



# Understanding the perpetrators of abuse

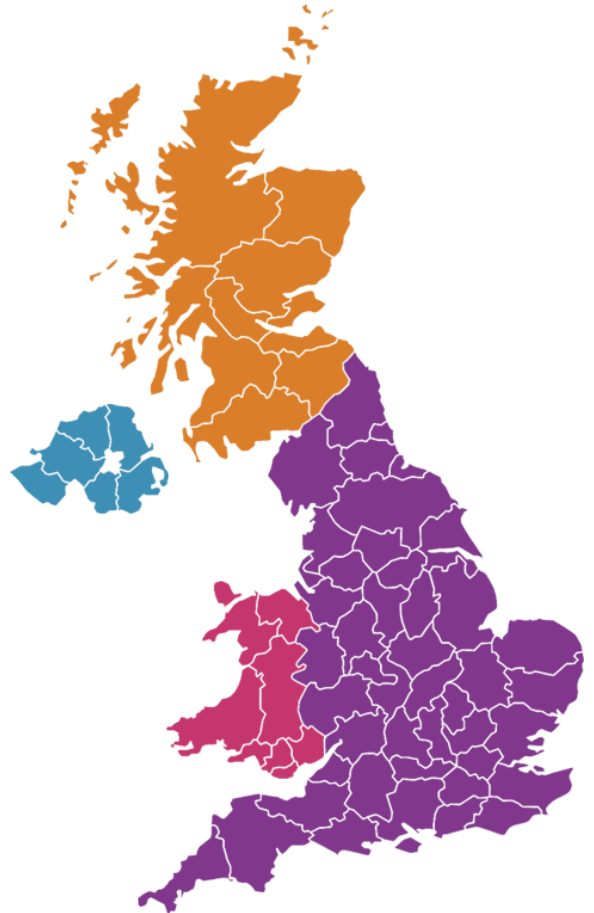


Policy Brief:  
September 2024

# Understanding the perpetrators of abuse

## KEY INSIGHTS

- **A lack of understanding about perpetrators has diminished the ability to respond effectively and provide targeted services to victims.**
- **Family members are the most seen perpetrator group by Hourglass, however it appears that there are variations depending on abuse types.**
- **Male perpetrators are more commonly seen, but perpetration of abuse against older people crosses gender lines.**
- **Perpetration risk factors can be individual or they can be linked to environmental, cultural, structural, or historical factors.**



# Recommendations

**Policy and practice around the abuse of older people must be both victim focussed and also advocate for interventions and specialist tools targeting perpetration.**

**The UK government needs to back a UK-wide prevalence study on the abuse of older people, within this there should be an equal focus on typologies, motives, and dynamics of perpetration.**

**The government needs to urgently develop a strategy to tackle abuse and violence committed against older people, and within this, perpetrator intervention should be one the key priorities, alongside awareness raising measures designed to support the general public to identify the signs of abuse.**

**The UK Government, working with key universities should institute a research programme focused specifically on perpetrators of domestic abuse or violence, sexual violence, and coercive control. This must include a key component focused on perpetration on older victims of abuse.**

# Understanding the perpetrators of abuse

## POLICY PROBLEM

Should victim support services focus solely on the victims of crime? Or can investigating perpetrators of abuse and violence help organisations better support victim-survivors and prevent abuse?

In the past couple of decades, there has been an interdisciplinary “turn to the perpetrator” wherein questions and focus have been placed on the perpetrators of acts of violence (genocide, mass, and individual), crime, and abuse.<sup>1</sup> Understandably it seems, one cannot truly understand the causes behind violence and abuse towards older victim-survivors, without paying attention to the actors who carry out or are complicit in such acts.

With its roots in the first large scale perpetrator psyche and motivation investigations during the Nuremburg trials following the Second World War and the Holocaust, attention and focus on the characteristics and reason of perpetrators and perpetration can be seen as a move away from simplistic concepts of perpetrators as being evil or monsters,<sup>2</sup> which may have proved to be counterproductive from both an understanding and supporting victims focus, as Shelley Jackson notes

*“The tendency to label all elder abuse perpetrators as the “bad guys” has diminished our ability to respond effectively.”<sup>3</sup>*

In the last 20 years, wider Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and domestic abuse (DA) prevention organisations mostly in the UK, USA, and Australia have also moved towards seeking to understand and intervene with perpetrators more readily, with perpetrator focused programmes such as Respect and SafeLives Drive Project successfully seeking to reduce offending behaviour and its risk through a whole systems approach based around high risk perpetrators.<sup>4</sup> However, as with almost all aspects of abuse and violence committed against older people there is a paucity of attention, as no such older people specific interventionist perpetrator programmes exist, and research and focus on perpetrators of such abuse is still lacking.

