

Sociology

Margot Jefferys

Ronald Clarke, Paul Ekblom, Mike Hough and Pat Mayhew, 'Elderly victims of crime and exposure to risk'. *Howard Journal*, 24 (1985), 1-9.

The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice, to give it its full name, does not often carry articles relating to elderly people. This is not surprising since, on the whole, it is the young in modern society who are the most likely to be convicted for committing criminal offences and also to be the victims of many kinds of crime, especially those involving violence.

Starting from this repeated finding, the authors use data from the 1982 British Crime Survey conducted by the Home Office Research and Planning Unit to see whether there are any clues as to why the elderly are much more fearful of criminal action than are younger people. In particular, they consider whether the lower incidence of 'street crime' inflicted on the over sixties compared with younger adults is merely due to their lesser exposure, or whether, after allowing for this, their risks of victimisation are indeed greater than those for younger people.

The data derive from a national (England and Wales) sample survey in 1982 based on the Electoral Register in which about 11,000 people aged 16 and over were interviewed. A follow-up covered some 6,300 and asked a considerable number of questions about life style. A Scottish survey run in parallel covered 5,000 in the first sweep and 2,800 in the follow-up. A total of 80% of the sample of eligible households responded. The data were combined and weighted to restore national representativeness and to allow for certain other biases built purposefully into the original design to yield more information on certain groups.

The data in this paper concern 'street offences'. These were defined as occurring outside the victim's home or place of work or that of relatives or friends. They involved contact (though not necessarily confrontation) between the offender (who had to be a stranger or known only by sight to the victim) and the victim. They included serious wounding, assault or attempted assault, attempted rape, indecent assault, robbery, theft and attempted theft. All such incidences taking place during the year 1981 and the weeks preceding the interview in February 1982 were recorded. In keeping with other studies, the old, and especially men, had lower rates of victimisation, especially in the evening, than the young. Overall, women were less likely to be victims than men, but this was not true of the oldest (61 years and over). In this case, women were at greater risk from theft or pickpocketing than

men, but the differences taking all forms of offence into account were not significant.

The authors relate the incidence of victimisation in evening hours to the frequency with which individuals went out in the evening. They found that the risk of victimisation for both sexes at every level of frequency of going out (i.e. 1, 2 or 3-plus evenings a week) was less for the old (especially males) than for the young. They then examined whether there was any connection between the 'riskiness' of the places visited or of the means of transport used and victimisation. Their riskiness measures in both instances were crudely dichotomised: 'visits to pubs, clubs, discos or parties' were 'risky' and all other venues 'not risky'. Travel by public transport or on foot were 'risky'; other forms of transport were not. Discriminating in these ways did not help to explain the age differences, and the authors conclude that the elderly were generally much less at risk of victimisation in street crime than were younger age groups.

They then speculate on why the elderly are less at risk and mention two plausible theories. The first is that the elderly are less likely to be associated with offenders, that is, to come into regular contact with the latter. Their own data yield little on this. They claim that there was no greater likelihood of young people living in areas with a high incidence of street offences; but it seems probable, at the commonsense level, that the offenders themselves are more likely to be young and to consort with or frequent places where there are younger rather than older people. The second theory is that the old are less attractive to offenders as victims, that is that they are less desirable sexual targets and less likely to carry valuables. The nature of the offences committed against victims of different ages lends support to this hypothesis.

Discussing the implications of their study, the authors accept that national averages may conceal specific situations (for example, in inner city areas) where the elderly do face grave risks compared with the young in salubrious areas. They believe, however, that dissemination of their findings could allay some of the fear which, at present, inhibits older people from taking advantage of all the community resources which exist outside their homes.

Institute for Social Studies in Medical Care, London.