Elder Abuse Statistics in Queensland

COMPANION DOCUMENT

YEAR IN REVIEW 2022–23

Contents

Purpose of this Document

This document provides contextual information that will enhance understanding of the *Elder Abuse Statistics in Queensland: Year in Review* report (hereinafter referred to as the Elder Abuse Statistics report). This document briefly introduces the topic of elder abuse, the data collection, theoretical framework, and key terms that underpin the Elder Abuse Statistics report.

Introduction to Elder Abuse

What is Elder Abuse?

The World Health Organization (2002) defines elder abuse as "a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person."

Why is Elder Abuse an Important Issue?

A recent Australian prevalence study estimated that 14.8 per cent of people aged 65 years and older experienced elder abuse in the preceding 12 months (Qu et al., 2021). Based on population estimates (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023), 656,115 Australians aged 65 years and older are likely to have experienced elder abuse in 2022. Australia's ageing population means that this number could increase to 968,114 within 20 years if the prevalence remains consistent (Wilson & Temple, 2022).

The consequences of elder abuse can be serious. Poor health, cognitive deterioration, homelessness, and an increased risk of death are just some possible consequences for victims of elder abuse. Further, the impacts of elder abuse often extend beyond the person experiencing abuse. Family members, friends, neighbours, and whole communities can all be affected when elder abuse occurs.

Why Do We Need Data?

Globally, gaps in the knowledge base about elder abuse have consistently been reported. The World Health Organization (2022) has identified data as one of five priority areas in tackling the abuse of older people. The importance of research into elder abuse has also been recognised in Australia, with funding for a National Research Agenda begun in 2016 (Council of Attorneys-General, 2019).

The National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study has provided some insight into prevalence, victim and perpetrator characteristics, and help-seeking; however, the study identified that further research is required (Qu et al., 2021). Non-experimental research such as that undertaken by UnitingCare's Elder Abuse Prevention Unit (EAPU) can help increase awareness and understanding about elder abuse and its consequences.

About the Data

This section describes how the data is collected and analysed, and limitations of the data.

Elder Abuse Helpline

The data analysed in the Elder Abuse Statistics report is collected from calls made to the EAPU Helpline. The Helpline is a confidential service that offers specialised advice, including information, support, and referrals, for older people who are experiencing abuse and for anyone who witnesses or suspects the abuse of an older person. The EAPU Helpline and research work is funded by the Queensland Government Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services.

Types of Calls

The Helpline receives a diversity of calls, from those seeking general information about what the EAPU does to calls reporting serious abuse. When recording information collected during calls, the calls are separated into three categories:

1. **Enquiries.** Examples are requests for general information, requests for information or training sessions, and follow-up to calls made by EAPU. Calls where an abuse notification is received for a previously reported case (where known) are recorded as enquiry calls to reduce the likelihood of any one case unduly influencing the dataset.

2. **Abuse in close or intimate relationships.** Examples are calls reporting situations in which a family member, informal carer, or close friend is abusing an older person.

3. **Abuse in consumer and social relationships.** Examples are calls regarding complaints about aged care services, neighbourhood disputes, or scams that target or impact older people.

Data Collection

Helpline calls focus on providing support rather than collecting data. Consequently, callers are not asked questions to elicit information about the victim or perpetrator solely to improve data collection. Nevertheless, during a Helpline call, callers often disclose a wealth of information about victims, alleged perpetrators, and the relationship between them.

Helpline staff enter this non-identifiable information into PEARL (Prevention of Elder Abuse Record List), the EAPU's custom-built research database. The information forms the basis of the Elder Abuse Statistics report.

Data Handling

The EAPU collects anonymous data about all call types; however, only cases involving a victim who is aged 50 years or older are analysed.

Data are cleaned and analysed using Stata® (StataCorp LLC) statistical software.

Limitations of EAPU Data

Several limitations are associated with the data collected by the EAPU:

- Accuracy: Data are collected through voluntary disclosure by notifiers and may be subjective, incomplete, or inaccurate. Calls are not scripted; therefore, Helpline operators may not collect data for every variable. Thus, EAPU data likely under-represents the prevalence of factors and may lack the consistency provided by structured interviews or surveys.

- Sampling: Information collected depends on what notifiers report and may not reflect prevalence, patterns, and characteristics of elder abuse in the community.

- Other issues relate to operationalisation of the variables and the consistency of ratings among Helpline operators.[1] The report includes caveats where particular concerns exist with data.

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[1] Note. Monthly database meetings and the provision of definitions for data points are used to increase inter-rater reliability. However, some subjectivity may remain.
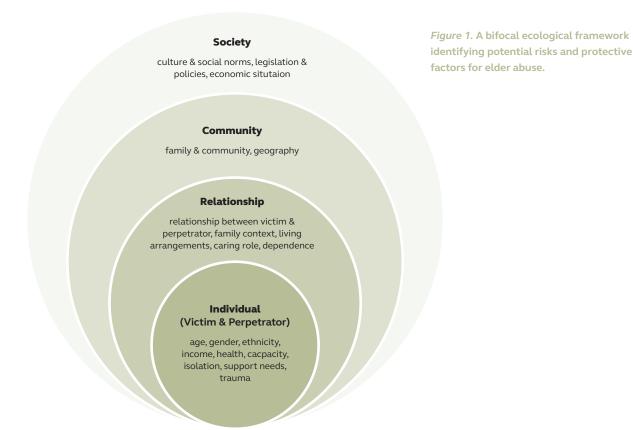
Theoretical Framework

The Ecological Model

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) positions the individual within four levels of environmental systems that interact to influence individual human development and life experience. The systems are conceptualised as dynamically influencing each other, often in bidirectional ways. Schiamberg and Gans (1999) used a bifocal approach to extend the ecological model through simultaneously focusing on both victim and perpetrator. The Elder Abuse Statistics report uses this bifocal ecological framework to situate the risk factors for elder abuse within four interconnected systems.

