

English summary of Brå report 2018:7



# Crime against the elderly

*On victimisation and  
insecurity*

**brå**

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## On victimisation and insecurity

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## Summary

The overall purpose of this survey has been to shed light, on a national level, on older people's exposure to various types of offences and their insecurity and concern about crime. At the same time as the percentage of older people in the population continues to increase, knowledge about the victimisation of this demographic group has been limited. The goal of the study, which has been undertaken on Brå's own initiative, is to contribute much-needed fundamental information for future work to prevent crime against older people and create greater security.

### Information from three empirical investigations

The report begins with a summary of the existing knowledge on the subject. Three empirical investigations were then used to answer the questions posed in the study. Responses from the Swedish Crime Survey (SCS) were analysed in order to show the scope and general patterns in victimisation of older people as compared with younger people, as well as age-related differences in insecurity and concern about crime. The SCS-Local is a comprehensive survey which focuses on a large selection of the population ages 16-84 and the questions referred to incidents during 2016. In addition, a selection of police reports regarding offences against older people from 2016 have been reviewed for the purpose of describing the circumstances surrounding the offences and the approaches used, with particular focus on typical offences against the elderly. In addition, a number of qualitative interviews have been conducted with older people who have been the victims of crime. Their narratives have provided a deeper understanding of the specific vulnerabilities of older people. The report concludes with a discussion of crime prevention and safety-enhancing initiatives.

### What do "older people" and "offences against the elderly" mean?

"Older people" means people older than 65 years of age, which is consistent with other research and with the definition of older people applied by Swedish public authorities. However, not all victims of crime over 65 years of age have necessarily been victims of typical so-called offences against the elderly. In this report, *offences against the elderly* are defined as: 1) offences where the person's advanced age has clearly been exploited by the perpetrator; 2) offences of which anyone can be

the target but where the risk of realisation is greater when the victim is older; and/or 3) offences targeting anyone, but with greater consequences for older people. All offences against people 65 years of age or older have been included in the analysis, but where possible (primarily in police reports but also in interviews) and despite difficulties in demarcation, these typical offences against the elderly have been shown separately.

## Levels of exposure and concern according to the SCS

The initial question posed by the study is the extent to which older women and men become victims of offences when compared with younger people, whether there are any general age-related patterns in the nature of the offences, and the degree to which older people experience insecurity and concern about crime.

### **One-sixth of all older people were the victim of an offence**

Among all people 65-84 years of age or older, 17 per cent – one in six – has been the victim of some offence against the individual or against their household during the preceding year (18 per cent of people 65-74 years of age and 15 per cent of people 75-84 years of age). In general, older people state a lower level of victimisation for all types of offences as compared with people younger than 65 years of age.

Among older people, the percentage of men who state that they were the victim of any offence is somewhat higher than that of older women. The opposite is true in respect of people under 65 years of age, where women report higher levels than men – this is primarily explained by the fact that exposure to sexual offences is estimated as relatively high in that group. The age-based difference in terms of victimisation is the greatest specifically in respect of sexual offences, but also for assault (i.e. violent offences). The levels which were reported for older people in respect of these offences are very low – less than one per cent. Of all studied offences against the individual, exposure to threats and, above all, harassment, were most common among older people.

Approximately 4 per cent of both older women and older men stated that they were harassed with unwanted conversations, visits, or suchlike. Among men, almost no difference was observed between the exposure to harassment for older men and younger men. In respect of criminal incidents (instead of victims, who may have been victims of several offences of the same type), experiences of harassment and fraud represent a somewhat greater percentage of all self-reported criminal offences among older people, when compared with people under 65 years of age.

In respect of the level of offence, as well as the structure of the offence, it appears that differences between women and men were somewhat less among older people than among younger people. This is true, for example, of the relationship to the perpetrator of assault and threats, where the percentage of incidents where the perpetrator is someone close to them or an acquaintance is greater when older people are victims than younger people, albeit primarily for men. As a result,

certain scenarios are more like those when older women are victims (e.g. violence at the hands of adult children), although it is still significantly more common for older women to be the victims of domestic violence than older men.

