Police Knowledge of Older Populations: The Impact of Training, Experience, and Education

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Older populations are growing at a rapid pace in America, creating new challenges for service related industries, including law enforcement. Since police officers will undoubtedly have more interaction with older populations over the next 20 years, it is critical that attention is also given to their knowledge of these populations. Most research focusing on this issue examined police chiefs and college students' opinions about laws and penalties for elder abuse and their perceptions of older populations in general. The present study concentrates on officer knowledge of older populations, and examines 126 police officers of all ranks in New Jersey. We find that formal education of the officers as well as their training both lead to increased knowledge of older populations. Policy implications surrounding this study are also discussed.

The term "old" has typically been used to denote people 65 years of age or older in the United States; an age that was once considered the last stage of a person's life. But, with better nutrition and medical advances, life expectancy of Americans has steadily increased over the past century. The 65 and over population has increased in number from 3 million to 35 million during the 19th century, and the population age 85 and over increased from 100,000 to 4.2 million during the same time period (Federal, 2004).

As the medical profession discovers more about the human body, these population increases will likely burgeon as will the social, economic, and justice related issues and concerns that these populations generate. On average, a male child born in 1990 will live 75 years while a female child will live to age 80 or older (Cockerham, 1991). Moreover, while the population age 65 and over currently accounts for just over 12 % of the population, it is predicted to expand to 20 % by the year 2030, doubling its overall population numbers during this time (Federal, 2004). Some hypothesize a more intense growth of older populations, calculating that they will account for 25% of the population by 2025 (Treas, 1995). In addition, those age 85 and older are expected to increase at an even faster pace, increasing from 4.2 million in 2000 to nearly 21 million by 2030 (Federal, 2004).

The controversy associated with the impending social security crisis demonstrates the impact that the growth of older populations can have on America's

economic structure. But, the implications of expanding older populations may be just as imposing for governmental agencies that provide social and justice services. In particular, theorists believe that increases in older populations will have a number of implications for criminal justice, most notably an increase in crime victims (Lachs, Williams, O'Brien, Hurst and Horrwitz, 1996; Minaker & Frishman, 1995).

While it is often declared that older populations have the highest fear of crime, yet the lowest actual crime victimization, the increase of older populations over the next twenty years will, nonetheless, have serious implications to the phenomenon of crime. White collar crime, particularly that being related to scams and technology is on the rise, and older populations are highly victimized by this brand of crime (Baron & Welty, 1996). Considering the fixed financial budget concomitant with older populations, the potential future crisis in social security, and the biological changes that contribute to older populations being vulnerable to fear and concern (Payne, 2000), increases in crime to this population could cause vexing concerns for their quality of life.

Increases in crime of older populations would have repercussions to the criminal justice system that extend beyond the quality of life for older populations, and the increased volumes of crime bestowed upon the criminal justice system. Since the treatment of ailments in aging bodies has outpaced knowledge of the problems impacting aging brains, an increase in older populations further complicates the jobs of criminal justice personnel, particularly the first responders. For instance, both elderly victims and offenders are more likely to have special needs (Blakely & Dolon, 1991; Enter, 1991; Sengstock & Hwalek, 1986), psychiatric disorders (Moak, Zimmer & Elliot, 1988; Petrie, Lawson & Hollender, 1982) and provide challenges for communication (Aaronson, 1998).

One concern of this study is that an increase in calls for police services by older populations, even non-crime related calls, may place law enforcement officers in conditions for which they have little training or experience. Although there is no shortage of literature focusing on strategies for policing different genders, races, and other groups, older populations have not attracted the same attention. This is not to say that the issue has been completely neglected, however, as some strides have been made over the past 15 years with the formulation of TRIAD programs that help inform the elderly about crime prevention techniques (Bourns, 2000). Indeed, by the year 2000, 30 states had state level TRIAD boards and a number had developed approved officer training curriculums in how to respond to the elderly (2000). But, police training on older populations still lags behind that placed on most of the other demographic groups.

