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# Elder Abuse: More Is Expected Unless Society and Newspapers Intervene

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**ELDER ABUSE: MORE IS EXPECTED UNLESS SOCIETY AND  
NEWSPAPERS INTERVENE**

A Thesis

by

BETTY LOU GUCKIAN

Presented to the Graduate Faculty of  
University of the Incarnate Word  
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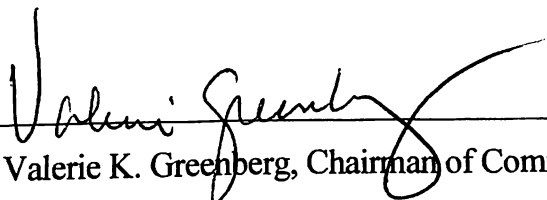
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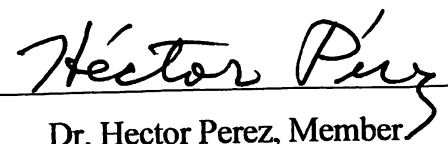
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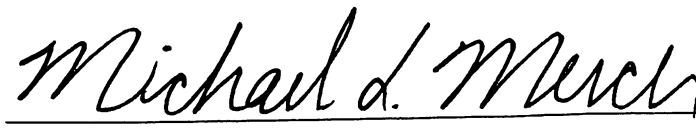
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## ABSTRACT

### ELDER ABUSE: MORE IS EXPECTED UNLESS SOCIETY AND NEWSPAPERS INTERVENE

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Elder abuse is a social illness of epidemic proportions in the United States and older Americans constitute one of the largest age groups in the nation. Ironically, there exists no comprehensive scientific study on the national incidence or prevalence of elder abuse in both institutional and domestic settings. However, state-based studies conducted over more than two decades show rampant elder abuse is a fact. Many factors contribute to the lack of research on a national scale including victims' underreporting of abuse for fear of retaliation. Lack of strong federal oversight of inconsistent, state-based laws and investigative procedures as well as widely varying definitions of what constitutes abuse or neglect are other key factors. In addition, researchers report a youth-oriented American culture dangerously discriminates against the old and this attitude contributes to the dehumanizing of older people. Academic and professional journals discuss elder abuse from many angles, and elder advocates publish information about the abuse of elders and urge communities to prevent abuse, but few if any point to mass media's role, particularly newspapers, in increasing public awareness of the problem. The purpose of this study is to attempt to explain the complex and pervasive phenomenon of elder abuse, to show newspapers in particular do little to expose it and thus contribute to it, and to suggest what society and newspapers should do to prevent elder abuse. Further, this study contributes to the body of research aimed at informing the public about elder abuse by explaining conditions in society that mitigate violence against old people, inspiring other researchers to accelerate investigations of it, and strongly suggesting newspapers expose and explain the daily reality and horror of elder abuse.

**Key Words and Phrases:** abuse, aged person, ageism, caregiver, child abuse, elder, elderly abuse, exploitation, euthanasia, frail elderly, geronticide, neglect, old-old, vulnerable adult, young-old

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## INTRODUCTION

“Lizzie Borden took an axe and gave her mother forty whacks. When she saw what she had done, she gave her father forty-one” (Brogden Crime 1). In 1892, a middle-aged Massachusetts woman named Lizzie Borden brutally murders her elderly parents in a fit of family violence and gets by with it. Borden’s jury and the community at large ignores rather than wrestles with the unimaginable—that a woman could kill her parents—and thus acquits her of the heinous crime (1).

More than a century and millions of crimes against the elderly later, American society including its media in general but newspapers in particular shut their eyes and hearts to the gruesome brutality of elder abuse in homes and institutions. The graphic photo shown in Figure 1 (NCEA GIF) illustrates one instance of mistreatment of the old—a fact for many of this nation’s most vulnerable citizens.



Fig. 1. Photo of an abused elder, National Center on Elder Abuse Web site, 18 July 2005.



Despite its ugly nature, discriminatory behavior against the old in America has quietly and systematically become socially acceptable. A New York Times report published in September 2005 suggests disturbing evidence. Reporter Rohde tells of trusted caregivers employed by the state who abandon 154 people, mostly old, in hospitals and nursing homes in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. All 154 die while their so-called caregivers escape soggy traps. Recounting this catastrophe, he takes issue with the collective conscience: “The breadth of the collapse of one of society’s most basic covenants—to care for the helpless—suggests that the elderly and critically ill plummeted to the bottom of priority lists as calamity engulfed New Orleans” (Rohde). Furthermore, he finds the nation’s highest authorities to blame: “Neither state nor federal agencies came to the rescue, and in some cases appear to have thwarted efforts to evacuate patients” (Rohde).

This paper explores the growing phenomenon in America known as elder abuse. It is a form of social and family violence that some researchers call the systematic “killing of old people” (Brogden Geronticide 52). One particularly noteworthy scholar is Mike Brogden. The former professor of Criminal Justice and director of the Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice of Queen’s University Belfast and honorary professor of the Department of Applied Social Sciences at Lancaster University, United Kingdom, Brogden has penned one of the most potent and recently published books on elder abuse: Geronticide: Killing of the Elderly. Geronticide draws on historical and modern social contexts to explain elder abuse (Jessica). Undeniably avant-garde, Brogden’s contemporary studies are especially important to this thesis considering traditional institutions in the United States have not approved such scholarly research, and in light of the social denial of ageing and elder abuse in America and the severe shortage of public coverage of elder abuse in America, particularly by newspapers. The book’s publisher, Jessica Kingsley of London, established an office in Philadelphia in 2004 and since 1987 has published extensively on the subjects of mental health, counseling, palliative care, and practical theology (Jessica). Additional scholarly works by Brogden have been offered by Willan Publishing, another independent publisher based in the United

Kingdom which since 1999 has specialized in law, criminology, and criminal justice and which has co-published books on crime prevention with Criminal Justice Press of New York (Willan). Jessica Kingsley and Willan boast worldwide distribution, with the latter enjoying circulation in the United States through International Specialized Book Services of Portland, Oregon (Willan).

This paper further examines the apparent nature and foundation of elder abuse, looks at the foreboding social attitude that overtly denies it while obscurely perpetuating it, and suggests what society and its media—newspapers in particular—should do to prevent it.

Concerning the case for newspapers, they neglect to expose or explain elder abuse. This essay will show that at least 2.5 million elderly Americans are at high risk for suffering abuse and neglect every year in America's institutions and residential care facilities and many more suffer at home at the hands of so-called caregivers (US, "Elder Mistreatment" 447). Also during one year, Americans buy and read more than 20 billion newspapers and pass them along to multiple others to read (Project). However, this researcher finds within a six-month period, seven of the top 10 major national dailies published only 18 accounts of actual elder abuse and very few accounts of much else to do with elders. (A content analysis of these newspapers is provided in Findings.)

There is further reason to support the case for newspapers to report on elder abuse. More than half or 54% of Americans read a newspaper during the week and 62% read the Sunday newspaper (Project). Concerning national major dailies, the New York Times, USA Today, and the Wall Street Journal have gained in popularity with local readers (Project). In fact, the top 7% of the nation's newspapers draw more than half the total newspaper circulation (Project). Moreover, elders remain loyal newspaper readers (Project). In light of these facts, it confounds this researcher to find that of the total 1,288 issues published by seven of the top 10 major national papers during a six-month period, only 68 mentions of anything having to do with elder abuse or elders were found, including 24 mentions of legislative matters that addressed cost cuts to social healthcare and adult protective services. Meanwhile, the same 1,288 papers printed 1,071 articles

about child abuse. This researcher suggests newspapers should play a key role in educating elders and the general public about personal safety and quality-of-life as well as influencing public opinion and activism to help fight elder abuse. This writer's interpretation of the data will show newspapers have shirked the role.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to examine the obvious as well as the obscure social attitudes and processes that perpetuate elder abuse, to show mass media in general but newspapers in particular do nearly nothing to expose it and thus contribute to the elder-abuse epidemic, and to suggest what society and newspapers should do to help prevent elder abuse.

### **A "time bomb" looms in a "nation of 50 Floridas"**

In the time it takes for a baby to grow into an adult, a demographic "time bomb" (Brogden Geronticide 29) will transform the world, producing repercussions that will last several lifetimes. Table 1 on the following page (5) shows the projected growth in the number of people age 65 and older, termed "elders," through 2050.

Table 1

United States Projections Indicate People 65 and Older Will Account for 20% of the Population by 2050

	Year	Population	Percentage of Total Population
Total	2010	308,936,000	
Adults 65+		40,243,000	13%
Total	2020	335,805,000	
Adults 65+		54,632,000	16.3%
Total	2030	363,584,000	
Adults 65+		71,453,000	19.7%
Total	2040	391,946,000	
Adults 65+		80,049,000	20.4%
Total	2050	419,854,000	
Adults 65+		86,705,000	20.1%

Source: US Census Bureau, 2004, "US Interim Projections by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin," <[www.census.gov/ipc/www/usinterimproj/](http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/usinterimproj/)>, Internet Release Date 18 Mar. 2004.

In this "nation of 50 Floridas" (Altman 205), the United States Census Bureau forecasts the 65-and-older age group numbering nearly 40 million Americans in 2010 will explode to more than 71 million by 2030 and to more than 86 million by 2050 (US "Projections"). This national trend echoes globally. Worldwide, the United Nations predicts that in just 20 years, elders will number 822 million, exceeding the total populations of Europe and North America (Brogden *Geronticide* 30). Moreover, by 2050, 65-to-85-year-olds will rise sharply from 400 million to 1.3 billion, and the oldest of the

old, people older than 85, will likewise increase from 26 million to a whopping 175 million (30).

As with world demographics, the jump in older Americans constitutes a major shift in the nation's demographic makeup and will for decades to come, thus forcing the re-thinking and re-invention of economic, medical, and cultural ideologies. A major part of this phenomenon is the sharply rising number of the oldest of the old. This age group has nearly quadrupled in number from 600,000 in 1950 to more than 2.3 million (Kakar 355) today. This entire movement can be classified by new expressions invented by demographers: the "young-old" who are in their 60s and 70s and the "old-old" who are 80 and older. The old-old are of primary concern to society because many of them require more care, and thus more resources, as their bodies degenerate.

A significant adjustment an ageing populace must consider involves social healthcare. Some speculate as many of the estimated 76 million baby boomers (born 1946 to 1964) (Altman 353) turn 62 in 2008 and qualify for Medicare and Social Security, and as this group lives longer and remains eligible for many more years of benefits than earlier generations, they will bankrupt the country within two or three decades (353). Economist Lester Thurow views baby boomers as "a fundamental threat to our political system" (354). A proponent of cutting social benefits to Americans as they age, Thurow also worries because baby boomers embody the voting majority and so could curtail government's plans to cut social benefits. Indeed, Altman asserts, politicians remain wary of this "monolithic" voting body (363).

Agreeing with Thurow, biomedical ethicist Daniel Callahan calls the growing older population "a new social threat" (Altman 354) and a "demographic, economic, and medical avalanche . . . that could ultimately (and perhaps already) do [sic] great harm" (354). Callahan's inhumane solution to this perceived problem is to deny Medicare reimbursements for "life-saving care" (354) to anyone aged 80 or older (354). However, critics contend that banning benefits to the oldest of the old is a premature-death sentence, given life expectancy today is 81 for men and 85 for women (88), and that advancements in medical technology and healthier lifestyles further increase life

expectancy with each passing decade (88). Discussions such as these by respected intellectuals show roots of an ideology that discriminates against the old. Such an ideology is disconcerting in light of scientists' research, which has barely begun to estimate the limits of the human lifespan, making a world population heavily weighted toward the elderly increasingly inevitable, and yet, policymakers have done little to plan for the fast-approaching gray future (Broden Geronticide 12). This phenomenon furthers the case for newspapers to educate an unaware or intolerant society about ageism.

Although troubling, it appears the views of Thurow and Callahan are shared by the United States government, which replaces only up to 41% of a retiree's employment income, compared to other countries including France and the Netherlands which guarantee up to 91% (Altman 12). Considering this, one must question whether this nation's leaders and economists plan to balance the federal budget by forcing its elderly into poverty with substandard retirement income assistance, by rationing health benefits, or worse. Elder rights advocates look to other countries for more humane answers to the problem. Other developed countries find ways to reallocate national resources to relieve the economic pressure without harming or dispensing with the old as a means to balance their budgets. For example, some reduce spending on younger working populations on average by .33% for every 1% increase in the elderly non-working population (13).

Given the implications and controversies surrounding an ageing America, Richard D. Lamm predicts, "Age could well be as divisive in the next 40 years as race and sex have been for the last 40 years" (Altman 200). In light of prevailing attitudes toward ageing, its far-reaching impact on all of society, and policymakers' neglect to plan for an ageing America, this researcher suggests mass media in general but newspapers in particular should follow this phenomenon with enlightening reporting to help society understand its complications and challenges.

#### **Ageism: a murky motive behind mistreating and murdering elders**

Amid the growing controversy over what to do about so many ageing Americans, negative attitudes toward older people prevail. Three decades ago, a United States Senator from Illinois, Charles Percy, expressed his concerns about the mistreatment of

the elderly in America's nursing homes to Congress, to whom he put the following question: "What is it that compels us to discard virtually anything that is old—including human beings—as if the signs of age mark one worthless?" (6). The short answer can be found in a word: ageism. Ageism is prejudice against people because they are old. It is similar to racism, which harbors hatred for people because of skin color, or sexism, which discriminates because of gender. Illustrating it further, psychologist Mary Pipher writes, "To say, 'He did that because he is old' is as narrow as to say, 'He did that because he is black' or 'Japanese' " (51). The observation of another intellectual, Mary Quinn, is even more disturbing. She writes, "Ageism allows the younger generations to see older people as different from themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings (Quinn Causes 117).

Ageism is in abundant supply in popular culture. Many birthday cards, for example, aimed at the older generation publish devaluing language such as "geezer," "old maid," "old fogey," "dirty old man," or "old goat" (Robinson). Discrimination against the old pervades American institutions such as state welfare funding programs, which often generously support children and young adults while stingily providing for older adults (Robinson). Driving ageism is a culture that seeks to perpetuate myths about its eldest citizens, and these views are entrenched in American society. One myth says old people are senile. The truth is, most elderly people retain their mental abilities and less than 10% develop Alzheimer's or dementia (Robinson). Another myth says old people are dangerous drivers. The truth is, the majority of individuals over the age of 65 who drive have fewer accidents than younger drivers (Robinson). Yet another myth asserts that older people are no longer productive. The truth is, older workers have less turnover and absenteeism than their younger co-workers (Robinson).

While governments have failed to address discrimination against the old, literature has accomplished the opposite. Tom Wolfe challenged the underlying ideology of ageism and other prejudice based on physical appearance when he wrote, "At the very core of fashionable society exists a monstrous vulgarity: the habit of judging human beings by standards having no necessary relation to their character" (Etkoff 241). Oscar

Wilde also attempted to dispel myths about older people: “The tragedy of old age is not that one is old but that one is young” (Pipher 161).

Ageing is not equal to illness or premature death. Hypocritically, however, the same American society that teaches tolerance and human rights compels its oldest citizens, by spreading social prejudice and negative stereotyping, to accept lesser worth because they have grown old. It may seem extreme when one first considers social prejudice by nature assigns old people an automatic sooner-than-later death sentence, but it is a reality in American culture, and old people do suffer and even die because of prevailing attitudes that damage their well-being. Laws, for example, are not equally enforced among all ages. “Many laws are on the books with regard to assault and battery, financial exploitation, and harassment of individuals in general,” says Quinn (Causes 297). “These laws should be enforced when applied to elders as well as to any other age group (297). Additional examples of this phenomenon can be seen in the rationing of health resources; reserving health-sustaining medication and technology for younger patients; abandoning the poorest of elders by withdrawing or severely limiting benefits and simultaneously raising the cost of medical care beyond their reach; and by degrees “as the elderly are processed as waste commodities on the conveyor belt of the modern nursing home” (Brogden Geronticide 12).

According to Brogden, a particular case in point was the nurse who works in a hospital who spent several minutes trying diligently to close the eyes of an older female patient. When asked what she was doing, the nurse replied the woman was dying. The woman was very weak and finally desisted attempts to reopen her eyes after the nurse continued to press down her eyelids. At this, the nurse showed signs of relief. She explained hospital procedures required deceased patients’ eyes must be closed, so she closed them before they died, as it was more difficult to do after death because of stiffening skin and muscles. She also did it in consideration of workers who would later be responsible for wrapping the body, as they “preferred to handle dead bodies as little as possible” (Geronticide 124), the nurse explained. While she obviously considered her



behavior rational and acceptable, this writer questions whether the nurse would have behaved the same had the dying patient been young.

In light of ageism, author Octavio Paz compares society to a fiesta. The fiesta, he writes, is rebellious and sacred and frees participants from established constraints. Likewise, society frees itself of ageing and death. Paz speaks of death in ancient Mexican society as “one phase of an infinite cycle” (56), in which death was the ultimate reward for life, followed by resurrection. Compared to modern society, however, he sadly observes, “In a world of facts, death is merely one more fact. But since it is such a disagreeable fact, contrary to all our concepts and to the very meaning of our lives, the philosophy of progress pretends to make it disappear” (57). Thus, contemporary society behaves as if death does not exist. If death does not exist, neither do the older individuals rendered vulnerable by failing bodies. It is through such bizarre logic that older people are reduced to non-persons. This reducing of old people to non-persons is apparent, for example, in state and federal legislation and funding habits that allocate significantly more protective laws and funds to children than to adults (Quinn Causes 119). Paz elaborates further on this notion without euphemism or excuse. “Modern criminals and statesmen do not kill: they abolish,” writes Paz (60). “They experiment with beings who have lost their human qualities” (60).

Prevailing attitudes against elders marginalize older people while idealizing youth. So it follows that a “youth-worshipping culture” (Pipher 41) has little clue about how to care for older people and even less interest in sick people in hospitals or funerals (41). Americans live in strict rejection of their own mortality and thus shun any image or mention of ageing. To entertain the thought of growing old is to allow oneself to think of one’s own eventual fate—death—so fantasy replaces reality in a society steeped deep in denial (41). Young people deny that the old will die soon and therefore spare themselves from the suffering that often accompanies caring for them (41). Looking into an older person’s retreating eyes is looking death in the face and acknowledging it exists for all people. Ageism forestalls such affirmation.

Naturally, as with any other marginalized group, the elderly view themselves differently from how a younger society views them. Ask any old person what they see in themselves, as a support team of counselors did during a session with elder abuse victims, and the answers are as distinctive as the respondents. Elders view themselves as “friendly,” “caring,” “strong,” “honest,” “generous,” “understanding” (Pritchard 103), and much more. In describing their abilities, older people find themselves useful and eager to produce. They enjoy “baking, knitting, sewing,” “getting on with people,” and “doing or making things” (103). They compliment their own “appearance,” “patience,” “staying power,” “sense of humor” (103), and other qualities.

If it were not for ageism, younger people would recognize the value and usefulness in their ageing elders and would acknowledge their resilience, spirit, expertise, and eagerness to be productive. Ageism prevents this recognition from happening. Younger people would learn how to age by observing their elders. They would learn to care for elders and in turn, teach their children to do likewise for them. If it were not for ageism, a youthful society would recognize the eldest people among them have decades of experience to hand off to anyone interested in hearing about it and thus learning from it. Pipher suggests older citizens can teach younger ones about “the importance of time, relationships, and gratitude” as well as patience and putting problems into perspective. “Old people have lived through the Depression, the wars, and the deaths of friends and family,” she writes (Pipher 38). They have a broader view of tragedy and understanding of the reality in which they live (38).

Young ageists are not alone in their discrimination against the old. Research shows when doctors treat older patients with indignation and indifference, other healthcare professionals including nurses and nurses’ aides tend to follow suit (Pipher 34). “The elderly are viewed as disposable” (Crime 2), says Brogden. Pipher agrees. Despite their roles as healers, physicians and the medical system in general apparently are guilty of ageism in their maltreatment of the elderly. Pipher’s research reveals one such example: A man’s mother who lived in a different state fell ill and was taken to a hospital where doctors diagnosed and treated her for Alzheimer’s. When the son arrived and

questioned whether his mother's disoriented state was the result of over-drugging, doctors changed her medications and withdrew the erroneous diagnosis. Without her son's intervention, the woman may have spent the rest of her life in an overdosed daze in an Alzheimer's ward (Pipher 34). In this instance, the elder patient's basic rights were ignored. She was reduced, by her physicians, to a state of powerlessness.

