Elder Abuse Statistics In Queensland

YEAR IN REVIEW 2023–24

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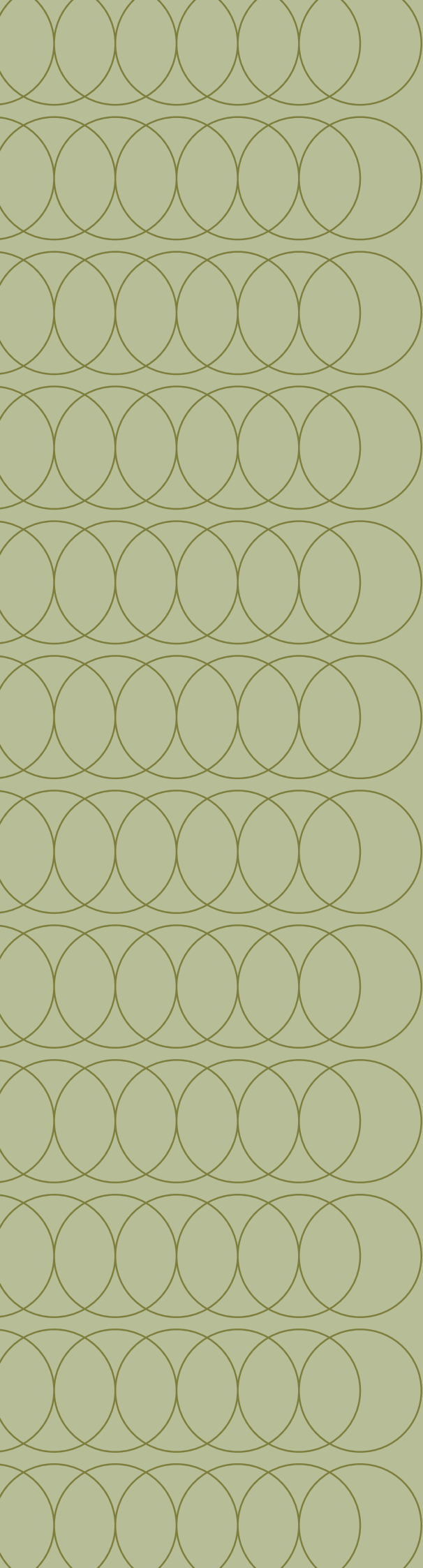
Contents

Executive Summary

The *Elder Abuse Statistics in Queensland: Year in Review* report presents analyses of data collected from calls to the Elder Abuse Prevention Unit (EAPU) Helpline in Queensland.

The EAPU is funded by the Queensland Government's Department of Families, Seniors, Disability Services and Child Safety to respond to elder abuse. Progressing towards a society in which older people live free from abuse and neglect requires greater understanding around experiences of elder abuse and factors associated with victimisation. Statistics presented in this report provide insight about elder abuse reported to the Helpline and may benefit prevention and intervention efforts. The report contains data about individual factors (victims and perpetrators), relationship factors, community factors, abuse presentation, impact of the abuse, and barriers to change.

Further information about the data contained in this report is available in the *Elder Abuse Statistics in Queensland: Companion Document.*

KEY FINDINGS

4,458 Calls

2,674 Abuse Notifications

Types of abuse victims experienced

75.9% PSYCHOLOGICAL

65% FINANCIAL

31.3% SOCIAL

24% NEGLECT

12.6% PHYSICAL

1.1% SEXUAL

69.5% EXPERIENCED MORE THAN ONE TYPE OF ABUSE
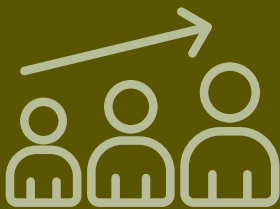
The most common age group for <u>victims</u> was **80-84** YEARS (22%)
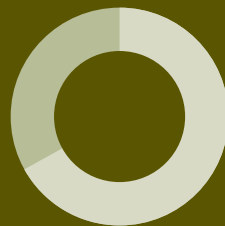
67.1% of <u>victims</u> were female

35.4% of <u>victims</u> had impaired capacity

55.2% of <u>victims</u> were living with <u>perpetrators</u>
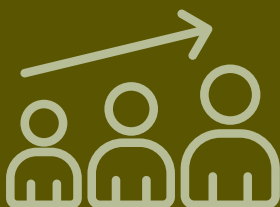
The most common age group of <u>perpetrators</u> was **50-54** YEARS (16%)
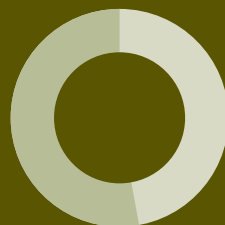
52.1% of <u>perpetrators</u> were female

36% of <u>perpetrators</u> were daughters

34.2% of <u>perpetrators</u> were sons

12.8% of <u>perpetrators</u> were partners

Insights

- Further research into facilitators and inhibitors of help-seeking would likely be beneficial. Many people do not contact the Helpline until they reach breaking point. Gaining knowledge about facilitators and inhibitors of help-seeking would assist initiatives for early intervention.

- Further research into social abuse should be considered. Social abuse is a form of coercive control that can be used as a means to facilitate, maintain, or hide other forms of abuse. The substantial increase in social abuse in 2023–24 (7%) is of concern given the role it plays in facilitating abuse and inhibiting help-seeking. Developing a greater understanding of social abuse could be beneficial in prevention, identification, and reporting initiatives.

- Further research into the neglect of older people is warranted. The proportion of cases in which neglect is reported has increased over the last 6 years (2018–19 17.6%, 2023–24 24%). The National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study (Qu et al., 2021) also identified that neglect had the second-highest prevalence. Despite this, little research into neglect occurring outside Australian residential aged care facilities has been done. Further research would help to better understand this phenomenon and guide prevention and intervention efforts.
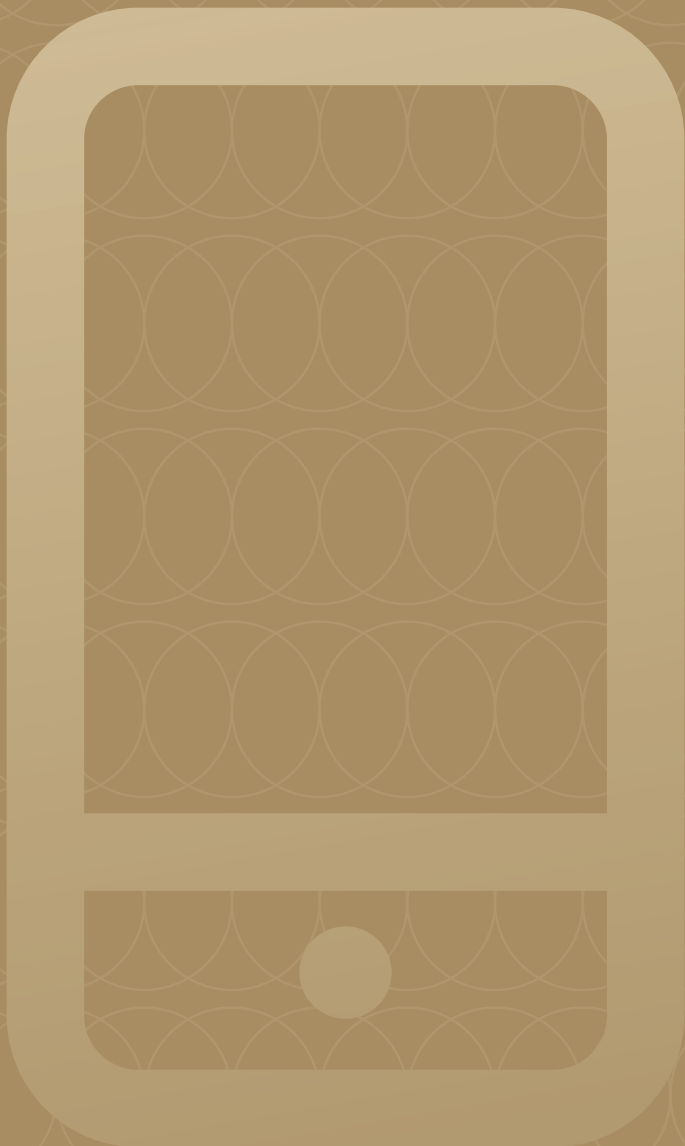
Total Call Data

This section describes notifications, what prompted the call, and referrals made.

Notifications

The Helpline received a total of 4,458 calls in the 2023–24 financial year. The total calls were one per cent (*n* = -43) lower than recorded in 2022–23. The calls comprised 2,674 abuse notifications and 1,784 enquiry calls. An increase of 0.8 per cent (*n* = 22) in the number of abuse notifications was recorded (Figure 1).

