



## Elder Abuse Prevention Unit

# The EAPU Helpline: Results of an investigation of five years of call data

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Ceallaigh Spike  
– Project Officer – Research & Systems

Elder Abuse Prevention Unit,  
UnitingCare Community



Elder Abuse Prevention Unit

The Elder Abuse Prevention Unit (EAPU) operates an elder abuse Helpline that services the state of Queensland in Australia. Queensland is Australia's second largest state of approximately 1.7 million square kilometres which is more than three times the size of Thailand or seven times the size of Great Britain but has a relatively sparse population of 4.6 million people with 960,000 people aged over sixty; more than half the population live outside Brisbane, the capital city<sup>1</sup>. The EAPU receives funding from the state government's Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, and is a program of UnitingCare Community, a not-for-profit organisation. The EAPU undertakes education and awareness raising activities across Queensland as well as the Elder Abuse Helpline telephone service. The helpline provides information, referral and support services for elder abuse victims, their family and friends as well as aged care and health workers, police and emergency services across Queensland. It is a confidential service and callers may remain anonymous, it does not provide face-to-face services nor does it have authority to investigate allegations of abuse. The EAPU is one of two services funded by the Queensland Government specifically to address elder abuse in Queensland and it works alongside Seniors Legal and Support Services (SLASS). These services provide face-to-face case management via legal and social work support. The victim themselves must have the decision making capacity to be able to instruct the SLASS service and telephone support is provided to victims living outside their geographical catchment area.

The option for Helpline callers to remain anonymous is important, as it allows people who are unsure of what they are experiencing or witnessing to access information and support without fear of interventions occurring without their consent. Calls to the helpline are often long and detailed and provides the opportunity for the EAPU to collect large quantities of non-identifying data about elder abuse situations. It is not possible for us to verify the extent to which the information collected over the course of a call is an accurate reflection of the abuse occurring because over 70% of callers are not the victim and witness accounts will likely contain errors associated with the callers perceptions and understanding of an abuse situation. For example, it is likely that medication abuse is under-reported in Helpline data as it is unlikely that a witness could identify medication abuse unless the witness has a thorough knowledge of the medical

requirements of the victim and the potential impacts of prescribed medication and drug interactions on that individual.

Another important limitation to note is that not all abuse situations come through the Helpline. In Australia, abuse, neglect and exploitation occurring in most residential aged care facilities is under the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth Government, while privately funded facilities have no legislative obligation to report abuse as the Commonwealth Government has no jurisdiction and therefore cannot impose punitive measures. The EAPU analyses data collected on the Helpline annually and makes the results freely available on their website – [www.eapu.com.au](http://www.eapu.com.au). Although data is not collected using research methods and EAPU is limited to providing descriptive statistics, the unit has observed that results from the annual data analysis seem to show considerable consistency. This year, the EAPU has undertaken a review of five years, from 1 July 2010 to 30 June 2015, of Helpline data to investigate what has stayed the same, and what –if anything - has changed.

State-based statutory authorities exist to investigate and intervene in cases where an adult with impaired capacity is experiencing abuse, neglect or exploitation. It is also important to note that when serious physical abuse occurs, notifiers are more likely to contact the police or hospital system rather than calling a helpline. Despite these limitations, the data collected on the EAPU's Elder Abuse Helpline is the longest running, largest and most comprehensive data set relating to elder abuse in Australia. For UnitingCare Community the EAPU data provides an important role in advocating for our clients, informing campaigns to raising community awareness and influencing government decision making. As a result, elder abuse is gaining foothold as an issue on the Queensland Government agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> Queensland government website [www.qld.gov.au](http://www.qld.gov.au) "About Queensland-statistics and facts", accessed October 2105 and Australia Bureau of Statistics data set 3101.0 - Australian Demographic Statistics, Jun 2014.



## Age & Gender

Age is a reasonably reliable statistic for victims of elder abuse. Most callers to the Helpline are the victim, a close relative or are involved with the victim in a health care capacity and usually disclose the age of the victim unprompted. However, unprompted disclosure of perpetrator age is much less frequent and callers are less likely to know the age of the perpetrator. On average 42.95% (SD = 3.61%) of perpetrators ages were unknown for the five reviewed years, for victims this figure was much lower, with 13.45% (SD = 4.85%) of victim ages recorded as unknown.

