

Mistreatment of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Elders

This research brief synthesizes the latest available information and research relating to the mistreatment of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) elders. This brief focuses on the intersection of culture and elder mistreatment in AAPI communities. Information is provided on perceptions and prevalence of elder mistreatment, help seeking behavior, and recommendations for research and intervention.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In many AAPI cultures, the family or group is emphasized over the individual, which can affect an elder's willingness to report abuse. This can be understood through the strong cultural value of **filial piety**.
- The AAPI community is often stereotyped as the “**model minority**” but little is understood about elder abuse in this community and more research is needed on AAPI subpopulations.
- **Psychological/emotional abuse** is the most commonly reported form of elder abuse in this community and it is defined in a way that differs from Western culture.
- There may be a **high tolerance for financial exploitation** in this community.
- **Reporting of elder abuse** is low in this community due to reasons like language barriers, considering elder mistreatment a family matter, and shame.
- Acculturation, length of time in the U.S., and place of birth may influence attitudes and behaviors related to elder abuse among AAPI elders.
- Recommendations for addressing elder abuse in this community include collecting indirect and disaggregated data, tailoring programs to culturally defined forms of mistreatment, and reframing traditional values to encourage elder abuse detection.

Demographics

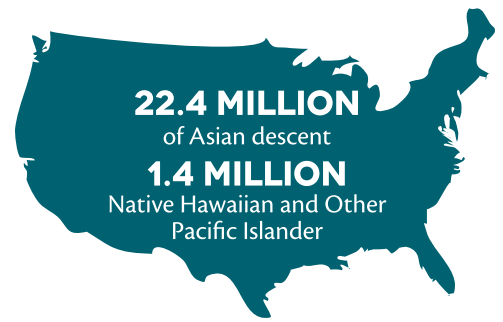
Asian Americans trace their roots to more than 20 countries in East and Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent, each with unique histories, cultures, languages and other characteristics.¹ The U.S. Census Bureau provides the following definitions for Asian and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.

Asian: *A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.*

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: *A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.*



In 2019, approximately **22.4 million persons designated their race as Asian** or Asian in combination with one or more other races and the Asian community made up 5.7% of those aged 60 and over in the U.S. Approximately **1.4 million persons designated their race as Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander** alone or in combination with one or more other races in 2019 and the Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander community made up 0.2% of those aged 60 and over.²



The single-race, non-Hispanic segment of the U.S. Asian population is the nation's fastest-growing racial or ethnic group; projected to reach 46 million by 2060.¹

46 MILLION

U.S. Asian population by 2060

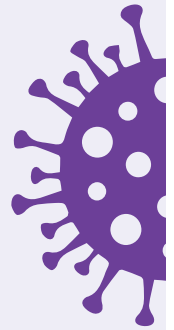
About **a quarter of Asian Americans (27%) live in multigenerational households.**¹



27% of Asian Americans live in multigenerational households

DISCRIMINATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

When discussing the AAPI community, it is important to note the recent increase in hate incidents targeting Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Stop AAPI Hate, a national coalition addressing anti-Asian racism across the U.S., reported approximately 6,603 Asian American and Pacific Islander hate incident reports from March 2020 to March 2021. These included verbal harassment and shunning, physical assault, civil rights violations, and online harassment. **More seniors (60 years old and older) reported hate incidents in 2021**, increasing from 6.3% in 2020 to 7.0% in 2021.³



Background

MODEL MINORITY MYTH

Stereotyped as the “**model minority**”, the AAPI are often viewed as the highest-income, best-educated racial group in the country, with few, if any, needs.⁴ In aggregate, AAPI older adults face lower levels of poverty as compared to other minority counterparts. However, within certain AAPI subpopulations, poverty rates are extremely high.⁵ In addition, AAPI elders worry about language barriers making them more susceptible to fraud and abuse.⁴



MODEL MINORITY MYTH

FILIAL PIETY

Research suggests that an Asian elder's primary approach to elder mistreatment or conflict-related family problems seems to strongly adhere to the concept of **filial piety**, which emphasizes the family or group over the individual and discourages seeking help from strangers or outsiders to the family.⁶