There were 2,560 cases of abuse in close or intimate relationships and 534 cases of abuse in consumer and social relationships (Figure 2). The number of cases is higher than the number of calls as more than one abuse relationship may be identified within a single call.
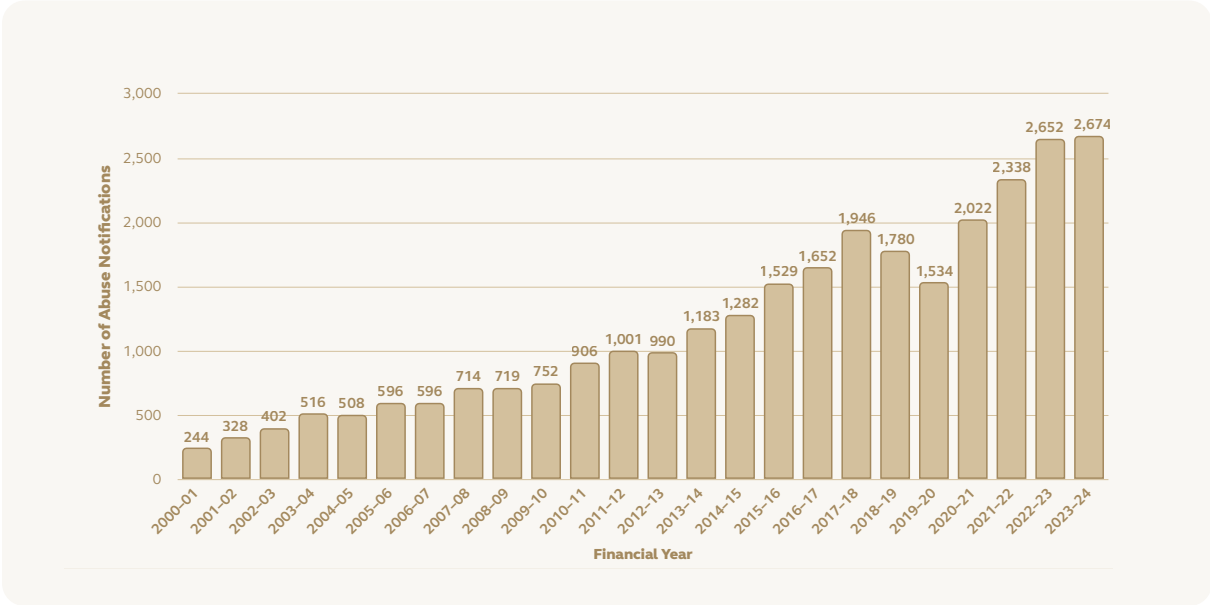
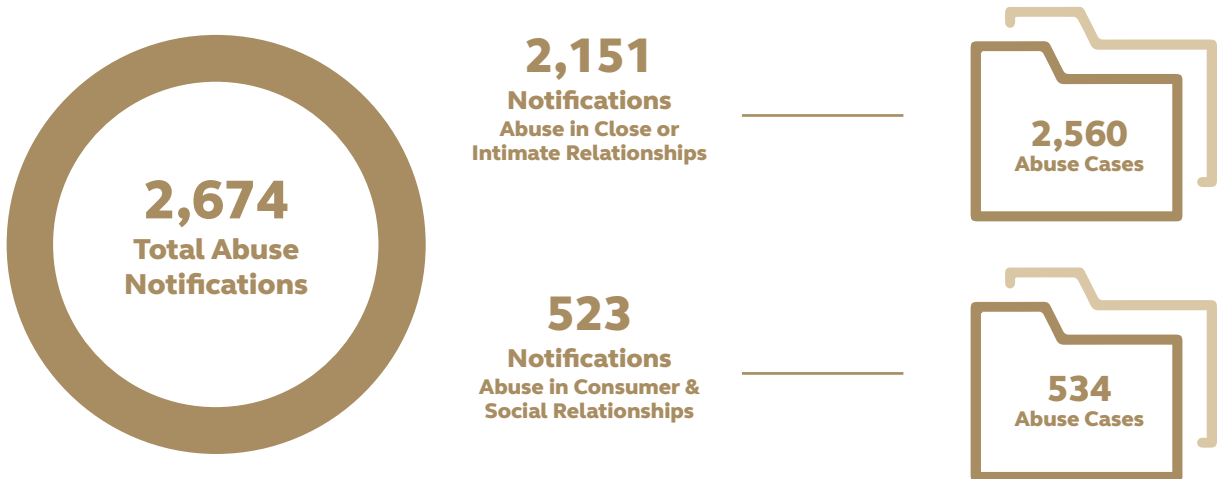

Figure 1. Total abuse notifications by financial year.

Figure 2. Notifications received in the 2023-24 financial year.

What Prompted the Call?

The PEARL database allows users to record what prompted the caller to phone the EAPU.[1] This information was recorded for about half of the calls (n = 2,299, 51.6%).

The most frequently recorded call prompt was that the caller found out about the EAPU (Figure 3).
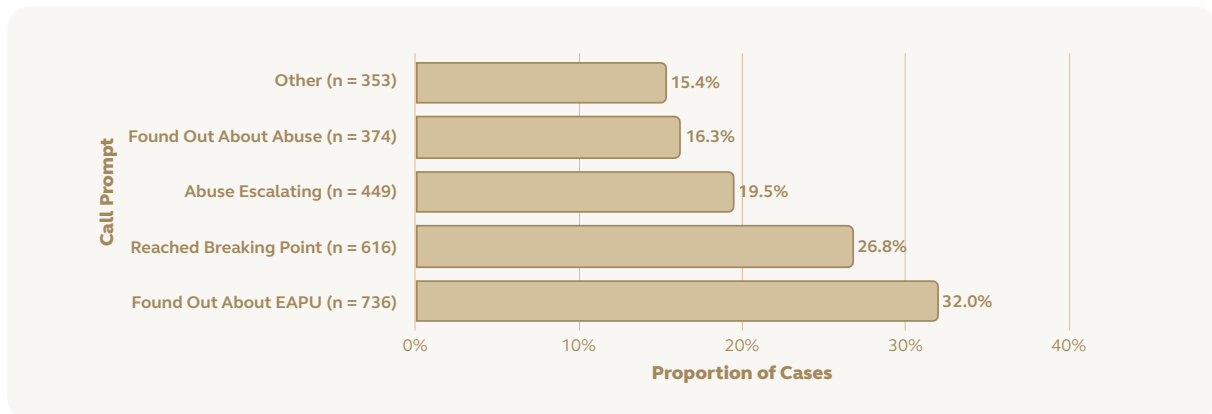
Figure 3. What prompted callers to contact EAPU (where known).

Referrals

Callers were referred to other services in 64.1 per cent of cases (n = 2,857). The most common referrals were to "Other Support Services" (Figure 4). Some examples of other support services include counselling, carer support, and interstate or international support services.

The findings differed from 2022–23, when the most frequent referrals were to legal services (n = 1,038, 23.1%). Another notable difference from the 2022–23 findings was that the proportion of referrals for mediation increased by 146.7 per cent (2022–23, n = 63, 1.4%; 2023–24, n = 154, 3.5%). Despite this increase, the proportion of referrals remained low.

Two-thirds of referrals to legal services in 2023–24 (n = 593, 68.9%) were to the Seniors Legal and Support Services (SLASS), which provides both legal and social-work support. Many victims of elder abuse are reluctant to initiate legal action against perpetrators, but some are more willing to engage when the legal and social-worker model employed by SLASS is described.
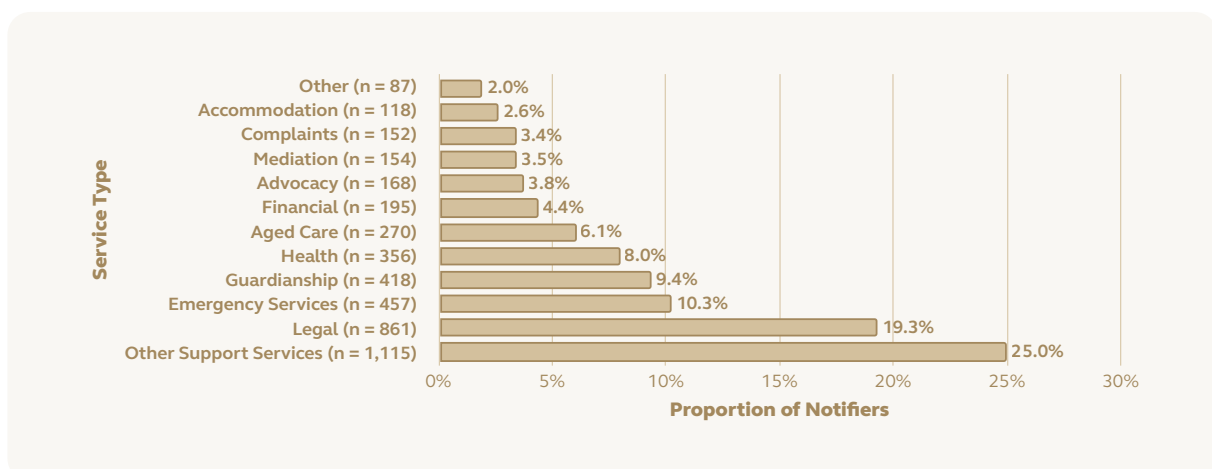
Figure 4. Types of services notifiers were referred to.

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[1] Note. More than one option may be selected. For example, a victim may call because they believe the abuse is escalating and they have reached breaking point.

Abuse in Close or Intimate Relationships

Individual Factors for Victims

Individual factors or life circumstances may increase an older person's vulnerability and also influence their risk of experiencing abuse. Although these individual factors are not causal factors, they may be associated with an increased risk of experiencing victimisation. For example, victims of elder abuse are more often females; however, being female per se does not increase the risk. Rather, a complex combination of factors such as gender roles and women's longer lifespan may contribute to an increased risk of victimisation.

This section examines the role of the following individual factors:

Age   **Gender**   **Ethnicity**   **Cognitive Impairment**   **Capacity**   **Care Needs**

Age

Victim age group was recorded in 76.7 per cent (n = 1,964) of cases but not for 23.3 per cent (n = 596). Similar to 2022–23, the most common age group was 80–84 years (n = 432). This group accounted for one-fifth of the total victims of known age (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Age of victims (n = 1,964).

