

LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

**THE SENIOR CITIZEN:
LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES**

**A LEARNING CONTRACT
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
MODULE II**

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SNYDER, TEXAS

JULY, 1990

#159

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THE SENIOR CITIZEN:
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INTRODUCTION

Americans over age 65 are the fastest growing portion of the population, and that trend will continue for the next decade. The concerns of the elderly are assuming a more prominent place in law enforcement. Law enforcement response to elder abuse has become a major issue and law enforcement is becoming involved in maintaining the well-being of senior citizens.¹

This paper will identify some of the circumstances in which law enforcement officers come into contact with senior citizens, special law enforcement related needs of senior citizens, and how law enforcement can meet the needs of senior citizens.

A questionnaire relating to crime and the fear of crime was distributed at the Scurry County Senior Citizen Center, one hundred one questionnaires were filled out and returned. A copy of the questionnaire is in Appendix 1 and the responses to the questionnaire are in Appendix 2.

LAW ENFORCEMENT CONTACT WITH SENIOR CITIZENS

While performing their duties, law enforcement officers may encounter the senior citizen as an offender, as a victim, or in a noncrime situation.²

Offender

The elderly are less likely to commit crimes than other age groups.³ The majority of older offenders commit either minor property crimes or offenses against public decency.⁴ Older people commit their individual crimes for the same reasons that other adults do: for example, lack of commitment to conforming norms, lack of alternatives, need for excitement, or mental aberrations.⁵

Victim

Crime Victim

Data from the National Crime Survey show that between 1980 and 1985 the elderly, those age 65 and older, had the lowest victimization rates of any age group in the United States population age 12 and older.⁶ When the elderly are touched by crime they appear to be relatively more susceptible to crimes that are motivated by economic gain such as burglary, purse-snatching, strong-arm robbery, and criminal fraud.⁷

The older person often suffers more physically and psychologically as a crime victim. Due to age and its

attendant frailty, physical injuries received are frequently more serious and slower healing, and psychological trauma experienced is more lasting and intensely felt. As a result of limited financial resources and reduced earning potential, prevalent among many older citizens, economic losses suffered as crime victims are often not easily replaced, resulting in severe deprivation in some instances.⁸

Elder Abuse and Neglect

While most older people live independently, later life can necessitate some dependency on others. Dependency may take the form of living with a caretaker or relying on one for housekeeping and personal services. Whether the reasons for dependency are economic or physical, this kind of relationship creates the potential for neglect of responsibility or actual abuse by the caretaker. The following are accepted definitions of elder abuse and neglect:

1. Passive Neglect-the older person is isolated or left alone and does not receive needed help and services. The caretaker may be unaware of the condition or unable to help.
2. Active Neglect-the caretaker withholds necessary food, medicine, assistance, or companionship.
3. Psychological Abuse-the older person is verbally and/or emotionally abused. This kind of abuse includes insults, threats, humiliation, screaming, or denial of rights.

4. Physical Abuse-the older person is physically harmed as a result of purposeful acts of violence. The abuse can range from physical restraint, shaking, and slapping to breaking bones, burning and sexually molesting.
5. Exploitation-the older person is manipulated or forced to give up financial resources.

Studies have shown that in 70 percent of reported cases, a third party reported the abuse rather than the victim. The victim may be unable to report abusiveness because of his own physical or mental limitations. In other cases, the older victim may be unwilling to report incidents because he or she does not want to run the risk of losing what little help the caretaker gives. For some older people, the alternative to the abusive situation may be institutionalization, something to be avoided even at great cost. In cases of passive neglect, the older person may not be able to identify a specific offender, seeing himself as a victim of circumstance instead.⁹

Abuse and neglect also exist in nonfamily settings. Nursing home abuse is probably the most well-documented. Financial abuse in nursing homes has taken the form of the theft of personal property and the confiscation of pension checks. Corners have been cut on food, safety equipment, and medical care while fees remained high. Patients have been billed for services and drugs that are never used. Physical and psychological abuse have been found to run the gamut of seriousness: patients have been slapped and beaten when uncooperative; drugged unnecessarily; allowed to lie in

filth; taunted; denied privacy and the courtesies that most of us take for granted; and allowed to deteriorate without the physical and psychological stimulation necessary for health at any age. Estimates of the amount of nursing home involvement in abuse and neglect have ranged from 30 to 80 percent of American nursing homes.¹⁰