The issues surrounding attention on older populations, or lack thereof, may extend beyond existing law enforcement officers to future law enforcement officers who are now in the classroom. Indeed, sparse attention has been found on older populations

in curriculums at the graduate level of study in criminal justice (Sever, 2004). There are also few textbooks available that have focused their coverage on the relationship between elderly and crime (Payne, 2000). Although this inattention may be due to the traditionally low incidence of crime among the elderly, it is cause for concern considering the mounting non-crime related calls for service by older populations. Moreover, since the increase of elder abuse cases will also increase interaction between law enforcement and older populations, a strong case is made for greater criminal justice student exposure to aging populations.

Axiomatic with increases in police interaction with older populations is the need for more training, education, and focus on older populations. It also necessitates a better understanding of the impact that officer training and education has of their knowledge of older populations. The present study examines the general knowledge that police officers have with regard to older populations, and it also examines a number of factors that may impact their knowledge. Specifically, we tested for the potential impacts of officer background characteristics, prior experience with older populations, training on older populations, and formal education. Since most officer interaction with the public is not crime related (Sever, 2001), we focused on the officers' general knowledge of older populations rather than knowledge related to their crime and victimization.

Prior Literature on Police and Older Populations

Although there has been some literature on the fear of crime of older populations, (Gurnack & Zevitz, 1993; Norton, 1982; Norton & Courlander, 1982; Yin, 1980), the preponderance of criminal justice literature pertains to their victimization and strategies used to accommodate them. This literature extends back to the 1970's with the bulk of attention placed on police service delivery to elderly populations (Bourns, 2000; Gurnack & Zevitz, 1993; Lachs, O'Brien, Hurst, & Horowitz, 1996; Schack & Frank, 1978; Zevitz & Gurnack, 1991; Zevitz & Rettammel, 1990) and police response to elderly abuse (Cavan, 1991; Dolon & Hendricks, 1989; Heisler, 1991; Minaker & Frishman, 1995; Sengstock & Hwalek, 1986). There has also been research on the implications that increasing elderly populations have on police (Burgheim & Sterbling, 2002; Cockerham, 1991; Enter, 1991), including issues ubiquitous in crime reporting and eyewitness testimony of the elderly (Starrett, 1988; Yarmey & Jones, 1982), as well as how to train and educate officers with regard to these populations (Bachand, 1984; Bourns, 2000; Enter, 1991; Needham-Bennett, Parrot, & MacDonald, 1996).

While the aforementioned police strategies for victims in older populations have been consistently written about over the past 15 years, perceptual research surrounding this group is less common. In fact, there have been as many studies testing older

people's perceptions of criminal justice personnel as visa versa. Specifically, researchers have examined older people's perceptions of the quality of police services to the elderly (Sundeen, 1979; Zevitz & Gurnack, 1991; Zevitz & Rettammel, 1990) as well as their perceptions of police in comparison to other criminal justice agencies (Sundeen, 1979).

We located four studies that investigated the attitudes of the criminal justice system personnel handling elderly populations. All four of these studies placed much of their emphasis on perceptions that police and other groups have with regard to the sanctions appropriate in elder abuse cases. For instance, Dolon and Hendricks (1989) compared the opinions of police and social service providers about elder abuse, while Payne and Berg undertook a series of studies that focused on the beliefs of police chiefs, students, nursing home personnel, and related groups (1999; 2003a; 2003b).

Payne and Berg (2003a) examined the perceptions of police chiefs and ombudsmen (nursing home investigators) about the criminalization of elder abuse. These two groups were surveyed because the authors sought to include the opinions of officials (as in comparison to most legislators) who are more likely to have been involved in the decisions surrounding elder abuse cases. Specifically, they asked these police executives and investigators what penalties they favored for six different types of crimes, ranging from negligence to theft to battery. Both groups had a number of similar ideas surrounding the management of elder abuse, and both favored criminal charges as a consequence for this crime.

Payne and Berg (2003b) examined these same general issues surrounding perceptions of elder abuse, but added criminal justice students and nursing home employees along to the sample of police chiefs. While the sample of police chiefs and nursing home employees considered those currently in charge of older populations and elder abuse cases, the idea behind this study was to also shed light on a population (students) that will likely have even greater involvement with older populations in a law enforcement capacity. The study indicated that although criminal justice students did not view crime as cumbersome of a problem in the lives of elderly as did police chiefs, they were sensitive to many of the social service needs of this group.

