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The Scope of Elderly Victimization

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Psychologically, financially, and physically, no group of citizens suffers more painful losses than our Nation's elderly do at the hands of America's criminal predators.¹ Nevertheless, confusion and doubt exist about the scope of the national problem, stemming largely from three factors:

- Elderly victims often do not report crimes,²
- Law enforcement officials are not aware of the special needs of elderly crime victims, and
- The subject of elderly crime victimization has been approached in a "bandwagon" fashion, rather than in an orderly, interdisciplinary manner, resulting in unreliable data.

As Jack Goldsmith and Noel E. Tomas reported in an earlier issue of *Aging*, the underreporting of crime by the elderly is a major roadblock to acquiring accurate data.³ Older people state that they do not report crimes because: they do not believe police can recover stolen property, especially if it was not properly identified and marked; they believe reporting crime is a waste of the victim's and law enforcement officials' time; and they do not want to admit they have been victimized, thinking the admission may be viewed as a failure on their part.

This failure to report makes it difficult to determine the level of victimization, the only measure being the number of crimes reported to police. Yet, in the majority of police departments, the victim's age is not recorded in the report, thus adding to the inaccessibility of data on older people. Therefore, the F.B.I.'s Uniform Crime Report compiled from



these data is a useless index of crime against the elderly.

Because many law enforcement officials are not aware of the special needs of elderly persons, changes in their attitudes toward, and responses to, elderly crime victims have been slow. The fact that most departments are not concerned about the age of their victims in an indication of their lack of knowledge about older persons' special needs. Law enforcement must foster the development of awareness among its officers—an awareness that the elderly victim requires a special response

which embodies concern and compassion. Poor inner-city elderly residents are the most frequent non-reporters of crime.⁴ Unlike more affluent, better educated, middle-class older Americans, the poor inner-city elderly need direction. If police are considerate and attentive to elderly victims, they will be encouraged to report future victimizations, thus contributing to accurate data.

With the advent of crime and the elderly as a "hot" issue, the statistical data generated by social scientists have proliferated haphazardly, promoting greater confusion. All statistical data

¹"Elderly Crime Victimization (Federal Law Enforcement Agencies—L.E.A.A. and F.B.I.)," hearings held before the Subcommittee on Housing and Consumer Interests of the House Select Committee on Aging, April 12 & 13, 1976, p. 24.

²Michael Hindelang, *Criminal Victimization in Eight American Cities*, L.E.A.A., 1975, p. 377.

³Jack Goldsmith and Noel E. Tomas, "Crimes Against the Elderly: A Continuing National Crisis," *Aging*, June/July, 1974, p. 11.

⁴*In Search of Security: A National Perspective on Elderly Crime Victimization*, Report by the House Subcommittee on Housing and Consumer Interests of the Select Committee on Aging, April 1977, p. 19; and Carl E. Pope and William Feyerherm, "A Review of Recent Trends—The Effects of Crime on the Elderly," *The Police Chief*, February 1976, p. 29.

can be interpreted in a number of ways, depending on the researcher and the situation. A prime example of this is a series of victimization surveys conducted for the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (L.E.A.A.).⁵

The L.E.A.A.'s survey method, unlike the F.B.I.'s Uniform Crime Reports, does not rely on incidents reported to the police. The L.E.A.A. surveys have two main elements: a continuous national survey, and periodic surveys of selected central city areas. These surveys reveal that only one-third of crimes against older people are reported to police.

Five of the L.E.A.A. city surveys constitute the most extensive documentation of victimization by different groups in our society. The surveys measure crimes considered most serious by the general public and crimes lending themselves to measurement by the survey method. Rape, robbery, assault, and personal larceny are the crimes against individuals measured by these surveys. Burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft are the crimes against households measured.*

The Scope of the Problem

The surveys found that older persons are victims of violent crime at a rate of 8 per 1,000 population, compared to a rate of 32 per 1,000 for the general population. The rate for theft among the elderly is 22 per 1,000 compared to 91 per 1,000 for the general population; for household crimes, it is 107 per 1,000 households, while for the general population it is 217 per 1,000.

But other data reveal a different story. For example, "Criminal Victimization Surveys in the Nation's Five Largest Cities,"⁶ shows that the elderly have the highest victimization rate for larceny involving bodily contact in four of the five cities surveyed.

