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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Bureau of Justice Statistics

Bureau of Justice Statistics
Special Report

NCJRS
DEC 4 1992
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Elderly Victims

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October 1992

The elderly comprise the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population, and their protection and well being are a high priority in our society. Violent crime victimization, which challenges residents of all ages, may hold especially serious physical consequences for the elderly.

This report uses the most recent data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) and the Comparative Homicide File to examine the characteristics of crime against the elderly. The central conclusion is that although the elderly are *less* likely than those who are younger to sustain a victimization by crime, they are *more* likely— when victimized— to be harmed by strangers and to sustain grievous injuries. Estimated homicide rates bear out similar conclusions about the elderly and their vulnerability to crime.

The NCVS establishes in this report, as in many others, its central importance in identifying the facts about crime victimization. Based on interviews with almost 50,000 households every 6 months, the continuous survey provides valuable, up-to-date knowledge essential for sound policies.

Steven D. Dillingham, Ph.D., LL.M.
Director

Persons age 65 or older are the least likely of all age groups in the Nation to experience either lethal or non-lethal forms of criminal victimization. Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) of the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) and from the Comparative Homicide File (CHF) are used in this report to give a detailed accounting of criminal victimization of the elderly. Although older persons were found to be less likely to experience a criminal victimization than younger people, they were more likely to suffer the more harmful consequences of a victimization such as sustaining injury or requiring medical care.

Some of the major findings in this report include:

- The elderly were significantly less likely than younger age groups to become the victims of virtually all types of crime. For example, persons age 65 or older comprise about 14% of persons aged 12 or older in this sample but less than 2% of all victimizations.

- Elderly robbery victims were more likely than younger victims to face multiple offenders and also more likely to face offenders armed with guns.

- Elderly victims of violent crime were more likely than other victims to report that their assailants were strangers. Consistent with this, it was also found that among victims of homicide the elderly were more likely to be killed by a stranger during the commission of a felony; younger individuals were more likely to be killed by someone known to them in a conflict situation such as an argument or fight.

- Elderly victims of violent crime were significantly more likely to be victimized at or near their home than victims under the age of 65.

- Elderly victims of violent crime were less likely to use measures of self-protection compared to victims under the age of 65.

- Elderly victims of all forms of crime, including crimes of violence, crimes of theft, and household crime, were signficantly more likely to report their victimizations to the police compared to victims under the age of 65.

- When the elderly were divided into two groups — age 65 to 74 and age 75 or older — the older group was generally found to have had lower rates of crime victimization.

- Among the elderly, certain groups were generally more likely to experience a crime than others: males, blacks, divorced or separated persons, urban residents, and renters. Those elderly in the lowest income categories were more likely to experience a crime of violence but less likely to experience a crime of theft than those with higher household incomes.

Lifestyle and vulnerability

The lifestyle of a group may affect its vulnerability to certain crimes. In general, compared to younger persons, the elderly are more likely to live alone and to stay at home because they are less likely to work full time or regularly participate in activities after dark. These characteristics or routines may contribute to the elderly having a lower likelihood of assault or robbery by a

relative or acquaintance. Because of this lower risk of victimization by nonstrangers, elderly victims of violent crime are proportionately more likely than victims in other age groups to be victimized by strangers.

Victimization rates

For virtually all crimes, the elderly were significantly less likely than younger age groups to be victimized (table 1). Those individuals in the youngest age group of 12 to 24 consistently had the highest victimization rates across all types of crime, while those 65 years of age or older generally had the lowest. The overall victimization rate for crimes of violence was nearly 16 times higher for persons under age 25 than for persons over age 65 (64.6 versus 4 victimizations per 1,000 persons in each age group). Similarly, the robbery rate for those under 25 was nearly 6 times higher than for those age 65 or older.

• Household crime victimizations showed a pattern similar to personal crime victimizations. Those persons over the age of 65 were significantly less likely to become victims of household crime than younger age groups. This was true for all forms of household crime, including burglary, household larceny, and motor vehicle theft.

• Personal larceny with contact (such as purse snatching and pocket picking), did not reflect this pattern. Those who were 65 or older were about as likely as those under age 65 to be victims of personal larceny which involved contact.

