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Fear of crime among older persons – Beyond simplifying paradoxes

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Since more than three decades, the so-called “victimization/fear paradox,” according to which older people are more afraid of crime than any other age group although they are (statistically) least likely to be victimized, has frequently been interpreted by criminologists as implying that fear of crime in older adults is a phenomenon in need of particular explanation. However, several studies have shown that older people do not actually experience fear more frequently or more intensely than younger adults, though they do behave more cautiously. This precautionary behavior could help to explain why older people are less likely to become victims of crime. Yet even if this resolves the apparent paradox, other questions remain open: Why do older people act more carefully? Is their prudence a by-product of fear? Why do younger people not take more care, though they would be well advised to do so? Do people register situations, subjects, and dangers differently? Why does precautionary behavior in old age not have a detrimental effect on well-being? Data from a series of 9 questionnaire studies (N>2,000) are presented in order to illustrate and support an interactive model of fear of crime in old age, according to which cautious behavior among older persons emerges from an interaction of several factors, including changing gain/loss expectations, increasing vulnerability, and changing expected states of fear.

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