Introduction
In recent years, the problems of elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation have garnered increasing attention within the United States. Although much work remains to establish reliable data, integrate policy solutions, and disseminate effective practice approaches to prevent and address elder abuse, significant advances have been made. This publication describes the nature, incidence, and risks of elder mistreatment; highlights recent federal elder justice initiatives; and provides strategies, tools, and resources to help social workers address elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

Understanding Elder Abuse
The National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA), a resource center of the Administration on Aging (AoA)/Administration for Community Living (ACL), differentiates seven types of elder mistreatment, often described collectively as elder abuse:

- physical abuse, which includes not only physical violence but also force-feeding, physical restraints, and inappropriate medication use
- emotional or psychological abuse, which includes not only verbal interactions but also infantilizing treatment and social isolation
- sexual abuse, which includes sexually explicit photographing or videotaping
- financial or material exploitation, which includes any illegal, improper, or coerced use of money, property, or assets
- neglect, defined as failure to meet an older adult’s basic needs, such as housing, nutrition, clothing, hygiene, personal care, medical care, safety, or agreed-upon financial support
- self-neglect, in which an older adult engages in behavior that jeopardizes their own health and safety, without understanding the consequences of those decisions
- abandonment, which may occur not only in health care settings but also in public locations (NCEA, n.d.-b).

At the same time, definitions and categorizations of elder abuse vary widely, and each state’s definition guides service providers’ responses to cases of suspected abuse (Mastebarger, 2012; Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2013).

Extent of Elder Abuse
Recent research indicates that elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation are widespread:

- In one national study, 9 percent of older adults reported experiencing verbal abuse within the preceding year; 3.5 percent reported financial exploitation and 0.2

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Risk Factors Associated with Elder Abuse

Elder abuse may be perpetrated by family members, friends, peers, service providers, or strangers in both community and institutional settings. Research has revealed multiple risk factors for elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation—some associated with victims, some with perpetrators, and some with both.

- **VICTIM CHARACTERISTICS:** female, physical disability, cognitive impairment, poor or declining health, limited social support, social isolation, recent losses, depression, substance use disorders, low income or possessing expendable resources, limited education, lack of understanding about financial issues, history of abuse earlier in life.

- **PERPETRATOR CHARACTERISTICS:** unemployment, mental health problems, substance use disorders, social isolation, social, emotional, or financial dependency on the victim, perceiving victims’ behaviors as challenging or inappropriate (Acienro et al., 2009; Anetzberger, 2012; GAO, 2011a; KOM, 2013; NCEA, n.d.a; National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse [NCPEA], 2008a; Rabin et al., 2008; Schramm et al., 2012).

In the past, caregiver stress was believed to be a primary cause of elder abuse. Some recent literature does not support this notion and, on the contrary, suggests that linking caregiver stress with elder abuse may unintentionally shift the focus of programs and policies away from helpful interventions (Brandl & Raymond, 2012).

Similarly, whereas past research pointed to an increased risk of elder mistreatment among people of color, current literature notes this is not the case; rather, some recent research underscores the risk factors of poor health and limited social support, which may be correlated with race and ethnicity (Hernandez-Tejada, Amstadter, Muzzy, & Acienro, 2013).

Physical and behavioral indicators of abuse vary by type of mistreatment (NCEA, n.d.b; NCPEA, 2008b). Comprehensive biopsychosocial assessment is critical to determine whether such signs and symptoms may be attributable to elder abuse or to other causes.

Effects of Elder Abuse

Research indicates that elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation have far-reaching ramifications for older adults:

- increased mortality risk related to self-neglect and elder abuse (Dong et al., 2009), especially for older adults with depression and limited social support (Dong et al., as cited in KOM, 2013).
- increased risk of emergency department use and hospitalization related to self-neglect (Dong et al., Dong & Simon, and Dong, Simon, & Evans, as cited in KOM, 2013); increased risk of hospitalization related to elder abuse (Dong & Simon, as cited in Rush University Medical Center, 2013).
- increased risk of placement in a nursing home or other institutional setting following hospitalization for elder mistreatment (Kazi, Vega Johnson, & Mouton, 2009; Dong & Simon, as cited in KOM, 2013).
- rapidly increasing economic losses incurred by older adults, especially by older women, as a result of financial exploitation (Lifetime Mature Market Institute, 2009, 2011).