Nurses and nurses aides' disapproving attitudes toward the elderly result in negative behavior, and the younger they are, the more certain a harmful attitude will prevail (Brogden Crime 90). Studies of elder abuse in nursing homes show that age of staff and the negative attitudes toward older people explain why nurses and nurses' aides abuse the elderly (Quinn Causes 42). Clinicians lend truth to Quinn's conclusion. "We live in a youth-oriented society and many people in our health institutions have no interest in the aged," says Dr. Morton Ward, medical director of the Philadelphia Geriatric Society (Percy 53). "At best, they tend to give poor care. This professional indifference begins in the medical schools" (53).

Ageism unchecked in healthcare systems that interface with growing numbers of ageing elders perpetuates destructive environments that deem the elderly disposable. Abetting healthcare systems in their harmful attitude is general society, which also treats old people as disposable. Geronticide, or the seemingly socially acceptable killing of the elderly, is more pervasive today than most would care to know (32). According to Brogden, eliminating the old among society has to do with the state's economy (Crime 33). He writes: "Geronticide practices can be traced to 95 different societies and can be indirectly related to the labor process" (33). In such societies, old people are seen as a drain on community resources. Therefore, ageism has its roots in social inequality rather than in the natural process of ageing (106).

Brogden further describes ageism as a market-driven phenomenon manifest in the "privatization of old age" (108). The degree of victimization of the elderly comes down to who owns and controls institutional care (108). In other words, private institutions that operate for-profit are incubators for brutal interaction between the elderly and institution employees (153). In fact, nursing homes may employ a number of intentional tactics to

render its residents powerless. For instance, employees conduct all aspects of residents' daily life in the same place, in the company of others who are treated exactly alike without consideration of individual differences or preferences, which results in degradation. Also, nursing homes restrict interaction with or influence by the outside world by enforcing rigid schedules (114-15). A case in point is William, an elderly man who lives in a nursing home and participates in a support group for victims of abuse. Except for his weekly van ride to group sessions held off-site, William is confined inside the building. He arrives to each morning session having missed breakfast because his meeting schedule does not accommodate the home's meal schedule. He also wears dirty clothes and comes without his walking stick, pipe, or tobacco. When his cane is with him, it is usually dirty and smeared with something strange (Pritchard 171).

Within the context of the overarching umbrella of ageism, it is unsurprising to visualize the harsh and even deadly reality of life inside nursing homes alongside a criminal justice system that bypasses older victims as if death or injury to an older person is naturally expected and thus deemed useless to investigate (Brogden Crime 152). From this point of view, it becomes clear that societal establishments and institutions that involve large numbers of older people can continue doing business as they see fit without question. Given the growing numbers of the vulnerable old-old among society who consequently live in mostly for-profit institutions [those that are in business to make a profit for their owners as distinguished from non-profit institutions, which are public-service or charitable works], prejudice against the aged must be broadly acknowledged and earnestly investigated. How better to influence society's attitude than through mass media and newspapers in particular?

#### **Abuse has many faces, causes**

Every day, untold numbers of older Americans are abused. Some suffer beatings. Some are forced to live without essential necessities. Others become the butt of threats. Still others are sexually abused or financially exploited (Anetzberger Preface xiii). Two main resources submit proof of elder abuse. First, scientific studies attempt to explain and quantify its makeup and magnitude. Second, clinicians such as physicians who treat

abused elders, other professionals who come into regular contact with elders, and abused victims of elder abuse give evidence of its physical and psychological scars (1).

Quinn defines elder abuse as “bodily harm that can range from bruises and scratches to death” (Causes 46). Generally, abuse refers to physical violence such as hitting, shoving, or slapping; sexual abuse involving non-consensual contact ranging from unwanted touching to rape; and emotional or psychological abuse characterized by anguish, emotional pain, or distress that stems, for example, from treating older people like infants, isolating them from family or friends, or giving them the “silent treatment.” Abuse also includes abandonment and financial or material exploitation (Tatara 3-3).

One of the best ways to understand the seriousness of elder abuse is to witness it firsthand. “If I showed you such pictures [of bedsores]—of flesh rotting off the bone—you’d think you were looking at something horrible, like in a Halloween movie,” asserts Beverly Ryan, a 30-year registered nurse (Ryan). “If you saw these pictures in newspapers, your perspective would change” (Ryan). Another way is through the stories of abused victims. This is yet another opportunity to inform an inexperienced or unsuspecting public about the plight of abused elders. To better understand this phenomenon, the following examples of such instances, as studied by Kakar, shed light on various types of abuse. Kakar studied actual cases of physical abuse as reported to police and social services agencies:

- “A 49-year-old woman confessed to hitting her father with a hammer and chaining him to the bed. She confessed she was tired of taking care of her old father and starved him so that he could die” (379).
- “An 83-year-old man was brought to an ER with a skull fracture, broken hip, and bruises. He died three days after admission to the hospital. Investigations revealed his son and daughter-in-law were abusing him repeatedly” (379).
- “A 15-year-old grandson was accused of hitting his grandmother in the head. Investigations revealed the grandson had done this several times in six

months. The grandson said he hit her because she was old, rich, and mean” (379-80).

In addition, Kakar found instances of financial abuse and exploitation are common:

- “A 90-year-old professor was kept prisoner in his own home by his son and daughter-in-law. His money was used to pay for all the expenses of his son’s family including the cost of a sports car and children’s college expenses” (382).
- “Protective service workers investigated a report which revealed a 69-year-old man was swindled out of his 20-acre farm, two-story home, and all his other possessions by a relative he trusted” (382).
- “A 79-year-old woman . . . fell and broke her hip. One of her acquaintances placed her in a boarding home. She was dehydrated and not given anything to drink to prevent her from urinating” (383).

Distinguished from abuse, neglect is another form of maltreatment. Neglect entails the refusal by an entrusted giver of care to tend to personal needs or fiduciary obligations on the elder’s behalf. For example, neglecting to feed, appropriately clothe or clean someone who suffers from incontinence, or failing to pay household bills constitutes neglect. Mostly, neglecting an older person means failing to provide life necessities: food, water, clothing, shelter, personal hygiene, medicine, comfort, and personal safety (Tatara 3-3). In addition, self-neglect [when elders neglect to care for themselves] occurs to mentally incompetent elders who deprive themselves of daily needs such as food or medicine (3-3).

Obvious gauges of neglect may include signs of malnourishment or dehydration; matted, uncut or unclean hair; cracks and crevices of skin caked with dirt; the presence of odor from urine or feces; neglected oral hygiene; overgrown finger- or toenails; dirty, torn, or inappropriate clothing; over-medication; bedbugs such as fleas or lice; isolation for long periods of time; unhealthy skin conditions such as rash, urine burns, or bedsores; unhealthy living conditions devoid of heat, running water, or electricity; and a living area

infested with roaches or rodents (Wiehe 137). To offer a better understanding of elder neglect, the following examples are borrowed from actual cases of neglect (Kakar):

- “A 70-year-old woman was admitted to an area hospital emergency room in a comatose condition. She was filthy, with her body covered with bedsores, hair matted, and soiled with feces” (376).
- “A couple was not providing adequate care to their grandmother. It was discovered the grandmother was frequently left by herself with a baby bottle full of milk by her bedside while the couple went to work. . . . She died three months later [after investigation revealed the neglect]” (377).
- “A 90-year-old man in the care of his son was bitten by a dog. The man died three days later. Authorities believed the initial neglect of the dog bite was greatly responsible for his death” (377-78).

Evidence of elderly victims of abuse and neglect suggests they suffer similar psychological consequences such as low self-esteem and depression as do victims of child abuse and spouse or partner abuse (Fenley 171). Likewise, just as abused children often become aggressive or learn helplessness and abused spouses or partners experience loss of appetite and sleep, victims of elder abuse suffer similar outcomes (171). In an effort to better understand the effects of abuse on elderly people, an independent team of scholars, nurses, and social workers formed and facilitated support groups for victims of elder abuse. They asked participants, many of whom lived in nursing homes, what the word “victim” meant to them. Some participants said they “lose all self-esteem” and are “still suffering,” while others reported “ongoing abuse,” “physical pain,” “emotional pain,” “spiritual suffering,” and “screwing with your mind” (Pritchard 97). Others replied they felt “worthless,” “dirty,” “vulnerable,” “sad,” and “ugly” (97).

In attempting to define the many forms of elder abuse and neglect, Adult Protective Services (APS) investigators, clinicians, lawyers, social workers, and others who interact regularly with older people or who deal with issues associated with the elderly find it difficult or impossible to agree. Each perceives the phenomenon differently

depending on their professional discipline and work experience. Definitions of elder abuse also vary considerably from state to state, given there are no nationally defined standards. Compounding matters, the 50 states disagree on even the most basic question of what constitutes “elder” or “elderly” such as inconsistently labeling “elderly” as 60 and older, 62 and older, or 65 and older (NCEA, “Fact”), which serves to further complicate measuring, reporting, and pinpointing the problem on a national scale. The lack of national scientific studies on elder abuse lends more fuel to the argument for newspapers to cover elder abuse and even to call for more research about elder abuse, particularly considering, despite the lack of national data, locally conducted scientific studies provide collective evidence of the pervasiveness of elder abuse across America.

Despite conflicting terminology and inaccurate measurement, elder abuse is a significant problem. Knowing why people abuse the elderly is another major problem, the answer to which may provide prevention and intervention solutions. Along these lines, Quinn cites five reasons why people mistreat the elderly: dependency of the victim, stress on the caregiver, a history of learned family violence, personal problems of the abuser, and ageism (Causes 87). A significant cause of child abuse (Wiehe 71), stress also contributes significantly to elder abuse. Repeatedly, research reveals stress combined with the psychosocial problems of caregivers—whether at home or in institutions—underlies elder abuse, and so relieving the problems of the caregiver in the form of counseling, for example, is a logical intervention to preventing abuse (160). If prevention hinges on intervention, enacting laws against elder abuse is an ineffective means of preventing elder abuse when used alone.

The criminal justice system which may require mandatory reporting of known abuse and which may punish abusive caregivers and/or institution owners found guilty of abuse is only one side of the elder abuse issue. The other side is intervention. Intervention requires focusing on helping both the would-be perpetrator of abuse as well as the victim. In this case, reducing or eliminating the stress on caregivers and other individuals’ problems appears paramount.



### **Abuse of old people expected to rise with elder population**

As if the phenomenon were not complicated or pervasive enough, instances of elder abuse are expected to multiply as the elder population grows. A 1981 report suggests the United States House of Representatives collectively acknowledged elder abuse as a serious social ill: “The problem is a full-scale national problem which . . . few have dared to imagine. In fact, abuse of the elderly by their loved ones and caretakers exists with a frequency and rate only slightly less than child abuse” (Kakar 363).

However, acknowledging the problem has not stopped it. In 1985, estimates of elder abuse derived from actual reports to authorities numbered between 51,000 and 186,000 (Filinson 165). Today, some studies show anywhere from 1% to 10% of the elderly who live at home suffer abuse by family members or other relatives (51), and these numbers are believed to be significantly underestimated because victims are dependent upon the abusers for survival and so shy away from reporting the abuse (49). Lack of third-party witnesses exacerbates the problem of underreporting. In institutional settings, the latest estimates in the United States are 2.5 million people who live in approximately 17,000 licensed nursing homes and roughly 45,000 residential care facilities are at “high risk” for abuse, even more so than if these elderly residents lived at home (US, “Elder Mistreatment” 447). Again, those numbers also may be grossly underestimated due to underreporting.

According to Filinson, “the research on elder abuse is sparse, methodologically weak, and theoretically insubstantial—yet elder abuse has been defined and legitimized as a social problem within a short period of time” (17). Eight decades after Lizzie Borden was accused of killing her parents, the British press labeled elder abuse in the late 1970s as “Granny Bashing” (NCPEA, “Nexus”). Three decades after that, instances of elder mistreatment mount, and accumulated research and some congressional acknowledgement does little to reverse the trend (NCPEA, “Nexus”). Consequently, Gellert offers a gloomy outlook: “In view of the imminent growth of the elder segment of an ageing United States population, the problem of elder abuse is likely to expand dramatically in coming years” (216).

### **Abuse routine in nursing homes**

During the late 1970s, Percy made Congress aware of the plight of the elderly in nursing homes. In 1997, Time Magazine published the following statement: “In possibly thousands of cases, nursing home residents are dying from lack of food and water and the most basic level of hygiene” (Brogden Geronticide 108), and a more recent poll of elderly people revealed that a third of them would rather die than live in a nursing home (113). Pipher, in 1999, wrote from a human point of view, nursing homes represent one of society’s most extreme and utter failures (48). At least according to these three sources, and many more could be cited, nursing homes have failed to improve.

The data offered over the past 20 to 30 years about the status of nursing homes in America paints a consistently grim picture. Research tells of government-funded nursing homes run by private companies intent on generating profits, of premature death inflicted upon unsuspecting and vulnerable elders by a barrage of economic and cultural factors, of the overuse of drugs and restraints, and of the stripping away of dignity. Percy described it well when he told Congress about the atrocities he witnessed and heard when he visited nursing homes across America. “Stick a pin blindly into a list of all the nation’s homes for the aged and you are apt to hit an atrocity,” Percy reported (83). “I have visited refugee camps in India and Pakistan where I found the refugees treated better than Americans in many of our nursing homes” (83). The reason for the atrocities, he claimed, was the vast majority of nursing homes were owned by corporations whose bottom line was economics over elder care (84). This situation apparently remains unchanged—another area of investigation newspapers should consider newsworthy.

Brogden substantiates Percy’s earlier claims. Elder care in the United States represents an \$87 billion annual business that floods Washington and state legislatures with lobbyists to weaken oversight of nursing homes (Geronticide 134). He finds 75% of the nation’s nursing homes are run for-profit and controlled by investor-owned chains (133), and that this investment arena has assured cash flows consisting nearly entirely of federal funds (134). “The federal government gives more than \$45 billion to nursing

homes annually. Corporate chains boost profits by laying off staff members, cutting wages, and doubling patient loads,” Brogden writes (134).

Considering the majority of nursing homes are in the business of making money instead of properly caring for the elderly, the following excerpts from Percy’s report to Congress hold few surprises—then or now:

- “Henry Jefferd, 80, is lonely and calls for aides. They ignore him. Eventually he is sedated. Henry has been receiving large doses of a tranquilizer used primarily for neurotics. Yet no physician has ever called Henry neurotic” (86).
- “The staff often runs out of diapers and linens for patients who are incontinent. ‘When that happens,’ an aide says, ‘we make do with anything we have around. I’ve used rags or shower curtains.’” (87).
- “Dignity can die quickly. Everyone undresses and is washed in front of everyone else. One man has been there a month and has yet to take a bath. He wants to take a shower by himself. He’s able to, but no one will allow him to” (88).
- “An incontinent woman had diarrhea. She wore a diaper, but she was changed so infrequently the dried waste produced a severe itch” (89).
- “An elderly man calls in vain for someone to help him during the night. He falls and . . . cut his arm badly. The house doctor was called and put in 12 stitches. ‘He gave no anesthesia,’ the nurse assisting later reported” (91).
- “The house doctor visits once a month. The last time he came, he checked all 60 residents in two hours” (91).
- “The men’s ward often is not cleaned. A thin film of urine lay in the aisle running between the beds. The men, most of them walking barefoot, trail the urine back from the bathroom” (91).

- “On one recent night shift, only one nurse and three orderlies came to work. They all gather in a corner downstairs and chat. If a fire started? ‘I’d get as many patients out as I could,’ says the nurse. ‘All of them? Impossible’” (92).

One ethnographer’s description of what goes on inside for-profit nursing homes describes the cunning subtlety with which discrimination together with accepted procedures take place behind the facade of birthday parties and smiling doctors: “Rather than hell (the author) finds a bureaucratic purgatory run for profit” (Brogden Geronticide 108). Within the same context, Brogden further describes the “disposal” (109) of the elderly as an itemized “logistical problem to be dealt with efficiently through fixed procedures . . . reduced to a function of the machinery of state and private institutional ‘care’ facilities—the approved organizational waste-bins for the aged” (109).

“Nursing homes make death ordinary and banal,” writes Brogden (Geronticide 110). Cost-efficiently managing the routine deaths of elderly residents has been shown to be part and parcel of the bureaucratic process of institutions. Studies of deaths among the elderly also show when death occurs in a hospital or nursing home, it is more likely to take place on a weekday [during normal business hours] instead of on a weekend, when most elders are apt to die if at home (135). Brogden’s research leads one to question if institutions seek to cost-effectively manage both the regularity and timing of elders’ deaths. Contributing to the data on abuse in nursing homes, Wiehe points to three key factors associated with abuse in nursing homes:

1. Whether the institution is non-profit or for-profit, with the former providing “superior medical and personal care” (138).
2. The education and experience of staff, indicating that increased training and time on the job lead to better treatment (138).
3. Whether staff are overworked, feel powerless to make a difference, are poorly trained, or work under great stress, research reveals that “low pay, low prestige, and physically demanding work in a high conflict situation” can lead to physical and emotional abuse by employees (138-39).

Another area of institutional abuse is the overuse of drugs. Instead of providing personalized care, nursing homes sedate residents with alarming frequency. Percy found years ago that 35% of drugs bought by nursing homes were designed to tranquilize the central nervous system (95). More recently, Brogden finds the majority of nursing home residents are given drugs and the amount has risen by 50% in 10 years (Crime 86). “It’s an effective if cynical way to put residents in a position where they will not complain and not ask for too much service; then service can be reduced still further to increase profits,” Percy previously informed Congress (95).

Mistreatment of the elderly in nursing homes also strips residents of privacy and encourages the overuse of restraints (Brogden Crime 86). Basic human rights frequently cease to exist in institutional settings, where abuse takes many forms, as exemplified by the following case: “A 76-year-old clergyman lived in a nursing home,” Brogden notes (86). “It was standard practice to wash each person down, leaving the door to the public corridor open” (86). Theft is common. And arguments between staff and residents in tightly sealed environments, similar to family violence in private homes, can lead to serious conflict (86), particularly when the elderly resident refuses to acquiesce. While doctors play a major role in whether nursing home residents thrive or wither and die, most direct perpetrators of abuse in nursing homes are nurses’ aides, who also represent the largest group of institutional employees (Brogden Crime 87). Nurses’ aides are hired without qualifications and then put to work “providing the most intimate kind of patient care” (Percy 93). Many see containment and restraint as part of the job, and what should be the daily care of individuals is viewed by caregivers as mundanely routine on a very fixed schedule (Brogden Crime 89). Saving time and cutting corners takes precedence over caring, and residents who complain or reach out emotionally or too aggressively are shunned (90), drugged, or physically restrained (90).

Residents are afraid to retaliate, and the situation seems even more hopeless as institutional employees also refuse to tell of abuse. Longtime workers loyally deny it as do newly hired employees who fear losing their jobs. Junior managers hesitate to report their senior managers, including administrators, who tend to overlook the problem

(Brogden Crime 87). This latter fact is significant because more than a quarter of older people who move into nursing homes die within the first year (88). Rather than a place to live, a nursing home is a place where large numbers of elders tend to die. Because nursing homes are perceived by society as “death disposal units” (Brogden Geronticide 126), they operate with little external criticism (126). Seemingly accepted by general society, according to Brogden, “Present-day elderly death-hastening frequently involves bureaucratic disposal in a so-called care home, a 20<sup>th</sup> century impersonal termination process, with the full knowledge that a quarter will be eliminated in their first residential year” (53). Geronticide, he concludes, is contemporary society’s way of disposing of its elderly “without regard to human selves” (109). Awaiting death, seniors are treated as objects instead of dignified human beings (Brogden Crime 88) by workers who are poorly trained, poorly paid, and overworked (90). In fact, elderly residents viewed as hopeless by nursing homes workers may fall victim to “involuntary euthanasia—often by starvation” (Geronticide 126), Brogden reports. The fact that dependent elderly are utterly vulnerable in institutions warrants significantly more investigation. And newspapers should make a sustained plea for such investigative efforts.

