

## DOMESTIC ABUSE IN LATER LIFE\*

### Relationships

How are abusers related to older victims of abuse? Are the majority of abusers adult children, spouses/partners or other family members? The answers to these questions are important in designing services and interventions that meet the needs of victims. This paper will examine research that provides information about the relationships between the victim and the abuser.

This series of papers\* defines domestic abuse in later life as male and female victims, age 50 and older, abused by someone in a trusted, ongoing relationship like a spouse/partner, family member, or caregiver. The victims lived primarily in the community, not institutions (e.g., nursing homes). Studies from the United States and Canada were included.

### ARTICLES REVIEWED

Twenty articles published between 1988 and 2000 were reviewed for this article.

<b>Author(s) Pub. Date</b>	<b>Sample size and demographics</b>	<b>Type(s) of abuse covered*</b>	<b>Selected finding(s) (page number/s in parentheses)</b>
Phillips, et al 2000	93 cases of women aged 55+ caring for dependent spouse or other elder family member	Verbal and physical abuse; threatened with gun/knife; gun or knife used -- all by the elder for whom they were caring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 29% of the caregivers had been abused by the elder they were caring for. (128)</li> <li>• Wives reported significantly more abuse than did daughters. (134)</li> </ul>
Teaster, et al 2000	42 substantiated cases of sexual abuse against persons 60+, collected over a 3-year period in Virginia	APS-substantiated cases of elder sexual abuse	Relationship to victim included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family member in household (7.5%)</li> <li>• Non-relative in household (5.0%)</li> <li>• Non-relative living outside household (5.0%)</li> <li>• Facility staff (7.5%)</li> <li>• Facility resident (75%) (10)</li> </ul>
Brownell,	401 elder abuse	Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 39% of abusers adult children (86)</li> </ul>

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\* This series of articles is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Rosalie Wolf, internationally renowned researcher on elder abuse and domestic abuse in later life. We miss her gentle guidance, wisdom, and dedication to elder victims.

♦ This article is part of a series of papers examining research on domestic abuse in later life. To link to the other articles, see the note at the conclusion of this paper.

\* For a chart with a more detailed description of the different definitions of abuse, see National Center on Elder Abuse website at [www.elderabusecenter.org](http://www.elderabusecenter.org).

et al 1999	cases 60+ known to Victims Resource Center in New York City	(including one case of sexual abuse), psychological, financial abuse and neglect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 22% of abusers non-relatives (86)</li> <li>• 15% of abusers relatives other than child/spouse (86)</li> <li>• 8% of abusers partners/spouses (86)</li> </ul>
Crichton et al 1999	50 Canadians age 60+ abused by adult child; 50 abused by spouse from Elder Abuse Resource Center in Winnipeg	Agency-substantiated cases of physical, psychological, and material abuse; neglect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of 50 adult child cases, 34 perpetrators were sons, 19 daughters. (122)</li> <li>• Of 50 spouse cases, 43 perpetrators were husbands, 7 wives. (122)</li> </ul>
Lithwick and Beaulieu 1999	128 cases of mistreatment of adults aged 60+ brought to the attention of community service agencies in Quebec	Physical, sexual or psychological abuse; financial and material exploitation; neglect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spouse was perpetrator in 48% cases; adult child in 30% of the cases. (101)</li> </ul>
Vladescu, et al 1999	26 abused elders (age limit unspecified) served between 1/1/97 - 1/1/99 by Seniors' Case Management program in Hamilton, Ontario; focus group of 3 case managers	Physical, psychological, and financial abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Son or daughter (including in-law) was abuser in 61.5% of cases. (13)</li> <li>• Spouse was abuser in 23.1% of cases. (13)</li> </ul>
NCEA National Elder Abuse Incidence Study 1998	APS reports and community "sentinel" reports of abused and neglected persons age 60+ from 20 counties in 15 states in U.S.	Physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, neglect, abandonment, financial or material exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "[F]amily members were the perpetrators in nine out of ten (89.7%) substantiated incidents of domestic elder abuse and neglect." Actual breakdowns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 47.3% adult children of victim</li> <li>○ 19.3% spouses</li> <li>○ 8.8% other relatives</li> <li>○ 8.6% grandchildren</li> <li>○ 5.7% siblings (7, 4-28)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Otiniano 1998	24,648 Hispanic elders referred to	Cases referred to APS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The most common perpetrator was adult children (47.7%), followed by</li> </ul>

