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Crime and Older People, ISBN 0 642 22739 X

Reducing Fear of Crime among the Elderly: The Victorian Experience through the Confident Living Program for Older Victorians

[Unedited. Paper as presented at Conference of 23-25 February 1993]

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The Department of Justice is the State Government Department charged with coordinating and implementing programs and policies to maintain law and order, prevent and detect crime, and promote the safety and security of the community.

The safety and security of older people is a major priority of the Department and a range of initiatives in this area are underway. In partnership with the Victoria Police, an integrated anti-crime strategy for Victoria has been developed. Under this 'VicSafe' strategy, police, government and the community are able to work together, more closely to identify community crime problems and find solutions to them.

In 1990, the government released a major statement on issues of concern to older people, entitled 'Looking Forward to an Older Victoria'. This document reaffirmed the government's commitment to older people, described the wide range of current programs and policies relevant to this group, and

provided a strategic framework to shape the future planning, development and delivery of government programs and services.

Of the seven strategic objectives outlined in the document, two were of particular relevance to the Department of Justice. These emphasised the importance of helping older people to maintain their dignity and independence in the community, and of safeguarding their rights and personal safety.

The Validity of Developing Specific Programs for Older People

The most fundamental issue to be addressed was the validity and appropriateness of developing a safety and security program targeted specifically at older people. A significant body of professional opinion was sceptical of the value of safety/security programs of this type, suggesting that such initiatives may serve to intensify already exaggerated feelings of vulnerability and fear of victimisation among those whose safety and security they purport to promote, when in reality their level of victimisation is disproportionately low. After considering the available evidence, however, the department adopted the view that the safety and security concerns peculiar to older people warranted the development of discrete, targeted programs, subject to their messages being carefully designed, and delivered in a clear, balanced and non-alarmist manner.

The Department's view on this issue is echoed in an article published in the *Australian Police Journal* by Whalley and Gately (1991), who point out that:

"It is clear . . . that there are factors associated with the ageing process which generate for the elderly particular problems of personal safety and security, and that they are exposed to and experience particular types of exploitation and abuse.

It is also clear that the impact of crime on the elderly may be much greater than on other age groups. They are particularly vulnerable to economic exploitation. Many elderly people receive substantial retirement benefits, or have substantial savings ... invested. Financial loss at such a late stage in life . . . will often have a far greater impact than if it had occurred at an

earlier age. The victims may be left with no means of support for the remainder of their lives, and may no longer have the capacity to earn income to replace the loss. Similarly, the process of ageing involves increasing physical frailty and decreasing capacity to recover from certain types of physical injuries. Even minor attacks . . . may have a greater disabling impact.

It is also well established that the elderly have greater concerns for their own safety and security than other age groups. This may well affect their . . . quality of life. Many elderly people are well aware of their frailty and vulnerability, and that their . . . susceptibility to certain forms of exploitation and of crimes (e.g. of the bag-snatching kind) may be apparent to potential offenders. This in itself generates a range of safety concerns (e.g. road safety, skateboard users in shopping malls, walking in darkened streets, living alone, etc.) which have implications for policing policy and operations" (p. 60).

In addition to the factors identified by Whalley and Gately (1991), the Department notes the declining capacity of many older people, particularly those born outside Australia, to make accurate and discriminating judgments regarding their social environment, for example, to interpret the social behaviour, tastes and dress codes of young people, and as a consequence their tendency to become inordinately fearful of goings-on around them, often exacerbated by unhelpful and sensationalist media reporting and peer reinforcement.

A Coordinated Response

The Department and Victoria Police came to the position that it was desirable to develop a coordinated government response to this issue.

Often media stories of particular older people who have been assaulted or robbed misrepresent the broader reality that older people are less vulnerable than other groups in the community to predatory crimes and household robbery. However, there is a real fear of attack and burglary amongst older people. Increasing police presence alone will not adequately address this issue.

The causes of this fear are complex and multi-causal. They relate more to issues of social isolation, access to services and income levels than the level of predatory attack or theft from older people. Victimization of the elderly requires not only a response from police and justice agencies, but from government agencies involved in the provision of health, community support, housing, transport services and urban planning. Effective crime prevention and policing strategies must be accompanied by a broader governmental and community response.

The Department fully recognises that 'old age' is simply a social construction, which in this community too often serves to segregate and marginalise those to whom it is applied. All service providers should be encouraged to consider the interests and abilities of all potential service recipients, regardless of their age, unless some critical differentiating feature exists which warrants the adoption of an age-group specific approach.

