

# Mistreatment of Chinese Elders

This research brief synthesizes the latest available information and research relating to the mistreatment of Chinese older adults living in the United States, providing insight into general cultural beliefs, views, norms, of Chinese immigrant communities and how they relate to and influence elder mistreatment.



**NOTE:** The majority of research articles reviewed in this brief used a sample from the PINE study (Population-Based Study of Chinese Elderly), a community-engaged and population-based epidemiological study of Chinese older adults (over 60) in the Greater Chicago area.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Despite being referred to as the “model minority”, elder abuse is prevalent in the Chinese community.
- Core values of **filial piety** and **family harmony** profoundly shape the response to elder mistreatment among this population.
- Definitions of **psychological abuse** and **financial exploitation** in the Chinese community are unique compared to other populations.
- Experiences of immigration and acculturation shape an older Chinese immigrant’s experience of elder mistreatment.
- Intervention recommendations include involving family members in educational/support programs, improving communication between elders and adult children, emphasizing traditional cultural values, and increasing care and support for victims, especially women.

## Background and Statistics

In 2018, there were an estimated **5.2 million individuals of Chinese descent** in the United States, making them the largest group within the Asian and Pacific Islander population.<sup>1</sup>



### THE “MODEL MINORITY” MYTH

Research findings of elder abuse among Chinese Americans challenge the so-called “**model minority**” stereotype by showing that violence is a prevalent and long lasting phenomenon among this community.<sup>2</sup>



**MODEL MINORITY**

## Perceptions of Elder Mistreatment

### FILIAL PIETY AND OTHER CORE CULTURAL VALUES

The value of **filial piety** is a key aspect of traditional Chinese Confucianism that is woven into Chinese culture. Filial piety emphasizes the importance of family cohesion and family obligation.<sup>2</sup> Core values of traditional culture, such as collectivism and family harmony, filial piety, marital and gender roles, spirituality, and social characteristics profoundly shape the norms and expectations regarding interpersonal and/or social interactions related to and in response to elder mistreatment within the Chinese community.<sup>3</sup>



**FILIAL PIETY**

Although older Chinese immigrants tend to be more culturally adapted, **many Chinese elders may be deeply affected by cultural norms of collectivism and family harmony which would emphasize group responsibility and sharing of financial resources with family members.**<sup>4</sup> One study found that Chinese elders tend to tolerate conflicts within families such as “destroying your belongings,” “uncomfortable relationship,” and “verbal attack without causing serious emotional outcomes.”<sup>5</sup>



### WHAT IS CONSIDERED ABUSIVE?

Behaviors that were considered to be abusive according to Chinese elders were:



**No help while in need<sup>5</sup>**



**No contacts/indifference<sup>5</sup>**



**Forcing elderly parents to leave when grandchildren grew up<sup>3</sup>**



**Emotional abuse of an elderly parent using immigration status and fear of deportation<sup>3</sup>**

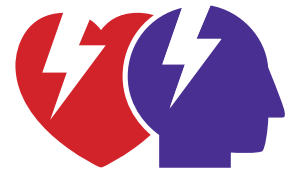
### FAMILY EXPECTATIONS AND FINANCIAL ABUSE

**Cultural norms of collectivism and family harmony might contribute to a Chinese elder's vulnerability to exploitation.**

Chinese elders in one study reported a tendency to support their adult children financially even after they have married and moved away. Participants from both groups also commonly reported the unauthorized use of their income or savings by their adult children and the unauthorized transfers of legal titles. Many immigrant elders relied on their children for things like managing bank accounts, using ATM cards, or receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security benefits. Such dependence might aggravate the elders' vulnerability to exploitation. Although all participants considered the unauthorized use of an elderly person's money by a non-family member to be exploitive and reportable, **elderly victims were less likely to report financial exploitation committed by a family member.**<sup>3</sup>

### EMOTIONAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

Chinese participants in one study expressed that being disrespected and ignored by their adult children were the worst forms of psychological abuse they could face. **The most frequently described dimension of elder mistreatment was psychological or emotional abuse.** Many Chinese elders perceived being disrespected, ignored, or excluded particularly distressing and psychologically abusive. A unique form of psychological abuse identified by this community was the “silent treatment”, which was commonly perceived as an extreme form of psychological humiliation or punishment.<sup>3</sup>



### IMMIGRATION-RELATED ABUSE AND SEXUAL ABUSE

Chinese participants in the same study referenced above expressed that **immigrant elders confronted additional forms of psychological, financial, and sexual abuse.**<sup>3</sup> Chinese experts in the same study commented that identifying elder sexual abuse is especially challenging since it is a culturally taboo subject.<sup>3</sup>



## Prevalence

Prevalence estimates of **elder abuse among the Chinese community range between 10.2% and 25.8%**, with a variation in definitions, geographic location, and sample size. Below is a summary of prevalence estimates.

