



Help the Aged

Crime and Fear of Crime

Help the Aged Policy Statement 2006

Summary

Law and order remains consistently high on the political agenda and is of great significance to older people. Crime and disorder is a major issue for older people because they are more likely to be on low or reduced incomes; more likely to live alone; and more likely to suffer from physical and cognitive impairments and thereby see themselves as vulnerable.

Statistics used throughout this statement cover Great Britain unless otherwise stated.

Help the Aged believes:

- that police resources should continue to be targeted in high crime areas;
- that the Police as well as local crime and disorder reduction partnerships should focus more clearly on older residents in high crime areas;
- Properly resourced, organised and staffed ODPM Neighbourhood and Street Wardens have enormous potential in combating fear of crime in partnership with the police; Their activities, including patrolling, should be purposeful in seeking out and assisting older people who are in poor health, live on low income, and who are isolated, anxious or depressed.
- that the best local schemes to prevent and reduce crime and the fear of crime are those which involve local (older) residents from the start. This can be done through focus groups and/or surveys.
- That local authorities should fund and organise home security/target-hardening projects such as 'Homecheck' in the Portsmouth area;
- That upper age limit for those working on the criminal justice system should be scrapped including for Justices of the Peace.

In terms of distraction burglary, we believe that there should be:

- a ban on the cold calling to offer property repairs, maintenance etc.;
- an extension of the 7 day cooling-off period so as to apply to invited visits; and
- a 7 day no work/no payment period for when salespeople call uninvited

Background

Older people are less likely than younger groups to suffer serious personal crime, mainly as a result of their 'restricted lifestyle' – they are rarely to be found in the city centre on a Friday night. It is also true that the rates for most crime categories have been falling in recent years. Nonetheless, many thousands of older people are victims every year and millions are anxious about crime and disorder. They suffer intensively from the emotional,

economic, psychological and physical effects of victimisation, and have their lives blighted by worry about being a victim. Nowhere is this more aptly illustrated than by the callous crime of distraction burglary when criminals force or talk their way into an older person's home and steal valuables and cash. The consequences can be traumatic and even fatal.

Surveys show that local 'disorder' and anti-social behaviour also causes a great deal of distress to senior citizens. This includes noise nuisance, graffiti, rudeness and rowdiness, litter and cycling on the pavements. But older people should not just be seen as 'fearful' potential victims of crime. Many are ready, willing and able to do their bit to tackle this problem in their locality. Every effort should be made to empower as well as assist older people in relation to crime.

Issues and Evidence

While the proportion of households who are victims of violent crime headed by people over 65 is relatively low, (in 2004/5 1.6% of households where the head of household was aged 75 and over were burgled, and 2.6% were victims of vehicle crime) the numbers of older people affected are substantial. Recent British Crime Surveys (covering England and Wales) shows that whilst less than 1% of older people were victims of crime, this represents thousands of older, often frail, people being victimised. And crimes of violence are on the increase.

Distraction burglary

Bogus caller or distraction burglary is a growing crime directed at vulnerable older people in particular. There are less than 20,000 incidences reported to and recorded by the Police annually, the true figure, as shown by Home Office and Help the Aged surveys may be as much as 350,000 - three quarters of whom were women and 90% of whom live alone.

Help the Aged's HandyVan Scheme reports that the risk of being burgled increases dramatically when there are no home security measures in use. One in three older person households were less well protected. That's 330,000 at risk of burglary and 45,000 actual victims of burglary every year. HandyVan also report 2,500 older households each year suffering a burglary for the third time.

Serious crime

Most serious crime is highly localised and concentrated. In some high crime areas older residents are certainly being victimised. A University of Keele survey, conducted on behalf of Help the Aged, found that 40% of older respondents in three inner city areas reported they had been a victim of crime during the last two years. 28% reported that they had been a victim of property crime, 21% had experienced a break in, or attempted break in, and 15% been assaulted or had something stolen from them in the street.

So some older people are victims of serious crime and many more experience anti social behaviour and see evidence of disorder in their daily lives.

Fear of Crime

'Crime, Policing and Justice: the experience of older people' (2002) published by the Home Office remains the most comprehensive factual report in relation to age and crime victimisation, based as it is on the 2001 British Crime Survey. Subsequent BCS results confirm that older people are less at risk, particularly of crimes of violence, but more fearful

than other age groups. For example the 2001 British Crime survey found that whilst 22% of women aged 65-74 are very worried about being mugged, only one percent experience this crime at first hand. Also the fact that older people are three times more likely to suffer property than personal crime.

Not surprisingly, given that some older people are victims, often with disastrous results combined with the widespread and often lurid coverage of these incidents in the media, many older people are anxious about crime. And many do not believe the official statistics which show that crime has fallen overall in recent years. For example the survey conducted by Mori on behalf of Help the Aged in 2001 amongst older people living on low incomes found that over half (55%) felt that the level of crime in their local area had increased during the past four years.

In the Keele study, for example, two fifths of respondents said that they worry about having their homes broken into or becoming a victim of robbery on the street. Only 7% of these older people – many ethnic elders – only 7% said that they would feel very safe when out alone after dark. These findings were amplified by a Help the Aged/ Mori poll conducted in 2001 amongst pensioners on low income, which found that crime was their most prominent concern. 55% felt that the level of crime had increased over the last four years; 55% were afraid of intruders entering their home; 61% were afraid of their homes being burgled and 50% were afraid to go out alone at night.