Although it was not a focus of their study, Payne and Berg (1999) did compare the knowledge of police chiefs, criminal justice students, nursing home directors and employees on criminal victimization of older populations. Using a strict legal definition of crime victimization (blue collar crime), they found that police chiefs and criminal justice students were more likely to know that older populations are victimized less than younger populations. The rest of their study focused on the opinions between four groups, and found that police chiefs and nursing home directors were more likely to hold older populations responsible for their own victimization than were the college students and

nursing home employees. Not surprisingly, nursing home directors and employees were more likely to believe that nursing homes are safe environments than police chiefs and students.

The four perceptual studies above examined a variety of issues concerning older populations, but mainly focused on the opinions of police chiefs, students and nursing home employees about the appropriateness of sanctions for specific crimes against older populations. When concentrating on studies specific to patrol officers and other such law enforcement personnel having greater interaction with the public, we were only able to find a study focusing on their understanding of elder abuse laws (Daniels, Baumhover, Formby and Clark-Daniels, 1999). We were not able to locate any studies that explore the attitudes that police at any lower levels have about older populations, let alone their knowledge of these populations. Thus, the present study attempts to fill this research gap. Again, since most police encounters with the elderly are not at a crime scene, we will explore police officers' general knowledge of older populations. We believe that this knowledge greatly impacts how officers are able to communicate and handle calls for service involving older individuals as well as how older individuals perceive the police.

Methods

The data for this study were taken from 126 sworn police officers who were spread across nine city police departments in central New Jersey. Surveys were given to the chief of police or the officer handling research requests in each department and then dispersed to the individual officers. Officer participation was voluntary, and we received completed responses from 57% of the total 221 officers in the nine agencies during the spring and summer of 2005. Since this was a non-probability sample of officers, the results can only be generalized to the sample and not to all officers in New Jersey. However, given the exploratory nature of this study and the omission of this type of investigation in the prior literature, the results should be of interest to the fields of both policing and gerontology.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variable in this analysis was police knowledge of older populations. This variable was created via an index of 20 scaled questions about older populations. Specifically, officers were presented 20 statements on aging, some being more accepted as fact in the field of gerontology and some being viewed as myths. Examples of questions include: "older drivers have fewer accidents per person than drivers under the age of 65" and "Most old people have little desire in, or capacity for sexual relations."

Since there can never be a 100% correct or incorrect statement, officers were given a scale of 1-6 (one being definitely false and 6 being definitely true) and asked the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement. If the statement is an accepted idea in the field of gerontology and the officer answered a four (possibly true), then the officer received four points for that particular statement. Conversely, if the statement is considered a myth in the field and the officer answered a five (most likely true), then the officer was credited with only two points for that statement, while a definitely false answer would have achieved six points. The officers' answers were totaled with a potential scoring range from 20 to 120.

The first knowledge variable in this study was the officer's *total knowledge score*. The officers' scores ranged between 59 and 105 with overall mean and median scores of 76.6 and 76 respectively. The second knowledge variable, *high score*, was a simple dichotomy indicating whether the officer scored over the median score of 76. An officer score of 76 or higher was considered a high score (1=high score, 0= low score).

Independent Variables

One of the primary objectives of this study was to ascertain the impact that police training about older populations has on our two knowledge variables. We tested nine dichotomous training variables against the knowledge of older population's variable. These nine variables included six distinct types (1=received training on aging, 0=did not receive training on aging) of training that may potentially indoctrinate information about older populations. These training types include: role call training, recruit training, promotional training, in-service training, specialized training, and field training. *Role call training* perhaps is the most common type of training, occurring daily in some departments. In such departments, officers meet at the beginning of their shift and discuss issues and current events pertinent to their work detail. *Recruit training*, on the other hand, only occurs at the beginning stages of an officer's career, but is longer in duration (up to six months for many departments), and thus has a great deal of potential for officer training on older populations.