The most common age group of victims for all five reporting years was 80-84 years. This group accounted for 23.10% of all victims where age was known (SD = 2.36%), followed by 75-79 years (16.24%, SD = 1.02%) and 85-89 years (15.49%, SD 1.80%). For perpetrators, the most common age group for all five reporting years was 50-54 years, accounting for 16.64% (SD = 2.27%) of all perpetrators where age was known, followed by 45-49 years (12.15%, SD=1.20%) and 40-44 years (11.52%, SD = 1.60%).

For each of the five years of data reviewed, less than 1% of victim gender was recorded as unknown. Overall, the gender ratio is close to 70:30, female to male; the mean proportion of females was 68.42% (SD=0.06%) and for males it was 30.82% (SD= 1.42%) (see figure 1). Although females represent a large majority of victims, it should be noted that the number of males per female decreases with age in Queensland and Australia. The largest age group of victims recorded on the Helpline is 80-84 years of age, and 2014 Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicates that in Queensland there are 0.79 males for every female in the 80-84 year age group<sup>2</sup>.

For the second largest group, 74-79 years, there were 0.93 males for every female; and for the third largest group, 85-89 years there were 0.63 males for every female (see figure 2). In this context it appears that Elder Abuse in Queensland, although affecting more women, is not a gendered issue to the same extent as spousal abuse.

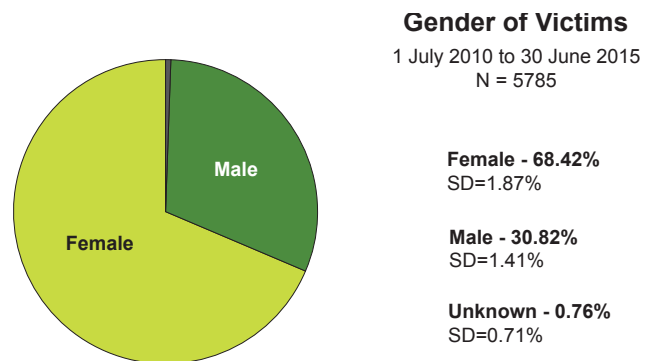


Figure 1. Gender of victims reported to the Helpline for the period 1 July 2010 to 30 June 2015, N = 5785



Figure 2. Number for males per female, data derived from Australian Bureau of statistics data set 3101.0 - Australian Demographic Statistics, Jun 2014

Across all categories EAPU data is generally less complete for perpetrators and approximately 5.00% (SD= 1.50%) of perpetrator gender is recorded as unknown (see figure 3 for combined data). Gender of perpetrators is not quite 50:50 male to female, with males accounting for 5.86% (SD=3.24%) more than females on average, though this figure varied by 6.87 percentage points over the review period. Again, the close ratio suggests that in Queensland elder abuse is not a gendered issue.

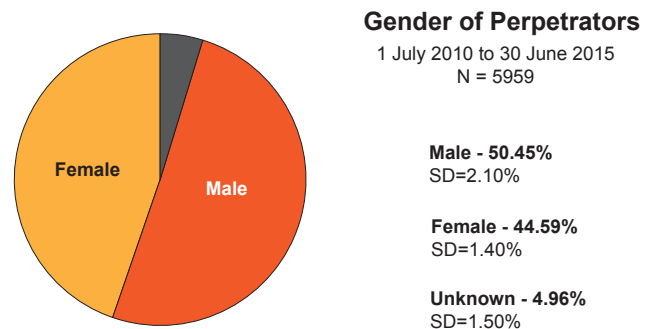


Figure 3. Gender of perpetrators reported to the Helpline for the period 1 July 2010 to 30 June 2015, N = 5959

## Relationships

Over the five-year period of review, there has been little change in the major perpetrator groups. Sons are consistently reported as the largest group of perpetrators, closely followed by daughters. The mean difference between these two groups is only 2.68% (SD=2.73%). There is a large gap between the first and second largest perpetrator groups and the third and fourth largest perpetrator groups. The third largest perpetrator group was 'other relatives' which includes nieces, nephews, grandchildren, and siblings, accounting for 9.89% (SD=0.96%). Smaller by less than 1%, spouse/partners were the fourth largest group, accounting for 9.05% (SD=0.30%) of perpetrators in abuse cases (see figure 4 for combined data). The remaining perpetrator groups were numerous and small, not identifiably consistent, and were not displaying indication of trends.

