

# The elderly, a vulnerable population

Psychology, Abuse



Many segments of the population can fall prey to the abuses of others, it can be physical, mental, sexual, and even financial; the elderly are a vulnerable group. The elderly can be susceptible to influences that can be devastating to their well-being (physical and mental) and financial stability. The abuse of the elderly can come from the hands of children, spouses, partners, and even caregivers either at home or in an institutional setting. Each year there are more and more reported cases of abuse to the elderly population and many more that occur are not reported.

Victims are frail and unable to take care of themselves and depend on other to help meet their basic needs leaving them at their mercy. Awareness of elderly abuse is important because older Americans comprise the fastest growing segment of the population with the remainder of Baby Boomers set to reach age 65 in the next decade and a half. Abuse against the elderly happens within ethnic, cultural, racial, and economic groups regardless of religion or socioeconomic status. Elderly abuse has been practiced for many years going back to ancient times when the elderly populations were misused and discarded after their usefulness expired.

This phenomenon came to light when domestic violence and child abuse were widely exposed and recommendations for interventions were introduced. Data gathered in 1970 showed findings of elderly abuse were more significant than at first believed. In 1973 the Older Americans Act was enacted, and it set the foundation for future federal programs that help protect the rights of senior citizens (Lachs & Pillemer, 1995) . In 1982 legislation was passed in the state of California that required health care professionals to report suspected elderly abuse (Lachs & Pillemer, 1995).

Concerns with the increasing numbers of incidents in nursing homes required enacting regulations to help protect the right of patients, particularly the older residents. State laws are in place to require nursing homes to be licensed whereas federal laws govern certification intended to ensure proper conduct of residential health care workers. Regulatory steps were made to improve the care and treatment of nursing home residents, but more is needed to further reduce the numbers of abuse. As the elderly population grows the numbers of possible victims of elderly abuse increases.

The definition of elderly abuse includes neglect and self-neglect, sexual, emotional abuse, physical, financial exploitation, and abandonment; this definition varies from state to state (Martin, 2007) . Commonly violent acts toward elderly persons include slapping, hitting, and beating with objects. Results of physical maltreatment can be sprains, cuts, bruise, and at times skeletal fractures. Neglect can be either intentional done as punishment or unintentional done in ignorance. Financial exploitation can leave an elderly person in financial ruin if not caught in time.

Emotional abuse involves threats and insults that can include statements meant to humiliate or intimidate (Lachs & Pillemer, 1995) . The anxiety that accompanies abuse can overwhelm the victim and cause severe physiological distress. Elderly abuse can be insidious because consequences can be devastating and even deadly in view of the advanced ages of some victims. The latest figures show that 1.1 million, one out of every 25 elderly persons are victims of elder abuse each year (Adult Protective Services, 2001) .

Substantial evidence indicates that elderly abuse will increase in the next few decades because of the growing aging population. Awareness of elder abuse is essential to detect problems that plague our society so strategies can be designed to protect our elders. Nursing homes and other residential institutions have legal responsibilities to protect their residents from abuse and to report abuses when detected. The media portrays institutions as the main settings for abuse but statistics show that domestic abuse is more common.

Domestic care-givers are more susceptible to everyday stress of caring for their loved ones that can result in burnout. The recognition of potential abuse can help caregivers find alternative care allowing them time to reenergize. A strategy that can help achieve suitable domestic care would be to have a social network that encourages open and honest dialogue. Many professionals from multiple systems work together to enhance victim safety, hold abusers accountable and to advocate for policies and legislation to help end elderly abuse.

There are many resources on local level and on the federal level that are designed to provide assistance in cases of abuse. Data from 1986 to 1994 showed a steady increase of reported cases of domestic elder abuse nationwide from 117, 000 reported in 1986 to 293, 000 reported in 1994. The median age of domestic elder abuse is 77. 9 years according to data collected in 1996 by the National Center on Elder Abuse. This study shows that 66. 4 percent of the victims of domestic elder abuse were white, and 18. 7 percent were black, Hispanics were 10. percent while Native Americans and Asian American/Pacific Islander were less than 1 percent (Adult

Protective Services, 2001) . In 1996, 67. 3 percent of female victims, while 32. 4 percent male victims were involved in reported elderly abuse cases. The most frequent abuser of the elderly are their children at 36. 7 percent with other family members at 14. 8 percent and spouse were at 13. 8; data gathered in 1994. These reports were conducted between the years 1986 and 1996 show the seriousness of elderly abuse nationwide and these reports only deal with abuse done in the home setting (Adult Protective Services, 2001) .

Because of the un-uniformed reporting policies that vary from agencies to agencies and state to state elderly abuse is underreported. In the early 1980 it became apparent that professions from various disciplines must work together to understand the clinical issues concerning elder abuse. Multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) were formed to assist service professional identify abuse cases and find ways to initiate preventative programs (Multidisciplinary Team, n. d. ) . MDTs were crucial in organizing social agencies abilities to implement policies and procedures that enabled them to resolve involved abuse cases.

Adult protective services, health and social services, the civil and criminal justice systems, and mental health are a few of the professional agencies involved in the formation of the Multidisciplinary teams (Multidisciplinary Team, n. d. ) . The checks and balances mechanism put in place by these teams help coordinated the community's effort to provide services. The skills of individual team members are improved by providing learning strategies, resources, and different approaches that help effectively resolve all form of abuse and neglect issues (Multidisciplinary Team, n. . ) . Summing up the

issues of elderly abuse must include recognizing the significant progress made in the last few decades while understanding that there is still much to be done. One out of nine Americans over the age of 60 has been abused, estimating as least five million per year. It is believed for every one case that is reported there are as many as five that go unreported. Human service professionals should be able to recognize even the slightest signs of elderly abuse so intervention can happen on behalf of the abused and in some instances the abuser.

The importance of developing a social network for the elderly as well as the care-giver can alleviate the stress of caring for a loved one (Martin, 2007) . Awareness of elder abuse is the best way to keep vulnerable senior from harm. With grim statistics on how our elderly are treated future policies need to address our growing aging population. People age 65 and older represent 12 percent of the general population today, they will represent 18 percent in 2025 and 21 percent in the year 2045; we must begin to think about the new challenges that lie ahead to protect our loved ones from harm.

Involvement of ordinary citizens interested in preventing elder abuse can go a long way in human service positions. Imagine the possibilities if we recognize and use our strengths and perhaps even our weaknesses to prevent the escalation of abuse in the future. Political consideration are important for future policies, regulation and laws, and toward politicians who are concerned with the welfare of their older constituents. The political climate towards the elderly these days calls into question what motivates policy makers, their next election cycle or their obligations to the voters.