
Fact Sheet

NATIONAL CENTER ON ELDER ABUSE

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.

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"Population-based surveys of elder mistreatment occurrence are feasible and should be given a high priority."

— National Research Council to Review Risk and Prevalence of Elder Abuse and Neglect, 2003

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Incidence

- 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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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.

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