The study, "Crime in Eight American Cities," documents a victimization rate for the general population for personal larceny with bodily contact of



317 per 100,000 population, compared to 342 per 100,000 for those aged 50-64 and 362 per 100,000 for persons 65 years and over. Robbery resulting in injury was highest for persons 50 years and above in three of the eight cities with the single exception of persons under 20 years of age.

According to L.E.A.A. national survey figures for 1973 and 1974, the increase in crimes of violence against persons over 65 was second only to the increase against 16 to 19 year old males. Assault against older people increased 46 percent during this one-year period. Personal larceny involving bodily contact also increased 14.4 percent for men. Robbery against males decreased 28.4 percent without

injury, but rose 25.4 percent with injury.

Crimes of violence against both sexes increased 6.5 percent between 1973 and 1974 for those 65 and older, while theft against women 65 and older increased 11.7 percent, a larger increase than for any other age group.

* L.E.A.A. defines robbery as theft involving violence. Personal larceny, defined as a theft not involving violence, can include bodily contact with the victim in which force, or the threat of force is not used, such as purse snatching. Personal larceny without bodily contact includes thefts such as stealing an unattended purse or parcel, or stealing from an unattended car.

⁵ The discussion of L.E.A.A.-sponsored crime victimization surveys is based on the data presented in the report, *In Search of Security: A National Perspective*. . . , pp. 3-12.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 4-12.



Personal larceny without bodily contact also increased 11.2 percent for women.

Household crimes against the elderly also increased dramatically during the 1973-74 period. Persons 65 and older had an increase in more kinds of household crimes (burglary, household larceny, and motor vehicle theft) than any other population group except the small number of households headed by persons under age 20.

A major drawback of these L.E.A.A. surveys is their failure to include certain crimes to which the elderly are more susceptible by virtue of their age, health, and economic status.⁷ Among these are fraud, confidence games, medical quackery, and harassment by teenagers. Many researchers of elderly crime victimization have failed to ensure that their data are complete and valid.⁸ Due to the "bandwagon" approach, most elderly victimization data cannot be used as the bases for generalizations concerning the aged and crime.

While we may not be able to accurately measure the extent of elderly crime victimization, we can draw the conclusion that the elderly are victims of certain types of crimes out of proportion to their number in the general population. This assumption

is confirmed by studies in several cities.⁹

According to a survey conducted in New York City in 1974, 15 percent of homicide victims were women over 65. This was greatly out of proportion to their percentage in the city's population. Another New York study found that 35 percent of the city's elderly lived in the 26 poorest neighborhoods; 40 percent of those interviewed reported being victimized. Similar problems were found in Oakland, Calif. where women over 65 were victimized by robbers at the rate of 1 in 24, compared to 1 in 146 for those under 65. In

Wilmington, Del., persons over 60, comprising only 19.7 percent of the city's population, were victims of twice as many street crimes as those under 60. A Boston, Mass. study reveals that the elderly made up 12 percent of the city's population, yet accounted for 28 percent of all robberies.

⁷ Goldsmith and Tomas, p. 4.

⁸ For further discussion, see Marc G. Gertz and Susette Talarico, "Problems of Reliability and Validity in Criminal Justice Research," *Journal of Criminal Justice*, vol. 5, no. 3, Fall 1977, pp. 217-224.

⁹ The discussion of city victimization surveys is based on the data presented in the report *In Search of Security: A National Perspective*, . . . pp. 12-17.

Table I¹⁰

VICTIMIZATION RATES BY AGE

<i>Crime</i>	<i>Under 65</i> <i>(per 100 people)</i>	<i>65 and Over</i> <i>(per 100 people)</i>
All Crime	41.7	29.8
Robbery	4.7	5.6
Burglary	13.8	7.9
Auto theft	4.7	3.0
Theft	10.0	4.9
Swindling	2.2	3.8
Purse snatching	1.3	3.2
Assault	3.5	1.3
Rape	2.5	0.0
Murder	.03	.08

The California State Attorney General reported that in 1975 more than 90 percent of fraud and confidence game victims in Los Angeles and San Francisco were over 65 and were mostly women. The California medical quackery business takes in more than \$50 million annually, and 70 percent of the reported cases involve elderly victims.

A study of the Houston Model Neighborhood Area (HMNA) in Texas, conducted between June 1971 and June 1973, revealed that for certain crimes such as robbery, swindling, purse snatching, and homicide, those 65 and over were more often victimized than those under 65.