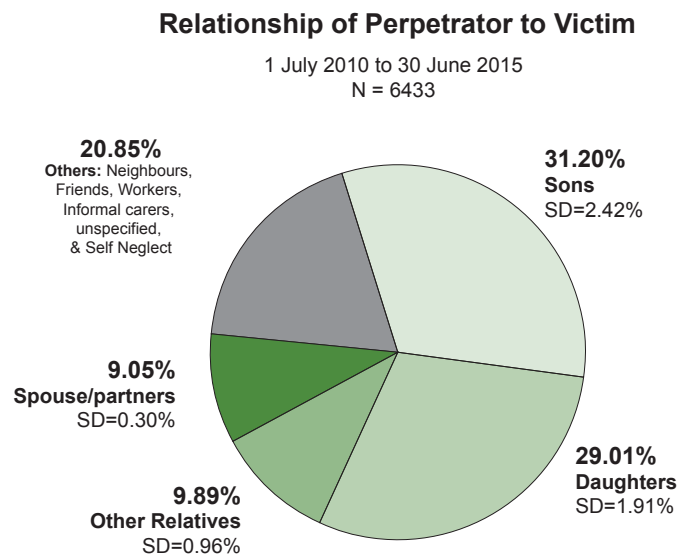


Figure 4. relationships between perpetrators and victims in cases reported to the Helpline for the period 1 July 2010 to 30 June 2015, N = 6433



## Abuse Types

Although the EAPU recognises the definition of abuse contained in the Toronto Declaration the EAPU and most Australian states include a sixth abuse type of Social abuse; referring to the behaviour of isolating or restricting the victim's access of to family/friends or activities they enjoy. Data is collected for the following elder abuse categories:

- Physical
- Sexual
- Psychological
- Financial
- Social
- Neglect

Although primary abuse types are very useful, providing a single measure of the main issue, the combination of primary and secondary abuse types provides a full picture of what occurs in elder abuse situations. Secondary abuse types are only available to record in abuses cases where the relationship is categorised as one where there is an expectation of trust – family friends, informal carers, and spouse/partners. Others such as strangers, workers and neighbours are not included this category.

Analysis of data from the five-year review period showed that financial abuse had overtaken psychological abuse as the primary abuse type and accounted for the highest proportion of calls to the Helpline. When examining the combined abuse types however, it is clear that psychological abuse had not

declined, psychological abuse has remained relatively stable while financial abuse has been increasing in the past two years and has 'caught up' with psychological abuse. Both psychological and financial abuse are now reported in just over 65% of instances of elder abuse (see figure 5).

The EAPU data indicates that one possible explanation for this increase in reported financial abuse to the Helpline is the effect of a Queensland Government statewide awareness campaign undertaken by the Department of Communities. The campaign promotes the EAPU Helpline number and works to raise awareness of elder abuse with posters, and wallet cards distributed widely and displayed in libraries, Doctor's surgeries, and a variety of community agencies, government offices and through the use of public convenience advertising. The choice of imagery in the campaign is informed by EAPU data and consequently financial abuse has been emphasised (see figure 6). The Department first undertook the elder abuse awareness campaign in 2011, and this has certainly contributed significantly to the ongoing increase in calls to the Helpline (see figure 7). However, the campaign equally emphasises psychological abuse but we have not seen a similar increase in the proportion of Helpline calls reporting psychological abuse. It is possible that the increase in psychological abuse reported to the Helpline is indicative of some increase in the prevalence of this type of abuse but we are not able to conclude this from the data collected by the EAPU.

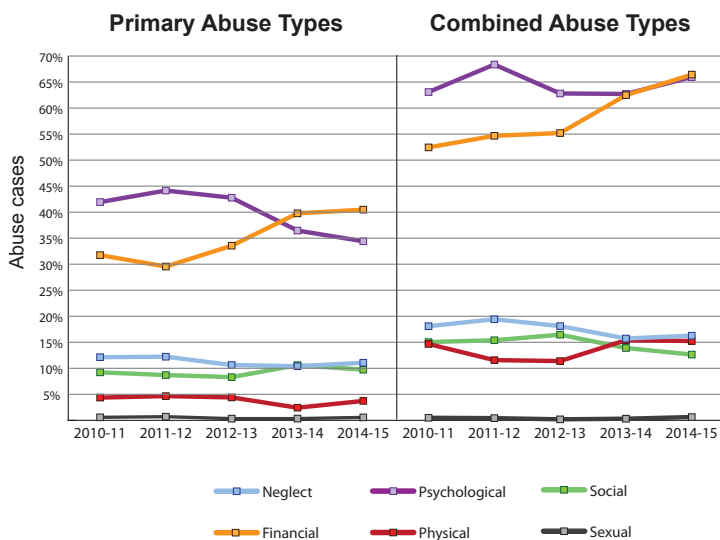


Figure 5. Proportion of abuse type as a) primary abuse type recorded for cases where there is a relationship of trust N = 5409, and 2) proportion of all cases where there is a relationship of trust in which abuse type is recorded, n= 9028.



