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**Fear of crime among the elderly:  
Beyond simplifying paradoxes**

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## 1 Are the Elderly Less Often Victims of Criminality? More Than One Answer to a Simple Question

The well-established finding that older persons are relatively seldom the victims of crime can be confirmed for the FRG. Just recently, Ahlf (1994) quoted official crime statistics which generally support this trend (see also Kawelowski, 1995).<sup>4</sup> At first hand, one could suspect that this pattern only reflects a lower readiness of the elderly to report criminal victimization to the police. However, the KFN-survey reveals that to the contrary older people tend to call the police more often than younger ones (Wetzels et al., 1995, S. 89ff.). Accordingly, the victim-survey data – in line with the official statistics – clearly show that the prevalence rates for just about all criminal acts involving personal victims sink with increasing age: Person over 60 years of age are due to their own reports less likely victimized than younger persons. Surprisingly, this holds not only für „contact crimes“ such as robber ( $\geq 60$ J.: 1,1‰,  $< 60$  J.: 3,8‰) or violence ( $\geq 60$ J.: 1,5‰,  $< 60$  J.: 13‰), but also for theft ( $\geq 60$ J.: 12,4‰,  $< 60$  J.: 21,3‰) and even for breaking and entering ( $\geq 60$ J.: 9‰,  $< 60$  J.: 10,4‰; these data refer to prevalence rates in 1991 for the old german countries; Wetzels et al., 1995, p. 61).

However, these findings, even if they can be considered to be sufficiently well-founded, may underestimate the elderly's experience with criminal victimization. In particular, considering the *actual* victimization risk in isolation does not account for the fact that older individuals, over the course of their lives, have had a greater opportunity to experience victimization. The risk of ever having become the victim of criminal activity increases proportionally with age: the longer a person lives, the greater *ceteris paribus* the probability that s/he will experience a certain event. Thus, for example, 80-year-olds report twice as many victimization incidents involving breaking and entering than 20-year-olds. A similar pattern of findings has been observed for other frightening crimes (serious physical assault, robbery, personal threat, purse snatching; cf. Greve, Hosser & Wetzels, 1996). The question whether a person belongs to the victim or to the non-victim-group depends obviously on the scope of time regarded (see also Sessar, 1990). Thus, findings that show the elderly are seldom the victims of actual crime yet nevertheless exhibit a more marked fear of crime must be viewed in the proper perspective. The more older a person is, the more likely s/he is an expert of criminality in terms of personal experience with criminal victimization.

Furthermore, the discussion within criminological literature has chiefly concentrated on anonymous crimes that generally occur in public places. It is rather important, however, to note that this perspective neglects the violence and victimization that occur in close social relationships. Although victimization experiences involving close personal acquaintances do not (as a rule)

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<sup>4</sup> The one exception is the subcategory of purse snatching, which at 55.6 percent affects more older women than younger ones. However, recent data suggest reducing trends even with respect to this category of crime (Pfeiffer, Brettfeld & Delzer, 1997).

## Fear of Crime Among the Elderly: Beyond Simplifying Paradoxes<sup>1</sup>

More than two decades ago, Clemente and Kleiman (1976, p. 207) claimed that "... it is reasonable to argue that for older people fear of crime is even more of a problem than crime itself." Though it seems to be the „state-of-the-art“-perspective until today (cf. Hale, 1996, p. 100ff.), this was not the starting point of the debate. To the contrary, the discussion on the impact of criminality on older persons started in the early seventies with the assumption that the elderly are "suitable targets" for criminal offenders (cf. Brillon, 1987; Cutler, 1987). At first hand it seems to be very plausible that a "reasoning criminal" (Cornish & Clarke, 1986) is more likely to search for a victim that is unable to defend himself, unable to escape, but at the same time is a relatively promising victim in terms of material goods and property (e.g., compared to children). However, it soon became clear that this belief does not appear to be based upon fact: official statistics on crime as well as large-scale victimization surveys have shown that with respect to almost every kind of criminality, older people are less often victimized than younger ones (e.g., Cook, 1976; Hirschel & Rubin, 1982; Mawby, 1982; Wetzels et al., 1995; among many others). Hence, from a statistical point of view, they carry the lowest risk of victimization.

