



Elderly Survivors of Sexual Violence

Abuse of the Elderly

In 2016, 15.2% of the U.S. population was 65 years of age or older.¹ The number of elderly individuals living in the U.S. continues to climb. It is projected that by 2050, the population of individuals aged 65 and over will have doubled from 2012 Census data, and the population of individuals 85 and over will have tripled.² Prevalence of sexual assault suffered by elderly individuals is difficult to determine, based on many factors including lack of comprehensive research about sexual violence and the elderly specifically, varying definitions of what constitutes elder abuse, and the inability or unwillingness of elderly survivors to disclose sexual victimization in surveys and related research.

A sampling of data:³

- As many as 1 in 10 Americans aged 60 and older have experienced some form of abuse
- It is estimated that only 7% of incidents of elder abuse are reported to authorities
- Nearly 50% of people with dementia experience some form of abuse, with the majority of that abuse perpetrated by caregivers
- Almost 60% of all elder abuse is perpetrated by a family member, two-thirds by an adult child or spouse
- When evaluated by Adult Protective Services, a known relationship between the victim and offender resulted in less investigation, less physical examination, and less referral to the prosecutor's office

Compared with younger women, older women reported lower lifetime rates of physical and sexual assaults in the National Crime Victimization Survey. One analysis of research found that "these lower rates may be due in part to reporting differences. Older women appear to delay disclosing traumatic histories to their psychotherapists. More specifically, although no older woman disclosed a trauma history at the time of outpatient admission to a mental health center, about 85% disclosed histories of childhood abuse, domestic violence in their marriages, or both during the course of psychotherapy."⁴

Reporting Sexual Assault

Reasons elderly individuals may not report sexual assault or abuse include:

- Threats from or fear of the perpetrator
- If the perpetrator is a caregiver, the survivor may fear loss of care that they depend on
- Feelings of shame, self-blame, or embarrassment
- Fear of not being believed by authorities or family/peers
- Fear of loss of independence if they report

¹ United States Census Bureau. United States QuickFacts, U.S. population estimates for July 1, 2016. Retrieved from:

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045216>

² National Center on Elder Abuse. "Research: Statistics/Data" webpage; retrieved from:

<https://ncea.acl.gov/whatwedo/research/statistics.html>

³ National Council on Aging. "Elder Abuse Facts" webpage; retrieved from: <https://www.ncoa.org/public-policy-action/elder-justice/elder-abuse-facts/>

⁴ Cook, J. et al. (2011). "Older Women Survivors of Physical and Sexual Violence: a Systematic Review of Quantitative Literature." Journal of Women's Health, 20(7), 1075-1081. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3130511/>

- Feelings of physical and/or social isolation, or lack of support
- Generational beliefs and/or cultural expectations to keep quiet about sexual assault/abuse
- Confusion about the assault/abuse, if cognitive impairment is present
- Inability to report if significant physical or cognitive impairment is present
- Not knowing who to contact to report an assault or to receive support

Risk Factors for Sexual Assault of the Elderly

Due to widespread adherence to rape myths, it is not commonly recognized that elderly individuals (including men, women, and transgender individuals) can be and are sexually assaulted. Sexual assault is a crime of power and control where perpetrators exploit vulnerabilities. Each elder adult has their own unique risk and protective factors; however, generally perpetrators know and often exploit the barriers to reporting listed above. It is also important to note that elderly individuals are sometimes assaulted by their peers, particularly in institutional settings such as nursing homes.

Impact of Elder Abuse

Elderly survivors of physical or sexual abuse are more likely than younger survivors to sustain physical injury, including bruising, abrasions, lacerations, broken bones, and genital injury. As a part of the normal aging process, the elderly are more easily injured from abuse and injuries take longer to heal. The effects of past and recent sexual assault on the physical and emotional health of elderly survivors is significant. Elderly individuals who experience any degree of abuse involving physical contact have a 300% higher risk for death. One study found that older women who had been sexually assaulted had higher rates of arthritis and breast cancer than those who had not experienced sexual assault. Older women who had experienced multiple incidents of sexual assault had a two to three-fold risk for developing these diseases.⁵ Another study found that women who had experienced some type of abuse since turning 55 were significantly more likely to report health conditions, including bone or joint problems, digestive problems, depression or anxiety, chronic pain, and high blood pressure or heart problems.⁶