SAMPLE SIZE	PREVALENCE OF ELDER ABUSE	SOURCE
266	<b>10.2%</b>	<i>Gao, Sun, &amp; Hodge, 2019</i>
2,713	<b>8.8%</b>	<i>Dong &amp; Wang, 2017</i>
3,159	<b>25.8%</b> (using least restrictive criteria) <b>13.9%</b> (using the most restrictive criteria)	<i>Dong, 2014</i>
3,159	<b>15.2%</b>	<i>Wang &amp; Dong, 2019</i>
3,159	<b>15%</b>	<i>Dong et al., 2014</i>

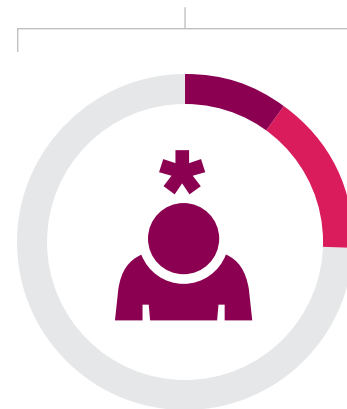
### By Family Members

In a study of 266 Chinese elders, the prevalence of **elder abuse perpetrated by family members was 10.2%**.<sup>5</sup>

### Older Chinese Women

In a study of 1,833 Chinese older women, **15.9% indicated suffering from some form of mistreatment**.<sup>6</sup>

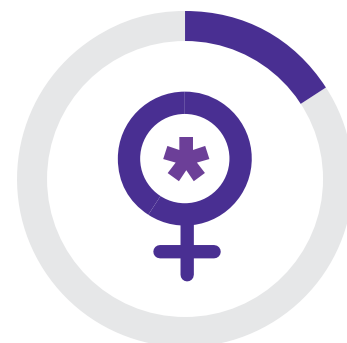
## Prevalence of Elder Abuse



Among the Chinese community



By family members



Among women

### FREQUENTLY REPORTED REPORTED FORMS OF ABUSE

The most frequently reported forms of abuse in the studies reviewed for this brief were:



**Financial exploitation<sup>7</sup>**



**Feeling uncomfortable with someone in the family<sup>8</sup>**



**Psychological<sup>9</sup>**



**Caregiver neglect<sup>4</sup>**

## Protective Factors



**Social Support:** One study found that Chinese elders with higher levels of overall positive social support, positive social support from spouse, and positive social support from family members were found to be less likely to experience elder mistreatment.<sup>16</sup>



**Tight-Knit Family Structure:** A tight-knit type of family structure has been found to be a protective factor for elder mistreatment among Chinese immigrants whereas unobligated, ambivalent, and detached family types were associated with higher risks of elder mistreatment.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, another study found that Chinese older adults lacking family cohesion were more likely to experience general elder mistreatment.<sup>5</sup>

## RISK FACTORS

**Age:** A study of 266 Chinese elders found that younger age was associated with elder abuse.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, another study found that the over-80 age group had the greatest odds of overall self-neglect across severities.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, another study found that older age was associated with a higher risk for elder mistreatment.<sup>11</sup>

**Gender:** One study found men were at greater risk of elder mistreatment and for financial exploitation.<sup>11</sup> In regards to caregiver neglect, a different study found that female gender is associated with increased risk.<sup>9</sup>

**Education Level:** One study reported that the lowest educated older adults had the lowest prevalence of moderately-defined elder mistreatment and all definitions of financial exploitation.<sup>11</sup>

**Income:** One study found that older adults with the highest income levels had the highest prevalence of strictly-defined overall elder mistreatment and all definitions of financial exploitation.<sup>11</sup>