#### **Elder abuse as common in families as child abuse**

The general topic of family violence is no stranger to society. As long ago as 1981, the Select Committee on Ageing characterized domestic elder abuse thus: “classics in the history of man’s inhumanity to man” and “all the more horrible” that it is committed “by a blood relative” (Kakar 358). Even though elder abuse is viewed amid the wider perspective of family violence, newspapers have steered clear of the subject while regularly informing the reading public about child abuse. Considering characteristics of elder abuse strikingly resemble child abuse, and this researcher finds newspapers grossly underreport on elder abuse as compared to child abuse, this thesis considers four areas of similarity between the two types of violence, in an effort to further suggest newspapers should cover both equally.

First, how common is it? Neither child abuse nor elder abuse has been conclusively estimated on a national scale primarily because its victims are hesitant or

unable to report the abuse, it is difficult to identify, and federal and local reporting laws and protective resources vary nationwide. However, the best national estimates suggest between 2% and 3% of the under-18 population experience abuse or neglect every year, while between 3% and 4% of people aged 65 or older suffer abuse or neglect every year (Gellert 17).

Second, who commits it? Family members typically account for the abuse in both instances. Parents abuse their children; adult children abuse their parents. In addition, both child and elder abuse occur in domestic and institutional settings (US, “Child Mistreatment”).

Third, what causes it? Research shows child abuse most commonly occurs in impoverished homes where its victims are isolated and its family suffers from problems such as unemployment or alcohol or drug addiction (Gellert 217). Much of the same is true in families where elders are abused, particularly when caregiver stress results from the abuser’s personal and financial problems (217).

Finally, what can be done to prevent it? In each case, first and foremost, the public must be educated about the nature and causes of the problem and the ways to get help before the abuse becomes entrenched (Gellert 34). Elder abuse in particular is very difficult to detect and thus to prevent because much of it is hidden (222). Gellert suggests that “media, schools, and community-based initiatives may all have an impact” (34). The forecast looms dark, however, as some researchers such as Kakar predict mistreatment of old people will increase “as more and more adult children have to care for their old and older parents” (364-65).

#### **Underreporting stumps researchers, gives way to more abuse**

Because a national study to conclusively determine the incidence and prevalence of elder abuse in the United States has yet to materialize—another major reason for newspapers to approach the subject of elder abuse—estimates that range from 1% to 10% of older Americans are based on local research at the state level (Anetzberger 6). Further, APS agencies in the 50 states report cases of domestic and institutional elder abuse to a single federal authority but operate individually without national oversight (Tatara 11),

which confounds efforts to quantify or correct the problem nationally. Some researchers say only 1 in 8 cases of elder abuse gets reported (Kakar 364). According to the National Center on Elder Abuse, only 1 in 14 cases of domestic elder abuse reaches authorities and only 1 in 25 cases of financial exploitation of older people gets reported (NCEA, "Fact"). Furthermore, Kakar calls elder abuse "the third face of family violence" (62) and says family violence "is one of the most underreported forms of violence" (11). Elder abuse researcher Tataru supports this view, reporting the "true incidence of elder abuse is something that no one knows" (368-69). By not covering elder abuse, newspapers fail the growing majority of society—elders—by doing nothing to help solve this problem.

Also contributing to underreporting is fear of retaliation. In domestic settings, an overwhelming majority of elder abuse is committed by a spouse or adult child (Teaster Preface x), leaving homebound elders afraid (NCEA). Seclusion accounts for victims' unwillingness to report abuse in nursing homes (Brogden Crime 87). Regulators of nursing homes offer residents little relief. Even though Medicare and Medicaid have been entrusted for two decades with oversight of nursing homes, the processing of mountains of paperwork has preempted actual onsite examinations, leaving untold numbers of institutionalized residents in harm's way (Fulmer 61). "As a result," Fulmer reports, "systematic undertreatment of nursing home residents can and does go undetected and unreported" (61).

Left unchecked, this hidden social sickness will worsen with time as more people grow old and older. Without intervention, today's elderly epidemic promises more of the same for tomorrow. Protecting the elderly will require understanding the problem, identifying and reporting it, and taking preventive action. However, quantifying the issue is an issue in itself because, as mentioned earlier, the United States lacks comprehensive or collaborative national data, which originates at local levels.

In principle, the states' mandatory reporting laws should contribute significantly to elder abuse prevention. But the states fail to enforce their widely varying reporting laws most likely because they lack adequate funding and thus, the resources to do so. Also, lack of funding places exhaustive demands on limited numbers of APS



investigators who are expected to attend to ever-growing caseloads (Wiehe 160). “Twenty-five percent of the states spend less than \$1 per elder for protective services; some states spend nothing or as little as 22 cents per elder,” reports Quinn (Causes 243). Local communities also are lacking in a sufficient network of intervention resources, which would help curtail further abuse (Wiehe 160). Such interventions could include counseling and financial services or specialized training for caregivers.

Lack of federal law, local laws without enforcement resources, and lack of intervention resources do nothing to protect vulnerable elders who are afraid to report abuse and neglect. All this leaves a complicated phenomenon only partly explored and inaccurately measured—and unexposed by newspapers—thus all the more reason to expose it in studies like this to help remedy a longstanding, growing problem.

#### **Government, healthcare breed contempt for elders**

Far from a humanitarian concern among the most powerful, elder care has become a matter of political control and economic gain. As more Americans turn old-old, their care is increasingly handed over to a profit-oriented private sector that operates dysfunctional institutions where rules are designed for efficiency rather than for humanity (Brogden Geronticide 131-32). Old people are being forced to exchange their status as human beings for economically itemized units as they are bought, sold, and shuffled between local and federal bargaining powers in the machine of a commercialized healthcare system (132). “We desperately need better places for our ageing population,” asserts Pipher (48).

Adding fuel to this fire, the government stands ready to defend the privatization of healthcare as it increasingly talks of needing to cut costs associated with caring for elders, viewing them in Brogden’s words as a “cost drain on the public purse” (Geronticide 132). Such talk has sparked an equally increasing concern about the survival of the elderly as more and more pressure is placed on them to “move over” (27). Looking at this phenomenon from an economic standpoint, a downward trend in birthrates after 1964 that has resulted in fewer taxpaying workers and more non-working elders is causing the nation’s government and public healthcare systems, which have not planned

ahead, to wrestle with how to handle the subsequent repercussions on society as a whole. However, the solution should not come in the form of eliminating one portion of the population (old) in favor of another (young).

There are two major ways societal authorities attempt to control populations from exploding: fertility and mortality (Brogden Geronticide 32). Widespread talk of euthanasia as a convenient means of dispensing with old people, the need to cut Medicare and Medicaid outlays to seniors, and concerns over shelter and long-term care for elders are gaining momentum among policymakers and medical providers (29). Addressing the demographic time bomb, more taxes are needed to provide for growing numbers of the old-old who are living longer, particularly those with failing health. The pressing problem is how to take care of the health needs of an ageing populace in light of a concurrently shrinking tax base (30). Policymakers and medical providers seek to label this phenomenon a threat or crisis using tactics that capitalize on a social predisposition against ageing (33). If social healthcare institutions view elders as an economic drain on the state and thus turn over healthcare and long-term residential care of seniors to for-profit corporations to relieve this drain, and for-profit old-age homes remain dysfunctional places where increasing numbers of the old-old are shuffled through to suffer abuse and to die, where does that leave the vulnerable old-old and other elders who are unable to live at home?

In view of such bias and negligible newspaper coverage, it should come as no surprise that less compassion for the poor or disabled as well as for the elderly could become much more commonplace in America, reeking of abuse. Reductions in Medicare and Medicaid spending on individual elders could translate into fewer benefits including the availability of life-saving medicine. Depriving the elderly who live below the poverty level of critical medical care when they cannot pay for it themselves seems a tactical plan for premature death. Often, then, it is the impoverished elderly without housing options that face institutionalization (Brogden Geronticide 37). But as discussed earlier, institutions such as nursing homes are recognized as undesirable places where the elderly go to die. Thus, a growing population of elders is contained. Moreover, thanks again to ageism,

societal denial, and the lack of foresight on the part of government and other institutions including healthcare, the demand for medical services and medical personnel far exceeds supply (35-36).

Completely withholding medical benefits is one tactic to hasten death to an increasingly older population. Shrewdly rationing healthcare is another. The state promotes early death by hedging already limited resources such as by denying aid or failing to offer aid to the general population of the elderly (Brodgen Geronticide 70). Understaffed acute wards in hospitals pose one such example of this discriminatory practice. Forty percent of coronary care units restrict drug therapy according to a patient's age, and 66% of patients over the age of 70 are regularly refused kidney dialysis and transplants (79). In addition, arthritic older patients are told to tolerate their pain, women 65 or older receive fewer notifications for breast exams even though this age group is considered high risk for breast cancer, and less than 40% of patients 75 or older receive treatment for lung cancer (79). What is more, elderly patients who used to be cared for in hospitals are now transferred to nursing homes, "releasing hospital beds for younger people" (45).

Even though the United States judicial system is supposed to protect American citizens from many types of discrimination including ageism, Brodgen reports that "discrimination against old people is widespread" (Geronticide 70). According to one study of patients over the age of 90 who were treated in hospitals with surgery, 20% suffered delays for reasons other than medical. In addition, the weakest patients were assigned to the least experienced staff. Furthermore, pain medication was withheld from 25% to 45% of elderly cancer patients, and more than 25% of all elderly patients received nothing for daily general pain (46). In all these instances, the patients possessed adequate health coverage so financial issues seemed a doubtful reason. The reason, Brodgen found, was ageism (47).

In the midst of all this turmoil are some legislators, medical professionals, and other elder advocates who seek reasonable answers to the problems the demographic time bomb poses. But their voices are few and faint. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s,

Congress held hearings and assigned committees to address the issue of elder abuse. To be sure, a few research grants have been awarded, federal block grants have awarded stipends for the elderly that have all but been absorbed into larger budgets for other forms of domestic abuse such as child abuse, and advocates have in part been heard. But in all that time, Congress has repeatedly failed to enact the Elder Justice Act or any other federal law that specifically protects and adequately funds provisions aimed at the rights of the elderly—including state agencies charged with investigating elder abuse and prosecuting offenders—and has failed to proportionately fund research that would produce an accurate national estimate of elder abuse in America, which, in turn, would justify a congressional commitment to the elderly (Filinson 129-36). Currently, elder abuse prevention programs receive less than 1% of federal funds allocated to abuse prevention programs while child abuse prevention receives nearly 94% (Quinn).

Senator Percy pleaded with the Special Committee on Ageing to do something about the atrocities occurring in nursing homes, claiming “regulation of nursing homes is so fragmented among local, county, state, and federal agencies that it amounts to almost no regulation at all” (Percy 92). However, the atrocities still continue three decades later.

In 1997, the General Accounting Office (GAO) informed Congress at least 25% of the nation’s more than 17,000 nursing homes endangered residents (Brogden Geronticide 130). Investigators’ documented violations showed elderly people’s lives were in danger and also cited a host of related abuses including major financial misconduct, inadequate specialized staffing and turnover, theft from residents, breach of diet regulations, insufficient supplies of laundry, and employees hired as direct caregivers who had histories of violent crimes (131). Another major charge was nursing homes were administering drugs for discipline or convenience. Over-drugging continues to constitute an unresolved problem in nursing homes. Beginning as long ago as 1987, complaints of over-medicating nursing home residents and using psychopharmacologic medications as “medical straitjackets” (131) finally resulted some 10 years later in a decrease of such drug use from 34% to 16%—but this was offset by a simultaneous 97% increase in the use of antidepressants (131). In addition, nearly half of nursing homes cited for abuse and

neglect were labeled repeat offenders, which demonstrates that facilities found negligent may correct their problems only temporarily but slip back into non-compliance, and so on (129). Furthermore, government inspections are often weak. One investigator reports her complaints about the nursing homes she inspected “were regularly ignored” (130) due to the “cronyism that exists between state overseers and nursing home operators. We write down violations, the nursing homes complain, and our superiors keep us from going back or else they dismiss our citations” (130), she reports.

Additional research supports this one investigator’s claim. One year prior to the aforementioned GAO findings, state investigators cited 10,000 of the nursing homes they inspected with citations. All the violations were forwarded to the federal government with penalty recommendations. Only 2% of the nursing homes cited were fined (Brogden Geronticide 130). Moreover, state inspectors urged further federal funds for new patients be banned from 5,458 of the 10,000 nursing homes but Washington reduced that number to 156 (130). Investigators requested training for staff in 3,039 of the homes but Washington reduced it to 103. They demanded fines for 2,395 violations, but the federal government fined only 228 of those and the ones that paid without an appeal paid only 65% of the fines they owed (130). In the end, government authorities refused to explain these decisions except to assert that nursing home operators “have the right” (130) to work on correcting whatever problems may arise during state inspections, and contracts to operate are rarely terminated (130). While this data paints a dismal picture, social reform of such a powerfully embedded process could happen, but it will require changes in the systems that perpetuate the process, particularly government and human-service systems (Robinson).

Combined with regulators’ questionable attitude toward the plight of the elderly, the absence of straightforward federal law, the lack of enforcement of state laws, and the severe shortage of federal or state funds to support elder abuse prevention sends a signal to American society that says elders do not count. Inadequate funding immobilizes elder advocates at the state level in communities that could, with adequate resources, improve

elders' quality of life and protect older people from discrimination, cruelty, and even premature death.

Time after time, efforts by elder advocates in Congress and elsewhere to correct this growing concern continue without success. In 2002, in response to the National Academy of Sciences report, "Elder Mistreatment: Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation in an Ageing America," Senator John B. Breaux, a Democrat from Louisiana, proposed the Elder Justice Act. As of November 2005, Congress has yet to pass it. Congress did, however, in its 108<sup>th</sup> Session debate the Elder Justice Act in the House. The House referred the bill to the Senate Committee on Finance, which by July 2004 had revised it, eliminating legal advocacy and public awareness funding (US, "Legislative"). On the global stage, the United Nations claimed in 2002 to make the "widespread but unreported" prevalence of elder abuse a priority (UN, "Elder Abuse"). But United States lawmakers seem nearly blind to elder abuse and federal funding is all but absent (Quinn), leaving abuse of the elderly a nationally unchecked epidemic.

The sun began to shine on abuse of older people in the late 1970s, which culminated in the initial funding of Adult Protective Services (APS) agencies across the United States via the Social Services Block Grant and creation of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program to expose elder abuse in nursing homes. What followed in the 1980s were a broadened beam of awareness among professionals who work with the elderly and the passage of mandatory reporting laws at the state level. In addition, Haworth Press launched the Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect, the University of Delaware established its Clearinghouse on the Abuse and Neglect of Elders (CANE), and the National Center for Elder Abuse was born (Anetzberger 3). Despite aforementioned progress, there are today no national standard definitions for the various forms of elder abuse (3), which suggests to this writer the subsequent absence of a national plan or program for its prevention. The findings of this study also continue to suggest the attitudes and actions of powerful establishments go unquestioned by the country's newspapers, despite newspapers' role as public informant.

### **State laws only part of solution**

On the one hand, all 50 states have enacted laws to protect the elderly from abuse and other maltreatment. On the other hand, limited resources ensure noncompliance.

The earliest studies on elder abuse raised public awareness and prompted states to pass mandatory reporting laws and establish protective services for seniors (Kakar 358). All 50 states have enacted laws to protect vulnerable elders, but the laws vary widely from state to state. For example, people who are protected are categorized in at least 30 different ways, ranging from "60-plus" or "65-plus" to "disabled adult," "endangered persons 18-plus," or "developmentally disabled or mentally retarded 18-plus or incapacitated 60-plus" (Filinson 141). Some states stipulate "licensed health and social professionals" and "public or private officials" must report elder abuse while others make it voluntary for "any person" should they witness it (142), but requirements vary from state to state with at least seven different categories of whom must report. When it comes to penalties for those who fail to report, each state again poses its own penalty. There are a minimum of 14 different penalties across the states that range from "misdemeanor" to "misdemeanor plus \$100-\$1,000 fine and six months in jail" (143). States also differ on what precisely people are required to report. Most states broadly cite "abuse," "neglect," "exploitation," and "other," which can encompass anything from "battery" to "sexual offense" (144). In addition, local governments disagree on how quickly elder abuse should be reported to authorities. In at least 16 differing requirements among the states, timeframes range from "ASAP" to "immediate verbal, written 10 days" to "in a timely manner" (145). In conjunction with this requirement are designated timeframes for which investigators are required to begin some form of intervention. These also vary widely in at least 15 ways from a disturbing "as soon as practical" or "promptly" to the more reassuring "24 hours" (146).

While the majority of states do not participate in a central registry that archives known offenders, most do not have hotlines, and most assign reporting and investigating of elder abuse to an assortment of disconnected agencies, there is evidence of widespread abuse in the proliferation of laws and agencies which states assign to protect victims of

elder abuse. Filinson lists 26 diverse groupings of such protective agencies with some states allocating duties to just one, such as “elder affairs,” or to as many as two or three, such as “human services, mental health and corrections (mentally retarded adults)” (146). There appears to be no single organization at the state level, across the 50 states, to handle APS duties, which one may deduce impedes collaboration and thus negates accountability locally as well as on a national scale. Complicating the matter further, many states’ mandatory reporting laws put eye witnesses in position to help abused elders but state officials practice laxity with the regulations, making prosecuting non-reporters unlikely (NCEA). As a result, “compliance in most states is poor” (Gellert 223), reports one researcher. Charlotte Flynn of the Austin Gray Panthers voices her concern to legislators who may be satisfied that laws are in place but deny a lack of enforcement: “I fear that a criminal justice approach will lead legislators and the citizens to believe they have solved the problem when they have not” (Filinson 233).

Even though “there is no single data source to consult for statistics on crimes committed against children” (Kakar 233), when it comes to funding, states typically show bias toward child protective services (Fulmer 119), leaving resources for adults critically low. Inadequate funding leads to inadequate staffing and inadequate prevention. “APS agencies are typically understaffed,” Quinn reports (Causes 297). This is critical because APS agencies are supposed to implement states’ mandatory reporting laws. Mandatory reporting laws require the reporting of abuse, neglect, or exploitation; the punishing of offenders who violate the laws; and the safeguarding of elder individuals’ rights (Kakar 390). However, already impossible caseloads congest investigators’ workloads while funding for additional resources fall severely short. This situation worsens as society turns old and older. More cases of abuse are likely to occur without proportionate increases in the resources required to actually carry out the letter of the law (297). According to Filinson, “Adult Protective Service agencies responsible for investigating reports of abuse have been and remain under staffed [sic] and under budgeted [sic] and thereby powerless to implement or enforce state laws” (210). And lack of such resources contributes to the underreporting of elder abuse.



Also impeding a unified process are the 50 states' reporting structures, which by design make a collaborative, national attempt at research impossible (NCEA). Kakar reports that providing policymakers with a single national prevalence rate for elder abuse is impossible but many estimates are based on the meanings and interpretations of elder abuse and neglect at local levels. Police perceive it as a crime. Social workers define it according to APS regulations. Nursing home workers see it within the context of what is acceptable in their working environments. And advocates, researchers, and elders each see it subjectively (358). Until definitions are standardized, estimating elder abuse so diversely defined is impossible. Complicating matters is that elder abuse is a "complex phenomenon" (359) that cannot be reduced to a single thing. That elder abuse is a complex, far-reaching matter is all the more reason for newspapers to get involved.

#### **Public awareness: what newspapers have to do with it**

Why do newspapers do a second-rate job of covering elder abuse? One answer points to ageism. Another alludes to ignorance. Perhaps irresponsibility and unaccountability are culprits. Ironically, even though newspapers have done little to expose or explain elder abuse, some journalists assert newspaper reporters are the best people to inform the public of elder abuse. According to Warren Wolfe, senior reporter for the Minneapolis Star Tribune who participated in a forum of the National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, "It is up to informed and responsible journalists to help people understand the world in which they live. And stories about abuse are good stories" (NCPEA, "Nexus"). Wolfe also says newspapers will do the best job for elder abuse awareness. "This is my bias, but . . . my experience with television reporters is that they usually are generalists, with no background in ageing issues (and often a stereotypically negative view of ageing in general)" ("Nexus"), he says. Robinson agrees newspaper journalists "have significant power in shaping public perception and opinion" (Robinson).