Figure 6. – Campaign material produced by the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services

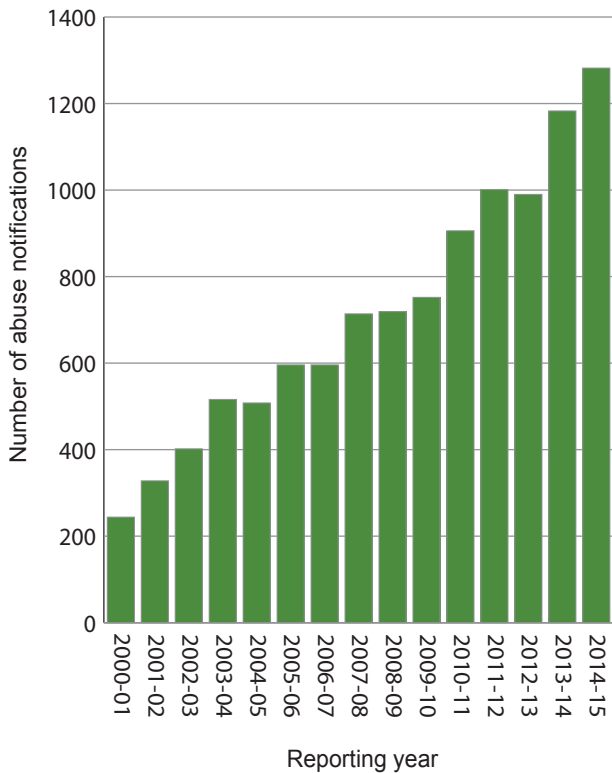


Figure 7. – Annual abuse notifications to the helpline for the period 1 July 2000 to 30 June 2015



## Patterns of abuse types

In recent years EAPU has occasionally been able to examine abuse type alongside perpetrator and victim characteristics. A number of patterns have been found and the present investigation sought to identify if these patterns were present in the four years' of data collected from 2010/11 to 2013/14 as well as the most recent data set for 2014/15. In particular, the type of abuse present in an abuse case varies depending on the cognitive capacity of the victim, and it also varies on the relationship between victim and perpetrator.

### Dementia and primary abuse type

Helpline workers have observed since the service began that the motive attributed by callers to perpetrators of elder abuse is often financial or lifestyle gain. Psychological abuse is omnipresent, but is used in aid of extracting money, resources or favour from the victim. The examination of abuse types and victim cognitive impairment appears to support this observation; financial abuse is reported as a primary abuse type at an equal rate, but a primary abuse type of psychological abuse is reduced by around half for victims who are confirmed or suspected to have dementia (see figure 8). A further observation we have made is that where financial motives are driving psychological abuse, once a victim has lost the capacity to manage their finances, psychological abuse becomes either: ineffectual as the victim no longer has the ability to direct their funds; or unnecessary because the perpetrator already has full access to the victims assets.

Other explanations we have considered are that victims who have dementia are more likely to be dependent on others and this increases the opportunity for neglect to be present in the abuse situation, thus reducing the proportion of financial abuse within the primary abuse types. A significant proportion of the population of older people with dementia are also more likely to be residing in residential care rather than the community and psychological abuse may become more difficult to

perpetrate in an environment where there is a constant presence of workers and other residents. Also when abuse occurs in Australia's highly regulated residential aged care setting it will follow a specific pathway for notifications and responses which do not come through the Helpline. Even though other explanations for the data exist and certainly contribute to the result, Helpline experience indicates that the financial motives of elder abuse perpetrators are a significant contributor to the differences in abuse patterns for impaired and non-impaired victims.

