



Help the Aged

Help the Aged SeniorSafety Campaign

Introduction

Whilst statistically older people are the group least at risk of crime, it is well documented that the impact of becoming a victim of crime (and / or worrying about becoming one) on an older person can be far greater than that of a younger person.

The consequences can include deterioration in health via the effects of the ongoing stress and trauma of the experience. This can also impact on an older person's confidence in going out, meaning a reduction in exercise, increased isolation and in many cases the ability to live at home independently.

Crime and disorder is a major issue for older people because they are more likely to be on low or reduced incomes; more likely to live alone; and more likely to suffer from physical and cognitive impairments and thereby see themselves as vulnerable. Local 'disorder' and anti-social behaviour causes a great deal of distress to older people – this includes noise nuisance, graffiti, rudeness and rowdiness, litter and cycling on the pavements.

Statistics

- Older people's risk of suffering from personal or household crime is much less than that of other groups¹
- Older people living in inner city areas are more likely to be at risk from crime. A University of Keele survey², conducted on behalf of Help the Aged, found that 40% older respondents in three inner city areas (Liverpool, Manchester and East London) reported they had been a victim of crime during the last two years. 28% reported that they had been a victim of property crime, 21% had experienced a break in, or attempted break in, and 15% been assaulted or had something stolen from them in the street.
- Older victims of burglary decline in health faster than non victims of a similar age and the impact of burglary is typically great³. Two years after the burglary, they were 2.4 times more likely to have died or be in residential care than their non burgled neighbours.
- 12 per cent of older people feel that their concern about crime negatively affects their confidence in going out and seven per cent feel that it negatively affects their overall quality of life⁴

¹ Crime Policing and Justice: the experience of older people. Home Office 2002

² Growing older in socially deprived areas. Scharf et al, University of Keele for Help the Aged 2002

³ Experiences of older burglary victims. Home Office 2003

⁴ Bogus Caller Crime: a Help the Aged survey of Britain. NOP World, Amanda Thornton and Chris Hatton. 2003.

Certain crimes are specifically targeted at older people. These include distraction burglary and rogue trader crime -collectively known as bogus caller crime - lottery scams and elder abuse (discussed below). Older people are targeted due to their increased vulnerability and / or the increased environmental opportunity for committing crime in these types of cases.

In response to these concerns, Help the Aged set up its SeniorSafety Campaign in 2001. The overall aim of the Campaign is to tackle crime against older people. Amongst its activities are:

- Lobbying government for changes in legislation
- Funding and disseminating new research into crime
- Raising awareness of crime via media campaigning and conferences

Backing up the work of the Campaign and feeding issues into it is the work of the SeniorSafety Operations team, who have been delivering a wide range of security and safety services and programmes on a charitable basis to older people, working with crime prevention and health practitioners across Britain since 1995 (discussed below).

The following represents a cross section of the work of the Campaign over the last four years.

Distraction Burglary

Distraction burglars are part of a highly organised, professional criminal fraternity. They pose as utility workers, tradespeople, police officers and sometimes even charity workers. They come in all shapes and sizes: men, women, working singly or in pairs - sometimes even children have been used in the deception – they come in all shapes and sizes but what they all share is an ability to convince an older person on the doorstep that they have a genuine reason to enter the home. Once inside the home they will use a ruse to distract the older person's attention, whilst they or an unseen accomplice search the home for money and valuables to steal. This type of crime is not petty and can result in perpetrators netting hundreds of thousands of pounds from their victims.

Under reporting

Official figures on distraction burglary are widely accepted to represent a gross under estimation of the real figures. This is due in part to inconsistencies across police forces in the classification and reporting of distraction burglary incidents. Victims of distraction burglary may also choose *not* to report the offence due to embarrassment, fear of engaging with the criminal justice system and fear of alerting other family members to their increasing vulnerability. Further, victims may fail to identify missing valuables from the home, or may not link stolen monies to a previous distraction burglary incident.

Statistics

Alarmed at the degree of under reporting of distraction burglary and following a pilot survey in 2002, the Campaign funded the first ever large scale national bogus caller survey in 2003. Overall a broadly representative sample of 3,403 people across Britain over 60 who had previously agreed to participate in telephone surveys were contacted by the National Opinion Poll and asked a range of questions on distraction burglary and the impact of crime on their lives.

