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The Role of Policing in the Caring Community: Perceptions of Older People

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Crime, as it relates to older people in our community, attracts considerable media attention. A brutal attack on an octogenarian couple on the Gold Coast (*Courier Mail*, February 1993), for example, received headline attention. In many ways, this media attention is not surprising. Crime is an emotive, evocative subject; it provides excellent copy for newspapers; it is the back stop for television news broadcasts. When young children or older people are the victims, particularly of physical attacks, then the reports generally become more strident and more extensive, for these groups represent the more vulnerable members of our community. They are less likely to be able to defend themselves against vicious attack. There is an underlying image of helplessness which is exploited by the media to attract attention. It is, however, important to keep firmly in view that, in general, elderly victimisation rates in Queensland, as elsewhere, continue to remain the lowest for any age group [Government Statistician's Office 1992]. Any criminal offences involving older people must be viewed with seriousness. More important, as

extensive literature will attest, fear of crime, real or imagined, would appear to be of major concern to older people.

The purpose of this paper therefore is neither to explore the extent of offences against the elderly nor to seek to verify the extent of fear of crime. Rather, the paper will focus upon the community networks which exist to assist older people in our community and the ways in which this network can be utilised to support and assist older people in a preventive sense, in terms of crime. In particular, the role of the police in this network will be scrutinised from the perspective of perceptions of the policing role provided by older people.

The material for the paper is drawn from two sources. First, from service agencies from both the public and private sector, which have been established to provide care, help or support to older people in the community or from established agencies, which in some way, provide care, help or support to older people; second, from older people themselves who were contacted either through Senior Citizens Clubs or through the service agencies.

The Services Survey Form was distributed to agencies only within the Greater Brisbane area. The Community Perceptions Survey form was distributed to older people in the community via organisations covering predominantly the Northern residential suburbs of Brisbane. Responses were returned from older people living in a total of fifty-six (56) suburbs.

BACKGROUND

Demographically, Australia's population is ageing. Edgar (1991, p. 6) has indicated that:

By the year 2031, our population will be 26 million, with an average age of 42 (now 32) and one in five (20 per cent) will be older than 60 (about 15.5 per cent now).

It is reasonable to assume that increasing numbers of the population not only can look forward to fit and productive old age but also that older people in the future will be better educated, healthier, better housed and more self-sufficient than any previous generation of the elderly (Edgar 1991). At present, however, Edgar would argue that ageing has a negative image bound up with "fear, stereotypes and alarmist projections". This negative approach is neither useful nor constructive but is indicative of the level of community ignorance concerning old age. It stands in contrast to the Canadian context in which McDaniel (1988) points out that an ageing society is seen as an indicator of success rather than one of failure. Nevertheless, the dominant perspective will be crucial in determining future social policy for older people.

In recent years, a determined effort has been made at the level of social policy to recognise older people as an identifiable group in their own right in Australian society. The establishment of State and Commonwealth Government Departments is indicative of this trend, as is the increasing number of services available to cater for the needs of older people in any given community. As older people have been 'identified' so attention has focussed upon the specific needs that this group may have.

In the Australian context, during the 1980s, increasing concerns arose about crime and the older person. In 1988, the Australian Police Ministers' Council requested that the National Police Research Unit examine the vulnerability of the elderly to criminal exploitation. Whalley and Gately (1991, p. 58) state that the objectives of this study were:

...to gather intelligence on the potential vulnerability of Australia's growing elderly population to criminal exploitation; especially personal

violation, property crime and white-collar crime. It was also intended to examine perceptions of vulnerability and to recommend what action might be taken by Australian police forces to provide the elderly with a greater sense of personal safety and security.

The study acknowledged that victimisation studies, not only in Australia (Biles 1975; 1983; ABS 1983; CJC 1992) but elsewhere in the world (Hough & Mayhew 1983; Clarke et al. 1985; Brillion 1987; US Department of Justice 1987) indicate that older people are the least likely age group to become victims of crime, particularly to predatory crime. Green (1990, p. 28) utilising a cross-cultural comparison of victimisation rates concluded that "the physical and financial violation is not greater for elderly persons than for younger people". The extent of emotional impact upon older people of criminal attack is more problematic, but despite fears about safety when walking alone the anxieties that older people express concerning health and lack of transportation would appear to assume greater importance than fear of crime.

