

Crime against the Aged  
*In Perspective*  
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The media are full of horror stories about violent crime against elderly, helpless victims. Eighty-year-old women are raped, beaten, and robbed at knife point. Elderly couples commit suicide to avoid the awful realities of modern urban life. Old people fear city streets even in the daylight hours. The sight of a group of teen-agers simply hanging out for an afternoon or the sound of footsteps approaching from the rear are enough to mobilize all the trappings of terror in those who are most vulnerable to wanton violent attacks.

But there are other, less public, crimes to be feared by our aged. There is a growing body of evidence that many are victims of neglect or brutality at the hands of their own children. Unable to fend for themselves physically, emotionally, or financially, they are victimized by their own families. The problem has become so wide-spread that a number of states, including Delaware, have established adult protective service organizations for old people and other helpless adults who are at the mercy of their so-called caretakers.

Dramatic and frightening as are stories of physical violence and abuse, there are less obvious, but perhaps more pervasive, crimes against the aged, crimes that are sanctioned by society. An employee who has served her employer well and faithfully for thirty-five years is laid off so that he doesn't have to pay her pension, a pension that would have been barely adequate to maintain her at poverty level. In one of the richest countries in the world there is a growing number of old people who have to choose between food and heat, because we have not made adequate provision for rewarding those who have made our affluence possible.

The Japanese, who have traditionally revered their elders for their wisdom, have taken the opposite tack. Employees of Japanese firms can expect to spend their entire working lives in one place, with the employer supplying total security in return for loyalty to the company. The latest twist in this womb-to-tomb security is a corporate cemetery provided for workers. Its tombstone inscription reads in part: "Let's keep doing good and cleanse ourselves while in life; and even when we are no longer of this world, let's get together sometimes, drink sake, and have a chat just as we did in life...." We might do well to borrow the Japanese attitude, if not their entire system.