

Older people in rural areas: Adverse Actions of Others (Crime, Neglect and Abuse)



Rural England Community Interest Company, established in 2014, brings together organisations with a strong rural focus. One of its core aims is to support research that improves access to information about issues affecting rural England.

This paper forms part of wider suite of research exploring different aspects of vulnerability as affecting older rural residents. We hope the findings will be of interest to you.

It had been intended to include a detailed topic paper on the vulnerability of older rural residents to the adverse actions of others focusing on:

- Crime and targeting
- Neglect and interpersonal abuse

However there is a general paucity of research information and statistics on these topics and none that the writer has found specifically examining these issues with regard to older rural people in England. Nonetheless the topic is of such importance that it is appropriate to briefly highlight some key areas of concern and indeed the lack of relevant research.

1. Introduction

Crime statistics based on recorded crime indicate that the risk of a rural resident being a victim of crime is significantly lower than many other groups

Table showing recorded offences per 1000 population 2012/13

	All	Urban	Rural
Violence against person	10.6	12.3	7.2
Sexual offences	0.9	1.1	0.7
Robbery	1.2	1.8	0.2
Vehicle offences	6.9	8.4	4.2

Source: Government statistics (2013).

Recorded burglary rates per 1000 households are also lower in rural areas (4.8 in 2012/13) compared to urban (12.8)

Certain crimes also show particular geographic concentrations. Analysis of the 2009/10 British Crime Survey (Higgins et al) indicated that 62% of robberies took place in just three police force areas (Metropolitan, Greater Manchester and West Midlands). 54% of knife crime was also within those three areas.

Recorded crime levels across all types reduced between 2005/06 and 2012/13

Under-reporting of crime is an important issue but it is not known whether there is any urban / rural difference in rates.

A recent National Crime Network online survey of more than 17,000 people living and working in rural areas throughout England and Wales found that more than one in four (27%) respondents saying they did not report the last crime of which they were a victim." It said a vicious circle of low

expectations was leading to chronic under-reporting, anger, frustration and worry among rural communities. The result was increasing fear of crime and significantly lower satisfaction levels in the police than the national average” (RSN online2015)

Older people are generally considered at a lower risk of being a victim of crime than other age groups. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) data from 2013/14 showed those aged 16 to 24 and 25 to 34 were more likely to be victims than those aged 55 to 64, 65 to 74, or 75 and over (ONS 2015).

Among respondents interviewed in the 2013/14 CSEW, those in younger age groups were more likely to be victims than those in older age groups in all property crime types. Households where the household reference person was aged 16-24 or 25-34 (both 3.8%) were more than twice as likely to be victims of domestic burglary as households where the household reference person was 65-74 (1.9%) or aged 75 and over (1.4%). Respondents aged 16-24 (2.9%) were more than twice as likely as those in all other age groups to be a victim of theft from the person (ONS 2014b).

However, as recognised by the Crown Prosecution Service (2014), “there is a huge under-reporting of crimes against older people, due to fear, embarrassment and a lack of access to trusted people to whom they can report their worries”. One study (O’Keefe et al 2007) found that only 6% of elderly victims had reported abuse to the police. Vulnerable adults may also be less inclined to report crimes because they feel embarrassed or have a lack of acceptance. Fraud in particular is significantly underreported (NFA and ACPO, 2009).

There are also potential issues around conviction rates. From limited evidence relating only to Wales there is a suggestion that crimes against older people may have a much lower than average conviction rate than the average for all crime. The Older People’s Commissioner for Wales has stated that of 18,931 recorded crimes against people aged 60+ in Wales during 2013-14 only 194, or 1%, resulted in convictions. That figure compared to 19% for all crime for the same year. Whilst comparable figures for England do not appear to be readily available there seem no obvious reasons why these should be markedly different.

Fear of crime can have a significant impact on an older person’s life. “While over 60s are actually less likely to experience street crime than any other age group, these fears have led many older people to become trapped in their own homes and separated from the local community.” (ILC-UK and Age Concern 2014 p2). Reporting on an Age Concern survey Casciani (2003) observed that almost half those aged 75+ were too afraid to leave home after dark because of fears of mugging or verbal abuse. 20% of all those interviewed said that fear of crime contributed to their sense of loneliness and isolation. Whilst certain urban locations were particularly feared the ILC-UK and Age Concern research noted that many older people mentioned fear of deserted streets and places.