Key findings from the 2003 Help the Aged research:

- Data from the survey found that 3.26% of respondents reported being approached by a suspicious caller. Based on a national 60 + population of 12,220,554, figures from this survey suggest that the potential extent of bogus caller targeting amongst this age group could be in the region of 390,000 (391,057) attempts per year (3.26% of 12,220,554).
- Bogus callers gain entry into around 180,000 older people's homes per year, steal from 122,000 of these and approach double this amount
- Nearly 40 per cent of those approached by bogus callers did not report the incident to the police
- 42 per cent felt the event was too trivial to report to the authorities
- 25 per cent of older people are not keeping their doors locked whilst at home
- 49 per cent of older people had not been reached by doorstep safety awareness campaigns.
- Adults over 80 and men were found to be the least aware groups
- 30 per cent feel worried *some or all* of the time when answering the front door to unknown callers, women more so than men
- 23 per cent of victims of distraction burglary felt that worry about crime affected their confidence in going out and 16 per cent felt that it affected their overall quality of life
- 10 per cent of older people reported needing help finding someone reliable to help with their property and garden maintenance

Other distraction burglary statistics

- Typical profile of a bogus caller victim is female, aged 81, living alone⁵
- The number of socially isolated older people is likely to increase by a third to 2.2 million by 2021 if current trends continue⁶
- Statistics gathered by the Home Office from police forces prior to 1st April 2003 show an average 17,367 reported incidents / annum, with 18,664 in 2002/3.⁷

What is Help the Aged doing about it?

Strategic work

Help the Aged was a founding member of the Home Office Distraction Burglary Taskforce, a group made up of key voluntary, private and statutory

⁵ Operation Litotes, Devon and Cornwall Police, 2003

⁶ Home Alone: combating isolation with older housebound people, Helen McCarthy and Gillian Thomas. Demos, 2004

⁷ 1998-2003: Home Office Distraction Burglary Reported Incidents

agencies. It was set up in March 2000 to spearhead various initiatives across the country to tackle distraction burglary, enhance relevant regulations, raise public awareness of the issue and inform the public of appropriate doorstep etiquette.

Lobbying

One of the elementary problems the police have faced in tackling the crime is in the measurement of its extent. Bogus caller crime was not recorded as an offence in its own right prior to April 2003. It was classified as a domestic burglary and one has to look at the method of entry in order to identify it as a bogus caller or 'distraction burglary' offence (the latter is the official police terminology). This was compounded by the fact that the way that police forces in England and Wales are organised means that each county police force had their own way of recording crime. This again, prevented meaningful statistics on the extent of the crime being gathered with ease. The consequence of this was that inadequate resources have been devoted to the problem.

The Charity lobbied the Home Office in three successive years of campaigning to enter distraction burglary into the recorded crime series and was successful in this aim as at 1st April 2003. This for the first time forced a consistency in recording practice by police forces and the consequent evidence will enable the authorities to justify the allocation of greater resources into tackling this insidious crime. The first official recorded crime statistics will be available in July 2004.

Help the Aged is now calling on the government to dedicate more resources to tackling distraction burglary via funding and targeted awareness raising campaigns.

Media campaigns

The Campaign used the results of its research to launch its annual media campaigns, the latest being in February 2004 with the key aims of:

- Disseminating the 'Lock, Stop, Chain, Check' message:
 - Ensure that doors are locked at all times even when at home;
 - Always put the chain on before you open the door;
 - Always ask to see an identification card – then ring the company concerned to check that the caller is genuine; and
- Urging older people to report all suspicious activity to the police

Conferences

From September 2001 to date the Campaign hosted a series of conferences targeted at older people's groups and practitioners to disseminate its own and partners research, share best practice models for tackling crime and stimulate delegates to take action in their own communities.

In the most recent programme, SeniorSafety conferences on Elder Abuse, Bogus Caller and Fear of Crime were held from January through to May, in London, the North West, Eastern, and North East. In all over 600 delegates from a wide range of community safety, voluntary sector and health practitioner backgrounds attended the Campaign's 2004 events, receiving Distraction Burglary Toolkits, Fear of Crime Reports and other useful crime pack information.

On average 99% of delegates said that their time was well spent at the event, 83% said that it had prompted them to further action and when contacted six months later, 20% said that had gone on to achieve the four action points they had set for themselves in the Action Plan workshops.