Even though newspapers could do their part to diffuse ageism and help to prevent elder abuse by explaining and reporting about these social problems, America's newspapers and its media in general do the opposite by venerating the young while

making little mention of the old (Pipher 50). This is evident by newspapers' negligible coverage of elder abuse or generally anything about the elderly as compared to extensive coverage of child abuse. As Pipher so clearly points out, "Young people burn countertops with hot pans, forget appointments, and write overdrafts on their checking accounts. But when the old do these same things, their mistakes are viewed as loss of functioning. The media hurt rather than help with our social misunderstandings" (51).

Even to the most professionally trained eye, "elder abuse is perplexing, complex, and ethically charged," reports Anetzberger (13) and therefore hard to detect. If clinicians struggle with the issue, then how much more must the general public need to understand? In order for society to respect and dignify its eldest citizens, major social change will have to happen. Newspapers are in a prime position to foster that change. Many newspaper readers may be unaware of the prevalence or atrocities of elder abuse, or that it is a form of family violence, or the ideology and implications of ageism, or how ageism is manifested in the attitudes and behaviors of those who care for the elderly. The reverse may also be true. Many newspaper readers may consider elder abuse and ageism socially acceptable. Whichever the case, until all of society is made aware of these ills and society deems them socially unacceptable, elder abuse and ageism are likely to continue. Finley has stated any form of violence perceived as socially normal can be changed just as disease prevention changes the social norm. She cites the polio vaccine as an example. Once the polio vaccine was implemented in the 1960s, polio was eradicated by the 1990s. Thus, polio became socially unacceptable (Preface vii). The key to changing the social norm of polio was activism (Preface vii), and activism will be key in changing the social norms of ageism and elderly abuse.

What newspapers can do to incite activism is to tell the ghastly, complete truth. Newspapers should increase their coverage of the issues surrounding elder abuse and neglect. Newspapers also should rethink how they portray ageing and elders. Because American society is transfixed on youthful bodies and appearances, older people portrayed in advertisements, for example, appear to possess complete independence and extreme fitness. This unrealistic view of growing old in general leaves younger

generations with an unrealistic outlook. Awareness initiatives targeted to children and parents have successfully been used to thwart child abuse (Wiehe 71), so it is logical to presume awareness campaigns aimed at elders and their caregivers could be as successful in curbing elder abuse.

Newspapers must cover the many complex and comprehensive aspects of elder abuse on a recurring, long-term basis, particularly to explain the complicated and currently inconsistent definitions of the various forms of abuse. News about elder abuse should become as regular as news about the weather or sports. Newspapers can raise the social consciousness by reaching far beyond the boundaries of clinicians and other professionals and paraprofessionals who regularly interact with older people. The general public must understand the problems associated with abuse of the elderly and be able to identify them and act on them. This will take a long-term commitment on the part of newspapers; it cannot be accomplished in an unsystematic manner. According to Wiehe, “the general public must be educated not only about how to recognize the various forms of elder abuse but also about their ethical and legal responsibility to report such cases to APS” (163).

Thus, newspapers can inform a hungry public about reporting sources and hotlines or a range of support services for elders and their caregivers. Reporters can cover stories about actual abuse, nursing home violations, updates to legislative agendas concerning social healthcare, and more. In addition, newspapers can link like-minded members of the community together to form networks of community-wide resources designed to provide assistance to protect vulnerable elder citizens and to prevent would-be abusers from inappropriate behavior (Wiehe 162-63). Likewise, the public should hold newspapers accountable for publishing the information they need to become better able to spot, report, and prevent elder abuse. Writing letters to the editors or publishers and suggesting leads for stories are two ways individuals can do this. Organizations such as the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), Gray Panthers, and other elder advocates could pressure newspapers with picket lines and posters or other less aggressive but public appeals. Information about elders and elder abuse published by

newspapers would apply whether the reader is an elderly person, a family member caring for an elder in the home, an employee of an institution for elder residents, anyone who interacts with the elderly, or anyone who soon may play one of these roles. It cannot be emphasized enough that educating the broader public is so important because elders hesitate to report victimization (163).

A consistent, long-term commitment by newspapers could raise awareness and interest and thus funds to help prevent elder abuse (US, “Elder Mistreatment” 7). Barbara Reilley, RN, PhD, and associate director of operations for the Texas Elder Abuse and Mistreatment Institute at Baylor University, says in agreement, “The media is very powerful in bringing issues forward” (Reilley). Never mind that elder abuse is a heartbreaking, repulsive thing. War is repulsive also, but news and graphic reports of the atrocities of war as well as violent crimes are spread across American newspapers day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year. As long as war and crime exist, it appears newspapers will cover the stomach-turning death and destruction of such events. A social and cultural war against elder abuse exists as well, only newspapers are not covering its casualties. This fight for human rights also should be covered by newspapers, and covered vividly and strategically, in all its gory detail, day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year—until the war against elder abuse is won.

In addition, newspapers should rally public support against elder abuse. By printing the gruesome truth about elder abuse and neglect in regular alerts, columns, and a wide range of stories, complete with graphic photographs positioned up front, newspapers can help break the silence that hushes the truth about atrocities committed against the elderly. “When sensational issues arise, they will be written in articles. Those stories must appear on the front page” (Teaster), asserts Pamela Teaster, PhD, associate professor of the College of Public Health at the University of Kentucky. In this way, reporters can serve as conduits to rally public support and encourage individual and community action.

The subject of elder abuse is wide and varied and thus is a fertile field for limitless coverage in newspapers, at both national and local levels. A few examples include exposing senior scams; encouraging partnerships with local Better Business Bureaus or AARP to publicize special announcements or workshops; rallying communities, churches, schools, and other civic groups around educational efforts; informing the public about courses offered at local schools focused on elder abuse prevention (Wiehe 163), and working with law enforcement, social work professionals, and other organizations to advertise important resources for elders and caregivers in need of support from their communities.

Indeed, the need for general information about caring for elders is great. "Courses are available in many communities to educate new parents in caring for a newborn child, yet adult children often have little or no preparation in caring for an elderly parent," writes Wiehe (163). Newspapers can keep the public up-to-date about support services and helpful information available at the national level, such as with the National Center on Elder Abuse, and at the local level in communities such as with meals-on-wheels programs, elder day care, home health care, companion services, and caregiver support groups. In addition, newspapers can partner with community organizations already on the bandwagon but with little means of their own to mass-communicate. Even though circulation for the 1,457 newspapers in the United States (Project) has dipped somewhat over time, those declines occurred mainly when publishers eliminated late editions. Newspapers remain a mass medium read by the majority of adult Americans (Project).

Furthermore, newspapers reach the large audiences who most need to learn about elder abuse, including the 65-and-older age group (Project) who are caring for old-old, whether at home or in institutions. Moreover, the 18-to-34-year-olds, which constitute the emerging "socially engaged" population, read more now than in the past, thanks to innovative national dailies like the Washington Post (Project). The Washington Post and many other major papers offer this particular reading audience courtesy subscriptions at no charge in hopes of resurrecting a daily reading habit that will continue as they age.

What may be needed most now is for newspapers to call for more research in the areas of elder abuse prevention and intervention. According to researcher and author Mary Ann Fenley, “The most critical need at present appears to be for information about the incidence and causes of elder abuse; without this, plans for intervention into the problem of elder abuse are at best educated guesses and at worst, opportunistic political compromises” (176). Thus, newspapers can promote elder advocacy by pushing for more research or even by sponsoring studies and publishing the results, as once did the Associated Press (AP) in 1987. The AP conducted a national study that demonstrates newspapers do in fact play a key role in helping victimized citizens. The organization questioned laws concerning conservatorship and guardianship and called for revisions. AP’s decisive and strategic action got results: Congress addressed the issue and public awareness campaigns swept the country. The collective press’s attention to the matter led local governments to amend their laws and create “independent investigators” who visit impaired individuals and report what they see directly to the courts (Quinn Causes 271).

However, newspapers have since seemed to shut their moral eyes to the plight of the elderly, and elder abuse remains unsolved. Newspapers should contribute to solving the elder abuse problem, and they should begin by opening their moral eyes, as British philosopher Iris Murdoch once wrote: “Seeing is a moral art. We have to see, recognize, know, become aware of, before we move to solve” (Altman 205).

Despite the AP’s success in the past and Congress’s acknowledgement of elder abuse in 1979, which resulted in a call for “better research and public education,” (Fulmer 106), neither the government nor mass media, particularly national newspapers, have done much to keep the public informed or generate awareness of a growing problem. On the contrary, in this writer’s analysis, newspapers have by omission encouraged the problem to worsen. Without social awareness of a growing elderly population and equally increasing abuse of elders, the trend is unlikely to reverse. A key to reversal of current trends is knowledge. Myths about ageing and growing old must be diffused. Some researchers suggest expanding public awareness about the effects of family and institutional violence committed against the old may help people understand it

and the need for intervention and prevention, especially if it is occurring in their own families (Kakar 427). Surprisingly, even professionals who interact regularly with the elderly are seemingly ignorant of their plight. “Ignorance of the problem remains high among professionals and the public alike” (223), Gellert asserts. “The first step in preventing elder abuse, therefore, is to provide information and increase public awareness of the problem, including among the elderly” (223), says Gellert. Dr. James C. Guckian, executive director of the University of Texas Medical Branch-Austin Outreach, takes it a step further when he says, “Getting the media to focus attention on elder abuse will require a commitment from reputable investigative reporters. It is not sexy like some areas of public interest, but it should be done” (Guckian).

#### **Society plays key role in prevention and intervention**

In addition to neglect on the part of newspapers to publish information about elder abuse, perhaps society in general also is at fault. The data presented in this study indicates preventing elder abuse will require considerably more public awareness as it has with child abuse and spouse or partner abuse. However, leading elder advocacy groups devise public awareness plans without seeming to mention newspapers, or any mass media for that matter, as key partners or methods for spreading their messages.

The First National Summit on Elder Abuse, well-attended and held in 2001 in Washington, for example, agreed elder abuse runs rampant, an ageing America adds to the problem, and a “coordinated national effort” to prevent elder abuse lacks federal support (Quinn). Yet, attendees mentioned nothing about newspapers as being a key public information resource or partner in such an effort. Another example indicates this lack of insight at the local level: Top civic leaders of organizations in Orange County, including the University of California Irvine’s College of Medicine Program in Geriatrics, Adult Protective Services, the Long-Term Care Ombudsman and others, joined forces in 2003 to sponsor the nation’s first Elder Abuse Forensic Center to protect vulnerable adults from abuse (Pine). But again, newspapers appeared missing from the roster of sponsoring partners—even though the Los Angeles Times, one of the nation’s top five dailies (“Top 10”), serves Orange County residents where the initiative took

place. It is unclear from the research whether journalists were uninvited or whether they declined to play a part. It also is interesting to note when this researcher conducted personal interviews for this study, reporters and publishers of national and local dailies invited to participate failed to respond to the invitation. Creating a catch-22, then, are newspaper journalists who have done little to expose or explain the pervasiveness and complexity of elder abuse, or at least to expose the need for more research of elder abuse.

From the United Nations to the United States Department of Health and Human Services to independent organizations to scholars and professionals across America, everyone agrees public awareness is crucial to preventing abuse of the elderly. Yet none of them cites newspapers (or mass media for that matter) or holds media accountable for raising public awareness. If newspapers are to act, organizations, individuals, and society in general should hold newspapers accountable. Otherwise, journalists may continue to hush the rising storm of elder abuse. They will likely continue to limit coverage, capitalizing occasionally on the extreme cases, such as those reported in the New York Times in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, while steering clear of exposing the daily truth and urgency of the matter.

It will take a village to prevent elder abuse, first perhaps by dispelling what appears to be a major roadblock to treating elders respectfully: ageism. One approach individuals can take is to teach their children the value of older persons as a contributing segment of society. For example, elementary schools could introduce the subject of ageing, as they have done with sex education, and high schools, colleges, and universities could follow suit. In addition, bringing children and young adults in contact with older adults can give them a more balanced view of ageing, and ultimately, a more objective and healthier view of themselves as they age (Robinson). Schools could include in the ageing curricula intergenerational programs that unite younger and older citizens in the community, perhaps aiming for homebound and institutionalized elders who may be otherwise isolated from people in their communities. On an even larger scale, social organizations such as the Gray Panthers, already very active in elder sponsorship, could step up their advocacy of elders with existing “watchdog” committees that keep an eye



on damaging media portrayals of older Americans and by further promoting intergenerational membership (Robinson).

Prevention of elderly abuse also will require much more training for those who deal regularly with old people. Anyone, particularly family members, who take the elderly into their homes to give them daily care must understand they are at high risk for abuse due to lack of experience and the stress associated with the demands of a dependent older person (Wiehe 164). Caregiving often is unknown territory for adult children who find themselves in such roles with their ageing parents, as it is for many younger adults employed by nursing homes and other public and private institutions that provide intimate daily care to older, often dependent adults.

Preventing elder abuse would benefit more than only the old people in society. The toll elder abuse and neglect takes on society goes beyond victim and perpetrator. The problem is a public problem. Health care, legal, and financial costs rise. People lose time at their jobs, and productivity is reduced or lost. Mental illness among victims increases. Abusers teach their children abusive lifestyles by example. Add to that the loss of lives (Kakar 421). Research shows elder abuse is a widespread social sickness, therefore society must take responsibility for its prevention (426).

Beyond awareness and training, keeping the elderly safe will take more than mandatory reporting laws, which come into play after the abuse has already occurred. The evidence suggests shifting the focus away from mandatory reporting legislation to intervention, which must include the development of comprehensive community resources that would be readily available to the elderly in order for them to live interdependently in their homes as long as they choose. Such resources and programs would help those who care for the elderly in their homes to provide the level and quality of support the elder and the entire family deserves.

As previously mentioned, research confirms caregiver stress and elder dependency are major contributors to abuse and neglect of the elderly at home and in institutions. This researcher's study suggests providing relief to elders and their caregivers in the form of community resources that are easily accessible, socially

supported, and federally and state-funded, should reduce abusive situations and thus improve quality of life and well-being for elders and their caregivers. Simultaneously, relieving abusive situations that lessen or eliminate elder abuse also should result in lowering caseloads for state-funded services such as APS, law enforcement, and the courts, thus freeing these resources for other needs in the community, and perhaps allowing for the re-allocating of funds to existing and new community resources required by an ageing village.

Moreover, Americans should focus on building “broadly based public support” (Filinson 214) in order to establish and maintain the services growing numbers of elders need. These may currently include transportation, home-delivered meals, home health aides, chore services, and health screening. But caregivers also will require help understanding how to care for their older family members as well as obtaining much-needed relief from the daily stress of care-giving, which will make respite services increasingly more necessary. In addition to companions and visitors for homebound elders, bill-paying services, emergency shelters, legal and financial assistance, and mental health services such as individual counseling and support groups will come progressively more into play (216). Offering elders reassurance by phone, educating them about their own health and wellness programs, and providing them medical referrals and reliable personal emergency response systems are all examples of additional resources the old-old will need from society to be able to remain at home (Altman 210).

Elders’ ability to pay for such services will be an issue for many older people, particularly the old-old who can no longer earn incomes. Meanwhile, healthcare, housing, and all the services the eldest in society need to live safely and healthfully can be expensive (Pipher 51). Older Americans have the right to live independently and respectably, but as people age, many need help with simple things such as getting out of bed in the morning, bathing, managing their finances, or driving (51), and many may not be able to afford such help. The question remains whether federal and state governments and individual communities will support its oldest citizens with necessary resources.

The needs of an ageing society may seem overwhelming to an unprepared nation steeped in ageism, but the problem if left unattended will predictably worsen with time as older people occupy the majority of the nation's population. Also as people age, more and more elders are choosing to live at home as long as possible, so not only is the availability of home-delivered services important but also these resources must be affordable to the masses (Percy 95). According to Fulmer, this situation will come down to a "reallocation of society's resources" (152), including health insurance for elders, and the ability for both elders and their caregivers to purchase community services (152). What this will ultimately mean is family members will be able to provide long-term care for their aged relatives without the stress of financial or other worries (Caro 283), thus helping to alleviate potentially abusive situations. Also, as the young-old turn old-old and remain at home, pressure for much more publicly funded home-care programs will hopefully prompt a greater commitment for public funds (293). However, "Without a consensus that abuse, neglect, and inadequate care of the elderly are serious problems worthy of attention, resources will not be found" (152), Fulmer warns. This returns the focus to newspapers and the media in general, which should be held responsible for generating more public awareness about elder abuse and neglect.

Aside from the increasing needs of elders, abusers must undergo treatment. Police need better training when handling calls of family violence. Social service agencies must become less reactive and much more proactive with intervention efforts. And families must teach their children how to care for elder family members so their children will learn to care for them. It all goes back to family values and social structures based on those values (Kakar 427). According to Kakar, "the process must begin with teaching children respect for each other and property, teaching nonviolent conflict resolution, communication skills, and belief in equality" (427). These things should be taught at home as well as in public schools. Pipher agrees. While society understands what it is like to be young through firsthand experience, it fails, she says, to teach its children what it is like to be old (48). Furthermore, law enforcers, business people, community leaders, and individuals can develop and implement continuous education

and training programs (Kakar 427). It will take a widespread commitment at all levels of society to create the social structure and attitudes in which elders are valued and welcome. In the words of Margaret Mead, the ideal community is one “that has a place for every human gift” (Pipher 89).

Dignifying elders goes beyond prevention of abuse. In building a better village where the young and the old live in unity, the younger segment of society should remember many of today’s eldest generation would rather suffer without than to be burdensome or ask for help, but many of them need help just the same (Pipher 51). Pipher’s interviews with elders reveal “The old-old often feel ashamed of what is a natural stage of the life cycle. In fact, the greatest challenge for many elders is learning to accept vulnerability and to ask for help” (53), she says. Therefore, asking older people questions about what they need is very important.

Another way society can help the elderly live with dignity involves professional schools such as those for healthcare and law, which could include ageing and elder abuse education in their curricula (Quinn Causes 296). Throwing out negative language and replacing it with positive language that accounts for changes in times and circumstances concerning an ageing America is another idea. For example, replace *dependency* with *interdependency* which suggests *mutuality*, and replace *elderly* with *elder* which suggests respect and strength (Pipher 53). As previously mentioned, teaching children such positive language would be particularly helpful in turning the tide on ageism and preparing children to become more aware, compassionate, and responsible adults.

In addition to these other incentives, the building of coalitions among individuals, groups, and legislators will have to be much stronger in order to develop and implement new policies that address action and solutions on a wide scale (Filinson 215). Filinson reports the Gray Panthers of Michigan, for example, include state representatives and gerontology specialists from the University of Michigan in an effort to develop health services for seniors (217). In the end, what appear to be surfacing are innovative additions of services and a change in the delivery system (217). On the one hand are many innovations that if realized and broadly implemented by society could free elders

from victimization. On the other hand, there are no extraneous rewards for clinicians or other professionals who try to protect abused older people (Anetzberger 15). When doctors or others suspect abuse, they must know they are backed by a community that stands ready to intervene appropriately and according to the wishes of the victim (15). Otherwise, the victim could be “re-victimized,” such as by removal from one intolerable environment and placement into another one that is equally intolerable (15).

Since there is still much to do both inside the nation’s healthcare and medical delivery systems as well as outside it in the form of creating comprehensive community resources that would guarantee detection and intervention as well as future follow-up, the question remains: Who or what will lead these efforts? Someone must. According to Lamm, “We delay addressing these problems at our own peril” (Altman 205). According to this researcher, newspapers—still widely read by the majority of Americans (Project)—should lead the way.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

This study explores elder abuse as an insidious social illness and its prevention primarily in light of one of society’s prejudices, ageism, as well as within the framework of newspapers, which have exposed and thus helped prevent other social illnesses such as child abuse. This study suggests what society and newspapers should do to counteract and change the status quo if elders are to live without abuse.