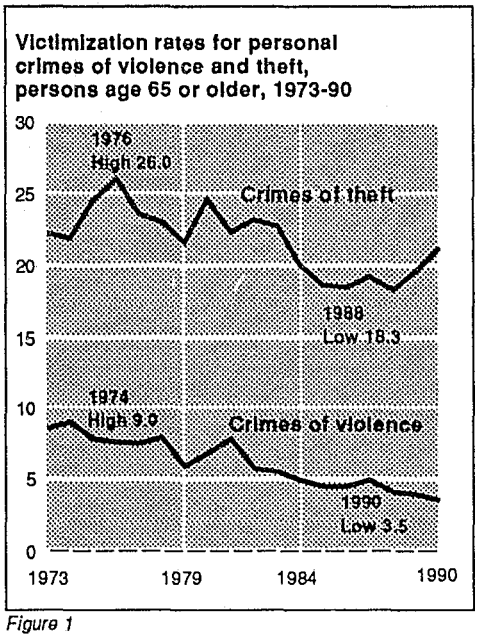

Figure 1

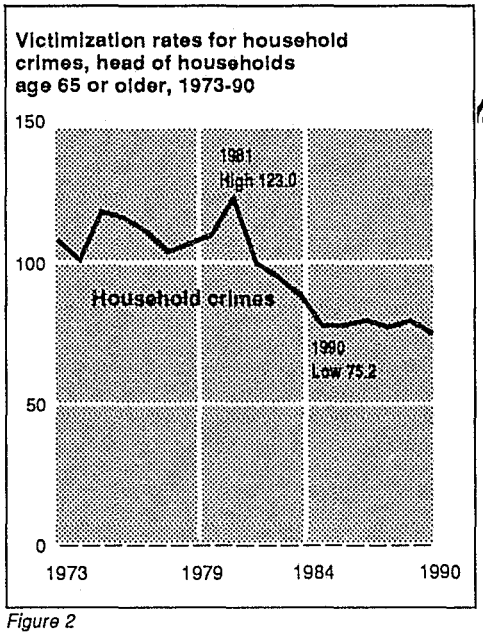

Figure 2

Trends

Crime victimization rates among the elderly have generally been declining during the 1980's. Both personal and household 1990 victimization rates for those age 65 or older were significantly lower than earlier highs.

• Violent crime victimizations against the elderly were highest in 1974 (9 per 1,000 persons over 65) and reached a low rate in 1990 of 3.5. This 1990 rate was 61% lower than the high recorded in 1974 (figure 1).

• Theft victimizations experienced by the elderly peaked in 1976 with a rate of 26 and were lowest in 1988 with a rate of 18.3. While rates of theft victimization appeared to be increasing since 1988, this increase was not significant. Theft victimization rates in 1990 were still about 22% lower than those witnessed during the mid-1970's.

• Household crimes against the elderly jumped to a high in 1981 of 123 per 1,000 households with heads over the age of 65 (figure 2). Since that time, however, household victimizations against the elderly have been decreasing and reached the low rate of 75 in 1990.

Table 1. Average annual victimization rates, by age of victim and type of crime, 1987-90

	Number of victimizations per 1,000 persons or households			
	12-24	25-49	50-64	65 or older
Crimes of violence	64.6	27.2	8.5	4.0
Rape	1.5	.6	.1*	.9*
Robbery	10.0	5.3	2.4	1.5
Assault	53.1	21.2	5.9	2.3
Aggravated	18.4	7.5	2.2	1.1
Simple	34.6	13.7	3.7	1.3
Crimes of theft	112.7	71.2	38.3	19.5
Personal larceny with contact	3.6	2.4	2.2	2.6
Personal larceny without contact	109.0	68.8	36.1	16.9
Average annual population	45,983,893	92,550,343	32,787,706	28,577,225
Household crimes[a]	309.3	200.2	133.0	78.5
Burglary	121.3	66.6	43.3	32.4
Household larceny	153.4	111.9	73.3	39.5
Motor vehicle theft	34.6	21.7	16.4	6.6
Average annual number of households	6,534,240	48,597,483	19,026,720	19,803,345

Note: The victimization rate is the annual average of the number of victimizations for 1987-90 per 1,000 persons in each age group. Detail may not add to total because of rounding.
*Estimated is based on 10 or fewer sample cases.
[a]Household crimes are categorized by age of head of household.

