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## Police Service Delivery to the Elderly

By STEVEN SCHACK AND ROBERT S. FRANK

**ABSTRACT:** This article presents some preliminary findings from a major study of police service delivery to the elderly. It begins with a discussion of the need for special police attention by the elderly; then it moves on to an analysis of the findings from a survey of older persons in two major American cities and a consideration of the survey's implications for police operations. The survey data indicate that most older persons have positive attitudes toward the police. However, when examined in detail the data revealed that those elderly citizens who have either called the police or report a higher willingness to call (for crime and for noncrime reasons) demonstrate a higher degree of dissatisfaction with the police than the elderly population at large. The paper explores the reasons for the dissatisfaction of that segment of the elderly population which tends to rely most heavily upon the police. A prominent source of dissatisfaction is the normative expectations of what police service should be like outrun the elderly's anticipations of the quality of the police services that would be provided. The glamorized role of television police is singled out as a significant source of increased unrealistic normative expectations. The attitudes of the elderly toward themselves and toward their role in society also contribute to increased dissatisfaction with the police. Recommendations are proposed to improve police service delivery to the elderly.

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RECENT years have seen a dramatic growth of interest in the problem of criminal victimization of the elderly. Since the late 1960s, rising crime rates, the growing number of elderly in the population, and the increasing militancy of senior citizens have led to a heightened awareness of the vulnerability of the elderly to crime, the impact of victimization and fear of crime upon their lives, and the need for special police efforts to protect the elderly and to provide them effective services. Indeed, what was not long ago an almost completely neglected issue is now a national concern often discussed in the language of crisis.

In this article we shall present a brief review of current knowledge about the need of the elderly for police services, discuss the initial findings of an ongoing study of police service delivery to the elderly, and offer some practical recommendations for improving the provision of services to this segment of our population.

The following questions will be addressed:

- Do the elderly have a legitimate need for special police attention?
- How do the elderly evaluate quality of police services, and what are their attitudes toward and expectations of the police?
- What steps could be taken to improve the quality of police services provided to the elderly?

#### THE ELDERLY'S NEED FOR SPECIAL POLICE ATTENTION

Interest in the quality of police services provided to the elderly has been motivated primarily by a widespread concern about the effects of criminal victimization upon elderly

citizens. There is almost a hysterical ring to much of the commentary on this issue. For example, the author of a highly regarded book on aging asserts (on the basis of only the most meager and incomplete statistics) that "Old people are victims of violent crime more than any other age group."<sup>1</sup> Others have described crime against the elderly as "continuing national crisis,"<sup>2</sup> and stated that "The hard fact is that crime is devastating the lives of thousands of relatively defenseless older Americans."<sup>3</sup> In fact, however, data drawn from national victimization surveys have consistently shown that the elderly (defined in different surveys as either age 60 and above or age 65 and above) have a lower level of victimization. Rates decline with advancing age.<sup>4</sup> These data have led some observers to argue that the elderly do not warrant the status of a group deserving special attention

1. Robert N. Butler, *Why Survive? Being Old in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 300.

2. Jack Goldsmith and Noel E. Tomas, "Crimes Against the Elderly: A Continuing National Crisis," *Aging* 236-37 (June-July 1974), p. 1.

3. Carl L. Cunningham, "Pattern and Effect of Crime Against the Aging: The Kansas City Study" in *Crime and the Elderly: Challenge and Response*, eds. Jack Goldsmith and Sharon S. Goldsmith (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1976) p. 31.

4. See Philip H. Ennis, *Criminal Victimization in the United States: A Report of a National Survey* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, May 1967) and U.S. Department of Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, *Criminal Victimization in the United States: A National Crime Panel Survey Report* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, May 1975). The findings of these surveys concerning criminal victimization of the elderly are summarized in Fay Lomax Cook and Thomas D. Cook, "Evaluating the Rhetoric of Crisis: A Case Study of Criminal Victimization of the Elderly," *Social Service Review* 50, (December 1976), pp. 632-46.

from the police.<sup>5</sup> It has been said that the growing attention paid to the problem of victimization of the elderly is a classic example of how a lack of solid information can merge with a sincere concern for the plight of older Americans (motivated mainly by widely publicized horror stories) to create the impression of a serious social problem when, in fact, one does not really exist.<sup>6</sup> However, most students of the problem, while acknowledging that the findings of victimization surveys contradict some of the rhetorical excesses of the past, still believe that the quality of law enforcement services provided to this segment of the population is a legitimate national and local concern. This contention is based upon the following observations:

#### *Impact of victimization upon the elderly*

There is circumstantial evidence that indicates that the impact of criminal victimization upon the elderly may be substantially greater than for citizens in younger age groups. The physical changes that occur with advancing age, while not as debilitating as often supposed, can still impair the ability of the elderly to cope with the effects of victimization. Eighty-five percent of the population over the age of 65 suffers from one or more chronic illnesses which can heighten the impact of physical injury; and age-related changes in sight, hearing, strength, and coordination can affect the older person's ability to handle

5. Richard D. Kundten et al., *Victims and Witnesses: Their Experiences With Crime and the Criminal Justice System* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1977), p. 3.

6. For example, see: Cook and Cook, "Evaluating the Rhetoric of Crisis."

crime-related situations.<sup>7</sup> The fact that many of the elderly live alone or with nonrelatives (31.5 percent of the population age 65 or over) means that they may lack the social support which can help them overcome many of the consequences of victimization experiences. And, finally, many of the elderly are forced to live on fairly small, fixed incomes which means that the loss of even relatively small amounts of money or property can be difficult to bear. In short, it can be argued that to be old and victimized may often be to undergo an experience which is qualitatively different from what it might have been for the same person at a younger age.

#### *Elderly fear of crime*

The elderly also suffer from a pervasive fear of crime. A nationwide survey of the attitudes and concerns of the elderly by Louis Harris and his associates found that more of the respondents pointed to fear of crime as their most serious personal problem (23 percent) than any other problem. It was selected more frequently than poor health, lack of financial resources, loneliness, and many other complaints commonly associated with advancing age.<sup>8</sup> Other surveys have shown that fear of crime increases with age<sup>9</sup> and that fear of crime is increasing at a faster

7. M. Powell Lawton et al., "Psychological Aspects of Crime and Fear of Crime," in *Crime and the Elderly*, eds. Goldsmith and Goldsmith, p. 21.

8. Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., *The Myth and Reality of Aging in America*, (Washington, D.C.: The National Council on the Aging, 1975), p. 29.

9. Michael J. Hindelag, *Public Opinion Regarding Crime, Criminal Justice and Related Topics*, (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1975), p. 9.

rate among the elderly than among younger age cohorts.<sup>10</sup>

It has been frequently stated, and not without reason, that fear of crime represents a form of indirect victimization which can lead to serious restrictions on the elderly's daily activities and greatly diminish the quality of their lives. It has also been suggested that the precautions taken by older persons in response to their fear may have a major influence on their level of victimization; that is, the fear of crime leads to self-imposed confinement, resulting in a reduction in the number of victimizations which might have otherwise occurred.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Elderly's need for noncrime-related police services*

The same factors that may increase the impact of criminal victimization upon the elderly (health problems, low income, and social isolation, for example) may also contribute to a heightened need for police assistance with noncrime-related problems. The majority of the calls for service received by the police are noncrime-related and the elderly, much like everyone else, tend to rely upon the police in times of trouble and need. In fact, one recent study of police/elderly interactions found that older persons requested noncrime-related services from the police approximately twice as often as would be expected on the basis of their proportion of the total population.<sup>12</sup> The reason

10. Cook and Cook, "Evaluating the Rhetoric of Crisis," p. 642.

11. See Brian J. Madden, "The Effect of Crime in a New York Community: The Elderly and the Role of the Police" (Paper presented to the National Conference on Crime Against the Elderly, (Washington, D.C. June 5-7, 1975), p. 5.

12. Richard E. Sykes, "The Urban Police

that many older persons tend to turn to the police for help with noncrime problems is fairly obvious. The police are the principal 24-hour emergency response service in virtually all jurisdictions, and they will respond to most requests for service whether or not the requests are related to law enforcement. In many instances, there is simply no other person or agency for an elderly citizen to turn to.

#### *The growing proportion of elderly in the population*

The proportion of elderly citizens in the country's population is growing rapidly and their relative growth rate is also expanding. Currently, growth in the number of individuals 65 years of age and older is almost twice that for younger age groups. As of 1970, the elderly comprised 9.9 percent of the population. It is estimated that by 2020 the percentage will have increased to 13.1 percent.<sup>13</sup> Thus, to the extent that the elderly have special needs for police services, these needs are likely to continue to increase in the foreseeable future.