Figure showing Victim Gender bar chart:
- Male (n = 841): 32.9%
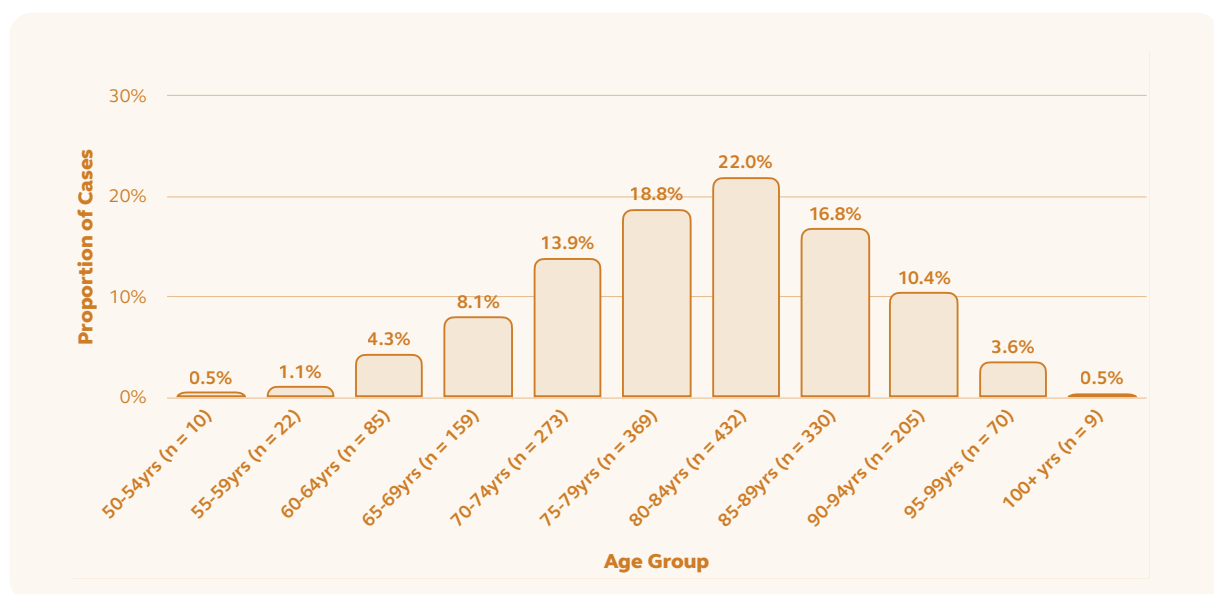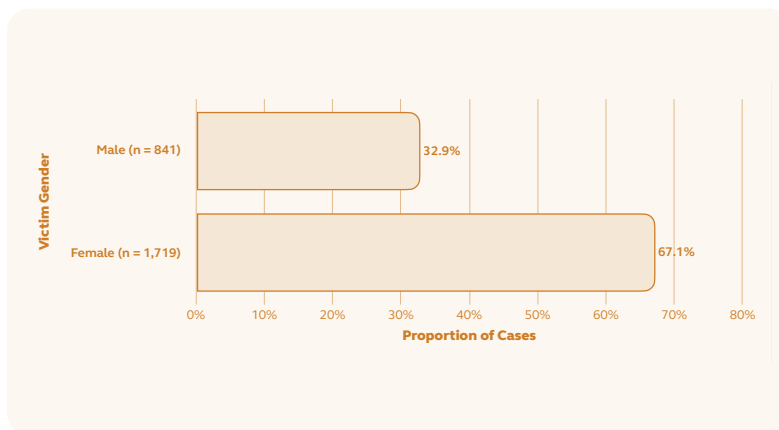- Female (n = 1,719): 67.1%

Proportion of Cases (x-axis: 0% to 80%)

Gender

Similar to numbers in previous years, in 2023–24 there were more than twice as many female victims as male victims (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Gender of victims (n = 2,560).

Ethnicity

Research suggests that race, ethnicity, and culture intersect with elder abuse in multiple and complex ways (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2017; Horsford et al., 2011). In particular, vulnerabilities and stressors associated with being a member of a minority or a marginalised ethnic group may increase the risk of elder abuse.

Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

In the 2023–24 reporting period, 94 victims (3.7%) identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. This number is 1.5 times the number that would be expected from population statistics (i.e. 2.4% of Queenslanders aged over 50 years identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities

During the 2023–24 reporting period, 104 victims (4.1%) were recorded as having a CALD background, which is much lower than the number expected from population data (i.e. 13.9% of Queenslanders aged over 50 years have a CALD background) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Cognitive Impairment

Cognitive impairment of victims was recorded in 453 (17.7%) cases. Dementia was the most frequently reported form of cognitive impairment, affecting 277 (10.8%) victims.

In 2018, it was estimated that 5.2 per cent of Australians aged 65 years and over had dementia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). In contrast, in the Helpline data, more than double this proportion had dementia (11.1%, n = 272 victims of similar age, where age was known).

Capacity

Impaired capacity was recorded for 863 victims (35.4%, where known). A further 290 (11.8%) were suspected to have impairment.[2] Capacity status was unknown for 106 victims (4.1%).

Care Needs

Victims were reported to require support in 1,546 cases (60.4%), with domestic, meals, and transport needs the most frequently reported areas in which support was required.

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[2]   Note. There can be differences in assessment and interpretation of capacity due to different frameworks being used (e.g. medical versus legal). Data recorded in PEARL is largely self-reported, which likely influences what is recorded and thus findings should be interpreted with caution.

Individual Factors for Alleged Perpetrators

This section covers key demographics of alleged perpetrators, as well as individual factors that are directly or indirectly associated with an increased risk of perpetrating elder abuse. Note these factors are not necessarily causal. Perpetrator age, gender, and psychological health are discussed.

Age

The age of perpetrators was unknown in 1,334 cases (52.1%), but the most common age group recorded was 50–54 years (Figure 7).
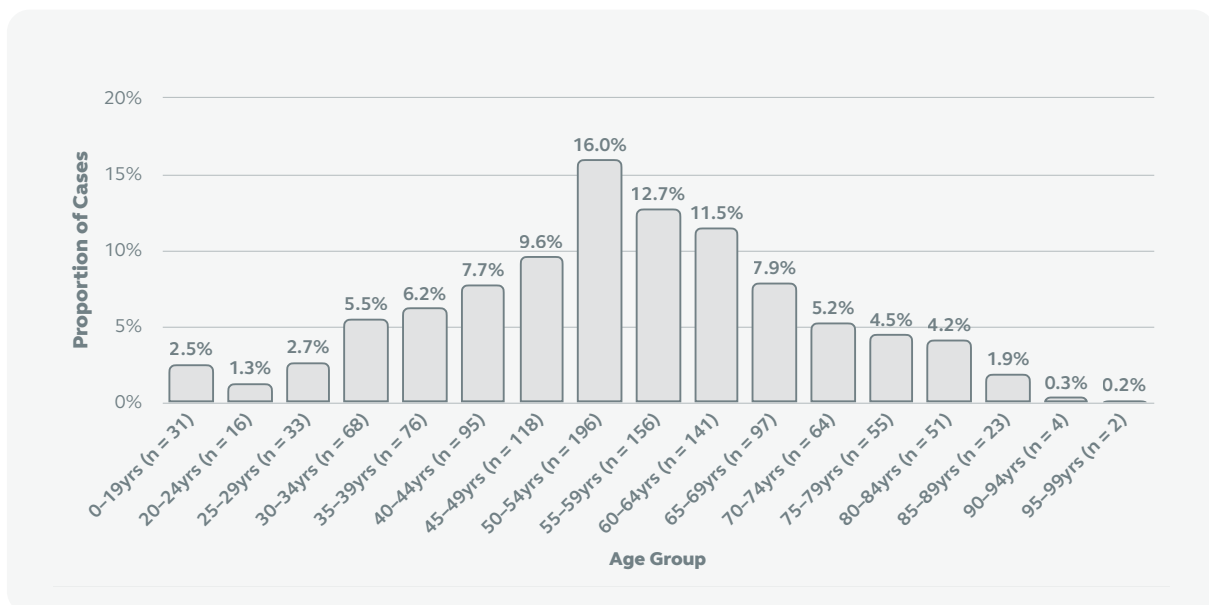
Figure 7. Age of perpetrators (where known) (*n* = 1,226*).*
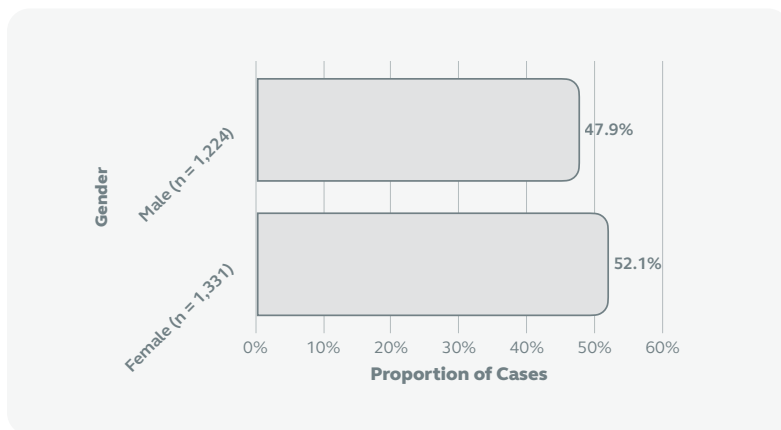
Gender

There were more female perpetrators than males (Figure 8). Perpetrator gender was not recorded for five cases.

Figure 8. Gender of perpetrators (where known) (n = 2,555).

Psychological Health

Mental Illness

In 457 cases (17.9%), perpetrators were reported to have, or were suspected by notifiers to have, some form of mental illness. This is a substantial increase from the 9.8 per cent recorded in 2022–23.

Substance Misuse

Substance misuse by perpetrators was recorded in 340 (13.3%) cases.

Relationships Between Alleged Perpetrators and Victims

This section of the report examines relationships between victims and perpetrators, as well as any shared history or current factors that may influence their interactions. The section covers relationships, living arrangements, and the caring role.