Characteristics of crimes against the elderly

The NCVS data have consistently demonstrated that the elderly have a lower probability of becoming victims of crime than do younger people. However, of the crimes they do experience, the elderly appear to be particularly susceptible to crimes motivated by economic gain such as robbery, personal and household larceny, and burglary. For example, those under age 65 were almost four times more likely to be victimized by an assault than by robbery, whereas for those 65 or older, the likelihood of assault was 1½ times that of robbery. Like the general population, the elderly are most susceptible to household crimes and least susceptible to crimes of violence. For specific crimes of violence, however, differences by age can be found.

Among the elderly, the victimization rates for assault and robbery are not significantly different. For the younger age groups, however, assault rates are much higher than robbery rates. Almost 38% of violent crime victimizations against the elderly were robberies, while robberies accounted for only 15% of violent victimizations against those under age 25 and for 20% against all persons under age 65.

A pattern of age-related differences also exists for homicides. Most homicide victims age 65 or older were killed during the commission of another felony, like a robbery, and victimization rates for the elderly were equivalent for homicides committed by relatives, acquaintances, and strangers (tables 16 and 17). By contrast, younger homicide victims were more likely to be killed by an acquaintance and to die during events such as a fight rather than to fall victim to a stranger during the commission of another crime.

Table 2. Perceived presence of weapons in violent crimes, by age of victim, 1987-90

	Percent of violent crime victims	
	Under 65	65 or older
Unarmed offenders	65%	62%
Armed offenders	35	38
Type of weapon used		
Guns	36%	41%
Knives or sharp instruments	30	29
Blunt objects	19	18
Other weapons	15	12

Weapons

About the same percentage of elderly victims of violent crimes (38%) as younger victims (35%) perceived their assailants using weapons (table 2). For those victims who believed their assailants were armed, however, elderly victims were somewhat more likely than younger victims to face offenders armed with guns (41% versus 36%). Offenders wielding weapons like knives or blunt objects victimized about the same percentage of violent crime victims age 65 or older as those who were younger.

Crimes by strangers

While victims of violent crime, regardless of age, were more likely to be victimized by strangers than by acquaintances or relatives, robbery victims age 65 or older were more likely than other victims to have been robbed by a stranger (83% versus 74%) (table 3). This was not true of assault victims. The percentage of assaults committed by strangers was not significantly different between elderly victims and their younger counterparts.

Crimes occurring at home

Elderly violent crime victims were almost twice as likely as younger victims to be victimized at or near their home (table 4). For example, elderly robbery victims were 53% more likely to be victimized in their own home and more than twice as likely to be victimized near their home than were younger victims of robbery. This was true for assault as well. This finding may reflect the lifestyle differences discussed earlier.

Table 3. Relationship of offenders to victims of violent crime by age of victim and type of crime, 1987-90

	Percent of violent crime victims whose offenders were:			
	Relatives	Acquaintances	Strangers	Relationship not ascertained
Crimes of violence				
Under 65	8%	33%	56%	3%
65 or older	8	20	64	8
Robbery				
Under 65	5	17	74	4
65 or older	3	5	83	9
Assault				
Under 65	9	36	52	3
65 or older	13	32	47	8

Table 4. Place of occurrence of crimes of violence, by age of victim and type of crime, 1987-90

	Place of occurrence					
	Total	At home	Near home	On the street	In commercial or public establishment	Elsewhere
Crimes of violence						
Under 65	100%	14%	11%	39%	21%	15%
65 or older	100	25	25	31	9	10
Robbery						
Under 65	100	13	9	52	16	10
65 or older	100	20	21	37	13	10
Assault						
Under 65	100	14	12	36	21	15
65 or older	100	27	29	27	7	10

Injury and medical care

While about the same percentage of violent crime victims age 65 or older (33%) as those under age 65 (31%) were injured, some evidence indicates that older victims received more serious injuries (table 5). Of those victims who were injured, 9% of the elderly reported serious injury such as broken bones and internal injuries, compared to 5% of those under age 65. In addition, 14% of elderly victims who were injured needed hospital care compared to 8% of younger victims.

