

Elder Abuse Prevalence and Incidence

No one knows precisely how many older Americans are being abused, neglected, or exploited. While evidence accumulated to date suggests that many thousands have been harmed, there are no official national statistics. There are several reasons:

- Definitions of elder abuse vary. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what actions or inactions constitute abuse, and the problem remains greatly hidden.
- State statistics vary widely as there is no uniform reporting system.
- Comprehensive national data are not collected.

In the absence of a large-scale, nationwide tracking system, studies of prevalence and incidence conducted over the past few years by independent investigators have been crucial in helping us to understand the magnitude of the problem.

This fact sheet highlights some of the most widely used estimates of elder abuse prevalence and incidence in the United States today. Readers are strongly encouraged to consult the original studies for further information.

What Do the Studies Say?

Prevalence

- According to the best available estimates, between 1 and 2 million Americans age 65 or older have been injured, exploited, or otherwise mistreated by someone on whom they depended for care or protection.

(Elder Mistreatment: Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation in an Aging America. 2003. Washington, DC: National Research Council Panel to Review Risk and Prevalence of Elder Abuse and Neglect.)

- Estimates of the frequency of elder abuse range from 2% to 10% based on various sampling, survey methods, and case definitions.

(Lachs, Mark S., and Karl Pillemer. October 2004. "Elder Abuse," The Lancet, Vol. 364: 1192-1263.)

- Data on elder abuse in domestic settings suggest that 1 in 14 incidents, *excluding* incidents of self-neglect, come to the attention of authorities.

(Pillemer, Karl, and David Finkelhor. 1988. "The Prevalence of Elder Abuse: A Random Sample Survey," The Gerontologist, 28: 51-57.)

- Current estimates put the overall reporting of financial exploitation at only 1 in 25 cases, suggesting that there may be at least 5 million financial abuse victims each year.

(Wasik, John F. 2000. "The Fleecing of America's Elderly," Consumers Digest, March/April.)

- It is estimated that for every one case of elder abuse, neglect, exploitation, or self-neglect reported to authorities, about five more go unreported.

(National Elder Abuse Incidence Study. 1998. Washington, DC: National Center on Elder Abuse at American Public Human Services Association.)

About Prevalence and Incidence

Prevalence refers to the *total* number of people who have experienced abuse, neglect, or exploitation in a specified time period.

Incidence is the number of *new* cases identified or reported at a given point in time—usually one year.

Many factors affect actual prevalence and incidence. National estimates may vary, due to differences in research methods, sample sizes, and definitions across studies.

Prevalence and incidence are two different ways of measuring the same thing. Prevalence is the total number of people who have experienced abuse, neglect, or exploitation in a specified time period. Incidence is the number of new cases identified or reported at a given point in time—usually one year.

Elder Abuse Prevalence and Incidence

Incidence

National Center on Elder Abuse Partners

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE UNITS ON AGING
Lead partner
1201 15th Street, NW
Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005
202.898.2586

AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION COMMISSION ON LAW AND AGING
740 15th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005
202.662.8692

CLEARINGHOUSE ON ABUSE AND NEGLECT OF THE ELDERLY
Department of Consumer Studies
University of Delaware
Newark, DE 19716
302.831.3525

NATIONAL ADULT PROTECTIVE SERVICES ASSOCIATION
1900 13th Street
Suite 303
Boulder, CO 80302
720.565.0906

NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE PREVENTION OF ELDER ABUSE
1612 K Street, NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20006
202.682.4140

