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The Victimisation of Older Australians

Carlos Carcach, Adam Graycar and
Glenn Muscat

This paper uses data from an Australia-wide survey of victims of crime undertaken by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) to examine the victimisation of older people. The survey was conducted in April 2000 in conjunction with the Australian component of the International Crime Victims Survey and had a sample size of 3,032 individuals, of which 1,246 were persons aged 65 years and over.

Older people have the lowest rates of crime victimisation when compared to the rest of the population. This is due to the unique nature of the social relationships and activities of older people. Consumer fraud is an important component of older people's experiences with crime. Among older Australians, consumer fraud is 2.2 times more prevalent than assault, which is the most common of the violent offences. This contrasts with younger persons, among whom fraud is as common as assault.

Older people are not homogeneous in their risk of victimisation. Variations in victimisation risk among older people are explained by differences in their recreational activities in the evening and whether they are married. For example, older people who are separated or divorced are twice as likely as other older persons to be victims of crime.

Crime prevention should be tailored to specific types of victim. Among socially advantaged older people, initiatives to promote the adoption of security measures to protect household or personal property as well as safe recreational patterns may reduce risk. Among socially disadvantaged older people there is a need for enhanced community support in order to minimise the effects that isolation and vulnerability have on the risk of victimisation.

Adam Graycar
Director

According to data from the latest census, the median age of the Australian population in 1996 was 34.0 years; persons aged 65 years and over made up 12.1 per cent of the total population. Demographic projections for the year 2051 put the median age at 42.6 years and the proportion of persons aged 65 years and over at 23.1 per cent (ABS 1997).

Ageing changes the way that individuals distribute their time across social roles and activities. These new roles and activities may affect quite dramatically the degree to which older people are exposed to crime victimisation. A 1997 survey on time use (ABS 1998) showed that persons aged 65 years and over tend to spend more time than younger people in activities associated with personal care, domestic duties, purchasing goods and services, voluntary work and care, and recreation and leisure. They tend to spend less time than younger people in activities related to social and community interaction and, as expected, child care or employment. Since victimisation risk varies across time, space and

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Australian Institute
of Criminology
GPO Box 2944
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia

Tel: 02 6260 9221

Fax: 02 6260 9201

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situations, it seems reasonable to expect that particular types of lifestyles may increase or decrease exposure to risk among older Australians.

Vulnerability

The concept of vulnerability is central to the study of victimisation among older people. There are three major types of vulnerability: physical, financial and social (Fattah & Sacco 1989). Ageing may contribute to an increase in any of these forms of vulnerability.

Physical Vulnerability

Ageing often results in a decline in physical strength and fitness. This can make older people less able to respond effectively to an attack. This may in turn enhance offenders' perceptions of older people as suitable targets (Grayson & Stein 1981). Declining physical strength and fitness is a major contributor to fear of crime among the elderly (Hale 1996).

Financial Vulnerability

Official statistics show that 74 per cent of older people derive their main source of income from government benefits (ABS 1999a). The relatively low income of older

people may expose them to more risk factors associated with victimisation. They may be less able to afford residential security measures or to deal with financial losses arising from criminal victimisation (Skogan & Maxfield 1981). Also, the financial insecurity of some older people may make them attractive to "get-rich" schemes. On the other hand, a low income may mean that older people have less money to be stolen or to spend themselves in activities outside the home, which may contribute to a lower risk of victimisation.

Social Vulnerability

Differences in lifestyles and levels of vulnerability may explain the differences in risk faced by older Australians and younger people. International research has consistently found that older people have lower levels of victimisation compared to others, both across countries and over time. The differences in levels of criminal victimisation between older people and those of other ages have been related to age differentials in socially determined patterns of day-to-day activities or lifestyles (Hindelang, Gottfredson & Garolfo 1978).

