



SOCIAL & GENERAL STATISTICS

Elderly people – fear and risk of crime

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[sgs/note/criminaljustice]

The elderly are often supposed to be particularly at risk of crime, or at least to be living in fear of crime. Neither is necessarily the case.

Because the police and official statistics do not generally record the age of victims, the best source of information on this is the biennial British Crime Survey (BCS). The BCS interviews a large¹ random survey of people aged 16 and over about the offences they have experienced in the preceding year (so the 2000 survey is on crime in 1999). This means the BCS covers both reported and unreported crime and since its results include a coding for age and occupation of head of household (including retired), it can be analysed by age.

Elderly people as victims of crime

The BCS results include several analyses of crime by age. First, it is worth mentioning that almost all types of crime showed a fall between the 1998 and 2000 surveys, a continuation of the fall between 1996 and 1998 surveys. This reflects the downward trend in crime recorded by the police over recent years.²

In 1997, 4.7% of all adults were victims once or more of some type of **contact or violent crime**, which comprises woundings, domestic violence, common assaults, robberies and snatch thefts. In 1999 this percentage had fallen to 4.2% of all adults. In both years the risks were highest for the youngest age groups and lower for older people. Comparing 1997 and 1999, the percentage of respondents victimised once or more were as follows:

Table 1. The victims of violent crime^(a)

% victimised once or more

Age	1997		1999	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
All	6.1	3.6	5.3	3.3
16-24	20.9	8.8	20.1	9.1
25-44	7.0	4.6	5.4	3.9
45-64	3.0	2.0	2.5	2.0
65-74	0.2	0.8	0.7	1.0
75+	1.0	0.2	0.7	0.7
All adults	4.7		4.2	

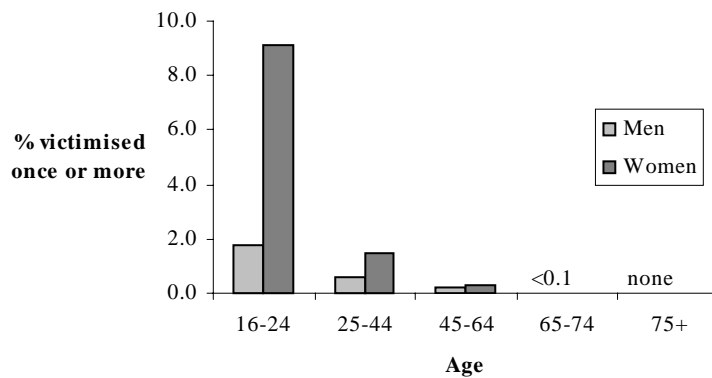
(a) England and Wales, from BCS, 1998 and 2000

¹ 19,411 in 2000, plus a further ethnic booster of 3,874

² Home Office Statistical Bulletins 19/96 *The 1996 British Crime Survey England and Wales*, 21/98 *The 1998 British Crime Survey England and Wales* and 18/00 *The 2000 British Crime Survey England and Wales*

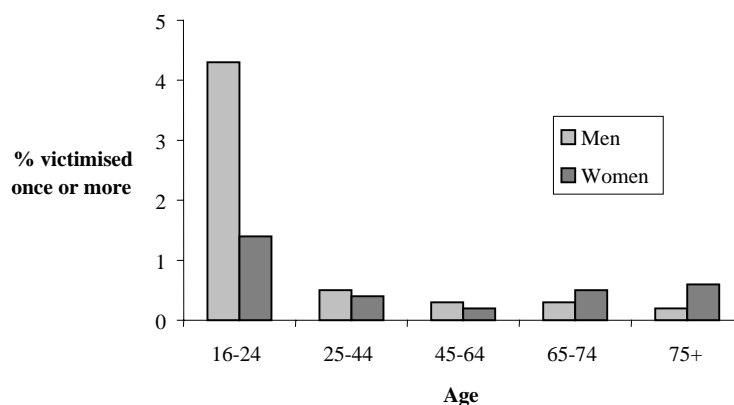
The BCS contains results for these violent crimes split by type of crime. **Domestic violence** is not a defined crime and so is not officially recorded, and while there are doubts about how well the BCS picks it up, this remains the best source. For 1999, risks of domestic violence for the older age group were relatively small:

Risk of domestic violence, 1999



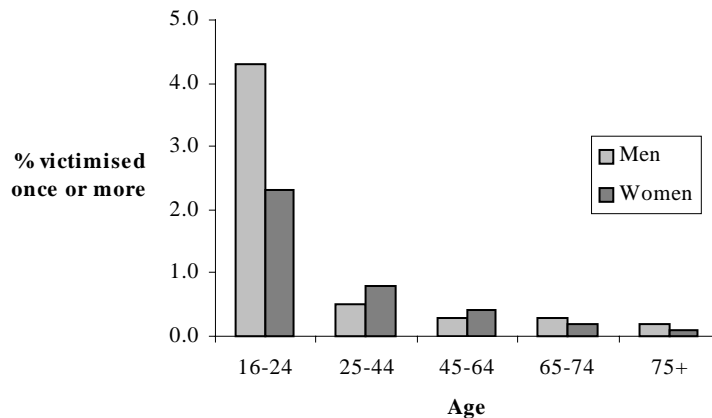
The BCS also asked about **muggings**. It is likely that the BCS measures mugging well since it is an unfortunately memorable experience, and the most obvious point is that mugging is relatively rare, with only 0.6% of respondents being victimised in 1999. Older men are at least risk, 20 times less likely to be victimised than the youngest men. Older women have relatively high levels of risk as amongst women the risks are more evenly spread across all age groups:

Risk of mugging, 1999



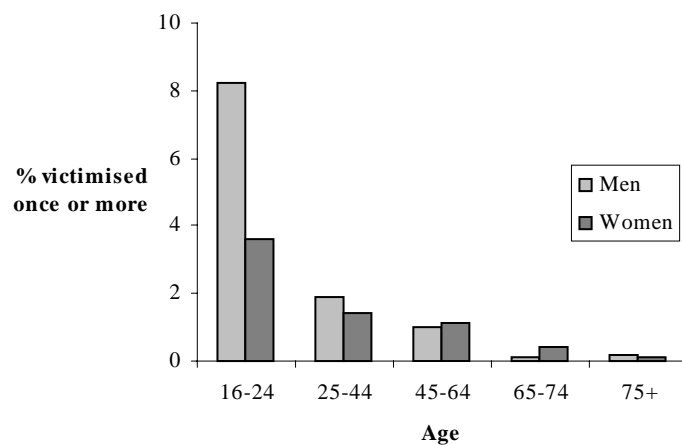
Violence by strangers (when none of the perpetrators had been seen before by the victim), like muggings, are likely to be well measured by the BCS. Young men, as for all crimes of violence except domestic violence, are at greatest risk. Older women were at relatively little risk, and older men only slightly more so:

Risk of stranger violence, 1999



Violence by acquaintances (excluding domestic relationships), as opposed to strangers, demonstrated a similar pattern over age groups. Again, older men and women were at relatively low risk. While 8.2% of men and 3.6% of women aged 16-24 were the victim of acquaintance violence one or more times in 1999, this applied to only 0.2% of men and 0.1% of women aged over 75.

Risk of acquaintance violence, 1999



For **crimes other than violent crime**, the age breakdowns refer to the head of household. The percentage of respondents who were once or more often victims of **burglary** in 1997 were:

Table 2. Victims of Burglary, 1999 ^(a)

% victimised once or more

Age of Head of Household	All burglary	With entry
16-24	12.0	7.5
25-44	5.3	3.1
45-64	3.6	2.0
65-74	2.3	1.3
75+	3.2	2.1
All households	4.3	2.5

(a)England and Wales, from BCS 2000

While older householders are at less risk than the average for all households, risk is fairly evenly split across all but the youngest age groups. Factors such as whether the home was inner city, the region of the country, and whether it was a detached house demonstrated strong correlation with risk.

Vehicle-related thefts (from and of cars) make up a large number of the BCS recorded crimes. While older heads of car-owning household were again at reduced risk compared to other groups, the percentage who were victims once or more was still high:

Table 3. Victims of Vehicle-Related Thefts, 1999 ^(a)

% victimised once or more

Age of Head of Household	All vehicle theft
16-24	22.9
25-44	15.5
45-64	11.9
65-74	7.9
75+	3.7
All vehicle-owning	12.6

(a)England and Wales, from BCS 2000

Elderly people and fear of crime

The BCS also asks respondents about their fear of 'Fear of crime', a shorthand for anxiety about street and property crime. For the purposes of their analysis, respondents were questioned about:

- Perceptions of risk
- Worry about crime
- Feelings of personal safety

Although variations by age were limited, older people tended to perceive a relatively low risk of crime in 1999. While 17% of men aged 16-24 said it was 'very' or 'fairly likely' they would be the victim³ of a stranger attack in the next year, this applied to only 7% of men aged 60 or older.

The survey found that women were more likely than men to be 'very worried' about burglary, mugging, physical attack and rape. However, there was little difference between age groups in the proportion of women who said they were very worried about particular crimes. Younger women aged 16-29 were far more worried about rape, and slightly more worried about burglary, mugging, theft from cars and harassment than women aged 60+. This was perhaps a surprise, which could be attributed to the fact that the elderly tend to expose themselves less to the risk of burglary or mugging by spending more time at home. There may also be some argument for resilience increasing with age.

The only category where older people were more worried was for 'feeling unsafe' which covered feelings of safety alone after dark in the home and in the area around the home. 30% of women aged 60 or over said that they felt 'very unsafe' walking alone in their local area after dark. This compared to 11% amongst the adult population as a whole. However, when fear of crime was placed in context, the elderly said they worried far more about illness hitting their family than about any type of crime (much as job loss was of as much concern to young men as burglary).

In 1994, the findings of the BCS survey on fear of crime were examined in greater detail.⁴ Researchers found the results (similar to those seen in the 2000 survey) surprising since society tends to link the elderly specifically to fear of crime. They felt that this probably arose through too many surveyors asking people how safe they felt walking alone in their area after dark, and they concluded that older people had no monopoly on fear of crime.

While the 1996 BCS results on this subject have not been examined in detail, a PQ summarised its results and reiterates much of the information in this note, concerning whether fear of crime by the elderly is greater than the reality of crime against the elderly⁵:

Mr. Maclean: The latest--1996--British crime survey, which is conducted by the Home Office, shows that the risks of crime for the elderly are considerably lower than for younger age groups. The elderly tend to rate their chances of victimisation in line with younger age groups, and they are as worried about falling victim to specific crimes. They also exhibit greater anxiety about being out alone after dark. Fear of crime is about not just the chances of victimisation but the perceived consequences. Greater anxiety on the part of the elderly about their safety on the streets may be because they see the physical, emotional and financial consequences of victimisation as greater than do the young.

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³ Home Office Statistical Bulletin 18/00 *The 2000 British Crime Survey England and Wales*

⁴ *Anxiety about crime: findings from the 1994 BCS* Home Office Research Study 147

⁵ HC Deb 29 October 1996 c57w