

Family violence against seniors¹

by Mia Dauvergne

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Persons aged 65 years and older constitute one of the fastest growing segments of the Canadian population. In 2001, an estimated 3.9 million seniors made up 13% of the country's population; population projections estimate that, by 2026, older Canadians will number almost 8 million, or about 21% of the population.

One potential effect from Canada's "greying" population is a possible rise in the incidence of abuse towards seniors. Shrinking health and social services in the early 1990s, as well as the shift away from institutional care for the aged, will likely increase the demand on family members to provide care for their older relatives.² This may expose a greater number of seniors to the risk of domestic abuse. With each passing year, the need to quantify and understand abuse against older adults by family members will become increasingly important. This article focuses on violence committed against seniors.

Abuse against older adults³

As with all forms of family violence, abuse and neglect of older adults is largely a hidden problem. And since seniors are vulnerable to frailty, poor physical or mental health, and financial or emotional dependency, they may be more at risk for mistreatment. Abuse can occur in private dwellings or in institutions at the hands of spouses, children, other relatives, caregivers or other persons in situations of power and/or trust.⁴ The physical, psychological, social, and

economic consequences of abuse and neglect can be devastating for older adults who may be isolated, on fixed incomes or unable to seek help.

Several theories have tried to explain the existence of abuse against older adults.⁵ The most widely accepted explanation suggests that stressful situations — usually the physical or mental impairment of the older person — cause the caregiver to be abusive. Others contend that abuse against seniors occurs because of learned behaviour: abusers model

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1. In this article "seniors" and "older adults" are used interchangeably to refer to persons aged 65 years or older.
 2. McDaniel, S.A. and E.M. Gee. 1993. "Social policies regarding caregiving to elders: Canadian contradictions." *Journal of Aging and Social Policy* 5, 1-2: 57-72.
 3. See "What you should know about this study" for a discussion about the difficulties of defining senior abuse.
 4. McDonald, L. and A. Collins. 2000. *Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults: A Discussion Paper*. Ottawa: Health Canada, The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.
 5. McDonald and Collins. 2000; Phillips, L.R. 1986. "Theoretical explanations of elder abuse: Competing hypotheses and unresolved issues." In *Elder Abuse: Conflict in the Family*. Edited by K.A. Pillemer and R.S. Wolf. Dover, Ma: Auburn House Publishing Company.

This article uses self-reported data from the 1999 General Social Survey (GSS) on victimization, which is the most recent survey data available on abuse against older adults. The GSS interviewed more than 4,000 older Canadians living in private households about their experiences regarding emotional and financial abuse as well as physical and sexual violence by children, caregivers and spouses.¹ This article also draws on detailed police data available from the Incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR2) Survey, which collects information about the frequency and type of violent crime, as well as characteristics about victims and accused persons. However, the results are not nationally representative: in 2000, 166 police forces in nine provinces participated in the UCR2, representing 53% of the national volume of reported crime.

Currently, there is no uniform definition of abuse against seniors. Abuse can take many different forms and include such behaviour as physical assault, emotional/psychological abuse, financial manipulation or exploitation, and neglect. Other forms of abuse include sexual abuse, medicinal abuse (e.g. withholding medication or over-medicating), systemic abuse (i.e. procedures and processes within institutions that allow harmful situations to be created or maintained), violation of civic/human rights (e.g. denial of privacy, denial of visitors, restriction of liberty, mail censorship) and abandonment.

violence after witnessing or suffering from abuse. Some theorists assert that physical, emotional and financial dependencies between the victim and the abuser contribute to abuse. Still others believe that abuse against older adults is spousal abuse "grown old" and question whether spousal abuse is ever first-time abuse in old age. Finally, some researchers and practitioners believe that mistreatment of seniors reflect, at least in some part,

prejudicial societal attitudes and beliefs towards the elderly.⁶

Prevalence of abuse against older adults

Data from the 1999 General Social Survey (GSS) show that about 7% of seniors reported experiencing some form of emotional or financial abuse by an adult child, caregiver or spouse in the five-year period preceding the survey. Emotional abuse was reported

