

Elder Abuse

Elder abuse is the mistreatment of older citizens within the home. Elder abuse includes physical and psychological abuse, financial exploitation and intentional, non-intentional and self-neglect.

Elder abuse prevention, detection and intervention allows law enforcement officers to improve the quality of the lives of older adults or senior citizens.

All states have legislation that in some way affects elder abuse victims. Police are expected to detect and report abuse, or enforce other state mandates.

Quality response by police to the needs of the elderly is an integral part of community-oriented policing. Between 1989 and 2030, the 65-plus population in the United States will double. By the year 2030, there will be proportionately more elderly than young people in the population. Elder abuse can also occur in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities.

Elder abuse spans the spectrum from conduct that may have relatively minor impact on and elderly victim to actions that threaten the older person's life or financial security. While some types of abuse may seem relatively minor, it is important to note that even seemingly small acts of abuse may have a much more serious impact on an elderly victim than they would on a younger person.

Many cases of elder abuse and neglect go unreported because victims are unable to ask for help, are afraid of retaliation or institutionalization, or are dependent upon their abusers for needed care. Some are isolated and have no one to tell. For these reasons, it is particularly important for law enforcement officers to learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of abuse and to understand the full range of potential responses by both law enforcement and social service workers.

Types of Elder Abuse

- **Physical abuse:** Non-accidental use of physical force that results in bodily injury, pain or impairment. It includes assault, battery, and inappropriate restraint. Physical abuse may be acts of violence such as pushing, hitting or punching, or force feeding or improper use of restraints or medication.

Possible Indicators of Physical Abuse:

Cuts, lacerations, puncture wounds, bruises, welts, discoloration, and unexplained injury.

Poor skin color or poor skin hygiene; absence of hair and/or hemorrhaging below the scalp.

Burns: may be caused by cigarettes, caustics, acids, friction from ropes or chains.

- **Sexual abuse:** Sexual abuse includes forced sexual contact or sexual contact with an individual who is incapable of exercising consent because of physical or mental impairments.
- **Psychological abuse:** Psychological or emotional abuse may involve frightening, humiliating, intimidating, infantilizing, threatening or isolating an older person.

- **Possible Indicators of Psychological/Emotional Abuse:** Hesitation to talk openly; implausible stories; confusion or disorientation. Anger, fear, withdrawal, depression, denial, agitation, or helplessness.
- **Financial abuse:** Financial or material abuse involves theft, fraud, unfulfilled promises of lifetime care in exchange for assets, and limitation on the older person's access to his or her own assets.

Possible Indicators of Financial Abuse:

Unusual bank account activity; inconsistent or implausible check signatures.
 Power of attorney given, or recent changes or creation of a will, when the person is incapable of making such decisions.
 Unusual concern by a caregiver that an excessive amount of money is being expended on the care of the older person.
 Numerous unpaid bills, overdue rent, when someone is supposed to be paying the bills.
 Placement in a facility which is not commensurate with the alleged size of the estate.
 Lack of affordable amenities, such as TV, personal grooming items, or jewelry.
 Missing personal belongings such as art, silverware or jewelry.

- **Active neglect:** A caregiver is defined as “a person who has the care, custody, or control of the older person.” Active neglect is denying an older person food, health-related services, or other needed items such as eyeglasses, dentures or walkers. It may include abandoning the older person.
- **Passive neglect:** Caregivers may fail to provide care because they do not understand the older person's needs or how to provide for them. They may be experiencing problems themselves that limit their ability to provide adequate care.

Possible Indicators of Neglect or Abuse by Caregiver:

Rashes, sores, lice, inadequate clothing, malnourishment, dehydration, or an untreated medical condition.
 Attitudes of indifference or anger toward the older person, or the obvious absence of assistance.
 Aggressive behavior by the caregiver toward the elder.

- **Self neglect:** Self neglect is the result of an older adult's inability or refusal to perform essential self-care tasks, including eating, bathing, or securing food, clothing, shelter, or medical care. The older person may also neglect his or her finances or physical security. Self-neglect may be associated with mental or physical impairments, illness, depression, alcoholism, or hopelessness.

Possible Indicators of Self Neglect:

Inability to manage personal finances, e.g. hoarding, squandering, giving money away.
 Inability to manage activities of daily living, including meal preparation, housework, etc.
 Suicidal acts, wanderings, refusing medical attention, isolation, substance abuse.

Lack of toilet facilities or animal infested living quarters.
Rashes, sores, fecal/urine smell, inadequate clothing, malnourishment, dehydration, etc.
Confusion, inappropriate or no response, disorientation, memory failure, incoherence, etc.
Not keeping medical appointments for serious illness.

- **Violating personal rights:** Denying the right to privacy and to make personal and health decisions. Includes forcible eviction or placement in a nursing home.

Possible Indicators of Violation of Personal Rights:

Social isolation of family, or isolation or restriction of activity within the family unit.
Conflicting accounts of incidents by family, supporters or the older adult.
Reluctance by the caregiver to comply with service providers in planning for care.
Inappropriate or unwarranted defensiveness by caregiver.

Extent of Problem: Researchers generally agree that over 1.5 million seniors, or about 5% of the elderly population, are abused annually.

The Role of Law Enforcement in Elder Abuse: Law enforcement's role in elder abuse is to protect victims, prevent and stop abuse and exploitation, enforce the law, arrest offenders, and provide referrals to other agencies/resources that can address non-police-related needs that must be met.

U.S. Department of Justice publication:

“Improving the Police Response to Domestic Elder Abuse”

The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) has developed an excellent training manual entitled, “Improving the Police Response to Domestic Elder Abuse.”

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