

Recent Research on Elder Abuse (Mistreatment), Awareness and Prevention

Compiled by Roger Acton, SCVAN Faith Based Victim Services Project Director, December 2020

Faith leaders need to take responsibility for protecting all ages in their houses of worship and caring for crime victims within their own faith communities. Plus, victims of crime and their families seek help from faith leaders in numbers greater than from other helping professions.

- 1 South Carolina is dead last in a national ranking of states in protecting its vulnerable elderly citizens from abuse, a new report shows.
 - a. The most common types of elder abuse include physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as financial exploitation and caregiver neglect, according to Elizabeth Mulvaney, a lecturer at the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh.
- 2 Experts have reported that knowledge about elder abuse lags as much as two decades behind the fields of child abuse and domestic violence. The need for more research is urgent and it is an area that calls out for a coordinated, systematic approach that includes policy-makers, researchers and funders
- 3 The ranking, by personal-finance website WalletHub, measured 14 indicators such as share of elder abuse, gross neglect and exploitation per resident 65 and older. South Carolina ranked 50th in those categories, 46th in total expenditures on elder-abuse prevention, and 41st in the number of elder care organizations and services. Abuse happens every day and takes many forms. But vulnerable older Americans are among the easiest targets for this misconduct; especially those who are women, have disabilities and rely on other for care. By one estimate elder abuse affects as much as ten percent of the population older than 60, and many cases go unreported—as many as 13 of every 14 instances. Unless states take action to prevent further abuse, the problem will grow as America becomes an increasingly aging nation.
- 4 In a study on elder abuse by family members in which data was collected by elder abuse type, Laumann and colleagues found that respondents most frequently reported verbal mistreatment (9%), followed by financial mistreatment (3.5%) and lastly physical mistreatment (less than 1%).
- 5 A community-based elder abuse intervention program called “Eliciting Change in At-Risk Elders” assists suspected victims of elder abuse and self-neglect through a partnership with local law enforcement had favorable outcomes. This program involves building alliances with the elder and family members, connecting the elder to supportive services that reduce risk of further abuse, and utilizing motivational interviewing-type skills to help elders overcome ambivalence regarding making difficult life changes. Risk factors of elder abuse decreased over the course of the intervention and nearly three-quarters of participants made

progress on their treatment goal. The project's findings suggest that a longer-term, relationship-based intervention for entrenched elders who are reluctant to receive services may be effective and therefore worth considering.

- 6 Education on elder abuse is another important way to intervene at the community level. Altering attitudes toward elder abuse may impact a persons' behavior toward older adults. The following example illustrates a way in which to provide elder abuse education, particularly to young adults. Hayslip and colleagues (2015) examined the effectiveness of educational interventions in altering tolerance for and behavioral intentions of elder abuse among college student young adults. Findings suggested that while specific interventions may reduce elder abuse tolerance, supplemental educational efforts over time may be necessary to maintain intervention-specific gains in intentions and behaviors particular to elder abuse.
- 7 Given the complex nature of elder abuse, inter-professional teams, also referred to as multidisciplinary teams consisting of physicians, social workers, law-enforcement personnel, attorneys, and other community participants working together in a coordinated fashion, have been identified as a possibly successful intervention as no single discipline or sector alone has the resources or expertise needed to address the issue.
- 8 Many older Americans turn to their faith communities and faith leaders for help when they are experiencing abuse. Older survivors know and deeply trust faith leaders and community members and often reach out for assistance in times of great need. As a faith leader, you can play a critical role in responding to abuse as well as improving access to services and supports for older survivors in your community. You may also be in a unique position to observe signs of abuse and indicators of abusive behavior. Amid this social isolation, a quiet, unseen tragedy is unfolding for the approximately 1 in 10 older adults who experience physical, emotional, sexual, financial, and spiritual abuse. While physical distancing will slow the virus, isolation is also a risk factor and a weapon of abuse. Like the pandemic itself, abuse is a matter of life and death: older victims are three times more likely to die prematurely than those who are not abused. For 89% of older adults, faith is a source of strength and resilience. That's why we are calling on faith communities and faithful people everywhere to increase their efforts to connect with and support older survivors of abuse. Safe Havens Interfaith Partnership Against Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse, and the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life wrote a letter encouraging faith leaders to raise awareness about elder abuse and help to support older victims. This letter has been endorsed by 22 other national organizations.
- 9 "The paucity of studies that look at elder abuse in religious communities speaks to the presence of a significant gap in our understanding of elder abuse...this important social support for seniors is not well tapped."

