

Criminal Victimization Of The Elderly In Three Types Of Urban Housing Environments

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The rapid increase in the number of old people in our society has focused public attention on the problems associated with aging. One major public concern is the need to provide adequate and secure housing arrangements for the elderly. Much of the effort to reduce crime and violence has been based on the assumption that it is first necessary to improve the quality of urban life before criminal victimization of the elderly can be prevented. While not directly discrediting this view, this paper argues that criminal victimization of the elderly can be controlled or prevented by careful planning of their residential environment.

In "Victimization in Old Age," Jaber F. Gubrium (1974) suggested that the extent of victimi-

zation of the elderly varied with the degree of "protectiveness" of the housing environment. Protective housing environments were ordinarily composed of age-homogeneous populations which encouraged social interaction and tended to protect against criminal victimization (Gubrium, 1974: 249). Due to the obvious public housing policy implications that a study which focused on age-homogeneity and victim protection might have, it is important to take an exploratory look at criminal victimization of the elderly in three different types of urban housing environments.

Data Collection and Study Design

The victimization data were obtained from interviews with a sample of 418 Boston, Massachusetts, residents, 62 years of age or older. The research was designed to generate a representative sample of the three types of housing environments in which Boston's elderly live: 1) 123 respondents were drawn from elderly housing projects, i.e., public housing projects inhabited exclusively by elderly persons; 2) 100 respondents were drawn from family housing projects, i.e.,

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public housing projects built for low and middle income families in which elderly people lived either alone or with others; and 3) 195 respondents from private housing located throughout the city of Boston. The sample universe for this study was defined as all housing units in Boston in which a person aged 62 years or over resided. This did not include institutional residences such as hospitals and nursing homes, nor did it include residences occupied less than one year. This universe was subdivided into three mutually exclusive subsets. Separate systematic random samples were drawn from each of the subsets as described below to yield respondents designated as residing in elderly housing, family housing, and private housing respectively.

Elderly Housing.

In fifteen elderly projects, 1,140 units were located. Every sixth unit (beginning with a random start of 4) was included in the sample, giving a total of 190 units. This allowance was made based on estimates of the percentage of unoccupied units, the percentage of units occupied less than one year, and the response rate in order to insure the completion of at least 100 interviews.

Family Housing.

The sample from family housing was drawn in two stages. In twenty-six family housing projects, there were 13,901 units. Of these, it was ascertained (with the help of project managers) that 3,525 probably were occupied by elderly. For the remaining 10,376 units there was either no information or they were believed not to be occupied by elderly. Every twenty-first unit of the "probably elderly" was chosen and every forty-second of the "unknown" units, yielding samples of 167 units and 247 units respectively. Again, the initial sample size was predicated on the desire to obtain a combined total of 100 completed interviews.

Private Housing.

In order to insure that all private housing units had an equal chance of appearing in the sample,

four separate samples were drawn from different sources: 1) the 1972 Boston Police list of all persons aged 62 or over; 2) the Boston city directory; 3) a Boston Redevelopment Authority's list of new construction; and 4) a 1970 Census tract block listing. It was desired to obtain 100 interviews from the police list sample and 100 interviews from the city directory, block listing, and new construction samples combined.¹ For the police list sample, the address for every 300th name was included, yielding a total of 265 addresses.² From the city directory, one out of every 300 residential addresses was chosen, giving 751 sample points. All new construction from 1967 to 1972 (except for group quarters and public housing projects) was listed along with the estimated number of housing units at each address. Clusters of five were chosen at intervals of 1500 (for a rate of 1 in 300). Fifteen units fell into the sample. Finally, a listing of all blocks in the city of Boston was compiled, and every 300th chosen. In the 13 selected blocks, any addresses which were found neither in the city directory nor in the lists of new construction became part of the block supplement sample.

Results.

The results of interviewing and the statistics on the various samples are presented below in Table 1. Refusal rates were remarkably consistent across samples, ranging from 15 to 19 percent. However, there appears to be a difference in the percentage of respondents not-at-home. In the private housing, the number of respondents not at home was about 12 percent, whereas in the elderly and family housing it was only around two percent, in spite of the fact that no fewer callbacks were made in the private sample than in the project samples. One possible explanation is that elderly respondents in private housing tended to be somewhat more mobile than their counterparts in public housing.

