

Confronting Ageism and Raising Visibility to Prevent Domestic Violence Homicide of Older Adults

By Kristin Burki

There is no one face of domestic violence (DV) homicide; it is not a monolithic phenomenon. DV homicide cuts across all demographic groups and occurs across the lifespan. Yet, when most people think of who is impacted by DV and DV homicide, they typically think of a younger victim; indeed, domestic violence services are often designed with younger adults in mind. At the same time, the elder abuse field often overlooks coercive power and control dynamics, and responses aren't designed for the context of domestic violence. When this happens, there is gap between fields; domestic abuse experienced by older adults isn't recognized and older survivors are often unable to access the support and services they need.

Despite much progress in research and policy surrounding the issue of elder abuse, there remains a scarcity of data on the homicide of older adults by an intimate partner or family member. One study in England showed that one quarter of domestic violence homicides involved a victim aged 60 and older (Bows, H., 2019). This suggests that while the risk for domestic violence homicide decreases with age, the number of older adults impacted is significant. As a result, domestic violence homicide prevention strategies must be viewed in the context of the whole lifespan and must consider the specific dynamics and safety needs of older adults.

Key to developing prevention strategies is understanding the unique dynamics and safety barriers specific to older adults experiencing domestic violence:

- Generational and cultural norms about family and privacy
- Social isolation resulting from retirement, caregiving, health concerns, the loss of family or friends, etc.
- The caregiving context: whether the victim is providing care for their abusive partner, or the abusive partners provides them with care
- Health and mobility concerns
- Not viewing domestic violence services as being designed for them
- Fear of loss of independence
- Shame and embarrassment, particularly when the abuser is an adult child

- Economic dependence due to an older victim who has never worked outside the home. Alternatively, the victim may be the sole breadwinner, but due to a lifelong relationship, may feel obligated to support their abuser.

Service providers, policymakers and researchers cannot ignore the need to focus on older adults; the aging of the country's population is one of the most significant demographic trends of our time. The number of people over age 55 grew by 27% between 2010 and 2020, which is 20 times larger than the rate of growth for those under 55. (Frey, 2021) The number of Americans ages 65 and older is projected to nearly double from 52 million in 2018 to 95 million by 2060, an increase from 16% to 23% (Mather, Scommegna, Kilduff, 2019).

This growing population will undoubtedly alter demographic trends across many arenas and will, in all likelihood, have an impact on "patterns of elder intimate partner violence and lethal violence" (Salari, S., & Maxwell, C. D., 2016). This could mean that as the United States population ages, domestic violence homicide of older adults will increase.

One study shows this pattern to already be emerging, with a growing number of homicides occurring in middle and later life ages. While the exact reason isn't known, it may be due to this demographic shift in our population (Salari, S., & Maxwell, C. D., 2016).

One of the primary barriers to effective responses to older survivors of domestic violence is ageism, which supports societal norms that devalue older adults. Ageism is tremendously common, with one study showing that 93.4% of adults ages 50-80 experience everyday ageism. (Allen, J. O., Solway, E., Kirch, M., Singer, D., Kullgren, J. T., Moïse, V., & Malani, P. N. 2022). Ageism diminishes how older adults are valued and creates a culture where the abuse, neglect and exploitation of older adults is tolerated, minimized, or even ignored. As a result, older victims are too often invisible in research, in data, in services, and in community responses to domestic violence.

There are severe consequences of ageism in the context of domestic violence homicide. For example, the death of an older adult may be assumed to be related to age and not investigated as abuse-related. Injuries that result from abuse may be wrongly attributed to normal aging vulnerabilities, and an older victim may be released back into the care of the perpetrator, allowing an abusive situation to escalate and become lethal. Assumptions about older adults' capacity and ability to accurately report what is happening in their lives may mean their safety concerns are not heard or taken seriously.

Without addressing ageism in ourselves, our programs and our system responses, abuse in later life will be overlooked, minimized, and ignored, and survivor safety and offender accountability will not be possible.

While aging, the nation is also becoming more diverse. Older adults who are non-Hispanic white will become a smaller percentage of the population, with a projected decrease from 77% to 55%

(Mather, Scommegna, Kilduff, 2019). It is estimated that the number of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older adults over 50 will double by 2030. (Choi, S.K. & Meyer, I.H., 2016). Additionally, the prevalence of disability rises sharply as individual's age, which makes them at particularly high risk of mistreatment (National Center on Elder Abuse, 2022).

This is important because each person's background, culture, and identity are the context in which their life occurs; for older domestic violence survivors, it's also the context of their abuse as well as the context for their safety and healing. As such, services providers must account not only for the intersections of gender and age, but also race, sexual orientation, and other identities. "One size fits all" approaches ignore unique barriers to safety and services and leave too many older adults vulnerable to being unseen or dismissed. Taking an intersectional approach means we design outreach, services, collaboration and policies in ways that are responsive to an older adult's identity and experience.

The National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life, an initiative of End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin, focuses on the nexus of domestic and sexual violence and elder abuse. NCALL envisions a society that respects older adults, and where communities work collaboratively to ensure their dignity and safety. To achieve this, we engage communities to foster a collaborative, inclusive, survivor-centered response to abuse in later life.

Through training, technical assistance, and resources, NCALL raises the visibility of abuse in later life and advocates for elder justice. As you seek to consider the context of an older victim's experience and integrate their needs into your work, please visit our website at www.ncall.us. There, you will find information, practical tools, training modules, a video library and shareable graphics to support your work with and on behalf of older victims. Information is also included about a federal funding opportunity for communities interested in advancing elder justice through the Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women's (OVW) [Enhanced Training and Services to End Abuse in Later Life Program](#). NCALL has provided technical assistance and training to OVW Abuse in Later Life grantees since 2002.

Citations

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