

An Overview of Elder Abuse: A Growing Problem

ALL

Abuse in Later Life

Elder abuse is a hidden yet growing problem in the United States with significant public health and societal implications. It is a tragedy that impacts older adults of all races, cultures, sexual orientations, social classes, geographic areas, faith communities, mental capacities, and physical abilities. Until victim service providers, the justice system, health care professionals, social service agencies, and other community members work together to address this problem, elder abuse will continue unabated, with devastating consequences for older adults and their loved ones.

Although definitions of elder abuse vary, the term generally refers to any physical, sexual, or psychological abuse, neglect, abandonment, or financial exploitation of an older person either within a relationship where there is an expectation of trust and/or when an older person is targeted based on age or disability (U.S. DOJ, 2013). Older adults may be harmed by spouses or partners in heterosexual, gay, or lesbian relationships, adult children or other family members, caregivers or persons in a position of authority such as guardians, lawyers, or interpreters. In some instances older adults may be targeted by strangers and become victims of sexual assault, stalking, or financial exploitation. The various forms of abuse often co-occur (Acierno, 2010; Lifespan of Greater Rochester et al., 2011).

Older victims often experience shame, pain, economic loss, spiritual and physical anguish, institutionalization, and poor quality of life (Beaulaurier et al., 2008; Brandl et al., 2007; Dong et al., 2011). Studies suggest that older adults exposed to physical and verbal abuse have a greater mortality risk than those who did not experience violence (Baker, 2009; Dong et al., 2011; Lachs, 1998).

Research estimates that approximately one in ten older adults living in their homes experience elder abuse each year (Acierno et al., 2010; Beach et al., 2010; Lifespan of Greater Rochester et al., 2011). In addition, evidence is emerging that shows this rate is especially high in racial and ethnic minority groups (Beach et al., 2010; DeLiema et al., 2012). The current economic crisis has further exacerbated the problem, as the frequency of reported financial exploitation of older adults (which is often coupled with other forms of abuse) has increased (Gunther, 2011; MetLife, 2009).

Yet research suggests that cases of elder abuse are significantly underreported. One state study found fewer than 5% of cases come to light (Lifespan of Greater Rochester et al., 2011). Furthermore, a significant number of elder abuse cases that are actually reported or identified end up slipping through the cracks due to a lack of coordination among service providers (Brandl et al., 2007; Connolly, 2010; Lifespan of Greater Rochester et al., 2011).

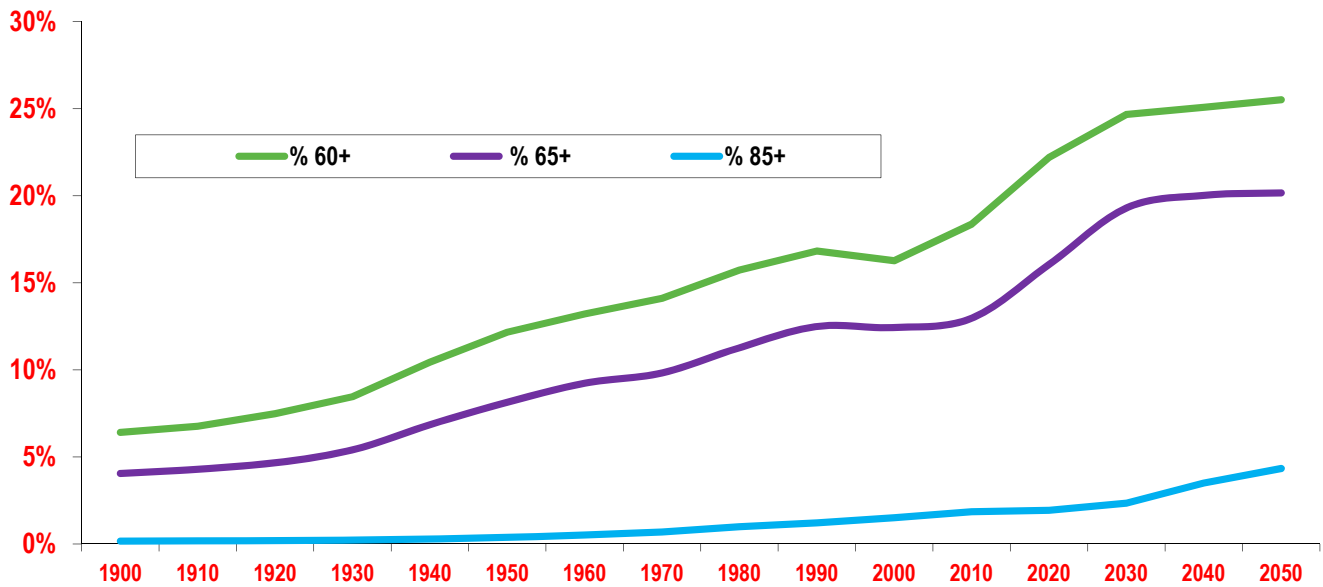
Unfortunately, as 77 million baby boomers age, the problem is only expected to worsen. Within the next 40 years, the number of individuals age 65 and older is projected to more than double so that in 2050, they will account for over 20% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).



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Older Population by Age: 1900-2050 - Percent 60+, Percent 65+, and 85+



Citation: http://www.aoa.gov/aoaroot/aging_statistics/future_growth/future_growth.aspx

While great strides have been made in recent decades to improve responses to child abuse and domestic violence, elder abuse lags far behind in terms of recognition and attention. A recent report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) declared that resources directed to elder abuse are not keeping pace with the growing volume and complexity of cases (U.S. GAO, 2011).

Thankfully, there are several key players that can make a difference. Domestic violence and sexual assault programs provide vital services for victims

that need only be expanded in order to help address the growing problem of elder abuse. The justice system has legal resources and remedies to hold offenders accountable. Other professionals from the aging services network, adult protective services, health care, and faith communities identify and assist older victims. However, in order to better serve and protect our older citizens, it is increasingly imperative for service professionals to work together and to gain a better understanding of the complex and devastating issue of elder abuse.

Additional information sheets may be found at: www.ncall.us/content/ALL.

The National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL) focuses on program and policy development, technical assistance, and training on abuse in later life: the nexus between domestic violence, sexual assault, and elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation. For more information please visit: www.ncall.us or call: 608-255-0539.

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