

# Public Safety Planning for Aging America

By HAROLD G. CAMPBELL

**P**eople 75 years of age and older constitute the second fastest-growing segment of the American population. By the year 2000, it is anticipated that this portion of society will nearly double in size.

This speculation makes it imperative that public safety officials take the special needs of this group into consideration in their planning efforts. One specific area that will be affected by this growth rate, which has not yet been adequately addressed, is the impact that increased incidents of dementia among these older citizens will have on public safety services.

Dementia is a broad term used to describe a state in which the affected person experiences a global decline in intellectual functions yet maintains a relatively normal level of consciousness. Although suffering from a serious brain disease, many persons remain bright and alert, experiencing only some forms of emotional or behavioral alterations. Susceptibility to dementia has been found to be correlatively associated to advanced aging. In fact, of all people over the age of 65, about 8 percent have some form of cognitive impairment. The degree of prevalence by age 80 is 20 percent, and by 90, it appears in about 30 percent of the population.

In light of the dramatic rise in the number of persons expected to live past the age of 75 and the probability of these people contracting such a disease, it is easy to see that dementia could become a predominant concern of public safety planners. In fact, the number of persons experiencing dementia is expected to rise from the present figure of 2.5 million to over 5 million by the end of the century.

## Victimization

Relative to the area of police services

planning, three distinct concerns arise in connection with dementia. The foremost of these involves the susceptibility of these persons to victimization. Since dementia causes a severe retardance in the person's abilities to understand—and consequently protect himself from—swindlers, con men and would-be thieves, it seems likely that police officials will soon detect an increase in this type of criminality. Such vulnerability, combined with the prospective reluctance of prosecuting attorneys to pursue a case in which the victim is unable to articulate the circumstances of a criminal act, strongly suggests that these persons may be sought out by criminals as potential victims.

To avoid such radical increases in this type of victimization and to achieve the highest possible levels of prevention, it seems advisable for local police to attempt to acquire patient listings from area doctors of those persons being treated for the disease, using them to indicate potential targets of crime. Additionally, police may find it helpful to use existing census information to isolate disproportionately large regions of elderly citizens so that preventive coverage might be employed.

## Emotional Outbursts

The second area of concern regarding dementia patients involves their abilities to cope with daily frustrations. Since dementia patients become more easily frustrated by normally simple tasks or encounters, they subsequently possess a higher likelihood of displaying emotional outbursts. These outbursts could manifest themselves in mere verbal confrontations or escalate to physical violence. In either case, police officials may soon detect increases in the number of calls they receive regarding domestic violence where elderly persons are involved. Since patients suffering the earlier phases of dementia quite often appear normal, it seems probable that policemen arriving at the scene of a family disturbance will be unaware of the cause of the person's problem unless alerted by means of in-service training. In cases where the officer suspects dementia as a possible cause of the problem, he

should suggest to the other family members that they seek medical or psychiatric treatment for the elder person.

## Traffic Accidents

The final concern relative to police services planning involves the likelihood of an increase in the number of traffic accidents and fatalities involving the elderly. Since it is unlikely that Americans will change their standard mode of transportation, police officials can expect to witness an increase in the number of traffic accidents involving elderly persons. While it would be impossible to restrict all elderly persons from driving strictly because of their age, it seems prudent to suggest that people over the age of 70 be given a cognitive functions examination as part of their driver's license renewal requirements. This simple modification should cause no severe hardship to those persons applying for a license, but may well alert officials to potentially dangerous drivers and thereby save lives.

## Fire Safety

One more element of public safety planning that should be addressed involves fire safety. Because of the cognitive impairments attributable to dementia, fire safety officials may well experience an increase in the number of house fires where there are elderly residents. Forgetting to extinguish a cigarette, turn off a stove, and check for or report the presence of a gas leak are all probable behaviors for people suffering from dementia. The spread of multi-unit dwellings and high-rise apartments as senior citizens' sanctuaries will only add to the problems faced by fire officials. Accordingly, it appears advisable for fire officials also to utilize census information to isolate geographic regions, and to develop appropriate strategies for response and prevention.

The miracle of extending normal life expectancy has, as its flip side, a number of unusual problems and challenges for those who have chosen to serve the needs of the public. Public safety officials have an obligation to do everything in their power to provide the services necessary to make their last years as safe as possible. ★

DR. HAROLD CAMPBELL, 14709 Carnell St., Whittier, CA 90603, is a professional consultant who specializes in strategic planning and urban development. He received his doctorate degree from Claremont University and concentrated within the fields of the behavioral sciences, mathematical analysis and administration. Dr. Campbell has written various articles dealing with the subjects of public planning and has lectured at the University of Southern California, California State University-Long Beach, and the Northrop Institute.