FILIAL PIETY

LACK OF RESEARCH

Despite the fact that AAPIs are the fastest growing groups of ethnic elderly in the country, AAPI needs are **not well researched** and relatively few programs and services are designed for their unique needs.⁵ Asian older adults face barriers in participating in research due to linguistic and cultural issues. There are also significant systemic research pipe-line barriers to support research about Asian populations and research led by Asian investigators.⁷ Very little information is available regarding elder mistreatment in these communities, particularly disaggregated research.⁴



LACK OF RESEARCH

SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS IN ASSESSING RISK OF ELDER ABUSE

Risk assessments often fail to consider sociocultural factors particularly relevant to AAPI older adults, such as:



Prioritization of family harmony over self



Immigration and levels of acculturation



Cultural norms
(e.g. transferring wealth to one's children)



Cultural behaviors
(e.g. silence)



View of endurance and suffering as cultural virtues

These sociocultural factors lead to invisibility and may make AAPI older adults more susceptible and less likely to report elder abuse.⁴

Perceptions of Elder Abuse

DISRESPECT AS A FORM OF ELDER ABUSE

It is evident that AAPI elders identify culturally specific forms of mistreatment that would not necessarily be deemed abusive from a western perspective. For instance, the concept of “disrespect” captures actions and attitudes that violate basic Asian cultural norms.⁹

HIGH TOLERANCE FOR FINANCIAL EXPLOITATION

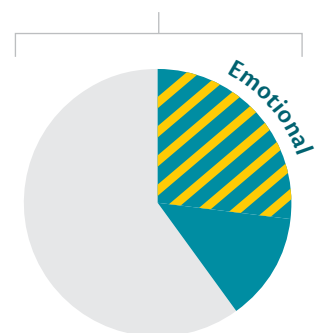
While many Asian cultures consider disrespect to be a serious form of elder abuse, their elders may show a high tolerance for financial exploitation.⁹ One study on the perceptions of elder financial abuse among elders in California found that Asian-American (and Latino) participants were less likely to perceive the signing over of property as financial abuse when compared to Caucasian participants.¹⁰

Findings In AAPI Communities

PREVALENCE AND COMMON FORMS OF MISTREATMENT

A study of AAPI adults aged 55 and older found that out of 60 participants, **40% reported having experienced at least one type of elder mistreatment with emotional mistreatment being the most frequently reported type.** Approximately **27% of the 60 participants reported experiencing at least one form of emotional mistreatment** within the prior 12 months, including feeling humiliated, feeling ignored, verbal mistreatment, and feeling harassed or coerced.¹¹ Psychological abuse that includes verbal abuse, emotional abuse, and psychological neglect might be the most prevalent and recognized form of elder mistreatment among AAPI elders.⁶

Prevalence of Elder Mistreatment



HELP SEEKING

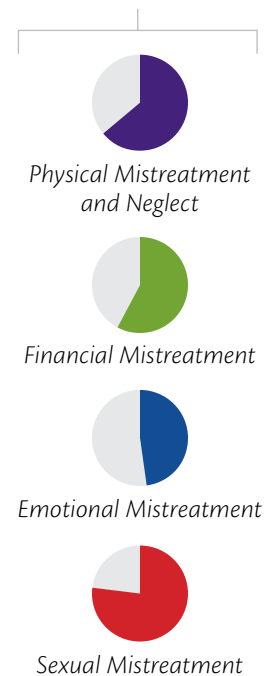
Inherent to many AAPI cultures is the tendency not to speak up about the challenges that they face, as **many AAPI older adults and families do not want to be a “burden,” are hesitant to complain, and have a strong sense of pride in being capable of self-managing.**⁴ AAPI elders are less likely to seek formal types of elder mistreatment services such as Adult Protective Services (APS) or an elder abuse hotline.⁶ **They are more likely to use informal social networks such as family members, friends, or ethnic churches as their primary source of help.**^{6,9}



A study of 60 AAPI older adults reported several findings on help seeking behavior¹¹:

- 65% and 63% of the older adults reported that they were likely to contact APS if they ever encountered **physical mistreatment and neglect**, respectively. Over half reported that they would consider contacting APS if they were experiencing **financial mistreatment** (58%). A lower percentage of participants reported that they would be likely to contact APS in case of **emotional mistreatment** (48%). Study participants were more willing to seek help from APS if they encountered **sexual mistreatment** than any other type of mistreatment (77%). 38% of the respondents reported that they would be either 'very unlikely' or 'unlikely' to seek help from APS for any type of mistreatment.
- Reasons for not seeking APS services included having English language barriers, feeling uncomfortable in reporting private problems to the third party, considering elder mistreatment as a family matter, and preferring private sources of help such as family, friends, and religion.
- While a large number of participants considered seeking help from APS, the majority of them chose family members as their top preferred resource for help if they encountered elder mistreatment (72%).
- 63% reported that they did not know know an organization or a professional to turn to if they were being abused or mistreated. Those who did know of professional resources identified ethnic specific service agencies, police or 911, churches or pastors, and APS.

Likelihood to contact APS by type of mistreatment



DIFFERENCES BETWEEN U.S. BORN AND FIRST-GENERATION AAPI ELDERS

A study of four groups of AAPI elders (n = 273) found significant differences between U.S.-born Chinese and Japanese Americans and first generation Korean and Taiwanese Americans in regards to their tolerance for elder mistreatment, tendency to victim blame, and attitudes toward reporting. Large percentages (40%-50%) of "don't know" and "it depends" responses from the participants for some of the statements about elder abuse indicated that the respondents had difficulty relating to the phenomenon of elder mistreatment.¹²

ELDER MISTREATMENT STATEMENTS	U.S. BORN	BORN OUTSIDE OF U.S.
<i>Agreed that it is okay for adult children to yell occasionally at their elderly parents</i>	Chinese: 30% Japanese: 21%	Korean: 8% Taiwanese: 5%
<i>Agreed that it is okay for an adult child to use his/her elderly parent's money for himself/herself</i>	Chinese: 10% Japanese: 8%	Korean: 45% Taiwanese: 13%
<i>Agreed that many elderly people are badly treated because they did something wrong to deserve it</i>	Chinese: 6% Japanese: 6%	Korean: 43% Taiwanese: 11%
<i>In favor of persons outside the family getting involved when an elderly person is abused or neglected by a family member</i>	Chinese: 62% Japanese: 62%	Korean: 70% Taiwanese: 54%
<i>In favor of reporting elder abuse to authorities when an elderly person is abused or neglected by a family member</i>	Chinese: 90% Japanese: 77%	Korean: 68% Taiwanese: 68%



Filipino and Korean Elders

A study of attitudes toward elder abuse among Filipino and Korean elderly women (n = 20) in Hawaii found that the two groups had similar perceptions of what was abusive. Results were compared to a previous study in Minnesota that used the same elder abuse scenarios and it was found that responses from Korean and Filipino participants in Hawaii were more similar to Caucasians and African-Americans in the Minnesota sample, than to Koreans in Minnesota; the average percentage of respondents who perceived the scenarios as abusive was 66% for Koreans and 69% for Filipinos compared to 73% for African Americans, 67% for Caucasians, and 50% for Koreans in Minnesota. While only 9% of Korean-Minnesotan respondents would seek help from formal sources, the overall average percentages for the other two Minnesota groups and the two Hawaii groups ranged from 25%-41%. Differences in acculturation, length of time in the U.S., and the availability of family networks are possible explanations for the difference in responses between Koreans in Minnesota and the Hawaii sample.¹³



Vietnamese Elders

A study of Vietnamese elders (n = 20) in the U.S. found that emotional abuse was the most prevalent form of abuse reported, followed by verbal abuse. The typical elder abuse victim was a female over age 60, recently settled in the U.S., did not speak English and was unfamiliar with Western culture, usually in good health, living in a multigenerational household, and financially dependent on her children. The typical abuser was a daughter-in-law who usually works outside the home and has young children at home. The study found that victims hesitate to ask for help for fear of: losing those family members who offer vital assistance to them, bringing shame to the family, and incurring additional abuse if they speak up.¹⁴



Asian Indian Elders

- Historically, Asian Indian elders have held unique and honored positions within their family. However, the changing social landscape has impacted their role.^{15,16}
- In the Indian context, older people customarily perceive the word ‘abuse’ to mean extreme behavior of violence but not neglect/abandonment. However, in qualitative studies, older people have acknowledged the existence of maltreatment and neglect within their society.¹⁶
- One study found that elder abuse showed a negative association with the mental health of older Asian Indian adults, especially among women.¹⁶



