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Understanding and Adressing Elder Abuse in Contemporary Society

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Understanding and Addressing Elder Abuse in Contemporary Society

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Honors Research Project

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Abstract

The goal of this project was to research and present a public awareness campaign on elder abuse to help spread awareness. This paper addresses the question of how prevalent elder abuse is and what we may do to prevent this abuse from occurring. For the research portion of this project, I created a literature review to address the topic of elder abuse with an emphasis on the extent of the problem, the risk factors, and relevant laws and societal policies. Elder abuse affects an estimated 5 million elderly adults per year and the rate of abuse is increasing. The public awareness campaign included development of infographics on how to Spot an Online Scam, how to file an online report, and the risk factors for both the perpetrator and victim. Plans for dissemination of this campaign are discussed.

Understanding and Addressing Elder Abuse in Contemporary Society

Everyone's stories deserve to be heard, but how often do you hear about the horrors of elder abuse? Although elder abuse is a growing concern, it does not receive the same recognition as child abuse and domestic violence and is often underreported or not reported at all (Stark, 2012, p. 26). Many cases of elder abuse are unreported, so it is hard to get a good estimate of the total cases. Occasionally you may see a post on social media or an article in the news about elder abuse, but the issue does not seem to be prominent in popular literature. Eventually, over time it gets covered up by other stories and is forgotten. It is necessary to educate individuals on the importance of this issue and how to look for the signs of potential abuse to help spread awareness.

A comprehensive literature review is needed to understand each form of abuse and how common they may be. It is also important that we understand the risk factors and causes of each type of abuse. Once we understand these ideas, we can try to prevent abuse. In this case, a public awareness campaign is how I have chosen to present these facts about abuse to the reader in an informative yet visual way.

Literature Review

Extent of problem

An elder is considered anyone 65 years of age or older. The Department of Justice stated that at least 10% of adults aged 65 and over will experience some form of elder abuse within the given year; this means an estimated 5 million adults per year may experience some form of elder abuse. Unfortunately, “just one in 14 cases is reported to authorities” (Rural and Tribal Elder Justice Resource Guide Summit Event Briefing, 2018, p. 292). According to *2023 National Population Projections Tables: Main Series*, the population of elderly adults in the United States

is projected to rise from the 58 million currently elderly adults to 84 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). As the rates of older adults begin to rise, so will the cases of abuse. Across the world, the number of elderly adults vulnerable to abuse, neglect and exploitation will grow as the population changes (Social Determinants of Health, 2014).

Types of Elder Abuse

There are seven types of elder abuse recognized by the Nursing Home Abuse Center, including emotional/psychological abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, financial exploitation, neglect, self-neglect, and abandonment (NHAC, 2024). The National Elder Mistreatment Study focuses on five of these seven types of abuse and provides us with a general percentage of prevalence for physical, sexual, emotional, financial abuse, and neglect. These five types of abuse are the most common cases of abuse among elders. Let this be an example of why we should urge the spread of awareness and research on this topic. Results from this study are shown in Table 1. As you can see, emotional abuse and neglect were the most prevalent forms of abuse among elders.

Table 1: Prevalence of Abuse from National Elder Mistreatment Study.	
Type of Abuse	Percentage of prevalence in the last year endured by respondents
Emotional	5%
Physical	1.6%
Financial	>5%
Sexual	<1%
Neglect	5%

Emotional Abuse. Emotional abuse is noted as one of the most common types of elder abuse. Elder emotional abuse can be defined as “is the infliction of emotional pain or distress, e.g., verbal assault, insults, threats, intimidation, refusal to communicate” (Lacher, Wettstein, Senn, Rosemann, & Hasler p. 2). These acts could come in many forms, like threats and verbal harassment, manipulation, isolation, or embarrassment. In the National Elder Mistreatment Study (Acierno, Hernandez-Tejada, Muzzy, & Steve, 2009), it is shown that since age 60, 33.49% of elders had been a victim of some kind of emotional mistreatment. Being the most prevalent type of abuse, it is also the most reported type whether by the elderly themselves or someone else such as a caregiver.