### **High degree of concern in relation to the risk of specific offences**

Previous research shows that older people tend to show a relatively high level of insecurity and concern about crime disproportionate to their lower risk of actually becoming a victim. This observation is both contradicted and confirmed in this study, depending on the type of question which was posed. The SCS shows that, in general, concern about crime and insecurity is lower among older people than younger people. On the other hand, older people appear to have high degree of concern about being the victim of specific offences which is disproportionate to their low risk of being the victim of that same offence (among older people as a *group*). This is particularly clear as regards concern about burglary, assault, and robbery. The results also show that regardless of age, people who have personally been the victim of any offence have a higher degree of concern and insecurity than those who have not been a victim. At the same time, it appears that this link between concern and one's *own* victimisation is somewhat weaker among older people; this indicates that older people have a higher level of concern about crime and feel insecurity for reasons other than having personally been a victim. It may also be the case that concern and awareness of a greater vulnerability renders older people more likely to avoid certain risks than younger people (for example being outdoors at night, see below), which contributes a lower rate of victimisation.

### **One in five women over the age of 74 does not go outdoors late at night due to insecurity**

Generally, one can measure concern and insecurity in many different ways and the different metrics reveal, in part, varying age differences. There are two questions posed in the SCS which are noteworthy in respect of the higher level of concern among older people. The first is that older people, particularly those 65-74 years of age, are more concerned about crime trends in society; approximately one-half of this age bracket feel such concern, which can be compared with two in five people among those under age 65. The second question involves the degree to which the person refrained from going outdoors late at night due to insecurity; approximately one in five women over the age of 74 responded that she never goes out because of that reason. The corresponding percentage among women under 65 years of age is 8 per cent. Similar age patterns are observed among men as well, albeit at lower levels throughout (5 per cent among the oldest men never go out due to insecurity).

### **Police reports of offences against older people: recurring methods**

Almost 1,700 police reports regarding a selection of types of offences have been reviewed in order to describe that which characterises offences against the elderly and, primarily, typical offences against the elderly. These types of offences are fraud, theft in a home without

burglary, pickpocketing, purse snatching, robbery, assault by acquaintances/close associates, assault by unknown persons, sexual offences, and molestation. Among these, offences against the elderly (as defined in this study) are, to the greatest extent possible, reported separately and common methods are illustrated with examples from the free text of the reports. The selection refers to reports from 2016 where at least one of the victims was 65 years of age or older.

### **Fraud and theft: uninvited visits and deceptive telephone calls**

Certain types of fraud, as well as theft, are often described as typical offences against the elderly. A relatively large percentage of these offences are perpetrated in organised form by leagues which systematically exploit the vulnerable position of older people. This frequently involves uninvited visits to the home by false service people or false civil servants. This can involve both cheating older people out of money with false services and incomplete work, but perpetrators can also steal valuable goods or cash from the home. In respect of theft from the home, suspicion is not infrequently cast on home healthcare aides. Among offences which were classified as *theft in the home without burglary*, as many as half could be identified as typical offences against the elderly.

In respect of fraud, certain perpetrators begin the attempted offence with a telephone call and exhibit a high degree of social cunning – in a number of matters, the individual pretended that they were the older person's doctor, offering a new and expensive medicine. Another repeated method was a so-called grandchild scam, where the caller causes the older person to believe that they are relatives and the older person is duped into making a financial contribution because they believe there is an emergency. Examples of other common cases of fraud against the elderly include telephone sales of subscriptions, fraud involving stolen bank cards, unlawful transfers, or certain internet scams, where older people may find it more difficult to identify an attempted offence and the attempt often comes to fruition more often. This also applies to so-called offer invoices, i.e. offers which appear to be an invoice which the older person believes must be paid.