Regarding newspapers, public perception efforts aimed at prevention have succeeded in combating child abuse and other domestic violence (US, “Elder Mistreatment” 519-20), and so it stands to reason the same should hold true for elder abuse. But newspapers steer clear of elder abuse, labeling the topic a “downer” (NCPEA, “Nexus”), because it is an unpopular, ugly, complicated, and pervasive problem—but so is child abuse. Disturbing parallels that characterize elder abuse and child abuse should more than justify the outlays of time, talent, and money required for newspapers to expose it. Because newspapers do not expose it, this study suggests that newspapers are a direct contributor to elder abuse and to widespread ageism, which this study finds plays a key role in elder abuse. To the extent newspapers do not report on elder abuse,

newspapers are complicit enablers of elder abuse in a dysfunctional society. Marialyn P. Barnard, attorney and caregiver to her elderly parents, agrees. "Newspapers should do a better job of covering this topic" (Barnard), she says. "Increased exposure of the problem could significantly reduce elder abuse."

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

"Granny bashing" was exposed in 1975 by the British press. Quinn reports the earliest studies of elder abuse began in the late 1970s when researchers saw it as a form of domestic family violence (Causes 27). By 1978, United States lawmakers and the general public became even more aware following a congressional testimony about elder abuse. About that time, Dr. Suzanne Steinmetz informed Congress of "battered parents" based largely on her review of hospital emergency room records and reports from social workers (27).

The following year, studies on elder abuse multiplied. Lau and Kosberg found after reviewing medical records of 404 homebound older patients of a Chronic Illness Center in Cleveland, Ohio, nearly 10% exhibited signs of abuse and only 10% of those sought help. Block and Sinnott surveyed the elderly in Maryland to discover more than 4% of them reported being battered (Tatara 2-1), and most of them lived with a spouse or adult child (Quinn Causes 28). O'Malley *et al.* questioned more than 1,000 medical, legal, and social work professionals and paraprofessionals as well as police in Massachusetts about cases of elder abuse. They found 183 of 332 respondents reported being abused and 75% percent of those lived with a relative (28).

Douglas *et al.* in 1980 also interviewed a variety of professionals including lawyers, doctors, coroners, and clergy in Michigan as well as nursing home staff to find out their perceptions of elder abuse. While most professionals agreed "significant mistreatment occurs," (Quinn Causes 29), nursing home staff denied it.

Early studies used small samples and based findings on inconsistent state-based statistics but still contributed to a better understanding of the prevalence of elder abuse particularly in domestic settings (Tatara 2-1). These initial studies were limited to the perceptions of people who worked with the elderly under extreme or emergency

situations and did not, in most cases, include the viewpoints of the elderly themselves. However, this research confirmed elder abuse as a serious social problem and product of family violence and called for further investigation. Also missing from earlier research were standard definitions or categories of abuse.

The next wave of research followed in 1984 when Giordano and Giordano were the first to compare confirmed cases of elder abuse with unconfirmed cases as reported to Adult Protective Services (APS) agencies in several counties in Florida (Quinn Causes 30). They reconfirmed most victims of abuse live with a spouse or adult child and suffer more than one kind of abuse, and they identified predictors of abuse (30). About the same time, Sengstock and Hwalek conducted a similar study also using agency records to reduce 203 indicators of mistreatment down to nine, and then used the nine indicators as bases for questioning elders. Three of the nine were direct questions concerning abuse or threats including “Has anyone taken money or property?” (31) and “Have you been threatened by someone?” (31). Two characterized the elder, such as “the elder is a source of stress [in the home]” (31). And four characterized the elder’s caregiver including “the caregiver is a persistent liar” (31).

By 1986, Phillips had turned to nurses with questions about abused and non-abused elders (Quinn Causes 32), became the first to suggest differences between the elder’s and the caregiver’s expectations of one another, and then related those differences to stress and thus abuse (32). This study’s weakness, however, was in nurses’ perceptions of what constitutes abuse.

Also in 1986, one of the most widely known studies emerged, called the Three Model Project on Elder Abuse. The study was conducted by Pillemer; Wolf, Godkin, and Pillemer; and Wolf, Strugnell, and Godkin in Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island. It amplified the role of psychological abuse, added it as a separate category of abuse to physical and material abuse, and differentiated abuse from neglect as well as passive neglect from active neglect (Quinn Causes 33). Quinn states “from this point on, physical abuse no longer predominates” (33), and the focus of subsequent studies shifted away from physical abuse to neglect and to the characteristics of the abuser (33).

Through 1986, researchers neglected to explain the results of their data in terms of national prevalence (Tatara 2-1). Also, earlier studies were exploratory and based only on small samples (Filinson 154). Even so, the problem of elder abuse was significant enough to result in 1987 in passage of the Elder Abuse Prevention Act under the Older Americans Act of 1975; however, it remained unfunded for several years (Wiehe 142). Upon funding, 600 state agencies collectively received less than \$3 million to investigate and help prevent elder mistreatment (142).

A breakthrough came in 1988 when Pillemer and Finkelhor made the first attempt at a large-scale national prevalence study using a random-sample survey of more than 2,000 elderly in the Boston area. The study revealed 20 in 1,000 elders suffer violent physical abuse, 11 in 1,000 suffer [psychologically] from verbal aggression, and 4 in 1,000 suffer neglect (Quinn Causes 34). But Quinn suggests rates may be much higher due to limited definitions of elder mistreatment used in this study. Missing from the study were financial or material abuse, sexual abuse, abandonment, and some forms of psychological abuse (34).

By the late 1980s, researchers estimated 1.5 million elderly were victimized in their homes every year (Kakar 62), and subsequent studies began to address the causes of caregiver stress and elder abuse in institutions such as nursing homes. Exploring caregiver stress, Homer and Gilleard in 1990, and Paveza *et al.*, and Pillemer and Suito in 1992 all found caregiver stress whether in elders' homes or in institutions is a major contributor to elder abuse (Quinn Causes 36).

Concerning abuse in nursing homes, Pillemer and Moore in 1990 found alarming numbers of caregivers admitted to committing or witnessing abuse of elderly residents (Quinn Causes 41). Their study showed 81% of 577 nurses and nurses' aides from 32 nursing homes observed psychological abuse, 41% had committed the same, 36% had watched another physically abuse an elder, and 10% had perpetrated the physical abuse themselves (41).

In another study in 1996, Payne and Cikovic dissected 488 incidents of abuse of nursing home residents as documented in Medicaid fraud reports dated from 1987 to



1992. They found the reports to represent the most extreme cases of physical and sexual abuse as well as improperly performed daily living tasks and theft (Quinn Causes 42). In addition, their research revealed nurses' aides are the largest group of abusers in nursing homes (42). Furthermore, the study reported while 335 of the 488 incidents of sexual abuse resulted in criminal convictions, only 295 offenders were sentenced, usually to no more than probation, and only 68 went to jail (42). The fact there were no witnesses to most of the abuse made prosecuting nearly impossible (42).

Research that occurred from the late 1970s to the end of the 1980s raised the issue of elder abuse and confirmed elder abuse in domestic and institutional settings, but much of the problem with studies thus far stems from variances in methods and sources of data as well as the lack of comprehensive national data (Tatara 11).

Taking elder abuse research to the next level, Toshio Tatara in 1990 sought to homogenize the 50 states' diverse definitions and reporting methods for domestic elder abuse when he published Suggested State Guidelines for Gathering and Reporting Domestic Elder Abuse Statistics for Compiling National Data. In 1992, Congress originated the National Elder Abuse Incidence Study (NEAIS) through the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act, and the Administration on Ageing sponsored it (Tatara 1-1). Eyeing elder abuse as a form of domestic violence, the study aimed at establishing the incidence, or new cases, of domestic elder abuse and neglect in the United States. Tatara led the multi-year study that concluded in December 1997. The study's design replicated other national research previously conducted on child abuse and neglect, and analyzed reports of abuse submitted by APS agencies as well as by specially trained "sentinels" from community organizations that frequently contacted the elderly. In the findings, the NEAIS approximated 450,000 elderly people aged 60 and older suffered abuse or neglect in domestic settings in 1996 (4). The study further and most notably found that at least 84% went unreported (4).

This groundbreaking finding affirmed the validity of the "iceberg" theory—the widely accepted assumption that reported cases constituted only the smallest portion of actual abuse (Tatara 5-10). The study also examined formally underreported instances of

abuse from 1986 to 1996 that showed a jump of 150% while the number of people aged 60 and older rose by only 10% (2-2). Tatar's breakthrough research provided a national incidence estimate of elder abuse and established itself as a foundation for future research (Tatar 19). In addition, it standardized definitions for physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse, financial or material exploitation, abandonment, and neglect and self-neglect. Furthermore, the report characterized the victims of abuse and profiled perpetrators. Missing from Tatar's research, however, was a comprehensive picture of elder abuse that also included its incidence in institutional settings. Finally, although Tatar's study more clearly defined abuse and neglect, without a federal edict or funding specifically aimed at elder abuse prevention, the 50 states remained at liberty to define it, report it, and punish it—or not—as each state legislature saw fit.

Building on this exemplary attempt at a nationwide perspective of elder abuse in America, The 2000 Survey of State Adult Protective Services added “vulnerable younger adults” aged 18 to 59 to the body of research on elder abuse. Although previously excluded from earlier studies (Teaster 8), vulnerable adults receive support from APS agencies along with elders and adults with disabilities (vii). In addition, Teaster's work stands apart from Tatar's study because it also explores abuse in institutional settings, including mental health and mental retardation facilities (viii).

Teaster echoed Tatar's hypothesis that little remains known about elder abuse, despite that, “as with child abuse, elder abuse has always existed” (Tatar 3). Her study also concluded state-to-state inconsistencies and confidentiality protections impede collection of accurate national data (3). As mentioned earlier, while the majority of states have mandatory reporting laws for elder and adult abuse, and most states name healthcare and other professionals as mandated reporters of abuse, many states do not prosecute for failure to report (40) nor do they maintain abuse registries. In addition, states face severe funding shortfalls. Since 1993, federal grants decreased, leaving local APS agencies to draw 20% more from general funds to function (43). This latest study confirms earlier findings while re-emphasizing the following: the need for better data management, more

funding, research, and training, and significantly more “public awareness efforts” (44), which this researcher suggests should start with newspapers.

Recently, the National Institute on Ageing (NIA) solicited scientists and organizations with expertise in the area of elder, child, and other types of abuse to expand on the National Academy of Sciences’ published study, Elder Mistreatment: Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation in an Ageing America. The NIA wants researchers to address and uncover better methods for establishing a national incidence of elder abuse, to further standardize definitions and measurement, to clarify risk factors, to identify ways to medically and perceptively assess elder mistreatment, and to spot elder abuse in institutional settings. To this end, awarded researchers will begin receiving annual grants of \$1.7 million as early as April 2006 (US, “RFA”). The researchers’ first task: to produce reliable ways to measure a national prevalence and incidence of elder abuse and neglect, to consider possible problems associated with a single study if a national incidence study is deemed impractical, and to add numbers to those scholars who research elder abuse. It is hoped these first steps will bring about a national incidence study, which is hoped to lead to national policy, and thus adequate resources, aimed at preventing elder abuse (“RFA”).

This study contributes to this body of research by building an argument for increased public awareness that starts with the younger members of society seeing with moral eyes to change their negative attitudes and discrimination against people because they are old, and culminates with all levels of society holding newspapers accountable for exposing and explaining and thus helping to prevent elder abuse, even if coverage commences with a relentless call for more research.

### **METHODOLOGY**

First, this study is informed by the existing literature. It defines, categorizes, and estimates elder abuse, explains its causes, discusses America’s rising ageing population and the implications of a dominantly elder demographic. It also explains the notion and practice of ageism, evident in the voices of legislators, institutional leaders, and in documented policies as well as in the lack of federal law expressly prohibiting elder

abuse and neglect. This literature includes books published within the past three decades including the current year, articles published in scholarly journals, scientific studies, and government documents. This writer attempts to synthesize the research, spot common themes, and point out weaknesses or gaps.

Second, this researcher conducted a content analysis of seven of the top 10 national daily newspapers (according to circulation)—Chicago Tribune, Houston Chronicle, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, and USA Today (“Top 10”)—over a six-month period from 1 Mar. 2005, to 31 Aug. 2005, to observe the number of times the newspapers’ content contained topics on elder or elderly abuse as compared to the number of times the newspapers’ content contained topics on child abuse. This writer’s reasons for analyzing these specific publications during this specific timeframe are first, to narrow the focus of the research given time constraints assigned by the structure and deadlines of the curriculum that requires mass media be of primary inclusion; second, to accept the widely recognized and observable presumption that major national dailies serve as leaders in publishing newsworthy content that is often duplicated by the nation’s other hundreds of local dailies; and third, to accept the Audit Bureau of Circulations’ ranking by circulation as a valid ranking of the nation’s “top” newspapers.

This writer’s rationale for comparing elder abuse coverage to child abuse coverage is first, that child abuse and elder abuse are both considered widespread, underreported, and poorly estimated forms of family violence as well as institutional violence in America and both are considered social illnesses that warrant public awareness. Second, it logically follows that public awareness and prevention strategies used to educate the masses about child abuse, which have included newspapers, should be at least as successful in educating the masses about elder abuse. This thesis focuses on newspapers. The tally of the number of times child abuse was reported is used as a basis for comparison to a tally of the number of times elder or elderly abuse was reported. This comparison is important to this particular study that shows elderly abuse is pervasive and thus deserves at least the coverage in newspapers that another pervasive social ill—child

abuse—receives. In addition, this researcher examined specific instances of content that addressed elder or elderly abuse for substance and coded those occurrences by theme to explore specifically what newspapers covered. The results are provided in this study's chapter on Findings.

Finally, this researcher conducted eight personal interviews with the director of the National Center on Elder Abuse, an attorney and primary caregiver to her elderly parents, a professor of sociology who formerly managed a master's program for gerontology, a physician and executive director of a university medical branch, a registered nurse and associate director of a university's geriatrics program, another registered nurse certified in rehabilitation and case management, an elder-abuse researcher and associate professor of a gerontology and health behavior department at a university, and a social worker with Adult Protective Services. These participants shared valuable insights into their understanding of and experience with elder abuse and their points of view about how to prevent it including their opinions on newspapers' role in raising public awareness about elder abuse. Newspaper journalists from the Houston Chronicle, New York Times, and San Antonio Express-News were randomly invited to participate in this part of the research but provided no response. Representatives of AARP at both national and local levels also failed to reply.

### **Significance of study**

Most significantly, this report supports newspapers' tradition of in-depth and recurring coverage on important social issues such as child abuse and therefore questions whether newspapers take responsibility as an important messenger about the issue of elder abuse. This researcher hopes newspapers will be compelled to expose and explain the enormity and violence of elder abuse and the threat it poses to the quality of life for older people—or at least, in the absence of conclusive national data on the incidence or prevalence of elder abuse, to stand ready to question the lack of federal support in the face of validated cases of elder abuse across the 50 United States and research that substantiates underreporting of abuse by fearful elders and others.

If published publicly, this study's findings could serve to inform key groups of society, particularly elders and maturing people, but also any agency, institution, or individual responsible for the protection of older citizens, the investigation and reporting of elder mistreatment, the prosecution of perpetrators, or intervention. From this research, if published, the general public could be prompted to hold newspapers accountable for helping to prevent elder abuse. Furthermore, newspapers, newspaper readers, perhaps mass media and media consumers in general can learn about elder abuse from this report and the need to expose and explain it.

If published, this research could compel newspapers to commit to leading a long-standing and sustained public awareness initiative on elder abuse prevention and intervention that informs the public about its complicated, violent, and prolific nature, and to do this by incorporating regular reports, customized columns, and human-interest features containing graphic imagery into their daily publications. It is further hoped this study could remind newspapers of their powerful influence on public opinion and activism, which with awareness-building could lead to increased funding, investigation, legislation, and prevention of elder abuse.

Preliminarily, the impact of this study may reside in a synthesis of existing literature that underscores the need for more public awareness to drive more research, funding, lawmaking, and development of much-needed community resources aimed at preventing the mistreatment of older people and restoring dignity to frail elders. Besides highlighting the plight of America's older citizens in hopes to improve their chances for safer living conditions and higher quality of care, this study, if published, could hopefully encourage other researchers to be relentless in their efforts to investigate and measure this social ill, lawmakers to protect the elderly and punish those who abuse them as well as those who witness abuse and fail to report it, and the United States and local governments to effectively fund elder abuse prevention, intervention, and training programs. Additionally, this research could benefit care-giving family members who experience anxiety and stress as a result of their elderly loved one's abuse or neglect because it encourages discussion and disclosure as well as recommendations to seek help. It also

prompts communities to provide such help over and beyond the boundaries of law enforcement. Finally, this researcher suggests that, if published, this report could serve to inform and influence decision-makers in public and private healthcare systems to raise the bar on training and performance standards for healthcare providers to ensure clinicians, therapists, nurses' aides, social workers, and others receive training to identify abuse, and to hold their employees and managers responsible for reporting it.

Last but not least, if this study were published and provided to newspaper publishers, it is this researcher's sincerest hope that newspapers would hold themselves accountable for doing their part to change the status quo in America's ideology that currently condones discrimination against the old by exposing ageism in all its ugly forms. Further, it is hoped newspapers will commit to exposing and explaining the complex plight of the elderly.

### **Limitations**

This study may be limited by a six-month analysis focused on seven of the top 10 national daily newspapers, according to circulation, which may reduce the generalizability of findings to all newspapers or even to all mass media. However, future research on this topic could expand to include an analysis of a larger number of the nation's newspapers or additional mass media such as major magazines, television news programs, documentaries, movies, radio commentaries, and more. This study may be further limited without the direct input of elders.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

### **Analysis of newspaper content**

As Table 2 on the following page (57) illustrates, a content analysis of seven of the top 10 national daily newspapers shows of the 1,288 newspapers published during a six-month period, only 68 instances of elders or elder abuse is found. Compared to instances of child abuse, a much larger number totaling 1,071 is found. Thus, the newspapers published instances of elder abuse only 5% of the time whereas the newspapers published instances of child abuse 83% of the time. It is interesting to note these data coincide with earlier-reported data concerning federal funding, whereas less than 1% of the

budget allocated to prevention services goes to elder abuse prevention but nearly 94% goes to child abuse prevention (Quinn). These facts lead this researcher to believe substantial media exposure may prompt public interest that results in increased resources.

Table 2

## Total Occurrences of Elder Abuse as Compared to Total Occurrences of Child Abuse

Published in Seven of the Top 10 Newspapers in the United States from 1 Mar. 2005  
Through 31 Aug. 2005

Newspaper	Elder Abuse	Child Abuse
<u>Chicago Tribune</u>	1	4
<u>Houston Chronicle</u>	8	176
<u>Los Angeles Times</u>	28	319
<u>New York Times</u>	13	182
<u>USA Today</u>	6	98
<u>Wall Street Journal</u>	3	12
<u>Washington Post</u>	9	280
Total Occurrences	68	1,071

Source: ABI/INFORM Global/ProQuest® (Wall Street Journal) and LexisNexis™ Academic (Chicago Tribune, Houston Chronicle, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, USA Today, and Washington Post) electronic databases (all sections, full-text) for papers published 1 Mar. 2005 through 31 Aug. 2005 including examination of some printed editions of New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal published during August. Electronic databases may exclude some articles due to the pending “Literary Works in Electronic Databases Copyright Litigation.”



Tables 3-9 on the following pages (59-70) illustrate by headline as well as by day, date, section, and page each newspaper's positioning of the 68 instances of content related to elder abuse, which is further analyzed in this study.

Table 3

Details of the One Occurrence of Elder Abuse Published in the Chicago Tribune from 1 Mar. 2005 Through 31 Aug. 2005

Day	Date	Sec.	Page	Words	Headline	Photo
Sun.	Apr. 17	Business News	Unknown	1,025	State Moves To License Caregivers	None

Source: LexisNexis™ Academic electronic database for Chicago Tribune published 1 Mar. 2005 through 31 Aug. 2005 (all sections, full-text).

Electronic databases may exclude some articles due to the pending “Literary Works in Electronic Databases Copyright Litigation.”

