



Sexual Assault and Older Adults

Historically, older adults have been discriminated against because of their age, seen as incapable and helpless, separated from society at large, and denied opportunities and life experiences that others are allowed. A subsequent history of misperceptions and stereotypes about older adults has put elders at an increased risk of sexual assault. Assaults are motivated primarily out of anger and/or a need to feel powerful. Offenders seek victims they perceive to be vulnerable and isolated from services and support.

Sexual violence is and act (verbal and/or physical), which violates a person's trust and/or safety, and is sexual in nature. The term "sexual violence" includes date/acquaintance rape, partner rape, caregiver sexual assault/abuse, stranger rape, incest, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, exposure, and voyeurism. Sexual contact becomes assault when a person is unable to consent to an activity, does not consent, and/or when a service provider engages in sexual contact with a client. Victims/survivors of sexual violence can be forced, coerced, and/or manipulated into participating in sexual activity. Elder sexual abuse is when a person of 60 years or older is sexually assaulted. Sexual abuse of the 'frail' elderly is when an older person who has a severe disability that limits her/his functioning (and which may require her/him to have a guardian and/or a personal care attendant) is sexually assaulted. Many elder victims/survivors of sexual assault may have experienced their sexual assault/abuse as an adult or they may be adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

- 18% of women raped each year are sixty years of age or older.
Cries from the Heartland Video, 1995.
- An estimated 3.5 million women sixty years of age and older are survivors of childhood sexual abuse.
Farris, M. & Gibson, JW. 1992. "The Older Woman Abused as a Child: Untold Stories and Unanswered Questions."
- 30% of people age 65 or older reported their sexual assault to the police.
Chaiken, J., Klaus, P. 1999. "Crimes Against Persons Age 65 or Older, 1992-1997." U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- About 12.2% of older victims were sexually assaulted in their home; 2.4% were assaulted in an adult care residence; 70.7% were assaulted in a nursing home; and 14.6% of older victims were assaulted in the home of the perpetrator.
Teaster, P., Roberto, K., Duke, J., Myeonghwan, K. 2000. "Sexual Abuse of Older Adults: Preliminary Findings of Cases in Virginia." Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect. Vol. 12 (3-4).
- In 90% of all elder abuse cases the perpetrator was a family member. Two-thirds of the offenders were adult children or spouses.
Administration on Aging, 1998. National Elder Abuse Incidence Study.

This information sheet was compiled in 2003 by the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (WCASA). WCASA is a membership organization of sexual assault centers, other organizations, and individuals throughout Wisconsin working to end sexual violence. For information sheets on other topics or to become a member, contact WCASA 600 Williamson St., Suite N-2, Madison, WI 53703, (608)257-1516, www.wcasa.org. For more information about sexual assault or to receive support with a sexual assault experience, contact your local sexual assault program. This sheet may be reproduced in its original format only.

- 98% of sexual abusers of older men and women are male; however, women are also perpetrators of elder sexual assault.

Dombo, Eileen. *Widening the Circle*, 1998.

- Older adults are also at high risk of sexual abuse by professionals, paraprofessionals, and in-home care workers.

Holt, M.G., 1993. *Elder Sexual Abuse in Britain: Preliminary Findings*.

- In one-third of the cases, sexually abusive acts towards elders were witnessed by others.

Ramsey-Klawnsnik, H. 1991. *Elder Sexual Abuse: Preliminary Findings*. Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect. Vol. 3 No. 3.

- According to one study, more than 1/2 of Nursing Home residents, who were victims of sexual assault, died within 1 year of their victimization.

Burgess, A., Dowdell, E., Prentky, R. Sexual Abuse of Nursing Home Residents. *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing*, Vol. 38, No. 6. June 2000.