

Feeling Safe? Feeling Vulnerable?

Exploring Older People's Views and Experiences of Safety and
Vulnerability in Everyday Life

Executive summary

The Feeling Safe project was a collaborative study conducted by researchers at the University of Stirling, in collaboration with Ceartas Advocacy and some of their members who are older people. It was prompted by gaps in our knowledge of older people's own priorities, meanings and experiences of keeping safe, despite developments in adult protection procedures, policy, legislation and research over the previous two decades. The research questions for the study were:

- What do 'safety' and 'vulnerability' mean to older people living in the community who are supported by health and social care services? How important is safety in their lives?
- What resources/sources of support do older people draw on to manage vulnerability and secure safety? What other factors impact on their safety/vulnerability?
- How might improvements be made in the ways that older people in the community are able to keep and feel safe?
- What might be the best methods of capturing this knowledge?

Methodology

In the first stage of the research, we held two focus groups, with a total of eight older people, two of whom brought supporters (a befriender and a carer) who also

contributed as participants. We discussed safety and vulnerability, then discussed and refined methods for the next stage of the research. In the second stage, five older people were paired with a named researcher and shared their experiences of safety and vulnerability in everyday life with them over a period of three months. Methods were selected by each participant from a range of options, and included informal interviews and walking tours of the person's home and community environment. Participants had the chance to review the data they had contributed, then collaborative analysis workshops were held, to which all stage two participants were invited. The first analysis workshop guided the university researchers in their developing thematic analysis, and the second reviewed and refined its findings.

Findings

We found that different people had different understandings and experiences of “safety” and “vulnerability”. Public and policy perceptions of the risks to older people, for instance rogue traders and financial scams, were of more concern to some people than others. Participants' relationships, environments and experiences over time strongly influenced what safety and vulnerability meant to them. For instance, one participant felt vulnerable when her son wasn't nearby, and several mentioned feeling distant from their neighbours. This was experienced as a particular vulnerability factor by people who had been part of close communities in their younger years. Several participants described feeling vulnerable in environments that didn't meet their specific needs, for instance safe routes and sufficient space for electric wheelchairs and scooters.

...before, it used to be a whole street, and everybody knew everybody on the street, everybody's kids knew everybody else's kids. ...Everything in that has all changed now, and it's a case of everybody is, my house, my garden, my zone, and that's it – 'Elsie'

When asked how they keep safe, participants focused on their own skills and resources. For instance, they described adapting actively to changing abilities and family circumstances, and amassing significant knowledge in using and adapting assistive technology to their particular needs. Other resources that they drew upon often resided in people too: for instance, committed carers and family members, supportive communities and professionals with whom they felt able to engage. Nevertheless, a degree of active negotiation was often required, by the older person themselves or/and on their behalf, to marshal these resources into their most useful form. This could take significant effort, and could be emotionally draining too.

When I was younger, I didn't mind so much asking for help, but as you get older there was something about sometimes you might feel more vulnerable and you kind of want to be able to do it yourself more – 'Jean'

Safety, vulnerability and risk were not central to any of the participants' accounts of their lives. That is, they did many things to keep themselves safe, by their own definition of this idea; however, these strategies were not clearly separable from participants' wider strategies for living well, in ways that kept them connected to their core sense of who they were, in the context of their important relationships. Hence "keeping safe" could be de-prioritised in favour of other considerations at times: for instance, choosing to remain at home despite feeling vulnerable there, or choosing to decline a break from caring, because of concerns about a loved one's experiences in respite care settings.

I says, Tom, I really need to go to the shops. He says, mum, it's treacherous underfoot....Anyway, he arrived and he said, I wish you'd just let me get what you need. I went, no, I want to go – 'Jane'

Implications

The findings illuminate the complexity of decisions about risk, in ways that underline older people's strengths and supports, their varied priorities and the emotional weight of this terrain. Appreciation of this context is important to support positive relationships between older people, informal carers, health and social care professionals and other professionals and community members. In the context of adult support and protection services, the findings help to flesh out why council offers might be perceived as either an opportunity or a threat, and the collaborative approaches that might best support effective interventions. In the context of other services, the findings highlight the importance of low-level, preventative support. They also demonstrate the wealth of expertise that older people have about accessibility issues, which ought to be fully exploited by transport services, urban environment planners, business leaders and others.

Information and resources

A full report and accompanying resources can be accessed here:

<https://feelingsafebeingvulnerable.stir.ac.uk/>. The resources include materials to support discussions amongst groups of older people, carers, students and/or practitioners. This project was conducted by Dr Fiona Sherwood-Johnson, Kathryn Mackay and Dr Corinne Greasley-Adams, University of Stirling, in collaboration with members of Ceartas Advocacy, between January 2017 and July 2019.

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