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Original research article

What troubles our senior citizens? Crime against the elderly in the Czech Republic in 2016

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ABSTRACT

The article examines a topical issue: the prevention of crime committed in the Czech Republic against senior citizens. It aims to describe: (1) how aware senior citizens are of the options available to prevent crime; (2) from what sources they obtained this information; and (3) how sufficient they judge this information to be. A semi-structured questionnaire was distributed in October 2016 among those attending the University of the Third Age at Masaryk University in Brno. A total of 92 forms were returned, the analysis of which showed that most respondents had encountered information about crime against senior citizens, and that the bulk of this information was obtained from the media and from peers (friends etc.). The information was concerned with particular types of crime against senior citizens and tended not to involve prevention, i.e. how senior citizens might act to avoid crime. Respondents viewed the information as insufficient, with specific advice on preventive behaviour noticeably absent. On the basis of these findings the authors propose that prevention measures should be designed to cater for the specific characteristics of the various groups of senior citizens.

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Introduction

The category of 'senior citizens' is one where biological, medical and sociological aspects intersect. The phenomena and processes of senescence are not just biological, but also psychological, cultural and social in character. Thus, the issues of senescence form a topic not only of biology and medicine, but also psychology and sociology [1, 2]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO)

definition, senescence is that period when the deterioration of physical and mental capacities becomes manifest, as compared to earlier life periods. Today the second half of human life is most often divided into the following intervals: 45–59 years of age: middle or mature age; 60–74: elderly; 75–89: old age; 90 and over: very old [3, 4]. Some scholars distinguish early old age (65–75) and advanced old age (75+), although gerontologists are not unanimous about the boundaries of these categories, and some define advanced old age as 80+ [5]. Crime targeting senior citizens

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and the prevention of such crime is a broad and topical issue that is attracting much media attention. The media often employ stereotypes (such as 'naïve pensioner' and 'cunning criminal') and, in doing so, help perpetuate these stereotypes. What is more, they reinforce the notion that senior citizens are 'easy targets' [3, 6]. Media reporting often creates the impression that senior citizens become victims of crime more often than is actually the case. Thus, the media habitually co-create the reality in this particular area [7].

Crime against the elderly is a topical and priority issue for cooperation between police forces in the countries of the European Union (EU), not least due to demographic developments in EU countries and the growing proportion of crime committed against senior citizens. The elderly are much more often the victims of crime than the perpetrators of crime [8]. Beyond physiological reasons that have a bearing on their decreased defensive abilities, the causes for this can be sought in the social risks of old age, including ageism and generational intolerance, prejudices of various sorts (for example, overestimates of the morbidity rate among the elderly population and of the decline in their functional abilities), loneliness (such as that connected with the loss of a spouse), the risk of loss of self-sufficiency, and the declining ability to follow current affairs and to communicate with younger generations, which might be related to the emergence of new technologies [9, 10, 11].

In recent times we have witnessed an unprecedented rise in various forms of violence, and senior citizens are among those targeted. Violence against the elderly is committed either in public areas or at home [2]. Typically the elderly are a group characterised by increased victimity. This is connected with their increased suggestibility, credulity and their frequently held opinion that thieves are not interested in them, given the prevailing conviction that the financial standing of most pensioners is often not very good [12, 13, 14].

Victimity, victimisation and harm caused to senior citizens

Victimity, that is the susceptibility of an individual or group to become a victim of crime, is more pronounced in the elderly than in the general population, as they are less able to escape or defend themselves, may be lonely and sometimes exhibit different behavioural patterns from the majority population. Tošnerová [15] also points out that in contemporary society, old age is viewed as something a priori negative. The process in which a potential victim becomes an actual victim is described as victimisation [16].

A core experience of victimisation, not just among senior citizens but also more broadly, is the loss of the illusion that the world is a good place. To those who have fallen victim to crime, the world seems evil and chaotic, a setting where inexplicable, unpredictable and unjust events occur; they lose their ability to trust others and experience intense feelings of fear. They also lose the illusion of control. Attempts to control and influence their own life seem vain and futile to them, since by accident they end up in situations that cannot be managed through their own activity; victims feel weak and powerless, sensing that

personal aspirations and plans are of no use as they cannot influence the events unfolding in the external world [17].

