

Summarising the evidence

# ELDER ABUSE

Research summary



Australian Government  

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Australian Institute of  
Family Studies



# Violence perpetrated against older people by another family member or carer

This research summary draws on an evidence review undertaken by Emily Stevens, Rae Kaspiew and Rachel Carson (Australian Institute of Family Studies) in 2022 as part of the *Summarising the evidence* project. The summary was developed by Respect Victoria in consultation with the evidence review authors.

Visit the [Summarising the evidence project page](#) for the accompanying context brief, as well as information about the scope and aims of the project.

Respect Victoria gratefully acknowledges the work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies and all authors in conducting this work.

Domain	Summary of research
<b>Definition</b>	The National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study (NEAPS) <sup>1</sup> defines elder abuse as involving 'a single or repeated act or failure to act, including threats, that results in harm or distress to an older person. This occurs where there is an expectation of trust and/or where there is a power imbalance between the party responsible and the older person'. <sup>1(p.17)</sup>
<b>Behaviours</b>	Elder abuse is commonly identified as involving five abuse subtypes including physical, psychological and financial abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. Abuse relating to language and culture was included in the sub study of multicultural communities in the NEAPS. <sup>1</sup>
<b>Prevalence</b>	<p>Overall, the prevalence of elder abuse in Australia is 14.8%. Prevalence of different subtypes of elder abuse, from highest to lowest is psychological abuse (11.7%), neglect (2.9%), financial abuse (2.1%), physical abuse (1.8%) and sexual abuse (1%). 3.5 per cent of survey participants in the Survey of Older People within the NEAPS reported experiencing multiple types of abuse.<sup>1(p.2)</sup> Among the culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)<sup>1</sup> subsample within the NEAPS, overall prevalence of the five violence subtypes was 14%.<sup>1(p.149)</sup> The distribution of subtypes was similar to the non-CALD sample, showing the following patterns: psychological abuse (11.9%), neglect (2.6%), financial abuse (1.6%), physical abuse (1.6%) and sexual abuse (1%).<sup>1(p.150)</sup> The additional construct of abuse relating to language and culture was measured among this population. The prevalence of this type of abuse was 4%, taking overall prevalence to 15.3%.<sup>1(p.2)</sup></p> <p>It should be noted that financial abuse related to family violence also impacts significantly on Aboriginal and Torres Strait older people disproportionately. The nature and strength of kinship structures and cultural values related to reciprocity make this a complex area to address.<sup>2</sup> It is also an area that is under researched, so the extent of this abuse is still to be reliably quantified.<sup>3-5</sup></p>
<b>Victim survivor and perpetrator profile</b>	<p>Data from the NEAPS indicates that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The overall prevalence of elder abuse perpetrated against older women and men are similar (15.9% women; 13.6% men)</li> <li>• 18% of elder abuse is perpetrated by adult children: especially in relation to financial abuse: 33%, psychological abuse: 18%, and physical violence: 17%</li> <li>• 12% of elder abuse is perpetrated by friends especially for sexual abuse: 42%</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> The NEAPS uses the term CALD to refer specifically to survey participants who reported speaking a language other than English at home.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10% of elder abuse is perpetrated by spouses, especially for neglect: 25% and physical abuse: 11.6%</li> <li>• 9% of elder abuse is perpetrated by and acquaintances, especially for sexual abuse: 13%.<sup>1(p.71)</sup></li> </ul> <p>The NEAPS data also indicates that there are gendered patterns to elder abuse:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Men are more likely to commit elder abuse than women (55% cf. 45%)’ especially financial abuse (65% cf. 35%), physical abuse (77%, cf. 24%) and sexual abuse (79% cf. 21%).<sup>1(p.72)</sup></li> <li>• Women more commonly report experiencing physical abuse, neglect and, to a lesser extent, psychological abuse by their male partners compared to reports from men in relation to their female partners. The higher rate of reports of women experiencing physical abuse by a male partner, as compared to men’s reports of physical abuse by their partner, was statistically significant.</li> <li>• 100% of reports of older people experiencing sexual abuse by their spouse were made by women.<sup>1(p.72-73)</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Settings</b>	<p>Data included in the evidence review focused on elder abuse perpetrated against older people living in the community. As indicated below, further research is required into violence perpetrated against older people residing in aged care settings before an accurate picture of the prevalence, dynamics and drivers of elder abuse occurring within these settings can be established.</p>
<b>Researchers’ indication of the drivers and reinforcing factors</b>	<p>It should be noted that a) ‘risk factors’ is a term more commonly used than ‘drivers’ and ‘reinforcing factors’ in research relating to elder abuse and b) that the term ‘elder abuse’ encapsulates a broad range of different subtypes of violence, all of which involve varying perpetrators and their relationship to the victim. Having said this, a range of risk factors that underpin elder abuse have been identified. Risk factors for perpetration include the perpetrator being male, having mental or physical ill-health, misusing substances, having financial problems, being unemployed or having a sense of entitlement.<sup>1</sup></p> <p>Risk factors for victimisation include the victim being a woman (for some subtypes), being divorced or never married, having a higher level of education, having stepchildren, living in a disadvantaged area, renting or paying off a home and experiencing social isolation, mental and physical ill-health or having a disability.<sup>1, 6-10</sup> This association between elder abuse and having a higher level of education suggests that older people with a higher level of education were more likely to identify abusive behaviours.</p> <p>Other risk factors highlighted include victim dependence on perpetrator and previous experience of abuse, family violence and trauma.<sup>11</sup></p> <p>Forms of structural and systemic discrimination and inequality identified in the literature include ageism, gender stereotypes, sexism and gender roles and racism in the culturally and linguistically diverse community.<sup>1,7</sup></p>