Surprisingly, the elderly seem to be unaware of their safety: numerous studies have shown that older people are not only *concerned* with criminality as a threat to society in general (cf. Sacco, 1993), but personally *fear* criminal victimization (starting with Clemente & Kleiman, 1976, or Sundeen & Mathieu, 1976; for a recent overview Hale, 1996, p. 100ff.; the difference between concern and fear was already discussed by Furstenberg, 1971). For more than two decades, the criminological literature has been full of alarming reports that older people suffer from fear of crime more than any other age group (for a recent example, see e.g. Parker & Ray, 1990). Consequently, as indicated in Clemente and Kleimans phrase cited above, criminologists have tended shift focus from crime against older people toward the fear of crime among the elderly. Recently Rosenbaum and Heath (1990, p. 222) declared even the „war on fear of crime“ instead of the „war on crime“.

Today, the often cited slogan that the elderly are "prisoners of fear"<sup>2</sup> seems to be widely accepted in the literature (Fattah & Sacco, 1989, p. 212ff; McCoy et al., 1996, p. 193f.) and

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<sup>2</sup> As the headline of Time magazine from 1976 claims (see Fattah, 1993b, p. 61, FN 8; Finley, 1983, p. 24; Skogan, 1981b, p. 29; Yin, 1980, p. 498, 1982, p. 240, 1985, p. 69; similar slogans are cited by McCoy et al., 1996, p. 192). It seems worth noting that beyond the objections concerning its empirical and theoretical

this so-called "victimization-fear-paradox" attained the status of common knowledge among criminologists (cf. Hale, 1996).<sup>3</sup> Although this pattern is not a „paradox“ in a strict sense, the combination of highest scores on fear and lowest (statistical) risk of criminal victimization for the elderly seems indeed to be a rather inconsistent pattern of results. However, attempts to explain this pattern have not always been very convincing. Despite various critical analyses (critical overviews are provided by Eve, 1985; Hale, 1996; LaGrange & Ferraro, 1987; a good example of a critical and differentiated empirical study was conducted by Warr, 1984), it is probably not unfair to say that the „paradox“ takes center stage in the discussion not only as an empirically confirmed finding, but also as still unsolved puzzle which, in many particulars, requires further explanation.

However, despite a large amount of literature (Aday, 1988) the issue of criminality and aging and in particular the emotional and cognitive reactions of the elderly towards criminal threats and victimization are seldom discussed from a geronto-psychological point of view. Usually, older persons as victims of crime as well as the perceptions of crime among the elderly are just mentioned marginally in pertinent gerontological textbooks (e.g., Cutler, 1987; Doyle, 1990). Quite possibly, this is why a second „paradox“ has been overlooked in the present discussion: if a person -- adequately or inadequately -- does in fact exhibit a great fear of criminality, then this should have a negative effect upon his or her general sense of well-being and life quality (Garofalo & Laub, 1978, p. 251; Lawton & Yaffe, 1980, p. 775; Ward, LaGlory & Sherman, 1986, p. 336f; Yin, 1982). However -- contrary to what one might expect -- recent gerontological findings show that general well-being is remarkably stable up to old age; this holds for measures of self-esteem as well as for indices of well-being and depression (cf. Brandtstädter, Wentura & Greve, 1993). There is much support for the notion that older persons generally experience a fair amount of success in coping with critical life events as well as with age-related threats, losses, and deficits (e.g. Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Brandtstädter & Greve, 1994; Staudinger, Marsiske & Baltes, 1995). Consequently, one should „paradoxically“ conclude that the high fear of crime among the elderly doesn't have a considerable impact on their life. Since this also is not very plausible, a more precise look on both sides of the „fear-victimization paradox“ appears promising.

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background discussed in this paper, the phrase 'prisoners of fear' is inappropriate and even cynical because originally this is the title of an impressive book by Ella Lingens (1948) about her memories as prisoner of the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz.

