

Deconstructing distraction burglary: an ageist offence?

Stuart Lister and David S. Wall, Centre for Criminal Justice Studies, University of Leeds. LS2 9JT. UK

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Contact: D.S.Wall@Leeds.ac.uk

Introduction [*107*]

This chapter is based upon research conducted in preparation for a Home Office funded evaluation of the Leeds Distraction Burglary Project (see Lister, Wall and Bryan 2004). Although statistically a relatively rare occurrence, distraction burglary has created considerable public concern during recent years because of the predatory way in which older people are specifically targeted as victims and its potentially devastating impact. The premeditated manner by which offenders engage directly with victims in order to deceive them and gain entry to their dwellings distinguishes distraction burglary from more conventional forms of burglary in which offenders typically seek to avoid victim contact by entering dwellings unnoticed (Bennett and Wright 1984; Wright and Decker 1994).

Major concerns about distraction burglary were voiced following the violent death of 82-year-old Leeds pensioner Isabel Gray in 1997 (Yorkshire Post, 10 February 2002) and the findings of the subsequent police investigation. The profile of the offence was further raised in 2000, following the formation of the Distraction Burglary Taskforce, a national partnership established by the Home Office which, in its turn, triggered a range of co-ordinated anti-distraction burglary initiatives across an array of agencies. This heightened focus on the offence led to distraction burglary becoming a recorded sub-category of the Home Office's 'burglary dwelling' offence category, in April 2003. For this purpose, it is defined as:

any crime where a falsehood, trick or distraction is used on an occupant of a dwelling to gain, or try to gain, access to the [*108*] premises to commit burglary. It includes cases where the offender first enters the premises and subsequently uses distraction burglary methods in order to remain on the premises and/or gain access to other parts of the premises in order to commit burglary. (Home Office 2004)

The formalisation of distraction burglary allows for the easier monitoring of reporting levels. However Thornton et al. (2003, p. 51) warned that a narrow definition premised on the use of a trick may fail to capture the variation found within distraction-type, victimoffender interactions. Indeed, subsequent research by Lister et al. (2004) into variations in the ways that older people are victimised found that not only does 'distraction burglary' frequently overlap with other non-distraction forms of burglary, but it comprises a range of variations within the broader modus operandi. Because of this, it will be argued herein that distraction burglary should be understood as a family of offences which incorporates a diverse range of strategies and rationales, each requiring different preventive strategies.

This chapter deconstructs distraction burglary in order to illustrate its many complexities and distinguishing features. Part one discusses what is known about the prevalence of distraction burglary, and explores what is currently known about offenders and their tactics of deceit. Part two identifies the victims and outlines their profiles. The third part situates distraction burglary within a broader debate about age, risk and crime prevention, while questioning some of the implicit assumptions made in discourses surrounding old age and victimisation. We conclude by raising questions about the reification of older people as a coherent unit for the delivery of criminal justice policy.

The prevalence of distraction burglary

Assessing the overall extent of distraction burglary has long been problematic because prior to April 2003 it was not disaggregated from other burglary dwelling offences within official crime statistics. However, statistics collected between 1999 and 2001 from all 43 police forces in England and Wales, showed annual fluctuations of between 15,000 and 19,400 distraction burglaries (Home Office 2002). Analysis of recorded crime data gathered from 41 police forces revealed that overall levels of prevalence remain at a broadly similar level, with [*109*] 15,000 distraction burglaries being recorded during 2003–2004, albeit two forces failed to participate in the audit (Ruparel 2004, p. 1). Distraction burglary accounts for 4 per cent of all dwelling burglaries in England and Wales, with variance across urban and rural police forces of between 0.4 per cent and 7.7 per cent (Ruparel 2004).

