

## Clinical Investigation

# Elder Abuse in a Risk Society

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**Background:** Inconsistent definitions of abuse, prevalence of types of abuse and abusers, and risks associated with abuse are apparent in the literature on elder abuse. This is due in part to the complexity that exists in the dynamics of the modern family and the subsequent challenge for researchers to construct a research design capable of capturing these interactions. The introduction of interpersonal risk theory to the literature on elder abuse promises to shed new light on the complex family dynamics encompassing elder abuse and neglect.

**Methods:** The data used in this study was drawn from the 1999 Canadian General Social Survey (GSS-99) to determine the prevalence of risk factors associated with elder abuse.

**Results:** Males, separated individuals, those living in rural areas, respondents who had a prior marriage or cohabitation partner, and seniors with sleeping problems or health-related activity limitations, had a significantly higher risk of emotional or financial abuse from a partner/ex-partner, child, or caregiver.

**Conclusion:** Consistent with some patterns that have emerged on risks for elder abuse in the existing literature, our model confirmed those predictors, as well as covariates that have not been adequately considered in previous research on elder abuse.

**Key words:** Elder abuse, risk factors, interpersonal risk

## INTRODUCTION

The concept and discourse of risk has spread throughout modern society and now dominates public policy debates in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, prominent sociologists refer to modern society as a “risk society” because of the growing social importance of risk.<sup>2,3</sup> One of the key types of risk identified in the literature is *interpersonal risk*, or risks that involve our closest personal relationships.<sup>4</sup> In this vein, elder abuse is increasingly recognized as a social, familial, and individual problem.

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Moreover, with the aging of Canada’s population in the coming years, the incidence of senior abuse has the potential to skyrocket. Importantly, the *1999 Canadian General Social Survey on Criminal Victimization* was the first effort by Statistics Canada to gather data from a national probability sample on the phenomenon of senior abuse. Our paper employed data from this national survey to examine several factors thought to be associated with the risk of elder abuse.

The recognition of elder abuse can be traced to Burston, an English emergency-room physician, who suggested in 1975 that the elderly were occasionally subjected to mistreatment.<sup>5</sup> In the decade to follow, studies began to emerge examining the prevalence and causes of this phenomenon.<sup>5-8</sup> However, the few studies generated were flawed due to small unrepresentative samples, inconsistent definitions, and poor methodologies.<sup>8</sup>

By the early 1990s, Canadian national studies began to surface and lay the groundwork for further research on elder abuse.<sup>9,10</sup> Unfortunately, any compilation of studies demonstrates inconsistent definitions of abuse, prevalence of types of abuse and abusers, and risks associated with elder abuse.<sup>9,11-13</sup> Much of this is due to the complexity that exists within the dynamics of the family, including the surrounding societal structural changes that have interjected greater challenges to family members today.<sup>6,14</sup> These challenges exist across socioeconomic classes, at a time when families struggle to stay together. This is exacerbated by an increasing need to meet the conflicting demands of earning a livelihood and keeping up with the tasks of caring for children and dependent older relatives.<sup>14</sup> The manipulation of risk factors, in particular, requires a research design capable of capturing contemporary family dynamics.<sup>15</sup>

In the field of elder-abuse research in the last decade, some patterns have developed among the victim, the abuser, and the type of abuse. Wolf’s

analysis of studies on elder abuse in 1997 and 2000<sup>16,17</sup> reveals that, in the case of physical and psychological/emotional abuse, the victims tend to have poor emotional health but are independent in their activities of daily living. At the same time, the perpetrators are more likely to display financial dependence on the victim and may have emotional, psychiatric, and substance abuse problems. Moreover, lack of external social supports for the victim continues to emerge as a risk factor. Risk factors connected to intimate relationships appear to be associated with these types of abuse.<sup>16,17</sup> For elderly people with more passive and avoidant personalities, there is a greater likelihood of financial abuse.<sup>18</sup> In addition, there is a greater tendency for unmarried women who live alone to become victims of this form of abuse.<sup>16,19</sup> In contrast, a study conducted in the Netherlands concluded that being male increased the risk of financial abuse.<sup>20</sup> Yet, studies have concluded that, among the elderly, gender is not a risk factor for abuse.<sup>9,10</sup>