Victoria - An Ageing Community

One of the major reasons for the emergence of this issue, is the number of older people and the increasing awareness of their particular concerns. Victoria is a rapidly ageing society. The percentage of the Victorian population aged 60 years and above will increase from 14.9 per cent of the population in 1986 to 28.9 per cent by 2031. That is there will be an additional 960 000 older Victorians between 1986 and 2031.

Further, there will be a significant increase in the 'old' old population, those seventy-five years and above, who will have higher levels of frailty and there will be higher incidences of people living alone.

Research Findings—The Literature

The concept of victimisation is generally considered to incorporate three components:

- i) the likelihood of victimisation
- ii) fear of crime;
- iii) the impact (physical\economic\social) of crime on the victim.

The Likelihood of Victimisation of Older People

Available research data indicates that older people are less likely to be the victims of crime than any other population group in the community.

Due to the lack of an age specification on crime reports, the best source of data on the incidence of crime on the elderly is victimisation studies. The most recent Australian study, *Crime in Australia* (1991) by the Australian Institute of Criminology indicates that for robbery, sexual incidents, other actual violent acts and threats of violence, the population aged 60-plus has a much lower rate of victimisation than other population groups.

Studies by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1983), 'Victims of Crime Survey' indicates that victimisation rates for the 65-plus population groups are markedly lower than for the fifteen to 64 population. The one area in which older people have a similar rate of victimisation is handbag snatching.

The major reason for the lower incidence of victimisation for the elderly is considered to be the 'lifestyle of the elderly'. That is, the elderly go out less often particularly at night and are at home more often resulting in less opportunity for attack on the street and less opportunity for a vacant house for burglary.

Nature of elderly victimisation

There appears to be some distinct trends in the actual victimisation of the elderly which are unique to this group. Again this may reflect lifestyle factors. Victimisation is more likely to:

- occur near the victim's home;
- be perpetrated by strangers;
- be perpetrated by armed aggressors.

Although victimisation rates for the elderly are relatively low, the nature of the victimisation patterns for elderly people are not dissimilar to those of the overall population. These include:

1. Elderly males have a higher chance of being victimised than elderly females.
2. Elderly people living alone have higher victimisation rates.
3. Elderly residents in urban areas have higher victimisation rates than those in outer metropolitan and rural areas.
4. Elderly people with low family incomes have higher chance of being robbed than those with higher incomes.
5. Females are more likely to have their purse or wallet snatched than males (Whitaker 1987).

Fear of Crime

There is much anecdotal evidence that concern about crime among the elderly is higher than other groups. While the media often portrays older people as being fortified in their own homes, available research and the market research undertaken by the department indicates that other issues; such as the availability of public transport, ill health, low income and lack of formal and informal supports; are also significant reasons for older people being socially isolated. Older people's perceptions of vulnerability appear to relate to issues of income levels, social isolation and access to health, housing, transport and community supports as well as to fears of attack or being robbed.

Impact of Victimisation

There is also much evidence suggesting that in terms of physical and financial impact, elderly victims are affected more than other victims of predatory attack.

The social and emotional effects on older people are also much greater than younger population groups. There are a number of reasons for this:

- the elderly are more frail and thus more likely to feel vulnerable to attack or robbery;

- older people are more isolated in the community and have fewer social supports to turn to for assistance. This isolation may contribute to their distress and sense of vulnerability; older people find disruption and change more difficult to deal with.

While the incidence of victimisation is lower, the perception of vulnerability or fear of attack amongst older people is high. As market research undertaken by the Department has indicated the reasons for this are complex. However, this fear or perception by older people of vulnerability must be addressed in any effective campaign addressing the safety and security of older people.

The Confident Living Program

Confident living is a state of mind brought about by feeling that you are in control of your life and your environment. It is an attitude that recognises possible risks and dangers, but encourages older people to take advantage of the opportunities available to them and fully participate in community life. A sensible lifestyle, keeping fit, a balanced diet and remaining involved in life are all essential ingredients for confident living.

The Confident Living Program was launched on the 7 April 1992. The program aims to:

- improve the self-confidence and well-being of older people;
- improve their access to services and their ability to participate in community activities;
- reduce the fear of criminal victimisation to appropriate levels;
- provide accurate information, and improve their control over their safety and security;
- provide practical measures to improve their personal and environmental safety and security.

The Confident Living Program has a number of interdependent components:

- seminars for older Victorians with an entertaining and informative video, tips and practical advice on personal and household security, information about available services and where to get help. The seminars include a display and demonstration of security devices, including locks, smoke detectors, personal alarms, and automatic lighting.

These free seminars are being held in all areas of Victoria and are open to all older people and those who work with older people.