While these figures indicate that distraction burglary is a relatively rare occurrence, many of these offences are likely to remain 'hidden' from official burglary statistics. Steele et al. (2001), for instance, identified that police recording inconsistencies sometimes lead to the misclassification of distraction burglaries as fraud or robbery offences, or they are treated as 'non-crime' incidents or merely filed as 'intelligence reports' (ibid., p. 16). Moreover, victims may be less likely to report these offences to the police in comparison to other forms of burglary. The embarrassment that can result from 'being conned' within fraud and deceit offences, and the feelings of self-blame that often follow, may suppress victims' willingness to call the police and engage with the criminal justice system (Home Office 2001). Equally, the social isolation of some distraction burglary victims means there may be an absence of significant others, such as immediate family members, to encourage them to report offences to the police. There is also likely to be a low ratio of 'attempt burglary by distraction' offences reported to the police in comparison to 'attempt burglary by force' offences. Whereas the latter often lead to visible or audible signs of forced entry (e.g. damaged window sills or triggered burglar alarms), the former, we can speculate, are likely to involve little more than a doorstep rebuttal – as such, the occupant may not realise they have just repelled a burglar.

Possibly the most accurate assessment of the extent of distraction burglary is drawn from the findings of the British Crime Survey (BCS), the national household victimisation survey which avoids police reporting and recording shortfalls. The 2002–2003 BCS found an annual 'burglary with entry' rate of 561,000 (Simmons and Dodd 2003). Of these, 4 per cent involved the use of false pretences as the method of entry – in 14 per cent of cases the head of household was aged 60 or over, (Budd 2001) and a further 5 per cent of offenders pushed past the person who opened the door (Home Office 2004). As we shall describe later, some of these latter incidents are initiated as distraction burglaries, suggesting that between 4 and 8 per cent of all burglary dwelling offences with entry might actually be distraction type offences. [*110*]

Distraction burglars

While there has been a tradition of ethnographic research into the offending routines of residential 'street' burglars (see for example, Shover 1973; Maguire and Bennett 1982; Bennett and Wright 1984; Cromwell et al. 1991; Wright and Decker 1994), little research has considered the various tactics that are employed by 'distraction burglars'. The empirical information that does exist is mainly drawn from local police intelligence reports, the victimisation studies of Jones (1987) and Thornton et al. (2003; 2004) and the interviews conducted by Steele et al. (2001) with convicted offenders.

As Shover (1973) acknowledges, the division of labour necessary to enact a burglary requires offenders to work co-operatively within networks from which they harness skill sets, not just to facilitate offending, but also to ensure the efficient distribution of stolen goods. Research by Steele et al. (2001, p. 55–56) into distraction burglary suggests that its social organisation involves the use of 'tipsters' who identify 'suitable targets' for distraction and then broker information about the victim and their whereabouts to offenders. The same research also indicates the existence of informal tutelage between offenders which reproduces patterns of offending across peer groups and down generations. Indeed, distraction routines display

relatively high levels of 'professionalism' in terms of organisation, planning and division of labour - hence, the tendency for distracters to operate in pairs. Typically, a 'distracter' will divert the occupant by enticing him or her outside or into a specific area of the house, while an accomplice 'sneaks in' to the household unobserved in order to steal cash, jewellery and other portable items. During the act of deception, 'distracters' employ a range of techniques of subterfuge which demonstrate the application of sophisticated interpersonal skills. Sometimes they gain entry to a dwelling by impersonating agency officials who have legitimate reason to visit households unannounced and exploiting the householder's fear of losing key domestic utilities. Else they may exploit the victim's goodwill, usually by requesting their assistance or asking for information. Unsurprisingly therefore, most distraction burglaries have been found to occur on weekdays, during daylight hours (Steele et al. 2001).

Although distraction burglaries regularly exhibit high levels of planning and organisation, the degree of sophistication can vary. There is, for example, a cadre of offender who, after establishing that the occupant is alone or too frail to resist, may simply enter the property uninvited, often by barging past the victim (see Jones 1987). [*111*] As Wright and Decker (1994) observe, the modus operandi of burglars is fluid because the burglary procedure does not always follow a rigid and pre-planned format. Consequently, offenders adapt their behaviour in response to the unfolding situation; therefore a burglary that begins as a 'distraction entry' may subsequently become a 'forced entry' (see Thornton et al. 2003, p. 21), or even an 'aggravated burglary' (with violence), particularly if the offenders believe that a large amount of cash is kept in the house. Perhaps in response to the threat of violence, Thornton et al. (2004) found that a minority of victims claimed not to be deceived by the offender's bogus guise, but allowed them entry all the same.