A considerable amount of literature in the early 1980s was devoted to the issue of fear of crime among older people (Braungart et al. 1980; *The Figgie Report* 1980; Lawton & Yaffe 1980; Ollenburger 1981; Lindquist & Duke 1982; Yin 1982; Janson & Ryder 1983; Jeffords 1983; Clarke 1984; Clarke et al. 1985). Few would deny that almost all members of our community will express some fears about criminal attack. La Grange and Ferraro (1987) in their critical examination of the research into the relationship between age and crime suggest that because of the more vulnerable state of older people in terms of reduced income, health and power, the overall effects of criminal victimisation are especially traumatic for older people, but the elderly are no more fearful of crime than other age groups.

La Grange and Ferraro are critical of the methodologies utilised by researchers, indicating that standard measures of fear of crime have been "too general, too hypothetically abstract

and too foreboding to have much relevance to everyday life". The fears of older people have become exaggerated and the fears of younger people underestimated.

La Grange and Ferraro accept that the effects of criminal victimisation are especially traumatic for older people. Older people are vulnerable in a series of ways to the vicissitudes of everyday, modern, urban living but they point with caution to the dangers of over-generalising. 'Older people' like 'younger people' is an all-embracing label when the reality is that 'older people' are no more a homogeneous group in social or cultural terms than the broad group defined as 'the young' or 'youth'. These are all broad-bank labels which deny individuality and individual difference which, among any group in any community, are great and varied. Levels of fear of crime in any given community vary greatly depending on circumstance. Inevitably, perceptions of crime will vary amongst any social grouping, including that group defined as being older people.

Fear of crime may not be an overriding concern. La Grange and Ferraro suggest that older people are not actually afraid but "more uncertain" and anxious about their environment, or genuinely more concerned about the overall quality of life in their neighbourhoods". Fear may be generated less by crime in its various forms than by "disorderliness", the disruption to patterns of everyday life.

In addition to the above, however, it is important to consider two further concepts. The first is that of community policing; the second is that of crime prevention or preventive strategies. The two are inextricably intertwined. Indeed, crime prevention can be viewed as an integral part of community policing.

Community policing is an oft-used phrase that defies easy definition. It is a phrase that means different things to different people. One of the leading researchers of the phenomenon, David Bayley (1991, p.9) states that:

First, it should be quite apparent that community policing is not a single program . . . Community policing is not an "it". Community policing is not one of several cans up there on the shelf that you can neatly take down, take the top off and feed to police forces.

Bayley is at pains to point out that community policing "is sometimes only pure rhetoric" utilised in the name of progressive policing but hiding the reality of traditional policing approaches or methods. In confirmation of this, Fielding et al. (1989, p. 62) state:

Community policing is no panacea and it is not an admission of defeat if one accepts that it has limits.

Nevertheless, there are a growing number of programs in many different parts of the world which represent creative, innovative approaches to policing. These programs are 'community-based' and incorporate a number of recurring elements—patrol deployment for non-emergency interaction with the public; active solicitation of requests for service not involving crucial matters; creation of mechanisms for grassroots feedback from the community; and community-based crime prevention (Bayley 1989). The latter, in particular, is the growing movement towards encouraging the public to take protective measures on their own behalf. All may be described as proactive approaches to policing rather than reactive, enforcement-oriented, traditional approaches to policing.

In considering the relationship between the state and crime prevention, Hegan (1990, p. 37) concludes that:

The whole crime prevention process has to start at the community grassroots level. It should be bottom-up driven, based on community definition of issues and needs and have a lot of community-based solutions.

The terms of the partnership are clear. In exchange for moving from a crime-control model of policing to a 'peacekeeping' model, the community generally must accept its share of responsibility in dealing with crime or crime-related problems. In this scenario, crime is no longer the exclusive problem of the police; police, as peace officers, become responsible not only for helping to control crime but also are concerned with the prevention of crime and the promotion of public order and individual safety.

At the heart of this approach to policing lies community consultation to identify issues of concern, followed by a problem-solving orientation to policing strategies. A partnership is created in which, hopefully, there are safeguards for both the major players, but there are unresolved difficulties as Wilson (1991, pp. 1-3) indicates:

Is it possible to have good community policing without unwanted intrusions from authority? ... Whose needs are being addressed? ... How do we ensure that the police adequately handle, and act upon, criticism from community groups?

Above all how, do we define community and devise policies which are sufficiently flexible to cater for the diversity of our communities. It is the successful resolution of these and other questions which will prove the worth or otherwise of community policing and community-based crime prevention. In the context of this research, it is the relationship between the police, older people, the services available to older people and the wider community generally within which the older people are located which provides the key to successful crime prevention strategies for older people.