Table 4

Details of the Eight Occurrences of Elder Abuse Published in the Houston Chronicle from 1 Mar. 2005 Through 31 Aug. 2005

Day	Date	Sec.	Page	Words	Headline	Photo
Mon.	Aug. 29	B	1	1,210	The Legislature; 700 New Laws—Which One's Yours?	None
Mon.	Aug. 15	Business	2	728	State Service Can Investigate Abuse of Elderly	None
Wed.	June 8	B	3	714	Perry Signs Protective Services Reform Into Law	None
Mon.	May 30	A	1	987	The Legislature; Protective Services Will Get an Overhaul	State House
Fri.	May 27	B	3	561	Protective Services Bill Hits Snags	Congressman
Fri.	Apr. 15	B	6	193	Couple Charged With Abuse of Woman, 86	None
Sun.	Apr. 10	A	17	1,303	Texas Closely Watching Medicaid Budget Battle; Lawmakers Fear a "Devastating Impact" on State's Ability To Give Healthy Care to Poor	Mother and child at a Texas clinic.
Fri.	Mar. 4	B	3	606	Health Funds Clear Senate Panel	Senators

Source: LexisNexis™ Academic electronic database for Houston Chronicle published 1 Mar. 2005 through 31 Aug. 2005 (all sections, full-text). Electronic databases may exclude some articles due to the pending "Literary Works in Electronic Databases Copyright Litigation."

Table 5

Details of the 28 Occurrences of Elder Abuse Published in the Los Angeles Times from 1 Mar. 2005 Through 31 Aug. 2005

Day	Date	Sec.	Page	Words	Headline	Photo
Sat.	Aug. 6	A Main	1	2,480	Behind a Priest's Suicide; Father Chevedden's Family Says His Reports of Sexual Abuse by a Fellow Jesuit Were Brushed Aside	Priest's dad, brother visit his gravesite.
Sun.	July 31	B Metro	17	465	Attorney General Steps Up Prosecutions of Elder Abuse	None
Sun.	July 31	B Metro	1	1,898	Nursing Home Scrutiny Lagging; Enforcement of Tough Laws Is on the Wane Despite Increase in Complaints About Care	Daughters of deceased nursing home resident
Sat.	July 30	B Metro	4	86	In Brief: Nursing Home Worker Guilty of Elder Abuse	None
Wed.	July 27	B Metro	2	1,393	Listening In/211 Help Line; L.A. County's Desperate Have a New Option	211 Operator
Mon.	July 25	A Main	1	1,567	Spending Cap Called Key to National Plan; Conservatives Say an Initiative on California's November Ballot Could, Like Proposition 13, Propel Similar Measures Now Brewing Across the US	None
Wed.	July 20	C Business	2	285	California; Two Ex-Execs of Defunct HMO Arraigned ... Medi-Cal Fraud	None

Table 5  
Continued

Day	Date	Sec.	Page	Words	Headline	Photo
Sun.	July 10	B Metro	4	1,000	Bill Targets Scams Against Seniors	None
Wed.	July 6	B Metro	4	288	211: Digits For Everything Else	None
Sat.	July 2	A Main	20	1,155	A Safe Haven for Elder-Abuse Victims; A Bronx Emergency Shelter Is One of the First in the Nation for Mistreated Seniors	Hebrew Home for the Aged
Sat.	July 2	B Metro	3	617	Abuse Victim Wins Award; A Nursing Home Must Pay \$12 Million to a 62-Year-Old Resident	None
Thurs.	June 30	A Main	1	1,276	Senate Takes On Medicaid Loopholes	None
Sun.	June 26	Magazine	14	2,451	One Final Con; Viva LeRoy Nash, the Oldest Condemned Man in America, Plots His Escape From the Executioner	Unidentified in source.
Mon.	June 20	B Metro	1	1,394	Gov.'s Donor Under Fire From State . . . Nursing Home Owner Emmanuel Bernabe has given Schwarzenegger Nearly \$70,000	Closed nursing home (after 13 misdemeanors)
Tues.	June 14	B Metro	3	877	Assemblyman Is Ill, But His Work Continues	El Segundo Mayor
Tues.	June 7	A Main	14	330	The Nation: Studies Say Mental Illness . . . Goes Untreated	None

Table 5  
Continued

Day	Date	Sec.	Page	Words	Headline	Photo
Tues.	June 7	B Metro	1	926	Two Counties To Spend Tax Windfalls	None
Mon.	June 6	B Metro	1	3,627	Capitol Session Lacks a Bold Agenda . . . Legislators Embrace Only Incremental Changes That Tinker Around the Edges of the State's Ills	Target of smoking ban: a state building courtyard.
Tues.	May 24	A Main	1	2,794	The State; Oregon Law Fuels Debate on Suicide; Experience Is Cited by Both Sides as California Considers Letting Doctors Prescribe Lethal Drugs	Two doctors in Oregon; a widow; a 48-year-old cancer patient.
Thurs.	May 12	A Main	2	44	For The Record: An Article in Friday's Section A About Doctors Disciplined at Martin Luther King Jr./Drew Medical Center	None
Fri.	May 6	A Main	1	1,271	Besieged Hospital "Cleaning House"; King/Drew Moves to Fire Three More Doctors . . .	King/Drew Medical Center
Wed.	Apr. 13	B Metro	9	292	Rapist Gets Life for Four Attacks; Gary Johnson Assaulted the Older Women at Their Homes	None

Table 5

Continued

Day	Date	Sec.	Page	Words	Headline	Photo
Thurs.	Apr. 7	B Metro	4	78	In Brief: Former Judge Pleads to Embezzling From Clients	None
Wed.	Apr. 6	B Metro	4	860	Riverside County Program Educates Potential Victims and Aids Those Already Taken; Agency Tries To Help Seniors Avoid Sting of Scam Artists	Listener and speaker at meeting for alleged victims
Thurs.	Mar. 31	B Metro	3	204	Bilked Investors Face a Long Wait	None
Thurs.	Mar. 31	B Metro	1	1,554	Emergency Rules Called Overused; Democrats Say Governor Is Using the Tactic To Rush Through Changes in Regulations Without Scrutiny	Unclearly identified in source.
Mon.	Mar. 7	B Metro	1	1,110	"Skateboard Murder" Stuns Town ... Disbelief After the Arrest of Boy, 13, in the Slaying of An Elderly Man	A child visits the murder site-turned-memorial
Tues.	Mar. 1	B Metro	3	629	Elder Abuse Charges To Be Filed in Death	None

Source: LexisNexis™ Academic electronic database for Los Angeles Times published 1 Mar. 2005 through 31 Aug. 2005 (all sections, full-text).

Electronic databases may exclude some articles due to the pending "Literary Works in Electronic Databases Copyright Litigation."

Table 6

Details of the 13 Occurrences of Elder Abuse Published in the New York Times from 1 Mar. 2005 Through 31 Aug. 2005

Day	Date	Sec.	Page	Words	Headline	Photo
Wed.	July 13	B Metro	6	489	Codey Signs Law To Restore Office of Public Advocate	None
Sun.	July 10	14 City Weekly	1	778	Nannies and the Clouds of Doubt	Drawing: unidentified in source.
Sat.	June 4	A Natl.	11	933	City Wonders How Widow Became Hostess to a Gang	None
Sun.	May 15	3 Business	1	2,400	Who's Preying On Your Grandparents?	Widow kept from cashing annuities without big penalties.
Sun.	May 15	14WC Weekly	15	459	A Grand Plan for SUNY	Unidentified in source.
Sun.	May 1	4 Editorial	15	737	The Greediest Generation	None
Tues.	Apr. 26	A Metro	1	2,276	Judges Turn Therapist in Problem-Solving Court	A defendant in court
Sat.	Apr. 23	A Natl.	1	1,740	The New Nursing Home, Emphasis on Home	Residents have lunch; elderly choose meals.



Table 6  
Continued

Day	Date	Sec.	Page	Words	Headline	Photo
Fri.	Apr. 8	A Natl.	18	738	States Told Not To Steer Beneficiaries to Drug Plans	None
Sat.	Apr. 2	B Metro	2	277	Year in Prison for Couple in New Jersey Abuse Case	None
Mon.	Mar. 14	A Editorial	20	925	Medicaid in the Cross Hairs	None
Tues.	Mar. 8	A Editorial	23	744	The Debt-Peonage Society	None
Sun.	Mar. 6	4 Week in Review	5	1,003	Go Ahead. Test a Lawyer's Ingenuity. Try to Limit Damages.	Unidentified in source.

Source: LexisNexis™ Academic electronic database for New York Times published 1 Mar. 2005 through 31 Aug. 2005 (all sections, full-text) including an examination of some printed editions published during August. Electronic databases may exclude some articles due to the pending “Literary Works in Electronic Databases Copyright Litigation.”

Table 7

Details of the Six Occurrences of Elder Abuse Published in USA Today from 1 Mar. Through 31 Aug. 2005

Day	Date	Sec.	Page	Words	Headline	Photo
Fri.	Aug. 12	Life	14D	505	“Skeleton Key” Goes Bump, Then Thuds [movie review]	Actors, old and young.
Mon.	July 25	News	18A	650	Federal Funds/Homeland Security Comes Before Public Housing	Policeman uses robot to open package.
Wed.	June 29	Money	3B	397	Hartford Reports New York Subpoena	None
Fri.	June 24	News	14A	459	Ruling Leaves Door Open to Abuse	None
Tues.	Mar. 22	News	12A	440	Terri Schiavo Needs Meaningful Constitutional Protections	Mary Schindler kisses her daughter in 2001.
Mon.	Mar. 21	News	4A	841	Justices Consider Enforcement of Restraining Orders	Advocate speaks before U.S. Supreme Court; Victim at children’s gravesite.

Source: LexisNexis™ Academic electronic database for USA Today published 1 Mar. 2005 through 31 Aug. 2005 (all sections, full-text) including an examination of some printed editions published during August. Electronic databases may exclude some articles due to the pending “Literary Works in Electronic Databases Copyright Litigation.”

Table 8

Details of the Three Occurrences of Elder Abuse Published in the Wall Street Journal from 1 Mar. 2005 Through 31 Aug. 2005

Day	Date	Sec.	Page	Words	Headline	Photo
Tues.	Aug. 2	A	A10	730	Medicine for Medicaid	None
Thurs.	Apr. 28	A	3A	890	Spitzer Staff Probes Mortgage Fees; Banks Including Citigroup, HSBC Are Asked for Data on Subprime Loan Practices	None
Wed.	Mar. 9	B	2B	281	California Targets Improper Sales of Elder Annuities	None

Source: ABI/INFORM Global/ProQuest® electronic database for Wall Street Journal Eastern ed. published 1 Mar. 2005 through 31 Aug. 2005 (all sections, full-text) including an examination of some printed editions published during August. Electronic databases may exclude some articles due to the pending “Literary Works in Electronic Databases Copyright Litigation.”

Table 9

Details of the Nine Occurrences of Elder Abuse Published in the Washington Post from 1 Mar. 2005 Through 31 Aug. 2005

Day	Date	Sec.	Page	Words	Headline	Photo
Fri.	June 24	Metro	B01	804	When the Sun Shines, Shady Characters Come Out; Summer Is Prime Time for Crime	None
Sun.	June 12	A	A01	2,230	Deep Throat's Daughter, The Kindred Free Spirit	None
Tues.	May 24	Metro	B01	731	DC Plans Greater Physician Oversight; Speakers Ask for Doctors' Data To Be Put Online	None
Tues.	Apr. 12	Health	F02	347	Suffer the Grown-up Children [book review]	None
Fri.	Apr. 8	A	A23	1,287	Medicaid Accounting Tactic Is Criticized by Lawmakers; States Defend Method as Means To Get Health Care Funding	
Thurs.	Apr. 7	Metro	B01	674	Williams Proposes Anti-Crime Measures; Mayor Revives Charge for Skipping Court Date	None
Sun.	Apr. 3	Metro	C04	858	Ex-Prosecutor Turns Focus to Victims; Legislation, Policy Top Agenda for Nonprofit Group's Director	None
Tues.	Mar. 22	A	A08	510	Kathleen Wilson Lay on the Kitchen Floor of Her Home for Nearly Two Years After She Died, Her Son and Husband Stepping Around the Remains as they Prepared Meals and Went on With Daily Life	None

Table 9

Continued

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Day	Date	Sec.	Page	Words	Headline	Photo
Fri.	Mar. 18	A	A05	307	Honors	None

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Source: LexisNexis™ Academic electronic database for Washington Post published 1 Mar. 2005 through 31 Aug. 2005 (all sections, full-text).

Electronic databases may exclude some articles due to the pending “Literary Works in Electronic Databases Copyright Litigation.”

The 68 specific instances of content concerning elder abuse have been coded by theme. Only 18 instances of the total 68 account for actual cases of elder abuse. Legislative content ranks highest. In 22 of the 68 instances, legislative matters account for concerns over Medicare and Medicaid (5), family protective services (5), general matters (4), general funding matters (3), public advocacy and prevention (2), assisted suicide (2), and senior scams (1). Discussions of local laws and the criminal justice system tally 12 instances. Four articles concern community resources for the elderly. Four additional instances take up the issue of nursing homes as relates to fraud (1), abuse (1), a better model (1), and lack of enforcement of regulation (1). Two occurrences deal with population demographics and baby boomers. Two more concern the regulation of elder care agencies. Another 2 inform the public of senior scams. One introduces a movie about elders. And 1 honors a newspaper journalist's investigative report on elder abuse.

This writer finds it particularly interesting, of the 18 instances of actual cases of elder abuse reported in the newspapers, only three of the 18 stories include a graphic or photograph of the victim. In fact, of the three, only 1 victim is portrayed photographically while the other 2 accounts contain photos of the site of the abuse. The reason this is noteworthy is some participants interviewed for this study say graphic pictures of elder abuse if published would help people understand the severity of elder abuse, and this researcher agrees.

It also is interesting to find when and where newspapers tend to place the 68 instances of content concerning elder abuse. The Sunday issue impressively tops the list with 13 articles; Sunday issues are more widely read than weekday or Saturday issues (Project). This is a significant finding because it indicates when newspapers do publish something about elder abuse or the elderly, the majority of the time this content appears in the week's most-read issue. Meanwhile, Thursday and Saturday tie for last place with 7 articles each. In between are Tuesday (12), Monday and Friday (which tie with 10 each), and Wednesday (9). Coverage of elder abuse appears fairly even across time. During the spring months of March, April, and May, newspapers printed 37 instances of content related to elder abuse. In summer, from June through August, newspapers

published slightly less with 31 noted. Concerning placement within the paper, Section B/Metro boasts the most instances with 33, followed by Section A with 24. This finding also is significant because these two sections of the paper appear up front. This speaks well of newspapers in that when they do cover elder abuse, they cover it in a prominent location of the overall newspaper. This finding agrees with participants' feedback during interviews conducted for this study concerning newspapers' placement of news about elder abuse: articles need to be on the front page.

Continuing on, Section C including Business and Money number 5 accounts; Editorial lists 3; and Health, Life, and Magazine each ran 1. Finally, while 22 instances include supplemental imagery, it is important to find that most of the photographs are of legislators, other officials, or buildings, and the majority, or 40 instances, show no supporting photographs or graphics. Further, 6 were unidentified by sources of this research.

Concluding the newspaper analysis, while newspapers fail miserably at covering the pervasiveness of elder abuse—estimated to date to be as many as 2 million or more elders abused every year in the United States—particularly as compared with coverage of child abuse—estimated in 1997 at 3.1 million a year in America (Kakar 236)—when they do report on the elderly or elder abuse, much of that reporting appears in the most widely read Sunday edition and is primarily located in the front two sections of the paper.

### **Personal interviews**

Eight individuals agreed to participate in interviews for this study. Interview questions varied among the eight due to the evolution of this study over time and the raising of new or different questions prompted by increasing reviews of research and the enlightening responses of participants to the initial questionnaires, which resulted in adjustments to subsequent interview questions. The complete interview questions and answers are provided in Appendix B. For the purpose of this study, the most important outcomes of this part of the research are respondents' answers to questions related to newspapers' role in helping to prevent elder abuse.

To shed light on participants' awareness or experience with elder abuse, five of the eight specified they have been involved with or aware of elder abuse from as few as five years to as many as 30 years. While most respondents have learned of elder abuse in their careers as clinicians, researchers, or teachers, others have learned from the experiences of elderly parents, grandparents, or friends of elderly parents. Generally, participants agree it is an area that deserves much more study and public awareness.

Perceptions about the magnitude of elder abuse range among participants from 1-to-5 million cases a year. Nearly all agree to a severe lack of existing data on the national incidence and prevalence of elder abuse and its settings, types, and causes, and most all agree it is a hidden problem that is much more widespread than mentioned in the media. Commonly accepted stereotypes are thought by most interviewees to play a big role in society's negative treatment of old people and that ageism causes young people to deny ageing altogether.

On the question of how well newspapers cover elder abuse, a small number of participants say coverage is improving but they also agree with the majority who perceive newspapers do a poor job of it, and newspapers and the media in general could and should do much more to expose the complexities of elder abuse and its prevention and intervention solutions. What little coverage there is often is seen as incomplete, and one person suggests newspapers exclude elder abuse stories because they are unpleasant. However, another individual says newspapers are improving and one says newspapers do a good job in general depending on their commitment to quality journalism but also suggests journalists may find stories about child abuse more interesting.

When asked whether newspapers cover child abuse more than elder abuse, most agree they do. A general reason offered is elder abuse is not as interesting; however, most also say elder abuse should be covered regardless. One respondent says elder abuse coverage is today where child abuse coverage was 25 years ago. Most participants report a major reason for disproportionate coverage is that society views children as more vulnerable than elders, and most cited ageism and an under-informed society as contributors to that view.



The majority of participants concur funding for child abuse prevention exceeds that of elder abuse prevention due to lack of awareness about elder abuse and ageism and that ageism pervades the media, lawmaking, and politics. Also, crusades for children are more prevalent in society and thus funding comes more easily. One of those interviewed suggest because children are legal minors, elders are perceived as less defenseless and able to make their own decisions but that many elders cannot care for themselves or make their own decisions. This is tempered with a caution: all elders cannot be clumped into one stereotypical group. They are individuals with distinctive abilities and characteristics.

When asked what more or less is needed to help prevent elder abuse, answers were plentiful and can be categorized into five general themes: raised public awareness, more and better policies and laws aimed at prevention and protection, increased elder advocacy, expanded community support, and more research.

Topping the list is the need for more public awareness—which lends itself to this researcher's conviction that the media in general but newspapers in particular play a key role in providing such awareness at both national and local levels. Public awareness takes the form of community education and general information about elder abuse aimed at the public, families, communities, and elders. Some respondents insist on the need for more education about mandatory reporting laws aimed at people who interact with the elderly, more information on how to prevent and intervene in cases of elder abuse, and more attention placed on the negative economic and societal consequences of elder abuse. The second most popular response was a call for more action at the federal and state congressional levels on behalf of elders including the passage of the Elder Justice Act, more funding for protective and prevention services, stricter law enforcement, and more political platforms focused on working class and poor elderly. Increased support within communities is considered significant also. This includes community protection, and more community support programs for the elderly as well as for caregivers in homes and institutions who need help emotionally, financially, and behaviorally.

Respondents say if elder abuse is to be prevented, more people need to get involved in elder advocacy, and some suggest such advocacy begins with adjustments to

societal values and morals, including a stronger commitment to family by children and grandchildren in caring for parents and grandparents. Finally, participants say more research into elder abuse is needed and suggest referring to successful model studies on child abuse would be helpful. In addition, respondents conclude a call for more research should result in more funding for elder abuse prevention. One respondent suggests further development of workable interventions is necessary. When asked what is needed less in the fight against elder abuse, individuals interviewed would like for society to become less tolerant of elder abuse, show less indifference toward elders, and have fewer problems associated with elder abuse such as caregiver drug abuse and unemployment.

Participants agree the media in general and newspapers in particular could and should contribute significantly to raising public awareness about elder abuse. All eight respondents consider newspapers the best medium for this task particularly if they seek to counteract ageism by depicting elders fairly. How elders are depicted is considered significant in the surveys. Respondents suggest increased coverage should heighten awareness and thus create a stronger effort to stop abuse, but also that sensational, graphic imagery published as front-page news should have the most profound impact on readers. Respondents generally agree "putting a face" on the problem of elder abuse is crucial in order to rally advocacy. In addition, interviewees consider newspapers a prime tool for explaining the far-reaching and complex nature of elder abuse, that the problem is growing, and that it impacts all of society. Furthermore, participants perceive most people are unaware elder abuse is a crime and suggest newspapers publish information about how to spot and report it, who is required to report it, and that not reporting it is a misdemeanor in some states including Texas. Moreover, they suggested newspapers include explanations of APS services and contact information.