Japanese Elders

- A study of 146 Japanese adults (ages 19-60) found that when generating examples of extreme abuse, participants most frequently gave examples of various forms of physical aggression. Economic abuse was seen as abusive only at the moderate level.¹⁷
- Traditionally, Japan’s strong emphasis on filial responsibility assured care for the elderly, and much of Japanese social interaction continues to be tied into social obligation.¹⁷



Korean Elders

Korean norms dictate that children should respect, obey, and engage with their parents in a polite and respectful manner. As the parents age, sons especially are expected to care for the parents physically, emotionally and financially in a willing manner. In turn, the parents share their income and savings as if equal access to their funds by their children is expected. In addition, the elder’s tolerance for financial abuse may be related to the traditional patriarchal property transfer system in Korean society. Under this system, sons, even after marriage, enjoy exclusive family inheritance rights.¹²



Malaysian Elders

- In the 2018 National Health and Morbidity Survey the most frequently reported type of abuse perpetrated against Malaysian elders was neglect. It also found that close to 30% of abused elders did not report their suffering to anyone.¹⁸
- Another study found that the reporting of abuse was scant in this community, with only a third of those screening positive for abuse informing someone. Of those who did report (n = 87), the majority (65%) reached out to police officers. Among those who said they had not reported (n = 29), the reasons for not reporting were: (1) did not want to implicate family members (57%); (2) did not feel it is an abuse or neglect (25%); (3) did not know where to seek help (16%); and (4) felt ashamed (2%). **The researchers noted that evidence from studies in other Asian communities like Hong Kong, India, and Korea revealed a number of similar reasons for under-reporting.**¹⁹



Nepalese Elders

A study of Nepalese older adults found that out of 158 participants, 96% had heard about abuse of older persons and **47% were suffering from at least one form of elder abuse in the last six months.** The most common forms reported were neglect (35%), followed by showing disrespect (35%), verbal abuse (25%), economic abuse (8%), physical abuse (6%) and emotional abuse (5%). Men suffered more from elder abuse compared to women (55% to 28%) and elders who were suffering from some form of disease had a higher rate of elder abuse.²⁰



Filipino Elders

A study of Filipino older adults found that the kind of elder abuse experienced by participants were: (1) violation of human rights; (2) physical abuse; (3) financial abuse; (4) emotional baggage and damage; and (5) feeling alone and no support from others. Participants also mentioned that they were usually branded as 'liability', 'useless', 'unusable', and 'hopeless' due to their physical and mental limitations. All participants experienced discrimination due to their conservative practices. Filipino older persons were accustomed to traditional teachings, which were already obsolete. Common topics that were customarily debated were marriage, relationships, courting, lifestyles, superstitions, life perspectives, and principles. These arguments usually lead to disagreement, failure to appreciate the importance of elderly in the society, and lack of respect of young adults and children.²¹



Thai Elders

- A study of Thai elders found that the causes of elder abuse noted by participants could be categorized into two groups: (1) individual factors of older people (illness and poverty) and (2) individual factors of abusers (use of addictive substances, gambling addiction, etc.). Elders were hurt the most by the verbal abuse that was done by their own children. Respondents noted that psychological elder abuse can be caused by economic struggle and that financial abuse was most likely to be caused by family members. Female elderly were perceived as particularly at high risk of neglect and financial exploitation due to their lower social status, especially if widowed.²²
- A review of elder abuse findings in Thailand found that the most common form indicated was psychological or emotional abuse, ranging from 40% to 56%. Exploitation was the second most common. **Family relationship, substance abuse, and a negative attitude toward aging were noted as risk factors for elder abuse in this community.**²³

NOTE: Refer to the *Mistreatment of Chinese Elders* and *Mistreatment of Korean Elders* research briefs to learn more about elder abuse in these communities.