SURVEYS

Service Agencies

The Services Survey form sought to build up information concerning the caring community for older people in the Queensland (specifically the Brisbane) context. In the

initial instance, eighteen (18) government or non-government agencies were identified as providing care, or support for older people. Each of these agencies was contacted directly. Each was asked to complete and return a short survey form. All forms were returned completed. The contacts, in turn, recommended other contact points. A further six (6) localised agencies were contacted. These agencies also returned completed survey forms.

The agencies contacted offer a diversity of services ranging from policy development and implementation at the Commonwealth or State Government level to health services, either domiciliary or in residential settings, to transport, counselling, recreation, including shopping and advocacy.

It should be noted that some agencies have been established specifically to deal with older people in our community. Other agencies contacted offer services to the community generally but have some contact with older people. The range of services is both proactive and reactive. The Services Survey responses indicated that almost all of the agencies had contact with other services dealing with older people or assisted in coordinating responses for those in need of care and assistance.

Service agencies were asked to list, in order of priority, their perceptions of the major concerns expressed by older people in the community at this time. Concerns varied both in terms of range and frequency of response but can be summarised as follows in Table 1.

Table 1: Service Agencies Perceptions of the Main Concerns of Older People

CONCERN	TIMES X PREFERENCE					TOTAL
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	
1 Loss of independence	4	5	4	4	3	20
2 Loneliness/social isolation	6	3	2		1	12
3 Safety and security	6	4	4	3	4	21
4 Finance	1	2	7	3	1	14
5 Crime/Victimisation	2	1	-	-	1	4
6 Health	2	3	2	2	-	9
7 Transport	-	1	2	2	-	5

Other concerns mentioned included coping with loss or grief and, at a more specific level fear of falling, fear of government documentation, adequate shelter, adequate food and home maintenance issues.

Among general questions focussed on services to older people, the survey invited agencies to indicate the extent of their contact with the Queensland Police Service.

The majority of agencies (54 per cent) do have some contact with the Police, although the extent or regularity of this varies greatly. Two agencies indicated that they are or were involved in ongoing projects run in conjunction with the Community Policing Branch of the Queensland Police Service. The contact that these agencies have developed is fairly extensive. Seven agencies mentioned contact with Police when access was a problem or when 'clients' were injured or found dead; four indicated contact when 'patients' wandered away from premises; two (2) agencies indicated police assistance in transferring violent 'clients' or 'patients' to hospital or other residential accommodation; one agency responded with the phrase "Traffic violations" but did not elaborate; and one agency appreciated the

Police Band responding to requests to play in the community. Two agencies indicated that the Queensland Police Service had provided information about 'securing property' or 'demonstrating safety devices'.

In response to the question, "To your knowledge do you think that the police have any contact with the aged community?", 46 per cent replied 'yes', 42 per cent replied 'don't know' and 8 per cent gave no response.

Some agencies were aware of ongoing police efforts in the form of presentations to older people on aspects of safety or security. Others felt that the only contact occurred through emergency situations. Ten agencies indicated that they knew of no formal contact.

Community Perceptions Survey

The researchers decided that the most appropriate group of older people to target for this research were the ones who still lived within the general community. It was felt that this group would have experienced the greatest impact from various service providers. It is not unreasonable to assume that this group would have the greatest security needs. As a result older people who lived in aged settlements or who were permanently hospitalised were not included in this research.

The immediate problem facing the researchers was how to access older people in their places of residence. This difficulty was overcome by approaching a number of Senior Citizens' Clubs throughout the North Brisbane region. These clubs agreed to hand survey forms to their members. The completed surveys were then handed back to the club where they were handed on to the researchers. It is accepted that one of this study's limitations, therefore, is that it failed to reach older people who did not belong to Senior Citizens' Clubs.

The survey instrument was devised by the authors after examining the content and format of a number of surveys used by other researchers in relation to the elderly. This instrument was meant only to be a pilot study and so no rigorous testing of the survey was conducted. Furthermore, the timing of the survey, i.e. Christmas/New Year period made it very difficult to obtain a random sample.

A total of 420 surveys were distributed to the various clubs of which 219 useable replies were received. This response rate of over 50 per cent was considered excellent given the time of year the research was being conducted.

RESULTS

Item 1 of the survey asked about the number of respondents who had recent contact with the local police. Only 26.9 per cent indicated that they had recent contact with local police. Of this group 12.3 per cent stated that reporting a crime was the reason for this contact; 0.9 per cent reported suspicious behaviour; 2.7 per cent were seeking help or assistance; 0.5 per cent were involved in a traffic accident; 2.7 per cent contacted police for such reasons as Neighbourhood Watch and intended holiday absences; while 80.8 per cent had had no contact with police.