Self-protection

Elderly victims of violent crime were less likely to take self-protective action than were younger victims (table 6). Violent crime victims under the age of 65 took self-protective action 73% of the time, compared to 58% for those victims age 65 or over. Moreover, of those crime victims who took self-protective measures, the elderly were less likely than their younger counterparts to use physical action such as attacking or chasing the offender or physically resisting in some other way.

Police reporting

In general, elderly victims of violent and theft crimes were more likely to report their victimization to the police compared to younger victims (table 7). Seven out of ten elderly victims of robbery reported their victimization to the police, compared to just over 5 out of 10 robbery victims under age 65. There was no measurable difference, however, between the police reporting behavior of younger and elderly aggravated assault victims or victims of household crimes.

Single versus multiple offenders

Elderly robbery victims were more likely to be victimized by multiple offenders, compared to their younger counterparts who were more likely to be victimized by single offenders (table 8). The reverse was true for aggravated assaults; younger aggravated assault victims were more likely to report more than one offender compared to elderly aggravated assault victims. Among simple assault victims, the same percentage of both age groups — 80% — reported lone offenders.

Table 5. Injuries, medical treatment, and hospital care received by violent crime victims, by age of victim, 1987-90

Outcome	Percent of violent crime victims: Under 65	65 or older
Injured	31%	33%
Serious	5	9
Minor	26	24
Received medical care	15	19
Hospital care	8	14

Note: Serious injuries are broken bones, loss of teeth, internal injuries, loss of consciousness, rape or attempted rape injuries, or undetermined injuries requiring 2 or more days of hospitalization. Minor injuries are bruises, black eyes, cuts, scratches, swelling, or undetermined injuries requiring less than 2 days of hospitalization.

Table 6. Self-protective measures taken in violent crimes, by age of victim, 1987-90

	Percent of violent crime victims: Under 65	65 or older
Did not take any action	27%	42%
Took some form of action	73	58
Type of action taken		
Physical action, including attacking offender with weapon, chasing offender, or physically resisting	34	23
Nonphysical action, including arguing or reasoning with offender, screaming, or running away	39	34

Table 7. Reporting to the police, by age of victim and type of crime, 1987-90

	Percent of victimizations reported to police
Crimes of violence	
Under 65	47%
65 or older	60
Robbery	
Under 65	53
65 or older	70
Aggravated assault	
Under 65	57
65 or older	56
Simple assault	
Under 65	40
65 or older	51
Crimes of theft	
Under 65	28%
65 or older	34
Personal larceny with contact	
Under 65	33
65 or older	46
Personal larceny without contact	
Under 65	28
65 or older	32
Household crimes	
Under 65	41%
65 or older	41
Burglary	
Under 65	52
65 or older	50
Household larceny	
Under 65	27
65 or older	27
Motor vehicle theft	
Under 65	75
65 or older	79

Table 8. Number of offenders perceived in crimes of violence, by age of victim and type of crime, 1987-90

	Percent of violent crime victimizations: Single offender	Multiple offenders	Don't know
Crimes of violence			
Under 65	73%	26%	1%
65 or older	65	32	3
Robbery			
Under 65	54	44	2
65 or older	46	50	4
Aggravated assault			
Under 65	69	29	2
65 or older	72	20	8
Simple assault			
Under 65	80	19	1
65 or older	80	16	4

Characteristics of elderly victims

The overall patterns of elderly crime victimization were similar to those found for the population in general with regard to demographic characteristics such as sex, race, and marital status.

• For crimes of violence and household crimes, elderly males were generally more likely to have higher victimization rates than elderly females (table 9). Elderly women, however, were more likely to be victims of personal larceny with contact such as purse snatching.

• Elderly blacks were more likely than elderly whites to be the victims of crimes of violence and household crimes. Blacks also had higher rates of victimization than whites for the specific crimes of robbery, personal larceny with contact, burglary, household larceny, and motor vehicle theft. However, rates of personal larceny which did not involve contact were greater for white residents than comparable rates experienced by black residents.

• Generally, elderly persons who were either separated or divorced had the highest rates of victimization for all types of crime compared to any other marital status category. Elderly victims in the other marital status groups experienced about the same number of household victimizations per 1,000 households. However, among those age 65 or older, married persons were victimized by crimes of violence and crimes of theft at higher rates than either persons who had never married or persons who were widowed.

