

INCREASING ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR OLDER  
VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

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# RESEARCH SNAPSHOT #4

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST OLDER PEOPLE: A REVIEW OF THE  
EMPIRICAL LITERATURE



**BY**

AMY PEIRONE  
MYRNA DAWSON

CNPEA  RCPMTA

CANADIAN NETWORK for  
the PREVENTION of ELDER ABUSE  
RÉSEAU CANADIEN pour la PRÉVENTION  
du MAUVAIS TRAITEMENT des AÎNÉS

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Each Snapshot features a relevant research study or resource from Canada or emerging topics that have been identified in other countries.

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# WHAT IS THE FOCUS OF THIS ARTICLE?

Despite some acknowledgment that being older is not a safeguard from sexual violence, a lack of knowledge and research examining sexual violence of older victims remains. This article demonstrates that there is no clear body of literature or discipline of study that focuses specifically on sexual violence in older age, restricting our knowledge and understanding about this phenomenon. To fill this gap, this article is the first comprehensive review incorporating empirical research on sexual violence against older people across multiple disciplines and fields of study. It focuses on identifying themes across studies, including similarities and differences in findings, and theoretical and methodological approaches to studying sexual violence against older people.

# WHAT DID THE RESEARCHER DO?

The author employed keyword searches (e.g., older sexual violence; sexual violence against older people; sexual violence older men; older sexual abuse) in research databases (EBSCOHOST, Ingenta-Ingenta connect, and JSTOR), google searches, and manual bibliography searches to identify, over the last four decades, all empirical research on sexual abuse in older age. Articles that grouped sexual and physical victimization together were omitted, as the focus was explicitly on sexual victimization. Articles were grouped into overarching fields of study (e.g., elder abuse, sexual violence, domestic violence) and themes to provide a more comprehensive depiction of sexual violence in older age.

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# WHAT DID THE RESEARCHER FIND?

A total of 40 relevant articles from the fields of elder abuse, domestic violence, and sexual violence were identified. Variations in terminology and definitions were evident, with sexual violence often absent or grouped with physical abuse, restricting conclusions specifically about sexual violence in older age. Variations in what constitutes old age were also apparent; however, the lower bounds of old age are typically around 50 years of age.

Across all three fields of study, four predominant themes were identified and summarized throughout the review: 1) prevalence; 2) characteristics of victims and incidents; 3) impacts and coping strategies; and 4) perpetrator and incident characteristics.

## 1. Prevalence

Due to differences in methodological approaches, samples, and definitions of old age and sexual violence, prevalence rates of sexual violence in older age vary and are not necessarily comparable. For example, while some research reports on the prevalence of elders who experience sexual abuse, others reports on the proportion of sexual violence victims who are older. Rates of sexual violence in older age tend to range from less than one percent to greater than 15 percent, depending on the field of study and sample employed. Elder abuse studies tend to report the lowest rates of sexual abuse in older age (0-2%), and domestic violence studies report the highest rates (up to 15%), with the sexual violence studies reporting rates in between (2-8%). Differences in prevalence rates also vary with the type of sample studied, with higher rates in samples derived from the criminal justice system (2-7%), compared to samples in health care centres (1-5%). **While these figures are not necessarily comparable, the crucial take away is that sexual violence in older age occurs and represents a form of abuse that warrants study independent of other forms of abuse.**

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## **2. Characteristics of Victims and Risk Factors for Victimization**

Victims of sexual violence across the literature in all three fields are predominantly women and white, although many studies are limited to white samples.

Different studies consistently report positive associations between sexual violence in older age and poor physical and mental health, dependence on others, low income, and low education; however, it is unclear whether the health conditions are an outcome of the violence, or are pre-existing conditions that impact vulnerability for sexual victimization.

Sexual violence is most likely to occur in the victim's home or care facility where the victim resides, and the relationship between age and sexual victimization in older age is dependent upon the victim's living arrangement. Those who reside in the community appear to be at highest risk of sexual victimization around 60 to 70 years of age (compared to those who are older >70 years), while those who reside in care facilities appear to be at most risk in the oldest age ranges (i.e., 79-99 years), highlighting the intersection of age, living arrangement, and vulnerability for sexual violence victimization.

## **3. Impacts and Coping Strategies**

Research on the coping strategies utilized by older victims is scarce. The limited information typically separates impacts into physical impacts, including genital trauma, aches, pains, cuts, bruises, and STIs, and psychological impacts, including depression, anxiety, sleep problems, low self-esteem, and fear. While less information is available on coping strategies, there are some suggestions that the misuse of alcohol and drugs can occur in the aftermath of victimization. However, very little research examines the long term impacts or coping strategies of older victims of sexual violence, emphasizing a clear gap in our knowledge.

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## 4. Perpetrator and Assault Characteristics

Perpetrator and incident characteristics vary across fields of study. Domestic violence and elder abuse research typically limit perpetrators to a spouse, family member, or someone they know including adult children, relatives, or caregivers, while the sexual violence literature is more likely to include stranger perpetrators.

Across studies, perpetrators of sexual violence towards older adults are typically known to their victims, and can include familial (e.g., spouse, child, another relative), caregiver, friend/acquaintance, and caregiver relationships, although stranger-perpetrated sexual abuse has also been reported.

Perpetrators are predominantly male; thus, there is minimal information on female perpetrators of sexual violence in older age. Most perpetrators are younger than their victims (sometimes upwards of 30 years younger than their victims); however, this is not necessarily the case in the domestic violence and elder abuse research, where perpetrators are more likely to be closer in age to their victims.

In terms of perpetrator backgrounds, some research reports perpetrators are likely to express antisocial behaviours and/or traits of psychopathology, may be financially dependent on the victim, may use or abuse alcohol and other drugs, and may have previous criminal convictions for sexual and non-sexual offences.

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# WHAT ARE THE KEY TAKE-AWAY MESSAGES FROM THIS ARTICLE?

While the author makes note of variations in methodological approach and theoretical orientation across fields of study, she also emphasizes substantial overlap across studies, helping to provide a more comprehensive depiction of sexual victimization in older age. The results of this critical review of the literature emphasize the need for future research that addresses some of the gaps in our knowledge and understanding about sexual violence in older age.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

There is a need for future research to focus specifically on sexual victimization in older age, and to conceptualize this type of violence as distinct from other forms of violence.

Additionally, there is a need for diverse samples as much of the literature is restricted to white, heterosexual women. Future research should aim to include non-heterosexual older persons, persons from diverse ethnic backgrounds, as well as men.

There is also a need for longitudinal studies that examine the long-term impacts and consequences of sexual violence victimization in older age, as well as the coping strategies utilized by victims.

Future research should examine and evaluate prevention and intervention strategies in effect for younger victims of sexual violence to assess their relevance for older persons.

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For example, can the Bystander interventions that are being applied in various educational and other settings for younger persons apply for older persons? Are treatment programs and intervention programs for perpetrators of sexual violence in older age effective?

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

There is a need for practitioners to recognize and acknowledge that older people can be and are victims of sexual violence with unique needs in comparison to victims of other ages, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that programs and interventions for older victims of sexual violence apply to these victims.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

There is a need for clear, consistent and comprehensive definitions of sexual abuse in older age. In particular, there is a need to recognize and conceptualize sexual violence as a stand-alone victimization experience, rather than a sub-component of physical abuse. High risk for sexual victimization among older persons with physical and or cognitive impairments also necessitates the need for policies that specifically protect these vulnerable groups, with a need for balance between respect and privacy.