SeniorLink Bogus Caller Scheme

The Charity launched a pilot bogus caller scheme offering support at the front door to older people when faced with an unknown caller via its SeniorLink Response service in 1997. This is now operational in all HandyVan areas and via partnerships in over fifty areas of Britain overall.

Help the Aged HandyVan fitters as well as partnership organisations install SeniorLink Bogus Caller packages in vulnerable older people's homes. The unit is linked to the client's phone and connected to the SeniorLink Response Centre. The unique feature of the package, a 'door alert' button is fitted beside the client's front door. When suspicious of callers, the client can press the door alert button, which triggers the unit to dial into the Response Centre, thereby putting the client in immediate voice contact with an operator. The operator gives advice and support, and can initiate a search on the callers' credentials – to see if they are genuine – all whilst the caller is on the doorstep.

In Thanet, the pilot area for the service in 1997, where almost half of the population are of retirement age, since the start of the pilot, there has been a sustained 65% reduction in bogus caller crime, with not one repeat victim.

Case study

In early 2003, Mick Martin, the Charity's South Bucks HandyVan fitter visited a couple who were delighted, in fact over the moon with their SeniorLink unit and door alert button. The lady in particular was quite emotional about her initial reaction to it. As part of the standard overall security service, he fitted a couple of smoke detectors and did a minor repair to a window; otherwise the security measures at the house were assessed as satisfactory.

Before the visit from Help the Aged the lady and her deaf husband were the victims of an aggravated distraction burglary, which is why they were recommended by a friend. After answering a knock at their front door early one evening, two guys barged their way into the couple's home shouting and demanding items. The lady was alarmed and terrified at this intrusion, but managed to remain fairly cool and did threaten to call the Police. At this point the intruders left and the couple felt relieved to find themselves unharmed.

Later on that evening the gentleman went upstairs to find that their bedroom had been completely ransacked. Both of the wardrobes had been completely emptied on the floor, clothes were everywhere, and tragically the lady's jewellery and £1,000 in cash had been stolen which they had been saving for a special holiday. It became apparent that a third person had entered the property unseen whilst the other two were distracting the couple. The thief had escaped via an upstairs window. The lady was unable to enter the bedroom for over two days afterward.

The lady is 88 years old and both she and her husband were greatly traumatised by this crime. Since the SeniorLink system has been installed, she has reported that her feelings of fearfulness have reduced significantly to a point where her husband does not have to barricade her in when he goes out. She told us that the knowledge that she can contact the helpful SeniorLink staff at anytime has given her back her confidence and that she feels so much safer as a whole.

HandyVan

Since 1995, the HandyVan Scheme has reduced the risk of loss through burglary for over 103,000 older people. It currently manages Schemes in 33 areas of England, Scotland and Wales, with presence in another 13 areas through HandyVan partnerships with other organisations. Each Scheme has a dedicated fitter, who works from a fully equipped mobile HandyVan, securing on average three pensioner's homes per day, or 600 homes a year. Referrals come from a wide range of community and statutory agencies, including the police, fire brigades, social services, voluntary agencies and health workers.

The aim of the scheme is to make the homes of older vulnerable people safer and more secure through the provision and fitting of a range of security and safety products and the carrying out of odd jobs where time permits – such as changing light bulbs and tacking down loose stair carpets. The scheme is aimed at those older people on low incomes and no charges are made for labour or for the products that are installed.

Gardening Programme

Older people's homes with overgrown gardens are a magnet for bogus callers as they can see that the person that lives there is not able to look after it and is therefore vulnerable. Help the Aged set up its Gardening Programme in 2002 to combat this threat. Its aim is to find new ways to support organisations wishing to provide gardening services for older people, thus reducing the risk of bogus caller crime.

The programme has several interlinked elements:

- Piloting new models of best practice – e.g. Neighbourhood Gardening Advisors Scheme
- Grants / capacity building programme
- Employee volunteering initiatives

Rogue Trader Crime

Cold calling for selling property repairs and garden maintenance is one of the main 'fronts' used by rogue traders who target older people in particular across Britain charging outrageous prices for shoddy work or no work at all. This approach has an additional motive - to gather intelligence which can be used to target the householders at a later date, most usually via distraction burglary.

'Prop men' are the single most significant criminal element of the bogus caller network, playing on the fact that they are carrying out at least some work, however shoddy, thus enforcing the authorities to dismiss the complaint as civil rather than criminal.