<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the fear-victimization paradox continues to receive mention in almost every examination on the topic; in most cases it is simply reproduced without critical commentary (Akers et al., 1987; Antunes et al., 1977; Boers, 1991, p. 57ff., 1993, p. 71f.; Brillou, 1987, p. 9ff., p. 52ff.; Clarke, 1984, p. 329; Clarke & Lewis, 1982, p. 50; Clemente & Kleiman, 1976, 1977; DuBow, McCabe & Kaplan, 1979, p. 15; Fattah, 1986, p. 472f., 1993b; Finley, 1983, p. 36; Gubrium, 1974; Hindelang, Gottfredson & Garofalo, 1978, p. 183f.; Janson & Ryder, 1983, p. 207; Kennedy & Silverman, 1985, p. 242; 1990, p. 307; Lee, 1983; Lindsay, 1991, p. 55; Lindquist & Duke, 1982; Mawby, 1982, 1986; Normoyle & Lavrakas, 1984; Ollenburger, 1981; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981, p. 77f.; Smith & Hill, 1991, p. 218; Stafford & Galle, 1984, p. 173; Ward, LaGlory & Sherman, 1986; Yin, 1980, p. 499, 1985, p. 20).

The present investigation attempts to analyze criminological findings with respect to this „paradox“ from a gerontological and developmental psychological perspective. The empirical arguments presented in the following rest upon data from a German representative victimization survey conducted in 1992 by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony (KFN) at the request of the Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women, and Youth. In order to obtain nationally representative data on the criminal victimization and fear of crime of older vs. younger persons in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) a representative sample of 15,771 subjects from both the old and new German states were assessed in personal interviews (for description of the sample, the assessment procedure and central results see e.g. Bilsky & Wetzels, 1994; Wetzels et al., 1995; assessment details concerning the data reported here are discussed below). The interview was essentially a retrospective, comprehensive assessment of personal experiences and consequences of victimization. In addition, numerous other criminological aspects (e.g. registering a criminal charge, attitudes toward the severity of punishment), and a scarce collection of psychological aspects (e.g. subjective well-being, perceived social support) were asked.

However, three remarks on possible restrictions of the empirical arguments presented in the following seem to be appropriate in advance. First, the selection of the variables and their respective operationalization in the KFN-survey was not planned from a developmental or gerontological point of view. Accordingly, various aspects that seem to be interesting or even necessary from a geronto-psychological perspective are simply not available for empirical analyses (e.g. health status of the participants, activities of daily living), and the assessment of the variables available is in some cases not as comprehensive and careful as one should demand from a purely psychological point of view. However, the richness of the available information in this sample (in particular concerning criminal victimization and fear of crime) seems to be worth the effort of re-analyzing criminological data from a geronto-psychological perspective. One consequence of this *post-hoc*-perspective, however, is that the „story“ to be told here rules the structure of this paper. Therefore, since its (hi)story is not a typical deductive one, its structure deviates somewhat from the usual sequence (introduction - method - subjects - results - discussion). Second, the analyses presented in the following sections are based upon portions of the total sample. Due to economic restrictions, the study was conducted in a modular fashion, i.e., various representative portions of the sample were presented with various combinations of parts of the master-questionnaire. Thus, the sample size (and, consequently, degrees of freedom) is variable for different analyses and in most cases too small (or even zero) for multivariate analyses, due to the lacking of overlaps between some parts of the questionnaires for different subsamples. Third, the findings presented in the following sections are based exclusively on cross-sectional data. Consequently, since personal tendencies to exhibit -- or report -- fear of crime and violence may also depend on the person's biographical and historical background, the observed differences between older and younger individuals can only be interpreted with reservation as developmental in nature.

appear in official statistics, such crimes are both quantitatively and qualitatively important problems for the elderly (Glendenning, 1993; Pillemer, 1993; Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988; Pillemer & Sutor, 1992; Pillemer & Wolf, 1986; Wolf, 1992; for FRG: Wetzels et al., 1995; Wetzels & Greve, 1996). In fact, the relative risk of victimization by a family member is higher for older individuals than for younger ones; the proportion of experiences of violence within the family related to the total of experiences of violence increases with age (Greve, Hosser & Wetzels, 1996). However, the psychological stress and emotional consequences of such experiences may differ in many important respects from the consequences of anonymous criminality; this is particularly plausible of fear reactions.