The remaining four training variables usually occur at different levels of an officer's career. For instance, *promotional training* is typically required of officers who are being promoted to a higher rank or given a different assignment. Since the new job will have different responsibilities, officers receive training on the protocol and standard procedures necessary for the position. *In-service training* is required for officers regardless of any impending advancement, and officers normally must complete a required number of in-service training hours per year. This training could serve as a

review of many of the issues covered in recruit training or it could center on contemporary issues involving specific populations.

Specialized training is typically provided to officers specifically selected to receive training on an issue that is critical to the department, for which perhaps only a few experts in the department are necessary. Examples would include officers who receive specialized training in crime analysis, hate crimes, or other modern-day requirements for policing. Finally, *field training* commonly follows recruit training and is a more informal process used to indoctrinate inexperienced officers. At this stage, a new officer is assigned to an experienced officer who instructs the officer while on the job. Officers may encounter older populations during this stage and could potentially receive tips from the experienced officers about their understanding of these populations.

Three summary variables are included in the analysis, indicating whether the officer had received no training (1=yes, 0=no), one or more training types (1=yes, 0=no), and two or more training types (1=yes, 0=no). These variables were included to assess whether exposure to a variety of training styles has any impact on knowledge distinct from individual training type.

We also hypothesized that experience with older populations will impact officer knowledge. Therefore, six measures of experience with older populations were controlled for, encompassing the officers' job experience as well as experiences in their personal life. All of these experience variables are dichotomous (1=yes, 0=no), and they all have potential to confound the impact of the training variables on knowledge. The three job experience variables simply denote whether the officers have ever been *involved in arrest* in elder abuse, *investigated elder abuse* or *discussed an elder abuse case* with other officers. The three personal experience variables gauge whether the officer is *currently in a caretaking role*, has been in a *caretaking role in the past* and whether he or she has *witnessed a relative in a caretaking role*. Tantamount to past research (Hyde & Miller 1999; Silverstein & Parrott 1997) that has found increases in exposure with older populations adds to favorable perceptions towards them, we believe that exposure will also amplify general knowledge about this group.

Finally, several officer characteristics were included as controls in this study. These variables include the officers' *age*, *years of experience*, *education* (bachelors or higher =1, no bachelors =0), and whether or not the officer works as a *patrol officer* (1=yes, 0=no). Education and rank were originally ordinal variables, but were dichotomized due to the small numbers in some of the categories. Officer experience in years is a continuous interval variable, while age is included as both an interval and dichotomous variable (40 and over =1, under 40=0).

Officer age, experience, and education are expected to have positive impacts on knowledge of the elderly. Although we located no evidence that these variables impact officer knowledge of older populations, there is some research suggesting that age and experience influence the general populations' stereotypes about these groups (Scott, Minichiello & Brown, 1998; Minichiello, Browne, & Kendig 2000; Silverstein and Parrott (1997).

Findings

Table 1 displays the cross-tabulation break-down for each of the independent variables, indicating the percentage of officers that answered "yes" to each of the survey questions. For each dichotomous variable, the table also shows the difference in mean knowledge for the officers who answered yes and no for each variable.

Table 1
Officer Training on Aging

(Knowledge Score)	(Mean=71.3)	Mean=77.4

Aging Experience Variables

Involved In arrest in Elder Abuse	Yes-15%	No=85%
(Knowledge Score)	(Mean=79.8)	Mean=76.1)
Investigated Elder Abuse	Yes-29%	No-71%
(Knowledge Score)	(Mean=78.2)	(Mean=76)
Discussed Elder Abuse Case	Yes-43%	No-57%
(Knowledge Score)	(Mean=75.8)	Mean=77.3
Caretaking Role Currently	Yes-9%	No-91%
(Knowledge Score)	(Mean-74.5)	(Mean=76.8)
Caretaking Role In Past	Yes-38%	No-62%
(Knowledge Score)	(Mean=78.4)	Mean=75.6)
Witnessed Relative Caretaking	Yes-31%	No-68%
(Knowledge Score)	(Mean=78)	(Mean=76)

