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Original research article

What troubles our senior citizens? Crime against the elderly in the Czech Republic in 2016

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ABSTRACT

The article examines a topical issue: the prevention of crime committed in the Czech Republic against senior citizens. It aims to describe: (1) how aware senior citizens are of the options available to prevent crime; (2) from what sources they obtained this information; and (3) how sufficient they judge this information to be. A semi-structured questionnaire was distributed in October 2016 among those attending the University of the Third Age at Masaryk University in Brno. A total of 92 forms were returned, the analysis of which showed that most respondents had encountered information about crime against senior citizens, and that the bulk of this information was obtained from the media and from peers (friends etc.). The information was concerned with particular types of crime against senior citizens and tended not to involve prevention, i.e. how senior citizens might act to avoid crime. Respondents viewed the information as insufficient, with specific advice on preventive behaviour noticeably absent. On the basis of these findings the authors propose that prevention measures should be designed to cater for the specific characteristics of the various groups of senior citizens.

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Introduction

The category of 'senior citizens' is one where biological, medical and sociological aspects intersect. The phenomena and processes of senescence are not just biological, but also psychological, cultural and social in character. Thus, the issues of senescence form a topic not only of biology and medicine,

but also psychology and sociology [1,2]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) definition, senescence is that period when the deterioration of physical and mental capacities becomes manifest, as compared to earlier life periods. Today the second half of human life is most often divided into the following intervals: 45–59 years of age: middle or mature age; 60–74: elderly; 75–89: old age; 90 and over: very

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old [3,4]. Some scholars distinguish early old age (65–75) and advanced old age (75+), although gerontologists are not unanimous about the boundaries of these categories, and some define advanced old age as 80+ [5]. Crime targeting senior citizens and the prevention of such crime is a broad and topical issue that is attracting much media attention. The media often employ stereotypes (such as 'naïve pensioner' and 'cunning criminal') and, in doing so, help perpetuate these stereotypes. What is more, they reinforce the notion that senior citizens are 'easy targets' [3,6]. Media reporting often creates the impression that senior citizens become victims of crime more often than is actually the case. Thus, the media habitually co-create the reality in this particular area [7].

Crime against the elderly is a topical and priority issue for cooperation between police forces in the countries of the European Union (EU), not least due to demographic developments in EU countries and the growing proportion of crime committed against senior citizens. The elderly are much more often the victims of crime than the perpetrators of crime [8]. Beyond physiological reasons that have a bearing on their decreased defensive abilities, the causes for this can be sought in the social risks of old age, including ageism and generational intolerance, prejudices of various sorts (for example, overestimates of the morbidity rate among the elderly population and of the decline in their functional abilities), loneliness (such as that connected with the loss of a spouse), the risk of loss of self-sufficiency, and the declining ability to follow current affairs and to communicate with younger generations, which might be related to the emergence of new technologies [9–11].

In recent times we have witnessed an unprecedented rise in various forms of violence, and senior citizens are among those targeted. Violence against the elderly is committed either in public areas or at home [2]. Typically the elderly are a group characterised by increased victimity. This is connected with their increased suggestibility, credulity and their frequently held opinion that thieves are not interested in them, given the prevailing conviction that the financial standing of most pensioners is often not very good [12–14].

Victimity, victimisation and harm caused to senior citizens

Victimity, that is the susceptibility of an individual or group to become a victim of crime, is more pronounced in the elderly than in the general population, as they are less able to escape or defend themselves, may be lonely and sometimes exhibit different behavioural patterns from the majority population. Tošnerová [15] also points out that in contemporary society, old age is viewed as something a priori negative. The process in which a potential victim becomes an actual victim is described as victimisation [16].

A core experience of victimisation, not just among senior citizens but also more broadly, is the loss of the illusion that the world is a good place. To those who have fallen victim to crime, the world seems evil and chaotic, a setting where inexplicable, unpredictable and unjust events occur; they lose their ability to trust others and experience intense feelings of fear. They also lose the illusion of control. Attempts to control and influence their own life seem vain and futile to them, since by accident they end up in situations that cannot be managed through their own activity; victims feel weak and powerless,

sensing that personal aspirations and plans are of no use as they cannot influence the events unfolding in the external world [17].

Being a victim of criminal assault increases the probability of a repeat assault. According to current knowledge, revictimisation after a relatively short time is by no means exceptional [18]. One needs to note in connection with this that in the period following a crime perpetrated against a senior citizen, their environment is of increased importance as it may substantially influence the victim's return to everyday life. Senior citizens who have fallen victim to a crime need the support of their environment in order to be able to deal with the consequences of the crime [17]. This is because a crime committed against a senior citizen impacts their subsequent functioning in society; they may often show signs of stress, anxiety and fear, feel threatened, etc. [19].

Crime committed against senior citizens

Crimes perpetrated against senior citizens constitute a serious social problem, requiring not only social workers, but also police officers and other law enforcement authorities to pay increased attention to issues of social gerontology [16,20]. Senior citizens are considered as one of the groups of the population most at risk of crime [20]. This is linked with the decreasing cognitive abilities among the elderly, including their deteriorating memory, changes in perception, decline in judgement, lower self-confidence, emotional instability and increased suggestibility [21,22]. These are some of the reasons why senior citizens get into conflict and fall victim not just to criminal behaviour, but also to verbal abuse, insults, humiliation and hostility [23].

The kinds of crime most often perpetrated against senior citizens are: (a) pick-pocketing and robbery, committed principally by young offenders (for instance on public transport, on the way to the post office, and in similar situations), who exploit the fact that the elderly might be likely to carry cash, even large amounts if they have just made a withdrawal; (b) burglaries of flats, family houses, cellars or holiday homes, often involving various tricks, and again based on the expectation that savings in cash could be retrieved from these places; (c) fraud; (d) blackmail; (e) intentional bodily harm [14,20].

Czech police analyses show that those committing property offences against senior citizens most often pose as grandchildren, electricians and social workers, or pretend to be refunding overpaid utility bills. Despite media campaigns warning against these confidence tricks, there are still credulous individuals who let the perpetrators enter their homes. The main criminogenic factor here is that senior citizens do not know how to act in such cases [20].

In recent years a particular type of fraud targeting senior citizens has become prevalent in the Czech Republic in which questionable businesses organise trips which include sales pitches that con senior citizens into buying overpriced items [24]. Probably not rare, but mostly latent, is crime committed on senior citizens at home and in care facilities [25].

The credulousness of many women, especially widows, poses a serious issue. Widows and widowers often subjectively feel a loss of security following the death of their partner, without this necessarily leading to more circumspection on

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