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The rise in reported elder abuse: A review of state and national data

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While reports of elder abuse have steadily increased across the state in the last decade, a true understanding of the extent and nature of crimes against the elderly is problematic. Elder abuse often goes unreported. Many senior citizens are socially isolated and do not know where to seek help. Others fear retaliation, feel ashamed, or are kept

The number of reported elder abuse cases in Illinois increased 85 percent between state fiscal years 1993 and 2003, according to the Department on Aging.

from reporting the abuse. Some are afraid that if they report abuse at the hands of a caregiver, they will be institutionalized.¹

Analysis of elder abuse is further complicated by the manner in which the crime is reported in Illinois. The limited list of mandated reporters may mask the actual number of abuse cases that occur.

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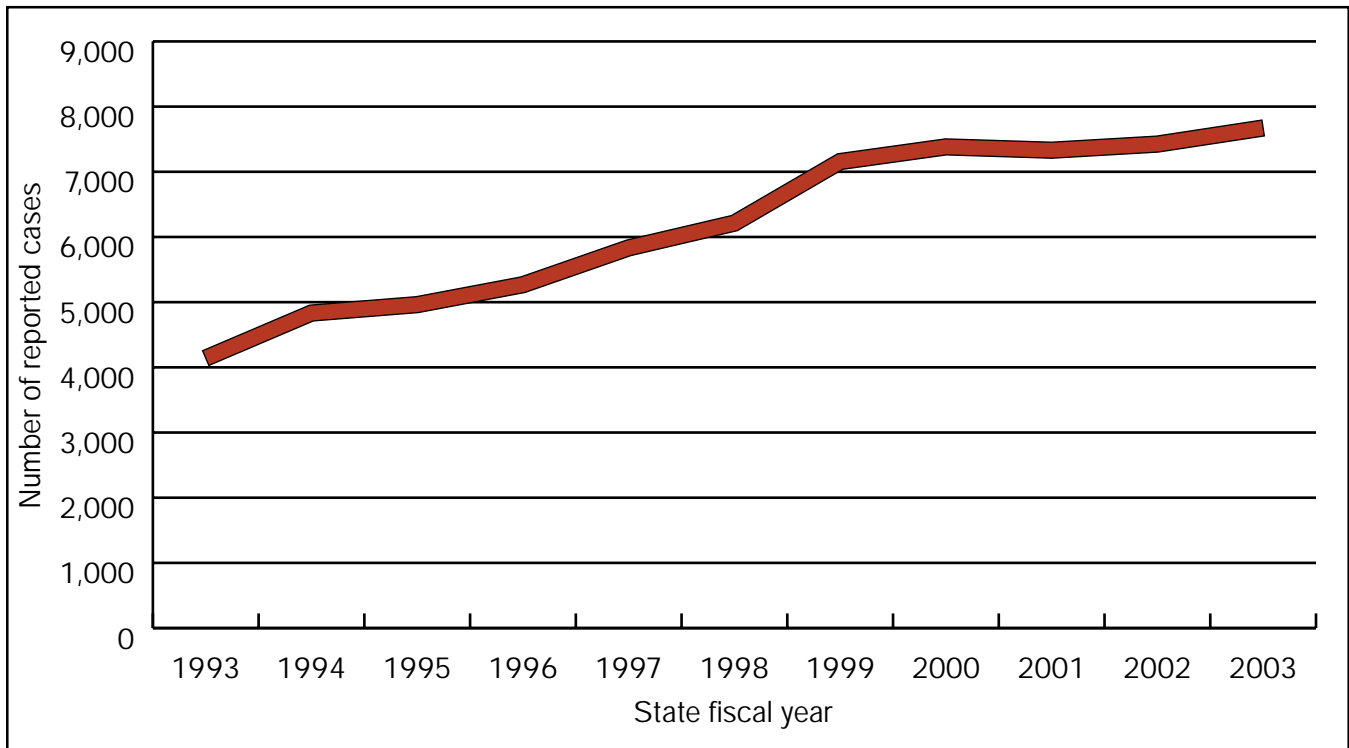
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This *Research Bulletin* is the first in a series of Authority publications on the elderly and the criminal justice system. It examines the local and national problem of elder abuse with data obtained from the Illinois Department on Aging, the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, and a study commissioned by the National Center on Elder Abuse.