#### *Elderly's right for special services*

There is a widespread belief that the elderly, simply because they are old, have earned the right to lead their lives in relative comfort, security, and dignity. It is a feeling that society owes a debt to and has

Function in Regard to the Elderly: A Special Case of Police Community Relations," in *Crime and the Elderly*, eds. Goldsmith and Goldsmith, p. 129.

13. Neal E. Cutler, "Demographic, Social-Psychological, and Political Factors in the Politics of Aging: A Foundation for Research in Political Gerontology," *The American Political Science Review* 71, (September 1977), p. 1012.

a responsibility toward those who have made a major contribution to its development. As one patrol officer expressed it to the authors, "I think it is important for the police to go out of their way to help old people. After all, they've paid their dues."

The above observations are commonly presented in support of the contention that the police should provide special services to the elderly. It should be noted that, while there is a certain, even compelling, logic to these observations and their implications for police service delivery to the elderly, they have not yet been thoroughly examined through careful research. The serious study of the elderly's needs for police services, and the problems involved in effectively providing these services, is still in its infancy. Several large-scale research projects have examined the incidence and impact of crime against the elderly and have recommended various crime prevention techniques, many of which involve police participation.<sup>14</sup> However, little effort has been devoted to exploring the nature of police/elderly interactions, that is, the types of police services requested by the elderly, their attitudes toward the expectations about the police, police attitudes toward the elderly, and the problems encountered by the police in providing services to the aged.<sup>15</sup>

14. For examples, see Cunningham, et al., *Crimes Against the Aging* and Marlene A. Young Rifai, *Older Americans' Crime Prevention Research Project: Final Report*, (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah County Division of Public Safety, 1976).

15. There are at least three limited, but extremely interesting, exceptions to this observation. See Phyllis Mench Brostoff, *District of Columbia Report to the 1971 White House Conference on Aging*, Appendix II:

In response to this situation, the University City Science Center is presently engaged in a major study of police service delivery to the elderly, supported by the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice. The study is designed to increase current knowledge about police service delivery to the elderly and to develop practical recommendations and guidelines for improving the effectiveness of the police services provided to older persons.

The analysis of all the data collected in the study has not yet been completed. However, some interesting preliminary findings concerning the elderly's perceptions of the police and expectations about the police services they should receive merit reporting at this time.

#### THE ELDERLY'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE POLICE: THE INITIAL FINDINGS OF A COMMUNITY SURVEY

A major part of our study of police service delivery to the elderly is a recently completed survey of elderly residents in two major American cities—one located in the deep South and the other in the Northeast. The survey explored the elderly's attitudes toward and experiences with the police, their reactions to criminal victimization, and their fear of crime.

All the respondents were 60 years of age or older; their average age was slightly over 70. They were

*Metropolitan Police Contacts With the Elderly*, (Washington, D.C.: The Washington School of Psychiatry, 1971); Phyllis Mench Brostoff, "The Police Connection: A New Way to Get Information and Referral Services to the Elderly," in *Crime and the Elderly*, eds. Goldsmith and Goldsmith, pp. 139-51; and Sykes, "The Urban Police Function in Regard to the Elderly," pp. 127-37.

selected by means of a random probability sample. A total of 913 interviews was completed, divided roughly equally between the two cities. 62.7 percent of the respondents were female and 37.3 percent were male; 55.4 percent were caucasian and 42.8 percent were black. Most were not financially well off: only 6.1 percent reported having incomes of over \$10,000 per year, and over 60 percent reported incomes of less than half that amount. Most of the respondents (85.6 percent) live in neighborhoods that were characterized by the interviewers as being either poor or working class. 50.1 percent have received only an eighth grade education or less. 40.3 percent of the respondents live alone.

#### *General levels of satisfaction with the police*

On the surface, many of the findings from the community survey are not unexpected and reinforce previous research on attitudes toward the police. For example, the elderly respondents in general have extremely positive attitudes toward the police. 88.7 percent feel that the police have one of the most difficult jobs in our society. 74.2 percent feel that they can always turn to the police for help regardless of the type of problem they are facing. And, almost three-fourths (73.4 percent) believe that the police are doing the best job they possibly can. These results complement the findings of other attitudinal studies which have also reported that older citizens have given favorable evaluations of police performance—in fact more favorable evaluations than those given by respondents in younger age groups.<sup>16</sup>

16. For example, see Hindelag, *Public Opinion Regarding Crime*, p. 10.

There were some demographic differences within certain categories (race and income) concerning attitudes toward the police. Whites and the relatively nonpoor were more likely to harbor positive sentiments toward the police than blacks and the poor. Nevertheless, across all demographic subgroups, the majority of respondents (even the black elderly and the poor elderly) have generally positive attitudes toward the police.

