

SENIORS, SAFETY AND CRIME a new outlook

TOPIC SHEET NO.5 Edition 2 – in the series 'Western Australia's Seniors'

December 2004



- Support in applying for a restraining order
- Referral to other services.

For help or more information about the Victim Support Service, call freecall number 1800 818 988 (outside metro only) or 9425 2850 (metro).

Knowing that risk of victimisation is low should not lead older people to become complacent about crime. But neither should they become alarmed for themselves or their families and friends if a serious crime is reported in a sensational way.

Seniors' crime prevention publications

- **Safety Advice for Seniors**, a booklet for WA seniors, available from WA Police Service, State Crime Prevention Bureau. (Phone: (08) 9356 0555.)
- **Commonwealth Attorney General's Department, Crime Prevention Branch, 2003, Crime Prevention for Seniors: A Guide to Personal and Financial Safety.** Available at www.crimeprevention.gov.au.
- Other crime prevention advice can be obtained from the Office of Crime Prevention website, www.crimeprevention.wa.gov.au.

In an emergency, call:
Telephone: 000 TTY (hearing impaired): 106

Additional copies

Additional copies of this topic sheet can be obtained from the Office for Seniors Interests and Volunteering, 7th Floor Dumas House, 2 Havelock Street, West Perth WA 6005. Phone (08) 6217 8500. It can also be downloaded from the Office's website, at www.community.wa.gov.au.

Reducing fear of crime in older people

While research shows that seniors are at less risk of crime than younger people, they feel no safer and in some circumstances less safe.

Older people may feel less able to protect themselves, so a level of fear slightly higher than their level of risk may be expected. It is important for seniors' wellbeing, though, that sensible levels of concern and caution do not grow into unwarranted levels of suspicion and fear.

Elder Abuse

Sometimes, seniors are the victims of elder abuse. That is, their right to feel safe in their home, manage and control their own money, and make their own decisions, are abused by members of their family or their friends.

This type of abuse can be physical, psychological, financial, social, sexual, or neglect. Seniors to whom this is happening, or who are aware it is happening to someone else, can speak confidentially with an advocate at Advocare's Elder Abuse Prevention Program (Phone: (08) 9221 8588 or 1800 655 566), or contact the Police.

Victim Support Service

Being a victim of crime can be very disturbing. Feeling a sense of insecurity and that your privacy has been invaded is normal. Confidential counselling and support is available through the Victim Support Service, which is part of the Department of Justice.

All services are free of charge. They include:

- Counselling and support
- Help with writing a victim impact statement
- Advice on criminal injuries compensation
- Information about the progress of police investigations
- Information about court proceedings
- Help in preparing for a court case



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Active Ageing

Growing older should be an active, positive time – a time in which the quality of life is maintained and improved as the years move on. But a fear of crime can stop some seniors from making the most out of life and enjoying it to the full.

The good news is that seniors have only a slight risk of becoming victims of crime.

Nonetheless, it's important that seniors take sensible precautions to help prevent crime and protect themselves and their property.

Crime prevention for older people

Increased levels of safety can be achieved by taking some simple steps, including:

- Being cautious about making purchases by telephone or from door-to-door salespeople, to lessen the risk of consumer fraud.
- Joining Neighbourhood Watch, an effective strategy for reducing home burglaries, or working informally with neighbours to improve neighbourhood security.
- Requesting the local community policing officer to conduct a security appraisal of their home. This will provide practical advice on how to solve any security problems they identify, as well as restoring confidence in their home's security.
- Asking the local community policing officer about 'Project Deadlock', which is for seniors who have recently suffered a personal crime or a home intrusion and are fearful as a result. Lockwood Australia will supply and have installed new locks free of charge, but certain conditions apply.
- Avoiding risky situations, such as going out alone at night and avoiding poorly lit areas.
- When out in the car, remembering to 'Look, Lock, Leave'. Look to ensure no valuables are visible, then lock and leave. When returning, look around before unlocking the doors.
- Decreasing the risk of having your handbag snatched by:¹
 - Holding the bag under-arm, close to the body
 - Holding the bag firmly, not putting it on counters, seats or in shopping trolleys
 - Being very careful when doing banking
 - Considering using pockets or money belts instead of a handbag
 - Not resisting if someone snatches a handbag, as it is not worth the risk of injury
 - Remaining calm and observing the thief so an accurate description can be given to Police.