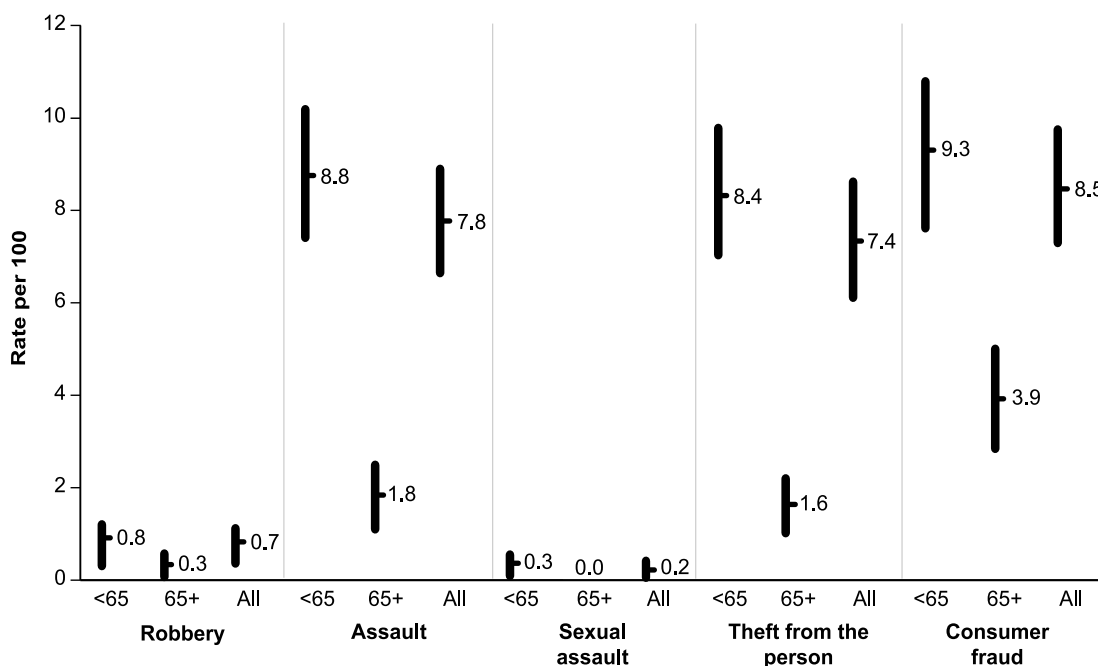
The 2000 Crime Victims Survey

This paper reports on some results from the AIC's 2000 Crime Victims Survey regarding the crime victimisation experiences of older Australians. It focuses on the following personal and household offences:

- robbery;
- assault;
- sexual assault;
- theft from the person;
- consumer fraud;
- break and enter (both completed and attempted);
- vehicle theft;
- vehicle damage; and
- theft from a vehicle.

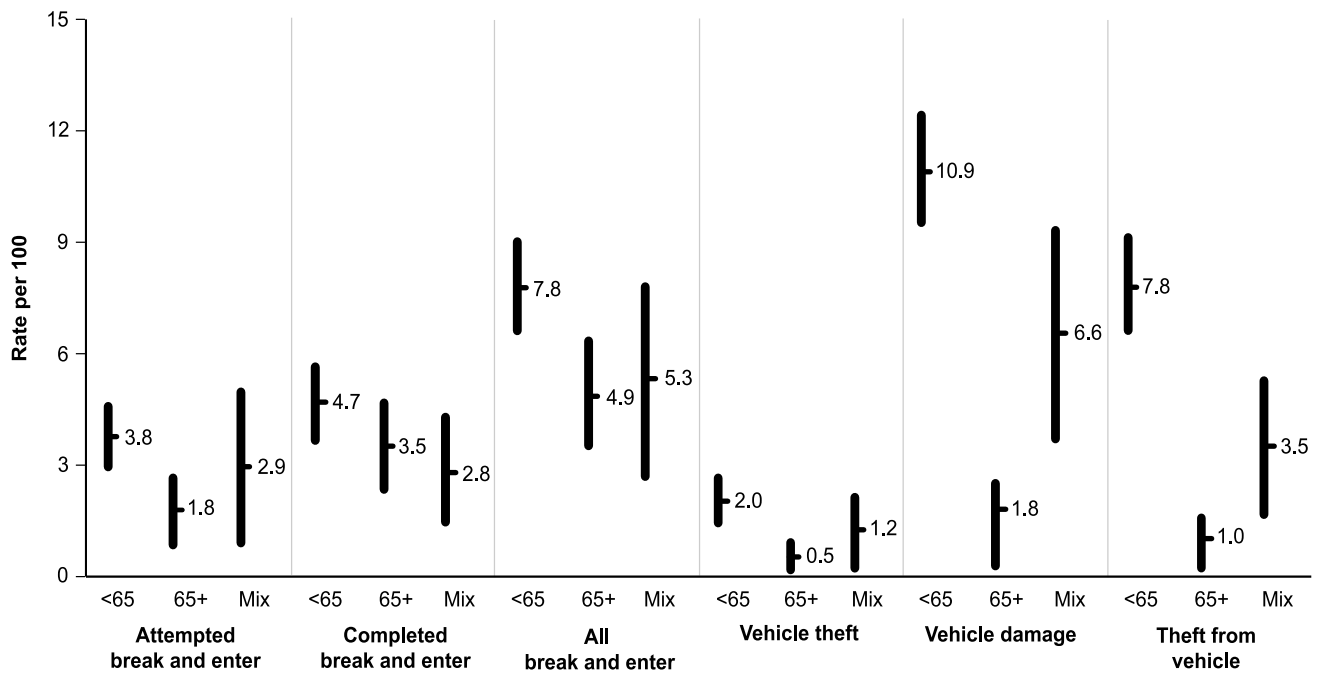
The 2000 Crime Victims Survey was an Australia-wide survey of victims of crime, commissioned by the AIC and conducted by the Roy Morgan Research Company. The survey was carried out in two phases. The first phase was part of the International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS). Data were collected over the first two weeks of April 2000 from a sample of the total population aged 16 years and over. The second phase collected data on experiences of victimisation among the population aged 65 years and