Emotional abuse occurs when an elder is yelled at, demeaned, or even threatened. Sometimes, cases of emotional abuse may not be intentional, even so, it still can be harmful to the victim. This kind of abuse could happen anywhere, from anyone. It could happen at the home by a relative, in an institutional facility by a nurse, or in a public setting by a stranger. A spouse partner, or an adult child are found to be the most common perpetrators of emotional abuse (Burnes et al., 2015).

Physical Abuse. Physical abuse is another prevalent type of abuse among the elderly. This kind of abuse is typically found in the form of hitting, kicking, restraining, or any other type of physical violence resulting in injury. A study released from the World Health Organization in 2017 found that “9.3% of nursing home staff members admitted to physically abusing elderly residents” (NHAC, 2022). Older adults who experience forms of physical abuse are more subject to long-term health consequences (Yunus, Hairi, Yuen, & Lumpur, 2019), and sometimes the abuse may result in the death of an individual. In most cases of physical abuse, the perpetrator is someone that the elder knows, whether it is a friend, a family member, or a facility member. It is

uncommon for the perpetrator to be a stranger to the victim. Looking at the Elder Mistreatment study, the lifetime prevalence of physical abuse for those studied was about 12% and only 31% of that abuse was reported to the police (Acierno et al., 2009).

Financial Abuse. Elder financial abuse has become a growing issue in recent years. Financial exploitation occurs when family, friends, or even strangers exploit the elderly. The U.S. Department of Justice defines exploitation as “illegal or improper use of an elderly or adult with a disability's money, property, or other resources for monetary or personal benefit, profit or gain” (DOJ, 2023). Whether the exploitation is through online scams, manipulation, or coercion, it can lead to negative consequences for the elderly and their family.

Perpetrators tend to exploit the victims that they feel are most vulnerable, in this case those who have diseases like Alzheimer's and Dementia, or elders isolated from others (Behavioral & Adults, 2020, p.190). As our use of the internet grows, so does the potential for online scams. It is becoming more common for elderly people to fall victim to these phone calls and email scams as they may not be as adept at spotting potential high risk content. Financial exploitation is a form of abuse that is a bit harder to detect due to a few reasons, for example, having Alzheimer's or Dementia. The Nursing Home Abuse Center believes that elders with diseases like Alzheimer's or Dementia are at the highest risk for financial exploitation because “they may not be able to recognize or take action against it” (*Signs of financial elderly abuse*, 2024). Being in isolation from family can also lead to risk of financial exploitation. If they are not being checked up on frequently, this form of exploitation could go unnoticed.

Sexual Abuse. One of the lesser researched forms of elder abuse is sexual abuse. Sexual abuse of an elderly person is defined by the Ohio Department of Aging as being “forced into a sexual or intimate situation by another person” (*Elder Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation* /

Department of Aging, n.d.). In most cases of sexual abuse, elders are confused and unable to give consent or in other cases they may be forced into acts including “rape, unwanted sexual contact or talk, or being forced to be naked, be partially undressed, or do sexual or intimate things in front of others”. Older adults may not report forms of sexual abuse out of embarrassment, which we will discuss when talking about the underrepresentation of elder abuse.

When we look at some of the statistics we do have for elder sexual abuse, it is quite devastating. The Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape has conducted various types of research indicating that “about 80 percent of the time, the perpetrator of elder sexual abuse was the caregiver to the elder” and “about 76 percent of elder sexual abuse victims have had their incident witnessed by another” (*Sexual Abuse of the Elderly*, 2024). This data provides a shocking insight on the perpetrators involved with these sex crimes, most commonly being their own family or their caregiver. Vulnerability is one of the greatest risk factors in any form of elder abuse, especially sexual abuse. Due to the circumstances in most situations, this is another form of abuse that often goes unreported and unnoticed.