Perhaps the most telling consequence of the inconsistencies apparent in the research is the lack of detection necessary to alleviate a growing number of elders experiencing abuse at the hands of family members. This extends to policy and law formulation. Disdain toward the elderly in modern society is a likely culprit in the lack of substantiation when elder abuse is detected.<sup>9,12,13,21</sup> For example, a great degree of uncertainty prevails among professionals who work with elderly populations regarding how to identify abuse.<sup>22,23</sup> This ambiguity is connected to the belief that the elderly person often provokes the abuser through cranky and overly demanding behaviour.<sup>7,8,22</sup> Moreover, elders who have been abused have a tendency to blame themselves for this treatment.<sup>9,10</sup>

Enforcing mandatory reporting legislation is an ongoing debate in both Canada and the United States, and the issue has yet to be resolved in many states and provinces.<sup>24,25</sup> This indecisive attitude toward the definition of elder abuse and, thus, uniform legislation, results in a lack of services and programs to support families caring for elders today.<sup>9,10</sup> This could potentially exacerbate the tension and anxiety that already exists within the changing North American family, producing greater possibilities for elder abuse. Clearly, more research is required to shed new light on the complex family dynamics encompassing elder abuse and neglect.

## METHODS

The data used in this study was drawn from the 1999 *Canadian General Social Survey (GSS-99)*. This was the 13th round of the General Social Survey conducted by Statistics Canada and gathered information on the nature and extent of criminal victimization in Canada. The survey encompassed a national probability sample of 25,876 respondents aged 15 and older, excluding full-time institutionalized persons and residents of the Yukon, Nunavut, and the Northwest Territories. Of this group, our study of elder abuse involved the sub-sample of 1,302 males and 2,070 females in the GSS99 who were aged 65 and older. Computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) using random digit dialing (RDD) were employed to collect the data, with an overall response-rate of 81.2%.

The GSS-99 measures criminal victimization. However, for the first time the GSS included focus content dealing with the issue of senior abuse, and Statistics Canada used the responses to these survey questions to construct a summary variable which measured “senior emotional or financial abuse by a child or caregiver or current partner or ex-partner”. Some 247 of the 3,372 sample respondents aged 65 or older (7.3%) had “yes” responses to this variable which served as our dependent variable. The remaining cases were coded as “no/no answer”.

Table 1 provides operational definitions and descriptive statistics (mean or percentages) for the covariates or risk factors used in the analysis of elder abuse. We included three demographic covariates (age, gender, and marital status) and two measures of socioeconomic status (education and income). Respondent gender and marital status were “effect” or “dummy” coded to make them suitable for logistic regression modeling. As well, mean income and a dummy variable identifying missing income responses were included in the regression analysis to avoid the loss of a substantial number of cases. Social and cultural background risk factors such as being a prior crime victim, religious affiliation, nativity, and region of residence were all dummy coded, while visits from children and religiosity (church attendance) were both measured using 5-point response scales on the survey. Finally, two health status risk factors, respondent sleep problems and major activity limitations due

**Table 1. Definitions and Descriptive Statistics for Independent Variables Used in the Analysis of Elder Abuse, Canada, 1999**