Figure 1: Personal offence victimisation rates and 95% confidence intervals by age group in 1999



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, Australian Crime Victims Survey 2000 [computer file]

Figure 2: Household offence victimisation rates and 95% confidence intervals by age composition of households in 1999



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, Australian Crime Victims Survey 2000 [computer file]

over who were residents of private households during the survey period. This phase was conducted over the last two weeks of April 2000. Among other items, the survey sought data on respondents' experiences of victimisation during the five years since 1995 and during the year of 1999. This paper concentrates on victimisation during 1999 only.

Interviews were conducted using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) and resulted in a final sample of 3,032 individuals, of which 1,246 were persons aged 65 years and over. The overall response rate was 56 per cent, which is in line with the response rates of most non-compulsory social surveys. For example, response rates for the 2000 ICVS were 57 per cent in Canada, England and Wales, and 58 per cent in the Netherlands and Scotland.

As the final sample over-represented persons 65 years and over, cases were weighted in order to ensure that the survey estimates conformed to the region-age-sex distribution of the Australian population during the month of April 2000. The weighting also accounted for differential non-response and

failure to achieve established quotas within strata.

Ninety-seven per cent of households in Australia have a telephone (ABS 1999c). In order to minimise the effect of silent numbers on contact rates, the sample was selected using the "White Pages plus one" method. This is an adaptation of random digit dialling that involves selecting residential telephone numbers at random from the White Pages directory and incrementing the last digit by one to get unlisted or not yet listed numbers.

How Older People Compare to the Rest of the Population

Personal Offences

The victimisation experiences of older people (that is, persons aged 65 years and over) differ from those of persons aged between 16 and 64 years. As shown by the confidence intervals in Figure 1, and consistent with theoretical expectations, victimisation rates among older people were well below the rates among the rest of the population, in particular for the offences of assault,¹ theft from the person and consumer fraud.

Robbery was an exception to this pattern.

About one in 12 persons in the general population reported consumer fraud victimisation.² Persons aged 65 years and over were almost three times less likely than persons in other age groups to be victims of consumer fraud. However, although older people's rates of consumer fraud victimisation were lower than the general population, this offence constituted a significant component of their experience with crime. In the general population, the victimisation rate for consumer fraud was as high as the rates of any other personal offence. Among older people, consumer fraud was 2.2 times more common than assault, the offence with the highest victimisation rate for violent and property offences. This difference was statistically significant. The consumer fraud-assault ratio was only 1.05 times for persons aged between 16 and 64.

Excluding consumer fraud, the offences of assault and theft from the person were the most common forms of victimisation for Australians within any age group.

Household Offences

Households with all members aged 65 years and over (“older households”) were compared to households with all members aged less than 65 years (“younger households”) and to households with members in both age groups (“mixed age households”³). The confidence intervals in Figure 2 show that the age composition of households is not a factor in explaining risk of victimisation for most property offences.