### Abuse type and perpetrator relationship.

Owing to low numbers in the less frequent relationship categories such as neighbours and workers, these groups were not compared. For the top largest groups – sons, daughters, other family, and spouse/partners only three showed strong patterns that were maintained over the five reporting years. Sons and daughters showed very similar patterns of elder abuse, but it should be noted that over the period daughter perpetrated abuse patterns have become more and more like son perpetrated abuse patterns, and both groups have seen an increase in financial abuse and reduction in psychological abuse recorded as a primary abuse type (see table 1).



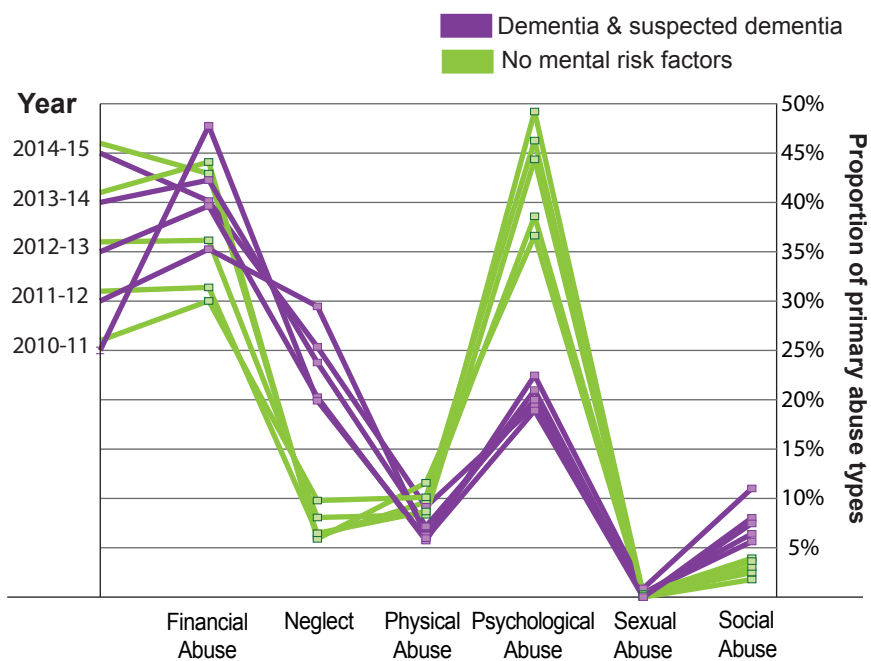
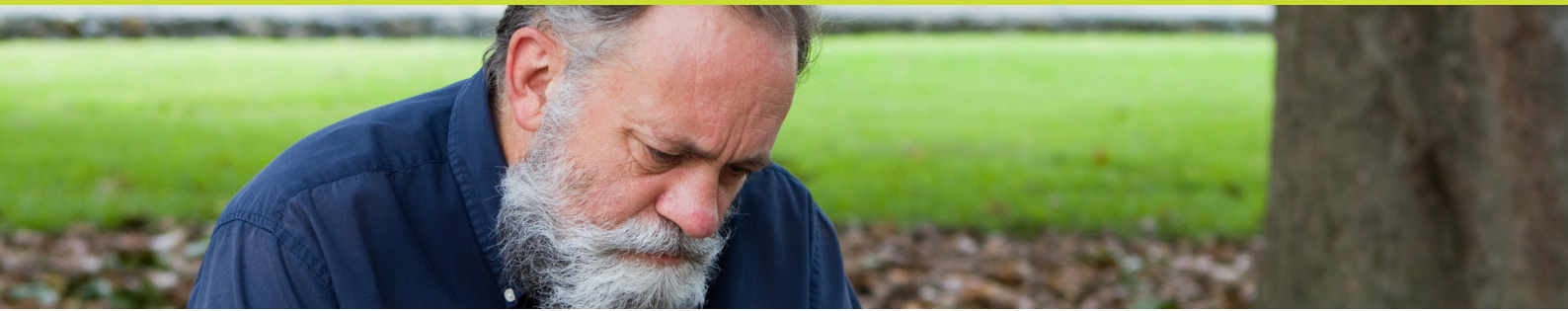


Figure 8. Annual proportion of primary abuse records accounted for by each primary abuse type for victims with confirmed or suspected dementia and for victims with no recorded psychological risk factor.

	Sons			Daughters		
	2010-11	2014-15	change	2010-11	2014-15	change
Financial	35.74%	45.11%	+9.37%	30.10%	43.30%	+13.20%
Psychological	37.46%	32.79%	-4.67%	46.37%	35.04%	-11.32%

Table 1. Change in primary abuse types financial and psychological over time for son and daughter perpetrator groups.



