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Crime Prevention and The Fear of Crime: The Role of Police
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This paper develops discussion on the role of police in crime prevention and the fear of crime. Some recent case histories are described. These illustrate police response to the effects of crime. All feature elderly people as recent victims of crime or recent potential victims of crime.

CASE 1

On 6 January 1992, South Australians awoke to the news that the body of an elderly lady had been found in her Pennington home (a suburb of Adelaide). The discovery and circumstances were such that a full-scale murder investigation commenced. The victim, Mrs May Pitt, was in her mid-seventies, lived alone in her own home in a quiet suburb known for the large number of aged residents. In Mrs Pitt's street there was no house occupier under the age of sixty. She was a well-respected neighbour who loved gardening and was often seen by passers-by tending her flower beds.

The daily newspapers reported the case over the next few days with growing alarm. These included:

"GRANNY MURDER SHOCK" Advertiser 7/1/92

"BENEATH THE VENEER, FEAR LURKS" Advertiser 7/1/92

"POLICE FLYING BLIND IN KILL HUNT" The News

"FEAR AFTER WOMAN, 75, MURDERED" Advertiser 6/1/92

The murder of an elderly woman at Pennington . . . has sparked fear among other elderly women living alone in the area. Several living near the murder scene have revealed they have been terrorised by intruders on their properties . . .

Mrs Pitt was involved in Neighbourhood Watch and had only recently had security mesh installed on some windows and doors.

"GRANNY LET KILLER IN" Sunday Mail 12/1/92

. . . Neighbours and close friends of the security-conscious Mrs Pitt said she never opened the door to strangers - but spoke with them cautiously through the locked security screen. One theory suggests she was locked inside the house after letting the attacker in . . . "

"THE LAST HOURS OF A LOVING GRANDMA" Sunday Mail

"GRANNY DEATH ADDS TO GRUESOME MYSTERIES" Sunday Mail

"STREET OF FEAR - Granny slaying shocks elderly" The News

Elderly neighbours of murdered Pennington grandmother Mrs May Pitt say they are afraid to go out after dark. They say the area has a history of break-ins and intruders have been active in this area before the latest tragedy . . .

The electronic media treated these events with as much drama, especially some talkback radio programs. An intruder alarm installation company assisted by sending a team of sales people into the area who door knocked many of the residences and used a

photograph of the victim as part of its marketing strategy which used scare tactics in a strong sales pitch.

It is important to emphasise here that Adelaide (and its suburbs) is not the crime capital of the world. The murder rate is lower than most overseas western countries. Also, reported crimes against property in Adelaide have fallen significantly in recent times. In fact, the elderly remain the least victimised members of our society even though they constitute a growing proportion of Adelaide's demographic make up.

As a result of the media attention, Pennington residents experienced extraordinary mass residential fear of becoming the next victim of crime. Much pressure was placed on the few service agencies which were required to deal with the aftermath. The fear, which at one stage bordered on hysteria, grew very quickly and affected elderly men and women alike whether living alone or with their spouses.

Police Response

Within the Crime Prevention Branch of the South Australia Police Department are two senior constables who are "HomeAssist" Coordinators. They basically deal with home and personal security matters which affect the frail aged, disabled people and pensioners (which means in reality that their clients are mostly elderly). The telephones in this unit started running hot a few hours after the first press release concerning the death of Mrs Pitt. The local police division's victim contact officer also become involved. Representatives from the Woodville Council (the local government authority for the area) joined these officers in reassuring residents as well as providing security hardware in necessary cases.

Within a matter of days this action team had visited all affected residents. They conducted twenty-four full home security surveys, installed needed security devices, and organised

and spoke to a Pennington residents public meeting. This personal approach reduced much of the fear and put the crime prevention effort back on track.

The private security company which had been offering its services was asked to withdraw from the area.

The media was also approached with a request to provide a balanced media coverage to quell rising fears. However, one newspaper then ran a story headed "**Elderly less likely to be victims**" above another headline which read "**Violent crimes jump by 24%**".