Noncrime Situation

The noncrime situation is the one in which most law enforcement officers have the greatest contact with the elderly. Many police calls are requests for service such as accidents, illnesses, intervening in noncriminal family situations, and assistance to individuals.¹¹ The public calls on law enforcement officers for assistance with elderly people who are disoriented, mentally ill, or homeless. They do so because peace officers are unique in providing free, around-the-clock service, mobility, and a legal obligation to respond.¹²

SPECIAL LAW ENFORCEMENT RELATED NEEDS OF SENIOR CITIZENS

Fear of Crime

Research has shown that while older people have lower than average victimization rates, they have above average levels of fear.¹³ Most fear of crime comes from vicarious experiences rather than from being the actual victim of a

crime.¹⁴ The fear among elderly nonvictims is affected by their perception of crime rates, feeling of physical vulnerability, the existence of social unrest, and signs of social disorganization in their immediate environment.¹⁵

The mass media is a source of fear of crime. A relatively large and highly consistent amount of space is devoted to crime coverage which varies little with actual crime rates in an area. Violent crime tends to be covered more than other kinds of crime, giving the impression that these crimes occur more frequent than they actually happen. The media, therefore, gives an unrealistically active and violent picture of crime to the public.¹⁶

Fear is not totally unproductive. It prompts caution among the elderly and thereby reduces criminal opportunities.¹⁷ Unreasonable fear, however, has caused many senior citizens to become prisoners in their own homes and lessened their enjoyment of life.¹⁸

Social Service Referral

Law enforcement officers can play an important role as a social service referral for older people. One of the problems that social workers for the aged face is that the extremely isolated older individuals are oftentimes hard to reach and difficult to locate, even though they may be the ones who need services the most. Law enforcement officers have the unique capacity to reach this segment of the

population in that they are often called upon to provide emergency service of medical and other natures.¹⁹

Law Enforcement Responses to Victims

When an elderly victim reports a crime, oftentimes law enforcement officers are the only justice system personnel with whom the victim ever has contact. When officers respond to a citizen's call, the victim is often in a highly emotional state. Victimization is a rare occurrence event, and frequently victims experience at the crime scene a feeling of helplessness or even a state of shock. When law enforcement officers arrive, the victims usually expect sympathy and understanding from the officers. However, the officers are entering the situation from a totally different perspective. Seeing victimization is part of the everyday experience of a law enforcement officer. Rather than being caught off-guard by the victimization, the officers are likely to react to the crime scene calmly and matter-of-factly. At the same time the officers are routinely taking down the information and recording the crime, the victim is expecting comfort and empathy from the officers. Hence some victims find the "bedside manner" of the police less than desirable.²⁰

One of the most critical services law enforcement officers can perform in many cases is telling elderly

victims where they can go for help and putting them in touch with appropriate service agencies.

Law enforcement officers should take time to explain how the complaint will be handled and follow up with information on the progress and outcome of the case.²¹

CONCLUSION: HOW LAW ENFORCEMENT CAN MEET THE NEEDS OF SENIOR CITIZENS

Law enforcement agencies should develop an accurate crime picture as it relates to older persons by conducting crime analyses that produce valid and useful information.²² When senior citizens are provided with factual information about crime in their neighborhood, their vicarious fear of crime can be reduced to realistic levels.

Law enforcement agencies should initiate crime prevention programs and programs where the officers on patrol stop and talk to as many local citizens as possible. Research has shown that communication with law enforcement officers on patrol is associated with lower levels of fear.²³ Crime prevention programs permit citizens and law enforcement to work together in a proactive posture in attempting to improve the total quality of life.²⁴

Law enforcement agencies should develop education and training programs to improve law enforcement performance with senior citizens. The programs should combine general information about physical and psychological aging with

practical advice on dealing with older people. High levels of fear among the elderly and the importance of reassuring the victim should be stressed as well as the importance of being aware of vision and hearing problems when asking for information.²⁵ Law enforcement officers should have a knowledge of social agencies and community services that are available and they should be trained to recognize situations where a senior citizen should be referred for assistance.²⁶

Law enforcement can meet the special law enforcement needs of senior citizens by providing factual information about crime, providing crime prevention programs, and training law enforcement officers on how to better relate to the elderly and recognize their needs.