The above offence dynamics usually enable offenders to exit the dwelling as they entered, without the occupant realising he or she has been victimised. This also buys time for the offenders, enabling them to leave the area and even the region before the offence is reported to the police. There is almost always a witness to these crimes because at least one of the offenders has face-to-face contact with the victim during the distraction, so it is perhaps unsurprising that offenders are keen to leave the wider vicinity with haste. Many offenders, therefore, regularly commit offences across several police force boundaries, often within a relatively short space of time. A police detective explained the regional context to this pattern of offending:

And what you find with bogus offenders is they're very clever. They'll hit three forces in the space of an hour, and they tend just to cherry pick. They'll come along the M62 or up the M1, which tend to be the two corridors we get hit on, and they'll just drop off and do crime. They'll pick a point, sort of West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Derbyshire, and bang, bang, bang, so they'll have done three crimes in three counties. Or they'll come to Leeds and maybe hit four divisions in the space of a day, so all that is [recorded], is one crime in every division.

Because this risk-avoidance behaviour reduces the likelihood of offenders being identified locally it acts to hinder the effectiveness of police investigations. As a result, the detection rates for distraction burglary are generally lower than those of 'burglary dwelling', fluctuating between 4 and 6 per cent (Home Office 2001, p. 6; see Lister et al. 2004). Our research found that offences committed within these 'crime sprees' are not necessarily restricted to distraction [*112*] burglary, but can include a range of other acquisitive and violent crimes, including robbery, auto-crime and (non-distraction) burglary of dwellings and commercial premises. Therefore, simply to apply the label 'distraction burglar' to this pattern of offending is possibly misleading and potentially constrains the scope for any remedial action.

The tactics of deceit

Our analysis of police burglary records found much diversity in the offending routines and behaviours that fall within the 'constructed' recording category called 'distraction burglary'. Offenders employ a range of guises to gain the confidence of the householder, but also use various distraction tactics and strategies of legitimation to gain entry to the dwellings. Such sophistication illustrates the importance of understanding 'distraction burglary' as a 'family' of deceptions for the purposes of crime prevention campaigns and criminal investigations. These different guises display a range of distinct tactics that fall into three basic sets within which are sub-groupings that illustrate further the complexity of the offence.

The first set of distraction tactics is used by bogus officials who employ recognisable symbols and tokens of trust (Lyon 2002; Clarke 2004) – uniforms and/or credentials – that convince victims of the bearer's credibility. This group impersonates workers who have legitimate and regular business calling on households and so do not attract attention to themselves as being 'out of the ordinary'. Once their credibility has been falsely established the householders allow them to enter. They include bogus utility workers, such as electricity and gas meter readers, or water board officials. Bogus public servants such as council officers, police officers, officials from social services, health workers and other bogus worker, postal workers or delivery operatives pretending to collect or drop off goods, boy scouts, charity collectors, door-to-door salespeople from 'recognised' outlets, often retail industry household names.

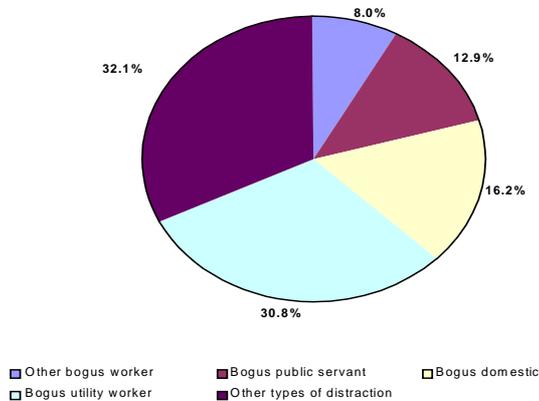
The second group, bogus domestic contractors, are workers who are also seen operating regularly in urban neighbourhoods, 'cold calling' on householders and offering 'good deals' on products or services – deals which enable the distraction. They are defined by their highly developed interpersonal skills which are used to present a 'plausible' story, argument or sales pitch to a potential victim in order to distract or deceive them (or both). Colloquially referred to by the police as 'bogey propmen' or 'rogue traders', the bogus domestic contractors [*113*] reflect the diversity of domestic services that a householder might reasonably require, including knife sharpeners, gardeners, roofers, drain cleaners, tarmac layers, and window cleaners. They rely less on abstract tokens of trust to gain entry to households, than upon their interpersonal skills to present a convincing sales-pitch (Steele et al. 2001). This group also may defraud householders through a variety of deceitful commercial strategies, most commonly over-charging for incomplete work or systematically inflating quotations for services.