The Woodville Council organised a meeting of all concerned agencies and instigated a personal security alarm scheme for residents considered "at risk". Other action was also taken. For example, one elderly resident who had a hearing disability and exhibited extreme nervousness because of the media reports had a specialised telephone installed by Telecom within hours.

Community officers employed by the Woodville council organised a "**Security Expo**" at the local town hall and invited a large number of security companies and government departments to demonstrate various devices or personal safety tips. This was an outstanding success and did much to convince the aged population that support agencies were available and did care.

CASE 2

A 73-year-old lady who lives on her own, does not speak English and is absolutely paranoid about her neighbours, accusing them of harassment, breaking in and throwing rubbish into her property had developed an overwhelming fear of becoming a victim of crime.

She had a three-metre high barbed wire fence erected around her suburban property. Her front gate is constantly padlocked and all her doors have deadlocks. Three pin security screens are fitted and every window has key-operated locks with separate keys. Every key was attached to a piece of string around her neck. This arrangement must have been extremely uncomfortable. First impressions would make one suspect dementia but this was not so, the sole problem was fear of crime. This fear had severely affected her quality of life.

Police Response

After much consultation with the police the woman was persuaded to have only one master key. She now only wears one key on the piece of string. Local council officers were involved and regular support is given. She now operates the deadlocks correctly and is not a prisoner in her own home. The woman, however, is still to be convinced that she does not need a barbed wire fence.

CASE 3

An elderly invalided man who is largely confined to bed and lives on his own had a fear of having his few possessions stolen. He is visited daily by Domiciliary Care, Meals on Wheels and the Royal District Nursing Service. He had no locks at all fitted to external doors because constant access was required by the service agencies that assisted him. There were no locks on windows. Further circumstance which increased his fear was that the nextdoor neighbours were known to be criminal offenders.

Police Response

The police, in conjunction with the local council HomeAssist officer, installed a digital number access lock at the front door. This made entry by domiciliary care etc. relatively easy. Normal locks were fitted to remaining external doors and all windows. Other neighbours were consulted and help enlisted so that his garden was cleaned and trimmed to make observation easier.

CASE 4

On 11 June 1992, an 85-year-old woman who lived on her own was confronted by an intruder in her unit who bashed and raped her. This locality has a high number of elderly residents who became distressed and fearful over the incident. Rumours and emotive misinformation kindled the situation and the local police division's victim contact officer became involved.

Police Response

Police officers involved enlisted the assistance of victim of crime counsellors, police HomeAssist coordinators, local council community service officers and church ministers to speak to all concerned residents. A public meeting was called and re-assurance given. Security and 'comfort zones' were improved and a positive attitude generated.

CASE 5

In a late May evening an elderly couple were asleep in the main bedroom of their home in an eastern suburb of Adelaide.

They were awakened by three masked intruders threatening them with a gun and a hammer. Both victims were in their seventies and were treated very badly by these offenders. The motive was robbery. Since the crime the victims have refused to re-enter or sleep in the bedroom and live in fear that the offenders will return.

Police Response

The home was subjected to a complete security upgrade with assistance from the local council. The victims of crime service was called in to begin reassurance counselling. The lives of this couple have been changed for ever and it will be some time, if at all, before anything returns to near normal for them. Follow up contact is often made.

THE ELDERLY: As Victims

In 1989 a national workshop that focussed on the effects of crime on the elderly identified that:

- * Elderly people believed themselves to be the easiest and most frequent target of criminals;
- * fear of daylight break-ins when a house is left unattended is often replaced by fear of burglary and assault during hours of darkness;
- * these fears were very real and reflected on the health, lifestyle and social interaction of the victim;
- * links could be shown between these fears and premature or inappropriate admission to residential care (Doherty 1991, p. 1)