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you believe the crime rate in Snyder is increasing?
yes_____ no_____
2. How safe do you feel in Snyder?
very safe_____ somewhat safe_____
somewhat unsafe_____ very unsafe_____
3. Were you the victim of a crime within the last two years?
yes_____ no_____
4. What type of crime was it?
theft_____ burglary_____ fraud_____
vandalism_____ robbery_____ assault_____
other (describe)_____
5. Did you know the person who committed the crime?
yes_____ no_____
6. Did you report the crime to the police?
yes_____ no_____
7. Have you curtailed any of your activities (such as travel. leaving home at night, etc) out of the fear of becoming a victim of crime?
yes_____ no_____
8. Do you live alone? yes_____ no_____

APPENDIX 2

RESPONSE TO QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you believe the crime rate in Snyder is increasing?
yes 85% no 13% don't know 2%
2. How safe do you feel in Snyder?
very safe 31% somewhat safe 54%
somewhat unsafe 12% very unsafe 3%
3. Were you the victim of a crime within the last two years?
yes 15% no 85%
4. What type of crime was it?
theft 7 burglary 3 fraud _____
vandalism 6 robbery 2 assault _____
other 1
5. Did you know the person who committed the crime?
yes 13% no 87%
6. Did you report the crime to the police?
yes 53% no 47%
7. Have you curtailed any of your activities (such as travel. leaving home at night, etc) out of the fear of becoming a victim of crime?
yes 34% no 66%
8. Do you live alone? yes 40% no 60%

9. Do you live in a: single family house 86%
 apartment/duplex type house 14%
10. What is your age? average age = 74
11. Sex? male 40% female 60%
12. If you have any comments or ideas as to the types of police services you would like to see more of in our community, please write them on the back of this sheet of paper.

The major responses were for more patrols in the park and in residential areas.

NOTES

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2. George Sunderland, "The Older American-Police Problem or Police Asset?," FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, August 1976, 3.
3. Beck, "Law Enforcement: The Next Ten Years," 94.
4. Letitia T. Alston, Crime and Older Americans (Springfield: Charles C Thomas, Publisher, 1986), 254.
5. Ibid., 156.
6. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Elderly Victims, by Catherine J. Whitaker, ([Washington, D.C.]: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, November 1987), 1.
7. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Crime and the Elderly, ([Washington, D.C.]: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 1981), 1.
8. Sunderland, "The Older American-Police Problem or Police Asset?," 4.
9. Alston, Crime and Older Americans, 63-64.
10. Ibid., 66.
11. Peter Yin, Victimization And The Aged (Springfield: Charles C Thomas, Publisher, 1985), 134.
12. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, Police response to special populations Handling the mentally ill, public inebriate, and the homeless, by Peter E. Finn and Monique Sullivan, ([Washington, D.C.]: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, January 1988), 1.
13. Yin, Victimization And The Aged, 7.

14. Neil J. Behan, "Fighting Fear In Baltimore County: The C.O.P.E. Project," The Police Chief, March 1987, 80.
15. Alston, Crime and Older Americans, 239-240.
16. Ibid., 107.
17. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, Policing and the Fear of Crime, by Mark H. Moore and Robert C. Trojanowicz, ([Washington, D.C.]: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, June 1988), 1.
18. Jerald R. Vaughn, "Seven Ways to Reduce Crime and Violence," The Police Chief, May 1988, 14.
19. Yin, Victimization And The Aged, 134.
20. Ibid., 135.
21. Alston, Crime and Older Americans, 232-233.
22. Sunderland, "The Older American-Police Problem or Police Asset?," 2.
23. Yin, Victimization And The Aged, 164.
24. William L. Hart and James L. Humphrey, "Crime Prevention," The Police Chief, March 1981, 16.
25. Alston, Crime and Older Americans, 166.
26. Ibid., 237.

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