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Crime and Older People, ISBN 0 642 22739 X

Victimisation and Fear Amongst the Elderly: An examination of two community surveys

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

Paul Thomas
Office of Crime Statistics
Attorney-General's Dept. (S.A.)

In examining the issue of crime and the elderly one must first define the term "elderly" as this has differing meanings for different people. Clearly, relying on chronological age as the sole determinant has many problems, not the least being the lack of homogeneity of its members in many factors. However, due to the difficulty in obtaining a more suitable operational definition, "elderly" will be defined in this paper as those individuals in our community aged 65 years or older.

Australians are frequently being reminded by the media and our politicians of the rapidly increasing age of our+ community. Preliminary data from the 1991 National Population and Housing Census reveals that currently 11.3 per cent of Australia's 16.8 million residents are aged 65 years or older (ABS 1992). By 2021 this proportion is predicted to increase to 16.9 per cent and by 2031 one in five (20.1 per cent) Australian residents will be aged 65 or older (ABS 1990a). In South Australia the situation is no different, as it has proportionately the greatest population of elderly citizens (12.5 per cent at the 1991 census) of all the States and Territories. Therefore the need for up-to-date and reliable statistics on issues such as crime and the elderly are paramount for our state planners and policy makers.

While a number of surveys measuring victimisation and fear of crime have been conducted both overseas as well as in Australia the most recent data specific to South Australia was collected in 1985 (ABS 1986a). That particular study, commissioned by the South Australian Police Department, was limited to the Adelaide Statistical Division, and reported only very basic statistics about break and enter victimisation and fear of crime. For assessment of South Australian victimisation rates of offences such as motor vehicle theft, robbery, sexual assault and other assaults one has to refer to data collected in the 1983 National Victims of Crime Survey (ABS 1986b). Thus, South Australia has a clear shortage of current survey statistics on the issues of victimisation rates and fear of crime. In recent years the Office of Crime Statistics has endeavoured to resolve this problem by commissioning two statewide surveys in 1991 and 1992.

The first of these surveys was conducted in April 1991 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 1991) and replicated a questionnaire used in the 1990 New South Wales Crime and Safety Survey (ABS 1990b). The survey was run in association with the ABS monthly population survey and administered using a drop-off and mail-back procedure. Information was collected from 3 500 households and 7 200 individuals statewide about their experience with break and enter offences, robbery, assault and their perceptions of crime problems within their neighbourhood.

The second survey, conducted between October and November 1992, used a selection of some of the previous victimisation questions along with a number of additional questions relating to fear of crime and perceived safety. The methodology differed slightly from the 1991 survey in that rather than being a separate survey the questions were included as part of a large omnibus study with the other questions being submitted by a range of health related agencies. Data was obtained by face to face interviews from approximately 3,100 individuals and unlike the ABS survey only one interview was conducted per household.

In both surveys information was collected from individuals aged 15 years of age and older concerning victimisations during the 12 months prior to the survey.

Previous findings

As stated above, the previous full scale study to provide South Australian data was the 1983 National Victims of Crime Survey. This study reported a strong relationship between age and rate of victimisation for personal offences such as robbery, other theft, sexual assault, other assault, and motor vehicle theft. For example, South Australian victimisation rates of personal crimes were of the order of 19.5 per cent amongst individuals aged 15-24 compared with 3.5 per cent amongst individuals aged 60 years or older. Similar patterns of victimisations were recorded throughout the country.

In the 1989 International Crime Victims Survey victimisation rates for personal crimes (including robbery, theft from person, sexual assault, other actual assault, and threats of violence) in Australia ranged from 27.2 per cent of individuals aged 16-19 down to only 2.2 per cent of those aged 60 years and above (Walker 1991). Similar patterns were also found in New South Wales where findings from the 1990 Crime and Safety Survey reveal 5.7 per cent of 15-24 year olds were victims of robbery or assault during the previous 12 months compared with only 1.3 per cent of individuals aged 65 or older (ABS 1990b).

