

SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND
CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

CRIME IN THE COMMUNITY

by the Older Persons Action Centre

A meeting of some members of the Older Persons Action Centre discussed issues relating to crime in the community, concentrating on those most significant for them, that is, the impact of being a victim and community safety and policing. The group consisted of people over 70 years, some mobility problems and/or vision defects. Most were on low incomes or pensions; most lived in their own homes or rented accommodation. Some received some assistance from Home and Community Care or Veterans Care services.

Of the 8 people present, each person was able to describe a house break-in of their own home or of a neighbour. None had experienced violence. The prevailing attitude was of annoyance rather than fear. The annoyance was partly at their own lapse in leaving a door or window unsecured, partly at the disruption, and also at the theft of objects of sentimental attachment. In one instance there was a dog in the house, but with a party in the back garden even the dog did not hear the intruder.

We know of many older people who feel much more threatened by such break-ins. Over many years we have staffed an information caravan during Senior Citizens Week, giving and receiving information on issues affecting older people. A number of older women have told us that they have moved into some form of supervised living as a result of such an incident. As people grow frailer, they become more nervous, which may affect their quality of life. We have suggested that they contact the community police in their area. A strengthening of this part of the force with more contact with older people's groups could help to reduce irrational fears.

We have in the past discussed the problem of media over-emphasis on attacks on older people, when they are less likely than others to be the victim. However, we believe that one of the reasons for the low level of violence against older people is that they are careful not to put themselves in dangerous situations. Most older people reliant on public transport (a higher number than most authorities admit) are reluctant to undertake journeys after dark. In our group we all revealed we now take more care even in our own home - locking front and back doors and closing most windows while we are working round the house or in the garden. We do not feel that our lives are circumscribed by our caution, but that life for all people is now under different rules than it was when we were young.

We do not support more severe sentencing. Most of the people apprehended for these opportunistic crimes come from troubled backgrounds and disadvantaged families and require assistance rather than retribution. We would welcome more visible policing and more interaction with local people. There are areas in human services where there is a great need for increased funding - such as in mental health services, supported accommodation for people with intellectual disabilities and mental health problems and drug rehabilitation. There must be better ways of dealing with minor offenders besides incarcerating them.

For older people, better transport system would allow them to participate more in society and reduce their isolation. One of our members was recently forced to decline to attend a focus research session at 4 pm in Footscray because she would not be able to get home after it - the last bus to her northern suburb would have already gone. Older people are keen to attend local groups, but funding to many of these has decreased while costs have risen. The more people are encouraged to be active the fewer will succumb to loneliness and fear.

Thank you for your attention.

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