Central Business District. These cameras are monitored on a twenty-four hour basis at the City Community Police Post.

Senior Citizens harassed or imposed upon by drunks, street kids, buskers can receive prompt police attention.

The cameras are supported by motorised special purpose vehicles which can be driven in malls and pedestrian cross overs.

The special purpose vehicles are also used to assist frail aged, collapsed persons or lost children.

- Medi-Safe is a program based on a Hospital Watch Scheme the primary aim of which is to reduce the incidence of crime in all areas of a health care facility.

Medi-safe is designed to increase awareness of both staff and patients within the hospital, it encourages people to report any suspicious activity to the Medi-Safe

Hospital coordinator immediately, to report any offences as soon as they are detected, to challenge any person found in restricted areas or places not usually accessed by them, to forge a closer relationship between the hospital and neighbours, and to engrave items of value.

- Pro Active Patrols carried out by the police mounted section in residential areas has lead to:
 - i) A reduction of day time breaking & entering;
 - ii) Stronger relationships between policy and community;
 - iii) Development of a better community spirit between neighbours.
- Blue Light and Cop Rock entertainment for youth which is police supervised dancing and other entertainment to provide young people with worth while activities.
- Police and Citizens Youth Clubs which are based on a similar principle as the Blue Light entertainment.
- Community Policing Council of Western Australia which has committees in each metropolitan region and many country areas. These committees have representation of local agencies like education, local government, community representatives, private business and other related agencies. They meet regularly to identify local crime problems and recommend and implement solutions. Three members including the President are over sixty years of age.

The Youth Family and Ethnic Affairs Branch is involved in programs to address issues such as domestic violence, protective behaviours as well as:

- School based police officers who work with children in their schools to improve their relationship with police and provide them with an understanding of the law.
- Constable Care is a program aimed at young children to instil a sense of safety and respect for police and law.
- The Safety House Association provides refuge to young people threatened when they are on their way to or from school.

- The Juvenile Justice Cautioning Program designed to keep juveniles out of the justice system for committing minor crime. These programs demonstrate that the problem of crime is two fold. It is the responsibility of the community to improve its security and be aware of crime and the responsibility of the police and other agencies to approach the social problems associated with crime. In both of these areas a great deal of work is being done and the community is benefiting by feeling safer and preventing crime. Local research has shown that 74 per cent of the community has faith in their police force and 50 per cent of the community is involved in community policing in one way or another. In addition 64 per cent of people in Western Australia feel community policing is effective in preventing crime.

Another initiative with a police connection has been the establishment of a Victim Support Service which provides advice and counselling. A Detective Sergeant is attached to this service.

It was recently announced that a place of retreat is to be set up with a resident counsellor to assist victims and their families. A charter of Victims Rights has been implemented.

Recent Police initiatives developed to protect seniors include:

- Regionalisation of Crime Prevention and Community Policing Officers. This involves locating Crime Prevention Officers and Community Policing Officers in Regional areas so that seniors have an easier access to police and security advice within their own area.
- Security appraisals and personal safety displays form an important section of the duties of these officers.
- To provide a closer access by members of the community to police, Community Resource Centres have been established in strategic locations such as police stations, schools and shopping centres.

Police are supported by civilian volunteers. Each centre is equipped with a computer, facsimile, tele video and a photocopier.

- The development of 'Safety for Seniors Forums' throughout all Police Regions to provide seniors with advice on personal safety, home security, and to introduce them to their local police officers.
- In addition to providing 'Safety for Seniors Forums' the Office of Crime Prevention has recently developed a 'Senior Citizens Crime Prevention and Safety Program'. This program has been designed as an instructional course for the purpose of training suitably qualified seniors within the community to become instructors to other seniors on subjects such as Personal Safety & Home Security.
- In association with the Office of Women's Interests and the Western Australian Municipal Association the Community Policing Council of Western Australia has adopted the concept of 'Community Policing Safety Audits' in providing a safer environment for our senior citizens.
- The first safety audit was carried out as a pilot study in Perth's Central Business District and was launched by the WA Premier on 1 July 1992.
A pilot scheme is being carried out in six Police Regional areas with a view to expanding the program to all regions.
- A Safety Audit is a tool for measuring the physical environment for safety factors.
- The goal of a Safety Audit is to improve the physical environment in ways that reduce the opportunities for general and sexual assaults.
- Safety Audits are a concrete and practical way of making public and semi-public places safe. By participating in an audit, members of the community have the opportunity of documenting their experience and assisting to create a safer environment.
- The process of establishing a safe environment is an ongoing one. Not all necessary change will happen at once - but the results of a thorough Safety Audit will help strategic planners to identify and prioritise changes which will affect the experience of safety in the street and neighbourhoods.

- Following evaluation of that audit it is anticipated other Police Regional District Committees will adopt the concept of 'community safety audits' in their regions.

Part of my brief today involves forecasting what an ageing population will do for crime and safety. We must look to the future in the light of community policing; it is cost effective and addresses the cause rather than the effect. There are moves to develop national strategies. A national approach will mean greater cost and resource efficiency, more effective campaigns resulting from sharing information about effective strategies.

Seniors and the entire community will benefit from these moves as the community begins to become more involved in the prevention of crime seniors will play an increasing role in keeping a safer community. Increasingly youth are becoming separated from the senior members of our community. Community policing has the power to reverse this trend. Seniors generally have more time on their hands to become involved in community activities. The forums outlined in this paper provide greater interaction between seniors, police, youth and responsible members of our society. These forums will most likely expand bringing a return to a community approach to living, with young people, police and seniors working together to solve the tensions evident in modern living.

In Western Australia a change has been made in the structure of the police organisation to accommodate the overwhelming support shown to Community Policing by the Western Australian society. The new Command known as Community Services includes the Branches of Community Policing, Youth Family and Ethnic Affairs, Police and Citizens Youth Clubs and Aboriginal Liaison. This change will improve the service to the public.

In closing, the author wishes to re-iterate the crime problem with seniors is more to do with the fear of crime than the actual risk they face. Experience has shown that

Community Policing and Crime Prevention has the greatest impact on fear of crime and in the future this is the way we must go.

Seniors will play an important role in the prevention of crime as they are presently doing. They have the experience of life, the motivation and time available. This is important - if we do not - values held in times gone by will be lost.