

Introduction



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On May 14, 2024, the NGO Committee on Ageing, UN Vienna, held a side event in the framework of the annual session of the Commission of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) at the United Nations in Vienna. This event was entitled

“New forms of criminal acts against (and abuse of) older persons - a rapidly growing threat to vulnerable persons using ordinary and advanced communication tools”.

The event was very well attended and supported by numerous international non-governmental organisations, as well as by the research institutes and organisations the speakers belong to. The conference was particularly appreciated by members of the UN Commission of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice as it highlighted in this context the potential dangers to which older persons are exposed through frauds or scams, using modern communication media.

As our society is rapidly moving from an analog to a digital environment, this process offers appreciable new opportunities but also some high risks for older persons. The opportunities are various: the maintenance of friendship relations and the exchange with family members who live elsewhere are considerably facilitated. Access to a great variety of information and the choice and ordering of goods and services at distance are made easy.

At the same time, the elderly – as well as young – are exposed to high risks of victimization and unlawful exploitation by criminals. Especially older persons are contacted by telephone or via WhatsApp and e-mail by fraudsters who often use the “grandchild trick” or the “daughter-son trick” to extort considerable amounts of money. Another

reason why older persons are particularly vulnerable to telephone fraud and friendship/romance offers is that for many of them the telephone and the use of the internet are attractive ways out of loneliness. Fraudsters exercise psychological pressure by pretending, e. g., that a grandchild is in danger and urgently needs money to get back home or be treated in hospital. In addition to financial fraud via telephone, e-mail or different online platforms, the risk of financial exploitation of older persons also exists in family care settings. This phenomenon can arise in the frequently precarious situation of dependent older persons in care, where they are particularly vulnerable and prone to violence and fraud.

Four well-known experts presented different views on the topic:

Heinz Kurt Becker, former member of the European Parliament, spoke about European Union regulations addressing risks of modern means of communication.

Edith Simöl, from “Digital Seniors”, explained how older persons can understand the dangers and protect themselves from becoming victims of cyber fraud.

Josef Hörl, professor of sociology, presented findings about older persons being victims of financial abuse within the family, also using sophisticated technological tools.

Thomas Frühwald, geriatrician and gerontologist, provided insight into the multidimensional vulnerabilities of older persons and how exposed they can be to violence and abuse.

Dirk Jarré

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