The third group, other types of distracters, are not bogus officials, workers or contractors, but ordinary members of the public who knock on doors uninvited. They frequently claim to be in need of emergency assistance or help, often requesting the use the toilet or telephone, a drink of water or looking for an old friend or relative in the neighbourhood. One common type of deception is the 'Hamster Trick' and its variants, whereby children ask for help recovering their hamster from the householder's garden, distracting the householder's attention from the entrance.

The absence of a 'bogus' guise in these 'other types of distraction' suggests that these burglaries occur at the less organised end of the offending spectrum and are therefore more likely to be opportunistic in nature, committed by local offenders who exploit their familiarity with a neighbourhood to select suitable targets to victimise. This interpretation is supported by an analysis of incidents recorded on the police database, which indicated that the involvement of younger offenders within distraction burglary is largely restricted to 'other types of distraction'. Of course many younger distraction offenders are unlikely to appear credible when impersonating agency officials who are expected to be older. Similarly, their offending methods may be constrained by unequal access to resources in the form of uniforms, equipment and transport (Mullins and Wright 2003).

Figure 7.1 illustrates the diversity of distractions by showing each offending guise as a percentage of all recorded distraction burglaries occurring in West Yorkshire between September 2000 and November 2003.

Figure 7.1 Offender (modus operandi) entry guises



Source: West Yorkshire Police recorded incidents of distraction burglary.

In common with the conventional wisdom about distraction burglars impersonating officials and workers, the guise of a bogus utility worker features in a large proportion of offences (32 per cent). Bogus public servants account for just over an eighth of offences (13 per cent), while other bogus workers for less than a twelfth (8 per cent). Bogus domestic contractors' commit just over a sixth of offences (17 per cent), which appears to indicate a fluidity in modus operandi between fraudulent property repairs and distraction burglary [*114*] (see Steele et al. 2001). Perhaps most surprising is that almost one third of offences were committed by 'other distracters' (32 per cent), who do not operate under the guise of any type of bogus official and – we suggest – are more likely to be locally based and less organised offenders (see also Jones 1987, p. 195). This finding serves to counterbalance media and political, and some academic discourses on distraction burglary which tend to emphasise in isolation the role of highly organised, bogus official type offenders (see for example Home Office 2001). As Christie (1986) has argued, the social construction of the 'ideal victim' evokes notions of the 'ideal offender', who is portrayed as a distant and de-humanised, 'non-person'.¹ However, common narratives which depict 'the distraction burglar' as being 'a dangerous man coming from far away' (ibid, p. 26) fit less well with images of local children recounting stories of lost hamsters.

Constructing victims as 'suitable' targets

The analysis of victimisation data by Lister et al. (2004) broadly reflects the findings of previous studies (e.g. Steele et al. 2001; Thornton et al. 2003) by confirming that distraction burglary victims are predominantly elderly, female and white. [*115*]

Four out of five (82 per cent) of all victims were over the age of 70 and over half (57 per cent) were over 80. The average age of victims was 77, indicating that offenders either target people within the 80 years or over group more than any other; or that people in this age group are comparatively less successful at preventing their own victimisation – or both. This finding gives increased weight to the argument that distraction burglars commonly act in a similar manner to domestic burglars in constructing typologies of preferred targets that are based upon a subjective assessment of potential risks and rewards (Cornish and Clarke 1986). In so doing, they associate the ageing process with increasing levels of vulnerability and therefore construct older people as 'suitable targets' (see Steele et al. 2001).

