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Older Age, Better Life—From Rhetoric to Reality

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Preventing crime and reducing fear for Australia's older people is not just the concern of individual people and individual organisations—it is a concern for the whole community. There is, therefore, a need to utilise the combined resources of a wide range of services. To achieve this, three main points need to be emphasised. These are:

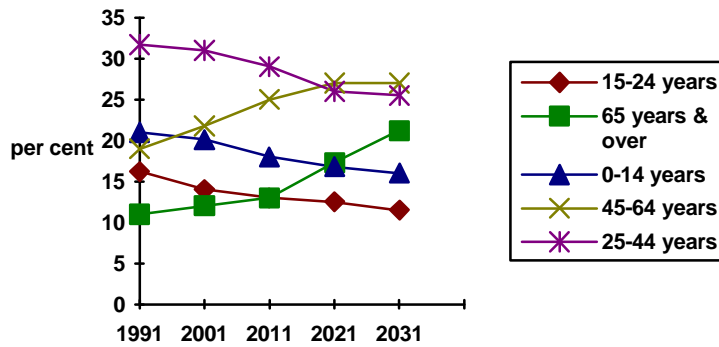
1. The fact that older people are a special group in need of special attention.
2. The necessity to reduce the high level of social isolation experienced by many older people in Australia.
3. The idea of multi-agency cooperation and local government participation.

Australia's population is rapidly ageing. This is a result of a decline in both birth levels and mortality levels as well as an increase in postwar migration.

As a percentage of the total population, the number of persons aged 65 and over is projected to increase from 10.7 per cent in 1991 to about 12 per cent in 2001. By next

century the change will be more marked when increases will rise to between 16 and 18 per cent in 2021 and then to between 19 and 21 per cent in 2031. The corresponding decrease in the younger age categories is quite obvious (*see* Figure 1).

Figure 1: Proportion of People at Selected Age Groups 1991-2031 (per cent)

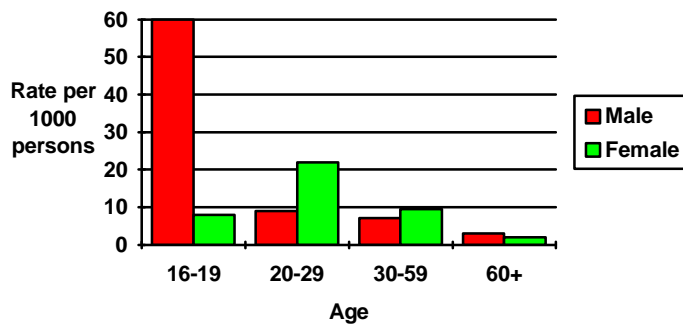


Data Source: *Projections of the Population of Australia, States and Territories 1989 to 2031*, Cat. No. 3222.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

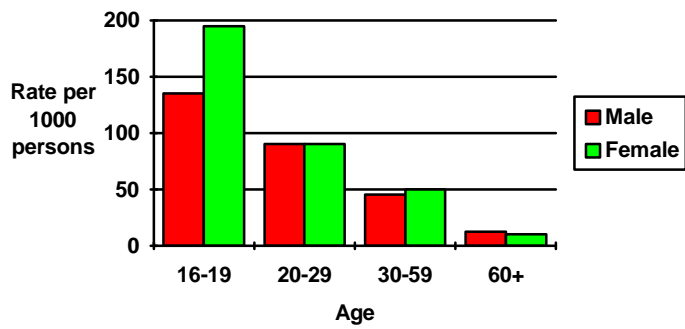
Surveys in Australia and, throughout the world have shown consistently that older people are far less likely than younger people to be victims of traditional crimes (*see* Figure 2).