With regard to the issue of fear of crime one tends to find consistent results between studies with most researchers concluding that the elderly are more fearful of crime than younger citizens. In the 1985 ABS survey, for example, residents of Adelaide were questioned about how safe they felt when walking alone at night in their own neighbourhood. Those aged 60 or older (28.0 per cent) reported feeling "very unsafe" compared to only half that proportion (14.4 per cent) amongst citizens aged 18-24 years (ABS 1986a). Likewise, findings from the 1975 National Crime Victims Survey reveal that 15.4 per cent of respondents age 60 and over felt "very unsafe" when walking alone in

their neighbourhood at night, compared with 7.1 per cent of respondents aged 15-19 years (ABS 1979).

The few exceptions to this general finding include a study by Jeffords (1983) who reported that while the elderly may be more fearful than younger individuals of walking alone in their neighbourhood they were less fearful than younger people of being alone in their own homes. Sacco and Glackman (1987) and Gomme (1988) also reported evidence that the elderly may be less fearful of criminal victimisation than younger citizens.

One of the problems in examining this issue is the difficulty in measuring "fear of crime". Ideally, fear of crime should be derived from a number of questions measuring the cognitive, affective and behavioural components as outlined by Fattah and Sacco (1989). With this in mind, however, the present surveys were restricted in the number of questions that could be included in the questionnaires. In the 1992 survey the method of assessment was to ask respondents to rate on a ten-point scale "how safe they felt with their own neighbourhood" (and then "within the State generally"). They were also asked if their fear of crime had increased or decreased during the preceding 12 months. In the 1991 survey the link to fear of crime was less direct, respondents were asked if they perceived any problems with crime or people creating public nuisance in their neighbourhood. Those who answered in the affirmative were then asked to nominate what they perceived the main problem to be.

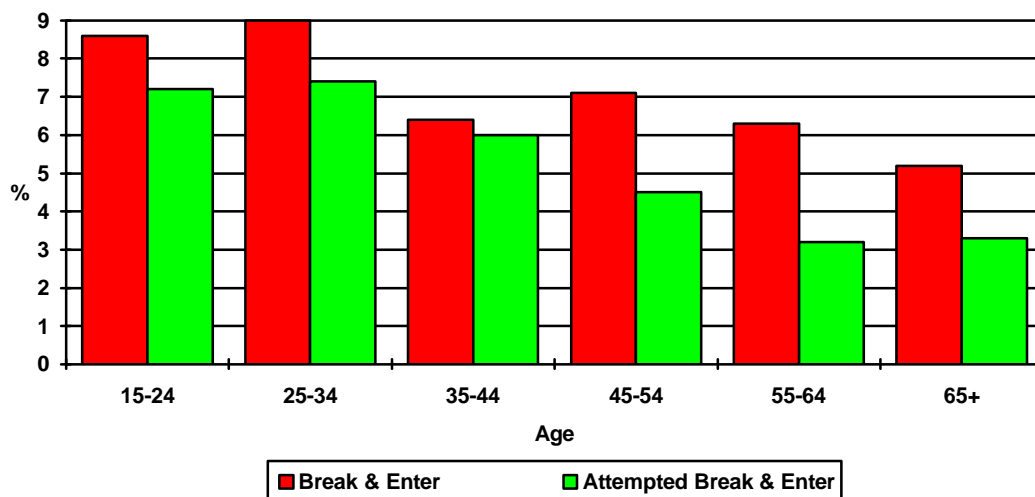
The current findings

As the 1992 survey interviewed a randomly chosen member of the household and not necessarily the head of the household, age based analyses for break and enter offences are not directly comparable with those from the 1991 survey. Therefore, in this paper only break and enter results from the 1991 survey will be presented.