1. **Individual:** relates to the immediate settings in which the individual (victim or perpetrator) lives; this includes any individual factors that create vulnerabilities.

2. **Relationship:** relates to the relationship between the victim and perpetrator, including shared risk factors; for example, whether the victim and perpetrator live together, or any relevant intergenerational experiences such as a family history of domestic violence or child abuse.

3. **Community:** refers to the relationships or connections of the victim or perpetrator with other people in the community, including any other family or support systems (both formal and informal). Community factors also include factors such as living in a small community and the potential for dual relationships and subcultures.

4. **Society:** relates to the cultural context in which individuals live, including aspects such as cultural norms and ideologies, public policy, access to health care, economic inequality, and legislation.

The interaction between these individual, relationship, community, and societal factors increases the risk of elder abuse. Figure 1 graphically represents the framework used in the report.

Figure 1. **A bifocal ecological framework identifying potential risks and protective factors for elder abuse.**

Society
culture & social norms, legislation & policies, economic situtaion

Community
family & community, geography

Relationship
relationship between victim & perpetrator, family context, living arrangements, caring role, dependence

Individual
(Victim & Perpetrator)
age, gender, ethnicity, income, health, cacpacity, isolation, support needs, trauma

Key Terms Used in the Elder Abuse Statistics in Queensland Report

Victim

The victim is the older person who has experienced abuse.[2]

Perpetrator

The perpetrator is the person who has acted or failed to act, and this has caused harm or distress to an older person.[3]

Abuse Notification/Abuse Call

These terms refer to initial contact made with the EAPU about an abuse situation. Notifications sometimes include multiple victims, perpetrators, or both. Thus, the number of notifications may be lower than the number of victims or perpetrators.

Abuse in Close or Intimate Relationships

This descriptor refers to abuse in which the perpetrator is a family member, ex-family member, informal carer, or close friend who is viewed as "acting as family".

Abuse in Consumer and Social Relationships

This descriptor refers to situations in which the perpetrator is not a family member. These forms of abuse include scams, consumer issues, neighbourhood disputes, and issues related to aged care.

Cases

The PEARL database can collect information about complex abuse relationships. Each abuse relationship within a notification (call) is recorded as a separate case; hence, one call may involve several cases of abuse.

The following scenarios demonstrate how one call can encompass multiple abuse relationships.

Scenario 1. Older person abused by son (data collected on one abuse relationship).

Scenario 2. Older person abused by son and daughter-in-law (data collected on two abuse relationships).

Scenario 3. Older couple abused by both the son and daughter-in-law (data collected on four abuse relationships).

Abuse and vulnerability factors may vary across cases, even for the same victim or perpetrator. For example, in Scenario 3, the son may be financially abusing one parent but may be perpetrating both physical and financial abuse against the other parent.

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[2] Although negative connotations may be associated with the label *victim*, another commonly used term, *survivor*, is not always appropriate because some victims do not survive the abuse. For simplicity, victim is used throughout the Elder Abuse Statistics report.

[3] Note that the term *perpetrator* refers to an "alleged perpetrator" because the EAPU does not investigate or verify details provided in calls.

Cognitive Impairment

Cognitive impairment can refer to a range of disorders relating to mental processes of knowing, including awareness, attention, memory, perception, reasoning, and judgement. Cognitive impairment includes intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties, acquired brain injury, foetal alcohol syndrome, dementia, neurological disorders, and autism spectrum disorders.

Consumer Relationships

Consumer relationships are primarily underpinned by a contractual arrangement such as the exchanges that occur between an aged care service provider and a client, or between a retailer and a consumer.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

A person who is culturally and linguistically diverse is one born in a country in which English is not the predominant language.

Elder Abuse

Elder abuse is defined as a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person (World Health Organization, 2002).

Financial Abuse

Financial abuse is the illegal or improper use and/or mismanagement of a person's money, property, or resources.

Neglect

Neglect is the refusal or failure of a carer or responsible person to ensure that the person receives life's necessities. Neglect can be intentional or unintentional and includes refusing or failing to provide physiological necessities such as adequate nutrition, as well as accommodation, and failing to ensure safety. Neglect also includes situations in which an attorney under an Enduring Power of Attorney cancels home care services if the cancellation results in the older person not receiving the care they require.

Older Person

For the purposes of data collection, the EAPU defines an older person as anyone aged 50 years or older.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse includes the infliction of physical pain or injury, physical coercion, or deprivation of liberty.

Psychological Abuse

Psychological abuse is the infliction of mental anguish, which includes actions that cause fear of violence, isolation or deprivation, and feelings of shame, indignity, and powerlessness.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is any unwanted sexual behaviour, language, or activity that makes a person feel uncomfortable, frightened, or threatened.

Social Abuse

Social abuse is intentionally preventing an older person from having social contact with family or friends, or accessing social activities of choice.

Social Relationships

Social relationships are relationships that the older person has with non-family members that are of a social nature (e.g. relationships with neighbours, friends, and acquaintances).

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