Offenders appear to assume that older people are more likely than other age groups to exhibit the following range of behavioural traits: live alone; remain in their homes for long periods during the day; acquiesce to doorstep callers; fail to check visitor's identification badges carefully (if at all); undertake cash transactions at the doorstep; keep cash savings at home; fail to miss stolen

items; make poor identification witnesses; fail to report the offence to the police (see Home Office 2001). However, the extent to which these traits are age-specific is very debatable. Whilst some of them may be age specific because of the structural and economic dependency of many older people, others appear to be informed by culturally prescribed, ageist constructions of older people's attitudes and behaviour.

However, like any age group, older people are a heterogeneous group, possessing different attitudes and outlooks, behavioural characteristics, states of health, social and economic status, life styles and experience. It is intuitive therefore that some people within this socially constructed cohort will display tendencies that make them more susceptible to distraction burglary than others. As such, the level of vulnerability and susceptibility to victimisation among older people is likely to vary significantly. Importantly, however, stereotypical and ageist assumptions appear to inform the offenders' constructions of older people as a generically vulnerable and frail population category, and therefore as 'suitable' targets (see Steele et al. 2001). Thus the prevalence of older people within distraction burglary statistics may reflect systematic ageist targeting attitudes by offenders as much as their actual level of personal vulnerability.

The analysis of the gender of distraction burglary victims revealed that over two thirds (69 per cent) of victims were female, whereas just under a quarter (25 per cent) were male. These data demonstrate that distraction burglary victims are not only predominantly elderly, [*116*] but disproportionately female. This gender profile may be attributable to two interrelated factors. First, the demographic fact that women usually outlive men means that older women tend more often to live alone than men (National Statistics 2004, p. 3). This 'knowledge' reinforces offender perceptions of women as the most 'suitable targets', not least because the commission of a distraction burglary is made easier if the householder is the single occupant. In only 6 per cent of incidents were more than one person recorded as 'the victims' at any single crime scene. Importantly, even accounting for some local variations in police recording practices, this data conclusively shows that distraction burglary victims are mainly single people living alone (see Home Office 2001, p. 7) Secondly, Steele et al. (2001) found that offenders make gendered assumptions about the physical and social vulnerability of elderly women, as well as their overall lack of capability to repel distraction burglars. Finally, the analysis of the ethnicity of victims found them to be almost exclusively white Europeans (99 per cent). This reflects the findings of Thornton et al. (2003) who described distraction burglary as a 'White-on-White' offence, but also suggested that lower reporting rates among ethnic minority groups generally may partly explain this disproportionately low level of victimisation.

The preceding analysis shows that 'age', 'gender', 'single occupancy' and 'ethnicity' each play a role in structuring the pattern of victimisation. It suggests therefore that some people will be confronted with circumstances of 'quadruple jeopardy', an understanding which at the very least allows some analytical purchase over the distribution of finite crime prevention resources (a point to which we return below).

'Older people' and crime victimisation

The preceding analysis of victimisation situates distraction burglary within a broader debate about the value of segregating older people as a discrete unit of analysis for crime prevention activity (see Mawby 1988; Midwinter; 1990; Pain 2003). Although research findings consistently demonstrate that older people are the age group that is least at risk of becoming victims of burglary (see Chivite-Mathews and Maggs 2002), our analysis shows that they disproportionately experience distraction burglary. For this reason alone, it is deserving of crime prevention resources. However, such risk analyses also fail to reflect the impact of specific types of victimisation across the age groups. [*117*]

The findings of research into the impact of burglary upon older people are ambiguous (see Mawby 2004). On the one hand, Donaldson (2003) found that its impact is relatively serious and that mortality rates can increase as a consequence. On the other hand, Maguire and Kynch (2000) found little evidence to show that burglary had a greater overall impact upon older victims

than younger ones. As stated earlier, it is difficult, if not unwise, to generalise about the impact of crimes such as burglary. Incidents of burglary vary in both form and seriousness, from the unnoticed loss of a negligible sum of cash to the violent robbery of a person's entire life savings. Similarly, the emotional, financial and physical impacts of distraction burglary on older people undoubtedly vary because the heterogeneous nature of the cohort in terms of their wealth, health, life experience and social status – indicates varying capacities to cope with, and recover from, episodes of victimisation.

