

74-Year-Old's Killing Underscores Rise in Attacks on Older New Yorkers

The murder of Maria Hernandez in her Upper West Side apartment reinforced some New Yorkers' fears that they are not safe aging in the city.

By Maria Cramer

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6 MIN READ

The 911 call came just before 10 p.m. on Jan. 18, a Wednesday. A woman had found her sister lying face down on the floor of her Upper West Side apartment, her hands and feet bound behind her with yellow and black rope.

The police said that the victim, Maria Hernandez, 74, who lived in a one-bedroom apartment on West 83rd Street, had been robbed and strangled. Police officers found marks on her neck and bruises on her face, arms and back. There were signs of severe sexual abuse.

Within a week, the police arrested Lashawn Mackey, 47, who had been filling in as a maintenance man at the building, and Terrence Moore, 53, a Brooklyn man with a prior conviction for second-degree murder and robbery. Both have pleaded not guilty to charges that include murder, aggravated sexual abuse and burglary.

"This is everybody's worst nightmare," said Jack Kupferman, 67 and president of the Gray Panthers NYC, an organization that grew out of a movement to fight ageism.

Violent crimes like robbery and felony assault against people 65 and older rose by about 10 percent in 2022 compared with 2021, part of an overall surge in major crimes in the city, according to the police. The number of rapes more than doubled to 17 during the same period. Cases of grand larceny — which include financial scams and credit card fraud — dipped 6 percent but remained high at 3,780 incidents.

Older New Yorkers who have read alarming news stories about the spike in crime are fearful, community leaders say. Some had already been reluctant to return to senior centers, which had closed during the pandemic. Those who do venture out request rides to and from the centers to avoid walking or taking the subway.

Others are signing up for defense classes or are cloistering themselves.





A need to find more resources has risen. Nearly one in six New York researchers also found that the

of people 65 and older has by Syracuse University. Its state.

In the city, the number of people the city's department of planning. By comparison, the city's general population is supposed to grow only by 9.5 percent.

The state and city said they were working to help older New Yorkers feel less isolated and empowered to report crimes like elder abuse, which remains underreported, according to organizations that work with senior populations.

The city's Department for the Aging has started a pilot program with the police that connects older crime victims with support services. Gov. Kathy Hochul's administration is working on a "master plan on aging," a broad-based effort still in the early stages. The "safety needs of older adults" will be "an integral piece" of the plan, Greg Olsen, director of the state's Office for the Aging, said in a statement.

The brutal and craven nature of crimes against people who are more vulnerable because they are lonely, isolated or less able to defend themselves has those who work with older Americans calling on public officials to define such incidents in even stronger terms — as hate crimes.

"When you look at who's getting attacked, it's often older people," said Allison Nickerson, executive director of LiveOn NY, an advocacy organization for older New Yorkers.

Perpetrators are targeting a class of people "because they are perceived as having or actually have little defense," she said.



Maria Hernandez's dresser, night stand and closets were rifled.

When the police arrived at Ms. Hernandez's apartment, they found the drawers of her dresser and night stand open and empty. The closets had been raided.

Prosecutors said surveillance video showed that about 7 p.m., two men walked into a stairwell with access to Ms. Hernandez's third-floor apartment. It is not clear yet what was taken, but prosecutors said the home invasion had been premeditated: Someone broke into the superintendent's office before the crime was committed and dismantled the security surveillance system.

The police said that surveillance cameras at Mr. Mackey's Brooklyn apartment the night of the killing showed him and a second man carrying two of Ms. Hernandez's bags.

Jessica Horani, a lawyer for Mr. Mackey, who was released in 2021 after serving more than 20 years for a stabbing, did not respond to messages for comment.

During his initial arraignment, Ms. Horani said there was no video surveillance that showed Mr. Mackey on the third floor that night. Mr. Mackey was in his Brooklyn apartment with his girlfriend when the police "violently entered" and took them both into custody.

He has "emphatically" denied the charges, Ms. Horani told the judge.

Glenn F. Hardy, a lawyer for Mr. Moore, said he "is maintaining his innocence."

The attack against Ms. Hernandez was a shockingly violent one that came amid a string of crimes against older New Yorkers. In February, a 90-year-old shopkeeper in the Village was left bloodied after a man hit him over the head with a heavy rock.

Last month, a Florida woman, Peaches Stergo, was charged with wire fraud after she was accused of manipulating an 87-year-old Manhattan man into giving her his life savings — \$2.8 million. Ms. Stergo met the man on an online dating site and over four-and-a-half years persuaded him to write 62 checks, some for as much as \$50,000. She then spent the money on Rolex watches, a Corvette and a house in a gated community, federal prosecutors said. The man, a Holocaust survivor, was forced to give up his apartment.

Last April, an 89-year-old woman was hospitalized with second-degree burns after a woman stormed into her Bronx apartment and poured boiling water on her to get her to tell where she kept her money.

Older New Yorkers' fears of such crimes has led them to avoid senior centers that had once been teeming with people eager to socialize and are now trying to lure people back through city-sponsored social media campaigns.

Before the pandemic, there were 300 to 500 people coming daily to the four centers run by the Chinese-American Planning Council, said Wayne Ho, its president and chief executive.

"Those numbers are at 50 percent now," he said. People still come for free lunches, but many usually pack food into containers and quickly leave, Mr. Ho said.

In the Bronx, centers that used to draw 150 people a day now get 70 to 80, said Katherine Martinez, president and chief executive of Neighborhood SHOPP, a Bronx organization that runs programs that serve more than 2,800 older New Yorkers.

"We want people back," Ms. Martinez said.

She said the centers are working with the police, hoping to engender trust between officers and older New Yorkers.

Lt. Spiro Papavlasopoulos, commanding officer of the Crime Prevention Division, said his office cooperates with the Department for the Aging to set up meetings with older New Yorkers, where they give safety tips.

One includes keeping a list of phone numbers of utility companies handy so that if someone knocks on the door claiming to be from the gas company, the resident can quickly call to find out whether the visit is legitimate.

"We also encourage them to call 911 right away," Lieutenant Papavlasopoulos said. "If you feel that something is not right, then go with that gut feeling."



Ms. Ling-Cohan said many friends in New York had stories about danger to the elderly.
Dana Golan for The New York Times

Doris Ling-Cohan, 67, has taken her safety into her own hands.

In 2021, Ms. Ling-Cohan, a retired New York Supreme Court judge, had been in Vietnam for a year and a half. She and her husband had gone there for a four-week vacation but got stuck in the country when the pandemic shut down international travel.

As countries began opening their borders and the couple prepared to return home, Ms. Ling-Cohan saw news about the rise in crime in New York and violence against older Asian people in particular. She said she wondered if she should stay in Vietnam.

It seemed everyone she knew in New York had a story about being attacked — one friend in her 60s said she was sucker-punched walking down Mulberry Street in Lower Manhattan.

To prepare for her return, Ms. Ling-Cohan began learning martial arts. Back in New York, she signed up for more courses — jiu jitsu, praying mantis kung fu, Filipino martial arts and Jeet Kune Do, a discipline conceived by Bruce Lee.

She loved how much stronger she felt and her confidence in her ability to defend herself grew.

“I’m obviously not going to look for a fight, but I feel that I can avoid one and take someone out if I have to,” Ms. Ling-Cohan said.

Ms. Ling-Cohan said she encourages friends who say they are too old to take such courses to think differently about what their bodies are capable of.

“I’m in the best shape of maybe not my entire life, but half my life,” she said.

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