- In 1996, nearly 450,000 adults aged 60 and over were abused and/or neglected in domestic settings. Factoring in self-neglect, the total number of incidents was approximately 551,000.
(*National Elder Abuse Incidence Study*. 1998. Washington, DC: National Center on Elder Abuse at American Public Human Services Association.)
- A University of Iowa study based on 1999 data found 190,005 domestic elder abuse reports from 17 states; 242,430 domestic elder abuse investigations from 47 states; and 102,879 substantiations from 35 states. Significantly higher investigation rates were found for states that require mandatory reporting and tracking of reports.
(Jogerst, Gerald J., et al. 2003. "Domestic Elder Abuse and the Law," *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 93, No. 12: 2131-2136.)
- In 2000, states were asked to indicate the number of elder/adult reports received in the most recent year for which data were available. Based on figures from 54 states, the total number of reports was 472,813.
(*A Response to the Abuse of Vulnerable Adults: The 2000 Survey of State Adult Protective Services*. 2003. Washington, DC: National Center on Elder Abuse.)
- In 2003, state Long Term Care Ombudsman programs nationally investigated 20,673 complaints of abuse, gross neglect, and exploitation on behalf of nursing home and board and care residents. Among seven types of abuse categories, physical abuse was the most common type reported.
(*National Ombudsman Reporting System Data Tables*. 2003. Washington, DC: U.S. Administration on Aging.)

Finding Data and Statistics

The Clearinghouse on Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly (CANE) Annotated Bibliography: "The Scope of Elder Abuse: Prevalence, Incidence, and Estimates" is available to assist scholars, policymakers, and others interested in finding additional data and statistics.

Search CANE's abstracts database at db.rdms.udel.edu:8080/CANE/index.jsp. For assistance, e-mail CANE-UD@udel.edu. Selected statistics and links to state data sources may also be accessed through the NCEA Web site elderabusecenter.org.

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National Association of State Units on Aging,
March 2005

The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) serves as a national resource for elder rights advocates, adult protective services, law enforcement and legal professionals, medical and mental health providers, public policy leaders, educators, researchers, and concerned citizens. It is the mission of NCEA to promote understanding, knowledge sharing, and action on elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

National Center on Elder Abuse
National Association of State Units on Aging
1201 15th Street, NW, Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005
202.898.2586 / Fax 202.898.2538
ncea@nasua.org

Abuse of Adults Aged 60+ 2004 Survey of Adult Protective Services

The 2004 *Survey of State Adult Protective Services (APS)*, the most rigorous national study of state-level APS data conducted to date, offers important new insights into the troubling elder abuse problem.

The findings show a 19.7 percent increase in the combined total of reports of elder and vulnerable adult abuse and neglect and a 15.6 percent increase in substantiated cases in the four years since the last survey was conducted in 2000.

The study, which analyzed the latest data from the states, found that overall, in 2003, APS agencies received 565,747 reports of suspected elder and vulnerable adult abuse, as compared with 482,913 reports four years ago.

The 2004 Survey collected 2003 fiscal year data from all 50 states, Guam, and the District of Columbia. Most important, at least two-thirds of the states were able to separate out reports of elder abuse from vulnerable adult abuse.

Among those 32 states responding, there were 253,426 incidents involving elder abuse, ranging from a low of 85 in Guam to a high of 66,805 in California. This represents 8.3 reports of abuse for every 1,000 older Americans.

Other Key Highlights

- In 2003, 192,243 cases of alleged elder abuse were investigated by the APS in 29 states.
- In 24 of the states, nearly half (46.7%) of the investigations were substantiated, ranging from a low of 7.2% in Arkansas to a high of 72.4% in Texas.
- In the overwhelming majority of cases (89.3%) the alleged abuse was reported to have occurred in a domestic setting.

About the Study

The 2004 *Survey of State Adult Protective Services* builds on earlier efforts to capture a national picture of elder abuse, as drawn from state APS data.

Data collection efforts, refined with iterations, have been conducted since 1986.

Because of differences in definitions and varying data collection capabilities among the states, comparisons with earlier data have been problematic at best.

The 2004 Survey presents a follow up to the National Center on Elder Abuse's 2000 *Survey of State Adult Protective Services*. It provides data, where comparable, to identify trends.

