

Understanding Elder Mistreatment in Asian American and Pacific Islander Communities

Elder mistreatment has become one of the top priorities in the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. The 2020 U.S. Census reports that out of the U.S. population, 25.5 million persons identified as AAPI. AAPIs make up a richly diverse and complex group of communities. Unique cultural values and norms may impact elder mistreatment perceptions, experiences, and help-seeking behaviors of AAPI older adults.

While the National American Pacific Center on Aging (NAPCA) serves Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) communities, findings in this fact sheet are based on available data and may not be representative of the experiences of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders. Additional research that intentionally seeks and explores elder mistreatment perceptions and experiences among Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders is needed.

What Is Elder Mistreatment?

Elder mistreatment is an intentional act or failure to act that causes or creates a risk of harm to an older adult, or their assets, that occurs at the hands of a caregiver or a person the elder trusts (definition from the CDC).

Common Types of Mistreatment¹



Physical – Injury/impairment, pain, illness, or death from intentional use of physical force.



Emotional – Verbal or non-verbal behaviors that inflict distress, fear, anguish.



Neglect – Failure to meet an elder’s basic needs (shelter, food, water, clothing, hygiene, medical care).



Financial – Improper, unauthorized, or illegal use of elder’s money, belongings, and assets for the benefit of someone other than the elder.



Sexual – unwanted or forced sexual interaction of any kind with an elder.

Related Harms

Self-neglect
– The failure to perform self-care tasks to the extent that it threatens an individual’s health or safety.

Perceptions and Experiences

Nationally, large studies suggest that 10-14% of older adults experience elder mistreatment.^{2,3} Participants at two of NAPCA's Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) sites in California shared the following:

- 40% had experienced at least one type of mistreatment
- Approximately 27% reported at least one form of mistreatment, with emotional mistreatment being the most frequently reported type of harm, followed by financial mistreatment (18%)⁴

Among the general population in the U.S., self-neglect is the most common concern reported to Adult Protective Services.⁵ However, studies of Chinese and Korean American elders found that financial and emotional mistreatment were most frequently identified.

Older adults within these communities perceived psychological/emotional mistreatment, such as ignoring or isolating older family members, as the worst form of mistreatment or as harmful as physical abuse.⁶ Small studies suggest that due to cultural norms such as sharing of assets, Asian-American older adults may be less likely to perceive the signing over of property to family members as financial abuse when compared to Caucasian older adults.⁷ Researchers found that 45% of Korean American older adults said it was acceptable for an elder's money to be used by an adult child for themselves compared to 2% of Caucasian and African American older adults.⁸ Other examples of mistreatment include financial fraud by strangers, romance scams, and abuse or neglect experienced by residents in long-term care facilities.

When talking about AAPI elder mistreatment, it is worth noting the hate incidents experienced during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Of the incidences of Anti-Asian hate and violence reported by older adults (60 years or older), one out of four cases were physical assault, twice the rate of those under the age of 60. Other incidents included verbal harassment or shunning, refusal to provide service, being coughed at or spat upon, and vandalism of property. Nearly all (98%) of Asian American elders who reported experiencing hate incidents believed the U.S. has become more physically dangerous for Asian Americans since early 2020, compared to 67% of Asian American elders who may or may not have experienced a hate incident.⁹

Among the consequences of mistreatment and self-neglect, older adults may experience physical, psychological, and financial harms—even premature death.^{10,11} Traumas may also include injury to family relationships, diminished autonomy, and nursing home placement.¹²

Mistreatment trends within the AAPI communities...



Chinese and Korean American elders most frequently identified financial and emotional mistreatment.



Psychological/emotional mistreatment is perceived as the worst form of mistreatment.



Due to cultural norms, certain forms of financial abuse may be overlooked by Asian-American older adults.



Nearly all of Asian American elders who reported experiencing hate incidents believed the U.S. has become more physically dangerous for Asian Americans.

Help-Seeking Behaviors

NAPCA listening sessions¹³ found several cultural factors which may inhibit the identification and reporting of elder mistreatment in AAPI communities:



Prioritization of family harmony over self

- Filial piety, which emphasizes the family over the individual, may hinder reporting to outsiders, especially if the perpetrators are loved ones



Linguistic differences

- Formal services may not have the in-language capacity to support all AAPI older adults
- The term “abuse” may be unfamiliar or unacceptable to older people that do not speak English as their primary language¹⁴



Cultural behaviors

- Silence (the tendency to not speak about their challenges)
- Perseverance and endurance of suffering as cultural virtues
- AAPI older adults also have a strong sense of pride in being able to self-manage and have strong feelings of not wanting to be a burden.¹⁵



Immigration and levels of acculturation

- When assessing the risk for elder mistreatment, the degree of acculturation into U.S. society (U.S. born vs. first-generation) needs to be considered^{16,17}

Keeping these barriers in mind can help shape your responses and interventions.



Asian American elders are less likely to seek formal services and are more likely to utilize informal sources of help, such as family members, friends, or ethnic churches.^{18,19} Among SCSEP participants in NAPCA's study, over 73% weren't initially aware of APS, but after learning about APS, most reported they were likely to seek help from APS if they encountered mistreatment. Reasons for not seeking APS services included having English language barriers, feeling uncomfortable reporting private problems to a third party, considering elder mistreatment as a family matter, and preferring private sources of help such as family, friends, and religion.²⁰

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) play a critical role in bridging community members with formal agencies and resources. Local community social organizations and religious institutions tend to be culturally acceptable and trusted sources of help for AANHPI elders. CBOS must be aware and equipped to respond when elder mistreatment is suspected.

Ways to Prevent and Respond to Elder Mistreatment

Elder mistreatment is an injustice that we all need to prevent and address. Everyone has a right to be safe and free of fear.

- Identify signs of mistreatment and encourage community members to seek help.
- If you suspect someone is in danger of immediate harm, call 911.
- If you have a reasonable suspicion that mistreatment is occurring or has occurred in the community, report your concerns to [Adult Protective Services \(APS\)](#). If you suspect mistreatment in a nursing home or assisted living facility, report your concerns to [Long-Term Care Ombudsman](#).

Please see the companion fact sheet, *Elder Mistreatment Interventions and Resources in AANHPI Communities*, for information on signs of mistreatment, resources for intervention, and making a report.



Resources

[Eldercare Locator](#) can help you find APS, Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs, and other services for older adults and families in your community. Visit eldercare.acl.gov or call **800-677-1116** (language interpretation is available).

[National Asian Pacific Center on Aging \(NAPCA\)](#) – For language assistance, contact NAPCA’s Senior Assistance Center hotline to receive in-language information and support.

- English: **800-336-2722**
- Korean 한국어: **800-582-4259**
- Mandarin 普通话: **800-683-7427**
- Cantonese 廣東話: **800-582-4218**
- Vietnamese Tiếng Việt: **800-582-4336**

[National Center on Elder Abuse \(NCEA\)](#) – For more information on elder mistreatment – including flyers in English, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, Tagalog, Samoan, and Spanish – visit the NCEA’s website at [NCEA – Elder Mistreatment and Diverse Communities \(acl.gov\)](#) or call **855-500-3537**.

Endnotes

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