The Police have certain advantages when inter-relating with older members of society. Firstly, aged people are usually more conservative, have a deeper respect for authority (especially police authority), and will readily approach a police officer. Secondly, a level of trust and mutual respect is present, because police officers see older people as non-suspicious, non-threatening and unlikely to be on the wrong side of the law. Thirdly, senior citizens seem to have more interest in crime prevention and community spirit. This is often reflected by the higher number of elderly people active in volunteer organisations

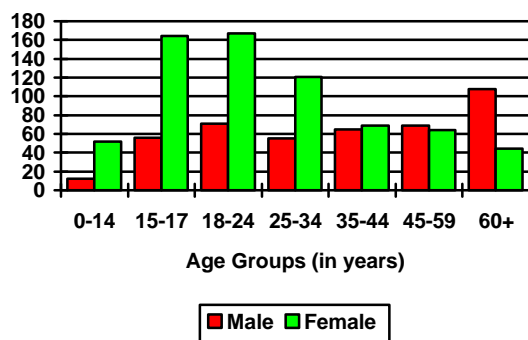
such as Neighbourhood Watch. Whether these traits are generic only to the current older generations or they develop as people age is yet to be studied.

The question is often raised as to whether the elderly should have specialised crime prevention programs or indeed as they are least likely to become victims, whether they should be considered at all.

Generally speaking, the elderly have an attitude toward security that needs to be constantly addressed and there is ample research to demonstrate that this age group suffer greater fears of becoming a victim. It is argued that specialised programs are necessary because older people are susceptible to some specific crimes, namely false pretences and robbery with violence and it is important to reduce fears by personal contact and reassurance.

In South Australia the elderly are relatively unlikely to become victims of crime but are abnormally represented when dealing with the crime of robbery with violence, which is also colloquially known as 'mugging'. (see Figure 1.) (South Australia Police, *Annual Report* 1991-92 p. 25). "Bag snatching" may also be recorded under the offence of 'larceny from the person' and the difference often depends on the level or type of violence used.

Figure 1: Age* and Sex of Robbery Victims, South Australia reports 1991-92



*Known victim ages only used

Interestingly South Australia Police records show that the majority of these offences occur in public places and that in the 60+ age group the majority of victims are men. Muggings

and handbag snatching are largely crimes of opportunity and there are personal protective behaviours and safety procedures that, if used, can reduce the likelihood of people becoming a statistic.

These behaviours must of course be demonstrated to people and they should be a regularly reinforced instruction given in a way that does not use scare tactics. This does not necessarily mean that police should be the sole educators and in South Australia, under the HomeAssist scheme, many local government authorities and some service organisations have taken on the role. The police have, however, trained the trainers and it is seen as an effective way to increase the crime prevention team and share the responsibility. This interaction fits well with the values of the SA police which believes that the quality of community life can be enhanced by involving the community in policing activities.

When it comes to confidence tricksters, senior citizens are often targeted as victims especially with door sales scams or identity pretence. The police and consumer affairs department publicise as much as possible the latest ruse through the use of local newspapers, electronic media outlets and Neighbourhood Watch groups.

Involving as many of the community as possible in preventing crime is seen as a major part of the answer and a two-way communication the main need.

It is true to say that nearly all of the crime prevention initiatives pursued so far, have aimed at reducing offences against property. This is so because although crimes against property are generally difficult to detect they are relatively easier to prevent. The opposite is true for crimes of violence.

Although 1991-92 crime figures show that there has been a significant reduction in break-ins, larcenies and motor vehicle theft (and during a period of extremely high

unemployment), records also highlight an increase in violence, with the vast majority of victims being younger people.

This demonstrates that crime prevention practices can work well, as long as the community is prepared to act in a partnership to tackle the problem.

THE ELDERLY: As Offenders

In South Australia one offence against property that has increased in recent audits is that of shop theft. As this crime is not readily noticed unless an offender is discovered these figures really reflect the increased levels of store security and apprehensions. However, when the general profile of these offenders are studied it is noticed that people aged sixty years or more are represented in greater numbers than they are in nearly all other crimes (*see Figure 2*)(South Australia Police, *Annual Report 1991-92* p. 55).