Although they say newspapers should cover elder abuse, participants warn it will take the whole of society holding newspapers accountable before they are likely to regularly or fairly expose and explain it. Furthermore, respondents suggest the public should demand newspapers insist more scientifically based studies on elder abuse be conducted, and newspapers should consider assisting researchers in attaining this goal.

Respondents also encourage newspaper reporters to frequent nursing homes to interview the residents and their family members and to make unannounced visits. Newspapers should explain institutions as well as the homes of families are fertile ground for abuse of elders although the former is clearly easier to access for direct interviews with individuals. Finally, most of those interviewed agree it will take newspapers sensationalizing elder abuse with graphic images as they have done with child abuse to shock people in order to get their attention.

### CONCLUSIONS

Review of prior research reveals elder abuse is underreported and underestimated but nearest estimates are staggering and represent only the tip of the iceberg. Even though elder abuse has been studied for decades, most of the research is based on localized data, and local governments vary widely in their assessments and investigations of elder abuse; therefore, the need for a scientifically sound national prevalence and incidence study on elder abuse in America is needed to attain effective federal legislation and adequate funding in order to help prevent elder abuse. Prior research also shows ageism is embedded in American culture and media. Literature shows elder abuse is unlikely to subside until society, including established institutions such as government and healthcare systems, defeat discrimination against the old.

This researcher's data show elder abuse is a fact but newspapers neglect to expose it. National dailies underreport on elder abuse—an act which by default keeps elder abuse hidden from the larger society and nearly absent from the national lawmaking agenda. Based on this researcher's data, if newspapers were to publish facts, graphic photos, and stories about elder abuse and neglect, with persistence and regularity over a sustained period of time, newspapers should successfully raise public awareness. Modeling their efforts after what newspapers do to help curb child abuse should aid newspapers in generating significant public interest about elder abuse that could spark new initiatives on community, legislative, and industry fronts.

Newspapers also should enlighten society about the dynamics of elder abuse as a form of family violence that occurs alongside child and partner/spouse abuse, and that

elder abuse shares many of the same characteristics as child abuse including its causes and the characteristics of perpetrators. Concerning the causes of elder abuse, newspapers should educate the public about the role of ageism particularly as it relates to younger Americans, and to the decisions made by established and otherwise trusted and respected institutions such as government and healthcare systems. In addition, newspapers should keep the public informed about the rising number of elderly among the general population and relate this rise to individuals' current and future quality of daily life and well-being, particularly in light of an ageing America's long-term impact on the nation's economic, cultural, and medical systems.

Because this study's results show a severe lack of coverage on the part of newspapers, this study creates a challenge for the nation's leading newspapers to spearhead an effort to raise awareness and interest in elder abuse. Newspapers should commit to a long-term and sustained public awareness plan. If the nation's leading newspapers take on the issue of elder abuse, then newspapers across the country are likely to follow suit.

Whatever prods the matter forward, whether it is newspapers or some other power, the burning question sticks: Will able-bodied Americans budge from their blissful ignorance about the abuse of their elders—or will the able-bodied among society sit this one out and wait for their turn to suffer?

#### **Future possible directions for additional research**

Beyond the scope of this study, the following questions suggest further investigation:

1. Aside from daily newspapers, do other mass media—including TV, cable TV, radio stations and popular media Web sites—regularly and evenly report on elder abuse? If they neglect to do so, then why?
2. Do economics prevent newspapers from reporting on elder abuse? Considering advertising revenues drive newspaper budgets, and that corporations that own elder residential institutions or that manufacture products or provide services to the elderly and advertise those products and/or

services in mass media, do mass media avoid regularly reporting on the state of elder abuse in America due to an economic conflict of interest with wealthy, influential advertisers?

3. Other than the occasional sensational story about an extreme case of elder or vulnerable adult abuse such as rape, newspaper publishers may be concerned regular bouts of bad news about elder abuse may slow newsstand sales or subscriptions. In light of this, what can newspaper publishers do to fulfill their social duty to regularly inform the public about elder abuse while keeping advertisers and readers engaged and subscriptions intact?
4. According to an article in the 25 Nov. 2005 New York Times: “Despite a growing number of men helping ageing relatives, women account for 71% of those devoting 40 or more hours a week to the task, according to the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP in a 2004 study. Among those with the greatest burden of care, regardless of sex, 88% either take leaves of absence, quit or retire.” Given this report, would it be helpful to conduct a national study of adult female children who have walked away from full-time careers and financial independence to care for their ageing parents at home and the impact of this movement, called the “Daughter Track,” on corporations and overall society?
5. Should further investigation be conducted into geronticide in America to expand upon and validate Brogden’s findings?

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**APPENDIX A**  
**GLOSSARY**

**Abuse:** Non-accidental infliction of physical or psychological injury to an aged person or disabled adult by a relative, caregiver, or adult household members, or the failure of a caregiver to take reasonable measure to prevent the occurrence of physical or psychological injury to an aged person or disabled adult (Kakar 62).

**Aged person:** A person 60 years of age or older who is suffering from the infirmities of ageing as manifested by organized brain damage, advanced age, or other physical, mental, or emotional dysfunction to the extent that the person is impaired in his ability to adequately provided for his own care or protection (Kakar 62).

**Ageism:** Discrimination against people because they are old (Robinson).

**Caregivers:** Persons who provide for the daily needs of elderly persons who are unable to provide for themselves.

**Child abuse:** A common feature found in all 50 States' definitions of physical child abuse is physical injury caused by other than accidental means that results in a substantial risk of physical harm (Kakar 232-33).

**Elder/Elderly:** Another word for older person or collectively, older people. Defined varyingly from state to state as any person aged 60, 62, or 65 and older.

**Elderly abuse:** Destructive behavior . . . within the context of a relationship connoting trust . . . of sufficient intensity and/or frequency to produce harmful . . . effects of unnecessary suffering, injury, pain, loss and/or violation of human rights and poorer quality of life (Kakar 360).

**Exploitation:** The improper or illegal use or management of an aged person or disabled adult's funds, assets, or property, or the use of an aged person or disabled adult's power of attorney or guardianship, for other's or one's own profit or advantage (Kakar 62).

**Euthanasia:** Physician-assisted suicide (Brogden 22).

**Frail Elderly:** Individuals of advanced age who have serious physical or mental problems (Wiehe 129).

**Geronticide:** The killing of old people. A modern term that means the deliberate and systematic killing of the elderly solely because they are elderly, either by others or through social pressure to commit suicide (Brogden 22).

**Neglect:** The failure of the caregiver to provide care and services necessary to maintain health of an aged person or disabled adult, including food, clothing, medicine, shelter, supervision and medical services that a prudent person would deem essential for the well being of an aged person or disabled adult. Neglect is repeated conduct or a single incident of carelessness which produces or could reasonably be expected to result in serious physical or mental harm or substantial risk to health (Kakar 62).

**Old-old:** More than 85 years old (Brogden 30). When health falls apart, generally in the mid-70s or later, the young-old move into the old-old stage (Pipher 28).

**Vulnerable adult:** Describes adults between the ages of 18 and 59 who are considered vulnerable due to some form of disability and therefore unable to care for themselves.

**Young-old:** 65 to 85 years old (Brogden 30). In America, the young-old are mostly in their 60s and 70s (Pipher 28).



## **APPENDIX B INTERVIEWS**

### **Interview with Sara Aravanis, Elder Advocate**

*Sara Aravanis is the Director of the National Center on Elder Abuse (NCEA) headquartered in Washington, D.C. I interviewed her July 11, 2005. by e-mail.*

**How long have you been involved with elder abuse prevention, and why?**

More than 30 years.

**How would you quantify the problem of elder abuse?**

Unable to quantify it because of the lack of national prevalence and incidence studies. Some estimate as many as 5 million cases. The big problem is that it is hidden because vulnerable elders are for the most part isolated and not visible in their communities.

**What is your opinion about the job the nation's newspapers do, in general, to expose and explain the daily realities of elder abuse?**

It's improving. We provide a daily news feed to the members of our NCEA Elder Abuse Listserve. [Listserve is an online forum for information sharing and discussions.] Some days, there are as many as 10-15 articles. Of course, this is a very small number—a drop in the bucket—but as recently as five years ago, even that number would not be visible.

**What is your opinion on whether and why child abuse receives more coverage in newspapers than elder abuse receives?**

Our society does not yet know how to deal with the ageing of our population. There are persistent myths about ageing and about family violence that keep the spotlight from this issue.

**Federal funding for child abuse prevention programs far exceeds federal funding for elder abuse prevention programs. Why do you think this is so?**

Again, "ageism." The failure to believe that elder abuse occurs.

**Considering that the world's oldest population will outnumber all the rest by 2050, elder abuse is a fact, and federal funds or laws aimed at elder abuse fall short, what do you think it will take more or less of to stop elder abuse?**

We must know more about how to prevent it and how to intervene. We need significant new resources in the research and development area in order to identify evidence that is based on interventions that work. And we need to enhance the protective aspects of our communities so that abuse is prevented.

**Please give your opinion on whether newspapers do a good job of regularly and evenly covering elder abuse—particularly as compared to child abuse or other social issues.**

Regularly? Evenly? We have a long way to go.

**It is my theory that printed newspapers are the best mass medium to make the public aware of the complicated and widespread issue of elder abuse by committing to a regular, long-term strategy to expose, explain, and thus help prevent elder abuse. But newspapers apparently have not committed to such a plan. What is your opinion on this?**

Yes. But we also need to build faith and trust in our Adult Protective Services (APS) systems so that communities recognize those services and know when to call in the professionals, and that those professionals are provided with appropriate training and support to do a good job in these situations. Press can be helpful in writing about the way APS contributes to the community safety net, so that people are not afraid to call and share their concerns with APS.

**If a study were done to examine whether and how the nation's leading newspapers cover elder abuse and to explain the reasons why they should do it regularly and comprehensively, what impact do you think such a study would have on elder abuse prevention and society at large?**

It would probably be valuable. But the real challenge is to prevent abuse from happening in the first place.

## **Interview with Marialyn P. Barnard, Attorney**

*Attorney Marialyn P. Barnard is Director of Business Intelligence for CPS Energy in San Antonio, Texas, and a primary caregiver to her elderly parents. I interviewed Barnard July 12, 2005, by e-mail.*

### **How long have you been involved with elder abuse prevention, and why?**

I have been concerned about elder abuse primarily for 15 years. Among my siblings, I'm the primary caregiver for my elderly parents, both of whom have suffered from significant health issues for 15 years. Through them, I've become aware that some of my parents' friends have been subjected to abuse and neglect.

### **How would you quantify the problem of elder abuse?**

Elder abuse is certainly more prevalent than is noted in the general media.

### **What is your opinion about the job the nation's newspapers do, in general, to expose and explain the daily realities of elder abuse?**

The nation's newspapers do not present much on elder abuse probably because it is not sexy and it does not sell papers. Clearly exposing the extent of the abuse would require action on the part of newspapers to educate the public about it and to stop it.

### **What is your opinion on whether and why child abuse receives more coverage in newspapers than elder abuse?**

Child abuse, in general, is considered more abhorrent. Unlike adults, children are considered innocent and legally unable to take care of themselves. Children are supposed to be nurtured and mentored into developing into independent adults. Society doesn't view adults, even elders, as defenseless as children, although many are vulnerable. There are probably many reasons why elder abuse is less covered in the newspaper: the elderly are adults, they often want to maintain their independence as long as possible and reports of abuse could end their independence, some elderly persons may not have a perfect history of treating others, including their children, very well in the past, and elder abuse does not make as popular reading as does child abuse.

### **Federal funding for child abuse prevention programs far exceeds federal funding for elder abuse prevention programs. Why do you think this is so?**

Funding for preventing child abuse is more easily supported because of the innocence of the child and the child's inability to defend him- or herself. Also, it is strongly believed that children need to be nurtured into becoming fully independent and healthy human beings. Many elderly persons do not want anyone interfering in their lives even when they need help. When it comes to protecting children, the lines drawn are black and white, whereas when it comes to protecting the elderly, the lines are gray. As a result, funding may seem easier to justify for children than for older adults.

### **Considering the world's oldest population will outnumber all the rest by 2050, elder abuse is a fact, and federal funds or laws aimed at elder abuse fall short, what do you think it will take more or less of to stop elder abuse?**

It will take many things to stop elder abuse. Some of those things are: a stronger sense of obligation and commitment to family by children and grandchildren who care for their parents and grandparents, less drug abuse, less unemployment, more of a society that refuses to tolerate elder abuse, more education, more funding for prevention and care of the abused, and more media coverage to expose abuse and make the public more aware of abuse.

**Please give your opinion on whether newspapers do a good job of regularly and evenly covering elder abuse—particularly as compared to child abuse or other social issues.**

Elder abuse is not covered as much as child abuse. Newspapers should do a better job of covering this topic, but even so, the general degeneration of values and morals in society seems to significantly contribute to crime in general. The weak in society are always the most vulnerable.

**It is my theory that printed newspapers are the best medium to make the public aware of the complicated and widespread issue of elder abuse by committing to a regular, long-term strategy to expose, explain, and thus help prevent elder abuse. But newspapers apparently have not committed to such a plan. What is your opinion?**

I agree that more newspaper coverage can help highlight the problem of elder abuse. More coverage could possibly affect a heightened awareness of elder abuse and, therefore, a stronger effort to stop it.

**If a study were done to examine whether and how the nation's leading newspapers cover elder abuse and to explain the reasons why they should do it regularly and comprehensively, what impact do you think such a study would have on elder abuse prevention and society at large?**

I believe the impact would be to help reduce elder abuse.

**In closing, is there anything else you would like to add?**

While elder abuse is one of many problems in our society, the increased exposure of the problem could significantly reduce elder abuse. How a society treats its children and its elderly is a true reflection of what is valued and what is not valued in society. Newspapers definitely help steer society into corrective action by addressing important moral issues like elder abuse.

### Interview with Roger C. Barnes, PhD

*Dr. Roger C. Barnes is Professor of Sociology at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas. He formerly ran the master's program for gerontology at the university. I interviewed Dr. Barnes on Sept. 26, 2005, by e-mail and then in person at his office.*

**Are you aware that researchers have estimated that every year in the United States between 1 and 2 million elders and vulnerable adults are abused and neglected in domestic and institutional settings, and that only 1 in 14 cases of elder abuse and neglect that occurs at home is actually reported to authorities? If you know about elder abuse, how did you become aware of it?**

Yes, I do know about elder abuse, primarily through my teaching. I have taught undergraduate and graduate classes in gerontology as well as criminology/deviance classes. The result is that I am pretty familiar with the overall pattern of elder abuse in the United States.

**Ageism is discrimination solely based on a person's age, just as racism discriminates against a person's skin color and sexism discriminates against gender. In what way is ageism evident in society's perception and treatment of people of older age, say 65 and older?**

There are many stereotypes of the elderly that prevail in everyday social interaction and in the media. These include such things as considering the elderly to not be "productive;" inherently conservative in cultural and political matters; nonsexual; "slow;" or just plain "senile" (a term that is of little value, actually). Since the American Revolution, our society has seen a split from venerating elders toward ageism. U.S. Constitution was written by affluent, older, white men.

**Unless people die young, they will grow old, and with each passing decade, more people are living longer and getting even older. Despite this, we use words such as geezer to poke fun at the old and we are taught not to ask someone's age. Why do you think people in general view elders this way?**

Cultural amnesia when it comes to the elderly. Don't want to have to deal with ageing. Gerontophobic culture. Those who are not old themselves run from ageing. Check out David Fischer's book Growing Old in America for an answer. He writes about the transformation of America from a colonial setting where the elderly were respected (gerontophilia) to today where the value of the elderly is discounted (gerontophobia). He considers both the French and American revolutions to be significant in this regard, as both signaled a break from the older traditions which venerated the elderly. Also one can toss in the movement westward to be an important thing as it was staffed primarily by the young. We can also cite the Industrial Revolution and the advancement of capitalism to be important as both tended to value the productivity of the young over the elderly.

**Researchers and lawmakers deem elder abuse as dangerous and socially pervasive as child abuse. However, from March 2005 through August 2005, seven of Editor & Publisher's "Top 10" U.S. newspapers (by circulation), including Chicago Tribune, Houston Chronicle, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, and USA Today, collectively published only 68 articles related to elder abuse but published a whopping 1,071 related to child abuse. What is your opinion on why child abuse receives more coverage in newspapers than elder abuse does, when both forms of violence are widespread crimes in America?**

Once again, it may reflect a cultural valuing of the young over the aged. It may reflect a greater awareness of child abuse, too. It also can be explained by the general idea that children are more valuable than older people. Children are defined as being more vulnerable. It's also a matter of who's blowing the horn and won't go away. When we organize at that level (such as M.A.D.D.) and put that kind of pressure on politicians, perhaps we'll see more coverage.

**Currently, people 19 and younger account for approximately 26% of the total U.S. population and child abuse prevention programs receive nearly 94% of the federal abuse prevention budget, but people 65 and older account for nearly 13% of the total U.S. population yet the older age group receives less than 1% of the federal abuse prevention budget. Why do you think this is so?**

See the answer to question 4. It might also reflect the presence of some important "moral crusades" that focus more on child abuse than on elder abuse.

**In your opinion, what will it take more or less of, to prevent widespread elder abuse?**

More education and expanded social support for the caregivers of the elderly. The No. 1 cause of abuse is stress—caregivers are under considerable emotional, financial, and interpersonal stress, both in homes and in institutions. The result is too often a rising frustration that ends in abuse. We need, as a society, a better commitment to supporting the elderly and their caregivers. Need to make elders and youth helping each other a more balanced priority (starting with politicians' campaign platforms, for example). How will America overhaul the quality of life for working class and poor elderly? Not a political issue last presidential campaign. It needs to be.

**Because of newspapers' legacy in providing an unbiased public voice and ability to cover topics in-depth, I theorize that newspapers are the best medium to inform the public about elder abuse—if they would commit to a long-term, sustained strategy to expose it in all its forms and settings, explain its complex and far-reaching nature, publicize critical intervention and prevention resources and coping strategies, call for more scientific research, and thus help increase awareness and prevention of elder abuse. But according to the aforementioned analysis, newspapers apparently have not committed to such a plan. Why do you think they have not, and what could be done to prompt newspapers into action?**

Newspapers cover (both in reporting and editorially) what consumers and pressure groups urge them to cover. That is, after all, what sells newspapers. If newspapers are not covering elder abuse like they should, it may be that no one is holding them accountable to do so. I don't know if one could reasonably expect newspapers today to be a vital source of information for people under the age of 40. I suspect most of those people get their news through other sources (the Internet, for example).

### Interview with James C. Guckian, MD

*Dr. James C. Guckian is Executive Director of the University of Texas (UT) Medical Branch-Austin Outreach, in Austin, Texas, and the former UT System Executive Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs. In his current role, Guckian develops medical education and biomedical research in Austin in association with UT Austin, UT Health Science Center-Houston, UT Health Science Center-San Antonio, Seton Health Care Network, St. David's Health Care Partnership, and the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System. Throughout a notable career that began four decades ago, Guckian has received several teaching awards, penned various articles published in refereed journals, and participated on a task force of the National Board of Medical Examiners charged with evaluating clinical skills. I interviewed him July 11, 2005, by e-mail.*

**Have you ever dealt with elder abuse?**

I have been aware of alleged abuse for a number of years.

**How would you quantify or describe the problem of elder abuse?**

I do not believe that we have accurate data on the prevalence of abuse, the setting of abuse (home, assisted living, minimal-care nursing homes, and skilled nursing homes), or that it has been adequately studied in terms of what kind of abuse occurs. As a result, criteria that can be widely used to study and report elder abuse are not available as they are with the abuse of children. Abuse can be trivial and inconsequential to health and well-being, and it can also be life-threatening.

**Please give your opinion on whether newspapers do a good job of regularly and evenly covering elder abuse—particularly as compared to the issue of child abuse or other social issues.**

Because we do not have adequate scientifically based studies on elder abuse, I cannot comment on whether the media underreports elder abuse. Media should first encourage and insist on such studies. These can be done in several ways, including interviews of patients and family members of the elderly. Another idea is unannounced physical exams. Nursing homes are the least difficult and most convenient places to begin the studies. This setting, however, probably does not adequately reflect the magnitude of abuse, since the majority of elders who are potentially victims of abuse are cared for in other places, such as in the homes of their children or friends, for example.