Thus, in the most general sense, examination of the survey data leads to the unsurprising conclusion that, when considered as a whole, elderly citizens in these two cities are satisfied with the performance of their local police departments. However, when the survey data are examined more deeply, some interesting and more complicated attitudinal patterns emerge.

#### *Problem areas in satisfaction with police services*

One significant finding that emerges from the preliminary analysis of the survey data is that positive attitudes toward the police tend to decay as a result of contact with the police.<sup>17</sup> Respondents who had called the police for either crime or noncrime-related reasons tended to have fewer positive attitudes toward the police than did respondents who have not had direct contact with the

17. This finding is partially reinforced by the results of earlier surveys of victims and nonvictims. These surveys found that elderly crime victims had lower opinions of the police than nonvictims. However, they did not distinguish between victims who called the police and those who did not. See James Garaofalo, *Public Opinion About Crime: The Attitudes of Victims and Non-victims in Selected Cities* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, National Criminal Justice Information and Statistics Service, 1977), p. 92.

police. And, the more often respondents had called the police, the fewer positive attitudes they had toward them. This is an extremely interesting finding. It indicates that the elderly's generally positive evaluation of the police cannot be interpreted to mean that there are few, if any, problems in police/elderly interactions. In fact, there is a segment of the elderly population that tends to lack positive attitudes toward the police, and it is a critical segment, for it is composed of many of those older persons who have actually had to turn to the police for assistance.

The importance of the relative lack of positive attitudes among this group of elderly citizens looms even larger in light of the fact that those elderly citizens who expressed a high willingness, or high propensity, to call the police for a wide variety of reasons also tended to be less satisfied with the police than those respondents who reported a lower propensity to call the police for help. It thus appears that elderly citizens who either have been the recipients of police services and/or who report that they would turn to the police for help in a wide variety of circumstances<sup>18</sup> tend to have a lower evaluation of the quality and quantity of services that they have received and/or think that they would receive.

This means that to the extent to which police performance can be

judged in terms of citizen satisfaction with police services, the police face a major problem in providing effective services to those older persons who comprise a large percentage of their actual or potential elderly clients.

#### *Analysis of elderly clients' and potential clients' dissatisfaction with police services*

There are several reasons which may account for these findings. Foremost among them is that the normative expectations of elderly police clients of what the police should do are significantly greater than what these same elderly people believe the police would do in response to their requests for service. Those elderly respondents who say they would call the police for more reasons have heightened feelings that it is very important that the police should respond quickly, that they should respond with certainty to all calls, and with an understanding of the problems of the elderly. At the same time, these same people tend to have less confidence that the "low propensity to call" elderly that the police would respond quickly, that the police would respond with certainty to all calls for service, and that the responding officers would understand the problems of the elderly. We have termed this phenomenon the "should/would" gap. Many elderly people have higher normative standards concerning what the police should be like than they do practical expectations of what the police are, or would be, like in a response-for-service situation. Approximately 25 percent of the elderly respondents fall into this category; however, the percentages vary somewhat depending on whether the "should/would" gap concerns police response time, cer-

18. The elderly respondents were provided with a list of possible service delivery reasons for calling the police and were asked to note for which of these reasons they would call the police. Our "would call" questions are a simplified measure of behavioral intentions. Research has shown such behavioral intentions are a good predictor of both attitudes and subsequent behavior. See Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, *Belief, Attitude, Intention and Behavior*. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1975), pp. 288ff.

tainty of response to all calls, or police understanding of the problems of the elderly.

It is difficult, at this juncture, to untangle all the possible reasons why elderly respondents who have a high propensity to turn to the police for assistance also doubt that the police will actually provide the fast and sensitive services they demand. However, without meaning to minimize the responsibility of the police to provide services which are responsive to the perceived needs and expectations of elderly citizens who have a high propensity to call the police, our survey data do indicate that these older persons tend to experience certain life situations and hold certain perceptions that could complicate the ability of police officers to effectively meet their service needs. These factors could lead to demands for service far in excess of what officers are capable of providing, even if the officers follow what are normally considered efficient law enforcement procedures.