Characteristics of Officers

Age of Officer	Mean=36	SD=8.8

Years of Experience of Officer	Mean=11.3	SD=8.8

Over 40 Years of Age	Yes=29%	No=79%
(Knowledge Score)	(Mean=79.3)	(Mea=75.5)
Bachelors or higher	Yes=26%	No=74%
(Knowledge Score)	(Mean=78.5)	(Mean=76)
Patrol Officer	Yes=65%	No=35%
(Knowledge Score)	(Mean=75.8)	(Mean=78.1)

Table 1 demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of officers, (88%) in our sample, have received at least one kind of training on aging, with half of them being exposed to two or more types. Officers most commonly received training at the recruit stage, followed by in-service training. While none of the individual training types radically impacted officer knowledge, officers receiving some type of training on older populations had higher knowledge scores than those not receiving training. Fortunately, there were only fifteen officers in our sample who had not received training on older populations. Interestingly, having two or more types of training had no impact on knowledge, indicating that being exposed to some training is helpful in increasing or establishing knowledge, but additional training may simply be redundant.

The experience variables had mixed results in Table 1. Officers having past experience with care taking and those that witnessed care taking in their families both had slightly increased knowledge scores. The same was true for officers who were involved in arrests in elder abuse cases and those who had investigated elder abuse cases. As expected, higher education, age, and rank all related to increases in knowledge scores.

Table 2
Officer Characteristics and Knowledge Index on Aging

Officer Variables	Knowledge Index
Education	
No College Degree (n=93)	46%
College Degree (n=33)	67%
Age	
Under 40 (n=89)	46%
Over 40 (n=37)	65%
Rank	
Patrol Officer (n=82)	44%
Higher Ranked Officer (n=44)	66%
Training	
Received No Training on Aging (n=15)	27%
Received one type of training below (n=47)	57%
Received two or more of Training below (n=65)	52%
Received Roll Call Training on Aging (n=42)	55%
No Roll Call Training on Aging (n=84)	50%
Received Recruit Training on Aging (n=65)	54%
No Recruit Training on Aging (n=61)	49%
Received In-Service Training on Aging (n=57)	54%
No In-Service Training on Aging (n=69)	49%
Received Specialized Training on Aging (n=23)	61%
No Specialized Training on Aging (n=103)	50%
Received Field Training on Aging (n=11)	64%
No Field Training on Aging (n=115)	50%
Experience with Aging Populations	
Involved in Arrest in Elder Abuse Case (n=19)	58%
Never Made Arrest in Elder Abuse Case (n=107)	50%
Investigated Elder Abuse (n=37)	59%
Never Has Investigated Elder Abuse (n=89)	48%
In Caretaking Role in Past (n=48)	60%
Never in Caretaking Role in Past (n=78)	46%
Witness to Relative in Caretaking Role (n=39)	62%
Never Had a Relative in Caretaking Role (n=87)	47%

Table 2 shows cross-tabulations between the independent variables and whether or not the officers scored high on the knowledge test. These results generally support the results in Table 1. For instance, older officers, those with college degrees, and those with ranks above patrol officer were all more likely to score high on the knowledge index than were comparable groups. The results for the training variables were also mirrored in this table, as officers without any training were much less likely to score high then those with training. Officers who received specialized and field training were the most likely to score high in Table 2.

Experience with older populations again had a strong impact on knowledge in Table 2. Indeed, being in a caretaking position in one's personal life and involvement in elder abuse cases both increased knowledge scores. While the age of officers had similar impact on knowledge scores in Tables 1 and 2, however, paradoxical results were found for education.