Relationships

Family relationships accounted for 95 per cent (n = 2,433) of cases of abuse in close or intimate relationships. Sons and daughters were reported as perpetrators in almost three-quarters of cases (n = 1,797, 70.2%).[3]

Daughters were most frequently reported as perpetrators, followed by sons (Figure 9). Further analysis revealed that 76 cases (3%) involved daughters-in-law and 56 cases (2.2%) involved sons-in-law.

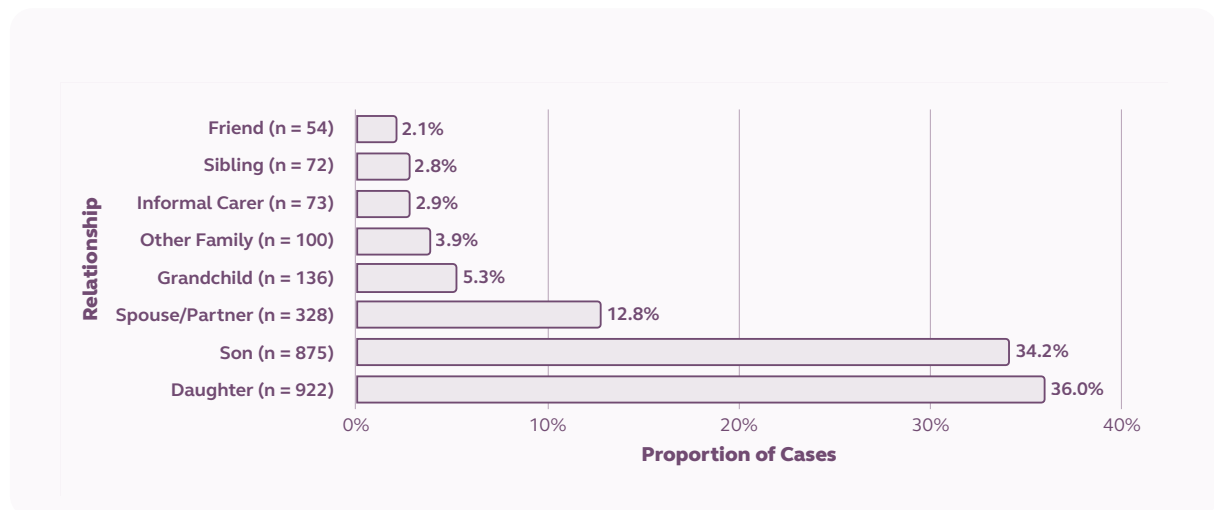Long-term conflict between victims and perpetrators was identified in 279 (10.9%) cases.

Figure 9. Relationship between perpetrator and victim (n = 2,560).

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[3]   Note. This data includes non-biological relationships such as sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, and stepchildren.

Living Arrangements

Living with perpetrators is an established risk factor for elder abuse (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2017; Kaspiew et al., 2016). Overall, more than half of victims (*n* = 1,391, 55.2%) lived with perpetrators (where known) (Figure 10). In 314 of these cases, at least one non-perpetrator was also living with the victim.

In more than two-thirds of cases (*n* = 936, 67.3%) in which perpetrators lived with victims, perpetrators were sons (*n* = 500, 36 %) or daughters (*n* = 436, 31.3%).

The proportion of cases in which victims and perpetrators lived together increased sharply in 2019–20 (Figure 10). This trend continued until 2022–23, when a slight decrease was observed. The downward trend in cases involving cohabitation has continued, with a more substantial decrease recorded for the 2023–24 financial year (Figure 10). The proportion of cases in which victims live alone has also increased in 2023–24. Why cohabitation rates have decreased over the past two years is unknown.
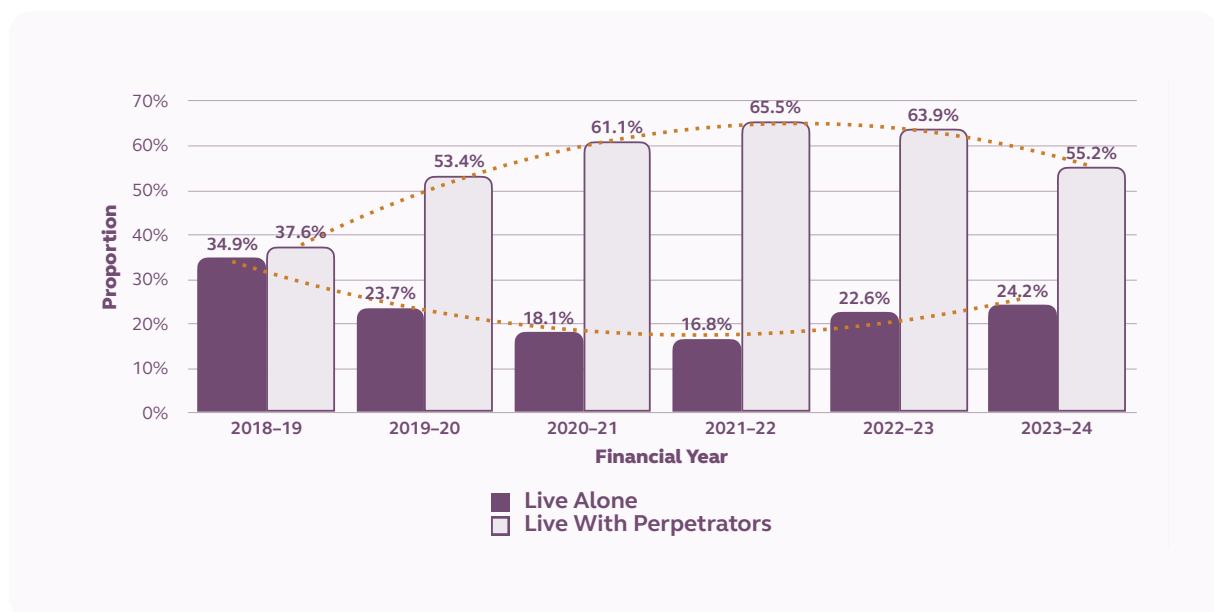

Figure 10. Comparison of victim and perpetrator cohabitation between 2018–19 and 2023–24.

The Caring Role

In 2023–24, 22.1 per cent (*n* = 566) of perpetrators were recorded as providing informal care to victims.

Community Factors

Community factors relate to the intersection of victim and perpetrator relationships with other family, friends, community members, and potential support networks, or with features of the community such as geographical location. This section discusses factors related to family and community, and geography.

Notifiers

In 2023–24, the largest group of notifiers were daughters, followed by victims themselves and workers (Figure 11). Aged care workers were the most common group of workers who contacted EAPU, representing 32 per cent of workers (n = 119). Notifiers' relationships to victims were unknown for 14 cases.

Geography

Queensland has the second-largest land area of the Australian states and territories. Over half of the population lives outside the Greater Brisbane area, making Queensland mainland Australia's most decentralised state. Geographical distance and population spread can create issues for service access in rural and remote areas.

Victim Location

Victim location was known in 85.8 per cent of cases (n = 2,196). Figure 12 displays the number of victims in each region.[4]

In three regions, the number of calls increased disproportionately compared with 2022–23 data: Moreton Bay–South (29.7%), Sunshine Coast (27.4%), and Mackay–Isaac–Whitsunday (20.4%). Central Queensland was the only region to record a substantial decrease in calls (–37.5%).
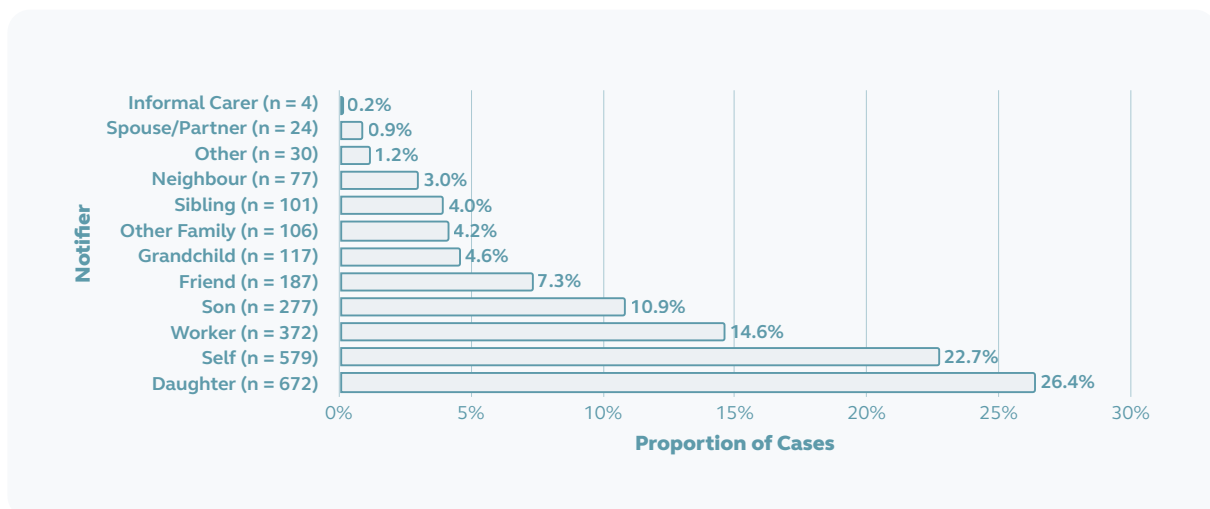

Figure 11. Notifier's relationship to victim.

4   Note. Data from Brisbane North, South, East, West, and Inner City were combined because Helpline workers sometimes record the suburb as Brisbane City if victims are reported to live in Brisbane without a specified suburb. This results in an over-representation of cases in the Brisbane Inner City region.

Figure 12. Geographic location of victims (*n* = 2,196).