	the Texas APS system from 1991-1995		spouse (12.3%). (194)
Bachman, et al 1998	Data from National Crime Victimization Survey for 1992 – 1994, approximately 50,000 housing units and 101,000 persons annually.	Robbery and assault	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The majority of [assault] victimizations [for both younger and older men and women] are perpetrated by friends and acquaintances.” (193)</li> <li>• “Females...have a distinctive vulnerability to assault by intimates (husbands, boyfriends etc) and other family members. Approximately one-quarter of all lone-offender assaults against women were perpetrated by intimates or other family members.” (193)</li> </ul>
Lachs, et al 1997 (a)	2,812 adults 65 and older from a stratified sample of residences in Connecticut; 47 were substantiated cases	Physical abuse, neglect, and exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The most common perpetrators of mistreatment were adult children (45%), followed by spouses (26%). (471)</li> </ul>
Lachs, et al 1997 (b)	182 victims of physical abuse aged 60+ from New Haven, Connecticut	APS-substantiated cases of physical abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult son was abuser in 28.9% of cases. (450)</li> <li>• Spouse was abuser in 26.8% of cases. (450)</li> <li>• Adult daughter was abuser in 21.6% of cases (450)</li> </ul>
Wolf and Pillemer 1997	73 abused women aged 60+ from 4 U.S. cities. 22 were abused by husband, 51 by children (review of written case assessment data)	Physical abuse, psychological abuse, neglect, financial exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 57% of adult child abusers were sons; 43% were daughters. (328)</li> <li>• “[W]ives were more apt to experience physical abuse from their husbands than the mothers from the sons (77.3% vs. 48.3%).”<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>
Seaver 1996	132 women aged 50+ who have attended older abused women’s program in	Unspecified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 58% of the abusers were husbands (16)</li> <li>• 42% were adult children or other kin. (16)</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> This quote was cut off in the version of the article published by the *Journal of Mental Health and Aging*. A paper including the rest of the quote was obtained directly from one of the authors; the quote was on page 7 of this version.

	Milwaukee, WI		
Pittaway 1993	605 adults aged 55-100 who accessed health and social service organizations in London, Ontario during a 3-month period	Physical abuse (including sexual abuse), chronic verbal aggression, material abuse (actual and attempted), and neglect (intentional and unintentional)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Most physical abuse and all cases of sexual assault in later life are perpetrated by spouses.” (84)</li> <li>• “Spouses are the most common source of chronic verbal aggression.” (86)</li> </ul>
Vinton 1992	25 battered women’s shelters in FL; “older” was defined as 60+	Unspecified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 95% of older women were battered by spouse; 3% by son; 2% by daughter, and 2% by other relative or nonrelative. (68)</li> </ul>
Podnieks 1992 (a)	Random sample telephone survey of 2008 persons 65+ living in community settings in Canada	Physical abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of 11 physical abuse cases, spouse was the abuser in 9 cases, a son and a roomer the abuser in the other 2 cases. (26)</li> </ul>
Ramsey-Klawnsnik 1991	28 community-dwelling older (ages 65 – 101) women suspected by MA APS workers of being sexually abused	APS suspicion elder was sexually abused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “In 81% of the cases, the suspected offenders were caregivers, and 78% were family members (primarily sons and husbands.) (81)</li> <li>• Relationship to victim (n = 28) husband--7; boyfriend--1; son--11; grandson--1; brother--2; boarder--2; friend--1; distant relative--1; and unrelated caregiver--1 (81)</li> </ul>
Greenberg et al 1990	204 cases of abuse of person 60+ by adult child in Wisconsin	APS-substantiated cases of physical abuse, material abuse, and neglect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 61% of perpetrators were sons, 39% daughters. (77)</li> <li>• Dyads were 43% mother-son; 33% mother-daughter; 19% father-son; 5% father-daughter. (77)</li> <li>• 67% of father-son cases involved physical abuse. (78)</li> </ul>
Godkin, et al 1989	59 abused elders (60 years and older) compared to 49 non-abused elders, both served by a	Physical, psychological, and material abuse; active and passive neglect by a caregiver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In all but 12% of cases, the abuser was a family member. (212)</li> <li>• Husbands were abusers in 25% of cases; sons in 23%, and daughters in 18.6% of cases. (212)</li> </ul>