| Variable                              | Definition   | Mean or Percentage* |
|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------|
| <b>Demographic Variables</b>          |  |                     |
| Age                                   | Age of respondent  | 72.7                |
| Marital Status                        | Current marital status of respondent   |                     |
| Cohabiting                            | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 1.1%                |
| Divorced                              | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 5.5%                |
| Separated                             | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 2.0%                |
| Widowed                               | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 38.8%               |
| Single/Never married                  | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 1.6%                |
| Married                               | Reference category   |                     |
| Marital History                       |  |                     |
| Prior marriage/cohabitation           | Dummy indicator of marriage/cohabitation with person other than current partner (1=Yes, 0=No)          | 6.3%                |
| Gender                                | Dummy indicator of female respondent (1=Yes, 0=No)   | 61.4%               |
| <b>Socioeconomic Status</b>           |  |                     |
| Education                             | Educational attainment of respondent in 10 levels (1=elementary or less, ..., 10=post-bachelor degree) | 3.9                 |
| Income                                | Respondent Income from all sources   | 22,147              |
| Income missing                        | Dummy indicator of nonresponse to income question (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 41.4%               |
| <b>Social and Cultural Background</b> |  |                     |
| Crime Victim                          | Dummy indicator of respondent ever being a victim of crime (1=Yes, 0=No)                               | 5.1%                |
| Kids Visits                           | Contact with children during past 5 years in 5 levels (0=Not at all, 5=Daily)                          | 2.6                 |
| Religion                              | Respondent's religious affiliation   |                     |
| Catholic                              | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 35.6%               |
| Protestant                            | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 49.2%               |
| Other religions                       | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 4.2%                |
| Religion not stated                   | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 3.9%                |
| No religion                           | Reference category   |                     |
| Church attendance                     | Church attendance in 5 levels (1=never, 5=once a week or more)   | 3.5                 |
| Nativity                              |  |                     |
| Canadian born                         | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 77.0%               |
| Foreign born                          | Reference category   |                     |
| Region                                | Region of residence of respondent  |                     |
| Atlantic                              | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 18.8%               |
| Quebec                                | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 18.6%               |
| Prairies                              | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 20.1%               |
| BC                                    | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 14.5%               |
| Ontario                               | Reference category   |                     |
| Rural                                 | Dummy indicator of rural residency (1=Yes, 0=No)   | 22.7%               |
| <b>Health Status</b>                  |  |                     |
| Sleep                                 | Dummy indicator of respondent sleep problems (1=Yes, 0=No)   | 24.3%               |
| Limits                                | Dummy indicator of respondent activity limitations from health problems (1=Yes, 0=No)                  | 8.7%                |
|                                       |  | N = 3339            |

\*Unweighted sample of respondents 65 years of age and older.

to health problems, were measured on the GSS-99 and included in our model as dummy covariates.

## RESULTS

### Statistical Model of Elder Abuse in Canada

Since the dependent variable is dichotomous with two categories indicating whether the senior respondent has or has not experienced emotional or financial abuse by a child, caregiver, or partner/ex-partner, binary logistic regression was used to model elder abuse.

As illustrated in Table 2, using the broad measure of senior abuse in the data set, our model discovered that males, separated individuals, those living in rural areas, respondents who had a prior marriage or cohabitation partner, and seniors with sleeping problems or health-related activity limitations, had a significantly higher risk of emotional or financial abuse from a partner/ex-partner, child, or caregiver. For example, the large exponentiated coefficient for elderly respondents whose marital status was separated shows that their risk of abuse is more than four times greater ( $\text{exp. } B=4.272$ ) than the reference group of married seniors. Likewise, respondents who reported having sleep problems faced nearly a 50% higher risk of experiencing abuse ( $\text{exp. } B=1.469$ ) than the reference group with no sleep problems.

On the other hand, seniors who are female, widowed, older in age, and have more visits from their children, enjoy a significantly lower risk of experiencing emotional or financial abuse. For instance, the exponentiated beta coefficient for visits from children reveals that each additional increment in contacts from children reduces the risk of a senior being abused by about 14% ( $1.00-.858$ ). Interestingly, respondents who refused to answer survey questions regarding their personal income also had a significantly lower risk of elder abuse, with an exponentiated beta of .611. Since this is a categorical covariate, we can interpret this to mean that respondents who refuse to report their income have close to a 40% ( $1.00-.611$ ) lower risk of abuse than respondents who report their income levels. The latter finding suggests that older respondents reticent about reporting income, may also be reluctant to report emotional or financial abuse by caretakers, children or partners/ex-partners.