There are several attitudinal characteristics of elderly people which are linked both to an increased propensity to call the police for service delivery and to dissatisfaction with the anticipated quality and quantity of such service delivery. For instance, elderly people who have experienced a financial downturn as they have become older<sup>19</sup> have both a higher pro-

19. Respondents were asked to describe their present financial situation and their financial situation when they were 50 years old. A four-point subjective financial well-being scale was used, the lowest category of which was "able to afford some luxuries in life." The greater the disparity between present financial situation and financial situation at age 50, the greater the respondent's decline in financial well-being. Thirty percent of the elderly respondents reported a drop of one "level" of subjective well-being

propensity to call the police and a diminished expectation of the quality and quantity of the police service delivery they would receive.<sup>20</sup> Also, those elderly respondents who were especially cynical about life not only reported a higher willingness to call the police, but they also exhibited a higher "should/would gap."

The cynical elderly also strongly believe that older people are superior to their younger cohorts, that the elderly in general are not treated well, and that elderly people should "stick together."<sup>21</sup> This feeling of elderly superiority can also hinder effective interaction between elderly service recipients and the responding police officer.

There are other characteristics of the elderly that tend to increase their willingness to call the police. Older persons who spend more time alone, who feel generally passive,<sup>22</sup> and

since they were 50; 7.7 percent reported a drop of two levels, and only 1.4 percent reported a drop of three levels—from being able to afford some luxuries at 50 (=4) to just being able to provide the necessities (=1) at the time of the interview. In short, a sizeable minority of respondents reported some worsening of financial well-being since age 50 with a diminished percentage reporting extreme financial decay. The validity and research utility of using such subjective measures of financial well-being has been demonstrated. See Bernard Strumpel, ed., *Economic Means of Human Needs: Social Indicators of Well-being and Discontent* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Survey Research Center, 1976).

20. Lack of financial stability has also been shown to be significantly correlated with increased fear of crime on the street and with the existence of problems in the neighborhood generally. See Eva Kahana et al., "Perspective of Aged on Victimization, Ageism, and Their Problems in Urban Society," *The Gerontologist* 17, no. 2 (1977), p. 127.

21.  $r = .34$ ,  $p = .001$  between the two multi-item scales of cynicism and elderly superiority.

22. Passivity is operationalized in terms of

who report that they have regrets about how their life has turned out manifest a greater willingness to call the police for noncrime service delivery. But older persons with these attributes do not accompany their greater propensity to call with a higher dissatisfaction (a greater "should/would gap") with the police. It is primarily the "recently poor" and the elderly cynics who pose special problems for the police. As noted above, they not only have a greater propensity to call for service, but they also tend to be dissatisfied with the service delivery that they think they will get!

In addition to these personal characteristics as a source of dissatisfaction with police, we have found that the television-imposed image of policemen held by older citizens constitutes another potent source of their dissatisfaction with real life police.

Many of the elderly respondents for police services tend to believe that: (a) the police portrayed on television are lifelike; (b) television clearly shows how dangerous it is to live in urban America; and (c) there is something to be learned about life by watching television.<sup>23</sup>

low internal locus of control, that is, people who feel they do not control their own personal destinies.

23. These three high intercorrelated items were turned into a single, more reliable, "importance of television" scale using standard factor analytic routines. Our research clearly demonstrates that attitudes toward television programming are more important than is the amount of television watched. Indeed, in contrast to Conklin's hypothesis, the lower the respondent's fear of crime, the more crime-related television programs he or she reported watching regularly. Upon consideration, this is to be expected: Elderly people who fear crime do not have to reinforce these fears by watching threatening television programs. Watching such programs

The major consequences of a belief in the reality and importance of television programming is an increased normative expectation of what the police should be like. Across all elderly respondents who actually had called the police over the last three years, contact with the police resulted in a diminution of belief in the quality and quantity of the police services that would be provided were the police to be called again.<sup>24</sup>

In short: Those older persons who tend to believe in the reality of television and television police tend to exaggerate the importance of a rapid, certain, and understanding police response. Police in real life find it difficult, if not impossible, to live up to this "Kojak image." Thus, when elderly citizens actually interact with the police, their expectations of the nature of that service delivery that should be provided will not be met and they will tend to downgrade their opinions of what the police actually did (or would do). This increases the "size" of the "should/would gap," thus detracting from overall satisfaction with police service delivery.