In relation to intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual assault perpetrated against older women it is likely that what are described as the gendered drivers of violence are also relevant to these forms of elder abuse.

## References

1. Qu L, Kaspiew R, Carson R, Roopani D, De Maio J, Harvey J, Horsfall B. National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final Report. Melbourne: AIFS; 2021.
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4. Cripps K, Habibis D. Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous individuals and families. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited; 2019.
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7. Gillbard A, Leggatt-Cook C. Elder abuse statistics in Queensland: year in review 2020–21. Queensland: Elder Abuse Prevention Unit, UnitingCare; 2021.
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11. Blundell B, Clare M. Elder abuse in culturally and linguistically diverse communities: developing best practice. *Advocare*: 2012.

# Further reading

All resources from Summarising the evidence can be found on the [project page](#).

## Research summaries

- Adolescent violence in the home (E Campbell & L Wall)
- Child maltreatment: a snapshot summary (D Higgins & G Hunt)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated against women by men (Respect Victoria)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated by women against men (M Salter & D Woodlock)
- Online violence and harassment perpetrated against women (B Harris)
- Non partner sexual violence (A Quadara)
- Sexual harassment occurring in the world of work (S Charlesworth & C Deen)
- Violence perpetrated against older people by another family member or carer (E Stevens, R Kaspiew & R Carson)

## Context briefs

- Summarising the evidence: Exploring what we know about drivers of violence against women, family violence and other forms of gendered violence - Project overview
- Summarising the evidence: Adolescent violence in the home
- Summarising the evidence: Child maltreatment
- Summarising the evidence: Elder abuse
- Summarising the evidence: Online harassment and abuse against women
- Summarising the evidence: Women's intimate partner violence against men
- Summarising the evidence: Work-related sexual harassment

## Suggested citation:

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## Acknowledgement of Country

Respect Victoria acknowledges Aboriginal peoples throughout Victoria as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways on which we rely. We proudly acknowledge the Aboriginal communities throughout Victoria and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living culture.

We acknowledge the significant and ongoing impacts of colonisation and commit to working alongside Aboriginal communities to effect change. We recognise the ongoing leadership role of Aboriginal communities in addressing and preventing family violence and violence against women, and will continue to work in collaboration with First Peoples to eliminate these forms of violence from all communities.

## Victim survivor acknowledgement

Respect Victoria acknowledges the significant impact of family violence and violence against women on individuals, families and communities, and the strength and resilience of the children, young people and adults who have, and are still, experiencing this violence. We pay our respects to those who did not survive, and to their loved ones.



Respect Victoria is the state's dedicated organisation for the prevention of family violence and violence against women. Our vision is a Victorian community where all people are safe, equal and respected, and live free from family violence and violence against women.

To achieve our vision, we lead and support evidence-informed primary prevention and act as a catalyst for transformational social change. Primary prevention aims to stop violence from occurring in the first place, by changing the culture that drives it. We drive coordination and effectiveness of the prevention system. We build and promote primary prevention knowledge and evidence. We keep prevention on the public and policy agenda. We guide prevention wherever Victorians live, work, learn and play. We raise awareness that violence against women is preventable and influence community conversations to fuel social change.

We are an independent voice, with functions, powers and duties enshrined in legislation.