Figure 2: Crimes Against the Person in 1991: Estimated Incidents per 1 000 Persons, Australia

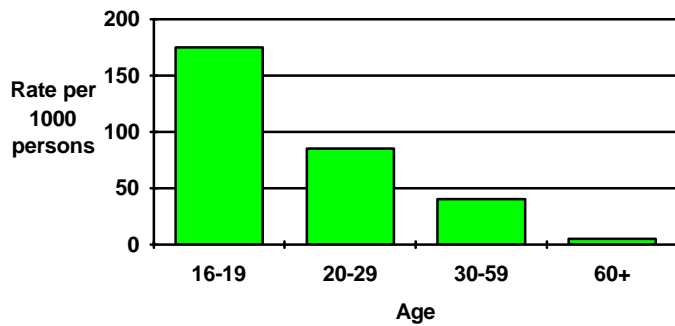
Robbery



Theft from Person

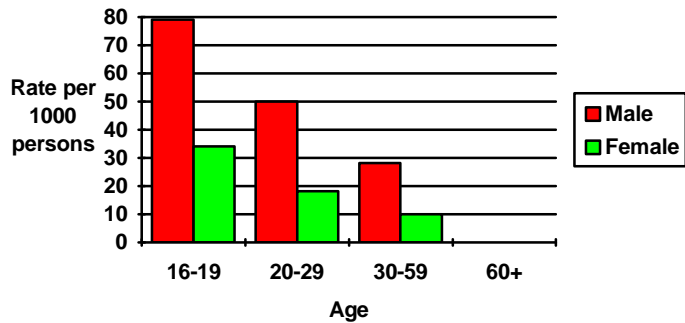


Sexual Incident*

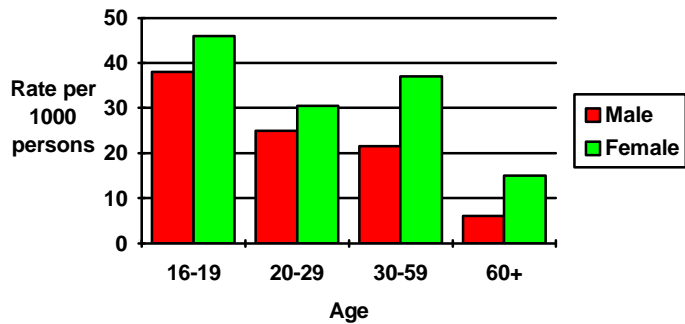


*Females only

Other Actual Violence



Threats of Violence



Source: Walker, J. 1992, *Crime in Australia*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

Older people are many times less likely to be victims of crime. However, there is an interesting variation in the graph depicting "threats of violence". Here the percentage of women over sixty who have experienced a "threat of violence" rises quite dramatically in comparison with the other graphs. This could be explained in a number of ways. It could be that older women's perception of violence takes on a different dimension from that of older men. Or, it could be indicative of the incidence of elder abuse. It has been estimated that the number of people who are the victims of elder abuse is as high as 5 per cent of the population aged over sixty-five.

The paradox is, however, that older people make up the group which fears crime the most. This fear can have an extremely negative effect on their quality of life.

Low victimisation rates, together with the abstract notion of what actually constitutes a fear of crime, have tended to generate disagreement regarding the extent of resources and support which should be allocated for crime prevention and fear reduction strategies for older Australians. After all, any form of social intervention involves the use of finite economic and human resources.

However, as the ageing trend becomes more obvious in Australia, increasingly more attention will need to be paid to the special crime and safety issues arising from the ageing process. As a result, it will become necessary to take into account the unique characteristics of elderly populations and their particular types of victimisation and social experiences. In other words, the special needs of older people will have to be acknowledged and addressed.

To achieve this, however, it must also be recognised that lack of social cohesion in some communities often corresponds with a high level of individual social isolation, and this, in

turn, is an important factor in determining the life experiences of many elderly people. In fact, two crime prevention surveys recently completed by the local councils in Waverley and Fairfield in New South Wales have provided some interesting aspects of the question of social isolation.

In Waverley, the older people who participated in the survey were chosen indirectly through community organisations. The reason for this was to promote less impersonal contact than would otherwise have been the case and to include housebound older people. The respondents were predominantly female, aged seventy and over and living alone. The findings of the survey revealed that fear of crime among the majority of these older people was not as high as had been expected. It was concluded that the reason for this is that the level of social cohesion in the Waverley area is high. Most of the older people have been living in the same house or flat for many years, and there is a definite community spirit.