Limitations of data on violence against seniors

Estimates of the extent of abuse against older adults are available from two types of data sources: 1) victimization surveys based upon self-reported accounts of violence; and 2) police statistics. Both have some drawbacks that may result in an under-representation of the problem. Surveys capture only what victims themselves disclose; also, the household telephone survey method that is frequently used to gather this type of information does not reach respondents who do not have a telephone or who are infirm, suffer from hearing difficulties, live in institutions or who may be isolated in some other way.

Data from police records cannot provide information on abuse that does not come to the attention of police. Older people who are mentally or physically impaired may not be capable of reporting an incident of abuse or describing its details. Or, if a report is made, it may not be believed. Victims may fear reprisals from the aggressor or negative consequences such as being removed from their home and placed in an institution if they file a report. Financial abuse, such as fraud or theft, may occur without the senior's knowledge.

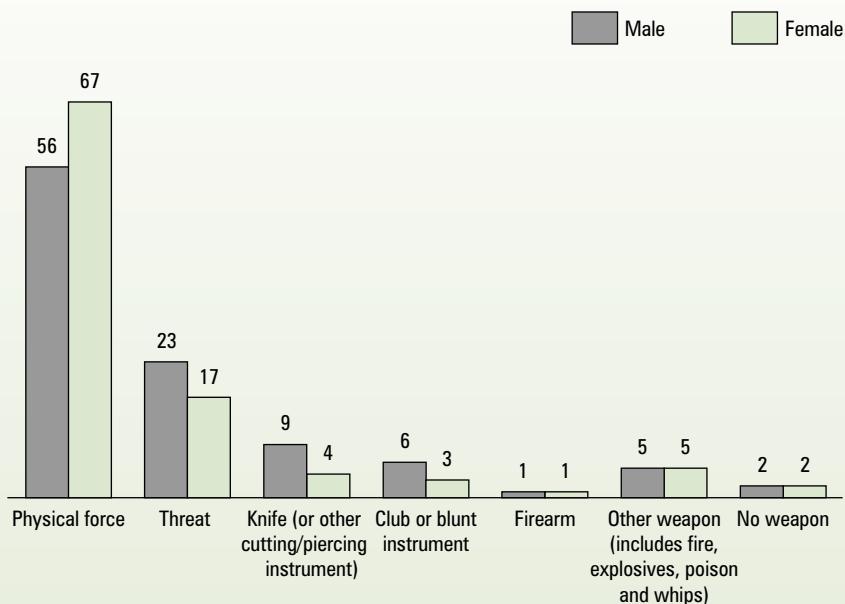
1. Senior respondents were not asked about sexual assaults by children. A caregiver is defined as anyone, either paid or unpaid, who provides assistance or health care in the respondent's home. This includes meal preparation, personal care or medical assistance. Spouses include current, former and common-law partners.

most frequently (7%), followed by financial abuse (1%) and physical or sexual violence (1%). Almost 2% of older Canadians said they had experienced more than one type of abuse.

6. Harbison, J. 1999. "Models of intervention for elder abuse and neglect: A Canadian perspective on ageism, participation, and empowerment." *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect* 10, 3-4: 1-17.

Physical force was the most common method of family violence against seniors

% of victims of family violence aged 65 and over



Note: Data are not nationally representative, being based on data from 166 police departments representing 53% of the national volume of crime in 2000. Excludes Toronto. Excludes cases where most serious weapon was unknown. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR2) Survey, 2000.

