

CRIME INFORMATION

Crime and Older People

Lucy is worried. She's lived in the old neighborhood for 50 years but things seem to be changing. Last week her friend Rose was walking to the store when a young man ran by and pulled her purse right off her shoulder. Two weeks ago Joe, the man upstairs, said he put his grocery bags on the curb while waiting for the bus, and before he knew it, someone had picked up his bags and run off.

Lucy feels sad to think she might have to move. She wonders, is anywhere safe for older people anymore?

Older people and their families worry about crime. Though older people are less likely to be victims of crime than teenagers and young adults, the number of crimes against older people is hard to ignore. It is often highly publicized. Each year, over two million older people are victims of crime.

Older people are often targets for robbery, purse snatching, pocket picking, car theft, or home repair scams. They are more likely than younger people to face attackers who are strangers. During a crime, an older person is more likely to be seriously hurt than someone who is younger.

But, even though there are risks, don't let a fear of crime stop you from enjoying life. Be careful and be aware of your surroundings. The following is a general overview of some of the areas of most concern to older people. These are common sense tips that can help fight crime and protect your safety. At the end of the fact sheet you can find a list of resources that will have a lot more information that can help.

Stay Safe

There are a lot of things you can do to keep you, your money, and your property safe. These do's and don'ts give you a place to start:

Be safe at home

- Do try to make sure that your locks, doors, and windows are strong and cannot be broken easily. A good alarm system can help.
- Don't open your door before looking through the peephole or a safe window to see who's there. Ask any stranger to show proof that he or she is who they claim to be. Remember, you don't have to open the door if you feel uneasy.
- Don't keep large amounts of money in the house.
- Do get to know your neighbors—join a Neighborhood Watch Program.

Be street smart

- Do try to stay alert. Walk with a friend. Stay away from unsafe places like dark parking lots or alleys. If you drive, don't open your door or roll-down your window for strangers. Park in well-lit areas.
- Do have your monthly pension or Social Security checks sent right to the bank for direct deposit. Try not to have a regular banking routine.
- Don't carry a lot of cash. Put your wallet, money, or credit cards in an inside pocket. Carry your purse close to your body with the strap over your shoulder and across your chest.

- Do not resist a robber—hand over your cash right away.
- Don't keep your check book and credit cards together. A thief who steals both could use the card to forge your signature on checks.

Fight Fraud

Older people may be victims of fraud, such as con games, insurance scams, home repair scams, and/or telephone and internet scams. Even trusted friends or family members can steal an older person's money or property. Trust what you feel. The following tips may help:

Be smart with your money

- Don't be afraid to hang up the phone on telephone salespeople. Remember, you can always say no to any offer. You aren't being impolite—you are taking care of yourself!
- Don't give any personal information, including your credit card number or bank account, over the phone unless you have made the phone call. Be careful when returning a sales call.
- Don't take money from your bank account if a stranger tells you to. In one common swindle a thief pretends to be a bank employee and asks you to take out money to "test" a bank teller. Banks do not check their employees this way.
- Don't be fooled by deals that "are too good to be true." They are often scams. Check with your local Better Business Bureau to get more information about the reliability of a company.
- Do be on guard about hiring people that come door-to-door looking for home repair work. They may overcharge you. You should try to check their references. Always spell out the details of the work you want done in writing. Never pay for the whole job in advance.

Avoid Identity Theft

How can someone steal your identity? If they use your name, Social Security number, or credit card without your go-ahead—that's called identity theft and it's a serious crime.

Protect yourself:

- Do take care to keep information about your checking account private—keep all new and cancelled checks in a safe place; report any stolen checks right away; carefully look at your monthly bank account statement.
- Do shred everything that has personal information about you written on it.
- Do be very careful when buying things online. Websites without security may not protect your credit card or bank account information. Look for information saying that a website has a 'secure server' before buying anything online.

Elder Abuse—It's A Crime

It's hard to believe, but elder abuse can happen anywhere—at home by family or friends or in a nursing home by professional caregivers. Many people don't think of elder abuse as a crime—but it is. In addition to physical harm, abuse can include taking financial advantage, neglecting, sexually abusing, or abandoning an older person. Most abuse involves verbal threats or hurtful words. It only rarely involves weapons or causes physical injury beyond minor cuts and bruises. If someone you know is being abused, or if you need help, remember:

- You can help yourself and others by reporting the crimes when they happen. If you do not report a crime because of embarrassment or fear the criminal stays on the streets. Reporting abuse is a moral as well as legal responsibility in most states.

- Contact your local or state Adult Protective Service programs for help.
- If you have been hurt, go to a doctor as soon as possible. Even though you may not see anything wrong, there is always the possibility of internal damage.
- Contact a lawyer. He or she will assist you in any legal action that needs to be taken.
- Plan for your own future. Arrange a health-related power of attorney (also called an Advance Directive) or have a living will so your family knows your wishes for the future.

Other Helpful Resources

There are many organizations that have more in-depth information on crime prevention or protection. Check with the following group for suggestions that can help you feel safer.

National Organization for Victim Assistance

1730 Park Rd., NW

Washington, DC 20010

1-800-TRY-NOVA (24-hour hotline)

www.trynova.org