- a handbook which consolidates the practical advice provided by the seminars, plus tips on diet, fitness and medication.
- practical assistance installing smoke detectors and security devices in the homes of frail and needy older people throughout Victoria. The Department of Justice established voluntary partnerships with Local Government, Lions Clubs, the Country Fire Authority, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Victoria State Emergency Service and other service clubs who install the devices free of charge.

The response to the Confident Living Program has been outstanding. Local government, community groups, senior citizen clubs and individual older people have welcomed the program and placed a high demand for its delivery. While the smoke detector and security device installation component is 'in limbo' due to funding uncertainty, local government interest in the program has been exceptional.

Some 40 000 copies of the handbook have been distributed. Despite some initial concerns from some quarters of the community that the handbook was too long and wordy, the feedback from older people has been amazing. Not only do they request it, but they read it! Word of mouth recommendations have provided a constant stream of requests for the book. A further 30 000 are being printed.

We have conducted 170 seminars with approximately 7000 older people. Bookings for the two two-hour seminar sessions have far exceeded our expectations. After a slow start, word of mouth recommendations have not only taken the program statewide, but ensured that the program move beyond its pilot phase and has been incorporated into mainstream Victoria Police proactive programs.

Conclusion

In closing, the key concerns of older people that have emerged through the Confident Living Program have confirmed our initial research. These concerns are:

1. The need for Community support, health services and police presence to assist older people in reducing their feelings of vulnerability.
2. The need for Safe Environments: the provision of security devices in their own home, building design, exterior lighting and information on how to deal with abusive phone calls or aggressive door-to-door salespeople.
3. Concern about the number of door-to-door salespeople preying on the elderly.
4. Problems with the public transport system. Lack of access to public transport and fear of walking home from a tram/bus stop are major deterrents to older people going out at night.
5. The lack of respect of younger people for older people.
6. The need for information and knowledge about safety and security at home and on the street to reduce the fear of older people.
7. The need for stricter and more consistently enforced penalties for convicted criminals.

Our experience has also clearly demonstrated that it is the fear of crime that is the key issue to be addressed. The experience of the Confident Living Program is that the actual occurrence of crime in general, and crimes of violence in particular, is very low. The fear of crime, particularly violent crime is indeed, debilitatingly high.

Not only has conducting the program confirmed our assessment of the concerns of older people, but most pleasingly, it has confirmed the effectiveness and appropriateness of our approach. The Program works! It does lead to 'confident living'. Time and time again the feedback comes, 'I feel less afraid', 'I feel more in control of my life'.

APPENDIX 1

Program Details*The Handbook*

With the cooperation and support of other human service agencies, a handbook was prepared outlining the wide range of government services and facilities designed to promote the general safety of older people that is, apart from safety from criminal victimisation. This encompasses safe travelling, sound driving and pedestrian practices, careful use of medication, safety around the house, fire safety, advice on the use of police services, and a number of other topics of particular interest to the older community. The handbook also incorporates information on the selection, uses and limitations of personal alarm systems for frail or housebound people, and identifies sources of further information on current services and costs.

Seminar Program and Trainers Manual

A practical skills/empowerment program for older people was established, which incorporates a modified version of the South Australian video 'A State of Mind'. For the first six months the seminars were jointly delivered using a Department of Justice officer working in partnership with an officer of the Victoria Police. The program pilot was widely publicised and its messages reinforced by appropriate media releases designed to stimulate discussion of safety and security issues among older people, and promoting a more positive image of older people within the community and among themselves. The program has now been incorporated into the Victoria Police Crime Prevention Bureau. Local police and community workers are being trained in the delivery of the program to older people and their service providers, and will have a brief to develop innovative methods of reaching and promoting contact among older people, a significant proportion of whom remain isolated from their surrounding communities.

Security Devices (Smoke Detectors, Deadlocks, Peepholes)

Lions International received funding to initiate a statewide program to install security devices in the homes of frail and financially disadvantaged older people. Lions felt that with tangible government support, it was capable of servicing around 4 500 households across Victoria annually. Lions work in conjunction with other service clubs, municipalities and Neighbourhood Watch. Lions are continuing the financial arrangements that they have currently in place for the fitting of devices, that is, recovering the costs involved from recipients on a voluntary basis, and bearing the unreimbursed costs themselves. In addition, they fitted door viewers purchased with funds provided by the Government.

The CFA and the MFB have installed smoke detectors. Through equal contributions of \$30 000 from the MFB, CFA and the Public Safety and AntiCrime Council (PSACC) a total budget of \$90 000 was made available for the purchase of smoke detectors. An implementation plan was prepared which targeted aged pensioners in receipt of local government home help services.

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