The overwhelming majority of the group who had experienced contact with police reported that they were either very satisfied or fairly satisfied with the police response as indicated.

Item 2 asked respondents to indicate in order of importance which crimes they most feared happening to them. These concerns were listed as follows: home burglarised 80.4 per cent; on a property being vandalised 45.7 per cent; being physically hurt during a robbery 44.4 per cent; robbed on the street 33.8 per cent; being murdered 17.0 per cent; being cheated of money by family or friends 3.3 per cent; being cheated of money by a stranger 1.4 per cent. This is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Crimes Elderly Most Worry About Happening to Them

Type of Crime	No	per cent
Home burglarised	176	80.4
Car or property being vandalised	100	45.7
Being physically hurt during a robbery	97	44.4
Robbed on the street	74	33.8
Being murdered	37	17.0
Being cheated out of your money by someone you know. eg. friend, family, etc	7	3.3
Being cheated out of your money by a stranger	3	1.4
Total	219	100

Item 3 sought to obtain data on the type of crimes the elderly have been victims of in the past five years and also the number of times they have been victimised. Table 3 indicates the crimes surveyed, and their frequency within the sample group. This table is interpreted as follows, for example in the case of 'home burglarised' 184 of the 219 respondents indicated that they had not been a victim of this crime, 27 respondents had been victims of this crime once over the specified time period, 6 respondents had been victims twice and 2 respondents had been victims on three occasions each. There are two points of interest arising from Table 3, firstly, the most frequent crime committed against the elderly was 'home burglarised' and secondly, nearly two-thirds of the respondents 137 (62.5 per cent) had not been the victim of any crime during that period. The first of these two points coincided with the previous survey item where 'home burglarised' emerged as the predominant worry amongst the sample. The second point of interest verifies research that the elderly are in fact one of the least victimised groups in society. The only other crimes

which were reported that were not on the list of crimes given included such things as 'purse stolen while shopping' and 'being mugged at the rail station'.

Table 3: Type/Frequency of Crime Against the Elderly

Type of Crime	Frequency of occurrences					Total
	0	1	2	3	4	
Car or property being vandalised	209	5	3	1	1	18
Home burglarised	184	27	6	2	-	45
Robbed on the street	217	2	-	-	-	2
Cheated out of your money by a stranger	218	1	-	-	-	1
Cheated out of your money by someone you know, eg friend, family, doctor, etc	217	1	-	1	-	4
Other	215	2	1	1	-	7

The results for item 4 which asked for frequency of non-reporting of crime indicated that 4.1 per cent of the respondents had not reported a crime committed against them to the police. Of these, those who gave reasons said the item stolen was not important enough to report.

Item 5 drew an overwhelming response amongst the sample: 209 (95.4 per cent) felt that crime in Brisbane had increased in the past few years. When responding to item 5 which asked if it was felt that crime had increased in Brisbane in the past few years, an overwhelming 95.4 per cent felt that it had. This is illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Perception of Crime Level in Brisbane

Level of Crime	No	per cent
Increased	209	95.4
Decreased	2	0.9
Stayed about the same	2	0.9
Don't know	4	1.8
No Response	2	0.9
Total	219	100

Item 6 asked respondents for their perceptions of crime levels in their local neighbourhood. An interesting point of comparison with the previous item shows up here in that a significantly smaller number of respondents 159 (72.6 per cent) feel that crime has increased within the local area as compared to Brisbane as a whole. This may be explained in terms of the media attention given to crime, particularly violent crime within the Brisbane area. In this way the wider world is perceived as more crime ridden, whereas in their everyday activities, the respondents have little contact with crime in their local neighbourhood.

Items 7 and 8 are grouped together because of the similarity of the replies. Both items deal with the time of response to calls by the Queensland Police Service. Item 7 asks about the response time for emergency calls and item 8 about response time for service or non-emergency calls. In both instances one-third of the sample rated police responses as excellent or good, while almost half the sample indicated that they did not know what the police response time was like.

Items 9 and 10 are also grouped for the same reason as above. These items ask the respondents whether they feel that the Queensland Police Service does the best job it can against crime in their neighbourhood, and also whether the police do the best they can to make them feel safe in their neighbourhood. In both cases, over 50 per cent of the sample

felt police were doing the best they could, while approximately 30 per cent were uncertain as to what police were doing in regard to these two areas.