Being a victim of criminal assault increases the probability of a repeat assault. According to current knowledge, revictimisation after a relatively short time is by no means exceptional [18]. One needs to note in connection with this that in the period following a crime perpetrated against a senior citizen, their environment is of increased importance as it may substantially influence the victim's return to everyday life. Senior citizens who have fallen victim to a crime need the support of their environment in order to be able to deal with the consequences of the crime [17]. This is because a crime committed against a senior citizen impacts their subsequent functioning in society; they may often show signs of stress, anxiety and fear, feel threatened, etc. [19].

Crime committed against senior citizens

Crimes perpetrated against senior citizens constitute a serious social problem, requiring not only social workers, but also police officers and other law enforcement authorities to pay increased attention to issues of social gerontology [16, 20]. Senior citizens are considered as one of the groups of the population most at risk of crime [20]. This is linked with the decreasing cognitive abilities among the elderly, including their deteriorating memory, changes in perception, decline in judgment, lower self-confidence, emotional instability and increased suggestibility [21, 22]. These are some of the reasons why senior citizens get into conflict and fall victim not just to criminal behaviour, but also to verbal abuse, insults, humiliation and hostility [23].

The kinds of crime most often perpetrated against senior citizens are: (a) pick-pocketing and robbery, committed principally by young offenders (for instance on public transport, on the way to the post office, and in similar situations), who exploit the fact that the elderly might be likely to carry cash, even large amounts if they have just made a withdrawal; (b) burglaries of flats, family houses, cellars or holiday homes, often involving various tricks, and again based on the expectation that savings in cash could be retrieved from these places; (c) fraud; (d) blackmail; (e) intentional bodily harm [14, 20].

Czech police analyses show that those committing property offences against senior citizens most often pose as grandchildren, electricians and social workers, or pretend to be refunding overpaid utility bills. Despite media campaigns warning against these confidence tricks, there are still credulous individuals who let the perpetrators enter their homes. The main criminogenic factor here is that senior citizens do not know how to act in such cases [20].

In recent years a particular type of fraud targeting senior citizens has become prevalent in the Czech Republic in which questionable businesses organise trips which include sales pitches that con senior citizens into buying overpriced items [24]. Probably not rare, but mostly latent, is crime committed on senior citizens at home and in care facilities [25].

The credulousness of many women, especially widows, poses a serious issue. Widows and widowers often

subjectively feel a loss of security following the death of their partner, without this necessarily leading to more circumspection on their part [26]. The relative vulnerability of senior citizens is the reason why some of them, alongside younger disabled persons, become victims in the earlier phases of the development of an aggressor: the aggression is often first aimed against non-living objects, then animals, then weaker individuals (children, senior citizens, the disabled) and only subsequently against able-bodied adults. The defencelessness of senior citizens is also the reason why crimes are perpetrated against them not just by anti-social offenders (who offend irrespective of whether there is a suitable opportunity to do so) but also asocial ones (who purposefully seek out suitable opportunities) as well as dissocial ones (random use of suitable opportunities, for example, the spur-of-the-moment whim of a criminal gang). On the other hand, senior citizens are much more fearful of crime than its actual incidence would warrant [27]. However, crime committed against them can substantially affect their quality of life, causing them physical and mental issues.

Crimes can be perpetrated by individuals or by groups that specialise in crime and use various group tactics. These include: (1) pressure tactics, using threats and intimidation; (2) legitimating tactics, making a claim to authority; (3) favourable exchange, when the victim is promised a reward; (4) coalition, using the support of other influential persons; (5) ingratiation, seeking to gain influence by courting favour; (6) rational tactics, employing logical arguments in persuasion; (7) inspirational tactics, making emotional appeals; (8) consultation, seeking to provide advice; and (9) personal tactics, making appeals to loyalty and friendship (for example, offers of care free of charge) [28].

Accurate data about crime against the elderly is not available, as latent crime, that is the difference between the incidence of actual crime and recorded crime (i.e. reported and registered crime) is an important factor [13, 29]. The reasons some crimes committed against senior citizens remain latent include the following: (1) the victims do not trust the police or the judiciary; (2) they do not know what expert assistance is available (psychological, financial or other); (3) they might be reluctant to report the crime because they are related to the perpetrator (who might be, for instance, a grandson, granddaughter, son or daughter); (4) the victims subjectively fear vengeance or loneliness (if they live in the same household as the perpetrator); (5) they might hesitate to report the crime as they feel ashamed and complicit due to some aspect of how the crime was committed; and (6) some victims do not approach the police because the damage caused seems negligible to them [13, 25].