In November 2002 an extensive household survey by the Trading Standards Institute found the following:

- 96% of all householders did not want doorstep sellers cold calling
- 10% of householders (2.5 million households) had experienced problems with cold callers for property repairs / garden maintenance in the previous two years⁸

What is Help the Aged doing?

The campaign team have been working with the Trading Standards Institute, the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) and other key agencies to formulate strategies to tackle this insidious crime since late 2002. Initially, the team encouraged the Distraction Burglary Taskforce to extend its remit to include rogue trader crime.

The team ensured that information about rogue trader crime was disseminated to its delegates at ongoing SeniorSafety national and regional conferences and via media releases to older people and their carers across the country. Operationally, new SeniorLink initiatives were developed with Trading Standards and Crime Prevention Officers in SeniorSafety areas (see below).

Lobbying for changes in legislation

Help the Aged agrees with the TSI that a total ban on all cold calling for doorstep trading for property repairs and garden maintenance is the only sure way to protect older people from rogue traders and distraction burglars.

The team joined forces with Gordon Marsden MP, who in May 2004 presented a Bill to Parliament, calling for a ban on doorstep of selling property repairs from unsolicited callers. The team ran a media campaign, calling for the public to ask their MP to back Gordon Marsden's Bill, and sign up to Early Day Motion 219 from Paul Truswell MP which accompanied it.

The draft legislation would outlaw cold calling for doorstep trading in the above area and would require all companies who wished to trade in this way to be licensed with the police and give seven days notice of their intention to call, as they do in France. It also seeks to give consumers greater protection via an extension of contract rights.

At the time of writing, the latest news from that campaign is that an announcement is expected from the Department of Trade and Industry on the proposal by the end of July.

The financial community

In 2003, the Charity joined forces with the TSI and the British Banking Institute to launch a new initiative pioneered by the TSI. Staffs in banks and building

⁸ Door to door cold calling of property repairs, maintenance and improvements: long overdue for statutory control. TSI: November 2002.

societies now have a set of guidelines to follow if they spot an older or vulnerable person trying to withdraw unusually large sums of money.

These are aimed at guarding against the high pressure tactics used by many rogue traders who often demand large amounts of money – and then drive their victims to the bank, building society or post office to pick up the cash. Counter staff are urged to be vigilant and step in to help people they suspect may be on the brink of falling victim to a doorstep con.

A CD, video and leaflets called 'The Bank Job' were produced and distributed by TSI via trading standards offices to their local bank and building society branches.

Bank and building society staff rogue trader guidelines

When an older or vulnerable customer wishes to make a withdrawal beyond their normal routine – for example, an unusually large sum, particularly if accompanied by an unknown person – counter staff are encouraged to:

- Tactfully enquire why the cash is needed
- Point out the dangers of carrying large amounts of cash
- Discourage the customer from withdrawing cash and point out other ways of paying
- Where possible, take the customer to a private area to give the advice
- If it is suspected the customer is in danger of becoming a victim, ask the client if the police or Trading Standards can be called for advice
- Try to ensure that the customer, and anyone with them, is caught on the CCTV security system
- Try to identify any vehicle the customer arrived in.

The advice spells out that the customer's own wishes must be paramount – but that these checks, applied with tact and sensitivity, could prevent someone from falling victim to doorstep crime.

Case study

Early in 2003 a client was connected to the SeniorLink Rogue Trader scheme run in partnership with the local police and Trading Standards agencies. She had been targeted by 'roofers' (male and female), claiming that her roof tiles were in urgent need of repair. The client had already parted with £13,000 for similar work over the past three months.

The Crime Reduction Officer was contacted initially by Woolwich Building Society, who informed him that the client had been taken to the bank by a couple with an invoice for replacing three roof tiles. The invoice amount was for £11,500. The officer installed a SeniorLink unit together with a camera to try to obtain evidence and support the client with 24 hour immediate response. The client was encouraged to use SeniorLink when the 'roofers' returned to collect ladders as agreed the next day. Faced with a no show by the 'roofers' the client used the system at 5.00pm to call Seniorlink for further advice. The operator at the Response centre called the police to respond and she was offered reassurance.

The outcome of this incident was that the cheque was cancelled by the building society and the 'roofers' are recorded on their camera. The female offender was well known both to the police and trading standards officers and similar incidents were being investigated.