Neglect

Neglect among the elderly can be separated into two aspects, neglect and self-neglect. Neglect is found when an elder's basic medical, emotional, and physical needs are not being met. Older adults tend to be more vulnerable to neglect because they may not have the capabilities needed to take care of themselves. This may put these elderly people at a higher risk to succumb to their health and wellness problems and could possibly result in death. As reported by older adults in a community setting, the percentage of neglect was around 4.2%, but neglect reported by others in an institutional setting was 23.6% (WHO, 2022). These studies were based on self-reports by staff, asking if they had witnessed or perpetrated elder abuse.

Abandonment. Since elder abandonment and elder neglect have quite a few similarities, some states define elder abandonment as a form of elder neglect (Rzeszut, 2017). However, in Ohio, abandonment is defined as a form of abuse as stated in Section 5101.60 of Ohio's Revised Code to be the “desertion of an adult by a caretaker without having provided for transfer of the adult's care” (Ohio Rev. Code § 5101.60, 2015). This kind of abuse typically occurs when the caregiver of the elderly becomes tired or fed up with caring for the victim. The difference between these two categories is that elder abandonment is more than just refusing to meet the needs of the patient. Since elder abandonment is in some states categorized as neglect, it is hard to find accurate data on how common this form of abuse is.

Data on elder abuse

One of the most underreported kinds of elder abuse according to an elder abuse statistics study done by the Department of Justice is caregiver neglect (Elder Justice Roadmap, 2014), presumably because they rely on that person whether it is family or a friend. According to the Elder Justice Roadmap, it is to be believed that “for every 1 case of elder abuse that comes to light, another 23 remain hidden” (Connolly, Brandl, Breckman, 2014, p.2). This staggering number of unreported cases of elder abuse leaves us with the question of why these cases are going unreported and unnoticed? Why don't these adults or their loved ones report these crimes?

Warning Signs

To report these cases of elder abuse, we must be aware of what signs or symptoms to look for in a victim. Considering not all forms of abuse may show physical signs, it is important to pay attention to the mental well-being of the individual as well as their physical well-being. An article released by the American Psychological Association lists some potential physical signs that we can look for. These include broken bones or injuries, infections, unexplained

bleeding, weight loss, lack of hygiene, untreated bedsores, and large money withdrawals. The emotional signs we can look for are isolation, withdrawal from family/friends, depression, anxiety or paranoia, and change in behavior (APA, 2022).

Risk factors

Another important aspect of raising awareness about elder abuse are risk factors to look for in both perpetrators and victims. Knowing these risk factors and warning signs can be an important part in detecting and reporting these crimes and protecting the older adults in our community. A study was done to assess the risk and vulnerability factors for elder abuse, the factors listed are, problems with physical health, problems with mental health, problems with substance abuse, dependency, problems with social stress, problems with attitudes, victimization, and problems with relationships (Storey, 2019). This does not mean that everyone who falls into these categories will become an abuser or victim, the risk for those individuals is higher than others due to these factors.

Offenders

When looking at the risk factors for the offender, you may also look at the criteria considered for these risk factors. According to one study, problems with physical health may be considered any form of chronic illness, physical disability, or a declining health rate. This may be considered a form of abuse because of the “Functional impairment related to Activities and Instrumental Activities of Daily Living” (Storey, 2019). The criteria for mental health problems are those who struggle with “mental and personality functioning, that can result in substantial problems with cognition, mood, and behavior”. Studies done in the United States show depression as a predictor of physical and verbal abuse (Pillemer, Burnes, Riffin, & Lachs, 2016).

Substance abuse may be considered a risk factor for all forms of abuse. These problems have been linked to cases of financial and verbal abuse. Stress and the individual's attitude towards the elderly may be found in cases of neglect or abandonment. The caretaker may have an attitude towards caregiving or stress that is making them unable to keep up with their responsibilities.

Victims

Now that we know the risk factors for the offender, what makes a victim vulnerable?