Perhaps this trend reflects the serious economic difficulties that aged pensioners face or the materialistic temptation created within supermarkets and department stores. Whatever the underlying causes, consideration must be given to include the aged as targets of crime prevention programs aimed at reducing potential offenders. Promoting the fear of apprehension in these instances is considered a legitimate use of scare tactics.

Retail traders associations and store security companies vary in their recommendations and procedures when dealing with elderly offenders. Some promote cautions rather than prosecutions as policy, but these decisions are made on economic grounds rather than social aspects so as to avoid the high costs of court action.

CRIME PREVENTION

The Role of Police

Each of the preceding cases have different aspects. Some refer to the response to actual victims of crime, some to potential victims. Some deal with serious crimes, others with

minor occurrences. However, all deal with fears, real and imagined, but what is highlighted is that:

1. Fears of crime were addressed, using crime prevention as a base;
2. Police tackled the problems outside of their perceived role;
3. Each problem was treated on its individual merits, there were no standard responses;
4. Actions were 'hands on' and practical, not just talk, chalk and pamphlets;
and
5. All responses required used a multi-agency approach.

These changes to traditional police responses have developed as a result of the introduction of "Community Policing", a strategy that has had a dramatic influence on police service. The establishment of divisional police victim contact officers and programs such as Neighbourhood Watch and HomeAssist are tactical responses to this concept and the phrase "Community Policing" has become largely interchangeable with the terms 'crime prevention' or 'community safety'.

Crime prevention is an area which has been neglected by police and the community for some considerable time and it is only in recent years that its full potential is being realised. Crime will never be reduced by placing all effort in investigation. This is because if police are only acting in their detection role, it means that a crime has already occurred. It is, therefore, now necessary to question the purpose of the police.

Do the police have a role in crime prevention?

It is timely to remind ourselves that modern police departments were not founded to detect crime but that their original purpose was purely to prevent crime. Investigation bureaus were not established until decades later. When promoting the principles of policing Sir Robert Peel, (the founder of modern police departments) wrote that one reason for the existence of an organised police service was :-

To maintain at all times a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and the public are the police; the police being only members of the public who are paid to give full time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen, in the interests of community welfare and existence." (Sir Robert Peel 1829)

This paragraph reinforces a philosophy that should be just as true today, namely that we are all responsible for crime prevention—police, citizens, service organisations, businesses, governments.

However, the reality of our society is that a large number of people within the community do not see that they have a responsibility of care toward others or their property; there is a long way to go before communities and individuals accept that responsibility (Creating a Safer Community 1992, p. 22). This obligation must be made known and encouraged to all members of society. To a large extent, the re-education has already begun with the introduction of such community based programs as Neighbourhood Watch.

The police certainly have a role to play in crime prevention as liaison officers, program coordinators and an information source for non-emotive crime facts, especially to senior citizens. Police must continually reinforce the idea to the elderly that they are least likely to become a crime victim despite the concerns raised by the media and they should not view themselves as easy targets for louts nor as defenceless members of society. The vast

majority of property offences are petty crimes of opportunity and can be prevented if that opportunity is reduced. These crimes can be prevented just as much by an elderly person as any one else.

Community policing experience has demonstrated that it is possible to provide police services in a manner which brings perceptions of risk of victimisation more in line with the actual risk thus increasing quality of life within the aged section of the community (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux 1990).

It must also be mentioned that police services of a State, Territory or Nation are generally governed by some Statute which encompasses the responsibility for Crime Prevention. Within South Australia that legislation is The Police Regulations which states (in part):-

Sec. 7: It shall be the purpose of the Force to provide a service in South Australia for the protection of life and property, the maintenance of law and order, the **prevention** and detection of crime and assistance to the public in circumstances of personal emergency (The Police Regulations 1982).