Reliable tradespersons project

As highlighted in the 2003 HtA survey above, around 10% of older people wanted help with the upkeep of the outside or inside of their property, or help with their garden. The type of help wanted was largely to work with the older person, rather than to do tasks for the older person. Schemes to put older people in contact with reputable traders have a number of benefits, including reduced distraction burglary targeting and reduced vulnerability to cold callers.

In 2003, the team conducted a survey of organisations to identify where reliable tradesperson's projects were located. The information from this survey will be used to advise older people calling into the SeniorSafety administration office as well as forming the basis for a report on this type of activity across Britain.

Top tips for dealing with bogus callers

- Ensure that all doors are locked at all times even when at home; If you have one, always put the chain on before you open the door, or look out the window to see if you know the caller
- Always ask to see an identification card, then ring the company concerned - not the number on the identification card - to check that the caller is genuine. Genuine callers will not mind waiting
- Never think you are being over cautious: it is always better to be safe than sorry
- Ensure that you know about the password systems operated by your utility companies. You will be assigned a password which genuine utility officials will know to quote when they call
- Ensure that you know what to do if something goes wrong with your water or gas supply. For example find out where the stopcock is, make sure you know what to do in a gas emergency so that you can check your supply yourself if someone calls saying there is an emergency
- Always ask the caller to call back later when you have someone with you if you are still unsure
- Never be pressurised to accept tradespeople at your door. Always ask for quotes from three different people for works to be done
- Remember bogus callers can come in all shapes and size - women, men, pairs and children. There are well documented cases of bogus callers even posing as policemen, council officials and charity workers
- The risk of this crime happening to older people is statistically a small one, but by following the steps above you can protect yourself very easily

Further information

The SeniorSafety team have a wide range of safety and security leaflets, stickers and videos (including the Home Office Video 'Closing the door on Bogus Callers') available free of charge to older people, older people's groups, their carers, relatives and / or crime prevention practitioners.

To contact the team to access these materials or any of the research reports discussed and / or find out where SeniorSafety services operate call 01255 473 999 or email seniorsafety@helptheaged.org.uk

Fear of Crime

It is well documented that older people's fear of crime is out of proportion to the risk of becoming a victim. Many do not believe the official statistics which show that crime has fallen overall in recent years.

Statistics

- 55 per cent of amongst older people living on low incomes felt that the level of crime in their local area had increased during the past four years. 40 per cent of older people in inner cities said that they worry about having their homes broken into or becoming a victim of robbery on the street. Only 7% of these older people – many ethnic elders – said that they would feel very safe when out alone after dark⁹.
- 47 per cent of those over 75 years of age and 37% of over 50 no longer take part in social and community activities after dark because of fear of street crime¹⁰.

What is Help the Aged doing?

In addition to delivering the practical services offering reassurance to older people described above, Help the Aged acted in an advisory role at the inception of the Neighbourhood wardens scheme and produced a good practice guide for helping and involving the older people in such schemes. More recently an in-depth study into understanding and tackling fear of crime amongst older people authored by Alan Burnett was published by Help the Aged in 2002. This was disseminated at a series of SeniorSafety conferences all over England and Wales from 2002/4.

On a strategic level the Charity has backed the establishment of a Victims Fund, offered guidance to 'street level guardians' and collaborated in the operation and projects of the Home Office Fear of Crime Reduction team.

⁹ Help the Aged/Mori 2001

¹⁰ The Fear Factor: Older people and Fear of Street Crime. Age Concern, 2003

The Canadian Lottery Scam

The Canadian Lottery Scam is big business for international fraudsters targeting UK pensioners. The SeniorSafety team joined forces with the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) early in 2004 in an ongoing campaign to warn the general public and older people in particular about these despicable criminals. The following case study illustrates how the Operations team were able to assist a SeniorLink client who was being targeted.

Case study

In April 2004 the SeniorLink Response Centre in Rotherham received a call from an elderly female client who said that she wanted help with finding a lawyer. The operator enquired as to why she needed a lawyer.

The client said she had come into some money and wanted someone to help sort it out. The operator asked the client where the money had come from and how much she had won, to which the client responded that she had won it on the Canadian Lottery, and that they were asking for money to release her winnings. The operator was immediately suspicious and explained that she could get someone from Help the Aged to come and see her to help her sort the problem out.