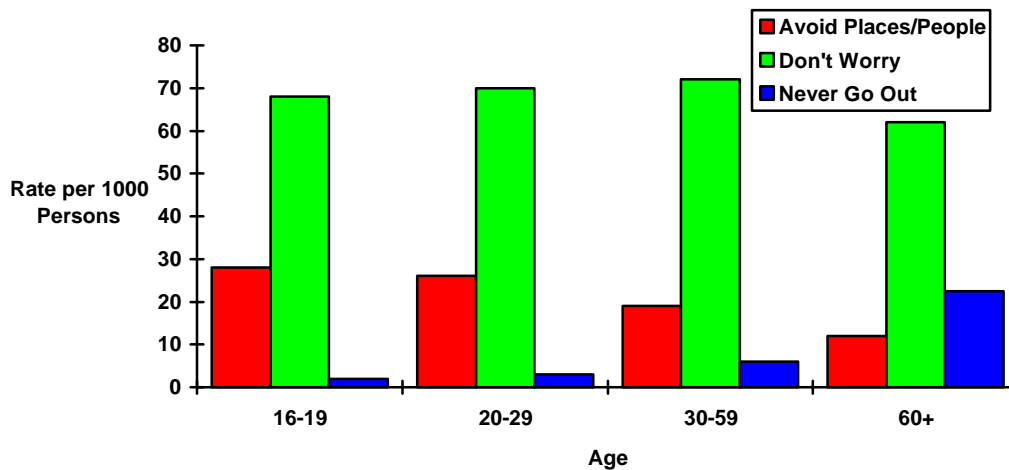
On the other hand, the Fairfield project indicated that fear of crime is a very substantial problem for older people in that area. This fear impacts negatively upon the ability of a large number of residents to move freely within their neighbourhood, to utilise local parks, public transport and even shopping centres. People do not feel particularly safe in their own homes, nor do they feel that it is safe to leave their houses and property unattended. It also appears that it is women who feel least safe and whose lifestyles are most constrained by fear of crime.

The Fairfield area has a high concentration of people from non-English speaking backgrounds, a very high population turnover rate and many of the people live on a public housing estate. There is little or no community spirit.

Fear of crime, it appears, could be quite strongly associated with social isolation. In fact, Figure 4 shows that older people do not avoid places more than younger people. They say

they worry less, but the percentage who say they never go out is very high compared with other age groups.

Figure 4: Fear and perceptions of safety, rate per 1 000 persons, Australia 1991



Source: Walker, J. 1992, *Crime in Australia*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

It appears then that not all crime problems can be separated from other social problems which confront older people. It also accommodates the diversity of the ageing population. Different groups, such as older women, the rural elderly, the ethnic elderly, the Aboriginal aged, the disabled aged and the frail aged should all have a major impact on preventive policies.

In fact, it is important to realise that by the year 2001, the number of women aged eighty and over will outnumber men of the equivalent age by more than two to one. Policies and attitudes will, therefore, have to be very sensitive to the circumstances of very old women living alone. By the same token, the problems of isolation from services and appropriate referrals experienced by older people in rural areas will have to be addressed, as will the fact that Australia's older ethnic population is expected to be the source of the greatest increase in the older age group in the coming decades. In 1981 the numbers of ethnic aged in this group amounted to 11 per cent of the total aged population. This figure will effectively double by the year 2001.

The group which has received the least attention, however, are the Aboriginal aged. If old aged is defined as sixty-five years and over, then only 3 per cent of the Aboriginal population fit into this category. This compares with, as we have seen before, nearly 11 per cent of the white Australian population. And, of course, the reason for this is the decreased life expectancy experienced by Aboriginal people. There is no doubt that there are complex social circumstances combined with severe economic deprivation interacting with all issues connected with the Aboriginal aged, and obviously different criteria need to be addressed. Nevertheless, it is of paramount importance to include older Aboriginal people in any strategies which may be devised to improve the quality of life for Australia's elderly.