Elderly residents residing in cities had the highest rates of victimization for all types of crime, compared to either suburban or rural elderly (table 10). The suburban and rural elderly experienced about the same rates of crimes of violence, but suburban elderly experienced higher rates of personal theft— both with and without contact. However, rural elderly were more likely to experience household crimes in general and burglary in particular, compared to those elderly residing in suburban areas.

Table 9. Average annual victimization rates of persons age 65 or older, by sex, race, and marital status and by type of crime, 1987-90

	Number of victimizations per 1,000 persons or households							
	Sex		Race		Marital status			
	Male	Female	White	Black	Never married	Widowed	Married	Divorced/ separated
Crimes of violence	4.9	3.4	3.6	7.6	3.0	4.2	7.6	11.3
Robbery	2.0	1.2	1.2	4.4	1.2	1.7	5.1	1.7
Aggravated assault	1.4	.8	1.1	1.4	.8	.9	1.5	4.8
Simple assault	1.4	1.2	1.2	1.4	.9	1.4	.7	4.4
Crimes of theft	19.8	19.4	19.5	19.6	18.2	4.2	26.3	35.4
Personal larceny with contact	1.8	3.2	2.3	5.7	1.8	2.9	6.1	6.4
Personal larceny without contact	17.9	16.2	17.2	13.9	16.4	15.1	20.2	30.0
Household crimes*	82.2	74.3	70.9	154.1	77.6	75.1	71.1	110.4
Burglary	32.8	31.9	29.1	63.8	28.7	33.7	35.2	46.3
Household larceny	41.6	37.1	36.5	71.9	41.6	35.7	34.1	37.8
Motor vehicle theft	7.7	5.2	5.3	18.3	7.2	5.7	1.8	10.5

*Household crimes are categorized by sex, race, and marital status of head of household.

Table 10. Average annual victimization rates of persons age 65 or over, by location of residence, home ownership, and type of crime, 1987-90

	Number of victimizations per 1,000 persons or households				
	Locality of residence			Tenure	
	City	Suburb	Rural	Own	Rent
Crimes of violence	7.1	2.9	2.2	3.1	7.7
Robbery	3.5	.9	.4	1.1	3.6
Aggravated assault	1.4	.8	1.0	1.0	1.6
Simple assault	1.9	1.1	.7	1.0	2.2
Crimes of theft	26.4	19.6	11.4	17.8	26.7
Personal larceny with contact	6.5	1.2	.4	1.9	5.5
Personal larceny without contact	19.9	18.4	10.9	16.0	21.1
Household crimes	112.6	61.2	64.5	82.0	66.8
Burglary	42.4	25.6	30.7	33.6	28.3
Household larceny	57.3	31.2	31.3	42.1	30.9
Motor vehicle theft	12.8	4.3	2.5	6.2	7.5

Measurable differences in the rates of victimization distinguished homeowners from renters (table 10). In general, elderly renters were significantly more likely to experience all forms of personal crime including robbery, simple assault, and both types of personal theft. However, elderly homeowners were more likely than renters to become victims of household crime.

Table 11. Average annual victimization rates of persons age 65 or older, by family income and type of crime, 1987-90

	Number of victimizations per 1,000 persons or households			
	Less than $7,500	$7,500-14,999	$15,000-24,999	$25,000 or more
Crimes of violence	12.0	8.4	6.5	6.1
Robbery	4.4	2.6	1.5	3.9
Aggravated assault	3.4	3.3	1.5	.6
Simple assault	3.9	2.3	3.3	1.5
Crimes of theft	29.1	30.4	40.3	60.8
Personal larceny with contact	7.1	4.2	5.7	4.3
Personal larceny without contact	22.0	26.2	34.6	56.5
Household crimes	76.3	70.2	81.3	96.0
Burglary	37.9	29.3	30.7	34.2
Household larceny	35.1	35.0	43.0	51.6
Motor vehicle theft	3.3	5.8	7.5	10.2

Note: Because the distribution of income was less variable for the elderly, the income categories in this table are somewhat different than those reported in other NCVS publications. It should also be remembered that this measure represents only annual family income, not total assets.

