

CANADIAN NETWORK FOR THE PREVENTION OF ELDER ABUSE

LEARNING BRIEF:
SEXUAL ASSAULT IN LATER LIFE

RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR RESEARCH,
POLICY, AND PRACTICE



CANADIAN NETWORK *for*
the PREVENTION of ELDER ABUSE

RÉSEAU CANADIEN *pour la* PRÉVENTION
du MAUVAIS TRAITEMENT des AÎNÉS

ACCESS TO JUSTICE PROJECT



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LEARNING BRIEF

SEXUAL ASSAULT IN LATER LIFE - RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE

The available literature provides several suggestions for the identification, prevention, and intervention of sexual violence in later life. These suggestions are typically categorized into recommendations for future research, policy, and practice.

While research studies on sexual violence in later life come from multiple areas of study (e.g., elder abuse, sexual violence, intimate partner violence), and are conducted with different samples using different methodologies, underscoring the bulk of recommendations and suggestions

across studies is the need to focus on sexual abuse in older age as distinct from other forms of abuse, and as distinct from sexual violence in younger victims.

Distinguishing between types of abuse, and viewing sexual victimization as a distinct victimization experience can facilitate the development and implementation of appropriate prevention and intervention strategies and approaches [1-4] that are attentive to the unique needs of older persons and older victim-survivors.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

INCLUDE DIVERSE SAMPLES OF VICTIM-SURVIVORS

Research typically reports on the experiences of a sub-set of older women who have attended community crisis centres, reported their experiences to authorities via self-disclosure, or whose experiences were witnessed by another person [5]. These experiences tend to be those of white heterosexual women, with limited inclusion of older persons who identify differently [1]. Future research needs to tap into the experiences of older persons who are not included in these studies (i.e. victim-survivors who do not seek help or who do not have their experiences reported) [5]. We need research to:

- **Include victim-survivors from minority ethnic and sexual orientation groups.** The underrepresentation of victim-survivors from diverse ethnic and/or sexual orientations in the criminal justice system suggests that these sub-groups of persons are not accessing justice in the same way as white heterosexual women [6], and highlights the importance of designing research that employs sampling strategies to reach these diverse sub-groups of older persons. Historical tensions characterized by violence, racism, and discrimination between police and indigenous persons (see, for example Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015 [7]) and police and persons from different racial backgrounds provide context to this underrepresentation.
- **Include men's experiences of sexual victimization [1].**

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

EXAMINE WHY SOME CASES OF SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION ARE BEING DIVERTED FROM THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM (CJS)

For instance, although victim-survivors typically know their perpetrators, cases involving familial or caregiver perpetrators are not progressing through the CJS, as cases involving stranger-perpetrated sexual victimization of older adults predominate Canadian case law [8].

In order to improve access to justice for older victims of sexual violence, and in particular victim-survivors who know their perpetrators, research should attempt to find out why these cases are not making it through the CJS [8].

CONDUCT LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH

Research on sexual abuse in later life is typically cross-sectional (i.e. research conducted at one point in time), limiting our knowledge about the coping strategies employed by older victim-survivors, and the long-term consequences and outcomes of sexual abuse in older age [1].

Research should be designed to explore how different types of abuse impact different health outcomes, including pre-existing medical conditions, cognition, and social and behavioural disorders [3].

We need longitudinal research studies to fill these gaps in our knowledge. If we know more about how sexual victimization impacts older victim-survivors over time (including but not limited to psychological and physical impacts), programs and supports can be designed accordingly.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

ASSESS THE APPLICABILITY OF CURRENT PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES & INCORPORATE EVALUATION MEASURES INTO EXISTING PROGRAMS

There are unique aspects of older life (e.g. living arrangements, changes to cognitive and physical abilities, physiological changes) that differentiate older persons risk factors for and experiences of sexual violence from those of younger persons. It is these differences that necessitate we examine and evaluate the relevance of prevention and intervention strategies for younger victims (e.g., bystander programs, intervention programs for perpetrators, educational programs) for older victim-survivors [1, 5]. Moreover, programs and interventions should be developed with an evaluative framework to assess the applicability of interventions for specific types of abuse [2].

DESIGN AND CONDUCT A NATIONAL PREVALENCE STUDY

We lack information about the prevalence of sexual abuse among community-residing older adults and older adults who reside in supportive care settings (e.g., LTC facilities, nursing homes, personal care homes). A prevalence study can be designed to assess not only the frequency of sexual abuse in later life but also the social and health consequences of this type of abuse [9].

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

PUBLIC AWARENESS AND EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGNS

Women must know what constitutes sexual abuse, including that sexual abuse, can be perpetrated within spousal or caregiver relationships [5, 8]. Information should be provided on what older persons can do if they are sexually victimized, and the available supports and services that they can access.

- Educational campaigns should be designed to promote social norms consistent with healthy, respectful relationships, communications, and boundaries, as this can also act as a preventative measure, especially in the context of intimate relationships [1, 5].
- It is equally important for friends and family members of older persons (and older persons who reside in care facilities) to have knowledge and education about sexual victimization among older adults. Education and awareness campaigns and efforts should, therefore, be targeted to the social networks and communities in which older persons reside.
- Emphasis should be placed on challenging misconceptions and myths that older persons are asexual and therefore not vulnerable to sexual victimization [5].

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

DEVELOPMENT OF CLEAR STAFFING PROTOCOLS AND INTERACTIONS BETWEEN CAREGIVERS AND PATIENTS

In supportive housing settings (e.g., LTC facilities, nursing homes, personal care homes), clear standards and protocols should be in place outlining what constitutes sexual victimization among older adults, and what to do in suspected or witnessed cases [5, 9, 10].

- Training should be implemented to ensure staff know how to recognize the signs of sexual victimization, including among older persons who have cognitive impairments or difficulty communicating verbally [5, 8].
- Team approaches to care have also been suggested whereby multiple caregivers monitor multiple clients/patients [11].

DEVELOPMENT OF POLICIES THAT ACCOUNT FOR DIVERSITY IN EXPERIENCES

Responses to sexual violence victimization in older adults must be diverse, with unique experiences and contexts included in policies on sexual violence [5]. However, It is not enough to merely develop policies and procedures; it is essential also to facilitate their implementation and to ensure they get put into practice [2].

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

DEVELOPMENT OF SEXUAL HEALTH POLICIES SPECIFICALLY FOR OLDER ADULTS

The development of sexual health policies specific to older adults can be informative not only in broad knowledge regarding sexuality in older age but also in terms of developing approaches to assessment and intervention in cases of sexual abuse among older adults.

EARLY INTERVENTION FOR OFFENDERS

The available case law research on sexual victimization of older adults indicates that stranger-perpetrators were predominantly young men who had a history of having committed other similar offences [8]. That these perpetrators had engaged in similar offences in the past suggests that early intervention that targets the root causes for these men is needed [8].

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