Emotional and financial abuse against older adults cuts across all socio-demographic lines. However, some characteristics are associated with higher rates of emotional and financial victimization by family members. These include being a man, being divorced or separated, having some postsecondary schooling and living in a rural area.⁷

Common assault most frequent offence experienced by seniors in 2000

In addition to data from the 1999 GSS, this study uses detailed information available from police records. While these statistics only capture a portion of all episodes of violence suffered by older adults, they do yield important analytical insights because

7. Pottie Bunge, V. 2000. "Abuse of older adults by family members." In *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, 2000*. Edited by V. Pottie Bunge and D. Locke. (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-224).

Over one-quarter of senior victims of violent crime had been victimized by a family member

Victimized by:	Number of victims			% of victims		
	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male
Family member	1,006	649	357	28	36	19
Spouse	312	236	76	31	36	21
Parent	53	28	25	5	4	7
Adult child	398	243	155	40	37	43
Sibling	110	60	50	11	9	14
Extended family	133	82	51	13	13	14
Non-family person	2,407	1,052	1,355	66	59	74
Unknown person	214	91	123	6	5	7
Total	3,627	1,792	1,835	100	100	100

Note: Data are not nationally representative, being based on data from 166 police departments representing 53% of the national volume of crime in 2000.

Family data excludes cases where relationship between victim and accused was unknown.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR2) Survey, 2000.

Between 1974 and 2000, the overall average annual homicide rate against seniors was 1.7 per 100,000, or about 45 older victims per year. (The average annual rate for the general population during this period is 2.4 per 100,000, or 637 victims per year.) The rate peaked during the 1970s and has been gradually declining (with some fluctuations) over the past 20 years. In 2000, the rate was 1.2 per 100,000 population aged 65 and over (and 1.8 per 100,000 for the general population). In that year, family members were responsible for 26% of senior homicides (10 homicides) and non-family members, primarily casual acquaintances, for the remaining 74%.

Among those senior homicides committed by family members between 1974 and 2000, spouses were the most likely perpetrators (39%), followed by adult children (37%) and extended family members (24%). More than half (52%) of the older female victims of family homicide were killed by their spouses

compared to one-quarter (25%) of older male victims. In contrast, older men were almost twice as likely as older women to be killed by their adult sons (42% versus 24%).

Many studies identify a history of family violence as a risk factor for family homicide. A 1997 study identified it as a particularly strong predictor of female homicide at the hands of a spouse or other family member.¹ According to data from the Homicide Survey, between 1997 and 2000,² 43% of persons accused of murdering a senior family member had a history of family violence with the victim.

1. Bailey, J.E., A.L. Kellermann, G.W. Somes, J.G. Banton, F.P. Rivara and N.P. Rushforth. 1997. "Risk factors for violent death in the home." *Archives of Internal Medicine* 157: 777-782.
2. Data prior to 1997 on the history of domestic violence between the accused and victim are largely unavailable.

they usually represent the most serious cases.

In 2000, according to police-reported statistics, common assault was the most frequent offence experienced by older adults from family members (54%). Many seniors were victims of uttering threats (21%) and assault with a weapon or causing bodily harm (13%). This pattern was the case regardless of whether the victim was female or male. On the other hand, offences committed by non-family members were slightly different, with almost one-third (30%) of older victims being a victim of robbery.

Physical force⁸ was the most serious form of violence present in assaults by family members, although it was more common against older women than older men — 67% compared with 56%. On the other hand, older men were more likely to

have been victimized by someone with a weapon.