48 Moreton Bay South

237 Sunshine Coast

138 Moreton Bay North

462 Brisbane (North, South, East, West, & Inner City)

136 Cairns

99 Townsville

68 Toowoomba

59 Mackay-Isaac-Whitsunday

130 Ipswich

272 Gold Coast

122 Logan-Beaudesert

32 Queensland Outback

253 Wide Bay

55 Darling Downs-Maranoa

85 Central Queensland
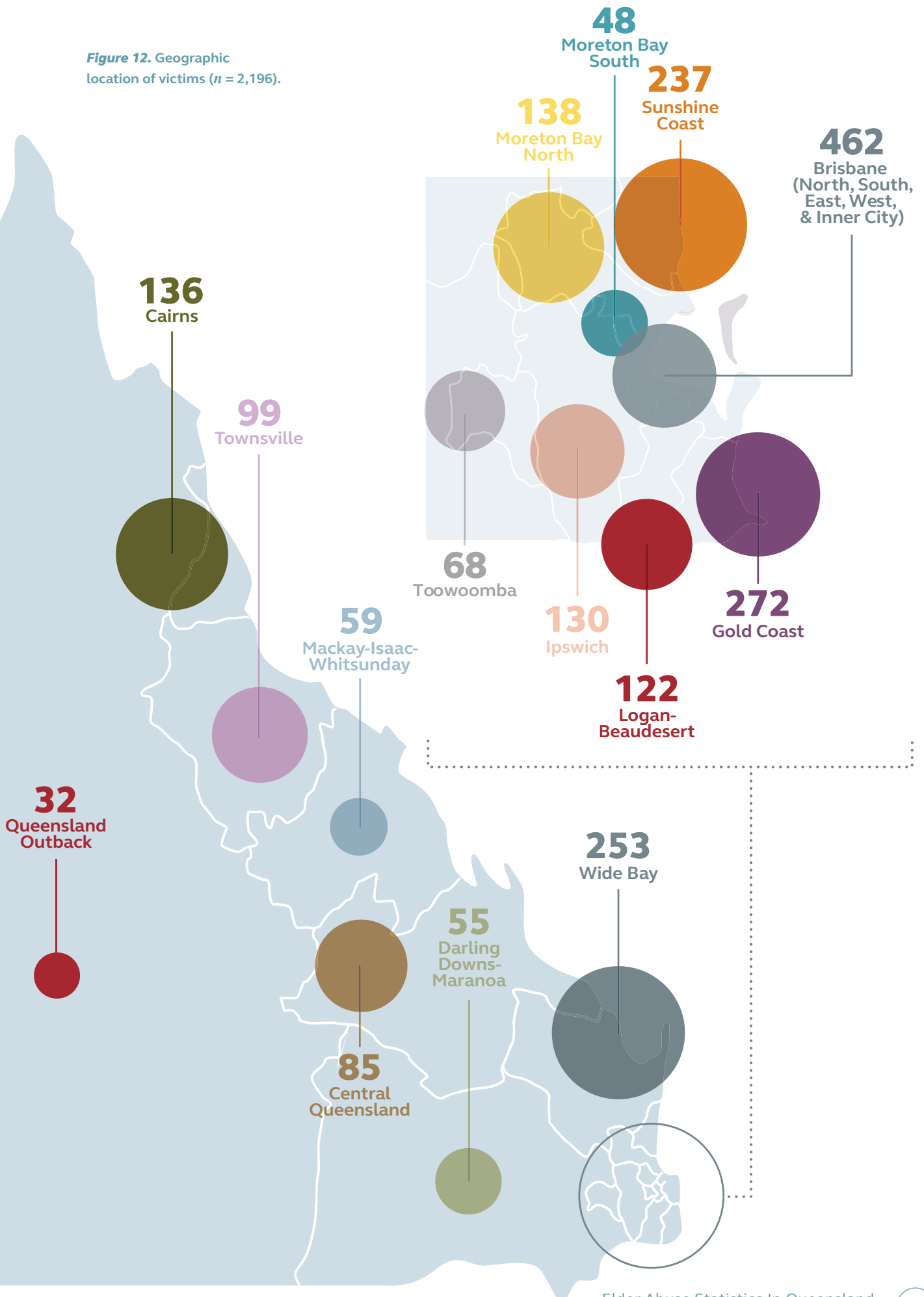
SECTION 2.5.

Abuse Data

Consistent with findings from 2022–23, the two most frequently reported types of abuse were psychological and financial abuse (Figure 13).

Two-thirds of victims (n = 1,778, 69.5%) were reported to be experiencing more than one type of abuse.

Social abuse increased substantially between 2022–23 (24.3%) and 2023–24 (31.3%). The rate of social abuse recorded in 2023–24 was the highest ever recorded and was notably higher than the peak observed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 14). Why the rate of social abuse increased is unclear.

Additional analyses were run in an attempt to ascertain if the increase could be related to heightened economic pressures. However, the data did not provide evidence for this hypothesis, with

no significant differences found between 2022–23 and 2023–24 with regards to rates of perpetrator financial dependence, co-occurring financial abuse, or perpetrator financial difficulties as a precipitating factor for the abuse.

The other abuse type that increased between 2022–23 and 2023–24 was sexual abuse, which more than doubled (2022–23, 0.5%; 2023–24, 1.1%) (Figure 14).

The rates of psychological abuse, financial abuse, neglect, and physical abuse were reasonably consistent with those found in 2022–23 (Figure 14).
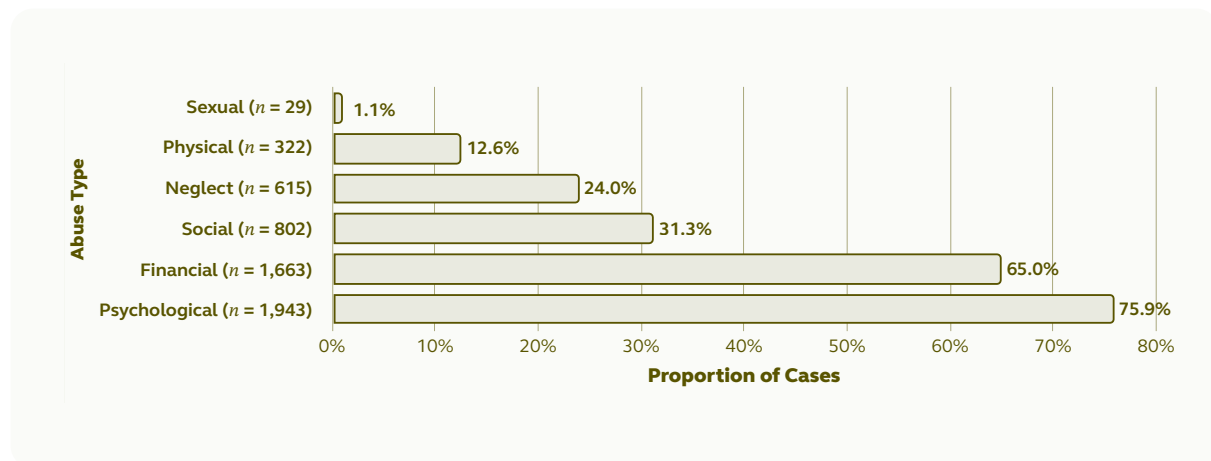

Abuse Type

Abuse Type	Proportion of Cases
Sexual (n = 29)	1.1%
Physical (n = 322)	12.6%
Neglect (n = 615)	24.0%
Social (n = 802)	31.3%
Financial (n = 1,663)	65.0%
Psychological (n = 1,943)	75.9%

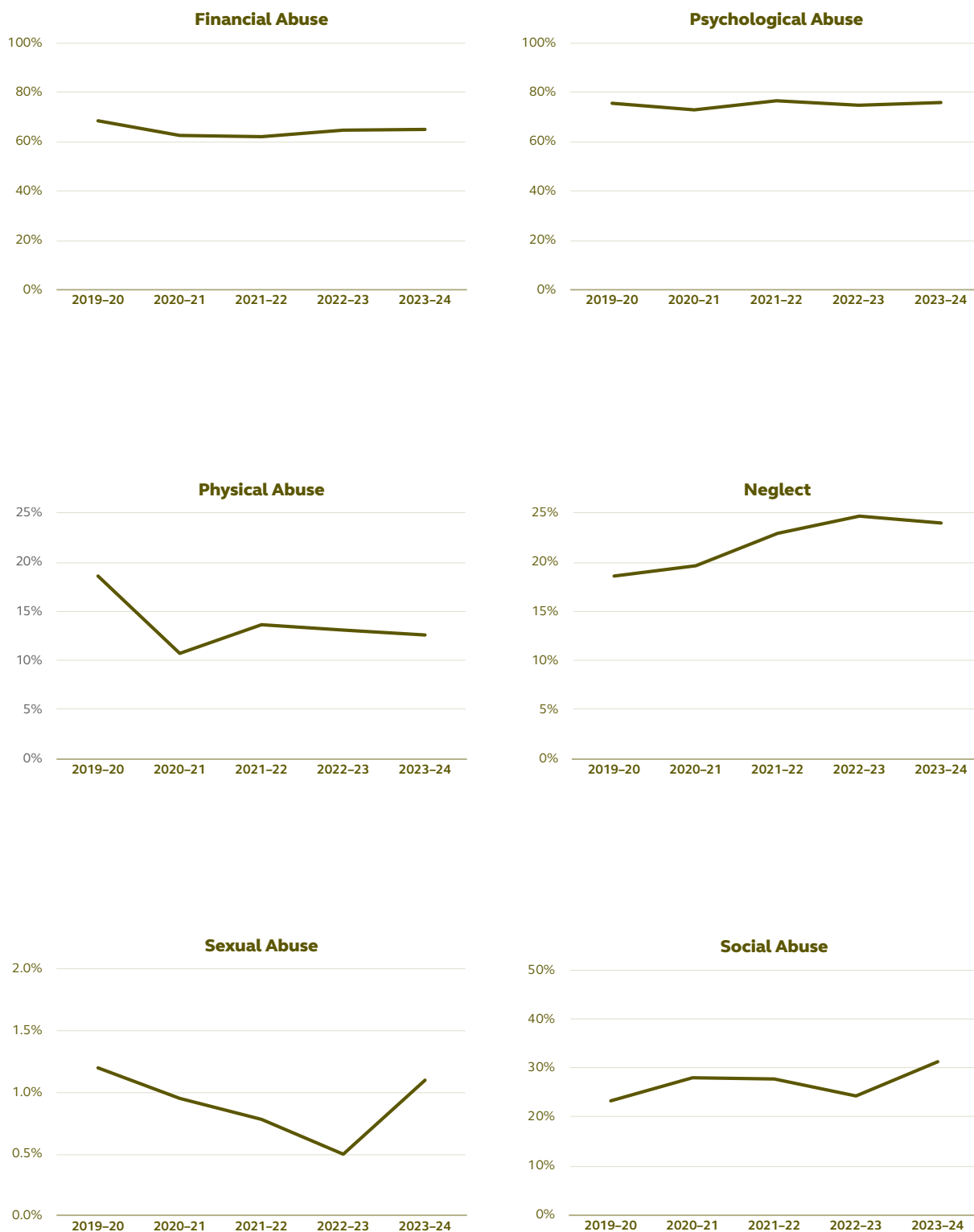***Figure 13.*** **Proportion of victims by abuse type.**