The client consented, so the operator called the administration office in Clacton and asked if someone could visit the client. John Lyon, the fitter who had originally secured her home and installed the SeniorLink service volunteered to go and see her and it transpired that the information the client had received was indeed from the Canadian Lottery scam and that all information was fraudulent. It also became apparent that she had already sent monies to the instigators. John got in contact with the local Trading Standards Officer to alert them to the fact that the scam was targeting older people in his area and to ask for their assistance in supporting the client.

The client was adamant that the situation was not a scam and that the information she had received from the instigators was bona fide. It took the SeniorLink Operator, the Fitter and the Trading Standards Officer to convince her it was all a scam. She had sent the scammers around £500 at the time the Response Centre was alerted.

How does the scam work?

The way that it works is that people respond to an unsolicited mailing or phone call telling them they are being entered into a prize draw. Their names are then added to a target or 'sucker' list which is made available to numerous direct-marketing and telemarketing operators. The next step is that victims receive an unsolicited phone call from Canada congratulating them on winning the 'big prize' in a National Lottery such as the Canadian, Australian or Spanish. The victim is told that before they can claim the prize, they must send money to pay for taxes and processing fees.

Thousands of older people in the UK have been targeted to date and the OFT is aware of people who have lost up to £67,000 as they respond to more and more telephone calls demanding payments to cover costs in order to receive their prize. The prize doesn't exist, and they never receive any winnings in return for their cash.

People are led to believe that they have won hundreds of thousands of pounds so sending one or two thousand pounds in taxes to claim the prize seems like a proportionately small cost. As victims send more and more money to claim their prize, it becomes difficult for them to make the decision to cut their losses and they become caught in the trap of thinking: "well, I've sent £3,000 already, I might as well send more."

Who is at risk?

Older people are particularly at risk from this crime. Over 80 per cent of victims are more than 65 years-old, but anybody can receive a phone call. In many cases victims have received a number of phone calls from somebody who tries to befriend them, asking them about their family and interests, before they call them again to tell them they have won a prize. The caller may pose as a government official, customs officer or lawyer. Evidence shows that most victims do not report the crime through embarrassment. Some fear that they may be forced by their families or the authorities to relinquish control of their finances and worse their independence because of their age.

The problem is huge - over the past year there has been a large increase in the number of cases reported to the OFT about the Canadian lottery, with more than 300 complaints since August 2003 alone. It is estimated that UK consumers have already paid out £10-£15 million to the scam. Research has also shown that there are 15 call centres in Canada solely targeting the UK. One centre is already known to have defrauded UK consumers of around £450,000.

Reporting the crime

Anyone who has been a victim of this crime or is worried that an elderly relative or friend has been targeted can call a telephone hotline which has been set up by the OFT to collect evidence which the Canadian authorities can use to prosecute the fraudsters. Although the OFT cannot take up cases on behalf of individuals, anybody who has received a phone call and / or sent money to the Canadian lottery can call the hotline in office hours to give their evidence and help put a stop to the scam.

The OFT hotline number is: 020 7211 8111.

Top tips for dealing with Lottery Scammers

What to do if you receive a phone call?

- be cautious: if you have doubts about a caller – hang-up
- never send any money in order to receive a prize
- don't give out private financial information

How to spot a scam:

- if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is
- being asked for money up front to release your 'win'
- being asked for your bank account, credit card details or other confidential information
- if the caller is more excited than you and wants to be your best friend
- if the caller tells you that you must reply straight away or the money will be given to someone else.

Be aware: Canada doesn't have a national lottery like the UK!

The SeniorSafety team is disseminating information about the scam, tops tips for avoiding becoming a victim and information on how to report it. In addition the team are discussing further awareness raising initiatives with the OFT.

Elder Abuse

Help the Aged has recently committed to developing an ongoing campaign from May 2005 to tackle elder abuse and supporting the rights of older people to live their lives free from abuse. The Campaign team have been working with Action on Elder Abuse (AEA) formally since February 2003 and informally since late 2002.

What is Elder Abuse?

