
Research on Abuse in Later Life

Wisconsin Aging & Disabilities Program
National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life

AMERICANS ARE GETTING OLDER

- By 2030, more persons will be over 65 than under age 18.
- By 2030, the number of elders is expected to have doubled since 1990 to 70 million.
- 52% of elderly live in nine states (CA, NY, FL, PA, TX, IL, MI, OH, NJ).
- Minority elderly will represent 25% of elderly in 2030.
- Between 1990 and 2030 Hispanic (elderly) will increase by 570%.
- American Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts (elderly) will increase by 294%.
- Asians and Pacific Islanders (elderly) will increase by 643%

REPORTED CASES OF ELDER ABUSE ARE INCREASING

- In 1999, 470,702 cases of abuse and neglect were reported to adult protective services throughout the United States. This is 62% increase since 1996 (NCEA, 2001).
- In 1999, 114,861 complaints of abuse, neglect and gross exploitation in nursing facilities were reported to ombudsmen throughout the United States (NCEA, 2001).
- 3,406 cases of abuse and neglect in board and care facilities were reported to ombudsmen in 1999 (NCEA, 2001).

DOMESTIC ELDER ABUSE IS PRIMARILY FAMILY ABUSE

- The National Elder Abuse Incidence Study found in almost 90% of cases, the perpetrator was a family member. (NCEA, 1998).

A SIGNIFICANT PORTION OF ELDER ABUSE IS SPOUSE/PARTNER VIOLENCE

- Random sample studies of seniors living in the community found more spouse/partner abuse than abuse by adult children (Podnieks, 1992; Pillemer, 1988).
- However, in cases reported to adult protective services, the abuser was an adult child more often than spouse in every study (Brownell, 1999; Vladescu, 1999; NCEA, 1998; Lachs, 1997; Wolf, 1997) except one (Lithwick, 1999).
- A study of 257 older women ages 50 – 79 study found that 32% had experienced physical abuse or threat at some point in their lives (Mouton, 1999).
- A study of 5,168 couples found that 5.8% of couples aged 60+-experienced physical violence in their relationship within the past year (Harris, 1996).

SEXUAL ABUSE OCCURS IN LATER LIFE

A study of 28 women ages 65- 101 who had been sexually abused found:

- 71% of victims were described as dependent for physical care or functioning poorly.
- 29% of suspected perpetrators were spouses/partners; 39% were sons, 7% were brothers. The total of 81% perpetrators were caregivers; 78% were family members.
- In almost 1/3 of cases, others witnessed sexually abusive acts; in 71% of cases other service providers suspected sexual abuse (Ramsey-Klawnsnik, 1991).

A 1999 study also found that many victims had difficulty taking care of themselves and that family members were the primary perpetrators of sexual abuse (Teaster, 2000).

VICTIMS COME FROM A VARIETY OF BACKGROUNDS

- No profile of an elder abuse victim has been identified (Seaver, 1996; Pillemer, 1989).
- A significant percentage of victims live with their abusers (Vladescu, 1999; Lachs (1997a/b), 1997; Seaver, 1996; Greenberg, 1990; Pillemer and Finklehor, 1988).
- Depression or other illnesses were common for victims (Reis, 1998; OWN, 1998; NEAIS, 1998; Le 1997; Pillemer, 1988). Some victims were unhappy and isolated and felt guilt, shame or fear (OWN; 1998; Reis 1998 and 1997; Podnieks, 1992). Some victims see abuse as normal behavior (Phillips, 2000). In addition, some victims minimize the abuse or believe it is their fault (Griffin, 1994; Podnieks, 1992).

ABUSERS ARE OFTEN DEPENDENT ON THEIR VICTIMS

- A significant number of abusers suffer some form of impairment (Brownell, 1999; Cohen, 1998; Reis, 1998 and 1997; Seaver, 1996; Greenberg, 1990; Lachs, 1997; Pillemer and Finklehor, 1989). These researchers defined impairments as including substance abuse, mental illness and depression, or cognitive impairments.
- Many abusers are dependent on their victims for housing, transportation and sometimes care (Brownell, 1999; Reis, 1998 and 1997; Otiniano, 1998; Wolf and Pillemer, 1997; Seaver, 1996; Pillemer and Finklehor, 1989). Financial dependency of adult children also seems to be a key factor (Otiniano, 1998; Lachs, 1997; Greenberg, 1990).

GENDER OF VICTIMS AND ABUSERS

- According to most research, the majority of older victims are women (Dunlop, 2000; Crichton, 1999; Lithwick, 1999; Vladescu, 1999; Lachs (b), 1997; Greenberg, 1990).
- The majority of perpetrators are male (Brownell, 1999; Crichton, 1999; Lithwick, 1999). Sexual abusers were almost exclusively male (Teaster, 2000; Ramsey-Klawnsnik, 1991). Of the cases reviewed, only men perpetrated homicide-suicide in later life (Cohen, 1998).

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