Finally, the logistic regression analysis found

that income, education, religion, attendance at church services, and regional residency do not predict elder abuse in Canada.

## DISCUSSION

Employing a general definition of senior abuse, our model confirmed predictors that are consistent with the existing literature, as well as covariates that have not been adequately considered in previous research on elder abuse. Clearly, senior abuse is a complex problem, and researchers urgently require data on specific forms of elder abuse if we are to improve our understanding of various risks factors associated with this phenomenon.

Ascertaining these risk factors would improve our ability to detect and substantiate cases of elder abuse. Using an interpersonal risk theory framework to explain the risk factors for elder abuse is an encouraging and warranted addition to the literature. An understanding of elder abuse through this theory could direct more resources toward effective community support services and programs for individuals living with or caring for elder family members. In addition, more education and awareness of the social forces that impede a family's efficacy would offer service professionals and providers more knowledge to work with the elderly people and their family conflicts. Ultimately, mitigating the increasing numbers of elder's experiencing abuse within their closest personal relationship, is an important direction for the Canadian Society.

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**Table 2. Logistic Regression Model for Emotional or Financial Elder Abuse in Canada, 1999**

| Variable                              | Definition   | Exp (B)†      |
|---------------------------------------|--|---------------|
| <b>Demographic Variables</b>          |  |               |
| Age                                   | Age of respondent  | .961*         |
| Marital Status                        | Current marital status of respondent   |               |
| Cohabiting                            | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | .508          |
| Divorced                              | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 1.453         |
| Separated                             | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 4.272*        |
| Widowed                               | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | .470*         |
| Single/Never married                  | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | .159          |
| Married                               | Reference category   |               |
| Marital History                       |  |               |
| Prior marriage/cohabitation           | Dummy indicator of marriage/cohabitation with person other than current partner (1=Yes, 0=No)          | 2.722*        |
| Gender                                | Dummy indicator of female respondent (1=Yes, 0=No)   | .644*         |
| <b>Socioeconomic Status</b>           |  |               |
| Education                             | Educational attainment of respondent in 10 levels (1=elementary or less, ..., 10=post-bachelor degree) | .995          |
| Income                                | Respondent Income from all sources   | 1.000         |
| Income missing                        | Dummy indicator of nonresponse to income question (1=Yes, 0=No)  | .611*         |
| <b>Social and Cultural Background</b> |  |               |
| Crime Victim                          | Dummy indicator of respondent ever being a victim of crime (1=Yes, 0=No)                               | 3.005*        |
| Kids Visits                           | Contact with children during past 5 years in 5 levels (0=Not at all, 5=Daily)                          | .858*         |
| Religion                              | Respondent's religious affiliation   |               |
| Catholic                              | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 1.472         |
| Protestant                            | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | .964          |
| Other religions                       | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 2.015         |
| Religion not stated                   | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | 1.251         |
| No religion                           | Reference category   |               |
| Church attendance                     | Church attendance in 5 levels (1=never, 5=once a week or more)   | .985          |
| Nativity                              |  |               |
| Canadian born                         | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  |               |
| Foreign born                          | Reference category   | .961          |
| Region                                | Region of residence of respondent  |               |
| Atlantic                              | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | .661          |
| Quebec                                | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | .915          |
| Prairies                              | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | .909          |
| BC                                    | Dummy indicator (1=Yes, 0=No)  | .920          |
| Ontario                               | Reference category   |               |
| Rural                                 | Dummy indicator of rural residency (1=Yes, 0=No)   | 1.460*        |
| <b>Health Status</b>                  |  |               |
| Sleep                                 | Dummy indicator of respondent sleep problems (1=Yes, 0=No)   | 1.469*        |
| Limits                                | Dummy indicator of respondent activity limitations from health problems (1=Yes, 0=No)                  | 1.386*        |
| Intercept                             |  | 1.428         |
| Likelihood Ratio Chi-Square (df)      |  | 229.009* (26) |

\* $P < .05$  (two-tailed test)

†Exponentiated Beta Values for unweighted sample of respondents 65 years of age and older

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