In examining crimes committed against senior citizens, specific criminogenic factors can be identified. They can be classified into three groups: (1) social factors (senior citizens are a specific group of victims); (2) behavioural factors (risky behaviours, for example credulity in social situations); and (3) personal factors (all individual risk characteristics, whether they are physical or mental, such as extreme gullibility, naiveté, mobility-related disability, etc.) [18].

Studies of crime perpetrated against senior citizens

Czech and foreign experience and studies show that most crimes committed against the elderly reflect broader patterns of crime in the population generally. Whereas most kinds of crime affect all age groups, there are some, namely fraud, theft of wallet, pocket-picking and crime perpetrated against the chronically ill, that have more victims among older than younger people [30].

In countries including the USA, Canada and the United Kingdom, studies of crime against the elderly have been conducted regularly since the 1970s, and their findings have been used to frame legislation. Some of these studies have confirmed that the number of criminal acts (especially violent ones) against the elderly is increasing, and that such crime is becoming more brutal and systematic [30]. Particularly alarming are the findings that such violence also takes place in families and in care facilities [31].

One study carried out in the USA during the 1970s was 'Patterns of Personal Crime against the Elderly'. The data was obtained from interviews with almost 375,000 respondents (of all ages) in 1973. Part of a programme funded by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, the study showed that assault was the type of crime most often perpetrated against persons in the USA, with 1.4% of respondents indicating they had been a victim over the previous six months. However, the victims were largely from the younger age brackets, with those aged over 65 being assaulted least often. Their victimisation rate was 1/7 of the total sample and 1/24 that of people aged 17–20. The study showed that, though the elderly feared crime much more than young people, the overall incidence of crime against the two groups was about equal. More than half of the crimes against the elderly occurred at or near to their homes, and less than 30% on the street. Interestingly, senior citizens only rarely participated in family disputes and quarrels, which can be explained by the fact that they often lived alone. It was unsurprising, therefore, that violence against senior citizens was often perpetrated by strangers (in almost three-quarters of cases the offenders were strangers). The study also showed that elderly victims were easily intimidated, and that they were often assaulted by lone and unarmed attackers [32].

In the Czech Republic an excellent study has been undertaken by the staff of the Institute for Criminology and Social Prevention (IKSP). The Police of the Czech Republic provided the IKSP with statistics of crime victims aged 60+ and of offenders being prosecuted for such criminal acts, for the 14 years from 1994 to 2007 [8]. The study demonstrated that in that period Czech senior citizens suffered crimes including theft (about 47,000 cases), robbery (more than 6000 cases), aggravated menacing, intentional bodily harm, bodily harm through negligence and others [32].

The data showed that over the 14-year period police officers recorded no fewer than 64,491 instances of people aged 60+ suffering from acts classified as criminal by the Czech Criminal Code. Over that time the absolute number of recorded victims of crime aged 60+ increased every year, from about 3500 in 1994 to about 6500 in 2005–2007. Over the years 1994–2007 the average number of recorded

victims of crime aged 60+ was about one tenth (10.2%) of all victims of crime recorded by the police [8, 32]. Most victims of a senior age were registered in Prague (49.1%) and the North Moravia (15.1%) and South Moravia (10.6%) regions [32]. The gender balance of victims was about equal, with 45.7% being men and 54.3% women [8].

Among the victims aged 60 and over, 12.5% (8052 persons) were injured and 1.2% (759 persons) lost their lives. For 13.0% of victims the attacks were, in police statistics parlance, without consequences (8397 persons) and about three-quarters of victims (73.3% or 47,283 persons) suffered other consequences (this mostly means that they lost some property through theft, etc.). In addition, victims aged 60+ significantly included victims of robbery (10.1%), bodily harm intentional and through negligence (8.8%), the majority of cases being those of intentional harm; and 3.9% of victims were subjected to aggravated menacing [8].