Moreover, the aforementioned data about health care utilization suggest that elder mistreatment results in increased health care costs not only for older adults, but also for families and communities.

Federal Initiatives to Address Elder Abuse

Elder justice has gained increasing national attention within the past several years and has been a top priority of the Administration on Aging/Administration for Community Living under the Obama administration.

- The **Elder Justice Act of 2009** (EJA) (S. 795, 2009) was enacted into law as an amendment to the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) (2010). The law’s major provisions include: (a) creation of an Elder Justice Coordinating Council, led by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), to coordinate and enhance federal activities addressing elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation; (b) creation of an Advisory Board on Elder Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation, which will develop a strategic plan for elder justice; (c) funding for state surveys of Medicare- and Medicaid-certified long-term care facilities, APS programs, long-term care ombudsman programs, and long-term care staffing; and (d) establishment of forensic centers addressing elder mistreatment (Elder Justice Coalition, n.d.-b). Congress has yet to appropriate funds to implement the EJA, although President Obama has repeatedly supported funding for the EJA. As of this writing, the Senate Subcommittee for Labor, Health, and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies has recommended that $10 million of President Obama’s $25 million budget request be appropriated for the EJA in FY 2014. The U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations, 2014. If approved by Congress, this funding would create an Elder Justice Initiative to foster cross-disciplinary partnerships for the prevention, investigation, and prosecution of elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

- Despite the lack of EJA appropriations, the EJA-nominated Elder Justice Coordinating Council has been meeting and gathering input from stakeholders for nearly two years. The Council recently adopted eight recommendations to improve elder abuse awareness, prevention, and responses (Elder Justice Coordinating Council, 2014). Recommendations that could directly affect social work practice include: (a) development of standardized APS data collection systems and standards; (b) development of cross-disciplinary training on elder abuse; (c) improvements to screening for dementia and cognitive capacity, financial capacity, and financial exploitation; and (d) development of a federal elder justice research agenda to identify best practices for prevention and intervention. The Council will also consider priorities and opportunities identified in the newly released *Elder Justice Roadmap* report, developed with the input of numerous stakeholders and with the support of the Department of Justice and the Department of Health and Human Services (Connolly, Brandl, & Breckman, 2014).

- In a separate effort to secure EJA appropriations, the Obama administration has approved new funding for elder justice through the ACA Prevention and Public Health Fund (PPHF). In FY 2012, President Obama authorized almost $6 million of ACA grant funding to enable states to pilot elder abuse interventions (Elder Justice Coalition, n.d.-b; Kuhl, Sanders, & Blumenfeld, 2012). In FY 2013, he released another $2 million from the PPHF for an elder abuse initiative.
Every year an estimated 5 million, or 1 in 10, older Americans are victims of elder abuse, neglect, or exploitation. And experts believe that for every reported case of elder abuse or neglect, as many as 23.5 cases go unreported.

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- **TYPES OF ELDER MISTREATMENT**

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In addition to supporting the National Adult Protective Services Association has accomplished with AoA/ACL funding (GAO, 2011a). The AoA/ACL has funded a new National Indigenous Elder Justice Initiative (NIEJI). NIEJI strives to enhance the well-being of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian elders by providing culturally appropriate research, education, and training on elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation in Indigenous communities.

AoA/ACL also supports the Institute of Medicine Forum on Global Violence Prevention (in which NASW is represented), which sponsored a workshop to explore collaborative, evidence-based approaches to elder abuse prevention and intervention (IOM, 2013).