### **The closely related methods of pickpocketing, purse snatching, and robbery**

In many cases, the approaches employed by perpetrators in the reviewed pickpocketing, purse snatching, and robbery offences are similar in nature. All of these offences can be regarded as incidents where the perpetrator has, for example, followed the older person while they were out shopping and, on the way or at the door, grabs their wallet or bag – either covertly, for example by pretending to want to help the older person with their mobility aid in the stairwell (pickpocketing) or by violence (purse snatching or robbery). In a number of cases, the bag was grabbed from the older person's mobility aid or bicycle handlebars, which sometimes led to a fall injury for the victim. Some of the pickpocketing incidents took place in grocery stores.

### **Assault and harassment: domestic violence, violent children, youth gangs, and neighbour feuds**

A large number of the reports of assault by *acquaintances* involve incidents of domestic violence which, in eight out of ten cases, is perpetrated against older women. Moreover, a relatively large number of cases of assault by perpetrators who are acquaintances involve children or grandchildren who often have psychological or substance abuse problems and become violent in connection with a visit. A number of incidents also involve various types of neighbour feuds, which also often occur in connection with harassment of the elderly, but these cases have violent elements. There are fewer offences against the elderly among the incidents which involve assault by an *unknown person* (16 per cent as compared with 26 per cent in the event of assault by an acquaintance). This includes a number of traffic incidents with older men as victims, youth gangs which appear to make attacks against an older person with no reason – these attacks sometimes stop with harassment and sometimes escalate into assault. Sometimes the reason is also theft, but the older person is injured in the course of commission of the crime and thus also reports it as an assault.

### **Reports of rape which are difficult to interpret**

A large majority of reports of sexual offences against older people – seven in ten – involve sexual molestation of older women, often through telephone calls with offensive sexual propositions or written messages with similar content. Most of the other offences are categorised as rapes and this category includes a number of serious incidents where the perpetrator exploits the older person's reduced functioning and their dependency. The suspected person in these cases is often a health caregiver or a person close to the older person. At the same time, a relatively large percentage of the rapes (although few in number) involved repeated reports made by the same victim, in which the narrative itself contains significant indications that no offence occurred. One example is twelve reports of rape made by a woman dementia patient at an elder care facility, naming several individuals who were alleged to have visited her regularly at night and committed very unusual acts against her. At the same time, these reports reflect a special type of vulnerability among certain older women, which must be taken into consideration.

### **Deadly violence against older people: domestic violence, murder-suicide, and drunken disputes**

Between 1990 and 2013, an average of ten older people each year, approximately as many women as men, died violently. In certain cases, the circumstances are reminiscent of the assault cases described above. In respect of women, the perpetrator is a relative in seven of ten cases, and a partner in four of ten cases. This frequently also involves other family-related violence with a deadly outcome (which is uncommon when younger women are killed), such as violence by children and grandchildren with psychological problems. A number of cases involve so-called murder-suicides in respect of older couples where (in all cases) the man kills his partner and then takes his own life – in certain cases as part of a mutual understanding. The background is often the incurable illness of one or both of them or, in the alternative, a situation when one of them is compelled to move into separate housing and the couple does not want to separate.

In respect of deadly violence against older men, a wide variety of different approaches have been observed. Drunken disputes with a deadly outcome occur as often as family-related violence (however seldom with a partner as perpetrator), as do a series of other scenarios. A clear difference when compared with deadly violence against younger men is that older men are seldom victims within a criminal subculture. On the other hand, criminal motives may exist – primarily in connection with burglary of older men, but also of older women.

## What older people have to say

In order to supplement the overall picture of older people's victimisation and concern about crime, and to obtain a deeper understanding of the experience of older people, interviews have been conducted with 11 women and 7 men, all of whom were victims of crime and, at the time of the offence, were 65 years of age or older. The interview subjects were recruited with the help of Victim Support Sweden, and the primary aim was to interview older people who, based on Brå's criteria set forth above, were victims of typical types of offences against the elderly. Their narratives in this context must not be seen as representative of the experiences of older people in general, but they illustrate examples of the group's vulnerability and risk factors associated with advanced age.