## 2 Do Older Individuals Exhibit More Fear of Crime? Different Answers to a Difficult Question

If the discussion regarding whether the elderly are truly less often the victims of criminality requires more differentiation, then this is all the more true for the other side of the fear-victimization paradox. At a first glance criminological research on victimization since the early seventies portrays this side of the paradox („elderly people show more fear than younger ones“) as a clearly replicable finding. A recent review of the literature (Hale, 1996), however, underscores that these studies are hopelessly mixed with respect to their assessment methods, their methods of analyzing the data and their theoretical background (if there is any at all). Accordingly, although most studies report increasing fear with age, some data contradict this claim. For example, Ortega and Myles (1987), despite the comprehensiveness of their sampling procedure, found no direct effect of age on fear of crime, and Smith and Hill (1991, p. 228) found a correlation of  $r = .05$ . Gomme (1988, p. 70) even reports a small negative correlation ( $r = -.08$ ; see also Ferraro & LaGrange, 1992; Krahn & Kennedy, 1985, p. 704). Somewhat more pronounced relationships were found, e.g., by Baker et al. (1983, p. 328), Hindelang, Gottfredson and Garofalo (1978, p. 193), Lewis and Salem (1986, p. 54), Maxfield (1984, p. 242), Mullen and Donnermeyer (1985, p. 239) and Warr (1990; for additional supporting results see section 2.1). This heterogeneous pattern of results proves that a more differentiated discussion of the *concept* ‘fear of crime’ is required in terms of method, content, and theory (Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987). As will become more clear in the following sections, depending upon the theory and methodology (operationalization and assessment procedure) applied, the question of whether the elderly exhibit more fear of crime than their younger counterparts can be answered in many different ways and with surprisingly divergent results.

## 2.1 Fear Increases with Age: The Standard Answer

The first answer to this question might be called the "standard" answer. It has been cited again and again in over 30 years of criminological literature and has provided the foundation for the fear-victimization paradox. In these studies, fear of crime is assessed using the so-called standard question from the American National Crime Survey. The question reads: "How safe do you feel or would you feel if you were here in this area at night, outside, and alone?" (the answer alternatives: very secure -- fairly secure -- fairly insecure -- very insecure; the exact formulation of the question varies somewhat between different studies; for an overview see Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987; Hale, 1996).<sup>5</sup> With respect to this measure of fear of crime, the KFN-survey replicates the previous findings quite clearly: fear of crime assessed this way rises with age. A comparison of means over eight age cohorts (Coh I: < 20 years, Coh II: 20-29, Coh III: 30-39, Coh IV: 40-49, Coh V: 50-59, Coh VI: 60-69, Coh VII: 70-79, Coh VIII: 80+) indicated a significant main effect of age ( $F[7;8870] = 34.17, p < .001$ ; cf. figure. 3, below) and also the correlation with age, though not very high, is positive and statistically significant ( $r = .15, p < .001$ ). This replication of previous findings is less interesting in terms of confirming an established fact as it is in demonstrating that the further findings and evaluations reported in this paper are based upon the same empirical foundations employed by those studies which describe the fear-victimization paradox.

In itself, the standard assessment of fear of crime conjures up a host of difficulties (Boers, 1991; Eve, 1985; LaGrange & Ferraro, 1987). One first obvious objection is, as Ferraro and LaGrange (1987, p. 77) ironically remark, that the standard formulation does not make exclusive reference to *criminality* as the object of fear -- for example, the item can be interpreted to include fear of nighttime accidents (Wetzels et al., 1995, p. 207). Second, from a methodological point of view the standard-question as a single-item measure is rather noisy (Taylor & Hale, 1986, p. 158) and tends to overemphasize the variation in responses.

More pertinent critique of the standard assessment is the doubtful validity of a procedure centered only upon specific kinds of criminality (and the fear of such). This measure ignores not only the issue of violence in close personal relationships mentioned above, but also, for example, the issue of public criminality which occurs within buildings including one's own apartment (breaking and entering is certainly one of the most important and threatening of crimes; Lindsay, 1991, p. 55). Several studies have shown that the original findings cannot be replicated when the operationalization of the standard question is slightly altered (e.g., Ferraro

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, the majority of the studies in this research area are based on or referring to this way of measuring 'fear of crime' (e.g. Arnold, 1991, p. 97f.; Baldassare, 1986; Baker et al., 1983; Balkin, 1979; Box, Hale & Andrews, 1988, p. 343; Clarke, 1984, p. 332; Hindelang, Gottfredson & Garofalo, 1978, p. 175ff.; Kennedy & Silverman, 1985, p. 246; Lebowitz, 1975; Lewis & Salem, 1986, p. 45; McCoy et al., 1996, p. 196f.; Sessar, 1990, p. 126; Sundeen, 1977, p. 14; Toseland, 1982; for an additional overview see Boers, 1991).