Elder abuse in Illinois

The Illinois Elder Abuse and Neglect Act became law in 1988 and established the Elder Abuse and Neglect Program under the direction of the Illinois Department on Aging.² This statewide program was created to respond to reports of alleged elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation committed against Illinoisans ages 60 and older, and to assist victims in abusive situations.³ The Elder Abuse and Neglect Program tracks reported cases of elder abuse including:

Figure 1
Reported cases of elder abuse in Illinois, SFY93-SFY03



Source: Illinois Department on Aging

- Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.
- Confinement.
- Financial exploitation.
- Passive neglect, which occurs when a caregiver fails to provide an older person with life's necessities, such as food, clothing, shelter, or medical care.
- Willful deprivation, which occurs when a caregiver denies an older person medication, medical care, shelter, food, or a therapeutic device or other physical assistance. This exposes the person to the risk of physical, mental or emotional harm.⁴

Between state fiscal years 1993 and 2003, the number of reported cases of elder abuse in Illinois increased 85 percent, from 4,142 to 7,672 (Figure 1).

As shown in Figure 2, the most common form of abuse was financial exploitation (34 percent), followed by emotional abuse (28 percent), passive neglect (22 percent), and physical abuse (10 percent). Deprivation was reported in 3 percent of the cases, confinement was reported in 2 percent of cases, and sexual abuse was reported in less than 1 percent of cases recorded.⁵

More than one form of abuse may have been reported in any single case.

In SFY03, 57 percent of reported cases of elder abuse were substantiated. In contrast, only 28 percent of child abuse cases reported that same year were verified. Child and elder abuse were compared here because both the Department of Children and Family Services and the Illinois Department on Aging apply a standard of reasonableness as outlined by statute in deciding whether or not abuse or neglect occurred in investigated cases, and because child and elder abuse are crimes against vulnerable populations.

The rate of reported cases of child abuse in Illinois decreased between fiscal years 1993 and 2003. And while the rates of many other crimes in Illinois also decreased in recent years, reported cases of elder abuse rose continually (Table 1).

Victim characteristics

Victim characteristics were known in 6,948 of the 7,672 cases of elder abuse reported in SFY03. Among these, 70 percent of the victims were women. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, women comprised 58 percent

Table 1
Reported crime rates in Illinois per 100,000 population*

Crime	1993	2003	Change
Murder	12	7	-39%
Sexual assault	65	46	-29%
Robbery	379	188	-50%
Aggravated assault	613	329	-46%
Total violent index crimes**	1,068	571	-47%
Crime	1997***	2003	Change
Crimes against children	318	314	-2%
Domestic crimes	1,069	987	-8%
Hate crimes	4	2	-43%
Crime	SFY93	SFY03	Change
Child abuse and neglect	1,070	770	-28%
Child sexual abuse	105	65	-38%
Elder abuse	213	391	84%

*Figures are rounded to nearest whole number. Percentages reflect actual rate.

**Violent index crimes include murder, criminal sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault.

***First full year of data collection.

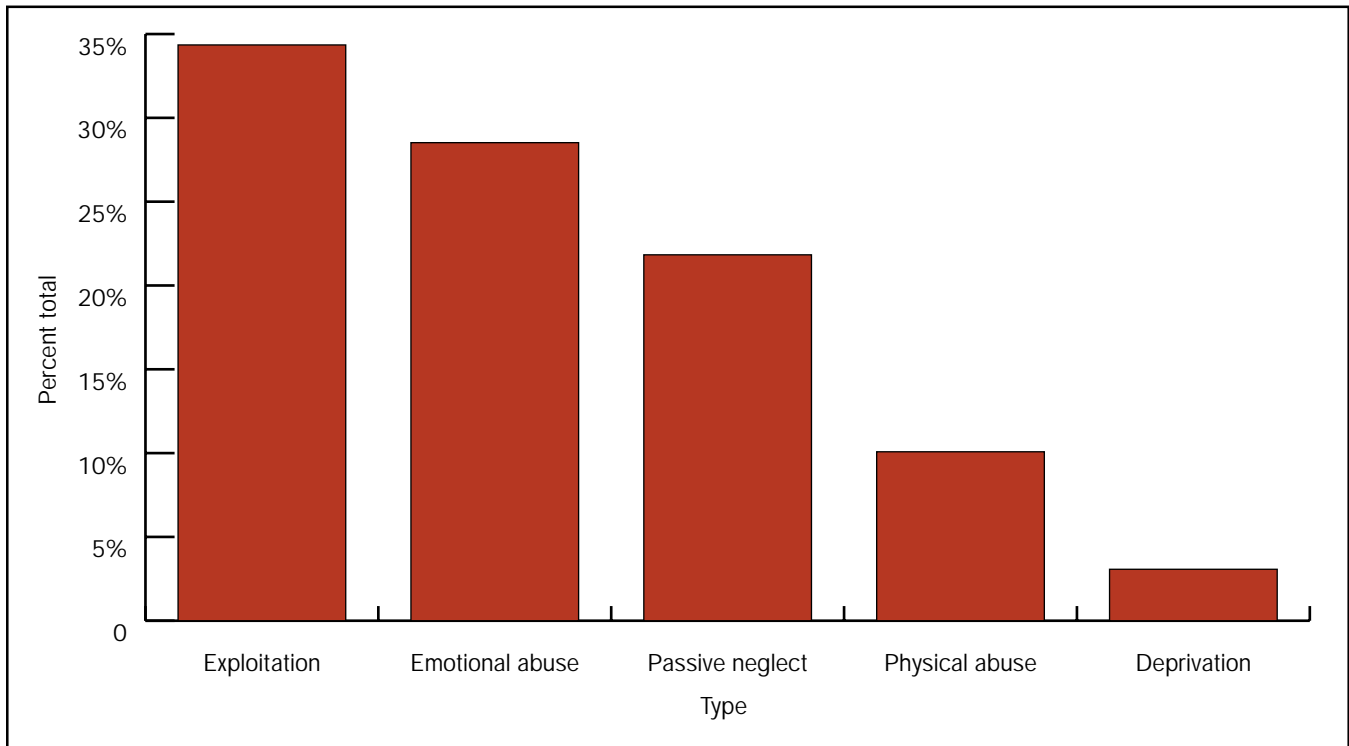
of Illinoisans ages 60 years and older. The gender disparity among victims of elder abuse is perhaps explained by the fact that women live longer than men; this disparity increases as the population ages.⁶ Table 2 shows how the proportion of women grows as the population of Illinoisans who are 60 and older ages.