Mental and physical disabilities can be a common risk factor because adults with disabilities may be more vulnerable to becoming a victim. For elders with poor mental health, it may affect their ability to carry out basic living activities (Lima, Augusto, & Ivbijaro, pp. 125-127). This means they require more care than other elders, placing them at a higher risk of being abused.

Dependency is another common risk factor in cases of elder abuse. When an elder is dependent on the perpetrator physically, emotionally, or financially (Storey, 2019), it could lead to potential abuse. One study found emotional and physical abuse to be significantly less likely in older adults with greater functional capacity (Burnes et al., 2015). Problems with relationships were also found to be one of the risk factors for victims, in the lives of elders these problems may lead to social isolation or lack of social support, it could also lead to conflict with the perpetrator (Storey, 2019).

Communities

Depending on the community or society one lives in, they may be subject to community risk factors. Community risk factors may include geographic location, or cultural norms. Living in certain countries or even states may increase the risk of any kind of elder abuse. Studies show that "elders living in urban areas and older female respondents faced a much greater risk than their respective reference groups" (Brozowski et al., 2010, p. 1193). If a culture promotes or does

not properly punish acts of violence, it may lead to a higher risk of elder abuse. These elders may also be at risk for societal risks like stereotyping and negative attitudes towards older people (Pillemer et al., 2016). Although risk community or societal risk factors may not be as common as others, it is still important that we are taking caution and teaching others to respect all individuals.

Prevention

In order to prevent cases of elder abuse before they start, knowing these risks are important. Caregiver interventions are an effective way to temporarily relieve the caregivers of their duties and reduce stress. These interventions are services such as housecleaning, support groups, or health care (Pillemer et al., 2016). Another useful prevention strategy is money management programs. These programs help pay bills, make deposits, and monitor account activity. Helplines are a useful intervention across countries (Pillemer et al., 2016). By calling these hotlines, elders can acquire information or assistance regarding elder abuse. Given the extent of elder abuse, it is vital to develop effective policies and laws to prevent this issue from growing further.

Laws and Social Policies

The Movement Towards Establishing Elder Abuse as a Social Problem

The movement towards establishing elder abuse as a social problem started in the 1960's. The earliest study of Adult Protective Services (APS) was conducted by Virginia Lehmann in 1960 for the National Council on Aging. This study was used to establish the need for elder abuse services. This study was then used as a basis for the first national conference on elder abuse held in 1963. Prior to the national conference, in 1961, the White House held a Conference on Aging. This conference was made up of a wide variety of professions and specialties to define

and propose solutions to the problem of elder abuse. Many of the topics covered were of special interest to occupational health workers as they were urged to act towards taking precautions and reporting these problems. In 1965, due to “concern by policymakers about a lack of community services for older persons” (*Older Americans Act / ACL Administration for Community Living*, n.d.), congress passed the Older Americans Act. This legislation established authority for grants and funding to states for various things like research, development projects, and personnel training. The OAA has been reauthorized multiple times since then, the most recent being in 2020 which was reauthorized until 2024.

By 1978, nearly 20 states had enacted legislation stating that “state social service agencies should provide protective services to adults” (Regan, 1978), but in the early 1980’s Adult Protective Services began to gain traction. Many states began to adopt their own APS statutes and by 1981 all 50 states were providing some form of protective services to support this population. In 1990 the National Adult Protective Services sponsored the first national training conference for APS. As the knowledge of this issue began to spread more states adopted mandatory reporting laws. In 2010, The Elder Justice Act was passed. This was the first comprehensive legislation to address elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation of older adults. It authorized programs and initiatives to “better coordinate federal responses to elder abuse, promote elder justice research and innovation, support Adult Protective Services systems, and provide additional protections for residents of long-term care facilities.” (*Older Americans Act / ACL Administration for Community Living*, n.d.).