Ideally, in order to determine the effect of age homogeneity on the risk of victimization, it is necessary to isolate this variable from the numer-

Table 1. Sample and Interview Results

	Elderly	Family		Private					Total	
		Probably Elderly	Unknown	Family Total	Police	City Directory	New Construction	Block Supplement	Private Total	All Samples
Units in Sample	190	167	247	414	265	751	15	28	1059	1663
Completed Interviews	123	89	11	100	111	80	2	1	194	417
Ineligible Units	30	48	233	281	92	627	12	27	758	1063
Total Non-Interview	37	30	3	33	62	44	1	0	107	177
Not at Home* (percent)	3 (1.9)	3 (2.3)	0 (0.0)	3 (2.3)	21 (12.1)	15** (11.7)	-	0 (0)	36 (12.0)	42 (7.0)
Refused (percent)	30 (18.7)	19 (15.9)	1 (7.1)	20 (15.0)	32 (18.5)	22 (17.2)	-	0 (0)	54 (17.9)	104 (17.5)
Other	4	8	2	10	9	8	-	0	17	31
Response Rate Percent	77	75	78	75	64	65	67	100	64	70

* With few exceptions, at least five calls were made in order to obtain a completed interview.

** One non-interview actually belongs to the new construction sample, but it is not known in which category it belongs.

ous other variables presumably affecting the crime rate, such as income, race, sex, etc. Unfortunately, the sample did not allow for a complete matching of all crime-vulnerability variables among the three types of urban housing environments. However, the population characteristics of the three subsamples were such that, with proper reservations and qualifications, it was possible to draw fruitful comparisons and to reach tentative conclusions.

Characteristics of Respondents

Table 2 shows characteristics of respondents in the three types of housing. Residents of the elderly projects were less likely than residents of the family projects and of the private housing to live in census tracts containing 10 percent or less blacks. A greater proportion of residents in the elderly projects were nonwhite than residents in the family housing, and private housing contained the lowest proportion of nonwhite residents. Almost all residents of the elderly projects and the family housing projects had incomes under 5,000 dollars, while only slightly over half of the residents in private housing had incomes less than 5,000 dollars.

Table 2. Selected Respondent Characteristics by Type of Housing

Characteristic	Elderly* Project	Family** Project	Private*** Housing
Living In Census Tracts Where Black Population Is Less Than 10%		(percent)	
Nonwhite	58.0	69.7	84.0
Income Under \$5000	35.2	23.0	12.3
Age 70 or Less	96.7	99.0	51.9
Living Alone	20.7	39.0	49.2
Female	84.6	62.0	36.4
Working Full/Part Time	78.0	73.0	57.2
Less Than High School Education	3.3	3.1	18.9
	68.1	78.4	60.0

* Based on N's ranging from 116 to 123.

** Based on N's ranging from 97 to 100.

*** Based on N's ranging from 189 to 194.

Residents in the elderly projects were more likely to be over the age of 70 than the residents interviewed in the family housing projects and in private housing. A large majority of the residents in the elderly projects were living alone, while a smaller majority of the residents of the family housing projects and a minority of the residents of private housing were living alone. Few residents in the elderly and family housing projects were employed, while about 19 percent of the residents of the private housing were employed.

Frequency of Crimes Against the Elderly

Table 3 presents the frequency of criminal victimization by type of housing. Residents of the elderly projects were the least likely to have been victimized, and residents of the family projects were the most likely to have been victimized.

The breakdown of types of crimes committed against residents of the three types of housing is shown in Table 4. Purse-snatching and pocket-picking were the most commonly reported crimes in all three types of housing. No cases of sexual abuse or rape were reported.

Table 3. Number of Times Victimized During Previous Year, By Type of Housing

Number Of Times Victimized	Elderly Project	Family Project	Private Housing	Row Total
	(percent)			
Never	80.3	44.4	69.6	66.7
Once	12.3	25.3	20.6	19.3
2-3 Times	4.9	21.2	6.7	9.6
4 or More	2.5	9.1	3.1	4.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N=	(122)	(99)	(194)	(415)

Chi Square = 41.2 with 6 degrees of freedom (p is less than .001)
Cramer's V = 0.22

Table 4. Number of Specific Types of Victimitizations by Type of Housing

Type of Victimitization	Elderly Project	Family Project	Private Housing	Row Total
Pocket-picking, Purse-snatching, or Attempts	12	17	23	52
Break-ins and Attempts	3	13	15	31
Glass Breakage	1	11	3	15
Auto Theft	3	4	7	14
Arson	—	8	3	11
Mail Box Locks Broken	—	9	—	9
Robberies	2	2	2	6
Walls or Doors Marked	1	3	2	6
Assaults	2	3	—	5
Total Number of Victimitizations (Multiple incidents of one type for one respondent counted as one incident)	24	55	59	138
(Total number of respondents answering question)	(122)	(99)	(194)	(415)