This study, unique in the Czech Republic, shows unequivocally that reported crime against the elderly has been on the increase, with cases of theft and robbery being the most common. However, there continues to be a large group of criminal acts that the victims do not report for various reasons [8]. It may be assumed that, if prevention measures were to be improved, the situation in this area would improve also. For that reason, our aim was to focus on how well senior citizens are informed about crime that targets them. We equally wished to know what information sources they use to learn about crime, and how sufficient they find this information.

Materials and methods

The questionnaire used in this study consisted of a combination of open-ended and Likert-scale questions and it employed a modified version of instruments used in previous research into crime against the elderly [33, 34]. The first part consisted of open-ended questions that examined: (1) awareness of crime among senior citizens, asking respondents whether they had any information about crime against senior citizens and what type of criminal behaviour they were informed about; (2) the media, that is the channels through which respondents received information about criminal behaviour and through what channels they would prefer to give them information about crime targeting the elderly; (3) prevention, asking respondents whether they knew how to prevent criminal acts or defend themselves from them.

Two four-point Likert-scale questions (scale: *entirely sufficient* to *entirely insufficient*; with an 'I don't know' option) complemented the open-ended questions. One of them asked respondents whether they thought they were sufficiently informed about crime perpetrated against the elderly. The second question enquired whether they considered their precautions to prevent crime against senior citizens to be sufficient. The questions used in the first part were adopted from a previous study conducted by Smolík and Kajanová [33].

The second part of the questionnaire was a modified version of the Crime and Security-Conscious Behaviour Scale by Norton and Courlander [34]. This part consisted of seven five-point Likert-scale items (scale: *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). The questions addressed respondents' concerns about: their safety in the neighbourhood during the day (4) and night (5); their fear of burglary during their absence (6) and at night (7); their fear of assault (8), and their fear of becoming victim to theft on the street (9) and on public transport (10). Additionally, we asked respondents to state their age, sex and place of residence.

Results

Research sample

The questionnaire was administered to 92 participants of the University of the Third Age course presented by Masaryk University in October 2016. The University of the Third Age (U3A) provides older people with education at the highest level. The programme is devised as a personal development course and does not award qualifications. The main aims of the U3A are to acquaint older people with scientific knowledge, deepen their self-awareness and improve their orientation in a constantly changing world [4]. We asked our respondents to state their place of residence. All respondents were living in the South Moravia Region. In order to determine the possible influence of the size of municipality on other variables, we categorised the municipalities by number of residents, using methodology devised by the Czech Office for Statistics that employs ten categories [35]. After conducting an initial data exploration, we decided to reduce the number of categories to only two: municipalities with more than 50,000 inhabitants ($N = 58$, 63.1%) and smaller ($N = 20$, 21.7%). Fourteen respondents (15.2%) left this question unanswered.

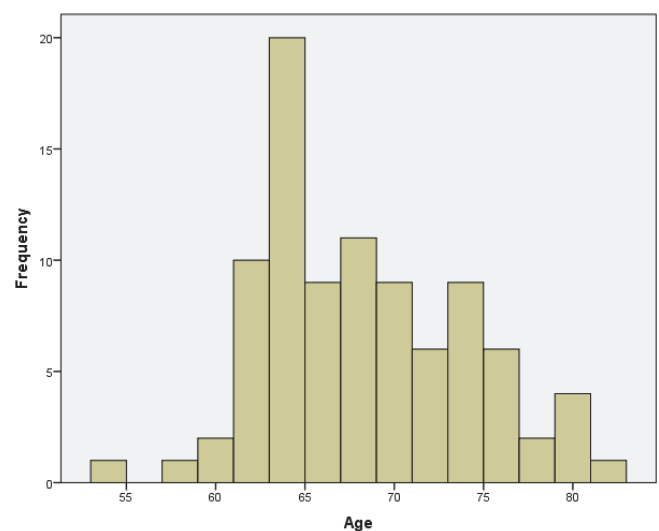


Chart 1 – Age frequencies

The majority of the respondents in our research sample (85.6%) were female. If we compare this ratio to that of all elderly women living in the South Moravia region (59.1% of elderly people) [36], we note that women were overrepresented in the sample compared to the average in

South Moravia. The age of the respondents (see Chart 1) varied between 54 and 81 years ($M = 67.8$, $SD = 5.7$, $Md = 67$). For the purpose of this study we divided the respondents into two groups, younger seniors (65 and younger) and older seniors (older than 65).