Ohio’s Adaptation

In the mid-1970s, Ohio began enacting laws relating to elder abuse and providing healthcare agencies with solutions on how to combat this problem. Aside from governmental

agencies, many state and local associations have begun to take an interest in Elder Abuse since this time. Many of these associations represent professional networks such as the Ohio Coalition for Adult Protective Services, Ohio Domestic Violence Network, Action Ohio, Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging, and other associations like these. In 2009, the Ohio Attorney General's Elder Abuse Commission was created in response to the growing concern about the treatment of offenses of elder abuse.

Elder abuse is defined in Ohio's Revised Code, Section 5101.60 as “the infliction upon an adult by self or others of injury, unreasonable confinement, intimidation, or cruel punishment with resulting physical harm, pain, or mental anguish” (2015). This code was first established on September 29, 2013, and has been updated and modified since to fit today's definitions and avoid any legal loopholes. Like all states, Ohio does have mandatory reporting laws, but this is where the issue of making sure these reports are being filed becomes a concern. Considering that the under-representation of elder abuse becomes conflicting when finding and establishing statistical data on this topic, it is necessary that we follow the laws on mandated reporting to make sure that these cases of abuse do not go unnoticed.

When looking at the Ohio law on mandated reporting in particular, the Ohio Revised Code section 5101.63 states that “(A)(1) No person listed in division (A)(2) of this section having reasonable cause to believe that an adult is being abused, neglected, or exploited, or is in a condition which is the result of abuse, neglect, or exploitation shall knowingly fail to immediately report such belief to the county department of job and family services”. This division is widely made up of health and service personnel. This code also states that “Any person having reasonable cause to believe that an adult has suffered abuse, neglect, or exploitation may report, or cause a report to be made of such belief to the county department of

job and family services.” meaning that anyone can report any signs of elder abuse without any proof or evidence. As the urgency of addressing elder abuse becomes increasingly apparent, initiatives like public awareness campaigns have emerged as crucial tools in combating this pervasive issue

Public Awareness Campaign

Methods

This public awareness campaign aimed to raise awareness about elder abuse in contemporary society and educate the public on how to recognize and address it effectively. The campaign's target audience included individuals of all ages, with a focus on elders, caregivers, family members, healthcare professionals, and community organizations. By targeting a diverse audience, the campaign aimed to create a comprehensive understanding of elder abuse prevention and intervention efforts. The key messages in this campaign highlight the prevalence of elder abuse, the different types of abuse, warning signs to look out for, and steps to take if abuse is suspected. To spread public awareness, I created a QR code link to a website with my research and infographics attached as well as other sources that may be useful for the user. This QR code will be presented at my research symposium and printed it out to be posted around campus for others to view. To get this information out to as wide an audience as I can, I will also be sharing the link to my website on my social media and encouraging my friends and family to share with others. The link to the QR code is temporary, so I will be attaching a link to my website.

My Campaign

The website that I created for this public awareness campaign includes information on what elder abuse is, the different types of abuse, the warning signs, and what the audience may do to get involved. I also included three infographics to reflect the important parts of my literature review. Since financial abuse is one of the least reported cases of elder abuse, I created an infographic on how to spot an online scam. As the use of technology reaches more elderly people, they may be subject to online scams, so it is important that they know what they are looking for. I provide examples of what to avoid while online and some common scams they may come across. In this paper, I also express the importance of reporting elder abuse as so many cases go unnoticed. To address this problem, I included a step-by-step walk through on how to file an online report on elder abuse. Some people may not know how to file an online report or even who to contact, by including this infographic it helps guide the reader. The last issue that I wanted to highlight through these infographics was the risk factors for both the perpetrator and victim. Using the information from my literature review, I created a list for both individuals and their risk factors in cases of elder abuse. This is where the prevention begins so it is important we address these risk factors. The website also includes links to resources for finding resources and helping with filing reports. I chose to take this approach because it provides information to everyone, not just the victims of elder abuse. It is an easy way to reach a wide audience to spread awareness.