Figure 14. Proportion of victims by abuse type (2019–2024).

Financial Abuse

In 2023–24, 1,663 cases of financial abuse were reported to the Helpline.

Methods Used to Perpetrate Financial Abuse

The most common methods of perpetrating financial abuse were undue influence, misuse of an Enduring Power of Attorney (EPoA), and misuse of debit and credit cards (Figure 15).
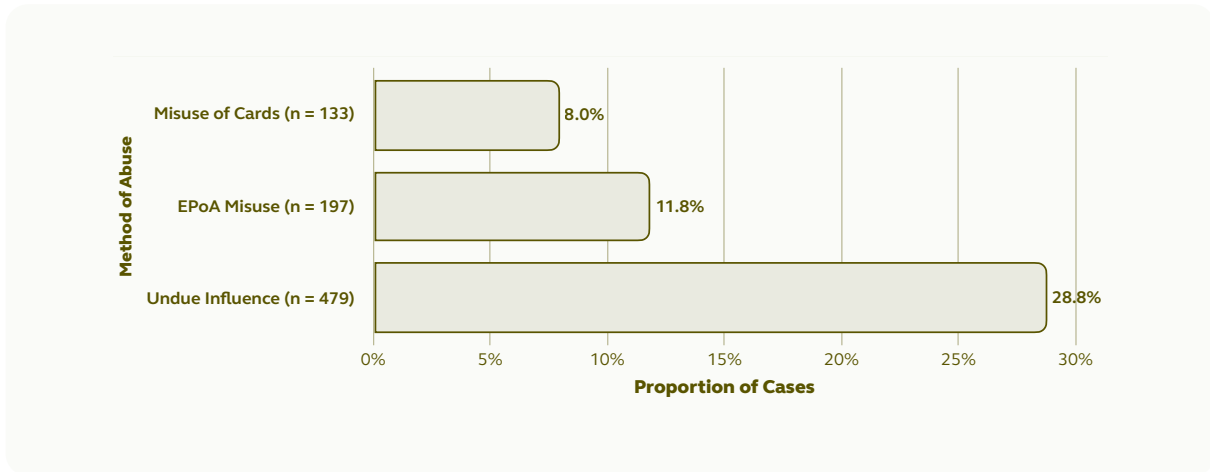

Figure 15. Methods of perpetrating financial abuse (*n* = 1,663).

Forms of Financial Abuse

The most common forms of financial abuse involved non-contribution (for example, living with the victim and not contributing towards expenses such as electricity or groceries), coercing the victim into gifting, and paying perpetrator's bills (Figure 16).
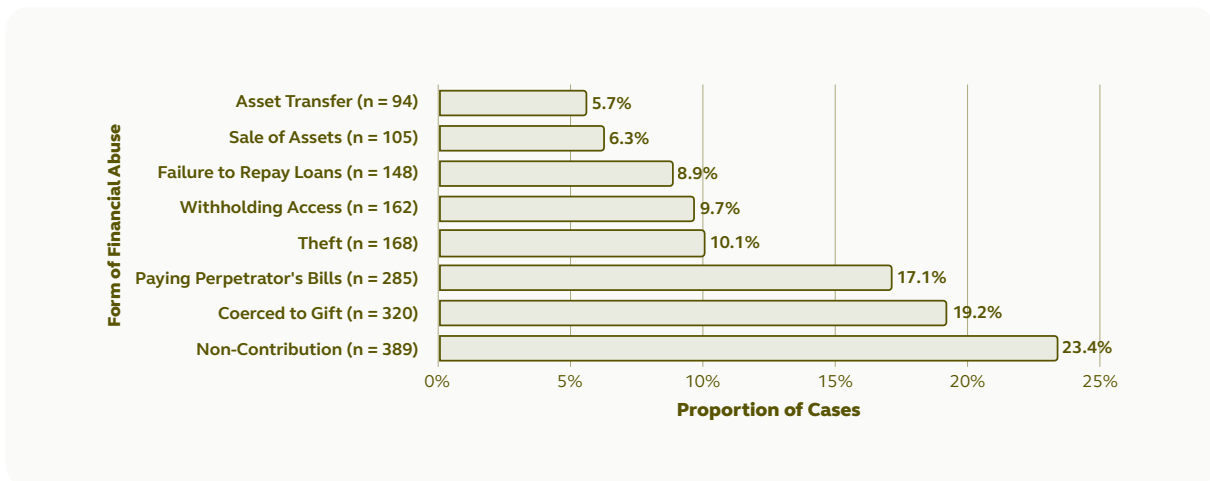

Figure 16. Forms of financial abuse (*n* = 1,663).

Neglect

In 2023–24, 615 cases of neglect were reported to the Helpline.

Refusing to allow others to provide care, failing to ensure victim's nutritional needs were met, and failing to ensure victim safety were the most frequently reported forms of neglect in 2023–24 (Figure 17).

These results differed from 2022–23 when failing to ensure victim safety, failing to take care of victim's medical needs, and failing to ensure victim's nutritional needs were met were the most reported forms of neglect.
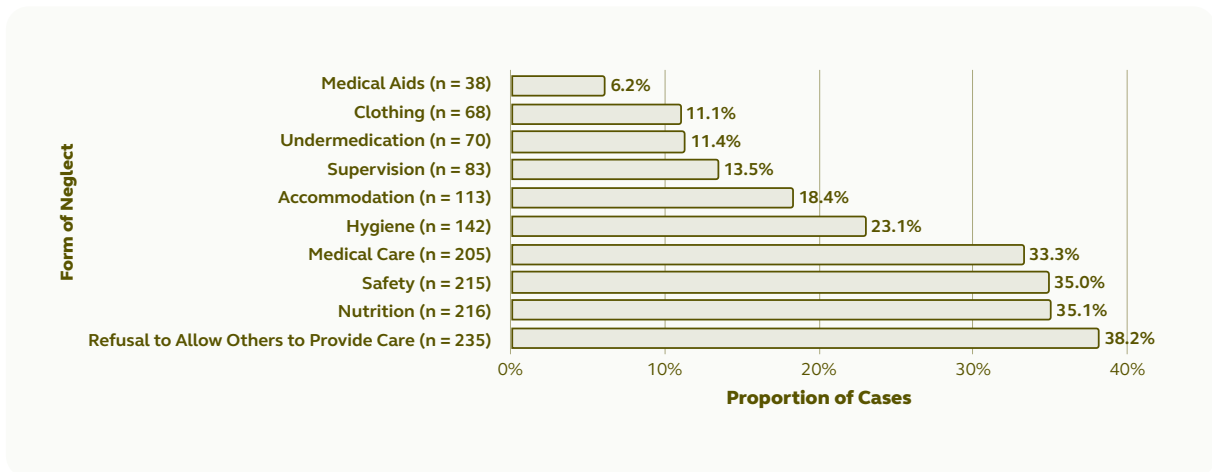

Figure 17. Forms of neglect (*n* = 615).

Physical Abuse

In 2023–24, 322 cases of physical abuse were reported to the Helpline.

The most frequently reported forms of physical abuse were pushing, striking, and rough handling (Figure 18).
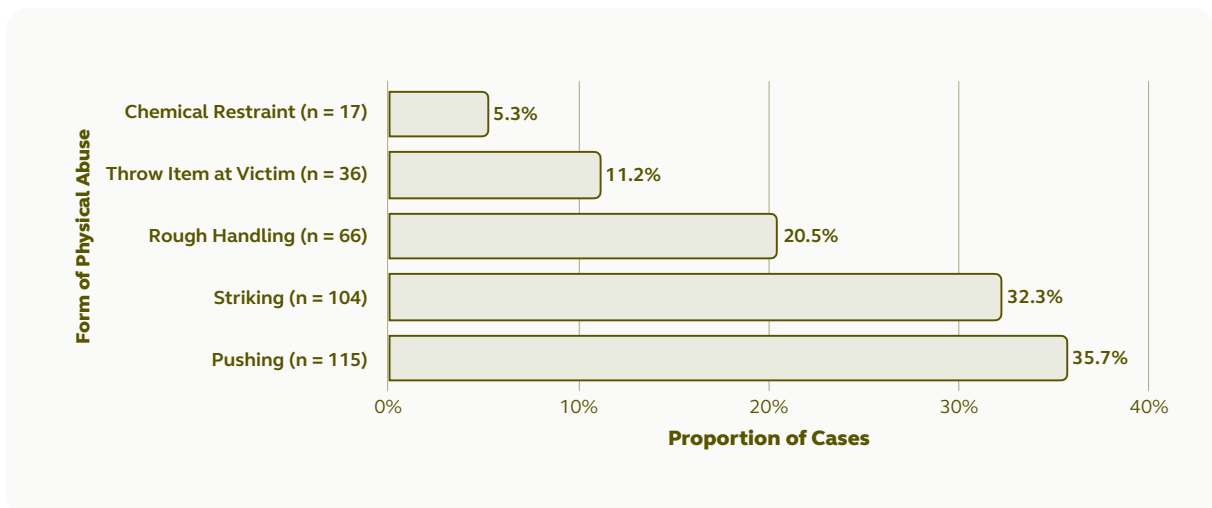

Figure 18. Forms of physical abuse (*n* = 322).