For these two items, respondents who felt that police were not doing their best to control crime and increase neighbourhood safety, stated almost uniformly that more police patrols were required to achieve these goals.

Item 11 asked respondents whether they had frequently seen police in their neighbourhood. Of the total sample 77.2 per cent stated that they had not seen police frequently in their neighbourhood.

Item 12 asked whether respondents would mind police making occasional courtesy check-up calls at their home. Of the sample, 80 per cent indicated that they would not mind police making such visits. Those respondents who did not want police to visit usually gave as their reason, that police time could be better utilised in preventing and solving crime.

Item 13 asked respondents to indicate what services police should provide for them. Four main themes emerged from the responses. There was a desire for more police patrols, more foot patrols, a more visible police presence and greater protection and security.

Item 14 asked respondents to indicate in order their three main concerns. Two major concerns are clearly apparent; i.e. break-ins, and being physically attacked or threatened. Other concerns to appear frequently were, being robbed, lack of police numbers or presence and vandalism.

CONCLUSION

It must be emphasised that the data utilised in this paper is from a pilot study only. Nevertheless, part of the data from the Community Perceptions Survey would appear to confirm general trends reported elsewhere. For example, older people do have some

concerns about crime, but the concerns are not necessarily their highest priority among a list of concerns. Similarly, a relatively small percentage (12.3 per cent) of the sample appear to have been victims of crime in the recent past.

The focus of the study is upon policing. Once again, it must be emphasised that the findings are in the preliminary stages of collection, but on the one hand, it would appear that the majority of older people in the sample have no formal contact with the police at any time (80 per cent), rarely see police officers in their neighbourhoods (77 per cent) and are not desirous of having much contact (80 per cent). The sample were largely unaware of response times or uncertain as to police strategies in their areas. On the other hand, it would appear that those older people who do have contact with the police are generally satisfied or more than satisfied with the service that they receive.

The first point that can be made from this is that, in terms of contact, the relationship between older people and the police would appear to be based firmly in the reactive mode. In other words, older people have contact with the police when offences have occurred and police have contact with older people only in emergency situations or when offences have occurred. The survey at this point in time, does not explore the extent of contact between older people and other service agencies, particularly those established to provide care, support or assistance.

The second point that can be made concerning the data is that older people do have perceptions that crime generally is increasing and that it has increased in their local neighbourhoods. Building on this perception, the sample would appear to be in little doubt that increased police presence would have an effect on crime rates, particularly if that increased presence is in the form of foot patrols.

None of this is either new or very surprising. There are three possible strategies available to police services in their relationship with older people within communities. The first is to

continue in reactive mode; to respond to emergency calls or, on occasions, when required by other service agencies.

The second strategy is to establish particular specialised squads within services to work with and promote actively contact with older people. Thus the 'Gray Squad' of Milwaukee (Zevitz & Gurnack 1991) or the New South Wales Aged Services Unit (Whalley & Gately 1991) stand as good examples. Zevitz and Gurnack claim, for example (1991, p. 95) that:

... the provision of specialised police service exerts a positive influence on elderly attitudes about police performance.

All personnel within the unit receive specialised sensitivity training in "interviewing and interrogating elderly people". Perhaps, more importantly, members of the squad are "more knowledgeable than most other officers about resources available in the community to assist the elderly".

Similarly, Whalley and Gately (1991, p. 61) note:

By recognising that issues of elder protection must necessarily involve other agencies, the allocation of resources in this manner reflects an extension of police involvement and interaction into areas which have not traditionally been recognised as 'police work'.

The Aged Services Unit (ASU) seek not only to demonstrate a capacity to react sensitively to criminal activity against older people but also to fulfil a protective role. The ASU provides direct access to police service, provides a comprehensive crime education program designed specifically for the needs of older people and involves older people in community policing activity.

The major difficulty with this strategy, however, lies in the ability or otherwise of the specialised squads to meet the needs of their client group across the whole community.

From this emerges something of a paradox. Just as older people fought for recognition within the community in order to be able to command resources, so they have become compartmentalised, almost isolated within communities. The situation is the same with specialist squads within policing services. Specialisation can lead to isolation.

Thus, the third strategy is a fourfold approach which includes existing service agencies, specialised squads, the serving officers generally and older people. By educating all police officers to the exigencies and vicissitudes and attributes of old age, the groundwork for improved communication, cooperation and coordination is laid. This will be of critical importance in terms of crime prevention strategies, for it will broaden the possibilities of crime prevention at the community level.

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