Table 3 depicts the population of Illinoisans over the age of 60 and reported victims of elder abuse by age range. Although the elder population decreases as it ages, the number of elder abuse victims increases for each age bracket between 60 and 80 years. Nearly 40 percent of elder abuse victims in SFY03, the highest percentage among all age brackets, were between the ages of 76 and 85 years. Note that the age range scales used by the U.S. Census Bureau, which provided demographic information about the population over age 60 in Illinois, and the scales used by the Illinois

Department on Aging, which provided data on elder abuse victims, differ slightly. Note also that all data from the Illinois Department on Aging is from SFY 2003, while data from the U.S. Census Bureau is from 2000.

In SFY03, 75 percent of reported elder abuse victims were white, 20 percent were African American, 2 percent were Hispanic, and 1 percent or less each were American Indian, Asian or Pacific Islander, or another or unknown racial or ethnic group. In contrast, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 2000, 84 percent of Illinoisans ages 60 years and older were white, 11 percent were African American, 2 percent were Asian, 1 percent each were of some other race or of two or more races, and less than 1 percent each were American Indian/Native Alaskan or Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. It also reported that 4 percent of

Figure 2
Types of abuse reported in elder abuse cases, SFY03



Source: Illinois Department on Aging

Illinoisans ages 60 years and older among these racial groups were of Hispanic ethnicity.

Varying data collection practices of the U.S. Census Bureau and the Illinois Department on Aging may impact some comparisons drawn between the two datasets. Also, the U.S. Census includes Hispanics in racial tallies. The percentage of Hispanics given by the U.S. Census Bureau includes Hispanics of all racial groups. The Illinois Department on Aging, on the other hand, separates Hispanics into a distinct group, and does not include Hispanics in its racial categories.

Notably, while 11 percent of the elderly population was African American in SFY03, 20 percent of elder abuse victims were African American. Data collection differences between the U.S. Census Bureau and the Illinois Department on Aging do not account for this discrepancy, as it only affects a small percentage of the population. In addition, data are not available for comparison of victims by age and racial/ethnic group or by gender and racial/ethnic group and the general elder population.

In SFY03, 60 percent of elder abuse victims did not have any special legal status (Table 4). Just more than 20 percent were under a power of attorney, although the alleged abuser did not necessarily hold power of attorney over the victim. The legal status of 14 percent of elder abuse victims was unknown, 2 percent had a legal guardian, and 1 percent had a representative payee.

Almost half of reported elder abuse victims were widowed and 26 percent were married. Marital status was unknown for 10 percent of elderly victims, 8 percent were divorced, 7 percent were unmarried, and about 1 percent were separated.