Although AoA/ACL has assumed a strong federal leadership role in elder justice, complementary efforts are underway in multiple federal agencies to address elder financial exploitation, (b) enhance data collection and other research, (c) support elder abuse training, (d) educate the courts, law enforcement agencies, and legal aid programs, (e) address elder mistreatment in nursing homes and other congregate residential settings, and (f) assist older adults who have been mistreated.

Interagency Working Group, 2013). In 2012, the White House hosted a forum on elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation. This forum, in collaboration with AoA/ACL, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and the U.S. Department of Justice, was just one recent federal government activity promoting the annual World Elder Abuse Awareness Day observance.

Between 2011 and 2013, the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging held five hearings addressing various forms of elder abuse. Although the Committee has no legislative authority, its findings and legislative recommendations may influence Senate bills.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) included the measure Elder Maltreatment Screen and Follow-Up Plan in the Physician Quality Reporting System for both 2013 and 2014. Clinical social workers in independent private practice may use this measure to improve the quality of care provided to Medicare beneficiaries (Calemam, 2013, 2014).

Strategies to Prevent and Address Elder Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation

RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT ELDER MISTREATMENT. Much elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation is invisible. Educate your clients, colleagues, families, and friends. Organize an event, give a presentation, or write a letter to the editor in observance of World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (June 15).

CHALLENGE AGEISM. Deep-seated disrespect for older adults and fears about aging contribute to the devaluation and marginalization of older adults. Such attitudes may contribute to elder mistreatment. Be conscious of, and ready to address, ageist bias and stereotypes.

KNOW YOUR PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES. Check with both your state and your social work licensure board about your mandated reporting obligations. Consult the Code of Ethics (NASW, 2008) for guidance and seek supervision and consultation as needed.

BE ALERT TO THE POSSIBILITY OF ELDER MISTREATMENT. Some older adults and family caregivers may not be able to name their experiences, or those of their family members, as elder mistreatment. Others may be reluctant to seek help, especially when family members or trusted service providers are the perpetrators. Be aware of the warning signs of elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Should such signs be present, carefully assess the situation.

FACILITATE ACCESS TO RESOURCES. Make sure your clients who are older adults or family caregivers know how to find local services using the Eldercare Locator (www.eldercare.gov or 800.677.1116). If you suspect elder abuse, neglect, or exploitation may have occurred, assess the gravity of the situation and connect clients with the appropriate resource or resources. Visit NCEA’s State Resource Directory (www.aoa.aoa.gov/Stop_Abuse/Get_Help/State/index.aspx) for helplines, hotlines, state agencies (such as Adult Protective Services and the Long-Term Care Ombudsman), laws and regulations, and other state-specific resources. In emergency situations, call 911, the local police, or the sheriff.

SEEK INTERGENERATIONAL ALLIANCE. Elder justice advocates have natural allies in child welfare advocates and domestic violence activists. Collaborate with other service providers, advocates, and organizations to facilitate understanding, leverage resources, and advance mutual agendas.

ADVOCATE FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE. Although elder justice is gaining momentum, much work remains to fund authorized programs and pass new legislation. Get involved in a local or state coalition on elder abuse (www.aoa.aoa.gov/Stop_Abuse/Teams/Local/index.aspx). Visit the Web sites of the Elder Justice Coalition and the National Center on Abuse in Later Life for national policy and legislative developments specific to elder justice. Participate in your NASW chapter’s state-level advocacy activities and join NASW’s national online advocacy network (http://cqrcengage.com/socialworkers/).

Tools Social Workers Can Use to Identify, Address, and Prevent Elder Abuse

Administration on Aging Web page on suspected elder abuse, neglect, or exploitation – www.aoa.gov/Aoa_programs/elder_rights/EA_prevention/WhatToDo.aspx Guidance to responding to suspected elder abuse, neglect, or exploitation.

AoA/ACL World Elder Abuse Awareness Day Toolkit – http://acl.gov/newsroom/observances/WEAADTools-Tips-Resources/index.aspx Fact sheets, outreach guides, and additional resources to promote this annual observance.