As found with other externally constructed groupings in society, some older victims will simply put their victimisation down to experience, others will be more deeply affected. However, there are a number of characteristics specific to distraction burglary that can work upon the vulnerabilities associated with ageing to intensify the trauma of victimisation: the lingering memories of personal, sometimes violent, contact with the offender during the commission of the offence; the humiliation of being deceived; the lasting impacts of financial and sentimental loss (Thornton et al. 2003); the violation of sentimental attachments to a hitherto 'safe' home environment (Sexsmith 1990). When combined, these characteristics of distraction burglary victimisation can be devastating to the individual, precipitating a downward mental and physiological spiral that, according to a consultant paediatrician interviewed during the course of our research, can lead to the eventual demise of the victim. So, although it can be argued that the prevalence of distraction burglary is still relatively rare when compared to all recorded burglaries, its circumstances, characteristics and consequences demand that it be treated very differently. However, in so doing, it is important to question critically the linking of age with risk, notably within crime prevention interventions and criminal justice policy.

Linking age with risk

Although our analysis shows that it is appropriate for distraction burglary reduction initiatives to focus upon older people, the ageing process impacts upon levels of vulnerability gradually. It is, therefore, [*118*] important to distinguish between 'younger' and 'older' old people. Lister et al. (2004) found that people over the age of 65 account for 87 per cent of all distraction burglary victims, which is quite staggering evidence of the link. However, further investigation found that almost three quarters (72 per cent) of the victims were aged 75 and over. Moreover, despite the fact that there were 11 per cent fewer people aged 75 and over in the population of the geographic area from where these data were collected, they were over five-and-a-half times more likely to suffer a distraction burglary than those aged between 65 and 74 (15 per cent of victims).

These findings suggest that when using age as the sole basis for distributing finite resources, distraction burglary reduction initiatives could most usefully target people aged 75 and over and emphasise the need for initiatives to prioritise resources and tailor activities across the 'older' age ranges. The danger is that if all 'older people' are considered to be at equal risk, crime prevention projects may take the easy option and engage predominantly with those 'young' old people who are easier to access because of their relative health and mobility. This may not be the most efficient use of resources because, as described earlier, the 'older' old people who are most at risk from distraction burglary, are also likely to be the hardest to reach. However, general awareness raising campaigns should not exclude those falling outside this age range because it is important to catch people early in order to enable them to internalise crime prevention messages over the longer-term (see Thornton and Hatton 2004).

Emphasising 'vulnerability' instead of 'age'

As the link between age and risk comes under scrutiny, then so the coherence of 'older people' as a unit for analysis and, therefore, as a focus for crime prevention policy initiatives and implementation comes into question. As we have emphasised, older people are as heterogeneous and diverse in their personal experiences, attitudes and behaviour as any other age group (Bytheway 1995). While the circumstances of some, especially those living alone, leaves them relatively exposed to distraction burglary, the circumstances of others do not (Anderson 1998). As a consequence vulnerability, linked to the ageing process, is a far more

reliable predictor of risk than age itself. Confusion between the two must clearly be avoided because although 'old age' overlaps with 'vulnerability', the two are not synonymous.

In assessing 'vulnerability', it is also important not to exclude other fields of enquiry (Pain 2003), as the known profile of distraction [*119*] burglary victims, described earlier, also varies according to gender, ethnicity and 'single occupancy'. Future research and practice into distraction burglary should explore factors beyond age that might also shape the distribution of victimisation. Gaining this knowledge, especially at a local level, enables the development of more 'intelligence-led' approaches towards allocating crime prevention resources. Indeed, if the targeting of victims by offenders is highly selective then scope exists for the distribution of crime prevention resources to be informed by a similar degree of selectivity. Other relevant factors are likely to be: socio-economic status; location of residence; household and tenure type; domestic living circumstances; physical and mental health capabilities; and everyday lifestyle routines and practices.