More than 30 percent of reported elder abuse victims lived alone. Just more than 25 percent of victims lived with a child or children while 17 percent lived with a spouse. Nearly 10 percent lived with a relative other than a spouse or child, and almost 5 percent lived with a spouse and child, or with a non-relative. Finally, about 2 percent lived with another uncategorized individual, or the relationship was unknown

Table 2
Male/female ratio in the Illinois
population ages 60 and older, 2000

Age range	Male	Female
60-64	47%	53%
65-69	46%	54%
70-74	43%	57%
75-79	40%	60%
80-84	36%	64%
85-89	30%	70%
90+	23%	77%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Data on the factors or characteristics that may put elders at a greater risk of abuse were also examined. More than 40 percent of elder abuse victims were defined as physically impaired and nearly 35 percent were living with their alleged abuser. Cognitive impairments were suffered by 20 percent of the victims. Around 15 percent were vision- or hearing-impaired, about 13 percent were disoriented or non-ambulatory, and about 10 percent had emotional issues, were incontinent, or had no detectable characteristics that put them at a greater risk of abuse. More than 25 percent possessed multiple characteristics that put them at risk for abuse.

Alleged abuser characteristics

Detailed information on alleged abusers was collected in 5,984 of the 7,672 reported cases of elder abuse. About half of alleged abusers identified were male, which paralleled the general Illinois population. Among alleged abusers, 49 percent were not considered caregivers of the victims, 44 percent were informal caregivers, and 7 percent were paid caregivers.

Table 5 details the specific relationships between alleged abusers and victims.

In SFY03, 72 percent of alleged abusers were white, 19 percent were African American, 3 percent were Hispanic, and 1 percent or less were American Indian, Asian or Pacific Islander. In 6 percent of the cases, the alleged abuser's race or ethnic group was unknown. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that 73 percent of the general Illinois population were white in 2000, 15 percent were African-American, 6 percent were of another uncategorized race, 3 percent were Asian, 2 percent were from two or more racial groups, and less than 1 percent each were Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, or American Indian and Alaska Native. Twelve percent of the Illinois population in 2000 was Hispanic. The same caveats discussed earlier concerning the racial and ethnic groupings used by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Illinois Department on Aging apply here.

Nearly 80 percent of alleged abusers held no special legal status in relation to the victim, while 11 percent held power of attorney. The legal status with respect to the elder abuse victim was unknown in 8 percent of the cases, and 1 percent of alleged abusers were a legal guardian or representative payee of the victim.

Data on alleged abuser characteristics that may add to an abusive situation were also analyzed (Table 6). In 22 percent of the cases, the alleged abuser was financially dependent on the victim, and in 21 percent of cases, the alleged abuser lacked reliability – he or she was not caring for the victim in the proper manner. Also in 21 percent of cases the alleged abuser lacked knowledge of a victim's needs, in 19 percent of cases the alleged abuser had limited coping abilities, and in 18 percent of cases the alleged abuser was experiencing substance abuse issues. In nearly 25 percent of the cases, such characteristics were unknown or not recorded.

Data reporting issues

Data collection issues affect the number of elder abuse cases reported. Many individuals who come into contact with elder abuse victims are not required to report suspected abuse under current laws.⁸ For instance, bankers and attorneys are not required by law to report suspected elder abuse because of the confidentiality restrictions of their professions.⁹

Table 3
Percent of total elder abuse victims and elder population by age range, SFY03

Age range, elder abuse victims	Percent of elder abuse victims	Percent of elder population	Age range, elder population
60-65	11%	34%	60-64
66-70	15%	29%	65-69
71-75	20%	20%	70-74
76-80	27%	11%	75-79
81-85	27%	6%	80-84

Source: Illinois Department on Aging and U.S. Census Bureau

Table 4
Legal status of victim, SFY03

Status	Total
No special legal status	60%
Under power of attorney	22%
Unknown	14%
Under legal guardian	2%
Had representative payee	1%

Source: Illinois Department on Aging

Certain employees at nursing homes such as aides and housekeepers also are not required to report suspected elder abuse. Finally, mandated reporters must report elder abuse only in cases in which the senior involved is unable to report the abuse himself or herself. If a mandated reporter believes that an elder is able to self-report the abuse, the mandated reporter is not legally required to report the abuse.

National elder abuse data

To add to our understanding of elder abuse, occurrences of abuse in long-term care, board and care, and nursing facilities were examined. National and Illinois data from the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program were compared since abuse occurring in residential facilities for the elderly is not typically reported to the Illinois Department on Aging.¹⁰ Results of a report

commissioned by the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA), "A Response to the Abuse of Vulnerable Adults: The 2000 Survey of State Adult Protective Services," also were compared with Illinois Department on Aging data.¹¹

According to the Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, in FY03, 426 cases of abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation that occurred in residential facilities serving the elderly were closed (investigated and resolved, at least partially, to the complainant's satisfaction) in Illinois. This represents nearly a 50 percent jump in closed abuse cases statewide since FY96, and comprises 7 percent of all closed cases, including complaints regarding food quality, living arrangements, and other issues unrelated to abuse, investigated by the Ombudsman Program.