### **A series of risk factors: looking defenceless, needing help from other people, and being out of touch with social changes**

The interview subjects had been victims of many different types of offences and, on that basis, described the specific circumstances which, in their experience, rendered them vulnerable and could increase their risk of becoming a victim of crime. These are physical limitations, such as looking defenceless, or otherwise being perceived as a suitable victim – for example using mobility aids outdoors, having poor vision or hearing. Consequently, they are more often at risk of being the victim of various types of offences, for example purse snatching, pickpocketing, or mugging. The interviewed subjects were very conscious of this type of defencelessness.

Another risk situation which a number of people reiterated was the fact that they needed help at home and were visited by many different people, who were frequently new and unknown. Interview subjects who had not specifically been victims of this type of offence also expressed concern that this situation would lead to, above all, theft, or fraud. Insecurity is created by not knowing who has, or even how many people have, a key. Some of the older people reflected on the dilemma of locking out "the bad guys" but at the same time not letting "the good guys" come in in the event of a health emergency.

A number of the interview subjects had been victims of fraud and an additional risk factor they described was the fact that society had "gotten away from them" and there was thus a greater risk of being duped. They believe that they have had an inappropriately high level of



good faith and a lack of healthy scepticism when they have been the victims of fraud attempts, but also that they had limited knowledge in terms of technological developments and internet behaviour.

### **Extensive consequences when older people are victims**

In addition to the fact that they can be perceived as an easier target, the situation of older crime victims is characterised by an additional type of vulnerability – namely that the consequences of the offence are often significantly more extensive than when younger people are victims. The majority of the interview subjects talked about long-term psychological repercussions in terms of concern, anxiety, and distrust. Common consequences include insomnia and not daring to leave home. In addition, even minor assaults can result in serious injuries to older people and recovery time can be very long. Psychological recovery can also take time. A number of the older people said that their quality of life had clearly declined after the offence. People who had been duped in connection with fraud also experienced significant shame and found it difficult to talk to their closest friends and family about what happened.

### **Men and women relate to their vulnerability differently**

At the same time, the interview subjects also included individuals who, despite their sometimes very advanced ages, instead emphasised their retained strength and energy and found it difficult to see themselves as vulnerable or typical crime victims. This was particularly common among the interviewed men, although the picture that they gave was, in certain cases, contradictory. For example, they could admit – sometimes between the lines, but sometimes relatively openly – the significance of age in connection with vulnerability, but chose instead to emphasise that they are fully capable of taking care of themselves ("*if I'd only discovered the crime in time* ", according to a quote from one man who was the victim of a pickpocket). These narratives are sometimes in contrast to how most of the women thought about their vulnerability; generally, the women used more emotive words while men focused on facts regarding the chain of events. The extent to which this tangible difference reflects a generational propensity is unclear, but it is conceivable that older men, to a greater degree, or differently than young men, perceive a need to live up to an ideal of masculinity – i.e. they do not want to appear as weak, vulnerable, and disempowered. In certain cases, this serves as a strength, but also risks contributing to it feeling more difficult to both seek and obtain assistance in an exposed situation.

### **Brå's assessment**

The survey shows a series of circumstances which characterise the criminality which affects older people and the serious consequences of the offence for the victim in the individual case precisely because of the victim's advanced age. As a result, even though exposure to crime is generally lower for older people than for younger people, the preventive and safety-enhancing work requires specialised knowledge and tools adapted to the target group. The fact that one in six people aged 65-84 states that they have been the victim of an offence during 2016 is *per se* remarkable, particularly since the nonreporting rate can be deemed to be greater in respect of the most vulnerable older people.