	Massachusetts home care program		
Pillemer and Finkelhor 1988	Random sample of 2020 community dwelling people aged 65+ in Boston, Massachusetts; 63 cases of elder abuse found	Physical assault, psychological abuse, and neglect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nearly three-fifths of the perpetrators were spouses (23 wives, 14 husbands); in 15 cases the abusers were adult children (10 sons, 5 daughters); and in 11 cases, the abusers were grandchildren, siblings, or boarders. (54)</li> <li>• 43% of the physical violence cases were of wife assaulting husband, and 17% were of husband assaulting wife. (54)</li> <li>• “Many more elders were abused by spouses (58%) than adult children (contrary to predominant image).” (55)</li> <li>• “There were no statistically significant differences between spouse perpetrators and child perpetrators in the level of violence they inflicted, in the number of injuries they caused or in the degree of upset they engendered in their victims.” However, only 6% of males abused by wives were injured versus 57% of women abused by husbands, and the abused women were almost twice as likely as the abused men to be “very upset” by the abuse. (55-56)</li> </ul>

## GENERALIZED FINDINGS

In the vast majority of cases, family members are the abusers of elders. In the National Elder Abuse Incidence Study, the abusers were family members in 90 percent of cases (NEAIS, 1998). This is contrary to the image that elder abuse is caused primarily by paid caregivers and/or strangers. However, one study (cases of sexual abuse primarily in institutions) found the majority of sexual assaults were perpetrated by other facility residents (Teaster, 2000), and Bachman (1998) found that only about ¼ of “lone offender assaults” against women (of all ages) were perpetrated by “intimates or other family members.”

Studies that broke out spouse/partner abuse versus adult children as perpetrators can be divided into 3 categories: reported cases through aging or adult protective services; random sample studies; and cases where the victims were using a domestic violence program. In reported cases, the abuser was an adult child more often than spouse in every study (Brownell,

1999; Vladescu, 1999; NEAIS, 1998; Otiniano, 1998; Lachs, 1997a and 1997b; Wolf, 1997; Godkin, 1989) except one (Lithwick, 1999).

In contrast, both the random sample studies and studies done on domestic violence services found more spouse/partner abuse than abuse by adult children. Two random sample studies found significantly more spouse abuse (Podnieks, 1992a; Pillemer, 1988). Domestic violence programs also saw significantly more spouse abuse. Two studies found 58% - 95% of women they work with abused by spouses (Seaver, 1996; Vinton, 1992). Since domestic violence programs generally focus their services on “intimate partner” abuse, these percentages are not surprising.

Two studies had findings regarding whether more husbands abused wives or wives abused husbands. Crichton (1999) found more husbands abusing wives where as Pillemer (1998) found wives reporting more physical abuse against their husbands than vice versa (Podnieks, 1992a; Pillemer, 1988). Pillemer used the Conflict Tactics Scales, which does not distinguish between the harm inflicted by different forms of abuse and does not gain information about who is afraid or changes their lifestyle as a result of the abuse. However, he noted that “only 6% of males abused by wives were injured versus 57% of women abused by husbands, and the abused women were almost twice as likely as the abused men to be very upset by the abuse.”

Most studies found sons more abusive than daughters (Crichton, 1999; Lachs, 1997b; Wolf, 1997; Vinton, 1992; Greenberg, 1990; Godkin, 1989; Pillemer, 1988). Sons were found to be sexual abusers of their mothers in a number of cases (Ramsey-Klawnsnik, 1991).

Phillips found that caregiving wives experienced more abuse than did caregiving daughters (Phillips, 2000). Wolf and Pillemer (1997) found that wives were more apt to experience physical abuse from their husbands than their sons (Wolf, 1997). Similarly, Pittaway (1993) found that spouses were the primary offenders in cases of physical abuse, sexual assault, and chronic verbal aggression.

## **LIMITATIONS OF STUDIES**

Numerous limitations in the research on abuse in later life were found. In part because of the lack of financial resources, only a few studies have been large (more than 1,000 respondents) random sample studies (Lachs 1997a; Podnieks, 1992a; Pillemer, 1988). Even these large studies ultimately based their conclusions on relatively small numbers of abuse victims, ranging from 47 to 80. Only one of the random sample studies included cognitively impaired elders (achieved by interviewing other family members), but using the reports of proxies is considered unreliable (The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2001).

All the other studies had serious sampling biases because they were based on elders who were using services of some sort and/or were known to adult protective services or domestic violence programs. This is problematic, because it is clear that many abused elders are isolated and do not come to the attention of professionals or seek help. With one exception (Otiniano, 1998), these studies also involved relatively small samples – 10 to 401, with the majority being

under 100. Respecting the confidentiality and safety of victims creates problems with many scientific methods. Very few studies used control groups.