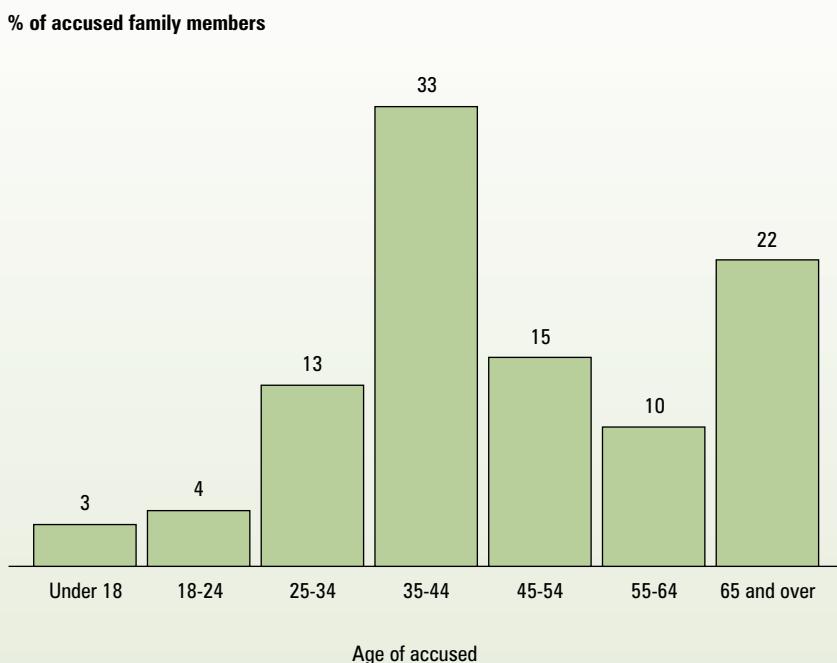
Men are most likely perpetrators of family violence against older adults⁹

In general, police-reported data show that men are the most likely perpetrators of violence in the family. This is also the case when the victimized person is a senior: in 2000, 80% of people accused of violently victimizing an older family member were men.

In cases of family violence towards seniors, adult children and spouses accounted for almost three-quarters (71%) of victimizations. Older men were most often victims of their adult children (43%) whereas older women were just as likely to be victims of their spouses (36%) as their adult children (37%). These relationships are reflected in the ages of the accused persons. More than half (54%) of

family members accused of violent offences against older adults were either aged 35 to 44 years (the children) or 65 years or older (the spouse).

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8. Physical force involves the use of one's own body strength and/or action (choking, pushing or punching) that is intended to cause bodily injury or death. Classification is based on the most serious weapon present during the incident, even though it may not have been used against the victim. Due to data quality issues that result in physical force being coded as "other," Toronto is excluded from the analysis on methods of violence.
 9. Analysis of accused characteristics is based only on those incidents for which there was a single accused and are derived from a subset of incidents from the UCR2 Survey, which itself only represents 53% of the national volume of crime.



Note: Data are not nationally representative, being based on data from 166 police departments representing 53% of the national volume of crime in 2000. Excludes cases where age of the accused was unknown. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR2) Survey, 2000.

costs to the civil and criminal justice systems, the health care system, community services, and business and labour market institutions. Assessing the full extent of these costs is a complex and difficult task. While some Canadian studies have attempted to estimate the cost of violence against women, none has yet attempted to single out the costs associated with violence against older adults.

10. Data for patients admitted for at least one night; does not include individuals treated on an outpatient basis.



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Consequences of family violence against older adults

Older victims of family violence may be more vulnerable to complications resulting from physical violence than younger victims. For instance, physical injuries could exacerbate pre-existing health problems or inhibit a senior's ability to function independently.

In 2000, a considerable proportion of older victims suffered minor injuries (37%), while major physical injuries or death accounted for 2% of violent crimes committed by family members. Although hospitalization data are limited because they do not identify the perpetrator's relationship to the victim, statistics for 1999-2000 indicate that 135 women and 146 men aged 65 years or older were admitted to hospital for an injury resulting from an intentional violent incident.¹⁰ Fights and assaults were the most frequent

cause of injury requiring admission to hospital among both older men and older women.

Summary

Most Canadian provinces and territories have introduced special adult protection or guardianship legislation designed to protect seniors from abuse and neglect. However, considerable controversy surrounds the issue. Proponents of the legal approach argue that legislative interventions safeguard the rights and improve the level of functioning of older adults. Critics, on the other hand, maintain that legislative responses promote ageism and fail to respect older people's independence by assuming that they are incapable of seeking help on their own.

Abuse and neglect of seniors also have widespread social and economic