Overall, 10.3 per cent of South Australian households had been a victim of at least one break and enter (B&E) or attempted B&E during the 12 months prior to the 1991 survey. This figure includes 6.9 per cent of households that were victims of an actual B&E and 5.2 per cent that were victims of an attempted B&E. Analysis by age of the head of the household reveals significant differences in victimisation across the age groupings (*see* figure 1). For actual break and enter offences 5.2 per cent of homes whose head of the household was aged 65 years and over were victimised during the preceding 12 months compared to 7.4 per cent of those aged 64 or younger.

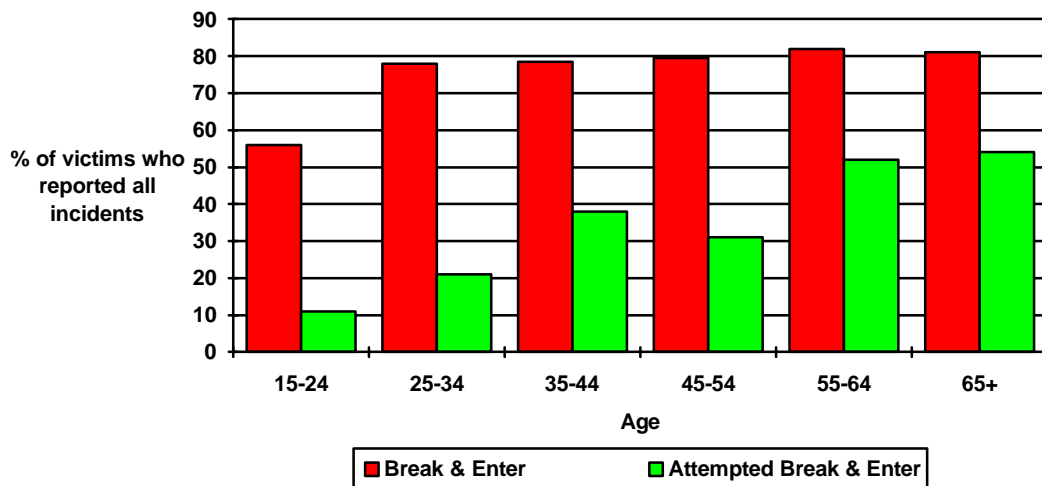
A similar pattern is observed with attempted break and enters where only 3.2 per cent of heads of households aged 65 and over reported being victimised compared with 5.7 per cent of those aged under 65 years.

Figure 1. Break and enter victimisation rates by age of head of household (1991 Crime and Safety survey)



For attempted break and enter offences there was also a relationship between age and the reporting of incidents to police, such that older victims were more likely than younger ones to report all incidents (*see* Figure 2). For actual break and enter offences a similar pattern was observed although the actual differences were not statistically significant.

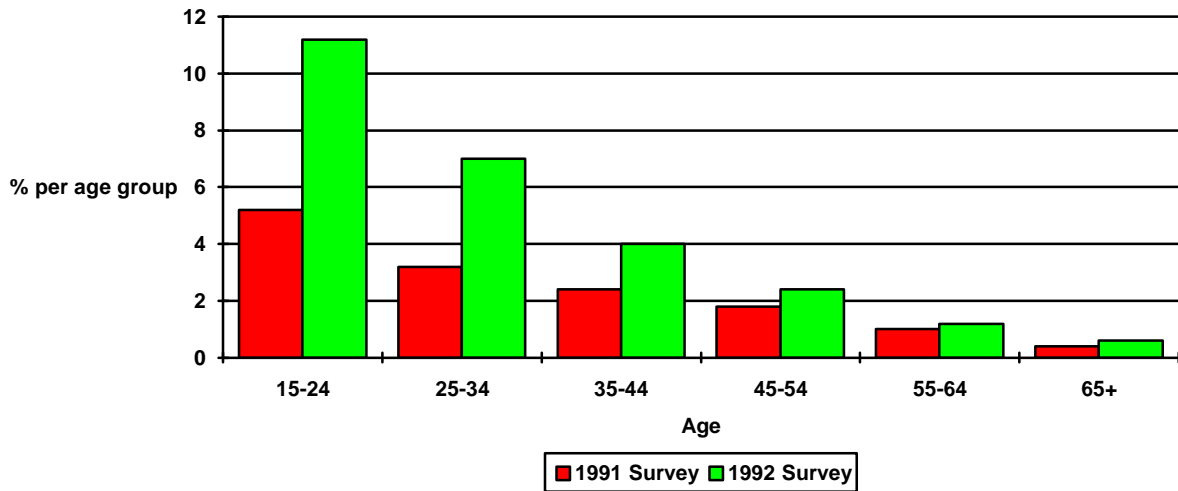
Figure 2. Reporting of all incidents to Police by age of head of household (1991 Crime and Safety Survey)