In addition, some elders deny that what they are experiencing is abuse (see, for example, Phillips, 2000), introducing another source of underreporting. Perhaps more importantly, studies have shown that elders' definitions of abuse do not always correspond to professionals' definitions, which may confound findings.

Comparing results across studies is practically impossible. These studies varied widely in: the types of abuse studied, the specific definitions of the types of abuse studied; whether abuse was self-reported or from agency records; the age of respondents (which ranged all the way down to 40); whether the target audience was predominately healthy elders or vulnerable adults; and whether only women or men and women were included.

## **POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Most elder abuse (excluding self-neglect) is family violence. The dynamics of family abuse are significantly different than being harmed by a stranger. Victims often encounter numerous barriers to living free from abuse. Most victims will be interested in maintaining the relationship (in some form) while asking professionals to stop the abusive behavior. This finding mandates collaboration between domestic violence/sexual assault advocates and professionals in the aging and adult protective services fields. Workers from these disciplines must work together to create effective interventions that focus on victim safety and abuser accountability.

Cases reported to adult protective services and aging units do not match the findings of random sample studies. Abusive adult children are seen in higher percentages by adult protective services (APS) than abusive spouses/partners. However, random sample studies suggest a significantly higher percentage of spouse/partner abuse is occurring in communities than is seen by social services. Several potential explanations for this phenomenon exist. One is that APS in many states serve only vulnerable adults, not healthy older victims of family violence. In these states, if domestic abuse/sexual assault services are not designed for older victims, there are probably few, if any, services available for older victims. Another explanation is that outreach and services offered by APS may not meet the needs of older victims of spouse/partner abuse. Often these victims are looking for services such as safety planning, support groups, legal advocacy and peer counseling. These are services that typically may not be offered by APS. Unfortunately, most domestic abuse/sexual assault programs in the United States do not have these services tailored for older victims either. In many communities, older victims are truly invisible because there is no place to meet their needs and they continue to suffer in silence.

These findings suggest that domestic violence/sexual assault programs must do outreach to older victims of family violence (including those abused by adult children or other family members) who could benefit from the services available to younger women. Interventions such as safety planning, support groups, emergency housing, legal advocacy, peer counseling, and a helpline have been found to be beneficial for older victims as well as younger ones. It is the

responsibility of domestic violence/sexual assault programs to be sure that their services are age sensitive.

In addition, adult protective services workers and aging network professionals can benefit from the work of the domestic violence/sexual assault fields on effective interventions. For example, APS workers can be doing safety planning in the field. APS workers can start support groups for older victims or co-facilitate a group with a domestic violence advocate. By working collaboratively, more victims will have services available that can help them live free from harm.

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#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

For a list of research questions on elder abuse and domestic abuse in later life, go to <http://www.elderabusecenter.org/research/agenda.html>.

For other articles in this series, see:

- Abusers  
[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-03R.html](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-03R.html) (html) or  
[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-03R.pdf](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-03R.pdf) (Adobe Acrobat format)
- Causation theories  
[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-04R.html](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-04R.html) (html) or  
[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-04R.pdf](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-04R.pdf) (Adobe Acrobat format)
- Culture  
[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-05R.html](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-05R.html) (html) or  
[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-05R.pdf](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-05R.pdf) (Adobe Acrobat format)
- Prevalence and incidence  
[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-06R.html](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-06R.html) (html) or

[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-06R.pdf](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-06R.pdf) (Adobe Acrobat format)

- Services and interventions  
[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-08R.html](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-08R.html) (html) or  
[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-08R.pdf](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-08R.pdf) (Adobe Acrobat format)
- Types of abuse (includes sexual assault and homicide/suicide)  
[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-09R.html](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-09R.html) (html) or  
[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-09R.pdf](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-09R.pdf) (Adobe Acrobat format)
- Victims  
[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-10R.html](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-10R.html) (html) or  
[www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-10R.pdf](http://www.WordBridges.net/ElderAbuse/Research/2002-09-10R.pdf) (Adobe Acrobat format)

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\*CANE – The Clearinghouse on Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly – is the nation's largest computerized collection of elder abuse resources and materials. Single copies of articles in its

holdings can be ordered from CANE for \$.20 per page. The digits following the hyphen in the file number indicate how many pages the article has.

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