In general, “older households” had the same risk of property crime victimisation as other households. Car vandalism and theft from a car were exceptions to this pattern. Households with all members aged 65 years and over were significantly less likely than other types of households to be victims of vehicle damage. For the offence of theft from a car, “older” and “mixed age” households had lower victimisation rates than households with all members aged less than 65 years. Similar results held for rates computed relative to the number of vehicle owners (not shown here).

Victimisation Among Older People

Gross comparisons between older people and those under 65 years may mask important distinctions within the older population with respect to the distribution of risk. A range of factors such as gender, age, marital status and lifestyle may have differential effects on the risk of victimisation among older Australians.

The number of older people who reported being a victim of specific personal or household offences was small. For this reason, the analysis of personal offences focused on victimisation for the more common offences of assault and theft from the person. For property offences, the analysis concentrated on victimisation for all property offences as well as burglary and the group of car-related offences

(that is, vehicle theft, damage to vehicle or theft from vehicle). Non-parametric analysis of variance was used to assess differences in victimisation between groups defined according to selected risk factors.

Personal Offences

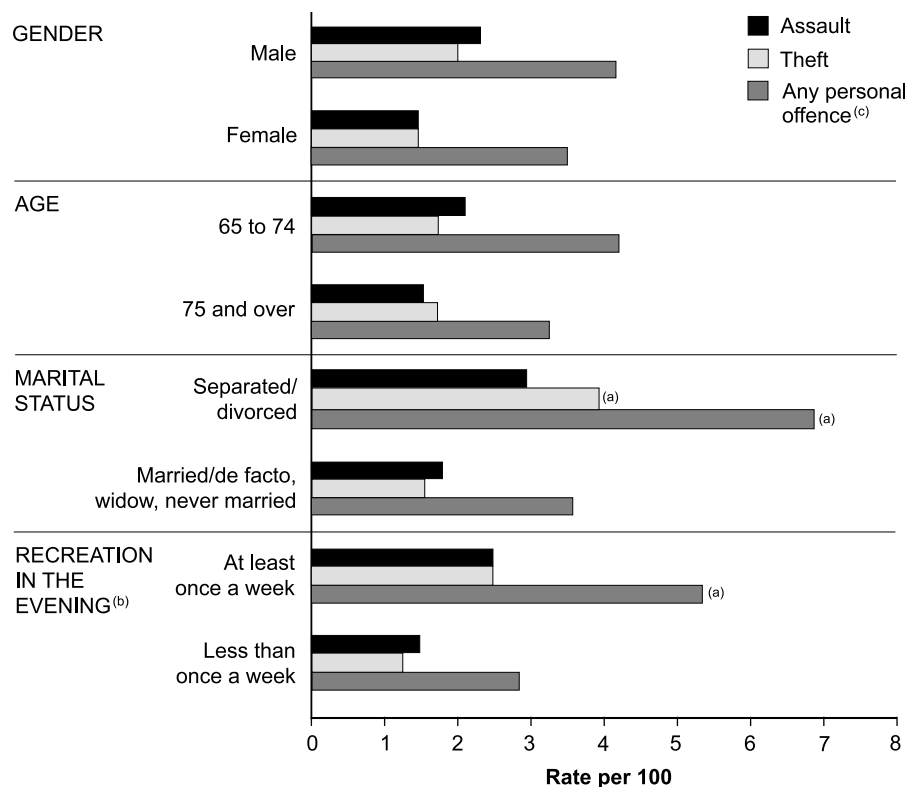
The literature indicates that in the general population, males are more likely than females to be the victims of personal crime. This is supported by crime survey data generally. In Australia, and during the 12 months prior to April 1998, male rates of assault exceeded those of females by 20 per cent (ABS 1999b). During 1999, and in 17 industrialised countries, males were nine per cent more likely than females to be victims of petty crime, including theft (Van Kesteren, Mayhew & Nieuwbeerta 2001). As shown in Figure 3, the data used in the present study indicate

that among older people, victimisation rates of males were not significantly different to those of females. This result held for assault, theft from the person and any personal offence, and is consistent with previous research findings.

Victimisation rates were examined for two age categories of older people: 65 to 74 years and 75 years and over. The data suggest that among older people, rates of personal victimisation for assault and theft are uniform across age groups.