The data also provides tentative support for the notion that households occupied by elderly respondents tend to be less frequently victims of repeat incidents. For example, only 15.3 per cent of households whose head was aged 65 or older were victimised twice or more during the 12 months prior to the survey. This compares with 22.5 per cent of households whose head was aged under 65 years. For attempted break and enters the results were 15.8 per cent and 33.8 per cent respectively. It should be stressed, however, that due to the relatively low victimisation rates amongst the elderly the sample sizes of many of the cells in this cross tabulation are quite small and therefore have large relative standard errors.

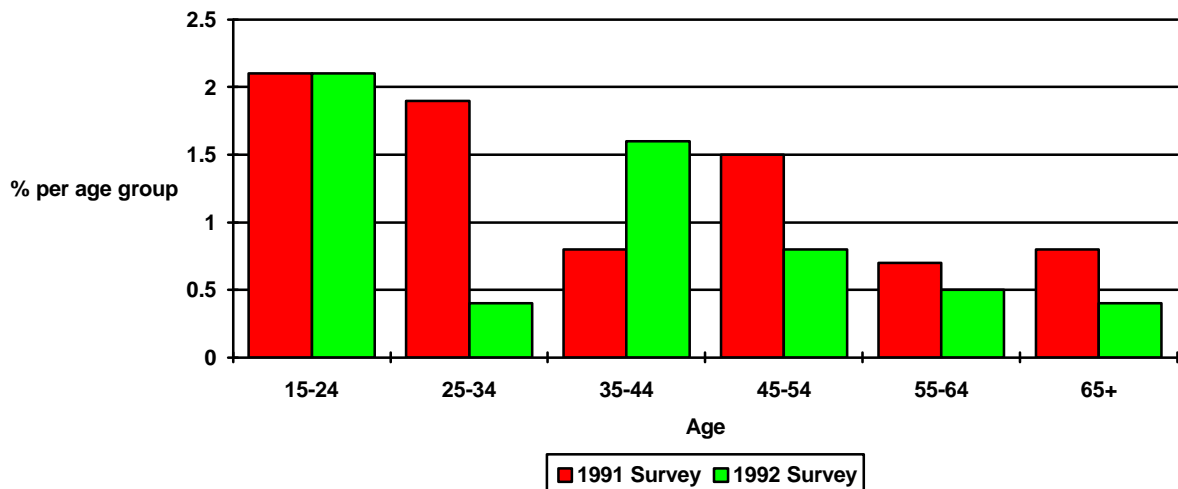
Figure 3 shows the proportion of each age specific group that was a victim of an assault during the 12 months prior to each of the two surveys. While once again small cells frequencies mean the results must be treated with caution, there are significant differences in both surveys between the victimisation rate of individuals aged under 65 years and those aged 65 and older. Specifically the 1991 survey recorded an assault rate of 3.0 per cent amongst individuals aged under 65 compared with 0.4 per cent amongst those aged 65 and older. In the 1992 survey the percentages were 5.8 per cent and 0.7 per cent respectively.