2. Crimes to which the elderly may be particularly vulnerable

“Safety and security, and the right to live free from the fear of crime, are fundamental human rights and go to the core of older people’s priorities. Feeling and being unsafe, or at risk have significant negative impacts on older people’s health and well-being and can leave them unable to participate socially and economically in their communities”. (CPS online)

Whilst overall older people may be less likely to be victims of crime than those in younger age groups there are certain types of crime to which they appear particularly vulnerable.

(i) Distraction burglary

Whilst the writer has been unable to identify the statistical sources or to corroborate the facts asserted in this online article (secured home) it claims:

- Distraction burglary is one of the most underreported crimes.
- The average age of victims is 78.
- 74% of victims live on their own.
- 77% of victims are women.
- Distraction crimes are largely committed in districts where the perpetrator is not recognised.

(ii) Doorstep Crime

“Doorstep crime involves criminals preying on vulnerable people – often older and living with ill health – by cold-calling at their homes and pressurising them into paying extortionate prices for unnecessary goods or services” (National Trading Standards 2014)

An assessment by National Trading standards (2014) showed that there are currently around 16,900 reports relating to doorstep crime made to trading standards in England and Wales annually. As reporting rates are low, estimated to be only 10 - 20%, the true number of incidents annually is about 84,500 - 169,000. On average consumers lost around £1,000 in each incident.

Age UK (2015), reporting on the National Trading Standards National Tasking Group Doorstep Crime Report of March 2014, identified the following characteristics of victims:

- 85 per cent of victims were aged 65+, 59 per cent were 75+, and 18 per cent were aged 80 to 84.
- 62 per cent lived alone.
- 63 per cent had a physical impairment, 43 per cent a sensory impairment, 15 per cent a mental health condition, 14 per cent a cognitive impairment, and 35 per cent had a long standing illness.
- 24 per cent had concerns about their memory, or their family or carers had such concerns.
- 33 per cent had experienced bereavement in the past two years.
- 36 per cent had experienced depression in the past six months.

- 37 per cent missed having people around and 40 per cent were lonely.
- 9 per cent were known to be repeat victims.

Again it is unknown whether there is an urban- rural dimension.

(iii) Financial abuse and Fraud

A national prevalence study, by O’Keefe et al (2007), found that financial abuse is the second most common type of abuse experienced by older people in the UK, (neglect being the most common). They report that 0.7% approximately 1 in 150 suffered financial abuse in the year of survey (O’Keefe et al 2007). Applying that figure to the 2011 Census population figures for persons over 65 in England that would equate to approximately 60,000 victims a year and, assuming an even urban and rural distribution of these crimes, about 14,000 of these victims would be rural residents.

In terms of risk factors the prevalence study identified that “The risk of financial abuse increased for: those living alone, those in receipt of services, those in bad or very bad health, older men, and women who were divorced or separated, or lonely” p6. The same study found that perpetrators tended to be aged 16-64 in paid employment and some 25% lived with the respondent.

Research by the Centre for Policy on Ageing (2008) included the following key findings:

- Indications are that 60-80% of financial abuse takes place in the home and 15-20% in residential care.
- Over 50% of financial abuse is by a grown-up son or daughter and nearly 70% by a family member.
- Older men, particularly the oldest old, may, overall, be more vulnerable to financial abuse than women. The majority of victims of financial abuse are, however, older women living alone but this is, to some extent, because the majority of older people are women in these circumstances.
- The risk of financial abuse is greater for those living alone, in receipt of services, in bad or very bad health, and those who are divorced, separated or lonely.
- Older women who are separated or divorced are particularly susceptible to financial abuse.

Worryingly, Help the Aged (2008) found that financial abuse within families and communities may often be accompanied by other forms of abuse, such as physical abuse or neglect.

ONS (2014) report that there was also a large increase in the volume of fraud recorded in the year ending March 2014 (17% year on year). That figure is however caveated by uncertainties about the extent to which this figure may reflect improved recording practices, an increase in public reports or a rise in actual criminality.

Age UK (2015) found that 53 per cent of people aged 65+ believe they’ve been targeted by fraudsters. Only one in 12 responded to the scam but 70 per cent of people of all age groups who did respond lost money. “This could mean that a staggering half a million older people have fallen victim to losing savings”. Whilst it could not be evidenced that older people were more likely to be victims

than other age groups, the financial loss for older victims (those aged 55 and over) was likely to be nearly twice as much per scam as that for younger age groups.

