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## **Crime and Older People, ISBN 0 642 22739 X**

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### **Preface**

Australia is experiencing rapid population ageing. This is a result of a decline in both birth levels and mortality levels as well as an increase in post war migration. As a percentage of the total population, the number of people 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 (ABS 1988).

Surveys in Australia and throughout the world have shown consistently that older people are far less likely than younger people to be victims of crimes such as robbery, theft, fraud, rape and homicide. However, many elderly people are unduly fearful of such crimes and this fear can have an adverse effect on their quality of life. The extent, as well as the fear, of the more covert phenomena of abuse and neglect is more difficult to gauge. In this instance, abuse and neglect includes any physical, psychological or economic ill-treatment inflicted on an older person in either the home or an aged-persons institution and is often referred to as elder abuse.

The vulnerability of the aged varies considerably. Health, gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic circumstances all affect the capacity of older people to cope with the material, financial, physical and psychological consequences of crime. On the other hand,

the geographical dispersion of crime is determined by population make-up, population densities and population mobility. As a result, these variables all interact in a complex way to determine how both crime, and the fear of crime, are experienced by different people in different places for different reasons.

For Australia's older people crime prevention must assume importance. With any crime prevention strategy, however, the objective must be to reduce fear to such an extent that older people are able to attain maximum enjoyment from their day-to-day lives, while maintaining their independence to remain in their own homes and communities as long as possible. It is equally important that strategies be developed to protect older people and prevent any form of elder abuse.

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. Any form of social intervention does, after all, involve the deployment of finite economic and human resources. To begin to unravel this dilemma the following questions must be addressed. Should revenue be allocated specifically for programs which prevent crime against the elderly, or should more general crime prevention efforts which benefit all members of the population including the elderly be undertaken? Should funds be set aside to promote programs which alleviate fear of crime by the elderly? Should separate legal or social service remedies be implemented to deal with elder abuse, or are initiatives directed against the more general problem of family violence adequate? In other words, is it necessary to take into account the unique characteristics of elderly populations and their particular types of victimisation and social experiences? Are older people a special group in need of special protection?

This conference addressed these issues by examining victimisation and fear of crime, the role the police have in crime prevention and fear reduction strategies for older Australians,

elder abuse and neglect, guardianship issues, policy perspectives around Australia as well as urban design and local government initiatives.

Marianne James

### **References**

Australian Bureau of Statistics 1988, *Projections of the Populations of Australia, States and Territories 1987 to 2031*, Catalogue No. 3222.0, Canberra.