Figure 3. Assault victimisations



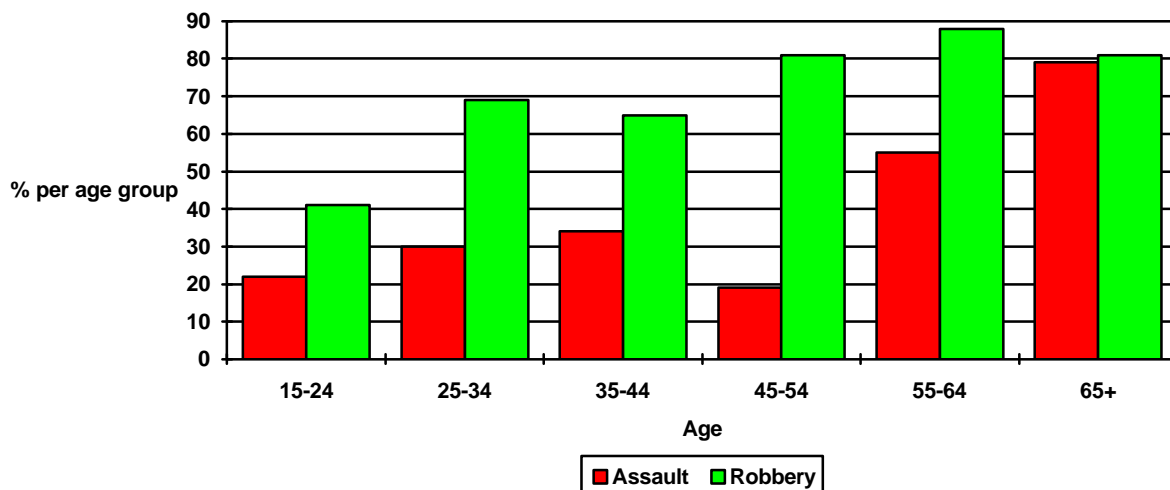
In relation to robbery offences 1.4 per cent of individuals in 1991 and 1.1 per cent in 1992 were victims. Amongst respondents aged 65 and older were statistics were 0.9 per cent and 0.4 per cent respectively (*see figure 4*).

Figure 4. Robbery victimisations



For both robbery and assaults it appears that reporting of incidents increases in proportion to the age of the victim, although the low frequency of these offences prevents any statistical testing (*see figure 5*).

Figure 5. Percentage of robbery & assault victims who reported all incidents



In the 1991 survey respondents were also asked about their perceptions of crime in their neighbourhood. The results indicated that elderly citizens were relatively less concerned about crime in their neighbourhood than younger citizens. Almost half of the respondents (48.4 per cent) aged 65 and over perceived no problems within their neighbourhood compared to the significantly smaller proportion of 38.7 per cent of individuals aged 15-64 (see Table 1).

The major problems perceived by those who were concerned about their neighbourhood were break and enters (30.7 per cent of all respondents), dangerous and noisy driving (8.3 per cent), vandalism and graffiti (6.5 per cent) and louts and youth gangs (4.2 per cent). The reporting of the major problems were consistent across age groups with the only significant difference being for "illegal drugs" where the elderly were less concerned than younger respondents.

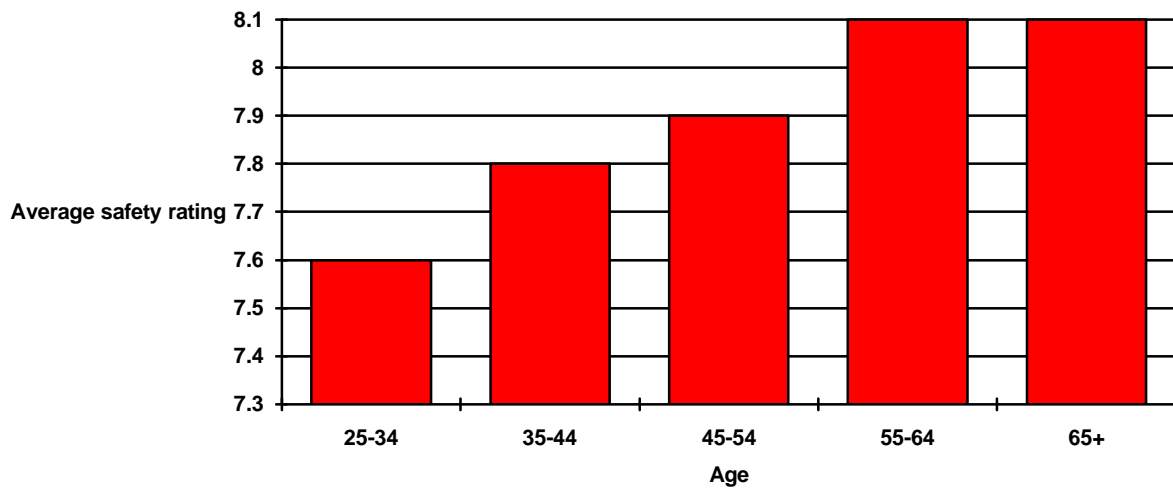
Table 1. Perceptions of crime or public nuisance problems in the neighbourhood
(Crime and Safety Survey, S.A. 1991)