### **Treatment by the justice system is important, but initiative is needed on many levels**

The justice system has significant responsibility in respect of offences against older people, not in the least in respect of how it treats people, interview techniques, or other steps in the legal process which require specialist knowledge in the area. Brå's contacts with representatives of the police indicate that there is potential for improvement here. At the same time, offences against older people constitute a problem area in which many different actors must get involved if victimisation is to be prevented and older people can feel greater security on a daily basis. One factor which is described as important in the newly adopted national crime prevention programme, "Together against crime" 2017<sup>1</sup>, is an increased awareness of the impact of political reform on criminality. It is recommended that an analysis of the consequences of criminality always be conducted prior to the drafting of new legislation or other reforms. At the municipal level, there are a number of activities which can have an impact on crime trends and, thus, impact analyses should also be conducted in conjunction with municipal decisions. This is deemed to have extra significance in respect of some of the types of offences of which older people are victims. The results of the report show, for example, that there can be risks associated with residential and care situations where political decisions are fundamental in terms of how the issues are to be addressed. In certain cases, offences can be prevented through measures in the healthcare system and municipal eldercare systems. A great deal of work has already been commenced within these areas. At the same time, the report presents several specific proposals for measures produced based on the conclusions of the survey and in consultation with experts in the reference groups associated with the project.

### **Geriatric healthcare and eldercare are key players for shedding light on victimisation of older people**

Geriatric healthcare and eldercare are, in many ways, key players in respect of discovering whether an older person has been the victim of an offence. Many older people live alone, and those who do are victims of crime more often. In certain cases, a large percentage of the older person's social interaction takes place with healthcare personnel and they are thus in a position to discover when something is not quite right. These personnel can discover everything from economic offences against the elderly to possible domestic violence or violence by adult children – something which this study points out as a relatively common offence against the elderly. However, a series of ethical dilemmas and conflicting loyalties can arise when violence is discovered, and these would be easier to handle if there existed legislative support when one is considering making report. Such support already exists in respect of problems within eldercare (Lex Sarah), but there is no reporting obligation when personnel discover that older people have been victims of violence by relatives or closely related persons. Such a reporting obligation can be considered.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tillsammans mot brott. Ett nationellt brottsförebyggande program.* (Together against crime. A national crime prevention programme) Government Communication 2016/17:126.

In the healthcare realm, discussions have also been underway for some time regarding possibilities in terms of instituting a screening tool to enable assessment of whether elderly patients have been the victims of assault. At present, there is a research project aimed at, among other things, evaluating possible screening tools, as well as the preparedness of personnel to use these tools. An increased effort in respect of such tools would improve the possibilities to discover victims of violence, particularly among those whose limited social network makes them particularly vulnerable.

### **Reduce the risks of offences within geriatric healthcare and eldercare**

At the same time as personnel have a unique possibility to discover offences against the elderly, they have the same possibility to personally commit criminal acts against the recipient of care, who is often in a dependent position. Studies show that many employees at residential care homes for the elderly have witnessed neglect and even physical attacks by their colleagues, and have also admitted committing such acts. Brå's review, as well, shows that the police receive reports regarding a number of physical, sexual, and economic offences within eldercare. Moreover, the home healthcare situation for older people who are cared for at home entails certain risks, since they are compelled to let in and trust (sometimes many) strangers. When theft occurs in the home – apparently one of the most common offences against the elderly – suspicions are frequently raised in respect of, for example, home healthcare personnel, who are sometimes the only people with the key to the residence. Such suspicions need not always be legitimate, but in such case the issue is not only one of reducing the risk of crime, but also creating greater security for older people in their own homes.

When protecting older people who need health care and assistance, a number of parallels may be drawn to childcare. Both children and older people are what researchers describe as vulnerable crime victims and it is important, to the greatest extent possible, to guarantee that the backgrounds of people who work closely with these groups and are part of their daily lives do not increase the risk of exploiting the vulnerability of older people. As is the case with childcare, it may be suitable to consider require criminal background checks of new hires within geriatric healthcare and eldercare. Employers are already able to request that an applicant enclose a criminal record extract with their application documents. In instituting a legislative requirement for criminal record extracts for a specific purpose, one can, however, limit it to relevant offences and include a time limit. This would increase accuracy and create greater security for older people.