**Physical Impairment/Health Status:** One study found that lower physical function was associated with greater risk of elder self-neglect.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, another study found a greater level of physical function impairment to be significantly associated with lower risk of elder mistreatment among Chinese elders.<sup>13</sup>

**Duration of Residence in the U.S.:** One study found that higher levels of acculturation were positively associated with elder abuse and emotional abuse.<sup>14</sup> A different study also found that longer duration of residence in the U.S. was associated with increased risk of financial abuse.<sup>9</sup>

**History of Child Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV):** One study found that individuals with a history of child maltreatment were associated with 2 times higher odds of IPV and elder abuse, and those who had experienced IPV were associated with almost 6 times higher odds of elder abuse.<sup>15</sup> Another study found that psychological elder abuse, physical/sexual elder abuse and financial exploitation were more prevalent among those who experienced child maltreatment and IPV.<sup>2</sup>

**History of Depression:** One study discovered that depressed Chinese elders are more likely to experience elder abuse, in line with previous studies on elder abuse in Mainland Chinese older adults.<sup>5</sup>



## Effects of Elder Mistreatment

### ANXIETY/DEPRESSION

One study found that participants who experienced any mistreatment were more likely to have anxiety and depressive symptoms than those who did not. Participants who experienced physical mistreatment had the highest odds of reporting anxiety. Caregiver neglect was associated with anxiety symptoms and depressive symptoms.<sup>4</sup>

### MORTALITY & SUICIDAL IDEATION

Elder mistreatment is a risk factor for mortality over time among this population. One study found that moderate and severe elder mistreatment were significantly associated with risk of mortality over time. **Threats to send older adults to a nursing home or to abandon them were associated with greater risk of mortality than other types of psychological mistreatment.**

Caregiver neglect was also associated with significantly greater risk of mortality.<sup>18</sup> Another study found that elder mistreatment was significantly associated with increased risk for suicidal ideation.<sup>19</sup>



## Tips for Working With Chinese Elders and Advancing Research



### **Be Sensitive to Different Cultural Definitions of Elder Abuse**

When assessing elder abuse among Chinese elders, particularly when assessing potential financial abuse situations, practitioners should be aware of how culture shapes definitions of such abuse.<sup>7</sup>



### **Recognize the Importance of Family Members**

Given the important role of family in the Chinese community, healthcare professionals should integrate family participation into healthcare services to enhance the spousal and family positive support.<sup>18</sup>



### **A Potential Screening Tool**

Gao and colleagues developed a **10-item elder mistreatment screening assessment tool** that is both culturally and linguistically appropriate and may aid Chinese older adults themselves, family members, and service professionals to quickly identify elder mistreatment among Chinese elders. Future research may use the screening assessment tool and replicate the study in other locations.<sup>5</sup>



### **Intervention Recommendations**

The following intervention strategies have been recommended for protecting Chinese elders: :

- Provide services entailing improved communication, understanding, and relationship building between aging parents in Chinese communities and their adult children's families.<sup>3</sup>
- Focus on increasing help-seeking behaviors among Chinese communities through the alleviation of negative consequences (e.g., arrest of abusive family member, deportation), reduction of stigma, and the promotion of education on reporting and advocacy.<sup>3</sup>
- Include family members in both educational programs and support groups to understand the cultural needs of elder parents.<sup>5,8</sup>
- Develop interventions that emphasize the assets of the culture while helping participants identify risks.<sup>5</sup> For example, more workshops or other educational opportunities could be offered to foster the Chinese traditional cultural value of "revering elders and caring the young."<sup>20</sup> Programs could focus on building "bi-cultural" identities among older adults and their adult children and could promote filial piety, which may have a protective effect against elder mistreatment.<sup>20</sup>
- Increase support and care for older adults who have been mistreated so as to prevent suicidal ideation arising from elder mistreatment.<sup>19</sup>
- Reduce caregiver burden and promote home care services to reduce caregiver neglect.<sup>11</sup>
- Provide special attention to elder mistreatment in older women and be aware of their heightened risk for suicidal ideation.<sup>6,19</sup> Gender-based interventions such as women's counseling groups could be designed to provide support and empowerment.<sup>6</sup>

#### RESEARCH NEEDED

Additional research is needed on cultural norms and expectations concerning the perception, determinants, and impacts of elder mistreatment and psychological well-being in Chinese elders.<sup>4</sup>



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