There are five main categories of abuse:

- **Financial:** which includes theft, fraud, exploitation, financial coercion re wills, property, money, inheritance, possessions or benefits, etc
- **Neglect:** which includes failure to provide food, heating, clothing or medical attention, ignoring medical or physical care needs, etc
- **Physical:** which includes slapping, kicking, hitting, burning, head butting, scalding, bruising, pushing, misuse of medication, restraint or inappropriate sanctions, etc
- **Psychological:** which includes shouting, swearing, humiliation, intimidation, blaming, threats of harm or abandonment, deprivation of contact, controlling, coercion, harassment, isolation and using what someone values as a weapon against them, etc
- **Sexual:** rape, sexual assault, sexual acts to which the older person has not consented, etc

Further to this Help the Aged believes it is important to recognise that abuse can operate, separately or in parallel, on three different levels:

- **Individual factors:** the action of one individual person whether they are paid workers, carers, family members or strangers.
- **Institutional factors:** institutions, such as hospitals or care homes that have cultures that are oppressive, neglectful or contribute to abuse in other ways.
- **Systemic factors:** the high levels of discrimination that exists within society that makes it permissible for elder abuse to occur. The extent of neglect resulting from under funding and inadequate care provision. For example the regular separation of couples being placed in care homes based on grounds of funding decisions.

Statistics

- Widely accepted that between 500,000 and 800,000 older people are suffering from elder abuse at any one time¹¹
- 88% of members of the Community and District Nursing Association (CDNA) had witnessed at least one incident of elder abuse during their work, for 12% this was

¹¹ Health Select Committee Report on Elder Abuse, March 2004

on a daily, weekly or monthly basis, yet worryingly few had known how to respond¹²

- The majority of older people who experiencing abuse are woman (approximately three times as many as men¹³)

Research from action on Elder Abuse Helpline, 2003

- 64% of abuse happens in an older person's home, 23% in care homes, 4% in sheltered accommodation
- 78% of the abused are over 70, 58% over 80 – men and women
- Types of abuse reported to the helpline: psychological (34%), financial (20%), physical (19%), neglect (12%), sexual (3%), other (13%)
- Most common forms of abuse in own homes and care homes is psychological, followed by physical and financial / neglect
- Abuse is reported by relatives (40%) and paid workers (19%). Of those that abuse:
 - 46% are family members – sons and daughters (50%), partner (11%), in-laws (9%)
 - 34% are paid workers – care workers (49%), nurses (11%), social and housing workers (10%), other (29%)

A recent Health Select Committee report accepted the above prevalence statistics as an extremely conservative estimate, based upon the time elapsed since the 1992 research that it was based on and the very 'hidden' nature of much of the abuse that occurs.

Understandably older people are often very fearful of the consequences of talking openly about what is or has been happening to them. They may have experience of being 'punished' for speaking openly, be conscious of how dependent they are, have emotional ties to the perpetrator or not be able to communicate what is happening to them.

It may not be always be helpful to break the issue of abuse into separate categories. Research has shown that older people are likely to experience many types of abuse, with an accumulative effect on the individual concerned, for example it was common that people who were financially abused also experienced gross physical neglect.

What factors increase vulnerability to abuse?

Although more women than men are abused, abuse is **not** exclusive to women. Individuals without strong networks of support are more at risk. Much of the abuse perpetrated is opportunistic, relying on older people being isolated, dependent and unable to challenge or stop what is happening. Older people are left isolated, frail and dependent without community links or independent sources of support.

If an older person has a physical illness, especially one which effects general levels of mobility or functioning, concentration or memory, communication skills or comprehension they are likely to be more vulnerable to being

¹² 'Responding to Elder Abuse', Community and District Nursing Association: September 2003

¹³ 'The Needs Of Older Women: Services For Victims Of Elder Abuse and Other Abuse', Jacki Pritchard, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, May 2000

targeted. Isolation and loneliness creates both physical and emotional dependence. The older person may rely on the caregiver as the only source of assistance. It is important to recognise that the relationships between the abused and the abuser can often be of a complex nature.

The influence of Ageism

The effects of the pervasive ageism that exists within society must be central to any understanding of elder abuse. When attitudes exist that permit any individual to be treated with anything less than dignity and respect, cultures in which older people can be abused are fostered. If older people are no longer viewed as adults, with feelings and aspirations, then there are no emotional constraints to prevent abusive reactions.

Furthermore ageist practices that fail to maintain older people's social networks, undermine older people's independence, foster isolation and dependence on the system perpetuate situations that leave older people more vulnerable to being abused. Cultural beliefs that permit the under funding of care systems or service structures that lead to decisions being made based in financial reasons rather than the views and wishes of the individual concerned all expose older people to the risk of neglect and abuse.

Older people are adults and must be treated as such. They have the right to expect to be treated with dignity and respect and for their wishes and views to be central at all times.