Psychological Abuse

In 2023–24, 1,943 cases of psychological abuse were reported to the Helpline.

The most common forms of psychological abuse were pressuring, shouting, and making threats (Figure 19).
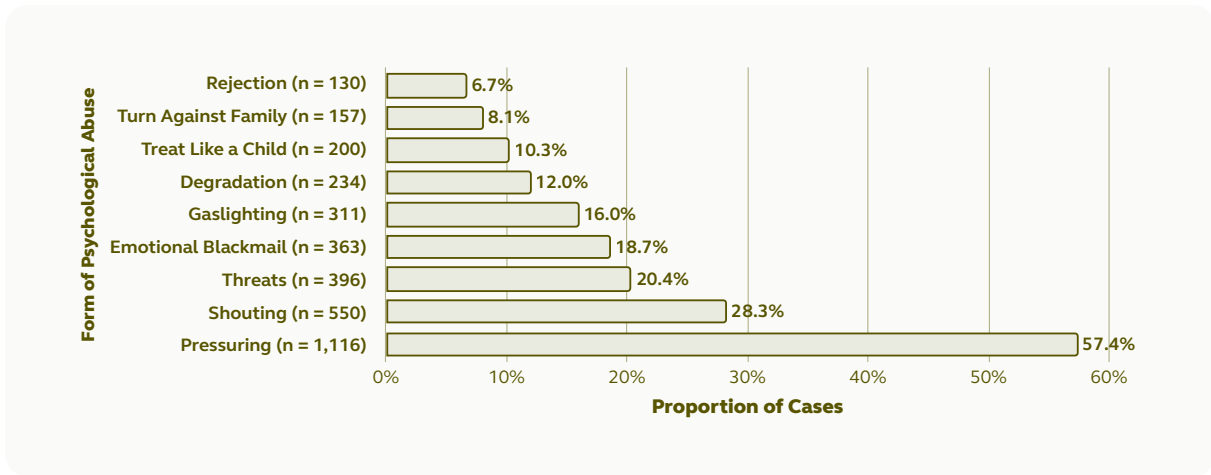

Figure 19. Forms of psychological abuse (*n* = 1,943).

The most common types of threats were threatening to harm victims, to send victims to residential aged care facilities, and to harm others (Figure 20).
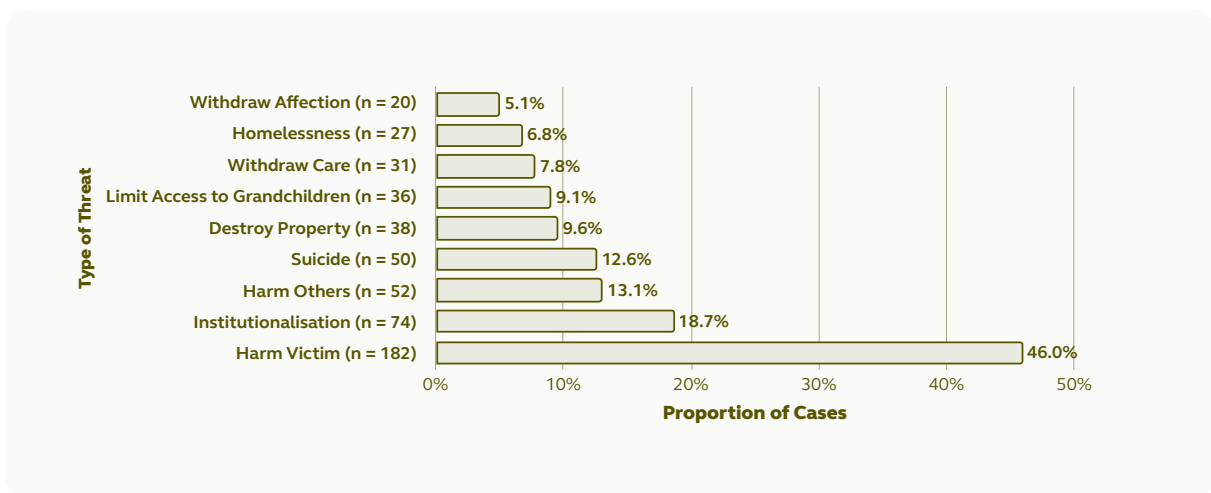

Figure 20. Types of threats experienced by victims (*n* = 396).

Sexual Abuse

In 2023–24, 29 cases of sexual abuse were reported to the Helpline.

The most frequently reported forms of sexual abuse were coercing victims to perform sexual acts, unwanted sexual comments, and rape (Figure 21).

These results differed to 2022–23 when the most frequently reported forms were unwanted sexual comments, inappropriate touch, and unwanted touch.
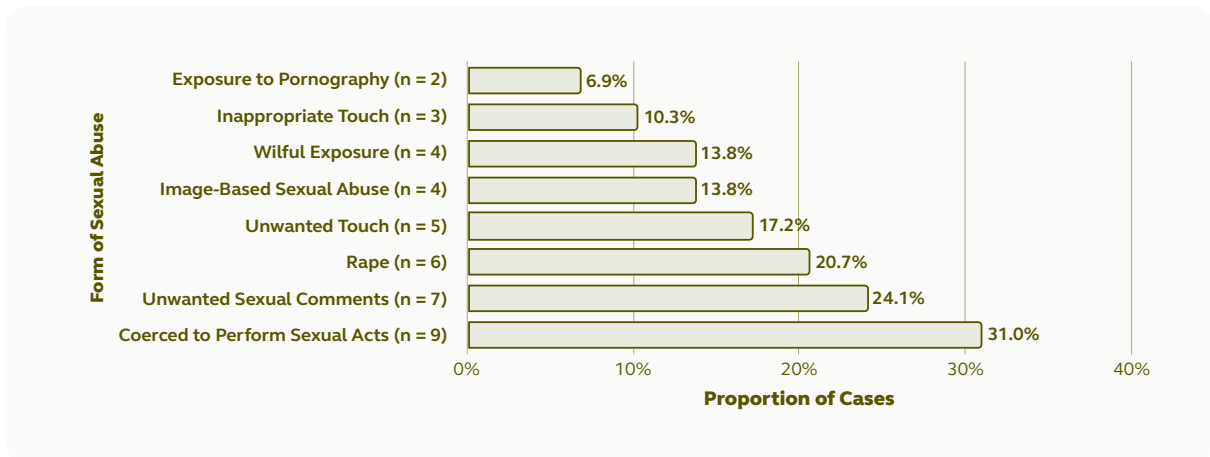

Figure 21. Forms of sexual abuse (*n* = 29).

Social Abuse

In 2023–24, 802 cases of social abuse were reported to the Helpline. The PEARL database allows Helpline operators to collect data on the methods used to perpetrate social abuse, along with the forms of social abuse.

Methods Used to Perpetrate Social Abuse

In 85 (10.6%) cases of social abuse, EPoA misuse was recorded as the method used to perpetrate the abuse.

Forms of Social Abuse

Perpetrators behaving in ways that limited visitation by others, restricting visitation by others, and restricting access to a phone were the most common forms of social abuse reported in 2023–24 (Figure 22).

These results differ from those in 2022–23, when restricting visitation by others, restricting access to a phone, and limiting the victim's ability to be alone with others were the most common forms of social abuse reported.
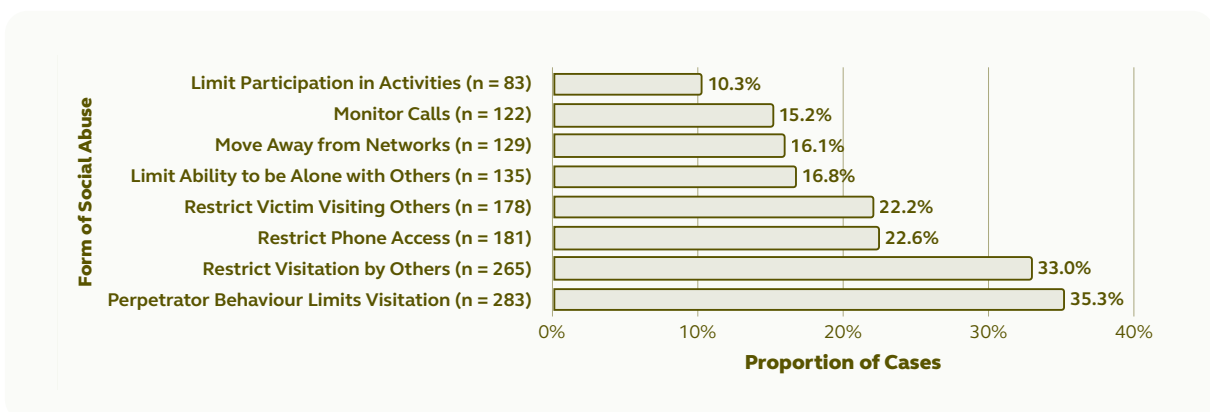
Figure 22. Forms of social abuse (*n* = 802).