A recent Age Concern report entitled 'The Fear Factor: Older people and Fear of Street Crime' found that 47% of those over 75 years of age and 37% of those over 50 no longer take part in social and community activities after dark because of fear of street crime. Also they report that 43% of over 60s feel very or a bit unsafe walking alone after dark. The Scottish Crime survey, 2000, reported that 35% of Scottish men and women aged 65 and over were worried that they, or someone living with them would become victims of crime. 10 % of people aged 60 and over say their life is significantly affected by fear of crime – that means over a million senior citizens. An in-depth study into understanding and tackling fear of crime amongst older people was published by Help the Aged in 2002.

A report by Polari indicates that, as with older people generally, fear of crime is a serious issue for older lesbian, gay and bisexual people. A survey by the organisation revealed that 31.5% of older gay men and lesbians feel unsafe within their communities¹.

The Help the Aged Position

Help the Aged welcomes many of the initiatives undertaken by the Home Office in the last decade. Putting the victim at the heart of the criminal justice system, setting up neighbourhood warden and community support officers schemes, putting an emphasis on re-assurance, and recognizing bogus caller crime officially to name but four. The charity has backed the establishment of a Victims Fund, offered guidance to 'street level guardians', collaborated in the operation and projects of the Home Office Crime Reduction Delivery team, and assisted in the process of the Police recording of doorstep crimes. The Charity has recently embarked on an initiative with three schemes involving 'elder wardens' in Hull, Walsall and Boscombe.

¹ As we grow older, report by Polari, November 2005. http://www.casweb.org/polari/file-storage/index?folder_id=66605&n_past_days=99999

- Help the Aged believes that police resources should continue to be targeted in high crime areas. This is partly because many older people live in high-risk areas, such as older inner city neighborhoods and council estates. Detection and clear up rates in these areas remain unacceptably low. Older people remain sceptical as to the efforts of the Police in relation to crime reduction, meeting the needs of victims and dealing with offenders promptly and effectively.
- Help the Aged argues that the Police as well as local crime and disorder reduction partnerships should focus more clearly on older residents in high crime areas. The publication of league tables comparing crime rates and clear up rates between police divisions should continue, and they should be extended to rates of detection in relation to specific groups such as the older minority ethnic populations. Such monitoring will make for more effective crime reduction strategies. Help the Aged urges the Police to concentrate their efforts on the high crime/high fear areas identified by the Home Office Fear of Crime team and in local crime audits. In areas where crime is relatively low but fear of crime remains high then programmes of re-assurance should be initiated.
- As far as the ODPM Neighbourhood and Street Wardens initiative is concerned, the Charity suggests that they should be adopted and funded by local agencies once central funding is terminated. Properly resourced, organised and staffed, these schemes have enormous potential in combating fear of crime in partnership with the police. Wardens should pay particular attention to the needs of vulnerable older people in their localities, including those living alone. There should be no age limit in the recruitment of wardens and community support officers. Help the Aged has provided a good practice guide for helping and involving older people in such schemes. We are able to advise on how to succeed in re-assuring older people who may or may not be at risk. Citing statistics or walking round the neighbourhood in pairs does not always work. What older people want are facts pertinent to their lives and 'purposeful' patrolling as well as practical help to keep and feel safe.
- Help the Aged believes that the best local schemes to prevent and reduce crime and the fear of crime are those which involve local residents from the start and which are multi-faceted. For example, improvements in the layout and design of the built environment, better street lighting, reforms in allocation and management policies in housing estates, and enhancing 'guardianship'
- Help the Aged urges local authorities to fund and organise home security/target-hardening projects such as 'Homecheck' in the Portsmouth area. Help the Aged expects to expand its HandyVan schemes which at present operate in 30 areas across England, Wales and Scotland. There are 155,000 Neighbourhood Watch schemes in the UK – many of them led by older people. Help the Aged urges the Government and Police to encourage and assist them.
- Help the Aged urges that upper age limit for those working on the criminal justice system should be scrapped including for Justices of the Peace. Such arbitrary limits are clearly discriminatory. Many older people have a wealth of experience and expertise to bring to such civic duties. Instead magistrates of all ages should receive appropriate competency tests at regular intervals.
- In terms of distraction burglary, we believe that there should be:
 - a ban on the cold calling to offer property repairs, maintenance etc.
 - an extension of the 7 day cooling-off period so as to apply to invited visits
 - a 7 day no work/no payment period for when salespeople call uninvited

Economic Justification

The cost of crime directed at older people is significant but difficult to put a figure on. Crime and fear of crime plays a major part in the social exclusion of older people and there is a strong link between poor neighbourhoods and the levels of crime. Removing or reducing the fear of crime would almost certainly play a part in rejuvenating local economies.

Help the Aged Activities

Through our SeniorSafety service, Help the Aged aims to support independent living through our HandyVan, SeniorLink and gardening projects. All of these services are easy to access, cover a wide range of areas and are freely available to many older people.

National Gardening Programme: An overgrown garden can be used as a clue by bogus callers that a potentially vulnerable older person is living there. The Help the Aged national Gardening Programme aims to increase the availability and coordination of gardening services for older people.

HandyVan: Fitters are based all around the country and will install essential security devices like door chains and window locks.

SeniorLink: An immediate response service, which enables older people to contact someone instantly for help.

Date of Last Update

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