

New study finds elders living alone with abuser more likely to endure severe mistreatment

3 March 2016, by Dominic Ali

A new study examining elder abuse—released today by researchers at the University of Toronto, Cornell University, and Weill-Cornell Medical College—has found that older adult victims living alone with their abuser were up to four times more likely to endure more severe levels of mistreatment. The study suggests that the addition of non-perpetrators also living in the home played a protective function to buffer severity.

"Older adults are particularly vulnerable to severe mistreatment when the abuser has unrestricted and uninhibited access to the victim", said co-author Dr. Karl Pillemer, Hazel E. Reed Professor at Cornell University's Department of Human Development and Professor of Gerontology at the Weill Cornell Medical College.

Research on [older adults](#) tends to categorize subjects according to different age groups, including the "youngest old" (ages 60 to 74) and the "oldest old" (ages 85 and up). One surprising finding was that across each type of elder abuse, it was the "youngest old" who experienced the most severe forms of mistreatment.

"These findings challenge the prevailing belief that the oldest old are more vulnerable to the most severe forms of elder abuse, although we need more research that includes older adults with cognitive impairment and those living in long-term care settings," said co-author Dr. Mark Lachs, Psaty Distinguished Professor of Medicine and Co-Chief of Geriatrics at the Weill Cornell Medical College and Director of Geriatrics at the New York Presbyterian Health System.

"Previous studies on elder abuse have found that approximately one in ten older adults experience some form of elder abuse," says lead author Dr. David Burnes, an assistant professor with the

University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. "As the population of older adults in North America nearly doubles over the next 25 years, this problem will just get bigger. Older adults who are abused have shorter lifespans, and are more likely to be hospitalized and experience mental health issues."

Previous studies have largely explored elder abuse in general yes/no terms, but this study examined different forms of elder abuse along a continuum of severity. "We know that the yes/no characterization of [elder abuse](#) does not capture the complex, lived reality of mistreatment or align with the way clinicians examine and intervene on the problem", says the University of Toronto's Dr. David Burnes.

Data for the study came from a large-scale, representative sample of 4,156 cognitively intact, community-dwelling older adults across New York State. Among older adults reporting physical abuse since age 60, more than two-thirds (62 per cent) reported being abused in the past year and 11 per cent experienced over ten physically abusive events in the past year.

More information: David Burnes et al. Elder Abuse Severity: A Critical but Understudied Dimension of Victimization for Clinicians and Researchers, *The Gerontologist* (2016). DOI: [10.1093/geront/gnv688](https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnv688)

Provided by University of Toronto

APA citation: New study finds elders living alone with abuser more likely to endure severe mistreatment (2016, March 3) retrieved 22 April 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-03-elders-abuser-severe-mistreatment.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.