Remaining consistent over the five-year review period, were the proportions of primary abuse types recorded as social abuse, physical abuse and neglect. Social abuse accounted for a greater proportion of primary abuse type records in the daughter perpetrator group than the son perpetrator group (daughters, 4.51%, SD=1.76%, sons 3.13%, SD=0.69%), but the reverse is true for physical abuse (daughters, 5.99%, SD=1.32%; sons, 9.72%, SD=1.33%). The groups appear equally likely to perpetrate neglect (daughters, 11.22%, SD=1.19; sons, 9.99%, SD=1.30). Although there are slight differences between son and daughter perpetrator groups, and some changes over time, overall the patterns are similar. The abuse profile of spouse/partners on the other hand is, is starkly different. Spouse/partners principally perpetrate psychological abuse (40.99%, SD=4.82%), but also perpetrate substantial amounts of physical abuse (19.67%, SD= 4.27%) and neglect (19.30%, SD=1.29%), financial abuse is less than half that of adult children (15.20%, SD=1.95%) (see figure 9 for combined data, figure 10 for annual breakdown).

These results suggests to us that elder abuse and spousal abuse are different constructs, and that

although spousal abuse occurs in late adulthood, it is a different phenomena to elder abuse perpetrated by adult children. Adult children appear to be principally committing financial or psychological abuse, whereas spouse/partners appear to principally commit psychological abuse but physical abuse and neglect also feature heavily in their abuse.

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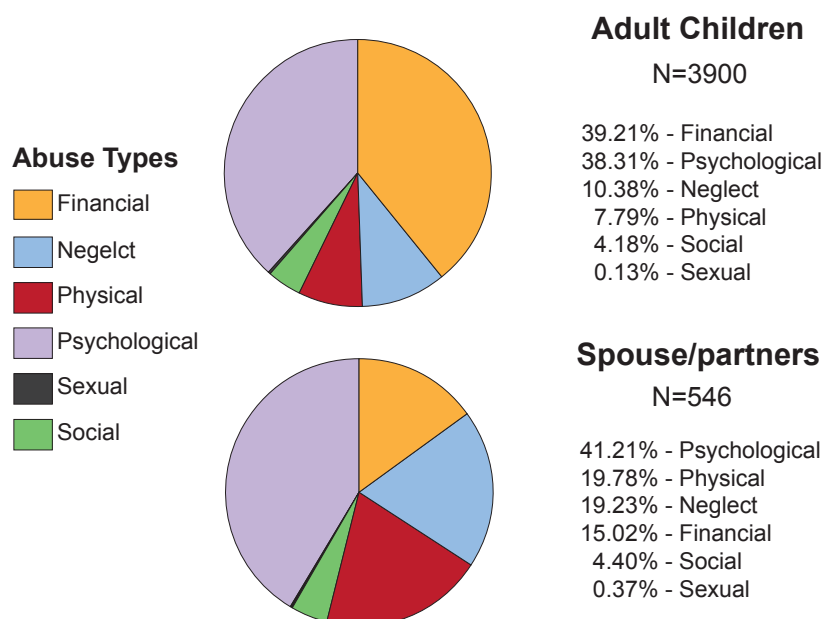


Figure 9. Abuse type accounting for proportion of primary abuse records for adult child and spouse/partner perpetrator groups, yearly data combined.