Responding to Elderly Survivors of Sexual Assault

As with all survivors of sexual assault, elderly survivors are individuals with their own identities, beliefs, perspectives, and experiences. When working with elderly survivors, rape crisis advocates should:

- Speak directly *to* the survivor, not *about them* to another person. This is especially important if the survivor has a physical or cognitive disability. To every extent possible, allow the survivor to speak directly and make decisions on their own behalf.
- If a guardian, family member, or caregiver is with the survivor, obtain consent from the survivor (if possible) prior to discussing anything with the other person regarding the assault. It's important to maintain confidentiality at all times.
- Non-offending friends or family members who are with the survivor likely also need support. If possible, speak with them separately to discuss their feelings, assess their needs, and strategize on the best ways to support the survivor going forward.
- Know the mandatory reporting laws regarding elder abuse and your obligations as an advocate, and communicate this to the survivor. Loss of independence is a significant fear for many elderly survivors. It's important to balance the survivor's safety with their desire to remain as independent as possible.

⁵ Stein, MB & Barrett-Conner, E (2000). "Sexual assault and physical health: findings from a population-based study of older adults." *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 62(6): 838-43. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11139004/>

⁶ Fisher, BS & Regan, SL (2006). "The extent and frequency of abuse in the lives of older women and their relationship with health outcomes." *Gerontologist*, 46(2): 200-9. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16581884/>

- Respect the survivor’s generational beliefs about and responses to sexual violence. While it’s important that all survivors hear that the assault was not their fault, it is not helpful to challenge long-held cultural or generational beliefs about violence or gender roles when a person is in crisis.
- Ensure that the survivor has access to ongoing support services, including medical and emotional support.

Providing Outreach to the Elderly in Your Community

Given that elderly survivors are generally less likely to report their assault or to seek supportive services compared with younger survivors, it’s important that rape crisis centers make a concerted effort to reach this specific population.

Suggestions for providing outreach to the elderly in your community:

- Include the elderly in your messaging and outreach materials, including images that convey your accessibility to diverse elderly survivors. Consider developing a brochure and webpage specifically for elderly survivors, and consider writing an op-ed or blog post about preventing and responding to elder abuse.
- Consider offering services in your agency geared toward elderly survivors, such a support group specifically for this population.
- Form (or join) a task force or multidisciplinary committee/team in your community regarding effective responses to elder abuse victims.
- Research and develop collaborative relationships with all groups and organizations in your community that serve the elderly in any capacity; this might include senior citizens centers, a Meals on Wheels program, nursing homes, civic groups, adult learning programs, home health agencies, etc.
- Actively seek the perspectives and talents of elderly community members through board or staff positions, volunteer opportunities, advisory committees, speaker’s bureaus, etc.
- Devote time and resources to staff training and professional development that enhances organizational capacity and competency in serving elderly survivors.

Additional Resources

Ohio Coalition for Adult Protective Services: <http://www.ocapsohio.org/>

Ohio HOPES: <http://ohiohopes.org/>

Ohio Adult Protective Services fact sheet: https://ifs.ohio.gov/factsheets/aps_factsheet.pdf

Ohio Dept. of Public Safety Elder Abuse fact sheet: <http://www.publicsafety.ohio.gov/links/elder%20abuse.pdf>

Ohio Department of Aging: <http://aging.ohio.gov/home/>

Ohio Attorney General: <http://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Individuals-and-Families/Seniors/Elder-Abuse>

Ohio Ombudsman Programs: <https://aging.ohio.gov/services/ombudsman/>

Map of Areas on Aging in Ohio: <https://aging.ohio.gov/resources/areaagenciesonaging/>

National Center on Elder Abuse: <https://ncea.acl.gov/>

National Council on Aging: <https://www.ncoa.org/>

National Institute of Justice, Elder Abuse: <https://www.nij.gov/topics/crime/elder-abuse/Pages/welcome.aspx>

National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse: <http://www.preventelderabuse.org/>

National Sexual Violence Resource Center: <http://www.nsvrc.org/projects/lifespan/sexual-violence-against-adults-later-life>

Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence: / 216-658-1381 / 888-886-8388 / info@oaesv.org / www.oaesv.org

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