A Kansas City, Mo. study, "Patterns of Crimes Against Older Americans," looked at serious crimes against persons 60 and older from Sept. 1, 1972-Apr. 15, 1975. During that time, 2,958 cases of burglary, robbery, purse snatching, assault, fraud, rape, and homicide occurred. Approximately 1,400 of these crimes were studied in detail. The rate of robbery was higher for the elderly than for any other group. In non-inner city areas, the elderly were robbed at a rate approximately twice that of younger persons living in the same area. The inner-city elderly were robbed approximately four times more often than other age groups outside inner-city areas.

Crimes That Plague the Elderly

The Subcommittee on Housing and Consumer Interests of the U.S. House Select Committee on Aging conducted a survey of chiefs of police in 50 cities around the country. Of the 34 who responded, 10 reported that the elderly had higher victimization rates for certain crimes than other population groups. Atlanta reported higher rates in pedestrian robbery and swindling, Detroit, higher rates in unarmed robbery and breaking and entering, and Denver and Philadelphia, higher rates for robbery. Hartford, Conn. had higher rates for purse snatchings, muggings and swindling. Higher rates for the elderly were reported in other cities as follows: Montgomery, Ala.,

Table II¹¹

TOTAL CRIMES AGAINST the ELDERLY*

<i>Crime</i>	<i>Against the General Population</i>	<i>Against The Elderly (60 years and over)</i>
Robbery	81	129
Aggravated assault*	51	28
Larceny (pickpocket)	116	168
Larceny (pursesnatch)	87	146

* Data for Miami Beach, Fla. January-June 1976.

* Simple assaults not counted.

con game artists and robbery; Montpelier, Vt., commercial fraud, medical quackery, insurance fraud, and high pressure sales schemes; San Antonio, Tex., con games and swindles; and Seattle, Wash., purse snatchings and crimes against the person.

Table II data were collected from Miami Beach, Fla., where 59 percent of the permanent residents are 60 and over. Table II shows that the elderly are prey to some crimes much more often than the general population.

Examining the profiles of elderly victims obtained from these independent city surveys gives further insight into the impact. Poor inner-city elderly suffer from crime more often than their non-inner city counterparts.

In Wilmington, Del., 86.7 percent of the victims surveyed were between the ages of 60 and 77; 72.6 percent were white women. The 105 persons surveyed had been victimized a total of 144 times after reaching age 60, and 41.4 percent had been injured. The crimes usually occurred within four blocks of their home, where 76 percent of the victims lived alone.

In Detroit, the average age of the victims was 67.8 years, and 12 percent were over age 80; 20 percent more women than men were victims. The majority were poor, with 68 percent having incomes under \$3,500, and most of the remainder less than \$7,000.

In Houston, 26 percent of all victims were elderly men and 32 percent women; 32 percent were black and 26

percent, white. Only 3 percent of the Houston sample had incomes above \$10,000, 80 percent had incomes less than \$5,000, and 16 percent had incomes between \$5,000 and \$10,000.

In Kansas City, blacks comprised 14.9 percent of the elderly population but accounted for 21.7 percent of the victimizations. This rate was almost 20 percent higher than the rate for whites. Elderly black men were victimized at a rate 75.4 percent higher than elderly white men, while the victimization rate for older black women was 39 percent higher than for white counterparts. Approximately 27.3 percent of the elderly were multiple victims. Blacks were multiple victims at a rate of slightly more than one in three, compared to whites who were multiple victims at a rate of one in four.

The Boston study revealed that criminals are more likely to use violence on older persons. Only 25.2 percent of victims under 60 years of age were injured (19.7 percent required hospital treatment), while 41.9 percent of the over-60 victims were injured and 27.5 percent needed hospital treatment.

Elderly vulnerability to crime is also increased by economic, physical, environmental, and social factors that

¹⁰ Raymond Forston and James Kitchens, *Criminal Victimization of the Aged: The Houston Model Neighborhood Area*, North Texas State University, 1974, p. 10.