### **Application of Lex Sarah**

Another way to reduce the risks within geriatric care may be to review the use of the provisions of Lex Sarah regarding irregularities in geriatric healthcare and eldercare. Specifically, personnel have a reporting obligation in the event of such irregularities and a report must be submitted to the Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO) in the event of serious irregularities. There is much to indicate that the number of Lex Sarah reports submitted to IVO do not reflect the actual scope of

the problem; no reports whatsoever are made from certain municipalities. This means that despite the obligation to report, many assaults within geriatric care remain hidden. Research also confirms a failure to report in respect of such assaults. Accordingly, it may be important to evaluate how the provisions of Lex Sarah are used and any possible impediments which make it possible to bring more irregularities to light.

### **Better control over who, and how many people, visit older people**

The fact that many different employees within the home healthcare services pass through older people's homes is not optimal. It creates insecurity and increases the risk of unauthorised people entering the residence. Municipalities can take active measures, for example by scheduling to reduce the number of different carers who visit an older person per a specified unit of time, and there may be a need for guidelines regarding a maximum number of carers. A situation in which the older person could develop some level of personal relationship to the carers would be desirable in terms of increasing a sense of security. If this is not possible, there should at least be a requirement whereby the older person can always be certain that the individual presenting himself or herself as a carer actually is such. In Brå's opinion, it may be difficult to comply with a requirement that personnel identify themselves with an ID document at every visit if the goal is effective protection. One promising alternative is for the municipality to consider technical measures, for example the digital door system which has been developed in Uddevalla. The system makes it easier to keep unauthorised individuals from the older person's home without reducing the possibility for, for example, emergency healthcare services to come in when necessary. As has been emphasised in Brå's interviews with elderly crime victims, this is a delicate balance. Solutions to such problems are therefore urgent.

### **Provide older people with information about how they can protect themselves**

In respect of fraud and other types of property offences, increased knowledge among older people, as well as those in their proximity, maybe the most important and most effective tool. It is therefore urgent that various parties – the police, pensioners' associations, and the media – actively and regularly disseminate information regarding, for example, constantly new methods used by fraudsters. The police's CIRCA group, which investigates serial offences against older people, regularly uses the media as a means of spreading information about leagues which prey on older people. The National Fraud Centre also works in a similar manner and has also produced a training packet, *Don't Try To Fool Me*, which is used in study circles customarily arranged by one of a number of pensioner associations. The film *Väska* (The Purse), which was produced in local cooperation by various parties in the city of Gothenburg in 2010, is also used for training purposes and contains study circle material. Similar efforts to give older people tools to be able to better protect themselves have been appreciated; at the same time, it must be underscored that the primary responsibility for reducing victimisation of older people and creating greater security in their daily life lies primarily with the people in their proximity.

### **Social networks prevent crime, provide safety, and help with processing**

The physical environment is important in terms of creating security, and this perspective must be taken into consideration as early as at the level of city planning and construction planning. As the study's results show, there are many older people, particularly women, who do not leave home at night due to insecurity. Residential environments should be created not only to reduce the risk of crime, but also to create a greater sense of security. However, the social environment can also have an important safety-enhancing effect. Many older people live alone and are more or less isolated. One example of an effective measure could be various types of volunteer work and neighbourhood watch programmes. The latter has been developed primarily with a focus on preventing break-ins, but can also be effective in respect of other types of offences against older people, not in the least domestic violence. Such violence tends to be repeated and more must therefore be done in order to shed light on and prevent continued criminality. Here as well, neighbours can be important key persons and the *Huskurage* project, focused specifically on preventing violence in close relationships, is a good example of how such types of neighbourhood watch programmes can be encouraged.

### **Geriatric issues must be addressed**

In order to anchor the various crime prevention and security creating initiatives, various sectors within society must take an interest in the situation of older people. The research shows that the absence of in-depth knowledge regarding the victimisation of older people may be the result of age discrimination which is not limited merely to issues regarding the security and vulnerability of older people. According to international comparisons, older people in Sweden generally have a lower status than in certain other countries. This indicates a need for a change in attitude.

Particularly in light of the aging population, geriatric issues must receive greater attention in public discussion. If the initiatives and proposals which are discussed in Brå's report relate to a group with a weak voice, there is a risk that they will not be heard and followed.