Socioeconomic status is also a crucial factor to be taken into account when considering strategies relating to Australia's older people. Significantly, the Henderson Report which was released in the mid-1970s revealed the largest group of people in poverty in Australia to be those over sixty-five years of age. More specifically, 24 per cent of aged people living outside institutions are very poor; they live below the poverty line. A further 22 per cent are rather poor; they live just above the poverty line. Even though the Henderson Report is now quite a few years old, the author feels these figures would even be higher today.

Preventing crime and reducing fear, therefore, is not just about law enforcement—it is a concern for the whole community. The community needs to be more effectively mobilised as a resource; it needs to be given adequate support in managing and implementing specific programs. As a result the skills and reserves of a wide range of organisations and people need to be involved. These would include all levels of government, the police, social workers, the media, housing, recreational and educational institutions, older people's organisations, as well as the older people themselves.

This approach also means that by placing preventive strategies within an alliance of local organisations and agencies, the capacity of each area to prevent crime and alleviate its consequences is strengthened. This emphasises the importance of local government involvement and the idea of multi-agency cooperation.

Multi-agency cooperation recognises that local crime problems are associated with a range of conditions and, by implication, policy arenas. Multi-agency intervention is the planned, coordinated response of the major social agencies to problems of crime. Traditionally, however, the interests of such agencies have been somewhat diverse. As a result, there has been little overall rationale for the allocation of resources. For agencies to cooperate at the local level, it requires a genuine commitment to organise a variety of means by which local interests and views may be represented. Differing objectives and responsibilities of the separate agencies have to be taken into account with a corresponding respect for both individual and combined roles.

In the first instance, emphasis should be placed on putting crime prevention strategies into place at government level. For a multi-agency approach to succeed there needs to be both a strong commitment to, and a general flexibility in, the provision of services provided. These should reflect the diversity of requirements and situations among older people. Cooperation between federal, State and local governments is an essential part of the process. This would ensure that the programs available are integrated and appropriate, notwithstanding the divided responsibilities between all levels of government and departments within them. Local government is then in a position to identify the special needs of people within their area and to coordinate a positive response from the appropriate services.

The police, as well as other agencies have to have people who are expertly trained to handle the situations in the most caring and effective way possible. Guidelines have to be established which would enable all organisations to coordinate their activities and provide

appropriate services. This way older people throughout Australia would be accorded a uniform level of service opportunity. Local government strategies then need to be focussed through both national and State government strategies. Their focus, in turn, however, would be adapted to individual community requirements.

At this stage, it can only be emphasised that with all the best will in the world, no program for older people will work without recognising that these people have special needs. Their feelings of vulnerability and isolation have to be reduced, and this can only be achieved through the expertise of specially trained people and multi-agency cooperation at the local level. Policy should, therefore, be specifically sensitive to these issues and as a result would recognise:

- The fact that older people are a special group in need of special attention;
- The specific needs of certain sections of the older community. For example, women, the rural elderly, the ethnic elderly, the Aboriginal aged, the disabled aged, and the frail aged;
- The need for consultation with older people through their organisations on a regular basis to ensure their involvement in the decision-making process;
- A reduction in the social isolation of older people with a corresponding emphasis on social cohesion;
- The introduction of multi-agency cooperation, including the formation of local crime prevention committees which would include the police, family and community services, local councils, local service providers, Neighbourhood Watch, voluntary organisations, older people's organisations and older people themselves;

- A public campaign to promote a more realistic and positive picture of older people.

However, one of the most important aspects of crime prevention and fear reduction for Australia's older people, is the older people themselves. Older people need to be encouraged to increase their own opportunities to remain independent and continue contributing to society. Old age is beset with negative stereotypes which tend to set older people apart and, in a very real sense, create their "difference". The result of this can be reduced opportunities for social involvement and independence, especially if the older people themselves come to believe the stereotypes.

Through multi-agency cooperation at the local level, particularly in respect to community participation, the elderly are more likely to experience independence, self-esteem and social integration. This way they are less likely to become victims of, or be unduly fearful about, crime in Australian society.