This scenario, of course, is predicated upon a given elderly person's belief in the life-like characteristics of television programming. Unfortunately for the police, those elderly citizens who tend to harbor

may have a deleterious influence, not by increasing fear of crime, but rather by increasing the "should/would gap" between what is ideally expected and what is anticipated from the police. For a different hypothesis, see John E. Conklin, *The Impact of Crime* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), p. 106ff.

24. With an  $r = .14$  for the importance of television correlation,  $r = .12$  for the total number of respondents contacting the police correlation, both correlations are significant at  $p < .001$ .

such attitudes toward television programming are also the ones who report a higher propensity to call the police for service delivery.

A major implication of the discovery of the "should/would gap" is that overall satisfaction with the police cannot simply be measured in terms of how many and how strong the positive attitudes are that people have toward the police. The elderly (and this may hold for younger age cohorts, although we have no data to support this conclusion) can have somewhat positive opinions concerning what the police do and how quickly and compassionately they respond. But, if these same people have even higher and more demanding expectations of how quickly and certainly the police response should be, then overall lack of satisfaction with the police can occur in spite of the presence of moderately positive attitudes toward the police.

#### SUMMARY AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

A preliminary analysis of the results of our survey of elderly citizens has led to the emergence of several general themes:

- Most of the elderly have positive attitudes toward the police.
- However, those elderly citizens who either have called the police for assistance, or who express a high propensity to turn to police for help with a wide variety of problems tend to have less positive attitudes toward the quality of services that they either have received and/or would expect to receive.
- The relative lack of positive attitudes toward the police appears to be primarily the function of a gap between what the elderly feel

the police should do and what they believe the police actually would do when they are called for assistance.

- Certain personal attributes of the elderly are associated with evaluations of police performance. Primary among these are: race, income, levels of personal cynicism, feelings of elderly superiority, and reactions to television.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the results of our study are intended to contribute directly to the development of practical recommendations for improving the quality of police services provided to the elderly. While the analysis of our data is only partially completed, the findings reported here, when considered in light of some well-established knowledge about police work, do have some direct policy implications. In particular the existence of the "should/would expectation gap" among the elderly who are most likely to call the police for help points to two rather obvious, but nonetheless very important, approaches to improving police service delivery to the elderly. The first approach concentrates on enhancing the ability of officers to provide effective services to the elderly, while the second attempts to give the elderly a more realistic picture of what types of services they can expect from the police.

#### *Improving police services*

First, it appears that police services to the elderly could be improved if the police were trained to be more sensitive to the needs, characteristics, and attitudes of the elderly citizens who are most likely to call upon them for help. Officers should be made aware that certain

conditions which sometimes accompany old age may require them to take more time with older service recipients and to be more patient with them. For example, officers should be taught that the elderly may often have unrealistic expectations of what the police can do for them. They should be instructed in techniques for communicating effectively with older persons whose hearing or vision may be impaired. They should be told that rather than concentrating only on the immediate difficulty that prompted the person to call the police, they should look carefully for other problems that may be facing the older caller. Finally, they should understand that providing efficient, equitable police services to all segments of the community does not mean treating everyone alike, but rather dealing with each individual, regardless of age, in a manner that is appropriate to his or her particular problem. Finally, and this is very important, the police need to appreciate that once a call has been accepted and an officer dispatched to the scene, the department has accepted a responsibility to do something about the citizen's problem even if it bears little relationship to traditional law enforcement activities. The widespread tendency of officers in many departments to dismiss many calls as "unfounded" can have serious negative consequences for citizen satisfaction with police services.

Care should be taken that police training programs concerned with the elderly do not foster or reinforce negative stereotypes about older persons; ideally, training should produce exactly the opposite effect. When officers are informed about the types of elderly citizens with whom they are most likely to have

professional contact, it should be made clear that this information is based on trend analysis. The information should, therefore, help the officer to make a determination as to whether an individual requires special attention and care; but the officer should not be made to feel that all elderly citizens with certain characteristics will have similar types of problems or attitudes toward the police. Knowledge of the general patterns of attitudes and problems common to different segments of the elderly population should assist the officer in working with them, but it is no substitute for paying close attention to individual problems and needs.