Main problem within own neighbourhood	All respondents	15-64 years old	65+ years old
Housebreaking/burglaries	30.1	30.7	26.4
Dangerous/noisy driving	8.3	8.5	6.6
Vandalism/graffiti	6.5	6.6	6.4
Lotus/youth gangs	4.2	4.5	2.8
Car theft	2.2	2.2	1.8
Neighbours/domestic problems	1.5	1.6	1.1
Other theft	1.4	1.5	0.9
Prowlers/loiterers	1.4	1.3	1.7
Illegal drugs	1.1	1.3	0.4
Other assaults	0.2*	0.1	0.2
Sexual assaults	0.2	0.2	-
Other	0.8	0.7	0.8
No one main problem	2.1	2.1	2.6
No perceived problem	40.1	38.7	48.4

This overall finding from the 1991 survey that the elderly were less concerned about crime in their neighbourhood was tentatively supported by the results from questions asked in the 1992 survey. In this case respondents were asked to indicate on a ten point scale "how safe they feel within their own neighbourhood", where 10 represented "totally safe" and 1 "not safe at all". The results reveal that a significant increase in perceived safety was associated with increasing age of respondents (*see* figure 6). Amongst individuals

aged 65 and over the mean safety rating was 8.1 compared to an average of 7.7 for respondents aged 15-64 years old.

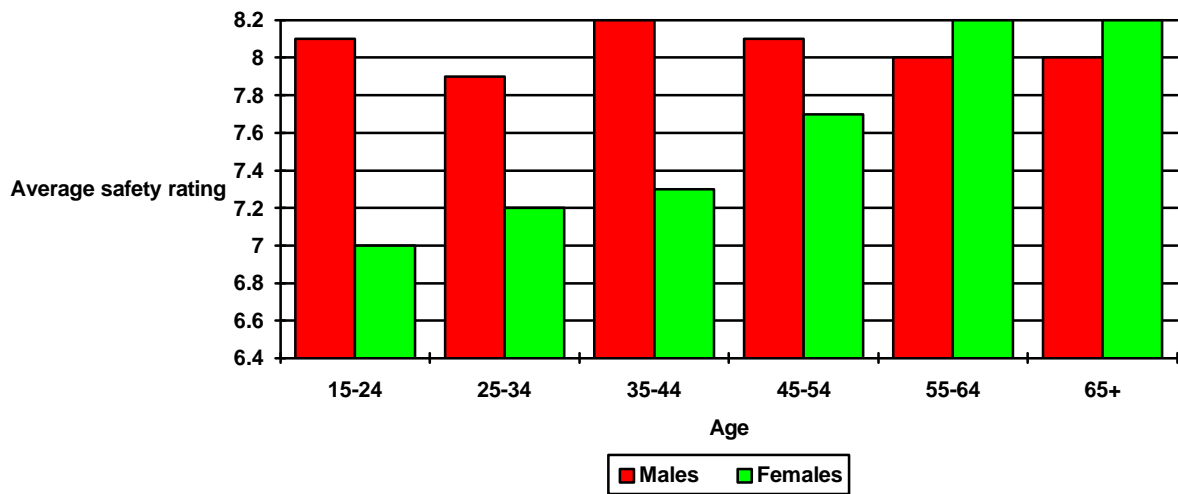
Figure 6. Average safety rating within own neighbourhood



In addition to the differences across age groups, male respondents were found to feel safer within their own neighbourhood than females, with a mean rating of 8.1 compared with 7.5 for females.