Table 1 – Awareness among senior citizens of crime targeting them (N = number of statements, % = relative number)

Crime (Czech Criminal Code)	N	%	Subcategory	N	%
§ 145–146 Bodily harm and grievous bodily harm	9	9.8	On the street	6	6.5
			At home	1	1.1
			Unspecified	2	2.2
§ 173 Robbery	27	29.3	–	–	–
§ 178 Breaking and entering	7	7.6	–	–	–
§ 199 Domestic violence	16	17.4	–	–	–
§ 205 Theft	58	63.0	On the street / on public transport	26	28.3
			Burglary	12	13.0
			Unspecified	20	21.7
§ 209 Fraud	49	53.3	–	–	–

Crime against the elderly

The first question in our survey focused on awareness about criminal activities targeting the elderly. We used the Czech Criminal Code (2009) as a framework to categorise the various criminal acts [37]. We excluded from further analysis all mentions of crimes that were not senior-citizen specific – namely several mentions of homicide or rape – all statements that were related to non-criminal activities and statements that were too general to categorise. We identified several clusters of criminal behaviour against seniors (see Table 1). The first level of classification is the categorisation of crime according to the Czech Criminal Code, the second level cites more specific crimes (if stated).

As we can see from the table, there are several categories of crime targeting senior citizens that our respondents were highly aware of. The most commonly cited category ($N = 58$) was theft. The respondents were aware of the danger of becoming victims of theft on the street, on public transport or in their homes. The second most common category was fraud ($N = 49$). Our respondents were familiar with the spirit practices of various dealers who target senior citizens and attempt to pressure them into buying their overpriced goods (in Czech the term used to describe such unscrupulous individuals is ‘šmejdi’, which could be translated into English, in singular, as ‘a nasty piece of work’). The third most common category was robbery ($N = 27$), followed by domestic violence ($N = 16$), indicating cases when senior citizens are physically and emotionally abused by members of their own household, typically by their own family.

We also asked respondents whether they considered the amount and quality of information available about crime against the elderly to be sufficient or not. Here we counted only those who indicated that they were aware of the issue. The majority of the respondents (58.5%) stated that their awareness of such crime was entirely sufficient

or sufficient, 36.6% of the respondents stated that their awareness of the topic was insufficient and only 4.9% considered their knowledge to be entirely insufficient. Additionally, we tested for potential differences among the respondents based on their sex (male vs. female), age (younger vs. older seniors) and size of their place of residence (bigger vs. smaller municipalities) by means of a chi-squared test with Bonferroni correction. No significant differences were found between any of the groups.

The second question examined the most common communication channels by which respondents obtained information about crime targeting senior citizens (Table 2). Television was not surprisingly the most common communication channel (59.8%) used by respondents to get information, followed by print media (44.6%), relatives, friends and acquaintances (33.7%), and events such as lectures or discussions (31.5%) organised by the police, municipal authorities, seniors’ clubs or others.

The third open-ended question focused on prevention, in other words, what seniors do to defend themselves against criminal behaviour and to avoid situations that

Table 2 – Communication channels (N = number of statements; % = relative number)

Type of media	N	%
TV	55	59.8
Print media (newspapers, magazines, bulletins)	41	44.6
Relatives, friends, acquaintances	31	33.7
Organised events (lectures, discussions, Senior Academy)	29	31.5
Radio	12	13.0
Personal experience	10	10.1
Internet	9	9.8
Media (unspecified)	14	15.2

might lead to it. The results are summarised in Table 3. Additionally, we tested for potential differences among the

respondents based on their sex, age and place of residence. No significant differences were found.

Table 3 – Crime prevention (*N* = number of statements; % = relative number)

Type of prevention	<i>N</i>	%	Subcategory	<i>N</i>	%
Increased vigilance	52	56.6	On the street	44	47.8
			On public transport	6	6.5
			In risky places	2	2.2
Behavioural restrictions	68	73.9	Not going alone to deserted or risky places	19	20.7
			Not going out alone in the evening / at night	19	20.7
			Not wearing jewellery / carrying large amounts of money	16	17.4
			Not attending promotional events selling products	9	9.8
			Not answering unknown callers	5	5.4
Home-related prevention	35	38.9	Not opening doors to strangers / not letting strangers in the flat	23	25.0
			Security locks and other security measures	12	13.0
Active prevention	20	21.7	Defensive equipment, dogs, self-defence courses	14	15.2
			Gathering information about criminal risks	6	6.5