Table 12. Average annual victimization rates, by age of victim and type of crime, 1987-90

	Number of victimizations per 1,000 persons or households	
	65-74	75 or older
Crimes of violence	4.7	3.0
Rape	.1*	.1*
Robbery	1.5	1.6
Assault	3.0	1.3
Aggravated	1.3	.7
Simple	1.7	.6
Crimes of theft	22.9	14.2
Personal larceny with contact	2.5	2.8
Personal larceny without contact	20.4	11.1
Average annual population	17,774,054	11,351,210
Household crimes[a]	85.4	68.9
Burglary	33.7	30.5
Household larceny	43.2	34.4
Motor vehicle theft	8.4	4.0
Average annual number of households	11,557,918	8,245,427

Note: The victimization rates are the annual average of the number of victimizations for 1987-90 per 1,000 persons or households in that age group. Detail may not add to total because of rounding.
* Estimate is based on about 10 or fewer cases.
[a]Household crimes are categorized by age of head of household.

The elderly with incomes under $7,500, were generally more likely to experience crimes of violence than those elderly with higher family incomes (table 11). Conversely, those elderly with the highest family income ($25,000 or more) were more likely to experience a personal crime of theft or a household crime.

Many of the demographic variables discussed above are related to each other. For example, an individual's education is almost certainly related to his or her income. In addition, income may also be related to marital status and to place of residence, which, in turn, affects vulnerability to crime.

Victimization rates for those age 75 or older

A variety of differences in victimization patterns occurs when the elderly age group is divided into two groups: 65 to 74 and 75 or older. A number of factors that NCVS does not measure— such as lifestyle, mobility, and ability to recall the details of a victimization— may be related to these differences.

Overall, those 75 or older experienced lower rates of victimization for crimes of violence, crimes of theft, and household crimes compared to those between the ages 65 and 74. There were no significant differences, however, between these two age groups for the specific victimization rates of robbery, aggravated assault, personal larceny with contact, and burglary (table 12).

Persons under age 75 experienced higher rates of victimization than persons age 75 or older, regardless of sex, race, marital status, or family income. When examined within demographic categories, rates for persons 75 or older generally reflected patterns observed for persons age 65 to 74. For example, males age 75 or older were more likely to experience crimes of violence and household crimes than females. However, females age 75 or older were just as likely as their male counterparts to experience a personal theft (table 13).

• Black individuals age 75 or older had an increased risk of being the victims of violent and household crime, but the same risk as whites of experiencing a personal theft.

• Similar to those between the ages of 65 and 74, those age 75 or older were more likely to be the victims of all types of crime if they were divorced or separated than if they were married or widowed.

• Similar to the population under age 75, among the elderly age 75 or older, those who had lower family incomes were more likely than persons with higher incomes to experience a crime of violence and less likely to experience both personal theft and household crime.

• For the more serious injuries, the percentage of violent crime victims in both the older age groups were not significantly different. Thirteen percent of violent crime victims between the ages of 65 and 74 and those age 75 or older were hospitalized for at least 2 days because of their injuries.

• The places where elderly victims were likely to experience violent crime varied for the two age groups: 65 to 74 and 75 or older. For the overall category of violent crimes and for the specific crimes of robbery and assault, victims age 75 or older were more likely to be victimized at home than elsewhere, while those between the ages of 65 and 74 were more likely to be victimized on the street (table 15). A higher percentage of those age 75 or older were victims of violent crime in commercial or public establishments, compared to those age 65 to 74.

Table 13. Average annual victimization rates of persons age 65 to 74 and 75 or older for crimes of violence, crimes of theft, and household crimes

	Number of victimizations per 1,000 persons or households					
	Crimes of violence		Crimes of theft		Household crimes	
	65-74	75+	65-74	75+	65-74	75+
Sex						
Male	5.2	4.4	22.4	14.8	86.9	73.1
Female	4.2	2.2	23.4	13.9	82.9	65.6
Race						
White	4.2	2.6	23.1	14.2	77.6	61.4
Black	13.9	6.5	36.7	16.1	156.8	149.6
Marital status						
Married	3.3	2.2	20.5	12.9	82.7	66.5
Widowed	5.6	3.1	24.6	13.0	83.3	68.5
Never married	8.1	7.0	30.8	20.2	73.3	67.7
Divorced/separated	13.1	6.2	34.9	36.5	116.6	92.2
Family income						
Less than $7,500	9.7	3.3	19.1	12.0	83.3	70.7
$7,500-$14,999	4.5	4.1	18.2	12.0	49.4	64.6
$15,000-$24,999	3.6	2.2	21.1	15.9	86.5	70.6
$25,000 or over	3.2	1.7	30.6	20.9	78.5	78.6

Homicide victimizations

The patterns observed in rates of homicide victimization across the age groups were similar to those found for crime victimization in general. The elderly were significantly less likely to become the victims of homicide than were those in the youngest age groups. Characteristics of elderly homicide victimization resembled those of victimization of the elderly in general as well.