Beyond training, increased attention to meeting the needs of older people can be fostered by changing some of the demands that police administrators place on their officers. For example, many departments insist that patrol officers handle service calls as quickly as possible so that they can again become available to handle incoming calls. This may account, at least in part, for the oft-noted tendency of officers to be abrupt and impersonal in dealing with citizens, and it may contribute to the feeling expressed by some of the elderly respondents that the police do not really understand what they need. Relaxation of the policy of completing all service calls as quickly as possible would provide officers with the opportunity to thoroughly explore the needs of an elderly service recipient and to attempt to satisfy them as completely as possible. Available evidence strongly indicates that most departments can allow officers the additional time to work on the kinds of calls that would benefit from special attention and sensitivity without seriously interfering with depart-

mental ability to handle its service call workload.<sup>25</sup>

Police departments could also place increased emphasis on the ability of patrol officers to effectively handle the problems which occur on their assigned beats. A service feedback mechanism could be established enabling supervisors periodically to check back with service recipients to ascertain if they had been satisfied with the help they had received from the police. Special attention might well be paid to individuals who had a relatively frequent need for police assistance. The frequency of repeat calls is an excellent indicator that an individual's needs are not being met. At this time, our analysis of police activity and service call data is not yet complete, so we cannot say with any degree of certainty whether or not the elderly, as compared to citizens in other age groups, have a tendency to call the police repeatedly. However, conversations and interviews with police officers indicate that one of the major problems the police face in dealing with the elderly is the "repeat," or chronic, caller. Police tend to label these older persons as nuisance callers, or cranks. But, viewed from another angle, many of the frequent callers may simply be people whose problems are being improperly diagnosed and handled.

Finally, our data strongly suggest that the police could play a much more active role in referring elderly

citizens with either crime or non-crime-related problems to other social service agencies. In our survey, of the 257 older persons who called the police for assistance, only 9.2 percent reported that the officers referred them to other sources of help. This is a surprisingly small percentage, especially since the police are so often called to handle noncrime-related problems and since they also encounter many elderly crime victims who may be having problems coping with the physical, economic, and psychological effects of victimization.

Because the public tends to turn to the police for help with such a wide variety of problems, the police are in an excellent position to serve as a referral or finding agency, linking older persons to more appropriate sources of help for their nonlaw enforcement problems. Although the role of the police in this regard has been mentioned in the literature,<sup>26</sup> few departments have placed much emphasis on it.<sup>27</sup> Part of the reason for this is simply long-term neglect. But, it is also a function of the traditional animosity existing between the police and social workers and the fact that many social service agencies are unavailable when their assistance is needed—after 5 p.m. and on weekends. But, whatever the cause of the current lack of coordina-

26. *Toward a National Policy on Aging, Final Report of the White House Conference on Aging*, Vol. II (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1973), p. 235.

27. Brostoff, in what is, perhaps, the only serious examination of the police referral function notes that aside from one very limited project, "no attempt has been made to link up elderly victims of crime, or older people who come to the police for help when no crime has been committed, with services that might help them with the social problems that they bring to the police." See "The Police Connection," p. 149.

25. For a discussion of police workload and an explanation of how a police department can schedule its workforce to handle service calls promptly at the same time that it can make more time available to officers to spend on particularly difficult calls or to undertake other activities see, William G. Cay et al., *Improving Patrol Productivity*, Vol. I: *Routine Patrol*, (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1977).

tion between the police and other social service agencies, establishing formal ties between them and explicitly recognizing that the police can serve to link older persons with problems to appropriate sources of help could represent one of the most important contributions the police could make to improving the quality of elderly citizens' lives.

#### *Altering the elderly's expectations*

To date, most police contact with senior citizens' groups and most police literature distributed to the elderly have concentrated on crime prevention techniques. Our survey findings indicate that many older persons have unrealistic expectations about the services that law enforcement officers can provide to them. This suggests that the police might be well advised to take steps to present a more realistic picture to elderly citizens of what services they can actually expect to receive. Information on the realities of the police operations could be included in crime prevention lectures and publications. In addition, officers should carefully explain to elderly service recipients exactly what they are doing and why. It would also be useful for the police dispatcher to give elderly callers an estimate of how long it will take an officer to arrive. The survey data show that perceived police response time is an extremely important determinant of the elderly's attitudes toward the police. At present many departments simply inform the caller that an officer will be sent immediately. When the officer arrives 20 minutes later (and 20 minutes can seem like an hour to an upset person), callers feel that the police are not taking their problems seriously. Recent research findings indicate that this

situation can be overcome by telling the caller at the outset how long it will take for an officer to arrive.<sup>28</sup>