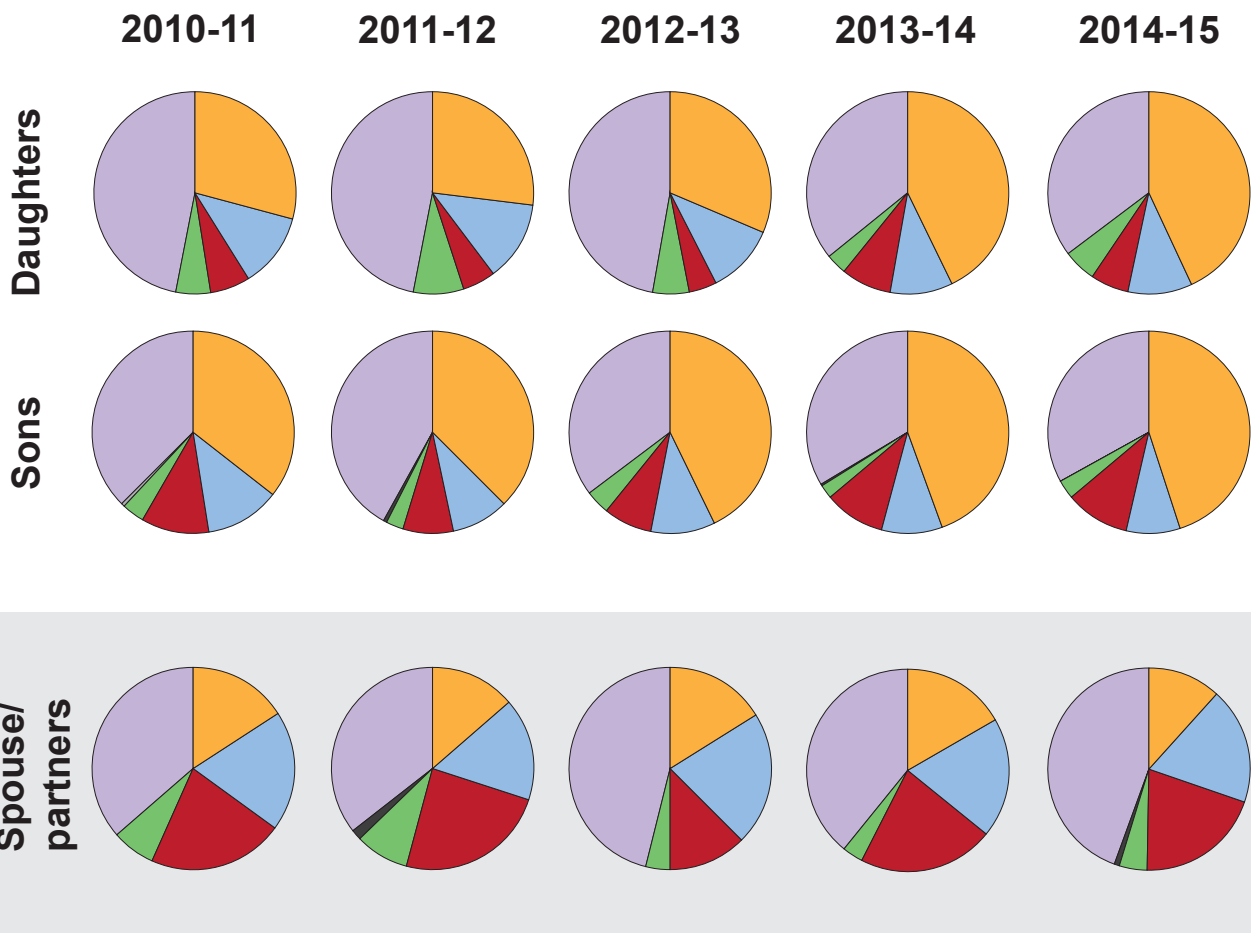


Figure 10. Abuse type accounting for proportion of primary abuse records for daughters, sons and spouse/partner perpetrator groups, by reporting year.



## Conclusion

Without a prevalence study in Australia, it is not possible to generalise these results to all elder abuse in Queensland. However, for a proportion of elder abuse in Queensland, in those cases where the community is aware and concerned about an older person, a number of patterns have been identified in the Helpline data collected by the EPAU:

- Most commonly, victims are 80 to 84 years of age.
- The majority of victims are female (70%). However, this is moderated by population statistics that show a marked decline in the proportion of males in older age groups.
- Most commonly, perpetrators are adult children, 50-54 years of age and they are just as likely to be male as female.
- Spousal abuse occurs in older age groups and has a different abuse profile in comparison to elder abuse perpetrated by adult children.
  - Spouse/partners perpetrate more psychological abuse, physical abuse, and neglect
  - Adult children perpetrate more financial abuse
- The most common types of elder abuse reported to the Helpline has historically been psychological abuse but now it is both psychological and financial abuse that is most commonly reported.
- Patterns of abuse differ for victims with no psychological risk factors and victims with confirmed or suspected dementia. Victims with confirmed or suspected dementia experience less psychological abuse.

In summary the UnitingCare Community EPAU Helpline data provides a valuable insight into elder abuse in Queensland and it is not only informing Queensland stakeholders but across Australia, researchers and decision makers use the data in their work to develop policy and structures to enable action to address issues and instances of elder abuse.



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