What Law Enforcement Students Need to Know About Elder Abuse

As a law enforcement officer encountering older adults on patrol, while responding to radio calls, conducting welfare checks, and investigating potential crimes, you are in a unique position to identify, intervene, and respond in cases of elder abuse.

What is Elder Abuse?

Elder abuse is defined by state statute. In general, it is an intentional act or failure to act that causes or creates a risk of harm to an older adult. Types of elder mistreatment include physical, sexual, emotional/psychological, or financial abuse, and neglect. Multiple forms of mistreatment can co-occur.

What Does Elder Abuse Look Like?

Elder abuse can present in many ways. Examples include an adult son who beats his older parent or threatens a parent with harm; a spouse who neglects their partner who has advanced dementia and leaves the partner lying in their own waste for days, without care; an agent under power of attorney who steals an older person's retirement funds; and a direct care worker who sexually assaults an older adult in a residential care facility.

Did You Know?

1 in 10 community-dwelling older adults experiences abuse every year.

1 in 3 older adults with cognitive impairment experiences abuse.

Only **1 in 24** cases of elder abuse is reported.

Elder abuse has significant **medical, mental health, financial, and social impacts**.

Elder abuse occurs across all **cultures, contexts, and communities**.

Older adults who are abused have a **3x higher risk of death** compared to those who have not been mistreated.

Why is Elder Abuse Important to You?

Elder abuse is a crime. It often impacts older people who are vulnerable, isolated, and unable to report harms. Whether abuse occurs in a community or residential care setting, it is frequently hidden. Most offenders are family members or caregivers, which promotes secrecy, perpetuates victim nondisclosure, and results in continuing harms.

Older victims are reluctant to report crimes. They may fear retaliation, be dependent on the abuser, fear being alone and lonely, too embarrassed to divulge abuse, unwilling to report family offenders, and/or unaware that remedies and resources are available.

You can intervene, help facilitate safety, and ensure justice for older victims.

Mandated Reporting

In many jurisdictions, law enforcement officers are legally required to report known or suspected abuse of older adults. Failure to report abuse can result in a criminal charge against an officer.

Indicators and Impacts of Elder Abuse

Understand the signs of abuse. Since individuals experience harm in different ways, look for these red flags:

Physical

- Malnutrition, dehydration, or unexplained weight loss
- Sudden mental health status changes unrelated to advancing dementia
- Uncontrolled pain despite pharmacological treatment
- Uncontrolled conditions such as hypertension, heart failure, asthma, or diabetes
- Inadequately explained bruises, lacerations, abrasions, fractures, or pressure ulcers

Psychological/Emotional

- Unusual changes in behavior or sleep
- Increased fear or anxiety
- Isolation from friends or family, or withdrawal from normal activities

Sexual

- Bruising on body, particularly in the genital area and buttocks, breasts, inner thighs
- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Fear of caregiver or others in the vicinity
- Genital or anal bleeding
- Torn or bloody undergarments

Financial

- Stealing an older person's money
- Unpaid bills
- Fraudulent signatures on financial documents
- Coercing or deceiving an older person into signing any document such as a contract or will
- Unusual or sudden changes in spending patterns, will, or other financial documents
- Improper use of conservatorship, guardianship, or power of attorney

Neglect

- Malnutrition, dehydration, or unexplained weight loss
- Lack of medical aids or assistive devices
- An unsupervised person with dementia
- Untreated bedsores or other medical problems
- Unsanitary or unsafe household conditions
- A housing eviction notice for unpaid rent

Contextual Signs: If an older adult is accompanied by a caregiver, observe whether the older person is uncomfortale in their presense, or whether the caregiver appears to be disengaged and inattentive, or hovering, frustrated, and angry. These signs may indicate that the older adult is at risk of, or experiencing, abuse.

Risk Factors

Know the risk factors that can increase exposure to abuse. Early detection can mitigate injury and facilitate offender accountability.

Vulnerable older adult

- Medical or mental health conditions and/or cognitive impairments
- Frailty and/or functional deficits
- Social isolation
- Stress and poor coping mechanisms

Alleged Offender

- Economic and/or emotional dependency
- Substance abuse
- Stress and poor coping mechanisms

Context

- Lack of social support, connectedness, or access to community resources
- Cultural norms
- Quality of relationship

Ageism and Misconceptions

Ageism can influence how abuse is perceived and addressed. Misperceptions regarding older adult abilities and capacities can adversely impact older adults and compromise an investigation. Don't assume ability or acuity because of age, disease, or diagnosis alone. Older people can be accurate reporters and credible witnesses, notwithstanding the potential presence of a health condition. Dismissing their concerns may lead to underreporting, deter intervention, and contribute to proliferation of harms. Avoid misconceptions in your case observations, questions, interviews, investigations, and documentation.

Your Role

- Investigate cases and collect evidence
- Interview victims, witnesses, and alleged perpetrators
- Coordinate with Adult Protective Services and seek guidance from prosecutors
- Arrest the subject
- Consult with experts serving on a multidisciplinary team such as geriatricians, psychologists, ombudsmen, financial institutions, and forensic accountants
- Connect older victims to service advocates, community liaisons, or needed resources

Steps You Can Take

- **Learn** how to identify, document, report, and respond to elder abuse
- Use **EAGLE** tools to investigate cases of elder abuse
- Understand your **state's laws on elder abuse**
- Apply person-centered, trauma-informed **interviewing** techniques
- Seek the expertise of your local **multidisciplinary team**
- Participate in community awareness events, like **World Elder Abuse Awareness Day** (WEAAD), June 15th.

Protect and serve older adults in your community.
You can make a difference.

Keck School of Medicine of USC
EAGLE Elder Abuse Guide for Law Enforcement
NCEA National Center on Elder Abuse
Department of Justice Elder Justice Initiative

This project was supported by a contract awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Elder Justice Initiative.