

## Old, home alone and soft targets

Asseem Shaikh/, TNN | Apr 6, 2011, 11.45pm IST

PUNE: With the breakdown of the joint family system and children moving to foreign countries, senior citizens in Pune are beginning to live alone in flats. This makes them vulnerable to criminal attacks. Their inability to defend themselves, slow reflexes, difficulty in identifying assailants due to poor vision, little interaction with neighbours and being invalid makes them victims. Criminals are emboldened when they know that they can get away with the crime as senior citizens can do little to defend themselves.

Most crimes against them involve purse snatching, chain snatching, mugging, frauds, accidents and burglary at home. The serious ones include murders.

On March 26, 20011, retired civil engineer Hari Vasudeo Dhamdhare (84) was found brutally murdered at his bungalow in Mitra Mandal Colony in Parvati. He was attacked with a sharp weapon and Rs 3.27 lakh cash kept in a cupboard was missing. Dhamdhare, who lived with his family, was alone at home when he was murdered.

A day later, British citizen of Indian origin Malgar Singh Padam (78) was found murdered at his bungalow in Waksai village in Lonavla. Padam was hit on the head with a sharp weapon. Police said theft could be the motive. Padam was alone when he was attacked. Both cases are under investigation.

Senior citizens are often targeted for their jewellery on the roads and inside homes. Chain snatchers watch their movements for a few days and strike when they find them alone. Motorcycle-borne youths wearing helmets often whiz past women walking on roads and snatch their ornaments, mostly gold chains and 'mangal sutra'. Another modus operandi is when they pose as policemen and ask women to part with their jewellery and flee once they get it. Police had recently appealed to women of all ages not to wear heavy jewellery as a precaution.

Unscrupulous elements posing as representatives of banks and credit societies defraud citizens by promising them good returns on their investments. Police have asked citizens to contact the nearest police station, call 26208295 or the police control room on 26122880 for help. But according to them crimes against senior citizens have decreased since last year.

"Crime against senior citizens in Pune is negligible -between 2 and 3 % a year because the police

are creating awareness," said deputy commissioner of police (DCP) Anant Rokade (crime).

The authorities are trying to help bring down crime against senior citizens. "We have been announcing over the public address system, holding meetings at housing societies, police stations and chowkeys and interacting with them about precautions to be taken. The idea is to ensure that they feel safe and secure."

Rokade said the drive has made people pro-active. "They are now helping us nab criminals. Police commissioner Meeran Chadha Borwankar has been felicitating citizens who help us detect cases," he said.

Other measures to protect them are being taken. "We have also sensitised private security agencies and are checking criminals on police records regularly. The initiatives by the police and crime branch have helped reduce crime against senior citizens and others to a larger extent," Rokade stated.

While self-defence classes work for youngsters and women, they are not very practical for senior citizens. There are health concerns and they lack physical strength to defend themselves. But **one can reduce opportunities for criminals to strike by being careful, alert, and a good neighbour,** police said.

In an offshoot measure, Pune police, in association with Athashree Foundation, launched a helpline number for senior citizens on June 8, 2007 during the tenure of former police commissioner Jayant Umranikar. Over 7,000 calls in the last three years have been received. **"Many elder citizens call to complain about neglect by their children, non-receipt of pension, clashes in family or non-cooperation by banks, civic body or other officials. Sometimes, legal steps are taken to deal with issues. Instructions have being issued to all police stations to assist the helpline,"** coordinator Jyoti Pund said.

Senior police inspector Bhanupratap Barge of the social security cell of crime branch, Pune said that the helpline was doing well, but police had not received any major complaints from senior citizens. "Minor complaints like telephone bills are referred to NGOs," he added.

Senior citizens with BSNL connections can dial 1091 for any assistance from 9.30 am to 4 pm, from Monday to Friday. Those with other telephone connections can dial the helpline number 020-26050191. Both are toll-free numbers.

### **Counselling Helps**

On an average, the helpline gets around 13 calls every day from senior citizens. Most complain about cheating and ill-treatment by children. The helpline also receives complaints of issues relating to the Pune Municipal Corporation, power bills, BSNL bills, LPG cylinders which are referred to the government organisations for redressal. Complaints about crimes against senior

citizens are referred to the police stations, said coordinator Jyoti Pund, who, in association with the city police, runs a helpline for senior citizens.

### **Precautions**

The police have advised senior citizens to be circumspect and register themselves at the nearest police station. There are 1,300 senior citizens who have registered their names at the police stations.

"It helps the local police step up patrolling in their areas and take preventive action against criminals on police record. The police will frequently call up senior citizens -- especially those who stay alone -- and enquire about their well-being. If children have gone out of the country, elderly persons should install security doors," Pund said.

Elderly persons living alone are susceptible to criminal activities. Senior citizens staying alone are vulnerable to attacks and other crimes. They have been advised to stay in a group or in the company of friends or relatives.

### **Preventive steps**

Assistant Commissioner of Police (Crime) Prabhakar Patil said, "We are taking preventive measures to curb crimes against senior citizens. There is a grievance redressal session organised at police stations and chowkies. We also hold meetings involving senior citizens. To remove the fear factor, assistant commissioners and inspectors are present during the session so that citizens feel reassured. We also circulate telephone numbers of police officers so that senior citizens can contact them in an emergency."

### **Follow these safety tips**

In most cases, the offences against senior citizens are committed by the persons known to the victims. They can be servants, watch men, relatives or vendors. Such persons are generally not on police record.

Information about servants is generally not provided to police for the fear of losing household hands/servants.

Senior citizens must employ people after verifying his antecedents with the help of the nearest police station.

Never discuss financial matters in front of servants/strangers.

Deposit your valuables in the safe deposit vault of any bank. Treat your servants humanely. Do not allow relatives or friends of your domestic help to visit your house. If at all he/she has any frequent visitors, get their antecedents checked. Try to keep the number of such persons to a minimum.

If you are staying alone, please inform your neighbours and also to the secretary of your housing society.

Use of modern security gadgets like door alarms, electronic bells are an advantage. Consult professionals before installing such gadgets.

Install a peephole on the entrance door and allow access only to known and identified persons. Install a double-door system. It is always safer to deal with strangers without opening the main door or deal with them only after informing the neighbours or the security personnel.

Never leave spare keys or even the original keys in the open or in the conventional hiding places.

Verify the identity of any repairman, salesman and allow them access only after informing the security.

When you admit a workman or a salesman, do not leave him alone at any time.

You will be safest in bright, well-lit and busy areas.

Stay alert to the surroundings while jogging or walking. Avoid using ear phones.

Keep emergency medicines and family doctor's numbers or emergency medical services (EMS) numbers handy.