Impact of the Abuse on Victims

Information about how abuse had affected victims was recorded in 1,722 cases (67.3%). Psychological, relationship, and health impacts were most frequently reported (Figure 23). The proportion of cases in which social isolation was identified was much higher in 2023–24 (28.7%) than in 2022–23 (17%). This increase is likely to be a consequence of the increased number of social abuse cases observed in 2023–24.

Figure 23. Impact of elder abuse on victims (*n* = 1,722).

Barriers to Change for Victims

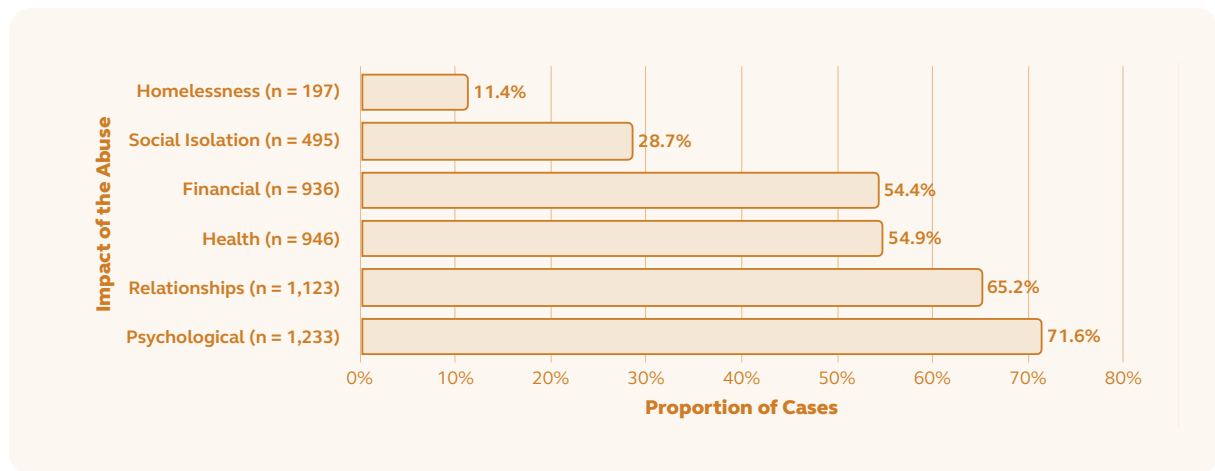**Helpline operators can record data about barriers to a victim's ability or willingness to enact change regarding the abuse they are experiencing. Barriers to change were identified in almost two-thirds of cases (n = 1,643, 64.2%).**

For simplicity and clarity of reporting, the 25 barriers to change (Table 1) have been grouped into six categories (factors) (Gillbard & Leggatt-Cook, 2022).[5]

1. Protecting the Perpetrator and Relationship
2. Fear of Further Harm
3. Impact on Relationships with Others
4. Available Resources
5. Shame or Stigma
6. Individual Vulnerabilities

The most common barriers to change for victims were protecting the perpetrator and their relationship with them, shame or stigma, and fear of further harm (Figure 24).

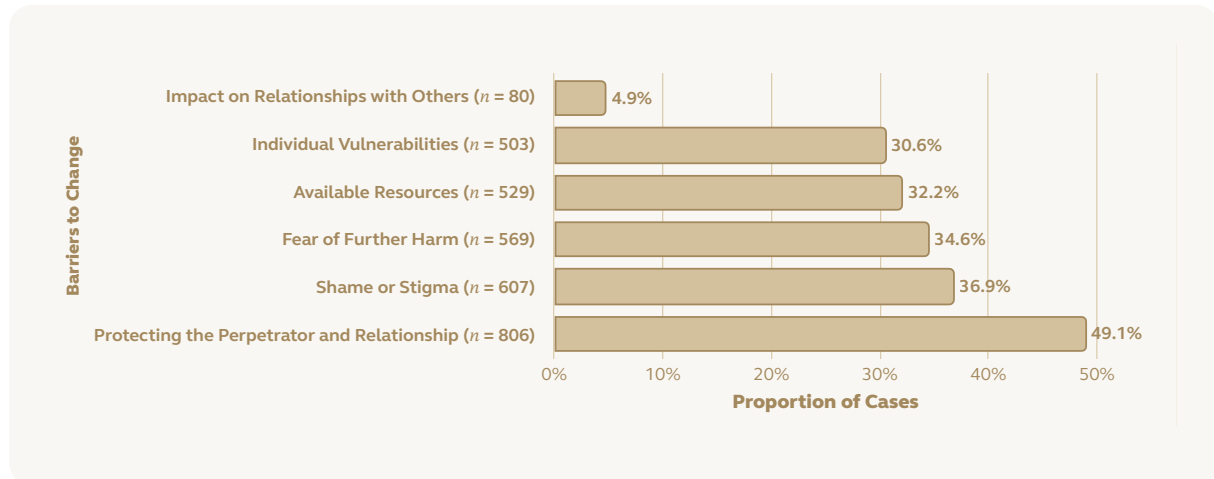See Table 1 for a full breakdown of factors and frequencies for the 25 data points.

Figure 24. Barriers to change for victims (n = 1,643).

[5] Note. The factors were identified using a principal factor analysis with oblique (oblimin) rotation for the 2021–22 report.

Table 1. Barriers to Change Factors and Frequencies (*n* = 1,643)

Factor 1 – Protecting the Perpetrator and Relationship	
Impact on perpetrator – financial	334
Impact on perpetrator – lose relationships with others	333
Impact on perpetrator – police involvement	322
Impact on perpetrator – homelessness	252
Fear – lose relationship with perpetrator	184
Fear – safety of perpetrator	169
Impact on perpetrator – health/mental health	129
Fear – forced intervention	74
Factor 2 – Fear of Further Harm	
Fear – safety of self	320
Fear – further abuse	271
Fear – safety of others	97
Fear – not be believed	44
Factor 3 – Impact on Relationships with Others	
Lack of knowledge	417
Financial situation	123
Fear – lose relationship with grandchildren	47
Fear – homelessness (self)	45
Fear – lose other relationships	25
Fear – lose relationship with other children	11
Factor 5 – Shame or Stigma	
Denial	334
Guilt/self-blame	214
Shame or stigma	185
Cultural factors	37
Factor 6 – Individual Vulnerabilities	
Lack of capacity	320
Support needs	220
Fear – moved into aged care	30

Abuse in Consumer and Social Relationships

Although the Helpline focuses primarily on abuse in close and intimate relationships, it also receives calls about abuse in consumer and social relationships. Further information about abuse in consumer and social relationships can be found in the Elder Abuse Statistics in Queensland: Companion Document.

In 2023–24, 523 calls about abuse in consumer and social relationships were recorded. Some victims were experiencing abuse in both consumer and social relationships, and thus one call may have generated two cases (one consumer abuse case and one social abuse case). Consequently, cases of abuse in consumer relationships numbered 328 and cases of abuse in social relationships numbered 206.

The most common abuse types recorded for cases involving consumer and social relationships were psychological and financial abuse (Figure 25).
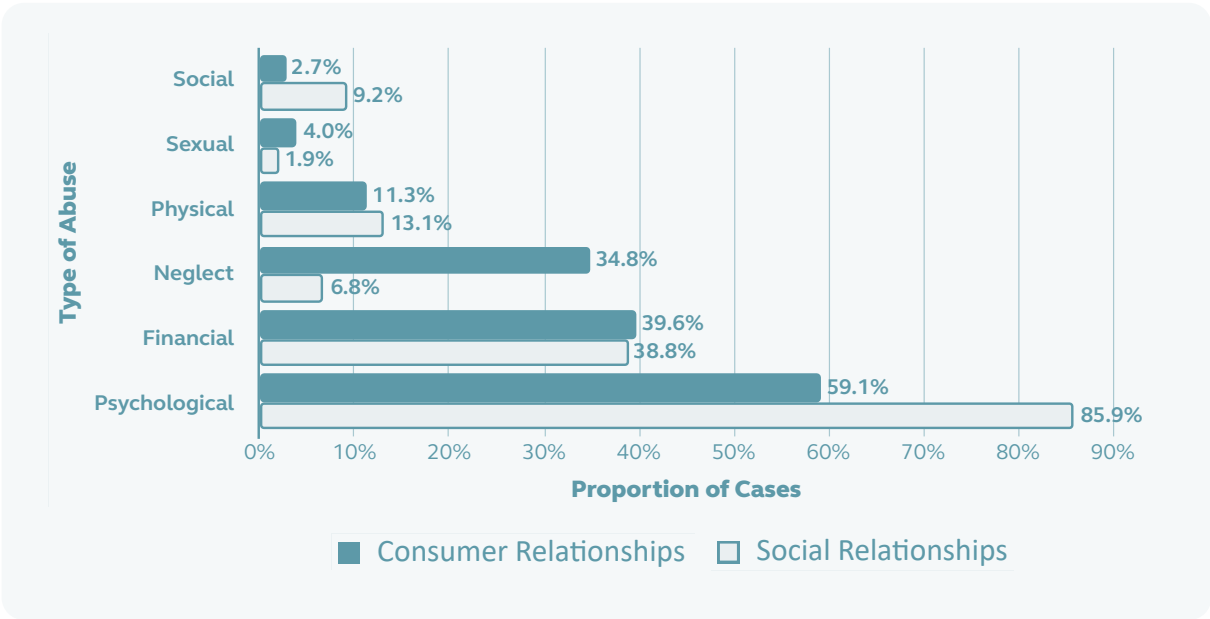

Figure 25. Abuse types reported for abuse involving consumer (n = 328) and social (n = 206) relationships.

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