Is Carer stress to blame?

Too many reports about elder abuse have misleadingly blamed carer stress as the precipitating factor. Research has consistently shown that while loving, supportive, carers may worry about lashing out as a consequence of the burden of their caring responsibilities this rarely happens. For too long we have been distracted by responding to carers own worries about the stress they are inevitably under, rather than facing the harsh reality that paid workers and professionals are often themselves perpetrators of abuse.

While the largest group of call to AEA's helpline was about abuse perpetrated by family members they **were not** the main carers in that person's life. Extended family members and family friends were exploiting the opportunities they were privileged to, due to their trusted position within the family.

Professionals as abusers:

One third of all calls to AEA's helpline are about situations involving paid workers and professionals. The helpline figures highlight nurses and care workers as the professionals most likely to be abusers although all professionals were mentioned.

Institutional Cultures

It is not only individuals who should be highlighted as perpetrators of abuse. There are considerable institutional factors which can contribute to a culture of abuse. The role of management and leadership in promoting good practice, empowering staff and being open and honest in reaction to complaints is crucial in preventing the existence of abuse in care settings. Issues of loyalty, peer pressure, fear, intimidation, cutting corners and inequitable power dynamics are all potential minefields that can foster abusive attitudes, or at least permissive attitudes in which it is acceptable to 'turn a blind eye'.

Domestic Violence in relation to older people:

At present the policy response to abuse of older people only recognises 'vulnerable adults'. That is it only highlights older people who are more 'vulnerable' due to poor physical or mental health as being at risk of being abused. This fails to acknowledge that a significant proportion of abuse that occurs within the older population is the continuation of abusive relationships that have existed for a large proportion of the person's life. These relationships are often complex and are underpinned by issues of power and control, patterns of behaviour that have been established over long periods of time.

Help the Aged seeks to challenge the ageist assumption that domestic violence, either from a spouse or adult son or daughter, ends just because the person becomes older. The Charity produced a report in 2004 that highlighted that in particular more consideration needs to be given to the specific needs of older women experiencing domestic violence¹⁴. American research has shown that while the frequency of the attacks may decrease with age the seriousness of the injuries inflicted increase.¹⁵ Any older person, within this framework is at risk of abuse not just those perceived as 'vulnerable'.

More must be done to ensure that all support and response services for domestic violence are accessible for and supportive of older people. Services that respond to elder abuse need to consider the often complex nature of the relationships involved and respond in a supportive, empowering way that puts the older person at the heart of the process.

The importance of advocacy services:

More needs to be done to ensure that all older people have access to independent advocacy services. It is unrealistic to expect older people to be able to raise the alarm about abuse they witness or directly experience. Older people are often very dependent on the very people who are perpetrating the abuse and are genuinely fearful that if they make a complaint of any kind they will have to face the repercussions. It is essential that every older person has access to independent advocacy services, to ensure they have support to highlight any problems, discuss their potential options and support them in taking any of the choices open to them.

¹⁴ Older women and domestic violence. Imogen Blood for Help the Aged. 2004

¹⁵ 'Addressing the Needs of Older Battered Women, with Special Emphasis on Intimate Partner Violence': Annotated Bibliography, Clearinghouse on Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly, July 2003

Practical work

Joint work on conferences has been developed and resulted in a national conference at which elder abuse was given a half day in January 2004 and a series of regional seminars with specialist speakers on elder abuse.

Operationally the SeniorLink team are investigating a direct link between the Response centre and the AEA helpline. All staff coming into unsupervised contact with older people either face to face or via the telephone are CRB checked to enhanced levels and are receiving elder abuse awareness training.

Case study

Late in 2002, a male client was referred to the SeniorLink service. He was 85 years of age at the time and suffering from dementia. He lived with his wife, an alcoholic some 20 years younger than him. The local social services department reported what they feel to be a series of assaults on him, by her, when drunk. He was referred as an "Adult at risk" and a SeniorLink unit was installed for him so that he could request help when and if she attacked him. Alarm calls are responded to by social services during normal working hours and by a Police response out of hours.

Research

The SeniorSafety Campaign is funding the production of AEA's helpline report 'Hidden Voices', which represents the only national research that exists as to abuse. The report will be produced in four versions, one for each nation and each launch will be accompanied by a series of events to raise the profile of elder abuse as appropriate to each nation.

Fundraising campaigns and Comic Relief

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