Elder Abuse Prevalence and Incidence

No one knows precisely how many older Americans are being abused, neglected, or exploited. While evidence accumulated to date suggests that many thousands have been harmed, there are no official national statistics. There are several reasons:

- Definitions of elder abuse vary. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what actions or inactions constitute abuse, and the problem remains greatly hidden.
- State statistics vary widely as there is no uniform reporting system.
- Comprehensive national data are not collected.

In the absence of a large-scale, nationwide tracking system, studies of prevalence and incidence conducted over the past few years by independent investigators have been crucial in helping us to understand the magnitude of the problem.

This fact sheet highlights some of the most widely used estimates of elder abuse prevalence and incidence in the United States today. Readers are strongly encouraged to consult the original studies for further information.

What Do the Studies Say?

Prevalence

- According to the best available estimates, between 1 and 2 million Americans age 65 or older have been injured, exploited, or otherwise mistreated by someone on whom they depended for care or protection.

- Estimates of the frequency of elder abuse range from 2% to 10% based on various sampling, survey methods, and case definitions.

- Data on elder abuse in domestic settings suggest that 1 in 14 incidents, excluding incidents of self-neglect, come to the attention of authorities.

- Current estimates put the overall reporting of financial exploitation at only 1 in 25 cases, suggesting that there may be at least 5 million financial abuse victims each year.

- It is estimated that for every one case of elder abuse, neglect, exploitation, or self-neglect reported to authorities, about five more go unreported.

About Prevalence and Incidence

Prevalence refers to the total number of people who have experienced abuse, neglect, or exploitation in a specified time period.

Incidence is the number of new cases identified or reported at a given point in time—usually one year.

Many factors affect actual prevalence and incidence. National estimates may vary, due to differences in research methods, sample sizes, and definitions across studies.

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“Population-based surveys of elder mistreatment occurrence are feasible and should be given a high priority.”

**Incidence**

- In 1996, nearly 450,000 adults aged 60 and over were abused and/or neglected in domestic settings. Factoring in self-neglect, the total number of incidents was approximately 551,000.

- A University of Iowa study based on 1999 data found 190,003 domestic elder abuse reports from 17 states; 242,430 domestic elder abuse investigations from 47 states; and 102,879 substantiations from 35 states. Significantly higher investigation rates were found for states that require mandatory reporting and tracking of reports.

- In 2000, states were asked to indicate the number of elder/adult reports received in the most recent year for which data were available. Based on figures from 54 states, the total number of reports was 472,813.

- In 2003, state Long Term Care Ombudsman programs nationally investigated 20,673 complaints of abuse, gross neglect, and exploitation on behalf of nursing home and board and care residents. Among seven types of abuse categories, physical abuse was the most common type reported.

**Finding Data and Statistics**

The Clearinghouse on Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly (CANE) Annotated Bibliography: “The Scope of Elder Abuse: Prevalence, Incidence, and Estimates” is available to assist scholars, policymakers, and others interested in finding additional data and statistics.

Search CANE’s abstracts database at db.rdms.udel.edu:8080/CANE/index.jsp. For assistance, e-mail CANE-UD@udel.edu. Selected statistics and links to state data sources may also be accessed through the NCEA Web site elderabusecenter.org.

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