Tips For Working With AAPI Elders and Advancing Research

BE SENSITIVE TO DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS OF ELDER ABUSE

There may be a need to conceptually adjust current definitions of financial abuse to account for the complexity in how it is defined by different AAPI communities.^{24,25} Formal definitions may need to be considered more broadly according to different elderly minority groups given social and cultural contexts.²⁴



RESEARCH NEEDS

Recommended Research Strategies

Recommended strategies for expanding understanding of elder abuse in the AAPI community include:

- Using indirect estimates by asking participants to report abuse they have heard of or witnessed, an alternative to traditional research focused on personal experience.⁹
- Soliciting data not only from victims, but also from multiple informants such as perpetrators, ethnography observations, and facility-level or medical records to minimize threats to data validity owing to recall bias, recognition barriers, and reluctance for disclosure.²⁶
- Utilizing the community-based participatory research approach.^{25,27,28}
- Conducting longitudinal studies.^{9,28}
- Researching culturally appropriate interventions that can guide policymakers and social service organizations.⁶
- Utilizing disaggregated data collection methods to account for ethnic distinctions, cultural norms, traditions, and social and economic health needs among and between AAPI subpopulations.⁵

Areas Needing More Research

There is a strong need for research on the following areas:

- Subgroup differences in the experience and definition of elder abuse among diverse Asian ethnic groups^{29,24}
- Changing notions of family responsibility toward caregiving and its implications for elder mistreatment⁶
- Elder mistreatment in long-term care settings⁶
- Comparing the impacts of culturally specific forms of abuse with traditional types of abuse³⁰

SCREENING AND ASSESSMENT

An argument has often been that much of the screening and assessment instruments developed in Western societies may not be able to capture culture-specific forms of elder abuse in Asian cultures.³⁰ Recommendations for improving screening and measuring of elder abuse in the AAPI community include:

- Develop culturally sensitive instruments that will map culturally specific types of abuse while at the same time providing enough flexibility for comparison between multisite cross-cultural studies.⁹
- Develop gender-sensitive instruments for detecting elder mistreatment in minority older women.³¹
- Practitioners should keep in mind the diversity of beliefs and be sensitive to the possibility that their elderly Asian clients may be dealing with abusive behavior but will not reveal it due to self-blame feelings about the situation.³²
- Since an admission of being victimized may only occur only if the victims ascertain that the perpetrators and families will not be affected negatively, practitioners must explore the elder's degree of collective self or commitment to the perpetrator¹²





PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

Recommended strategies for preventing and addressing elder abuse in the AAPI community include:

- Mobilize victims' social networks, family, and friends to aid prevention and intervention efforts.⁹
- Tailor intervention programs and services to the types of the mistreatment under the specific cultural context.³³
- Provide counseling to families to help address their own perceptions of caregiver burden and stress and possibly help improve communication in multigenerational households.¹⁵
- Form close collaborations among AAPI service providers, community leaders, and APS.¹¹
- Social service providers and APS should actively reach out to AAPI communities, especially in disseminating APS program information.¹¹
- Maximize the victim's culture's potential power; when elders cite family loyalty as a reason not to stop the mistreatment, through reframing, practitioners and family members may emphasize the elders' obligation to admit to the mistreatment in order to obtain help for the perpetrators and to stop participating in the perpetuation of a tense atmosphere that is deleterious to all family members.³² Traditional values of filial piety and avoidance of shame can be reinterpreted in ways to encourage healthier behaviors such as therapeutic approaches that strengthen entire families without singling out individuals or assigning blame.¹³

SUCCESSFUL INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMS IN THE AAPI COMMUNITY

Intergenerational connections may be a promising approach to preventing intergenerational tension and conflict in AAPI communities, which could in turn help prevent mistreatment of AAPI elders. A study of two intergenerational programs that were developed by Asian American communities showed success in intergenerational learning and increased social connections. Observations showed learning by the younger generation on how to communicate with the older generation and learning to be patient. Community-driven programs are important because families cannot be counted on as the only resource to prevent isolation of older adults and because community-driven programs have the potential to contribute to more culturally appropriate and effective strategies to address societal issues.³⁴



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NOTE: * Indicates that the source is a peer-reviewed journal. Other pertinent sources (e.g. presentation, report, community research study) are also included in this review for informational purposes, even though they may not be peer-reviewed. The specific author(s) should be consulted regarding questions on their content, research and/or review process.