Crime survey data show that, in general, separated or divorced persons have the highest risk of violent crime victimisation when compared to persons with other marital status. They are followed by never married and divorced persons (see, for example, ABS 1999b). The AIC data are consistent with this pattern and show that among older people,

Figure 3: Personal offence victimisation rates by selected characteristics for persons aged 65 and over



- (a) The difference between victimisation rates was significant (p<0.10).
- (b) Frequency of going out for entertainment during the evening.
- (c) “Any personal offence” includes robbery, assault, sexual assault and theft from the person.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, Australian Crime Victims Survey 2000 [computer file]

with the exception of assault, the separated or divorced also had higher rates of personal victimisation compared to older people in other marital status categories (that is, married or in a de facto relationship, widowed or never married).

The data in Figure 3 show that among older people, those who tend to go out for recreation during the evening with a relatively high frequency also have the highest risk of personal victimisation.

These results indicate that there is a similarity between the victimisation patterns of older and younger people, in particular regarding the effect of marital status and habits of outside evening entertainment. However, it is interesting to observe that the relationship of gender and age with victimisation, which is so strong among persons aged less than 65 years, virtually disappears among older people.

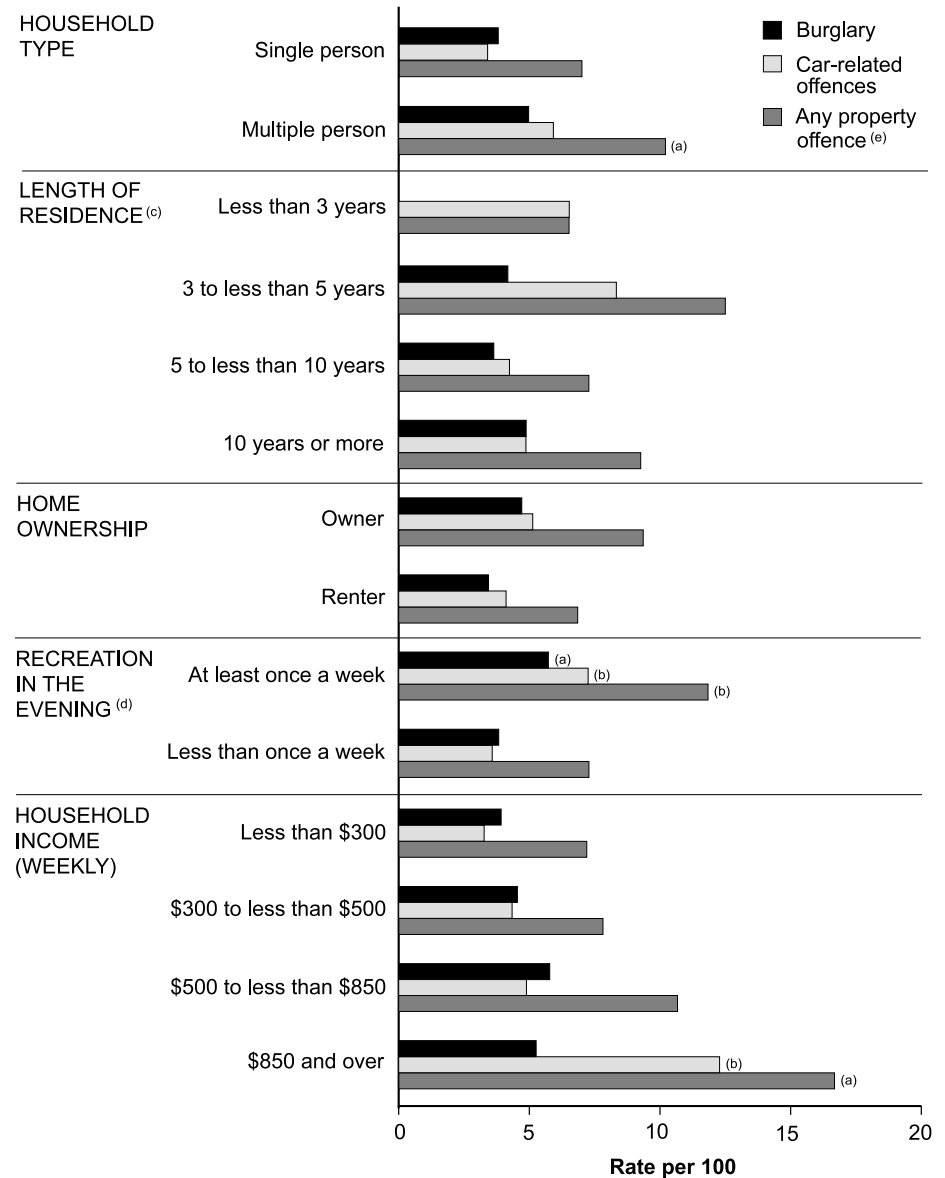
Household Offences

This section examines older people's victimisation for the offences of break and enter, attempted break and enter, and vehicle-related offences (that is, vehicle theft, theft from a car and damage to a car).

The data suggest that among older households, three factors explain variations in risk of victimisation: household structure, frequency of going out for recreation during the evening, and household income. As shown by the data in Figure 4, variations in victimisation among older households arise mainly from car-related offences.

Multiple-person households, households where members go out at least once a week, and high-income households are at highest risk of burglary and car-related⁴ victimisation when compared to other types of households. These results suggest that lifestyle plays a prominent role in explaining risk of victimisation for car-related offences, mostly theft from cars and damage to cars.

Figure 4: Household offence victimisation rates, selected characteristics, for households with at least one member aged 65 years or over



- (a) The difference between victimisation rates was significant ($p < 0.05$).
- (b) The difference between victimisation rates was significant ($p < 0.01$).
- (c) Length of residence in postcode of enumeration.
- (d) Frequency of going out for entertainment during the evening.
- (e) "Any property offence" includes break and enter (completed and attempted), vehicle theft, damage to vehicle and theft from vehicle.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, Australian Crime Victims Survey 2000 [computer file]