The same research expressed concern that “older people may be particularly targeted, often because it is assumed that they have more money than younger people”. Age UK is particularly concerned that “recent changes to private pensions allowing people aged 55+ to take all their pension savings in cash will encourage the scammers to target this age group even more”.

There is further evidence to suggest that phone scams or ‘vishing’ may target older people. BBC News online (6 July 2015) reported that a review by the Financial Ombudsman Service of 185 phone scam cases found that 80% of those conned out of cash were over the age of 55.

Age UK (2015) found that the most common type of scam was online fraud, with 34% of scams occurring via the internet. Whilst, at present, older people are less likely to become victims than younger age groups this reflects the lower levels of internet use by those 65+. As internet use increases amongst older age groups their vulnerability to such scams can be expected to increase.

The same research found that scam victims of all ages are unlikely to tell anyone about it and that there is still a feeling of embarrassment related to being scammed. Only 8% went to the police.

3. Neglect and interpersonal abuse

This is a particularly concerning area where older people are especially vulnerable. However it is not known whether there is any particular rural dimension.

A 2007 study (O’Keefe et al) found that 2.6%, of people aged 66+ and over living in private households reported that they had experienced mistreatment (neglect ,financial, psychological, physical or sexual), involving a family member, close friend or care worker during the past year. Neglect was the most prevalent type of mistreatment. When the prevalence survey findings are broadened to include incidents involving neighbours and acquaintances, the overall figure increases to 4.0% of people aged 66 and over. This equates to 342,400 older people in the UK (2007 figures) who are subject to some form of mistreatment each year.

Prevalence rates for types of mistreatment of persons aged over 65

Neglect	1.1%
Financial	0.7%
Psychological	0.4%
Physical	0.4%
Sexual	0.2%

(Source O’Keefe et al 2007)

That same study identified the following risk factors for neglect: “ being female, aged 85 and over, suffering bad/very bad health or depression and the likelihood of already being in receipt of, or in touch with, services.” p5

“Risk of interpersonal abuse was higher for: women aged 66-74, men who felt lonely in the past week, and both men and women reporting three or more depressive symptoms. There was a higher rate of interpersonal abuse reported by women who were separated or divorced. Perpetrators lived in the same household in two-thirds of the cases, and in two-fifths of cases the respondent was providing care for them”. (O’Keefe p6)

This study also suggested that over half of situations of abuse involve partners, often in the context of people struggling to provide care, and especially if frail and/or unwell themselves.

Underreporting is a key concern.

“We know that those affected by crimes against older people are sometimes reluctant or unable to report the incident we know that some older people may not report incidents to the police for fear of repeat victimization, or due to fears about continuing dependency on the perpetrator or removal from their own home and being placed in an institution or care home.

Older people may be targeted because of their unequal access to safety or on account of the environment in which they live, for example, in a hospital, care home or in their own home. Even if incidents have been reported, older people may be reluctant to give evidence for fear of intimidation if the perpetrator is prosecuted” CPS

Again there is no evidence of differences between urban and rural areas. However, given that rural victims may find it more difficult to access to people they trust, possibly have a greater dependency on the perpetrator for continued care (due to lack of choice), and perhaps are more likely to be hidden especially in isolated locations, this is a subject surely meriting urgent research attention.

There is some limited evidence that suggests domestic violence generally may be more prevalent in rural areas. “ In 2013 26% of women using specialist domestic violence services had come from rural areas while only 19% of the UK population lives in rural areas” (Women’s Aid Chief Executive Polly Neate in Crimestoppers 2014). Rural victims can face particular problems in getting help including:

- Access to specialist services which are generally in urban areas.
- Difficulties in finding outside support within small close-knot communities especially if perpetrator is well respected or liked within the community
- Talking about their experiences or attending a meeting without people knowing is difficult
- Anonymous resettlement in the same place is impossible

Older victims may face additional barriers to reporting including:

- Victims may be constrained by the traditional mores of their time i.e. what goes on in the home is private.
- An absence of the specialised support that older women may need

- Lack of facilities for those with disability and mobility issues
- Lack of awareness of support services.
(Blood 2004, McGarry and Simpson, Women's Aid, 2007)

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