- 10 In a 2010 report at University of South Carolina: Interviewees further characterized the faith community as an untapped human resource: There's so many individuals within a different congregation that have so many skills and are willing to share their talents and expertise—that would be a wonderful thing. (Participant 7-sexual/domestic violence services)
- 11 A project supported by OVC, Promising Programs: How Faith Communities Assist Crime Victims, identified 48 victim support programs in the faith community that were struggling to survive, primarily due to lack of education and collaboration. They were (1) not aware of others doing similar work; (2) not aware of government-funded victim-assistance programs; (3) struggling to establish grass-roots programs; and (4) in need of technical assistance to more effectively minister to crime victims and their families.
- 12 A number of unique issues arise for faith communities when addressing the safety and healing of crime victims. Those issues include the following:
 - a. It is a sad fact that South Carolina's violent crime rate is among the Nation's highest. For every crime, a crime victim is left behind to rebuild their life. Violence can challenge or even destroy a person's faith and any sense of feeling safe. Persons of faith who are victims of crime often struggle to make sense of the abuse in light of their faith. Crime victims often go to their faith leaders in times of crisis but some faith leaders, even those with the best of intentions, are ill equipped to know how to respond. Even though there are LEVA's to provide support to crime victims in most South Carolina jurisdictions, the number of crime victims demands additional support services to augment services provided by the LEVA's.
 - b. Faith leaders may not know how to address problems related to victimization proactively in their faith community.
 - c. Members of faith communities may not know the resources available for families experiencing the trauma of victimization and therefore may not be able to make the appropriate referrals to victim and social service providers.
 - d. Victims hear messages in their faith communities that if misinterpreted may cause spiritual or emotional issues.
 - e. Many faith leaders believe they can solve all of the problems of their congregants from within their community.
 - f. Faith communities are extremely diverse in their belief systems, organizational structure, community composition and personal interactions. Each of these may require unique delivery of resources and messaging specific to their needs.
 - g. Because the people of South Carolina represent many faith traditions, one answer will not fit all.
 - h. Victim assistance programs possess the knowledge and practical resources for responding to the immediate needs of victims, but they may not be able to address the profound spiritual crisis brought on by criminal victimization. Furthermore, few avenues exist for faith communities and victim service providers to interact.

Footnotes

- 1 Liv Osby, The Greenville News (2019) “South Carolina dead last in ranking of states for elder abuse protections” Published 11:14 a.m. ET Dec 4, 2018/Updated 12:43 p.m. ET Dec 4, 2018
- 2 U.S. Department of Justice, Department of Health and Human Services, Connolly, M.T., Brandl, B., & Breckman, R. (2014). *The Elder Justice Roadmap: A Stakeholder Initiative to Respond to an Emerging Health, Justice, Financial and Social Crisis*. Retrieved from The Elder Justice Road Map (PDF) [The Elder Justice Road Map \(PDF\)](#).
- 3 Adam McCann, Financial Writer, ‘States with the Best Elder-Abuse Protections,’ WalletHub, December 4, 2019
- 4 Laumann, E., Leitsch, S., & Waite, L. (2008). ‘Elder Mistreatment in the United States, prevalence estimates from a nationally representative study,’ [Elder mistreatment in the United States: prevalence estimates from a nationally representative study](#). *The Journals of Gerontology Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 63(4), S248–S254.
- 5 Mariam, L.M., McClure, R., Robinson, J.B., Yang, J.A. (2015). Eliciting change in at-risk elders (ECARE): evaluation of an elder abuse intervention program. *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*, 27(1), 19–33. doi: 10.1080/08946566.2013.867241
- 6 Hayslip, B, Reinberg, J, & William, J. (2015). The impact of elder abuse education on young adults. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 27(3). doi: 10.1080/08946566.2014.1003264
- 7 Lachs, M., & Pillemer, K. (2015). Elder abuse. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 373, 1947–56. doi: 10.1056/NEJMra1404688
- 8 National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life, a project of End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin: The Wisconsin Coalition Against Domestic Violence. <https://www.ncall.us/for-professionals/faith-leaders/>
- 9 Elizabeth Podnieks, EdD, RN and Sue Wilson, PhD, “Elder Abuse Awareness in Faith Communities: Findings from a Canadian Pilot Study,” *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*, Vol. 15, No.3/4, 2003, p. 125. (from NAPSA and a presentation October 2, 2019)
- 10 DeHart, Dana, Collaboration Between Victim Services and Faith Organizations: Benefits, Challenges and Recommendations; *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work*, November 2010
- 11 ETP, Inc, “The Faith-Community Victim-Services Support Project: A Concept Paper,” Submitted to Office for Victims of Crime, December 2001.
- 12 MCVRC Communication Reporting Survey results to John Gillis, OVC Director, January 2002.