

Crime against the elderly: What's amiss?

IT WILL take a sustained combination of efforts by the police, community organisations and the family to keep the elderly safe from crime. Up by a quarter, to 145 cases in the first half of the year, robberies and snatch thefts involving victims aged over 60 have brought a sense of unease. As a sentinel indicator of neighbourhood safety, such offences signal sooner or later a deterioration of a city's liveability, its quality of life.

Singapore prides itself on streets safe enough for unaccompanied women to walk unmolested any time of the day or night. So, the increase in crime against the old appears all the more disturbing. Ironically, the safety taken for granted

by everyone for so long may have lulled even the vulnerable into ignoring commonsensical precautions, such as keeping valuables out of sight or checking the bona fides of strangers before letting them into the house.

Awareness is essentially nine-tenths of prevention. The National Crime Prevention Council, along with the police, the People's Association and grassroots organisations, has tried tailoring the anti-crime message to senior citizens, spreading it in dialects to the illiterate and others beyond the reach of newspapers and broadcasting.

Such efforts need to take fully into account frailties that come with age. Mem-

ory lapses, loss of confidence and diminished presence of mind as well as physical infirmity – all render the old easy targets for criminals. Law enforcement and community workers have to help the elderly compensate for their vulnerability with added vigilance.

It does not take sophisticated police work to identify, with the help of residents, crime-prone locations. Closed-circuit cameras or more frequent patrols could then discourage purse and jewellery snatchers employing the familiar modus operandi of cornering lone old ladies in lifts in HDB estates.

Since it began in 1981, neighbourhood watch – a community effort in which residents keep an eye out for one

another – has helped prevent crime. Improved and restructured into zones about 10 years ago, the scheme enables effective community policing, probably one of the best ways to protect the elderly. Especially for those living alone, staying safe entails more than steps purely in crime prevention. It will take at least a semblance of the neighbourhood spirit that used to prevail in the kampung, in which the old lived very much as part of the community.

Since such a spirit has largely eluded promotion in the high-rise HDB heartland, the family has to fill in, to check frequently on elderly parents and grandparents, and to guard them against crime as well as loneliness.