By comparison, the number of closed abuse cases nationwide increased 46 percent during the same time, from 13,469 to 19,660 cases. Nationally, in FY03, 28 percent of closed cases investigated by the Ombudsman Program involved complaints of abuse, neglect or financial exploitation.

The NCEA-commissioned report found that nationally 49 percent of elder abuse complaints were substantiated by adult protective services agencies, slightly lower than Illinois' percentage of substantiated cases in SFY03 (57 percent). Twenty percent of the substantiated complaints of maltreatment nationally involved physical abuse, followed by caregiver neglect or abandonment at 13 percent. SFY03 data show that a lower percentage of physical abuse cases (10 percent)

Table 5
Relationship of alleged abuser to victim, SFY03

Relationship	Total
Child	42%
Relative other than spouse or child	21%
Other	15%
Spouse	12%
Caretaker	4%
Housemate	3%
Homecare worker	2%
Former spouse or housemate	2%

Source: Illinois Department on Aging

was reported in Illinois, but twice the percentage of cases of neglect and deprivation together were reported compared to national statistics (25 percent).

Women comprised a higher percentage of elder abuse victims in Illinois (70 percent) than nationwide (56 percent). Nationally, 66 percent of elder abuse victims were white and 17 percent were African-American. In comparison, whites comprised a higher percentage of elder abuse victims in Illinois (75 percent), while African-Americans accounted for a comparable percentage of elder abuse victims (20 percent). Nationally, 47 percent of elder abuse victims were 80 years of age and older, similar to Illinois where 46 percent of elder abuse victims were 81 years of age and older.

About half of the perpetrators or alleged abusers nationally and in Illinois were male. More perpetrators or alleged abusers were children of the victim in Illinois (42 percent) than was true nationally (18 percent), and a higher percentage of alleged abusers in Illinois were family members (75 percent) than was

Table 6
Characteristics of alleged abusers that may exacerbate abusive situations, SFY03

Characteristic	Total
Financially dependent on victim	22%
Unreliable caregiver	21%
Lacked knowledge of care needs	21%
Limited coping abilities	19%
Substance abuse issues	18%
Multiple barriers	15%
Felt overburdened by their responsibilities	12%
Criminal history	11%
Violent history	8%
Mental illness	8%
None	8%
Physical limitations	7%
Other	3%
Developmentally disabled	2%
Cognitively impaired	2%
Unknown	24%

Source: Illinois Department on Aging

true nationally (62 percent). However, nationally, 30 percent of perpetrators were the victim's spouse or intimate partner, much greater than the percentage reported in Illinois (12 percent).

Conclusion

Overall, in Illinois the highest percentage of elder abuse victims lived in their own home or apartment (80 percent), were white (75 percent), female (70 percent), widowed (48 percent), physically impaired (41 percent), and between the ages of 76 and 85 (39 percent), with a mean age of 79 years. Sixty percent of elder abuse victims did not have any special legal status. The highest percentage of alleged elder abusers

were white (72 percent), were not likely to be a caregiver of the elderly victim (49 percent), were children of the victim (42 percent) and financially dependent on the victim (22 percent). Also, the majority of alleged abusers (80 percent) did not hold any special legal status, such as power of attorney, over the victim.

In both Illinois and nationally, the typical elder abuse victim is a white female 80 years of age or older, and family members are most likely to perpetrate elder abuse. Males and females are equally likely to abuse elders nationwide and in Illinois.

Laws governing elder abuse reporting combined with a variety of unique barriers senior citizens often face may camouflage the actual number of elder abuse cases that occur in Illinois. As the elderly population continues to increase due to the aging of the baby boom generation, and as policies and practices are developed to better identify elder abuse, it seems likely that the frequency of reported elder abuse cases will grow, resulting in an increased amount of attention focused on the problem.

Fight elder abuse. Call the Elder Abuse Hotline at 1-800-252-8966.

Notes

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4 Illinois Department on Aging. Elder Abuse and Neglect Act and Related Laws. April 2003: 1. Retrieved 30 March 2005 <http://www.state.il.us/aging/1news_pubs/ea-act_book.pdf>.

5 Based on victim interviews, the percentage of victims who were financially exploited was 56 percent, 42 percent faced emotional abuse, 41 percent were victims of passive neglect, and 22 percent suffered physical abuse. Deprivation, confinement, and sexual abuse together accounted for more than 22 percent of the types of abuse. Victims may have suffered more than one type of abuse, thus these percentages do not total 100 percent.

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