Table 5 shows the incidence of victimization by the racial composition of the census tracts for each of the three types of housing. In the elderly project sample, there was no significant relationship between the racial composition of the neighborhood and the incidence of victimization. In the family project and private housing samples, however, there were significant relationships between the racial composition of the neighborhood and the incidence of criminal victimization. In both types of housing, there were more single and multiple incidents of victimization occurring in census tracts with populations of 10 percent or more black.

Table 5. Number of Times Victimized by Type of Housing by Percentage of Blacks Living in Respondent's Census Tract

Number of Times Victimized	Elderly Project		Family Project		Private Housing	
	Proportion Black in Census Tract					
	0-9%	10+%	0-9%	10+%	0-9%	10+%
	percent					
0	83.1	76.5	53.6	23.3	74.1	46.9
1	9.9	15.7	18.8	40.0	17.9	34.4
2-3	2.8	7.8	20.3	23.3	6.8	6.2
4 or more	4.2	0.0	7.2	13.3	1.2	12.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N =	(71)	(51)	(99)	(30)	(162)	(32)
	$\chi^2=4.66$, 3df. p is less than .20 Cramer's V=.19		$\chi^2=8.97$, 3df. p is less than .05 Cramer's V=.30		$\chi^2=17.33$, 3df. p is less than .001 Cramer's V=.29	

Table 6 shows the incidence of victimization by the race of the respondent for each of the three types of housing. In the elderly project sample there was no significant relationship between the race of the respondent and the incidence of victimization. In the family project and the private housing samples, however, nonwhite respondents were significantly more likely than white respondents to have been victimized.

In all three types of housing, no significant relationship was found between the estimated income level of the respondent and the incidence of victimization. Those who had estimated incomes of under \$5,000 were no more likely to be victimized than those whose estimated income was greater than \$5,000. It should be noted that, in the elderly housing project, only one person in four earned over \$5,000 annually. In the family hous-

Table 6. Number of Times Victimized by Type of Housing by Race of Respondent

Number of Times Victimized	Elderly Project		Family Project		Private Housing	
	White	Nonwhite	White	Nonwhite percent	White	Nonwhite
0	75.6	88.4	51.3	21.7	71.8	54.2
1	14.1	9.3	19.7	43.5	18.2	37.5
2-3	6.4	2.3	21.1	21.7	7.6	0.0
4 or more	3.8	0.0	7.9	13.0	2.4	8.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N =	(78)	(43)	(76)	(23)	(170)	(24)
	$\chi^2=3.66$, 3df. p is less than .30 Cramer's V=.17		$\chi^2=7.94$, 3 df. p is less than .05 Cramer's V=.28		$\chi^2=8.99$, 3 df. p is less than .05 Cramer's V=.22	

ing project there was only one reported income greater than \$5,000. The private housing sample was more evenly divided: 97 individuals earned less than \$5,000 and 91 earned \$5,000 or more annually.

In all three types of housing, no significant relationship was found between victimization and (1) whether or not respondent lived alone, (2) the sex of respondent, and (3) the number of years the respondent lived at his current address.

For the elderly project sample and the family project sample no significant relationship was

found between respondents' present marital status and victimization. However, for the private housing sample a significant relationship was found with widowed respondents least likely to have been victimized (Table 7).

For the elderly project sample and the family project sample no significant relationship was found between the respondent's employment status and incidence of victimization. However, for the private housing sample a significant relationship was found, with employed respondents more likely to have been victimized (Table 8).

Table 7. Number of Times Victimized by Type of Housing by Present Marital Status

Number of Times Victimized	Elderly Project			Family Project			Private Housing		
	Married	Widowed	Other	Married	Widowed	Other	Married	Widowed	Other
0	87.5	80.2	76.0	42.9	50.9	28.6	65.8	80.3	56.1
1	6.2	12.3	16.0	14.3	24.6	38.1	22.4	15.8	26.8
2-3	0.0	4.9	8.0	33.3	17.5	19.0	9.2	1.6	1.6
4 or more	6.2	2.5	0.0	9.5	7.0	14.3	2.6	0.0	9.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N =	(16)	(81)	(25)	(21)	(57)	(21)	(76)	(76)	(41)
	$\chi^2=3.74$, 6 df. p is less than .80 Cramer's V=.12			$\chi^2=6.88$, 6 df. p is less than .50 Cramer's V=.19			$\chi^2=14.04$, 6 df. p is less than .05 Cramer's V=.19		