Table 14. Injuries, medical treatment, and hospital care received by violent crime victims, by age of victim, 1987-90

Outcome of victimization	Percent of victims of violent crime	
	65-74	75 or older
Injured	33%	37%
Serious	8	11
Minor	25	26
Received medical care	19	18
Hospital care	13	13

Table 15. Place where violent crime occurred, by age of victim and type of crime, 1987-90

	Percent of victims of violent crime					
	Total	At home	Near home	On the street	In commercial or public establishment	Elsewhere
Crimes of violence						
65-74	100%	22%	29%	33%	8%	9%
75 or older	100	33	28	25	14	11
Robbery						
65-74	100	14	27	40	7	12
75 or older	100	29	13	31	21	6
Assault						
65-74	100	24	30	29	15	8
75 or older	100	37	23	17	6	17

The elderly were as likely to be killed by an acquaintance or a relative as they were to be killed by a stranger (table 16). In contrast, persons in younger age cohorts were more likely to be killed by an acquaintance than either a relative or a stranger.

Of those elderly killed, proportionately more were likely to be killed during a felony situation, compared to victims in younger age groups for whom homicide victimization was more likely to occur during an argument or fight (table 17).

Striking similarities can be observed when homicide victimization patterns among the elderly are compared to the non-lethal crime victimization patterns of the elderly. Elderly victims of crime are particularly vulnerable to violent crime committed by a stranger for economic gain.

Table 16. Average annual homicide rates, by age of victim and victim/offender relationship, 1980-87

	Average annual number of homicides per 100,000 persons when the victim/offender relationship was:		
	Family	Acquaintance	Stranger
Age			
0-34	2.5	7.2	2.8
35-54	2.0	4.0	1.7
55-64	1.9	2.6	1.5
65+	1.0	1.1	1.0

Table 17. Average annual homicide rates, by age of victim and precipitating circumstances, 1980-87

	Average annual number of homicides per 100,000 persons where the incident occurred in:		
	Conflict	Felony	Other
Age			
0-34	5.9	.7	2.4
35-54	6.5	.7	2.5
55-64	2.1	1.5	.8
65+	.9	1.7	.6

All conclusions about crime against the elderly should be interpreted against a background of relatively low victimization rates. Although the elderly were more likely to be killed by strangers than by someone whom they knew, they were less likely to be killed by strangers than were other U.S. residents. Part of the reason that the elderly had the lowest rate of criminal victimization of all age groups may come from their way of life. For example, as the elderly are more likely to live alone as widows or widowers, they have reduced contacts with acquaintances and relatives who account for many of the victimizations of younger people.

Methodology

The tables in this report include National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data from 1987 to 1990. The NCVS obtains information about crimes, including incidents not reported to the police, from a continuous, nationally representative sample of households in the United States. This includes persons living in group quarters, such as dormitories, rooming houses, and religious group dwellings. Groups not included were crew members of merchant vessels, Armed Forces personnel living in military barracks, and institutionalized persons, such as correctional facility inmates. Similarly, U.S. citizens residing abroad and foreign visitors to this country were excluded. With these exceptions, individuals age 12 or older living in units designated for the sample were eligible to be interviewed. The NCVS measures crimes of violence (rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault), crimes of theft (personal larceny with and without contact), and household crimes (burglary, household larceny, and motor vehicle theft). The survey does not include murder, kidnaping, commercial crimes, and incidents that the victim may not recognize as crimes, such as fraud or con games.

Age

Because there are no universally recognized criteria for defining elderly, the cutoff at age 65 was used to be consistent with past public policy and research. Also included in this report, however, are comparisons of those age 65 to 74 with those in the older age category of 75 or older. It should be remembered that institutionalized elderly were excluded from this sample.