#### *Prospects for change*

It is important to bear in mind, in assessing the practical implications of our findings, that police departments are not easy organizations to change. The recommendations discussed above would entail a partial redefinition of the role of the police. The image of the police as "crime fighters" would have to be tempered by a more explicit recognition of their responsibility in the area of noncrime service provision. This redefinition would run counter to the way most police currently view themselves and to the way in which they are perceived by much of the public. The change in image is consistent with what the police actually do, but perceptions are often more important determinants of organizational change than are operational realities. Past experience with programs designed to increase the involvement of the police in handling many types of community and personal problems—not only crime—indicates that changing the police role vis-à-vis providing services to the elderly will not be an easy task nor one that can be accomplished quickly. However, the potential benefits that could be derived from focusing police attention and resources on the problems of the elderly would seem to make the effort worthwhile.

Finally, it should be pointed out that concentration on the particular needs of the elderly does not necessarily mean that the police would be

28. Tony Pate et al., *Police Response Time: It's Determinants and Effects* (Washington, D.C.: Police Foundation, 1976), p. 38.

neglecting other age groups in the population. Devoting extra time and attention counselling older persons on crime prevention measures, referring elderly citizens to appropriate sources of help for crime and noncrime-related problems, and comforting elderly crime victims should not represent much of an additional burden for the police. In most departments the patrol force spends approximately 30 to 40 percent of its time on routine patrol<sup>29</sup> (time spent not handling service

calls or administrative duties). Available evidence indicates that routine patrol is fairly unproductive and that patrol officers' time would be better spent performing specific activities in response to known community problems. Providing services to the elderly could be one of these activities. And, in fact, it can be reasonably argued that efforts to improve the quality of police services to the elderly could have significant spin-off effects that will enhance the ability of the police to effectively meet the needs and service demands of citizens in all age groups.

29. Gay et al., *Improving Patrol Productivity*, p. 4.

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#### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: In your study, I should like to know what cities were involved. I am also interested in learning whether you ran any correlations to determine if the impact of crime had anything to do with the elderly's attitude toward police, or was it simply age, or was it the indirect victimization about which you spoke. I am especially interested in the demographic aspect you mentioned concerning the blacks and the poor, who are more likely to live in the inner cities and in the rural areas.

A (Frank): The two cities we looked at are a northeastern city and a southern city. Beyond that we'd rather not say until the project is finished. They are larger metropolitan areas, older cities. We are not dealing with elderly people from West Palm Beach—they are middle- and lower-class for the most part.

We have tried to do some analyses where we looked at victims who did not call the police, and indeed we found that victimization per se did have an impact. But we also looked at people who were not victims who

called the police for service, and we found that that, too, had an impact. There seems to be an independent effect, both of victimization and of police contact.

Aging seems to increase the fear of crime, but it is very difficult to define "fear of crime," and this is something I think the literature handles inadequately. We won't know the effects of age per se until we're finished working with our fear of crime measures. But age definitely has some impact on fear of crime.

As far as economics is concerned—and I think economics is more important than race—the thing we found most interesting is that the poor people who have the least positive attitude toward the police are the ones who have not always been poor.

Q: With all of the information piling up, and without having to invent the wheel again, has there been

thought given to developing a specialized bureau of police which can serve as a source for referrals within the community, can work with community resources and agencies, and begin to ingest some fundamental knowledge of the aged and the aging process?

A (Frank): I know of at least one department that has set up a program where they have what they call community service officers. They are trained social workers. When a patrol officer responds to a situation with which he or she does not know how to cope, a community service officer will be called in who will either handle the problem or refer the citizen to an appropriate source of help. There is a tremendous amount of animosity between the police and social service agencies. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that many social service agencies are not functioning when the problems occur. The extent to which

people in social service agencies are willing to redeploy their work force is going to play a large part in future police-social worker relations.

Q: If the elderly invest substantial credibility in television and radio, might not society gain more by beaming sustained and extended and recreational programs to the elderly specifically?

A (Frank): The question is would anyone watch it. The elderly watch what they like to watch. You're talking, I believe, about counterprogramming, and I'm not saying that you are right or wrong. I am saying that it would probably depend upon the type of programming being presented and that that programming would probably already reinforce what they want to believe or they wouldn't watch it anyway.

**END**