Fear of Crime

Introduction

While statistics show older people are less likely to become victims of crime than other groups, their fear of crime has been shown to be significantly higher\(^1\). As this heightened fear of crime can have a negative impact on the quality of life of older people, it is important to understand how it can be addressed in policy terms. This article discusses the facts around older people’s fear of crime across the island of Ireland, the current policy responses and some implications for the future.

\(^1\) At the end of September 2010, the Republic of Ireland (ROI) Justice Minister Dermot Ahern launched a new Garda strategy on older people. In the strategy, it was stated that from a policing perspective, crime victimisation has been found to be lower amongst older people than other groups.
Key Points

- Crime victimisation has been found to be lower amongst older people than other groups. However, the fear of crime has been shown to be significantly higher.

- There are many subjective and objective factors which contribute to this fear of crime amongst older people, including isolation, a lack of control, a lack of information and a general perception that older people are not valued in society.

- Other factors that can increase fear include a lack of trust of younger generations and the character and sense of community in the area in which the older person lives. Intergenerational work and working within communities is therefore essential in reducing the fear of crime.

- The fear of crime can reduce the level of participation of older people in physical activity and social interaction. This can lead to further isolation and social exclusion.

- Successful strategies for reducing the fear of crime should target individuals who are most at risk of experiencing a reduced quality of life as well as whole communities.

Older people and crime - the fear / risk paradox

Older people have been found to report a greater fear of crime than younger age groups. This is despite the fact that older people are less likely to be victims of crime. This has become known as the "fear/risk paradox". Even if older people are less likely to be actual victims of crime, the fear of crime can affect their quality of life in serious ways.

Some recent studies suggest that the manner in which fear of crime is measured has led to an inflation of measured fear levels amongst older people. This is because survey questions such as “How safe do you feel walking around your neighbourhood after dark?” may by their nature prompt a fearful response. Older people may also be fearful of walking around their neighbourhood in the dark for other reasons, such as mobility or poor lighting.

Fear Factors

Nevertheless, older people may fear crime more because the potential physical, psychological and economic consequences associated with crime may be more serious for them than for younger people. Furthermore, some crimes relating to older people may not be reported in the official figures, e.g. elder abuse.

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The factors which contribute to this fear include isolation, a lack of control, a lack of information and a general perception that older people are not valued in society. Other factors that can increase fear include a lack of trust of younger generations and the character and sense of community in the area in which the older person lives.

The media also plays an important role in how crime and policing are viewed by the general public. Perceptions of crime can increase the fear of crime so reporting should accurately reflect the true extent and occurrence of crime.

The facts

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland (NI), people aged 16-24 are consistently the most likely age group to be the victims of crime. As Figure 1 below shows, 8.3% of this age group had been the victims of burglary in 2008/09, another 8.3% had been the victims of vandalism and 7.9% had been the victims of a violent crime. By contrast, a much smaller percentage of 65-74 year olds and those older than 75 had been victims. 0.2% of 65-74 year olds and 0.9% of 75+ year olds had been the victim of burglary. Rates were also low for vandalism (2.6% for 65-74 year olds and 1.6% for 75+ year olds) and violent crime (0.6% for 65-74 year olds and 0.5% for 75+ year olds).

Figure 1: NI victims of burglary, vandalism and violent group by age group

The Perceptions of Crime survey\(^3\) shows that respondents aged up to 54 years were most likely to be very worried about violent crime while those aged 55 and over were more likely to worry about being burgled. For 65-74 year-olds, burglary was the biggest fear for 19%. Yet as Figure 1 shows, just 0.2% of this age group had in fact been burgled in 2008/09.

While the figures from crime surveys in NI show that older age groups are less likely to be victims of crime, the fear of crime is higher amongst older people. Older respondents are much more likely than other age groups to feel very unsafe walking alone in the area after dark, with those aged 75 and over (20%) over three times as likely to feel very unsafe as people aged 16-24 (6%). However, there is no major difference across age groups when it comes to feeling unsafe in the home or worry in general about all types of crime.

**Republic of Ireland**

As can be seen from the table below, just 1.7% of those over 65 in ROI have been victims of crime. This is a lower level than any other age group. 8.9% of 18-24 year olds have been victims of crime, making this age group most at risk.

![Figure 2: ROI victims of crime by age group](image)

Source: National Crime Council Crime and Victimisation Surveys

However, as the figure below shows, the over 65s in ROI feel the most unsafe walking home alone in their neighbourhood after dark. 33% feel unsafe and 12% feel very unsafe, compared to 18-24 year olds (the highest at-risk age group for crime), 17% of whom feel unsafe and 4% feel very unsafe.
As with NI, the figures from crime surveys in ROI again show that older people are less likely to be actual victims of crime, but the fear of crime is higher. A Department of Justice report from 2009, *Fear of Crime in Ireland and its Impact on Quality of Life*[^4] used survey data and analysis to identify some of the causative factors behind fear of crime. The major factors were:

- Socio-demographic profile
- Perceptions of local crime
- Satisfaction with An Garda Síochána
- Prior history of victimisation

These factors can be taken into account when attempting to assess why older people might have a higher fear of crime.