& LaGrange, 1992; Lee, 1982, p. 662). To this extent, doubts regarding the validity of the standard question as sound indicator of fear of crime seem to be highly justified.

## 2.2 The Fear of Elderly Persons Is Not Exceptional: The "Absolute Level of Fear" Answer

The finding that fear of crime increases with age -- even when one puts aside doubts regarding the accuracy of this observation -- need not be particularly portentous or frightening. In fact, on the four-point scale (see above), the mean value for the standard question is 2.38 ( $SD = 0.86$ ) for the elderly over 60 years of age; this corresponds with the description "fairly secure" (for a similar pattern of results cf. McCoy et al., 1996, p. 199). The value for younger persons is somewhat lower ( $M = 2.14$ ;  $SD = 0.80$ ), as reported above, but corresponds to the same description.

Results from a different operationalization of fear of crime underscore this point. In the KFN-survey, the *frequency* with which persons experience fear with regards to four relevant domains was assessed (theft, violence, robber, and rape; item formulation: „how often do you fear to be beaten and injured [etc.]?“ alternatives: never - seldom - sometimes - frequent - very frequent). The results show that, in absolute terms, fear of crime was „seldom“ experienced (figure 1). Apparently, fear of crime among the elderly, despite the vast amount of literature on the subject, is not really a *grave* problem (for a similar viewpoint, see Ferraro & LaGrange, 1992, p. 233; Skogan, 1993, p. 138).

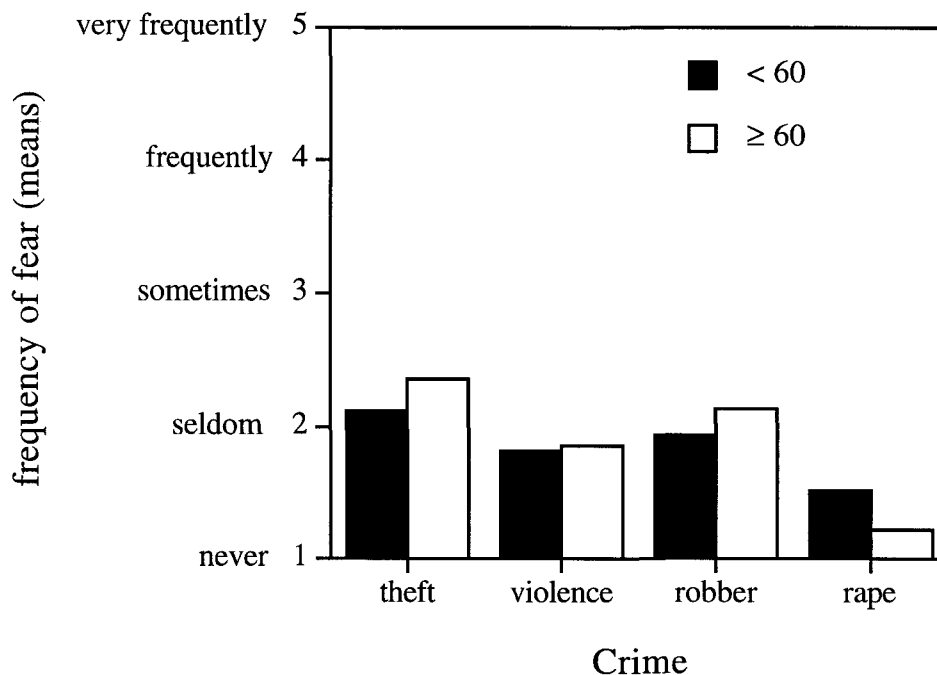


Figure 1: Frequency of fear among older and younger persons (means)