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2004 Survey of Adult Protective Services

National Center on Elder Abuse Partners

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE UNITS ON AGING
Lead partner
1201 15th Street, NW
Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005
202.898.2586

AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION COMMISSION ON LAW AND AGING
740 15th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005
202.662.8692

CLEARINGHOUSE ON ABUSE AND NEGLECT OF THE ELDERLY
School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy
University of Delaware
Newark, DE 19716
302.831.3525

NATIONAL ADULT PROTECTIVE SERVICES ASSOCIATION
1900 13th Street
Suite 303
Boulder, CO 80302
720.565.0906

NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE PREVENTION OF ELDER ABUSE
1612 K Street, NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20006
202.682.4140

Who are the victims?

- Older women, according to the survey, are far more likely than men to suffer from abuse or neglect. In 2003, two out of every three (65.7%) elder abuse victims were women (15 states reporting).
- In 20 of the states, more than two in five victims (42.8%) were age 80 or older.
- The majority (77.1%) of victims, according to reports from 13 states, were Caucasian.

Types of abuse and perpetrators

In 2003, slightly more than half (52.7%) of the alleged perpetrators of elder abuse or neglect were female (11 states reporting). Three out of every four alleged offenders (75.1%) were under 60 (7 states reporting).

Most alleged perpetrators in 2003 were adult children (32.6%) or other family members (21.5%). Spouses/intimate partners accounted for 11.3% of the total (11 states responding).

Twenty-one of the states (40.4%) maintain an abuse registry or database of alleged perpetrators, while 31 (59.6%) do not.

As reported by 19 states, types of maltreatment substantiated included:

- Self neglect (37.2%)
- Caregiver neglect (20.4%)
- Financial exploitation (14.7%)
- Emotional/psychological/verbal abuse (14.8%)
- Physical abuse (10.7%)
- Sexual abuse (1%)
- Other (1.2%)

Reporting elder abuse

The three most common sources of reports of elder abuse and neglect allegations were family members (17%), social services workers (10.6%), and friends and neighbors (8%), according to APS data from 11 states.

2004 Survey of Adult Protective Services

Recommendations

- Accurate and uniform data must be continuously collected at state and national levels so that elder abuse trends can be tracked and studied. A concerted effort is needed to create uniform definitions and measures for reporting. As a baseline, all states need to be able to provide the information requested by the 2004 Survey .
- States should collect detailed and age- and gender-specific information on race and ethnicity of elder abuse victims and the alleged perpetrators. Very little is known about the racial and ethnic composition of victims.
- Training in the identification and reporting of abuse should expand to key groups such as utility and postal workers, etc., who are not traditionally targeted in prevention and intervention efforts.
- It is crucial for states to collect outcome data on clients served. This information will be extremely helpful in determining efficacy of APS intervention.
- With the increasing number of abuse reports, investigations, and substantiations, there is a need to increase education, and intervention efforts at all levels, local to national.
- States should collect as much data as possible, not only about elder abuse victims, but also about the perpetrators. Little information is available on perpetrators and what happens to them as a result of APS intervention. Data collection in this area will be critical for prevention, intervention, and advocacy.
- A national study of APS data specifically related to the abuse of adults 60+ should be conducted no less than every four years to ensure methodological comparability between surveys.

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The 2004 Survey was conducted by the National Center on Elder Abuse, with oversight by the National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse and the National Adult Protective Services Association. Special appreciation to lead investigator and study author Pamela B. Teaster, PhD of the Graduate Center for Gerontology, College of Public Health, University of Kentucky and President Elect, National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse; and co-lead investigator Joanne Marlatt Otto, Executive Director, National Adult Protective Services Association. Other researchers participating in the study include Tyler A. Dugar, BA, Marta S. Mendiondo, PhD, Erin L. Abner, MA, and Kara Cecil, MPH of the Graduate Center for Gerontology, College of Public Health, University of Kentucky.

Abuse of Adults Age 60+: 2004 Survey of State Adult Protective Services is available in PDF form on the National Center on Elder Abuse Web site at www.elderabusecenter.org.

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20005
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