Calculation of rates

The rates in this report are annual average rates for 1987-90. The numerator (x) of a given rate is the sum of the crimes that occurred each year from 1987 through 1990 for each respective age group; the denominator (y) is the sum of the annual population totals for these same years and age groups.

Application of standard errors

The results presented in this report were tested to determine whether or not the observed differences between groups were statistically significant. Most comparisons passed a hypothesis test at the .05 level of statistical significance (or the 95 percent confidence level) meaning that the estimated difference between comparisons was greater than twice the standard error of that difference. However, some comparisons were significant at the 90 percent confidence level only. These comparisons are qualified by phrases such as "somewhat" or "some evidence of a difference." Comparisons which failed the 90% hypothesis test were not considered statistically significant and, therefore, were not discussed in this report.

Even though the data in this report were collected over several years, some estimates were based on a relatively small number of sample cases, particularly for those 75-or-older victims in certain demographic groups. The data tables note when estimates are based on 10 or fewer sample cases. Because standard errors cannot be accurately computed for such estimates, it is inadvisable to compare them to other estimates. Further, caution should be used when comparing estimates not discussed in the text, since seemingly large differences may not be statistically significant at the 95 percent or even the 90 percent confidence level.

Homicide rates

The homicide rates in this report are from the Comparative Homicide File (CHF) for 1980-87.* The CHF was computed from the Supplemental Homicide Report data tapes provided by the FBI. Using weighting and adjustment procedures, relationship by event-specific homicide rates were calculated as follows:

$$((I/P) \times 100{,}000)/8$$

where I = the total number of weighted and adjusted incidents of murder and non-negligent manslaughter of a specific type for each age group and P = the total population of each age group. The division by eight indicates that the rates were calculated over the entire 1980-87 time period and then reexpressed on a per year basis. Because homicide, particularly among older individuals, is a relatively rare event, this procedure was used to reduce the influence of random aberrations in year-to-year estimates, in addition to the possible unreliability of rates based on low frequencies.

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*The CHF was developed at the University of New Hampshire under a grant from the National Institute of Justice #851JCC0030. For more detailed information on rate calculation procedures see Williams and Flewelling (1987, 1988).

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Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletins are prepared by BJS staff. This report was prepared and written by Ronet Bachman with assistance from Marshall M. DeBerry, Jr., under the supervision of Patsy A. Klaus. Tina Dorsey was the production editor and prepared the final version of this report. Jayne Pugh produced the version for printing under the supervision of Marilyn Marbrook. Editorial assistance was offered by Tom Hester, Steven K. Smith, and Lawrence A. Greenfeld.

October 1992, NCJ-138330

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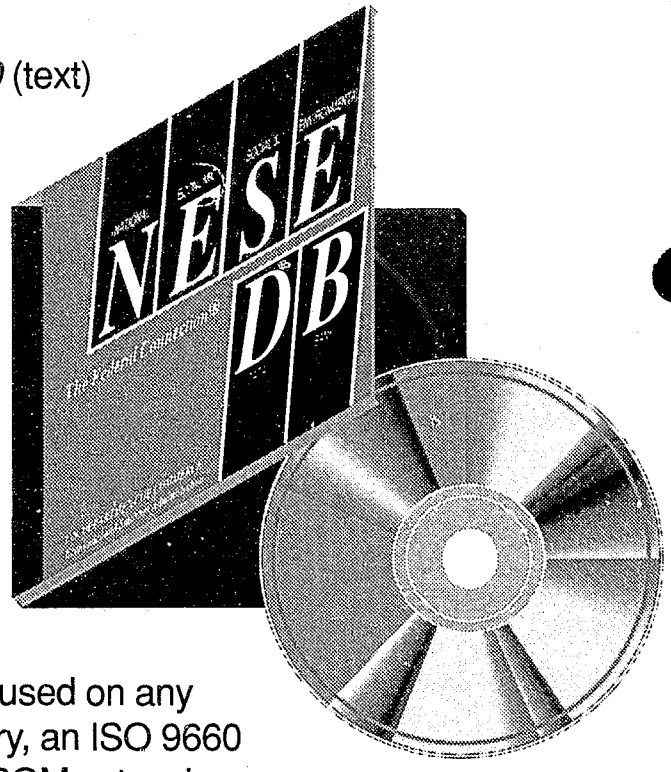

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