Consideration of these other factors brings at least four interrelated benefits to crime prevention policy formation in this area. Firstly, as suggested, it enables crime prevention strategies to be more intelligence-led in the distribution of finite resources. Secondly, it implies that personal circumstance and specific types of behaviour are primary determinants of victimisation, which is important to recognise because behaviour can be addressed and rectified, but the ageing process cannot. Thirdly, it helps to reduce the stigma resulting from labelling and categorising 'the elderly' as generically vulnerable, which in itself may reify the notion of a coherent and homogeneous cohort (Fennel 1988). This culturally reproduced ageist stereotype not only informs the offender's construction of older people as 'ideal targets', but older people themselves absorb and internalise it. A 'selffulfilling victimology' may therefore evolve, not least because 'the bully always goes for the weak' (Midwinter 1990, p. 52). Finally, it helps to prevent the exclusion of other high-risk groups from crime prevention discourses. For example, police officers interviewed by Lister et al. (2004) reported that younger victims of distraction burglary tend to be characterised by cognitive, health and mobility problems.

Conclusion

This chapter has told a complex, but important story, and in doing so it has reviewed and challenged some of the assumptions that underpin the debates over distraction burglary. Clearly, distraction burglary should not be viewed as a specific offence, but must be accepted as a family or genre of offences driven by diverse motivations, with [*120*] a broadly common modus operandi. Some of these variations are highly organised and calculating patterns of offending behaviour that display the hallmarks of being reproduced across generations of offenders. Others, however, appear to be carried out on-the-spot- the-moment and are largely opportunistic. But, to complicate the typology, distraction burglars also tend to be very reflexive to their situation. So, what may start off as a distraction sometimes ends up as an aggravated burglary (barge in). The drama created by this aggravation against an 'ideal victim' makes incidents of distraction burglary highly newsworthy.

On the one hand, media sensationalism can be very productive because it informs a sympathetic public about the problem, who then drive the policy formation process. Furthermore, greater public 'knowledge' of the offence leads to an increase in levels of reporting by the public, as well as rates of recording by the police. In the case of the latter, not only are police officers themselves subject to media sensitisation, but public concerns about the offence lead to calls for the police organisation to respond. On the other hand, there is a downside to media treatment which needs to be carefully considered during policy formation because the sensationalising force of media amplifies public perceptions of deviancy (Cohen 1972) which can also reduce the effectiveness of crime prevention initiatives. During the course of their reportage the media tend to construct only older people as the victims, rather than those with vulnerabilities linked to the aging process. This shapes the public view of the problem by reinforcing the idea of older people as potential victims and eventually skews the formation of crime prevention policy. Moreover, this same process construction also identifies older people and their lifestyle patterns as a low-risk

crime opportunity to potential offenders. The media cycle further amplifies the problem because the increases in victim reporting and recording rates give the outward impression of rising rates of distraction burglary and the publication of the statistics becomes a newsworthy event, contributing further to the media frenzy. This chain of events creates problems for the subsequent management of public expectations of policies designed to reduce distraction burglaries, especially as it reinforces, but also 'reifies' the notion of older people as a coherent unit for the delivery of criminal justice policy.

In conclusion, the distraction burglary debate is permeated by ageism – an ideology which uncritically links together constructs such as age and risk as 'naturally' occurring – not just in the deliberation of criminal justice policy, but also by offenders in the construction [*121*] of their victims. Nevertheless, although distraction burglary crime prevention resources appear to be being allocated to the right place and fairly efficiently, our concern is that this may in part be for the wrong reasons. Without a thorough understanding of the dynamics of the processes of offending and victimisation, other groups of victim may not enjoy the same level of protection – and we may not know about this.

Notes

1 As our analysis will show, distraction burglary victims are predominantly elderly, white females, living alone.

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