The same factors influence the risk of victimisation among older households and households with younger members (that is, less than 65 years). Length of residence in the area and home ownership did not fit into this pattern. This is due to a majority of older households either owning their homes or having lived in the same place for relatively long periods of time.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Older people have the lowest rates of victimisation when compared to the rest of the population. This has been attributed to the unique nature of the social relationships and activities of older people. However, older people are not

homogeneous in their risk of victimisation. Social vulnerability may play a crucial role in shaping victimisation experiences among older people. Older people who are separated or divorced have higher rates of victimisation than those who are married. The survey did not provide evidence of differences in victimisation risk due to gender and age.

The study shows that recreational patterns mediate the effects of relevant demographic variables such as gender and age on personal victimisation. Among older people, the risk of personal and household victimisation varies with the frequency of evening activities outside the home. In particular, the data on household victimisation confirm the crucial role played by guardianship in inhibiting household crime.

Crime prevention must be tailored to the type of potential victim. Among socially advantaged older people, initiatives to promote the adoption of security measures to protect household or personal property as well as safe recreational patterns may reduce risk. Among socially disadvantaged older people there is a need for enhanced government assistance and community support in order to minimise the effects that isolation and vulnerability have on the risk of victimisation.

These findings suggest that consumer fraud is more of a problem among older people compared to other age groups. This is an issue requiring further research and will be the subject of a forthcoming paper.

Notes

- 1 As an example, the 95 per cent confidence interval for the offence of assault among older people had a lower limit of 1.1 and an upper limit of 2.7, whereas among persons aged between 16 and 64 years, the lower and upper limits were 8.9 and 11.9 respectively. These intervals do not overlap, meaning that the rates of assault among older people were

significantly lower than among persons aged between 16 and 64 years ($p < 0.05$). Note also that the confidence intervals for the estimates of theft and consumer fraud do not overlap, which indicates that the difference between older and younger rates is significant. This was not the case for robbery and sexual assault.

- 2 Consumer fraud included incidents where respondents were cheated in terms of quantity or quality of goods and services sold or provided to them.
- 3 Mixed age households contributed 13.7 per cent to the total sample.
- 4 The results were not affected by differences in rates of car ownership.

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Carlos Carcach is Head of the Communities and Crime Analysis Program, Australian Institute of Criminology.

Dr Adam Graycar is Director of the Australian Institute of Criminology.

Glenn Muscat is a Research Assistant at the Australian Institute of Criminology.



General Editor, Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice series:
Dr Adam Graycar, Director
Australian Institute of Criminology
GPO Box 2944
Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

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