

Elder Abuse among Alaska Natives

Kathleen Graves, Ph.D.,
MSW

University of Alaska
Anchorage

School of Social Work



What is elder abuse?

National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

Elder abuse is any form of mistreatment that results in harm or loss to an older person. It is generally divided into the following categories:

- **Physical abuse** is physical force that results in bodily injury, pain, or impairment. It includes assault, battery, and inappropriate restraint.
- **Sexual abuse** is non-consensual sexual contact of any kind with an older person.
- **Domestic violence** is an escalating pattern of violence by an intimate partner where the violence is used to exercise power and control.
- **Psychological abuse** is the willful infliction of mental or emotional anguish by threat, humiliation, or other verbal or nonverbal conduct.
- **Financial abuse** is the illegal or improper use of an older person's funds, property, or resources.
- **Neglect** is the failure of a caregiver to fulfill his or her care giving responsibilities. **Self-neglect** is failure to provide for one's own essential needs.

Overall Picture of Elder Abuse in America

National Center on Elder Abuse

No one knows how many older Americans are being abused: Why?

- No national standards: definitions of abuse vary
- No uniform reporting system
- Difficult to collect National data

Recent studies related to prevalence:

- 1 and 2 million Americans age 65 or older have been injured, exploited, or otherwise mistreated by someone on whom they depended for care or protection. (Elder Mistreatment: Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation in an Aging America. 2003)
- Current estimates put the overall reporting of financial exploitation at only 1 in 25 cases, suggesting that there may be at least 5 million financial abuse victims each year. (Wasik, John F. 2000. "The Fleecing of America's Elderly," Consumers Digest, March/April.)
- It is estimated that for every one case of elder abuse, neglect, exploitation, or self-neglect reported to authorities, about five more go unreported. (National Elder Abuse Incidence Study. 1998.)

What is being reported in Alaska?

“Long term care needs of Alaska Native elders” 2004 Kay Branch, Alaska Native Tribal health Consortium.

Alaska State Trooper data 2001-2003

- Responded to 141 domestic violence cases (with an additional 12 reports for welfare on an elder that were not recorded as domestic violence).
- In 132 of the cases the perpetrator was male (median ages between 34-38) and the victims (ages 55-83) were evenly divided into males and females. Alcohol was involved in 114 of the cases. There were 9 reports where female perpetrators, with an age range between 18-50 and alcohol was involved in 7 of the 9 cases.

Adult protective services data 2003-2004

- APS reported 159 cases involving Alaska Native Elders
- during fiscal year 2001, adult protection caseworkers received over 1,000 reports of abuse/neglect, conducted over 751 investigations, and provided 139 referrals.

Adult Protective Services 2003-2004

Types of Elder Abuse:

- **65 cases of Financial Exploitation:** The unjust or improper use of another person or their resources
- **44 cases of Self-Neglect:** The act of omission by vulnerable adults that could result in the deprivation of essential
- **33 cases of neglect:** The intentional failure of a caregiver to provide essential services
- **26 cases of physical abuse:** The intentional or reckless non-accidental infliction of pain or injury
- **10 cases of Guardianship:** Petition for guardianship for any vulnerable adult deemed incompetent who doesn't have family member to petition
- **10 cases of Mental abuse:** The willful infliction of mental or emotional anguish by threat, humiliation, or other verbal or nonverbal conduct
- **2 cases of Sexual Abuse:** non-consensual sexual contact of any kind with an older person.

Alaska Trauma Registry 1996-2000

This registry reports the description of the injury was inflicted by a family member.

- There were **66 assault reports** involving people over the age of 55 for the five-year time period: 62% were male and 38% female
- There were two fatalities and 554 total hospital days resulting, and six people sustained permanent disability.
- Over 80 % of the cases included alcohol as a factor.
- Twenty-two of the cases, or one third, clearly indicated a family member as the abuser.

Alaska Native Elder Abuse:

Creating Harmony by Voicing Traditions of Listening

Who was involved? National Resource Center for American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian Elders at UAA, Kathleen Graves, Louise Shavings, Cookie Rose

What did we do? Interviewed 15 Alaska Native Elders, 3 Elders from each of the 5 main cultural groups: Inupiat, Yupik/Cupik, Athabscan, Aluet/Alutiiq, and Southeast: Eyak, Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian. We asked open ended questions and analyzed the results using qualitative software.

Why did we do it? The intent of this project was to ask Alaska Native Elders from the five major Alaska Native ethnic groups to share their ideas about the causes and kinds of elderly abuse and suggest ways to reduce and control such abuse

Findings

- **Respect and Disrespect:** Elders refer to abuse as a lack of respect. The use of the term *abuse* seemed to offend the Elders, making it more difficult to talk about. They preferred terms such as *respect* and *disrespect* rather than abuse. Emotional disrespect was one of the most common types of disrespect
- **Financial Exploitation of the Elderly:** This was the most frequently mentioned form of disrespect or abuse of Alaska Native Elders and is consistent with the Adult Protective Services data.
- **Verbal Abuse:** was a frequently mentioned form of abuse experienced by Alaska Natives: “...it’s hard for them to take about it, verbal abuse..”
- **Emotional Abuse:** It was mentioned that a form of emotional abuse is to place Elders in extended care facilities and not visit them. It was also mentioned that that some healthcare professionals treat them in a disrespectful manner because they assume they do not understand their own bodies. “...just cause you’re Indian, they (medical staff) treat you like you don’t understand. It’s your body, you know what it needs and what’s wrong with it! But they act like you don’t understand.”

Findings continued

- **The elderly are reluctant to report abuse:** Elders reported a reluctance to report abuse by a family member to law enforcement for fear of compromising the longevity of the group, a possible outbreak of suicide among at-risk youth, and the withholding of financial or personal support.
- **The elderly perceive a loss of respect by some younger Alaska Natives.** As younger Alaska Natives adopt non-Native ways, the traditions that protected Alaska Natives in the past are threatened. The Elders reported a belief that Native youth sometimes don't value traditional wisdom and therefore treat the elderly as though they lack intelligence.
- **The elderly are overburdened with care-giving responsibilities:** A common intergenerational practice is for extended family members to care for young children for short periods of time. This traditional arrangement for short-term care appears to have expanded to extensive care-giving responsibilities. When the elderly are overburdened with caring for youth, they may experience physical, emotional, and financial strain.

Recommendations for healthcare workers

- **Become informed about Alaska Native cultural communication practices:** Understand and communicate respect for protocols, values, and ways of life.
- **Slow down your pace of speech to match the pace of the patient** Mirroring the cadence of the elderly person is one way to increase communication as well as show respect. Health care professionals also need to be sensitive to nonverbal communication patterns. Because health care providers are held in high regard, it is customary, for example, not to look directly at them while listening intently to what they are saying.
- **Listen more than talk:** give the elderly total attention. It is vital to allow the elderly ample time to express themselves without interruptions. When Native people are silent, they may be showing respect rather than incomprehension. And finally, keep in mind that the elderly often speak indirectly, in metaphors and stories.

Recommendations continued

- **Understand local reluctance to implicate relatives.** Be aware that Alaska Native elderly do not always trust non-Natives. They may be reluctant to implicate others, particularly family members, in reports of neglect or abuse
- **Take a family or community systems approach.** Prevention and intervention of elder abuse requires a focus not only on the individual but also on the family or community.