**Federal funding for child abuse prevention programs far exceeds federal funding for elder abuse prevention programs. Considering that the world's oldest population will outnumber all the rest by 2050, elder abuse is a fact, and federal funds or laws aimed at elder abuse fall short, what do you think it will take more or less of to stop elder abuse?**

Child abuse has been extensively studied and reported, and there are clear criteria on what constitutes physical abuse of children, or of anyone for that matter. Studies and reports for children should be used as models for researching and reporting on elder abuse. Mental abuse is another area that needs attention, in older adults and even in children. In addition, advocates for elders are not as active, or perhaps not as organized, as advocates for children.

**It is my theory that newsprint is the best mass medium to make the public aware of the complicated and widespread issue of elder abuse if newspapers could commit to a regular, long-term strategy to expose, explain, and thus help prevent elder abuse. But newspapers apparently have not committed to such a plan. What is your opinion on this?**

I agree with your theory. Getting the media to focus attention on elder abuse will require a commitment from reputable media investigative reporters. It is not sexy like some areas of public interest, but it should be done.

**If a study were done to examine whether and how the nation's leading newspapers cover elder abuse and to explain the reasons why they should do it regularly and at length, what impact do you think such a study would have on elder abuse prevention and society at large?**

I would suggest that you focus on nursing homes where there has been considerable attention, both in the media and in the legislature. Again, I would encourage and insist on scientifically based studies. Perhaps, a foundation would be willing to assist in such a study. The UT medical school has a new geriatric center (the Barshop Center). You might talk with someone there to get some additional ideas.

**In closing, is there anything else you would like to add?**

Before studying the media, I would insist on a study of the problem itself. You will not know whether the media underreports until you know what the true prevalence is.



### Interview with Barbara A. Reilley, RN, PhD

*Barbara A. Reilley, RN, PhD, is the Associate Director of Operations for the Texas Elder Abuse and Mistreatment (TEAM) Institute located at Baylor University in Houston, Texas. The TEAM Institute is a partnership between the Baylor College of Medicine Geriatrics Program at the Harris County Hospital District and the Adult Protective Services Division of the Texas Dept. of Family and Protective Services. I interviewed Reilley July 12, 2005, by e-mail.*

#### **How long have you been involved with elder abuse prevention, and why?**

For about five years. My interest in research, education, and clinical care prompted my interest. This is a little-studied field for which there is great need for all three and that can have significant impact on society's well-being. Our program's mission is to "improve the lives of abused and neglected elders through clinical care, education, and research."

#### **How would you quantify the problem of elder abuse?**

There are no good national estimates. They range anywhere from 1 million to 3 million per year. However, we do know that the problem is significant and that we are just seeing the "tip of the iceberg." In many states, the definition of elder abuse includes self-neglect and is reportable. Texas is one. The majority of persons seen for elder abuse are actually self-neglectors, i.e. they are unable to care for their basic needs; they often live alone and in squalor with no support system. Self-neglecting elders account for over 70% of the referrals to Adult Protective Services in Texas. That percentage is also reflected in our practice.

#### **What is your opinion about the job the nation's newspapers do, in general, to expose and explain the daily realities of elder abuse?**

Exposure is increasing, which is a good thing. However, the public is often unaware that in many states, elder abuse is a reportable crime and failure to report is a misdemeanor (at least in Texas). More importantly, knowledge of the complexities associated with investigating and intervening in elder abuse needs to be communicated to health professionals and the public in an understandable way (especially for the public). For example, just because an elderly person says "no" to intervention does not automatically mean that we step aside. In some cases, the person may not have the mental capacity to make that decision; that is where it gets complicated, and that is where at some basic level the public needs to have basic knowledge of the "rules" so they may make more informed choices in addressing elder mistreatment. Other areas of education include: how to identify the problem, the growing extent of the problem, the catastrophic impact it is likely to have on society, and the need for policy changes to better enable care for abused elders; stricter enforcement of laws; more education for health professionals; and on and on. Physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, and ancillary health professionals are in a good position to see the signs but are often reluctant to get involved—perhaps because they may fear malpractice accusations or face other legal ramifications. They need a better understanding of legal protections for themselves.

#### **What is your opinion on whether and why child abuse receives more coverage in newspapers than elder abuse?**

One reason is that little attention has been paid to elder abuse. Attention to elder abuse is about where attention to child abuse was 25 years ago. In the past few years, we have seen some increased attention, and it's likely because of the media, and the dawning recognition that we are likely to face significant negative economic and societal consequences if we don't address the issue. In most states (probably all), there is very little money provided for elder abuse; and Congress and the states have also been slow to act. Children do not have the right to make their own decisions; therefore, it is easier to intervene with a child. Elders on the other hand have the right to self-determination, and if they have the capacity to make their own

decisions, there is nothing anyone can do. However, many elders who are abused, neglected, or exploited may not have capacity; incapacity can be caused by the dementias (like Alzheimer's), physical illness, depression, misuse of drugs (often prescription), nutritional deficiencies, etc., and may not be overtly evident. That is why it is important to assess the individual's living, medical, and mental health condition, support systems, etc., and determine if intervention is possible. That is also why it is so necessary to have an interdisciplinary approach, i.e. many agencies, professionals, and others looking at the problem together. Also, the physical and emotional demands of caring for an older person may be more taxing than with children, especially if the older person is sick, hard to get along with, uncooperative, unable to control his or her bodily functions, etc.

**Federal funding for child abuse prevention programs far exceeds federal funding for elder abuse prevention programs. Why do you think this is so?**

Same reasons as just given.

**Considering the world's oldest population will outnumber all the rest by 2050, elder abuse is a fact, and federal funds or laws aimed at elder abuse fall short, what do you think it will take more or less of to stop elder abuse?**

I don't know if we can stop or end elder abuse totally, but we can certainly work toward preventing and decreasing it. Lawmakers have to considerably increase funding in all areas. We do not have any kind of a surveillance system to track the incidence and prevalence of the problem, and we cannot have a surveillance system until we have research data that tell us what to collect. Very little research exists, so we have very little information to work with. The public has to be aware of the issues and be willing to do something about them. With shrinking budgets, the crises in health care, and a lower tax base, we are in need of increased attention and planning to allocate our resources in the most cost-effective and efficient way possible. One cannot ignore the need to determine what led to abuse in the first place. That is, what are the antecedents to abuse? The issue is so complicated that it will likely take many years to understand it, but it is certainly time we begin a significant effort.

**Please give your opinion on whether newspapers do a good job of regularly and evenly covering elder abuse—particularly as compared to child abuse or other social issues.**

Generally, I think they do a good job. It really depends on the newspaper and their commitment to quality journalism. Like others, they may find child abuse stories more compelling.

**It is my theory that printed newspapers are the best medium to make the public aware of the complicated and widespread issue of elder abuse by committing to a regular, long-term strategy to expose, explain, and thus help prevent elder abuse. But newspapers apparently have not committed to such a plan. What is your opinion?**

I don't believe it is a purposeful lack of commitment, but that newspapers have so many competing priorities that they must make the decision of what to publish, and what will go over with the public. Recently, we have seen some very good stories come out of the New York Times and a few others. However, I do think a series as you describe would be wonderful to see!

**If a study were done to examine whether and how the nation's leading newspapers cover elder abuse and to explain the reasons why they should do it regularly and comprehensively, what impact do you think such a study would have on elder abuse prevention and society at large?**

The media is very powerful in bringing issues forward, and depending on the way it were presented (honestly, fairly, objectively, and grounded in good background research), I believe it could have a very positive impact.

### **Interview with Beverly Ryan, RN, CRRN, CCM**

*A registered nurse for 30 years, Beverly Ryan holds certifications in rehabilitation and case management. Her latest role as an independent field case manager routinely takes her across a 200-mile-wide territory into peoples' personal lives and medical misfortunes. Child and elder abuse turn up in Ryan's fieldwork, just as it did when she took charge of an emergency room at the start of her nursing career. I interviewed Ryan on July 10, 2005, at her home in San Antonio.*

#### **Have you dealt firsthand with elder abuse?**

Yes. My grandmother, who died nine years ago at 91, suffered abuse at a nursing home. A certified nurses' aide tried to force her to eat by grabbing her around the throat and then forcing food into her mouth—which left bruises on her neck and scratches on the corners of her mouth. My dad photographed the marks and gave the photo to the administrator who fired the aide but later rehired her because “it was not her third offense.”

#### **How would you describe the problem of elder abuse?**

Neglect mostly. Our society is too busy to take care of our oldest people. We set them aside and forget they're there. We neglect their needs and over-medicate them. I imagine the numbers are very high.

#### **Do you read the newspaper?**

Mostly on Sundays.

#### **Do you watch TV?**

Yes.

#### **Do you read healthcare magazines or newsletters?**

What I read about my industry mostly comes through CEUs (continuing education units).

#### **In any media, do you come across much news about elder abuse?**

No. Maybe occasionally.

#### **Have you ever encountered or reported abuse?**

Yes. As a nurse, it's my responsibility to be constantly aware and to watch for and report any kind of abuse done to any vulnerable persons who cannot take care of themselves. One of my clients was recovering at home from a work-related injury, and he was angry and depressed. I noticed bruises on his wife's arms and that she and their children cowered around him. I offered to ask the sheriff to take her and the children to a shelter but she denied any abuse and refused help. When I began nursing, I was a charge nurse in an emergency room. An 18-month-old baby arrived DOA. The infant's parents said they had left him and his 3-year-old brother home alone, and when they returned, the baby had been scalded in the bathtub. The father threatened to punish the 3-year-old. I called the police and Child Protective Services.

#### **Are you required by law to report abuse?**

I presume it's the law. From my training, I know it's a must.

#### **Do you think the nation's newspapers expose the daily realities of elder abuse?**

They don't cover elder abuse. It isn't pleasing to hear so people don't talk about it.

**Why, then, would newspapers and other media cover child abuse?**

Children are cute, sweet little kids. Everyone wants to help children. Old adults don't get the same attention. We want to nurture a child in a diaper but we turn away from an older person in a diaper. People perceive a future for the child but no future for the old person. Young or old, all people need love and nurturing.

**Why do you think federal funding for child abuse prevention far exceeds that for elder abuse prevention?**

Same reason. Politicians and lawmakers are like the media. They're not paying attention.

**What will it take more or less of to stop elder abuse?**

First, educate the public, families, and communities. Second, establish legislation to protect the elderly, and enforce the rules. And third, we must become a more sensitive and prayerful society. If we're not, it's easy to miss what we're not looking for. Education plus prayer equals a stronger society, one that speaks up for those who cannot speak for themselves.

**Do you think newspapers are the best medium to make the public aware of elder abuse—even though newspapers apparently have not yet committed to such a plan (as they have done with child abuse)?**

Yes. You can't turn on the TV or read a newspaper without hearing about child abuse. "Amber Alerts" ["America's Missing Broadcast Emergency Response"] tell you when a child has been abducted. We're aware of child abuse because politicians and families have demanded more awareness and the media have responded. We've heard "it takes a village to raise a child." I say, it takes a village to protect the elderly.

**If a study were done to examine whether and how the nation's leading newspapers cover elder abuse and to explain the reasons why they should, what impact do you think that study would have on elder abuse prevention and society at large?**

It's going to take more than just newspapers covering it. It's going to take sensationalizing elder abuse as the media has done with child abuse. They're going to have to shock people to get their attention. Newspapers aren't good at shocking the public; they're good at giving them facts. TV cameras shock. If newspapers publish pictures of older people being abused, newspapers could shock people into action. When you see a graphic picture, you never forget it. Nursing homes and hospitals are required to photograph patients' bedsores as a means of documentation. If I showed you such pictures—of flesh rotting off the bone—you'd think you were looking at something horrible, like in a Halloween movie. If you saw these pictures in newspapers, your perspective would change.

**Is there anything you would like to add?**

You don't think about it much, but it's out there—even in the best of places. The "undocumentable" abuse makes it hard to pinpoint, unlike bedsores that you can see. I'm talking about psychological abuse including abandonment, the "silent treatment," lack of communication, and emotional estrangement. Older stroke victims are one example—they're set in the corner and left alone; it's easier to ignore them than to work at communicating with them.

### **Interview with Pamela Teaster, PhD**

*Pamela Teaster, PhD, is Associate Professor in the Graduate Center of Gerontology and Dept. of Health Behavior in the College of Public Health at the University of Kentucky. Teaster serves as Vice President of the National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, and she led a national study on elder abuse, "A Response to the Abuse of Vulnerable Adults: The 2000 Survey of State Adult Protective Services." Her study followed landmark research by Dr. Toshio Tatara and reinforced the need to increase public awareness of elder and vulnerable adult abuse. I interviewed Teaster July 12, 2005, by e-mail.*

#### **How long have you been involved with elder abuse prevention, and why?**

I have been involved with elder abuse prevention since 1997. I became interested in elder abuse research through my work in public guardianship. Many people who are guardianship wards have been abused, neglected, and/or exploited. Many of the ethical issues in the two areas are similar also, and both concern the role of government to address a human problem.

#### **How would you quantify the problem of elder abuse?**

The best way to quantify elder abuse is to conduct a national prevalence study. The NIA [National Institute on Aging] has issued an RFA [Request for Applications] to that end. The closing date for submission of grant proposals was June 15. Along with many other colleagues across the country, I submitted a proposal to conduct such a study.

#### **What is your opinion about the job the nation's newspapers do, in general, to expose and explain the daily realities of elder abuse?**

I am aware of newspaper reports from time to time. Newspapers are about bits of information and often do not cover the issue as a whole and as complex as it really is. I have been asked, on more than one occasion, to comment on what a reporter finds or thinks he or she finds. Without knowing an adequate amount of information, my comments to reporters are usually not earth-shattering, I am afraid. Particularly because I am a social scientist, I must have enough qualitative and quantitative data in order to make a thoughtful conclusion or recommendation. Some information that the newspapers provide can help focus public attention on this problem in a muddy policy world. Sometimes, in that way, newspapers are helpful. In other ways, because of the nature of reporting, newspapers do damage to victims and their families because only one part of a story is told. Many times, agencies and organizations cannot release information to newspapers, and so much is left untold and to the readers' imagination.

#### **What is your opinion on whether and why child abuse receives more coverage in newspapers than elder abuse?**

Intervention into problems of child abuse receives more dollars than issues of elder abuse. I also believe that there is a greater societal concern for the abuse of children (who have their lives to live) versus adults (who have lived their lives, or at least a part of them). Children often seem more vulnerable than adults seem.

#### **Federal funding for child abuse prevention far exceeds federal funding for elder abuse prevention. Why do you think this is so?**

Aside from the previous answer just mentioned, this question goes to societal determinations about who is worthy and why. Ageism likely plays a role in this. Awareness likely plays a role in the allocation of funding. Also, dollars for children are an easier sell than dollars for adults for reasons given above. There are some who believe that some adults who are abused are responsible for their own problems. (I am not one of these, of course.)

**Considering that the world's oldest population will outnumber all the rest by 2050, elder abuse is a fact, and federal funds or laws aimed at elder abuse fall short, what will it take more or less of to stop elder abuse?**

Hard question actually. It will take public awareness and interest for this issue to arise on the very full national policy plate. If the Elder Justice Act passes (it has not yet, in spite of the efforts of many), then more national attention will be given to this problem. If not, it will be up to the states, ultimately, to prioritize. I suppose I would add something else here. We will need to have a better understanding of what constitutes abusive behavior toward elders than we have at present. This will take collective and potentially uncomfortable soul-searching. I am not sure how this will be accomplished, but putting a public face on an often-private problem will help.

**I theorize that newspapers are the best medium to inform the public about elder abuse if they commit to a regular, long-term strategy to expose, explain, and thus help prevent it. But newspapers apparently have not committed to such a plan. What could be done to prompt newspapers into action?**

Newspapers capture the sensational. When sensational issues arise, they will be written in articles. Newspapers will reach more people than other print media, I suppose, but again, they will typically only give sensational stories, and those stories must appear on the front page.

**If a study were done to examine whether and how the nation's leading newspapers cover elder abuse and to explain the reasons why they should, what impact would such a study have on elder abuse prevention?**

Hard to say. There have been some efforts to document accounts of abuse in newspapers, although I am not sure it has been done on a national scale and for a sustained period of time. Like everything else, its impact would depend on the writing, findings, and dissemination plan.

### Interview with Dana Williamson, Social Worker

*Dana Williamson is a social worker and program specialist for Adult Protective Services with the Texas Dept. of Family and Protective Services, located in Austin, Texas. I interviewed Williamson on Sept. 27, 2005, by e-mail.*

**Are you aware that researchers have estimated that every year in the United States between 1 and 2 million elders and vulnerable adults are abused and neglected in domestic and institutional settings, and that only 1 in 14 cases of elder abuse and neglect that occurs at home is actually reported to authorities? If you know about elder abuse, how did you become aware of it?**

I am a social worker with Adult Protective Services. The agency I work for is responsible for investigating reports of alleged abuse, neglect, and/or exploitation of elders and adults with disabilities.

**Ageism is discrimination solely based on a person's age, just as racism discriminates against a person's skin color and sexism discriminates against gender. In what ways is ageism evident in society's perception and treatment of people of older age, say 65 and older?**

In our line of work I do not see discrimination related to age in particular. We see a lack of resources for elderly individuals who are impoverished just as one would for impoverished adults under the age of 65. I cannot provide an informed answer for this question based on my professional or personal experience.

**Unless people die young, they will grow old, and with each passing decade, more people are living longer and getting even older. Despite this, we use words such as geezer to poke fun at the old and we are taught not to ask someone's age. Why do you think people in general view elders this way? Historically, people have not been seen as productive, as beautiful, or as intelligent once they reached a "certain age." Due to technological and medical advancements, adults are living longer than ever before and are able to remain productive members of society for longer periods of time. However, the attitudes of society have not advanced along at the same rate. It will take a change in the public perception, particularly spurred on by how the media represents older adults, before we see a significant difference.**

**Researchers and lawmakers deem elder abuse as dangerous and socially pervasive as child abuse. However, from March 2005 through August 2005, seven of Editor & Publisher's "Top 10" U.S. newspapers (by circulation), including Chicago Tribune, Houston Chronicle, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, and USA Today, collectively published only 68 articles related to elder abuse but published a whopping 1,071 related to child abuse. What is your opinion on why child abuse receives more coverage in newspapers than elder abuse does, when both forms of violence are widespread crimes in America?**

This is an opinion; I have no empirical evidence for this. I think there is a pervasive perception that children cannot help themselves and adults can. Most people who are not either elderly or caring for an elderly adult do not realize how much debilitating conditions such as strokes, dementia, and heart or lung diseases can impact an adult's functioning. Oftentimes elders can be as vulnerable as children, but most people in society are not aware of these situations.

**Currently, people 19 and younger account for approximately 26% of the total U.S. population and child abuse prevention programs receive nearly 94% of the federal abuse prevention budget, but people 65 and older account for nearly 13% of the total U.S. population yet the older age group receives less than 1% of the federal abuse prevention budget. Why do you think this is so?**

The answer to this question mirrors the perception of vulnerability that is stated above. There is a tremendous need in the area of child abuse and neglect. I believe there are public policy decisions to place more resources in that area due to the belief that children are at higher risk than elder adults.

**In your opinion, what will it take more or less of, to prevent widespread elder abuse?**

Support at the federal and state level. Federal funding to the states will provide greater protective services for elders and will bring media attention to the issue.

**Because of newspapers' legacy in providing an unbiased public voice and ability to cover topics in-depth, I theorize that newspapers are the best medium to inform the public about elder abuse—if they would commit to a long-term, sustained strategy to expose it in all its forms and settings, explain its complex and far-reaching nature, publicize critical intervention and prevention resources and coping strategies, call for more scientific research, and thus help increase awareness and prevention of elder abuse. But according to the aforementioned analysis, newspapers apparently have not committed to such a plan. Why do you think they have not, and what could be done to prompt newspapers into action?**

Answer given above. A lot of the focus on child abuse originates with the programs in the communities that are developed for the protection of abused children. These programs are largely funded by the federal government. State and local funds support programs to a lesser extent. The more direct services are provided in a community the more the word gets out about abuse and neglect.