



Department for Communities
Government of Western Australia

Office for Seniors Interests and Carers

RESEARCH INTO COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TO ELDER ABUSE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA - SUMMARY

Elder abuse is emerging as an issue of great importance in the community. However, little research has been done on community awareness of and community attitudes to elder abuse. The Department for Communities decided to conduct a community survey¹, to find out how aware Western Australians are about elder abuse and what their attitudes are towards it.

The definition of elder abuse used for the purpose of this study was: ***Any act which causes harm to an older person and occurs within an informal relationship of trust, such as family or friends.*** Elder abuse can be physical, emotional/psychological, social, financial, sexual, or neglect.

Eight hundred Western Australians, aged 16 years and over, took part in a telephone survey. One-third were aged between 16 and 39 years; one-third between 40 and 59 years; and one-third were aged 60 years and over. There were equal proportions of male and female respondents; and three-quarters lived in the Perth metropolitan area.

Community attitudes towards older people in general were not particularly restrictive, with many saying older people:

- should have the right to make their own financial decisions (88%)
- should have the right to refuse help (79%) and
- usually knew what was best for them (61%).

Over half believed, however, that older people should have someone to make decisions about their lives as soon as they begin experiencing memory loss and confusion and that, under these circumstances, older people should *not* be able to make their own financial decisions. Nearly two-thirds (63%), however, believed that older people could *not always* trust their children to act in their best interests, regardless of whether they lacked mental capacity.

These findings highlight that people are generally aware of the need to be prepared for these circumstances but they do not necessarily take action. The study found, for instance, that less than one-third of people aged 60 years and over have an Enduring Power of Attorney (EPA), which would appoint someone to act on their behalf in financial matters if they lose the capacity to do so.

Respondents tended to believe that older people *suffering memory loss or confusion* should be protected from themselves or others in other areas of life as well:

- Two-fifths (40%) thought it was acceptable to restrain them to prevent them from wandering.
- Nearly half (47%) thought they should live in an aged care home.
- Two-thirds (68%) thought they should have someone to make decisions about their lives as soon as they begin suffering from memory loss or confusion.

When asked if they had heard of the term 'elder abuse', about half the sample (52%) said they had, with older respondents more likely to have heard the term. Understanding of what the term

¹ Catalyse Pty Ltd was contracted to conduct the fieldwork, analyse the results and write the report, which formed the basis for this summary.

'elder abuse' means was only moderate, with two-fifths (39%) describing it as the general mistreatment of older people. The types of elder abuse most frequently mentioned were *physical abuse* (27%) followed by *psychological or emotional abuse* (24%) and *neglect* (16%). It is interesting to note that financial abuse is the most common type of elder abuse (although it was mentioned by only 10% of respondents) and physical abuse is one of the least common.

Over one-third of respondents (36%) believed paid carers were more likely than family members, friends or others to be perpetrators of elder abuse, followed by 31% who believed sons or daughters were more likely. However, respondents aged 70-plus were much less likely than younger respondents to believe sons or daughters were more likely to be perpetrators. Another 22% believed that family members (not specified) were more likely to be the perpetrators,

The research revealed that people believed elder abuse to be a **serious** issue in our community, with 87% of respondents agreeing that it was a serious issue. Those acts broadly defined as physical abuse, financial abuse and neglect were considered more serious than those of a psychological, emotional or social nature. In particular, two behaviours were unanimously considered extremely serious by the general population. They are when a family member, friend or carer:

- hits, pushes or slaps an older person (93%); and
- prevents an older person from receiving adequate medical care (89%).

When asked whether elder abuse was common in our community, one-fifth (20%) of the total sample were unable to answer this question. Of the remainder 55% believed elder abuse was common. Females and respondents who were familiar with the term were significantly more likely to agree that elder abuse was common.

Of the seven types of elder abuse investigated in the research, over half thought that neglect, emotional abuse, financial abuse and material abuse (ie taking belongings without consent) were the most common; about two in five thought physical and social abuse were common; and only one in five thought sexual abuse was common. Females were more likely than males to consider each type of abuse to be common.

The research indicated that there is a need for an educational campaign directed at the general population of Western Australia to raise awareness about the issue of elder abuse and provide people with information about the support services available.

People 70 years of age and over present an interesting challenge for policy and campaign developers, with most personally not concerned about elder abuse and not having prepared an EPA to guard them against financial exploitation. Approximately half believe that they can trust their children to act in their best interests.

The research identifies a need to promote the usefulness of preparing an EPA to help protect individuals from financial abuse and exploitation. There is also a need for education about the extent to which people with decision-making disabilities can make decisions about their lives, particularly in the very early stages of dementia.