Table 8. Number of Times Victimized by Type of Housing by Employment Status

Number of Times Victimized	Elderly Project			Family Project			Private Housing		
	Works	Retired	Homemaker	Works	Retired	Homemaker	Works	Retired	Homemaker
0	75.0	79.8	80.6	33.3	42.9	47.8	75.0	64.7	80.0
1	25.0	13.1	9.7	33.3	24.3	26.1	8.3	27.7	8.6
2-3	0.0	3.6	9.7	33.3	22.9	17.4	8.3	5.9	8.6
4 or more	0.0	3.6	0.0	0.0	10.0	8.7	8.3	1.7	2.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N =	(4)	(84)	(31)	(3)	(70)	(23)	(36)	(119)	(35)
	$\chi^2=3.86$, 6 df. p is less than .70 Cramer's V=.13			$\chi^2=1.03$, 6 df. p is less than .98 Cramer's V=.07			$\chi^2=13.48$, 6 df. p is less than .05 Cramer's V=.19		

In all three types of housing no significant relationship was found between respondents' education or religion and victimization. Respondents with less than a high school education were no more likely to be victimized than those who completed high school or continued their education beyond the secondary level.

Conclusion

Our examination of the data suggests that reported criminal victimization of the elderly varies with the type of housing environment. In the elderly housing projects, only 20 percent of the residents were victimized in the year prior to the survey. In the family housing projects, 56 percent had been victimized, and in private housing 30 percent were victims of crime. Multiple victimizations varied as well: eight percent, 30 percent and 10 percent respectively. This finding is consistent with a recent Law Enforcement Administration Agency (LEAA) study which showed that the elderly were victimized at a far greater rate when they lived in age-heterogeneous housing environments where there were one-parent families with teen-age children (LEAA, 1976).

A breakdown of those victimized by type of crime and type of housing environment lent further support to the capacity of age-homogeneity to protect against victimization. The difference between the three types of housing environments was greatest when examining victimization for crimes which directly related to residential security. In the elderly housing project only two percent reported a break-in or burglary, while in the family housing project, 13 percent reported at least one break-in or burglary or its attempt, and in the private housing sample, eight percent reported at least one break-in or burglary or its attempt. Furthermore, the high victimization rate of the family housing project is made up of malicious vandalism, such as vandalizing mail boxes, breaking glass doors, setting fires in hall-

ways, etc. — a category of crimes practically non-existent in the elderly housing projects.

Although purse-snatching and pocket-picking were the most frequently reported crimes in all three settings, the data suggested that even street crimes can be reduced by building age-homogeneous housing environments for the elderly. The victimization rate for purse-snatching and pocket-picking in the family housing projects was almost double that reported in the elderly housing project and in the private housing sample.

The lower rate of victimization in the elderly housing project cannot be explained by the imperfect matching of crime-vulnerability variables. In fact, the data from a previous study (Schafer and Moran, 1975) suggested that instead of accounting for a lower rate, the imperfect matching should have made for a higher rate of victimization. In the city of Boston as a whole, the two major determinants of victimization for the elderly population were percentage of blacks in the census tract and race of the victim. Elderly housing project respondents were more often (42 percent) living in census tracts with 10 percent or more black population, as compared to 30 percent in the family projects, and 16 percent in the private housing sample (Schafer and Moran, 1975: 27). In addition, 35 percent of the elderly project respondents were black, as compared to 23 percent of the family project respondents, and 12 percent in the private housing sample (Schafer and Moran, 1975: 28). This information, coupled with the fact that victimization among the elderly housing project respondents was not statistically associated with any of the crime-vulnerability variables (i.e., there is a high probability that differences in victimizations across these variables can be attributed to chance) seemed to suggest that in addition to the elderly project protecting its residences against victimization, it also negated the traditional determinants of the victimization rate.

Notes

1. The police list and city directory/block/new construction were originally designed to be treated as two separate samples, but they have been combined for purposes of this paper as the "private housing" sample.
2. When two or more elderly persons with the same surname were listed at the same address, this was counted as one address.
3. For a valid chi-squared test all cells should have an expected frequency of at least 5. To insure this, however, it would have been necessary to redefine or collapse categories and much information would have been lost.

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