¹ Advice taken from Safety Advice for Seniors, WA Police Service, Community Policing Branch.

What Crime Statistics Show

There are two main sources of information about the rate of crime:

- community surveys in which people report their own experience as victims of crime
- the number of offences reported to the police.

These two sources provide different estimates of the crime rate, because many offences are not reported to the police, but both indicate that older people are the least likely to become victims of crime.

Reasons why offences are not reported to the police may include complex relationships between victim and offender; lack of insurance against burglary; and offences that are not considered to be serious enough to warrant police action.

Violent Offences

In 2002, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) conducted a nationwide General Social Survey (GSS), which included questions about people's experience of violent crime and break-ins (ie burglaries) during the previous twelve months.

Consumer Fraud Offences

A 2000 community survey shows that older people are more likely to experience consumer fraud than either assault or burglary², although they are at much lower risk of consumer fraud than younger people.

Offences Reported to the Police

In 2002, 24,370 violent offences or threats of violence were reported to the Western Australian (WA) Police³.

Reported crime statistics for Western Australia clearly show that people aged 55 and over are at least risk of becoming a victim of a violent offence. Assault is the most common violent offence in Western Australia, and older people have a very low risk of assault, particularly when compared to young adults.

² Australian Institute of Criminology, Australian Crime Victims Survey 2000 (cited in AIC Trends & Issues No. 212: The Victimization of Older Australians, by Carcach C, Graycar A, and Muscat G).

³ Source: Crime Research Centre, Crime and Justice Statistics for WA 2002, University of WA.

The WA data from the GSS is presented in Table 1. It shows that people aged between 18 and 24 years were most at risk from violent offences, while people aged 65 years and over were at a dramatically reduced risk level (1.7% for people aged 65 and over compared to 15.9% for people aged 18 to 24 and 13.4% for those aged 25 to 34).

Table 1: Violent Offences from 2002 survey:

Victimisation Rate by Age of Victims

Age Group	Victimisation Rate (%)
18-24	15.9
25-34	13.4
35-44	9.9
45-54	10.2
55-64	7.1
65-plus	1.7

(Source: 2002 General Social Survey WA, Cat.No. 4159.5.55.001.)

Break and Enter Offences (Burglaries)

The GSS data for WA tell a similar story for burglaries. Table 2 shows that people in their twenties and thirties are most at risk, while people aged 65 and over are at least risk

Table 2: Burglary offences from 2002 survey:

Victimisation Rate by Age of Victims

Age Group	Victimisation Rate (%)
18-24	17.0
25-34	20.9
35-44	16.4
45-54	13.5
55-64	14.3
65-plus	9.5

(Source: 2002 General Social Survey WA, Cat.No. 4159.5.)

Seniors and Fear of Crime

The GSS asked how safe people felt 'at home alone after dark', although the question did not refer specifically to crime.

A large majority of people aged 55 and over (over 70%) said they felt safe or very safe at home alone after dark. Older men felt safer than older women, with over 80% of men aged 55 and over feeling safe, compared with less than 70% of women. Similar results were obtained from a community survey carried out by the Office for Seniors Interests and Volunteering (Seniors Interests) in 1997.

When questions about feeling safe are asked in a different way, the results also differ. The community survey conducted by Seniors Interests in 1997, and another in 2001⁴, found that:

- seniors felt as safe from crime 'from day to day' as the rest of the community

- seniors were less likely than younger people to think they would become a crime victim in the next year
- seniors were no more likely than younger people to rate their neighbourhood crime risk as high.

The 1997 and 2001 surveys also found that some seniors nevertheless believed they were at greater risk of crime than younger people. This incorrect belief may have been influenced by the great interest shown by the media in crimes against seniors during the late 1990s.

⁴ Office for Seniors Interests and Volunteering: Seniors' Perceptions of their Safety at Home and in the Community, (unpublished) 1997; and Community Attitudes Towards Ageing and Older People (unpublished), March 2001.