Sec. 20 (in part) Every commissioned officer, non-commissioned officer and officer in charge of a police station or other component of the Force shall use all lawful means in his power:

(b) to **prevent crime** and detect offenders in the area in which he is required to work: (The Police Regulations, 1982) [Authors emphasis]

There are no other organisations that have such enacted duties. Yet if crime prevention is a widely shared responsibility perhaps it should also be written into the charters of other government departments, especially those dealing with the enforcement of criminal laws.

If Police have a role in Crime Prevention what should that Role be?

It is argued that in crime prevention, police should have a major role but not the lead. Crimes will only be drastically reduced when the total community is committed to that goal. This will not occur while the police are perceived to be in the driving seat. The responsibility must be a community responsibility. It cannot be delegated. Never-the-less a large number of police officers still have to realise that their role is bigger than just law enforcement and that they have a major social service function which must be shared with other agencies. There also exists a widely held view amongst members within all police departments that the only real police work is crime fighting and that crime prevention programs are soft options that don't achieve much. (The Right Stuff 1992, p. 9)

Views are changing as community policing strategies progress and internal police education improves, but the two camps of thought still exist and are usually reflected by the amount of resources placed toward crime prevention versus crime investigation. Police should act as instigators of crime prevention initiatives and attack all of the elements that are part of criminal acts such as:-

1. Promote public education that can change dangerous behaviour, eg. hitch-hiking or insecure payroll transportation (victim removal) ;
2. Remove the criminal opportunity that is always an element of a crime. This would include personal safety habits and improved household security (target hardening);
3. Relate with potential offenders to change intents and propensity to commit crime (offender interaction);
4. Change environmental aspects that assist crime being committed, eg alter street lighting, improve observation of areas etc. (designing-out crime).

In South Australia crime prevention is taken very seriously. The fact that we have a Ministry of Crime Prevention and a Coalition against Crime strategy speaks well of the overall commitment. The police are rightly considered as a major player in this strategy, in

fact many programs will not last unless there is active police involvement, but this involvement must not overtake or outbalance the contribution from other community members. Community policing and crime prevention is a partnership.

CRIME PREVENTION AND THE MEDIA

The media also have a major role to play in improving the quality of life within communities. They have a powerful influence in shaping the emotions and perceptions of people on many topics and elderly people are well represented as listeners and respondents.

The mass media do not simply provide information and reflect a social world - rather they structure it for us (Bilton et al. 1989, p. 428).

The media has on many occasions greatly assisted the investigation of serious crime; however, they have also exacerbated situations by the use of sensationalist style reporting. With some noted exceptions, media representatives have a poor understanding of crime prevention and associated issues. They tend to use negative leads and, in particular, over display scenes of violence. The media have a wider duty than solely investigative journalism but it appears that a number of journalists and commentators look on crime prevention strategy as political propaganda rather than community aid.

It is a role of police to liaise and interact with the media as with any other part of the community but with better understanding and communication many more positive outcomes could be achieved.

CONCLUSIONS

Crime prevention is an important concept and an under utilised strategy. Crime can only be effectively reduced by preventative measures that attack all of the elements within the crime equation and those measures include programs designed to affect offenders, victims, and criminal opportunities. Police departments have only in relatively recent times begun to re-discover appropriate prevention responses and have realised that they cannot achieve success without the full involvement of all levels of society. Indeed the first approach is to convince a large number of individuals within communities that they have a responsibility of public care.

The role of police in the overall strategy is as a major participant - not necessarily the leader. The elderly deserve specialised attention from crime prevention programs because, although they are generally less likely to become victims of crime, they are more susceptible to fears of becoming victims. These fears affect lifestyle and in some cases are responsible for placing older people in aged care situations before their time.

Older persons also have roles to play as participants and instigators of crime prevention initiatives, for example the Neighbourhood Watch program would not have progressed as well without the voluntary involvement of many persons over the age of 60. The role of police is to encourage these commitments and to act as an information source and crime prevention educator.

As police organisations take on this social partnership approach their own traditional perceptions must change. Police Officers cannot isolate themselves from the general public and must truly be seen to be 'a part of and not apart from' the communities they serve.

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