

Violence Against the Elderly **Virginia Valenzuela & Steve Martinez**

Violence is a destructive force that can grip families and communities. The public takes great offense and is outraged when a violent act is against a child or when a family is torn apart due to some inexplicable act of violence, but there are other people that experience violence who do not get this intense attention. The elderly are far too often pushed aside and forgotten but they too can experience great amounts of violence and abuse. The American Psychological Association's Office on Aging reports that an estimated 2.1 million older Americans are victims of some form of violence. They further claim that for every report of violence against the elderly, there are five unreported cases. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that people over the age of 50 represent 30% of the American population. The elderly also make up 12% of all murder victims and 7% of serious and violent crime victims. The sad fact is that 90% of all violence against the elderly is conducted by a family member. The Bureau of Justice explains that 42% of murder victims over 60 were killed by their own children.

Violence against the elderly can take many forms. The National Center on Elder Abuse in Washington, DC states that violence against the elderly can happen in five ways. The first is physical abuse, which is the use of physical force that may result in bodily injury, physical pain, or impairment. Second is sexual abuse, which is defined as non-consensual sexual contact of any kind with an elderly person. Third is emotional abuse, which is the infliction of anguish, pain, or distress through verbal or non-verbal acts. Fourth is financial/material exploitation, which is defined as illegal or improper use of an elder's funds, property, or assets. Lastly is neglect, which is refusal, or failure, to fulfill any part of a person's obligations or duties to an elderly person.

While any of the above can be catastrophic, the prevalence of financial abuse appears to be more widespread and increasingly affecting more of our elderly. Financial abuse is seen when family members force their vulnerable relatives to accept lower quality medical care in order to preserve their inheritance or even to accessing a person's bank account without their permission or forging their checks.

These sad statistics bring to light one of the reasons that elderly often do not report the abuse. They feel embarrassed or even a certain loyalty especially if the abuse is perpetrated by a relative especially a son or daughter; the abuse becomes a family secret, one that can lead to the older persons' complete isolation and even to death if the abuse is not reported.

Older adults do have the power to decrease their chances of being a victim of violence. The following 10 simple steps greatly reduce their risk:

1. Choose a caregiver with caution.
2. Have an inventory of valuables.
3. Shred all documents with personal identification.
4. Protect your incoming and outgoing mail.
5. Conduct a credit report two to three times a year.
6. Reduce your risk by using caller ID.
7. Avoid scams that are too good to be true.
8. Provide duplicate monthly bank statements to a trusted family member or professional advisor.
9. Check with the Better Business Bureau and the state contractor licensing board to confirm credentials and potential concerns.
10. Set up a second line of defense at the front door.

Many people who are elderly or have disabilities live alone or are dependent on others for their care. Isolation is a factor that places vulnerable adults at risk for abuse, neglect, or exploitation. We must make it our mission to remember the elderly and adults with disabilities in our community. As Catholics, we must create a safe environment for all. For more information on elder abuse prevention please visit www.mmLearn.org.