¹¹ John H. Tighe, "A Survey of Crime Against the Elderly," *The Police Chief*, February 1977, p. 19.

are not fully examined in the cited studies.¹² For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in 1973 that half of the aged couples in the United States had incomes below the amount (\$5,414) that provided a "modest but adequate" standard of living. Thus, many elderly crime victims are poor both relatively and absolutely. A \$20 loss by theft for an elderly person with a fixed income is a much greater loss than the same amount stolen from an employed younger person. If robbed, most older persons have no reserve funds to use until the next social security or pension check arrives. If property is taken from an older person, the financial capability to replace it is less than for a younger person.

Many older persons also experience diminished physical strength and stamina. Statistics indicate more than 60 percent of the elderly live in metropolitan areas, and most of these reside in the central city. For cultural, emotional, and economic reasons, many elderly have lived in the same area for decades. Many cannot afford alternative housing, and they are often dependent on public transportation. These urban elderly are consequently close to those most likely to victimize them—the unemployed, drug addicts, and teenage school dropouts. Criminals often know when social security, SSI, and pension checks are delivered, and can therefore judge with accuracy when an older person will be carrying cash.

Older persons are also more likely to be multiple victims of the same crimes.¹³ Additionally, the elderly cannot move away from their home area and, fearing reprisals, often do not report being victimized.

Fear of Crime

The psychological impact of fear of crime is another aspect of criminal victimization that the cited studies do not address.¹⁴ The 1974 Louis Harris and Associates national survey of the problems of the elderly found that they rank fear of crime as their most serious problem—above health, money, and loneliness. A 1971 Los Angeles *Times*

poll found fear of crime second only to economics as a cause of stress among the elderly. In two studies sponsored by the National Retired Teachers Association/Association of Retired Persons in 1972 and 1973, more than 80,000 older persons were surveyed and indicated that fear of crime ranked second in their lives, following concern about adequate food and shelter.

The Louis Harris poll reported that persons with low incomes are more fearful of victimization than others. Of those with incomes under \$3,000 per year, 31 percent felt fear of crime was a major social problem, while only 17 percent of those with incomes of \$15,000 or more expressed that fear. This relationship between income and fear of crime may be explained by the fact that poorer people live more often in high-crime, inner-city neighborhoods and actually experience greater victimization than the wealthier suburban elderly.

Virtually all studies have found a higher fear of crime among elderly blacks than among elderly whites. The Harris survey of older people found 21 percent of the white population stated crime was a serious personal problem, while 41 percent of the blacks surveyed reported fear of crime. The survey also found a correlation between race and income and fear of crime. Of those with incomes less than \$3,000, 28 percent of the whites and 44 percent of the blacks said fear of crime was a very serious problem. For persons with incomes over \$3,000, these percentages dropped to 18 percent for whites and 33 percent for blacks.

Frank Clemente and Michael B. Kleiman found 47 percent of the elderly white population they studied feared walking alone in their neighborhoods, compared to 60 percent of the elderly blacks in their survey.¹⁵ A number of studies have examined the nature of elderly fear of victimization and how it is distributed. A study by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago revealed 34 percent of older men and 69 percent of elderly women reported fear of crime as a grave concern.

Community size appears to be related to the fear of crime victimization. According to Harris polls in 1964, 1966, 1967, 1969 and 1970, as well as Gallop polls in 1967, 1968 and 1972, the fear of victimization increases along with the size of the community in which older persons live. Clemente and Kleiman also found fear of victimization "decreases in a clear step pattern as one moves from large cities to rural areas."

Due to incomplete data, the extent of elderly victimization cannot be accurately measured. However, the studies we have cited do provide convincing evidence that a higher proportion of older Americans are victims of certain types of crimes than the general population. The testimony of older victims and local officials also supports the conclusion that the consequences of victimization are frequently more devastating.¹⁷ This is especially true for fraud, as pointed out by Robert Butler in his book, *Why Survive? Being Old in America*.¹⁸ He suggests there are several factors that contribute to the general vulnerability of older persons to fraud including loneliness, grief, chronic illness, lack of education, the desire to be young again, and low income levels.

The elderly are being victimized. We can and must work to alleviate this problem.

¹² See report, *In Search of Security*, pp. 26-28.

¹³ See previously cited independent city crime studies, and Jack Goldsmith, "Community Crime Prevention and the Elderly: A Segmental Approach," *Crime Prevention Review*, California State Attorney General's Office, July 1975, p. 19.

