Are the elderly unduly worried about crime?

by Robert C. Trojanowicz

The latest report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics claims that violent crimes against the elderly have dropped 50% since 1973. In addition, the report says the elderly are only half as likely to be victimized as younger people. While this might seem cause for jubilation, other studies continue to confirm that the elderly exhibit the greatest fear of crime of any age group in this society. Does this mean the elderly's fear of crime is irrational?

Unfortunately, though the new report offers promise for the future, many of the elderly still have good reason to be afraid. Both the way in which such statistics are compiled and the particular dynamics at work concerning the elderly's vulnerability to crime suggests this age group has good reason to fear victimization.

First, statistics don't always provide a true picture of what's actually occurring, in part because many crimes go unreported. Often, unless the person needs a police report to collect on insurance, many victims say that calling the police is just a waste of time. Others fail to report crime because of fear of retaliation, a particular concern among the elderly who often find themselves trapped in decaying, high-crime neighborhoods. The elderly who have not already escaped to the suburbs realize they have become easy targets for predators. Because they justifiably lack confidence that the police can protect them from victimization in the first place, they may more likely choose to remain silent when crimes occur.

The second major reason why this apparent decline in the rate of victimization of the elderly may be misleading stems from how many have "solved" their crime problem. All too often, the solution the elderly employ is to drastically reduce their exposure to any potentially threatening situation. In many cities, crime and fear of crime hold the elderly hostage in their homes, afraid to venture out to participate in community life. In addition, many have spent scarce dollars fortifying their homes, turning them into virtual armed camps. If falling rates of victimization of the elderly are simply the result of this fortress mentality, then this "solution" becomes a problem in itself.

Much of the elderly's fear comes from the realization that age alone magnifies both the likelihood of victimization - and its consequences. Given a choice, no mugger would pick a 20 year old instead of a 70 year
old, since the younger person would be more likely to repel the attack or retaliate in kind. And not only does that 70 year old know he's a more inviting target, if the mugger pushes him or her to the ground, the elderly victim is far more likely to suffer broken bones than a younger person would.

The elderly are also less able to cope with the aftershocks of crime. Younger people typically have more options, such as taking a second job to pay medical bills or to recoup any financial loss resulting from crime. Younger people simply have more years in which to overcome the physical, emotional, social, and financial effects of any loss. In contrast, elderly people on fixed incomes find the consequences of crime more devastating.

As pollster Lou Harris said in his recent bestseller, Inside America, people's perceptions of crime may well prove the most accurate barometer we have of what is actually happening. This means we must take the elderly's high degree of fear of crime seriously. To meet our obligation to them demands finding creative new ways to help improve their overall quality of life.

Community policing, with its emphasis on daily, face-to-face contact within the community, often offers the elderly their only access to help. In the past, numerous agents of social control ventured into "tough" neighborhoods, providing some measure of security. The cop on the beat, the public health nurse, the social worker, all provided assistance and also served as visible agents of social control in communities in the past. Today, welfare clients must leave their neighborhoods to see social workers. Public health nurses rarely, if ever, visit clients in their homes anymore. The police remain the only agents of social control available around the clock who still make house calls. And only in areas that have embraced community policing can the elderly hope to see armed symbols of authority regularly visible on the streets of the community. The effect on the elderly's fear is far different than seeing motor patrol officers whiz by, isolated in their police cars.

The elderly are only one of many groups who benefit from the community policing approach. The welfare mother raising her children alone, the mainstreamed mental patient on the street, the frail youngster who fears being bullied on the way to school, all sense their particular vulnerability. To paraphrase Hubert Humphrey, a society is judged by how well it protects children at the dawn of their lives, the elderly in their twilight years, and those who are less able to cope overall.

It is vital that society adopt the attitude that the elderly among us deserve our respect and assistance. We live in a throw- away society and our neglect of the elderly's concerns, including crime, contribute to their fear we view them as disposable and obsolete. This must change, not only because it's the right thing to do, but because we will shape our own destiny in the process. How we treat the elderly among us today will inevitably determine how we can expect to be treated. The fear of crime visible in the eyes of the elderly today serves as a mirror of our own future.

Robert Trojanowicz is director of the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. He is also a research fellow in the Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.