Center of Excellence on Elder Abuse and Neglect (University of California, Irvine) – www.centeronelderabuse.org/

Clearinghouse of information on elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

Clearinghouse on Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly (University of Delaware) – www.cedid.udel.edu/

Extensive computerized catalog of literature on elder abuse.


Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation and CFPB Money Smart for Older Adults program www.fdic.gov/moneysmart

Instructor-led training curriculum to help older adults and family caregivers avoid elder financial exploitation and make informed financial decisions.


National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Older Life – www.nccal.us Technical assistance, training guides, and advocacy addressing the connection between domestic violence, sexual assault, and elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation.


Elder mistreatment can lead to increased health care utilization, loss of independence, substantial financial losses, and even increased mortality risk.
Preparation to Prevent and Address Elder Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation

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- Extensive computerized catalog of literature on elder abuse

- Warning signs, model response protocol, facility policies, and other information for assisted living and nursing home staff

- Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation and CFPB Money Smart for Older Adults program www.fdic.gov/moneysmart
- Instructor-led training curriculum to help older adults and family caregivers avoid elder financial exploitation and make informed financial decisions

- Tip sheets for family caregivers and older adults

- Eldercare Locator – www.eldercare.gov
- National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life – www.nccal.us
- Technical assistance, training guides, and advocacy addressing the connection between domestic violence, sexual assault, and elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation

- National Resource Center on LGBTQ Aging elder abuse resources – www.ltgagingcenter.org/resources/index.cfm?id=8
- Publications and multimedia on abuse of LGBT older adults
Other Related Resources

NASW

- NASW Press resources
- Encyclopedia of Social Work (20th ed.) article: Elder Abuse (Rathbone-McCuan, 2008)
- Social work speaks (9th ed.) policy statement: Aging and Wellness (2012)
- Specialty Practice Sections resources – www.socialworkers.org/sections
- Aging Section/Connection articles: Violence Against Adults: A Look at Elder Abuse (Hong, 2011); Trauma and Aging (Kizanoa, 2008); and Elder Maltreatment and Neglect: Twelve American Indian Outreach Workers/Community Health Representatives Share Their Expertise (Coa, 2007)
- Webinar: The Complexities of Elder Abuse (Krege, Anzteringer, 2013)

FEDERAL RESOURCES

- Administration on Aging/Administration on Community Living Elder Rights Protection Programs
  - National Adult Protective Services Resource Center – www.napsa-nov.org
  - National Association of Area Agencies on Aging – www.n4aa.org
  - National Association of States United for Aging and Disabilities – www.nasadac.org
  - National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse – http://preventelderabuse.org
  - National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care – www.theconssumervoice.org
  - OWL, The Voice of Maturity and Older Women – www.owl-national.org
  - Services and Advocacy for Gray, Lesbian, Bisexual, & Transgender Elders – www.sageusa.org
  - Women’s Institute for a Secure Retirement/ National Education and Resource Center on Women and Retirement Planning – www.wisewomen.org

U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging hearings on elder abuse – www.aging.senate.gov/hearings
- Tax-Related Identity Theft (2013)
- Phone Fraud (2013)
- Elder Financial Abuse (2012)
- Pension Fraud (2012)
- Elder Abuse, Neglect, & Financial Exploitation (2011)

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS WORKING TO ADDRESS ELDER ABUSE, NEGLECT, & EXPLOITATION

- Elder Justice Coalition – www.elderjusticecoalition.com
- National Adult Protective Services Association – www.napsa-nov.org
- National Association of Area Agencies on Aging – www.n4aa.org
- National Association of State Long-Term Care Ombudsmen Programs – www.nasop.org
- National Association of States United for Aging and Disabilities – www.nasadac.org
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INTERNATIONAL RESOURCES

- International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse – www.inpa.org

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- Social work speaks (9th ed.) policy statement: Aging and Wellness (2012)
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- Webinar: The Complexities of Elder Abuse (Kroeglein, Arntzinger, 2010)

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- National Association of States United for Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs – www.nasop.org
- National Association of States United for Aging and Disabilities – www.nasscd.org
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