The last part of the questionnaire deployed a modified Crime and Security-Conscious Behaviour scale. Again, we conducted a chi-squared test to compare the answers to the seven items of the scale (the dependent variables) and the respondents' sex, age and size of the place of residence (the independent variables). We found that the age of respondents and their place of residence had no significant impact on their answers to the items of the scale. Men and women differed at $p < 0.05$ in only one of the items. Men felt significantly safer in their neighbourhood at night, $\chi^2(4, N = 86) = 12.74, p = 0.013$. However, after conducting a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons, the results turned out to be statistically insignificant. The corrected level of significance in this case was $p < 0.005$.

Discussion

Although the findings above are inspiring and point to certain interesting tendencies, one needs to note that this was merely a sociological probe, and one that was limited by the fact that the respondents who attended the University of the Third Age at Masaryk University in Brno are not representative of the whole senior citizen population in the Czech Republic. Still, one may note an interesting trend apparent in the findings: that the principal source of information for the elderly is the media, which in many cases introduce bias to the reported issues and presents phenomena stereotypically. These findings complete the current knowledge about media reports of crime committed against the elderly, as presently discussed within the Czech criminological community [7, 13, 20, 38].

Our study has shown that senior citizens particularly fear robbery and theft, but were also aware of dubious sales practices and the growth in domestic violence. Whereas the former type of offences are generally known among the Czech elderly, domestic violence is substantially

latent and senior citizens often obtain information about it solely from their peers. This topic is also discussed in the expert community, who focus on physical, sexual and psychological violence within the family, to which the elderly often fall victim [33, 39, 40]. Violence committed among seniors who are partners tends not to be mentioned in connection with violence targeting the elderly. Lovaš sees this type of violence as a special category of violence within the family, which is not usually included in studies of crime perpetrated against senior citizens. This is one of the reasons why we consider this topic to be understudied and worthy of further research within the Czech senior community [39].

The study also showed that respondents obtained information about crime committed against the elderly from several sources. The most important were television (59.8%); print media (44.6%); friends, acquaintances and relatives who can relay their own personal stories and experiences (33.7%); and lectures and discussions (31.5%).

The last section of our study showed that respondents were aware of their situation as potential victims of crime, and acted more carefully as a result, especially on the street, on public transport or in risky places. They also adhered to some principles, such as not going out after dark, not wearing jewellery or carrying large amounts of cash with them, not answering unknown callers and not attending promotional sales events. They equally observed security rules at home, i.e. did not let strangers in and used security locks. To improve crime prevention they attended self-defence courses, or, when going out, were accompanied by a dog.

This implies that there is ample scope for prevention in this field. Given the demographic developments, these activities will continue to play an important role in the future, whether prevention will be carried out by the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, the Police Presidium of the Czech Republic, municipal police forces or non-governmental, non-profit advisory organisations for

senior citizens (such as Život 90) or other organisations such as citizens' advice bureau.

Conclusion

The chief aim of our research among senior citizens attending the University of the Third Age was to ascertain how aware this selected group of senior citizens were of crimes that immediately affect them. The sociological study focused on three ranges of issues. The first was concerned with their fears; we were interested to know what types of crime the elderly are most afraid of. The second dealt with information about crime perpetrated against senior citizens. Here we noted that the senior citizens obtain most of their information from the media and from those close to them (who might be able to refer to their own experiences). Although the elderly are informed about crime targeted against them, it must be noted that this information is rather selective in character. Given this finding, there is significant scope for information campaigns (such as those conducted by the Ministry of the Interior and the police) aimed at the growing senior population.

Given the limited character of the study sample – a specific group of senior citizens attending the University of the Third Age – it would be desirable to verify the outcomes of this sociological probe among other groups of senior citizens, as we expect certain diversity in results. Prevention programmes should also heed the possible specific characteristics of the various groups of senior citizens.

Conflict of interests

The author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this publication including any financial, personal or other relationship with other people or organizations within three years of beginning the submitted work that could inappropriately influence, or be perceived to influence, their work.

The author confirms the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed.

The author warrants that this contribution is original and that he/she has full power to make this grant. The author signs and accepts responsibility for releasing this material on behalf of any and all co-authors.

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