Understanding the larger topic

By creating this public awareness campaign, I was able to obtain valuable information related to my field of interest and apply it to this project. I identified key facts and statistics related to this topic and used these sources to create my own awareness campaign. I have gained insights into the barriers and challenges that individuals face when seeking help or reporting

abuse. Designing infographics challenged me to think creatively about how to visually communicate these important concepts and data points. Through my research on elder abuse, strategic planning of my infographics, and creative execution, this campaign sheds light on an overlooked issue in contemporary society. I used what I have learned throughout this project to share facts and information with others in a way that is visually pleasing to catch the viewers' attention.

Conclusion

The journey of developing a public awareness campaign on elder abuse has been educational and impactful. Continued advocacy, education, and support are needed to create lasting change and ensure the safety and well-being of older adults, this is why I chose to create a public awareness campaign on this topic. Raising awareness is only the first step towards addressing elder abuse effectively, and that was the goal of this campaign. If you know someone who is currently a victim or perpetrator, I urge you to file a report. Every second counts in cases of elder abuse.

[Click here to view my website](#)

How to file an online report

STEP BY STEP



Visit your states Department of Job and Family Services website

Using the local directory, find the department in your county.
In this case, visit <https://ajfs.ifs.ohio.gov/> to report a case of elder abuse in Ohio.

Sign up or login to your ohio digital identity account

This is a brief signup process to create an account that is required to file a referral.



Create and submit your referral form

After you complete signing up for your Ohio ID account, you will be prompted to fill out the referral form. You may remain anonymous and no proof or evidence is required

If you need assistance in creating referral form, Download user guide [here](#)



You've done your part, Thank you

After your referral has been submitted, it should be investigated within 3 working days; 24 hour if an emergency situation.



You may also call and report elder abuse at any time at 1-855-644-6277

For more information visit <https://aging.ohio.gov/care-and-living/ect-help/elder-justice/report-elder-abuse-1>

How to: Spot an Online Scam

CHECK LEGITIMACY OF EMAILS

THE EASIEST WAY TO SPOT AN ONLINE SCAM IS THROUGH GRAMMATICAL ERRORS. IN PROFESSIONAL EMAILS, THERE WILL BE NO GRAMMATICAL ERRORS BECAUSE THEY ARE TYPICALLY PROOFREAD.

SECURE PERSONAL IDENTITY

SCAMS MAY ASK FOR PERSONAL INFORMATION LIKE YOUR CREDIT CARD OR SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER DO NOT GIVE YOUR PERSONAL INFORMATION TO ANY SITE THAT IS NOT SECURE.

SWEETHEART SCAMS

AS ONLINE DATING BECOMES MORE POPULAR FOR OLDER ADULTS, THEY BECOME A TARGET FOR SCAMS. IF SOMEONE YOU MEET ONLINE ASKS YOU TO SEND THEM MONEY, IT IS MORE THAN LIKELY A SCAM.

IMPOSTER SCAMS

THESE IMPOSTERS MAY PRETEND TO BE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES, FRIENDS, FAMILY, ETC WHO CALL OR TEXT YOU ASKING FOR MONEY OR PERSONAL INFORMATION. THIS IN MOST CASES IS AN IDENTITY THEFT AND FRAUD SCAM.

For more information on online scams and how to keep your information safe, click [here](#).

The Warning Signs of Elder Abuse

What to look for

Perpetrator	Victim
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A "NEW FRIEND" • VERBALLY AGGRESSIVE, CONTROLLING, IRRITATION • ISOLATING THE ELDER • FAILURE TO SHOW AFFECTION • HISTORY OF MENTAL ILLNESS OR SUBSTANCE ABUSE • PAST CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR, OR EXPERIENCE OF ABUSE • ACTING AS IF THE ELDER IS A BURDEN 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EMOTIONAL AGITATION • PERSONALITY CHANGES • UNEXPLAINED BRUISES OR MARKINGS • UNEXPLAINED MONEY TRANSFERS • UNTREATED HEALTH PROBLEMS • WITHDRAWLING FROM OTHERS • MALNUTRITION, DEHYDRATION

For more information about these warning signs, visit <https://www.nursinghomeabusecenter.com/elder-abuse/signs/>

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