### The effect of the fear of crime on older people

In NI, almost two-thirds (64%) of people feel that the fear of crime has a minimal impact on their quality of life. However, 31% believe it has a moderate effect and the remaining 5% believe that their quality of life is greatly affected by fear.

of crime. In ROI, 63.5% of respondents to a survey stated that they were “not worried about crime” while 21.5% were “concerned about crime” and 15% were “fearful of crime”. These figures show that fear of crime has a significant effect on a proportion of the population, and older people can be severely affected.

Fear of crime amongst older people can have significant consequences for their health and wellbeing. One study from NI suggested that, although very few older people see themselves as “prisoners in their own home”, fear of crime and a lack of trust can have an impact on the mental and physical health of older people. They may reduce their levels of physical activity and social interaction out of concern for their safety, which can result in isolation, and thus further limiting activities and social interaction.

Similarly an ROI report on the fear of crime suggests that a fear of crime can have a substantial effect on quality of life by causing some people to severely restrict their movements and activities, thereby, reducing their physical, social and emotional well-being. For older people, restricting activities in this way can put them at a huge risk of social exclusion and isolation.

Current policy

Northern Ireland

At the end of 2009, the Northern Ireland Office launched a community safety strategy for older people. The NI Safer Ageing: A Strategy and Action Plan for Ensuring the Safety of Older People was developed in partnership with representatives from older people’s groups, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and the Policing Board. The strategy sets out how the NI government and partners will work together to reduce the crime and antisocial behaviour experienced by older people. It sets out three main aims for combating the fear of crime amongst older people:

1. To help reduce crime and anti-social behaviour experienced by older people.
2. To help reduce the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour, by informing and reassuring older people as to what is being done.
3. To work in partnership with all relevant groups at both regional and local level to reduce crime, anti-social behaviour and the fear of crime.

The strategy is supported by a number of initiatives aimed at reducing the numbers of older people who are victims of crime. For instance, the HandyVan scheme provides free locks, door chains, smoke alarms and other safety devices for older people. The strategy also supports the Good Morning scheme, which provides free confidential daily telephone calls and support for older people and others, giving access to other local community and statutory services and activities while helping to reduce loneliness, isolation, ill health and the fear of crime.

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6 French and Freel (2008)
7 Older people, fear of crime and health: the spirals of cause and effect, Healthy Cities Belfast, 2007
There is also a public policy framework for older people in NI, *Ageing in an Inclusive Society*, which aims to promote healthy, active and positive ageing. Along with the government's anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy\(^8\), this aims to ensure that older people in NI are valued members of society. Promoting a good quality of life in communities for older people can help to reduce the fear of crime.

**Republic of Ireland**

An An Garda Síochána now has an Older People Strategy\(^9\) which is intended to reduce the fear of crime amongst older people. The strategy is based around four key objectives:

1. Develop and maintain effective communication links between Gardaí and older people.
2. Deliver a timely and effective proactive response by An Garda Síochána for older people.
3. Increase trust and confidence by lessening the fear of crime amongst older people.
4. Determine and respond to the needs and expectations of older people on an ongoing basis.

The government in ROI is also developing a National Positive Ageing Strategy which should help to promote the participation of older people in society. The National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016 also aims to provide the support that enables older people to maintain a high quality standard of living. Improving the quality of life and sense of involvement in the community will contribute to addressing the fear of crime amongst older people.

**International community safety strategies**

- **England and Wales**: Under the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998, each local authority and its police force must establish a multi-agency Community Safety Partnership which includes health, probation, and other authorities, as well as youth representatives.

- **France**: Local security contracts cover most large urban areas. These contracts between government and city mayors require local partnerships to foster access to justice and victim assistance, develop youth employment and provide sports and cultural programmes that meet local needs. This system has also been adopted in Belgium.

- **Netherlands**: A Major Cities Policy was developed where government ministries agree with local government leaders to provide funds for the development of strategies and programmes targeting unemployment, family breakdown, decaying neighbourhoods and public spaces, drug addiction, and crime.

- **Canada**: The Federation of Canadian Municipalities and local authorities have worked together to create community safety plans. The federal government, through its National Crime Prevention Centre, has funded major programmes including a community mobilisation programme, a crime prevention investment fund and a crime prevention partnership programme.

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Policy implications

Further study to identify the factors which contribute to the fear of crime amongst older may be used to develop policies which may lessen its negative impact. As the fear of crime is based on many subjective factors such as a prior history of victimisation or level of engagement with the community, any successful strategy for reducing it should be targeted at those individuals who are most at risk of experiencing a reduced quality of life. This can depend on the area, level and quality of policing, prior history of victimisation and many other factors.

As well as targeting individuals, measures which address whole communities can be implemented. Evidence from Belgium suggests that older people who feel that they live in a neighbourhood that is adapted to them and who have a greater level of social participation feel safer than those who do not. The study showed that loneliness and lack of participation in both social and cultural life has a strong relationship with fear of crime.\(^\text{10}\)

As the fear of crime amongst older people is disproportionate to the actual level of crime, this fear can be reduced by addressing factors other than crime itself. Proposals to reduce the fear of crime amongst older people should be developed in partnership with local communities so as to take account of their level of concern and experiences. Intergenerational work is also important, as older people’s fear can be caused by a perception that the vast majority of young people pose a threat. Opportunities where different generations can learn more about one another, with a focus on safety and crime, could therefore help to reduce fear within the older community.

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\(^{10}\) De Donder et al., Fear of crime and elderly people (2005)