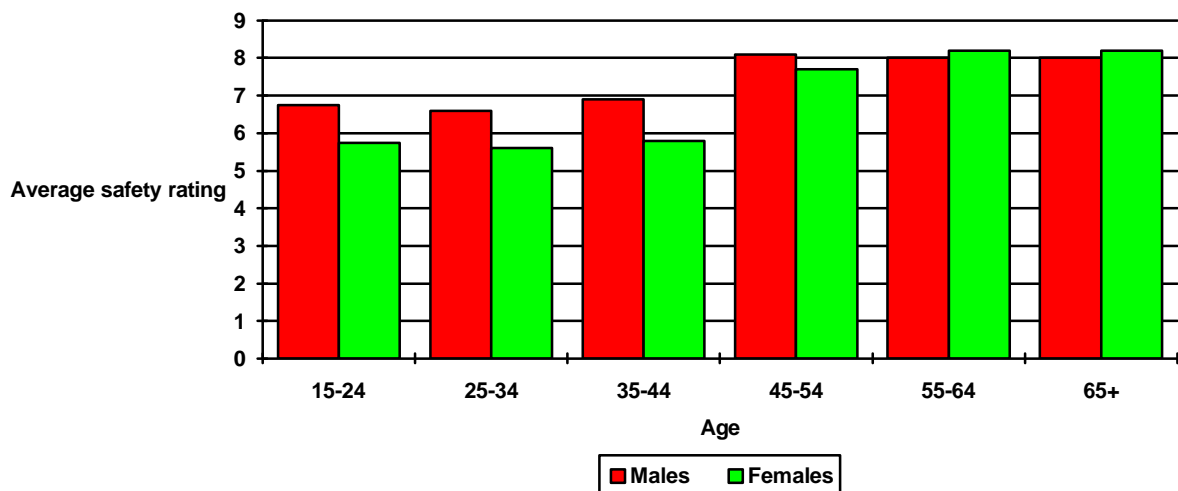
These significant differences across sex and age also combined to produce a significant Age x Sex interaction, such that between the ages of 15-44 years males record significantly higher safety ratings than females. Beyond the age of 44 the sex differences were no longer significant (*see figure 7*).

Figure 7. Average safety rating within own neighbourhood by age and sex.



Respondents were then asked "how safe they felt within the State of South Australia as a whole". As with the previous question males recorded higher safety ratings than females, although these differences decreased with age (*see* figure 8).

Figure 8. Average safety rating within the state by age and sex.

