



Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

Réseau canadien pour la prévention des mauvais traitements
envers les aîné(e)s

Myths and Misconceptions: Pitfalls to Avoid

Media Reporting on Elder Abuse: Avoiding Pitfalls

The characteristics often ascribed to older persons tend to be stereotypes. Journalists must exercise care when covering stories about mistreatment of older adults.

Journalists have a positive role to play in educating the public about abuse in later life. Below are just a few of the widely held misconceptions to avoid in reporting:

Myths vs. Reality

Myth #1: Abuse of older adults generally occurs on dark streets by unknown perpetrators.

Reality: Most substantiated cases of senior abuse are committed by people that the individual knows, in most cases it involves a spouse or other family member. Only one in five cases is referred for help.

Myth #2: Victims always despise the abuser and want to report the abusive situation.

Reality: Abusive situations are complex. The older adult experiencing abuse or neglect often can be torn between their feelings for and concern about an individual (a spouse or a child, for example) and knowing they are being mistreated or abused.

Myth #3: No one would ever abuse an older person.

Reality: Senior abuse exists in every community. While we have very little reliable national data, it is estimated that between 4 and 10 per cent of older persons in Canada are victims of some form of abuse or neglect.

There were over 4 million seniors in Canada in 2004. This suggests that between 162,500 and 406,000 seniors in Canada have experienced or will experience abuse in later life.

Myth #4: Senior abuse means the same thing all across the country. There are only three categories of abuse: Physical, Emotional, and Financial.

Reality: There many forms of abuse, including these three. Forms of abuse that are crimes apply all across Canada. Other laws may define senior/adult abuse and the definitions can vary from province to province, territory to territory.

However, the following types of abuse are often found in provincial laws: physical abuse, including acts of pain or injury; emotional abuse; sexual assault; financial exploitation; and neglect or self neglect.

Abuse or neglect of older adults can also occur in institutions such as nursing homes, personal care homes or other places where older adults live and receive support or assistance. Abuse or neglect may include violation of the person's rights, inappropriate use of restraints, unreasonable confinement, and inappropriate use of medications to restrict the person's freedoms. Rules and policies seem to be neutral may also significantly harm older adults, and can be abusive.

Myth #5: Neglect occurs out of ignorance of what an older adult needs.

Reality: While some situations of neglect may be unintentional, due to a caregiver's ignorance of what an older adult needs, a serious form of neglect is the intentional, willful failure of a family member or a caregiver to provide needed services and/or protections.

Myth #6: The risk of being abused varies based upon a person's income level.

Reality: Senior abuse cuts across all socio-economic strata.

Myth #7: Model prevention and intervention solutions for child abuse can be replicated for senior abuse.

Reality: Model prevention and intervention solutions would not be applicable to both child abuse and senior abuse because there are basic differences between the two forms of abuse. Children and adults differ in their level of competency, level of privacy and right to autonomy. As a result, using the same models to address both forms of abuse would not make sense.

Myth #8: As people age, they lose the ability to make choices, such as financial decisions.

Reality: Most older adults are fully capable of making choices.

Mental decline in older adults, if and when it occurs, is much milder than most people think. Some older adults may process information slower than a young adult, but the difference is often modest and can be offset by the older person's experience.

Adults with severe cognitive disabilities may require greater support, but this does not preclude their right to participate actively in decisions affecting their lives.

Myth #9: Older adults and young adults respond similarly to abuse.

Reality: Older victims are more likely to be injured, more likely to need medical attention, and more likely to lose trust than younger victims.

Some older adults (particularly older women who are being abused by their husband) have been living with abuse for many years and as a result are dealing with the cumulative effect of years of harm. This can significantly hurt them physically and emotionally.

Myth #10: Children who abuse aging parents were likely to have been abused themselves.

Reality: Some research has suggested a cycle of violence where children who have been abused grow up to be abusers themselves, but a few studies suggest that child abuse is likely to produce adults who abuse their children and/or spouses, not their parents.

Myth #11: Passing laws to protect older adults will solve the problem of senior abuse.

Reality: People on all levels who interact with older adults need to be aware of abuse in later life. This may involve providing more resources for community services working with older adults, enforcing existing laws, and training law enforcement and health professionals. Passing new laws may or may not be needed.

Special acknowledgements: The myths and misconceptions presented here are adapted with permission from the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA). That information, in turn is based on work done by Dr. Bernadette West on "Media Pitfalls" used in the Media Newsroom section of the NCEA web site. Dr. West is an Assistant Professor at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey and is writing a "Handbook for Journalists on Maltreatment of Vulnerable Adults". Our thanks to NCEA and Dr. West.

Source: www.elderabusecenter.org/default.cfm?p=pitfalls.cfm

Statistics: Statistics Canada. Population by Sex and Age. Online www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/demo10a.htm