Table 3
Logistic Regression of Training, Experience, and Officer Characteristics On High Police Knowledge Scores of Older Populations

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Witness to Elder Care	1.15*	1.19*	1.11*	1.13*	1.14*	1.15*	1.15*
	(.472)	(.477)	(.472)	(.480)	(.472)	(.472)	(.473)
Past Care Of Elderly	.973*	1.14*	.951*	.963*	.993*	1.03*	1.01*
	(.466)	(.485)	(.456)	(.461)	(.460)	(.470)	(.461)
College Degree	1.15*	1.13*	1.16*	1.12*	1.11*	1.17*	1.16*
	(.486)	(.489)	(.492)	(.487)	(.486)	(.497)	(.490)
Over 40 Years Old	.068	.188	.286	.202	.176	.223	.191
	(.543)	(.531)	(.542)	(.531)	(.532)	(.530)	(.534)
Patrol Officer	-.774	-.764	-.676	-.698	-.703	-.712	-.696
	(.505)	(.507)	(.500)	(.503)	(.499)	(.499)	(.504)
Arrest Experience	-.102	-.126	-.149	-.135	-.144	-.115	-.135
	(.585)	(.597)	(.588)	(.587)	(.581)	(.583)	(.579)
Investigation Experience	.397	.317	.367	.369	.363	.417	.392
	(.439)	(.440)	(.438)	(.438)	(.437)	(.446)	(.438)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Training (Two or more)	.165						
	(.398)						
Roll Call Training		.544					
		(.440)					
Recruit Training			.310				
			(.399)				
Promotion Training				-.042			
				(.613)			
In Service Training					.162		
					(.395)		
Specialty Training						-.280	
						(.565)	
Field Training							.735
							(.725)
-2 Log Like.	152.827	154.028	154.982	155.583	155.420	155.343	154.522
Chi-Square	19.387	20.518	19.564	18.963	19.127	19.203	20.024

*p<.05
(Standard Error in Parentheses)

Table 3 lists the findings for the multivariate logistic regression analyses of officer knowledge. The table has seven models, each with a different training variable included in order to control for their individual effects. Despite which training variables are used as controls, we find that education, past care of older populations and being a witness to care of older populations all have consistent significant positive impacts on knowledge across the models. While bivariate analyses had found that age, arrest, and investigative experience impacts knowledge scores, these impacts did not persist in multivariate analysis. These results suggest that investigative and arrest experience may simply be correlated with personal experience with care of older populations and not knowledge scores. Finally, none of the individual training variables included in Table 3 significantly impacted officer knowledge, but their positive impacts remain stable across the various models.

Discussion and Conclusion

The research in this study indicates that officers who receive training on older populations have more knowledge about these populations than those who receive no training. There does not appear to be an additive effect, however, whereby the more types of training that an officer receives would increase overall knowledge. There also does not appear to be a particular training type that is specifically effective in increasing knowledge. Formal education does impact officer knowledge in all of the tests undertaken in this study, suggesting that these officers receive additional knowledge of older people through their college experience and/or their resulting desire to continue their learning process.

This study has significance for the field of criminal justice through a number of different contexts. First, it suggests that it is common for officers, at least in central New Jersey, to be exposed to training about older populations. We provide evidence that this training, at least its mere existence, has positive impacts on officer understanding of older populations. Since law enforcement officers will likely have increased interaction with older populations in the future, these results provide support for enhancements in such training. Indeed, Payne and Berg (1999) found that 84% of their police chiefs sampled believed that officers were not receiving enough training on older populations.

While some may argue that college educated officers may have scored higher on the knowledge index due to testing effects, whereby they have become acclimated to taking exams and recognize the direction to which they should answer, we feel that education does have an impact beyond this phenomenon. We believe that this study demonstrates the potential that universities and colleges have in exposing future officers to subject areas that will become pertinent in their jobs. Indeed, institutions of higher

education are recognizing the necessity of gerontology as a subject for study, and related courses may also see an increase in coverage of this topic.

Since criminal justice students will be engaging older populations in the future in a number of different settings, it is critical that their exposure to older populations be augmented in and out of the classroom. As elucidated previously, there is evidence that exposure to older populations can impact college students' perceptions of these groups and diminish the existence of negative stereotypes that exists between both groups (Hopkins, 2000; Hyde & Miller, 1997).

Future research on older populations should move its focus beyond a general knowledge index and extend to officer knowledge specific to law enforcement and crime related issues. Perhaps research could be directed at the myths surrounding older populations' involvement as victims and offenders in crime and criminal justice. Moreover, other criminal justice personnel, such as prosecutors, judges, corrections officers, and probation officers, could also be surveyed to ascertain their training levels and knowledge of older populations.

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