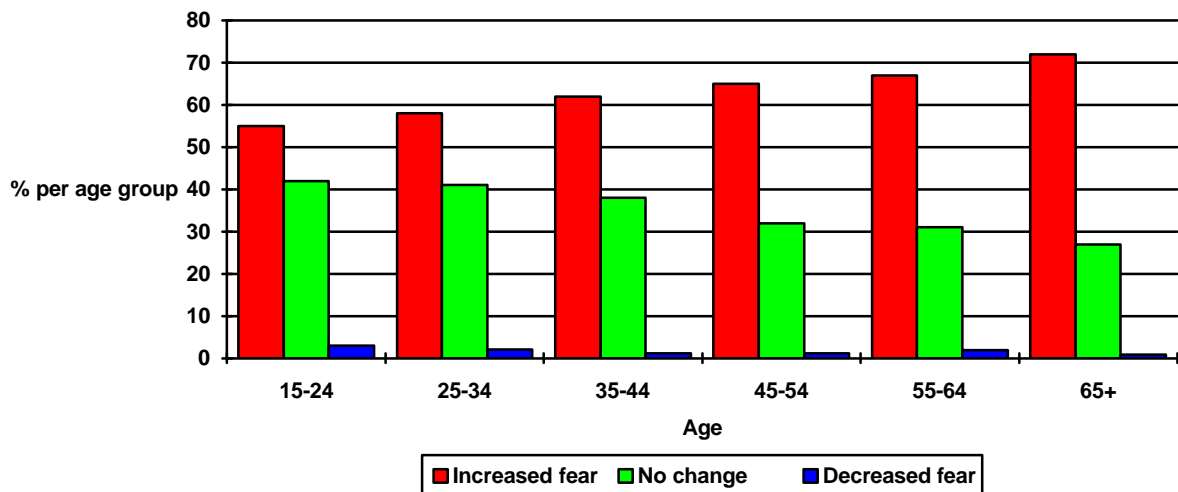


Generally, individuals reported higher safety ratings in their own neighbourhood than within the State (means = 7.8 and 6.2 respectively) and the difference between the two ratings was found to increase significantly with age so that elderly respondents reported a greater difference in safety ratings than younger respondents.

Finally, respondents were asked if their fear of crime had increased or decreased during the last 12 months. Overall 62.0 per cent of respondents reported an increase in level of fear, 36.4 per cent experience no change while only 1.6 per cent felt less fearful of crime.

Figure 9 demonstrates a linear relationship between increased fear and age, with 54.5 per cent of respondents aged 15-24 reporting increased fear, compared with 71.5 per cent of respondents aged 65 and over.

Figure 9. Change in fear of crime during the last 12 months



There were also significant sex differences such that a greater proportion of females (67.6 per cent) reported increased fear than did males (56.2 per cent), and males were more likely than females to experience no change in their fear of crime (42.0 per cent and 31.0 per cent respectively).

The age by sex interaction was significant with a greater proportion of young females experiencing an increase in fear than young males. Amongst older age groups there was no significant difference in the proportion of males and females reporting increased fear.

This result is more difficult to interpret. However, one possibility is that rather than basing their comparison on the previous 12 months, elderly citizens may be drawing comparisons with a more distant time frame. In other words, elderly citizens may be more inclined to compare their current level of fear with the "good old days, when there was less crime".

Summary

In summary, the two surveys discussed in this paper have provided useful South Australian data on fear of crime and victimisation rates.

The surveys show that for property offences and offences against the person there is a strong inverse relationship between victimisation and age. For break and enter offences, for example, persons aged 65 years and over are at approximately half the risk of those aged between 15 and 24. For robbery the elderly were found to be between half and one fifth the risk and for assault at least one-thirteenth the risk of individuals aged 15 to 24-years-old.

The elderly were also found to be more likely to report offences than younger victims and there was some support for the notion that younger individuals experience a higher rate of multiple victimisation than their elderly counterparts.

The current results also suggest that on average the elderly are less fearful of crime than younger members of society. These results are consistent with previous studies by Jeffords (1983), Sacco and Glackman (1987), and Gomme (1988). In addition the elderly are least likely to perceive crime as a problem in their neighbourhood and have the highest feelings of safety of all age groups, both within their own neighbourhood and across the State. Quite clearly the popular media image of the elderly as prisoners of fear trapped within their homes simply isn't true for the majority of our elderly citizens. In fact it is

young citizens, particularly young women between the ages of 15-24 who experience the greatest levels of fear of crime.

Clarke has suggested that many elderly may be prisoners in their homes, but this may be "related more to ill-health, lack of interest and poor access to transport than fear of crime" (1990, p.19). Thus fear of crime is only one of a number of concerns which the elderly experience in their day-to-day lives. For that smaller number of elderly whose fear of crime is disproportionate to their true risk of victimisation, individualised assistance should be provided.

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The author wishes to thank Frank Morgan, Adrian Barnett and Leigh Roeger for their comments on earlier drafts.