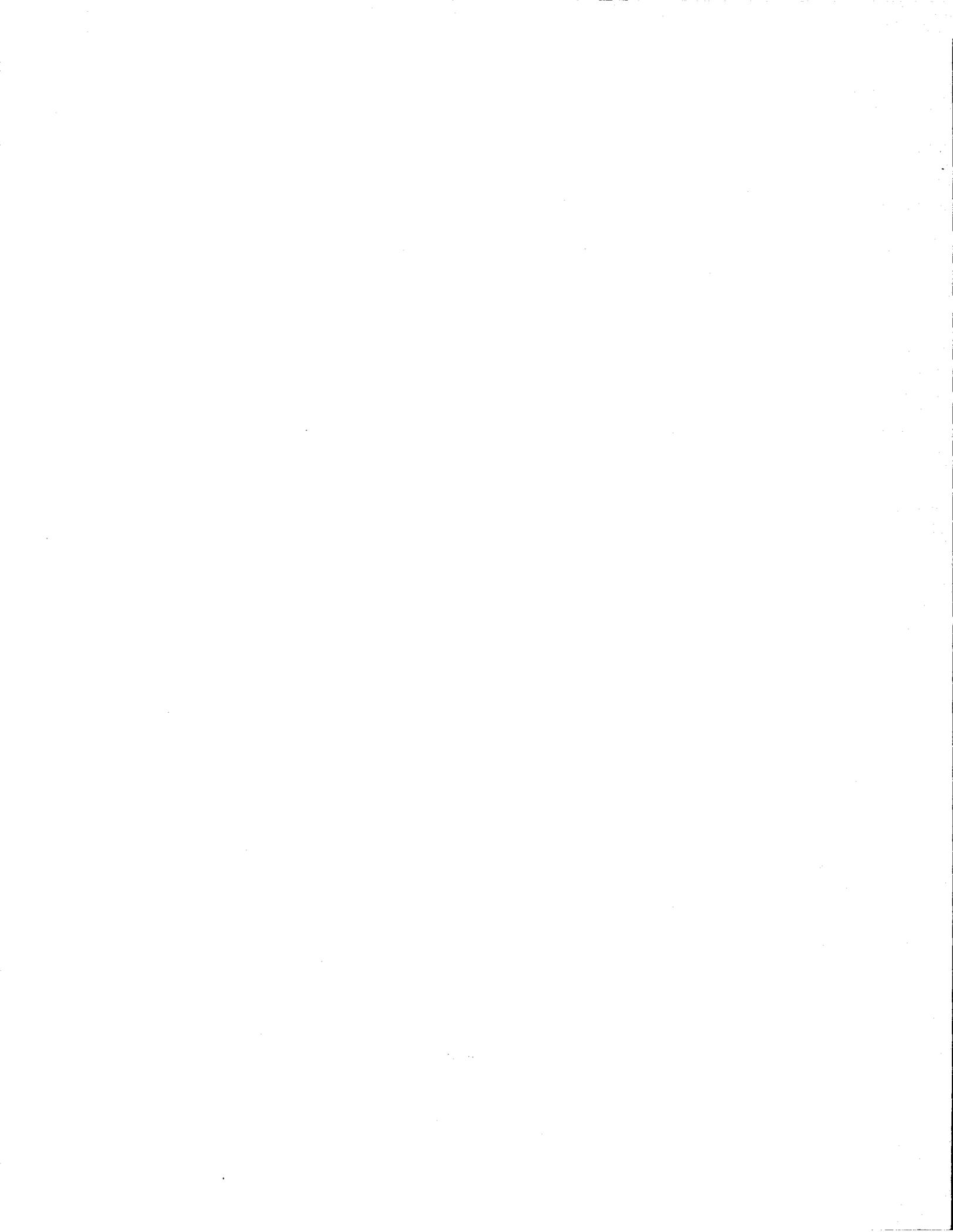
¹⁴ The discussion of elderly fear of criminal victimization is based on data presented in the report *In Search of Security*. . . , pp. 38-46.

¹⁵ Frank Clemente and Michael B. Kleiman, "Fear of Crime Among the Aged," *The Gerontologist*, June 1976, p. 208.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁷ *Crime Against the Elderly*, Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Federal, State and Community Services of the Select Committee on Aging, U.S. House of Representatives, Dec. 13, 1976.

¹⁸ Robert N. Butler, M.D., *Why Survive? Being Old in America*. Harper and Row, Inc., 1975, pp. 309-320.



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