Who are the perpetrators of abuse against older people? As noted above, understanding of this has not been a priority, with Hannah Bows et al finding only two research papers out of 75 focused on the abuse of older people prioritising understanding of perpetrators.<sup>5</sup> Data from the Hourglass Helpline finds that the vast majority of abuse towards older people is perpetrated by family members. Primarily this appears to be usually intergenerational, with sons and daughters being the main offenders. In 2022-23, 22.3% of known perpetrators were sons, and 19.4% were daughters,<sup>6</sup> although abuse by other family members (grandsons etc) is also commonly seen with “other family members” accounting for 16.3% of known perpetrators in 2022-23. As well as this, intimate partners also account for a large proportion of perpetrators of abuse according to Hourglass data, with 16.5% of perpetrators being intimate partners of the victim/victim-survivor in 2022/23.<sup>7</sup>

Going by media stories, the most common perpetrator group abusing older people are professional care workers. This idea is also one that many of the public share. In a 2020 Hourglass survey, the most common group thought to abuse older people were “care workers in a care home” with over half (53%) of UK wide respondents ticking this option,<sup>8</sup> just under half of UK wide respondents (49.8%) thought that “paid carers in the older persons own home” were also likely to abuse older people.<sup>9</sup> Although care workers can be perpetrators of the abuse of older people, data from the Hourglass Helpline shows that professional care workers only accounted for 6.8% of perpetrators in 2022-23.<sup>10</sup>

While family members appear to be the most common perpetrator type for many forms of abuse according to the calls and cases Hourglass receives, academic studies have illustrated differences in perpetrator-victim relationships according to different types of abuse. For neglect, some studies have indicated that adult children are the main perpetrators of this form of abuse,<sup>11</sup> however in the last UK wide prevalence study O’Keefe et al reported that neglect (70%) was mostly committed by intimate partners.<sup>12</sup> For physical and psychological abuse, intimate partners were also documented by a number of studies as to be the most common perpetrator type in these forms of violence with O’Keefe et al. (2007) reporting that partners (57%) and other family members (37%) were the main perpetrators of interpersonal violence.<sup>13</sup>

Looking at the perpetrators behind economic/financial abuse, we have to take into consideration the high prevalence of scam cases affecting older victims, wherein the perpetrator is normally unknown to the victim. Where the perpetrator is known to the victim, we again see a variance in different types of perpetrator-victim relationship. O’Keefe et al found that family members (54%) and care workers (31%) were the more frequent economic abuse perpetrators,<sup>14</sup> while Lithwick et al found that adult children committed more economic abuse (59%) compared with spouses (13%).<sup>15</sup> In a recent study looking at elder abuse vulnerability and financial/economic abuse risk factors, Dominguez et al noted that family members were more likely to perpetrate abuse that was economic/financial only in conjunction and co-occurrence with other abuse types, and were unlikely to commit only economic/financial abuse as a singular abusive act.<sup>16</sup>

Understandably, family members are also not seen as the majority perpetration group in cases of sexual abuse against an older victim. In a comparative study of incidents of sexual abuse committed against older adults in the US, Budd and Lidic noted that around 68% of incidents (for older women) and 67% (for older men) involved perpetrators outside the family.<sup>17</sup> Other studies have also illuminated a potential higher likelihood of older women being sexual abused or raped by a stranger in comparison to women in younger age groups,<sup>18</sup> although no comprehensive link in victim-perpetrator relationships across age groups has been shown.<sup>19</sup>

Hourglass data illustrates that a majority of perpetrators are male (57% in 2022-23),<sup>20</sup> but shows that abuse against older victim-survivors is not limited to one perpetrator gender, with a high proportion of alleged perpetrators being women. Perpetrators gender in sexual abuse cases is predominantly male, both for older male and older female victims, (although for older male victims, a substantial minority of female perpetrators has been documented, being seen as 19% of perpetrators in Budd and Lidic’s study)<sup>21,22</sup>

Why might perpetrators commit acts of abuse and violence towards older people? A number of studies have plotted a broad range of individual abuser focused risk factors for perpetration, including depression, psychiatric illness or psychological problems, dependency of the abuser on the victim (accommodation, emotional, or financial support),

economic/financial issues, or substance abuse (particularly drugs or alcohol).<sup>23</sup> Substance abuse is seen to be a key predictor for perpetration, being described by Jennifer Storey as “the single best predictor of elder abuse perpetration given its consistent association with elder abuse across many empirical studies and literature reviews.”<sup>24</sup>

For sexual abuse in particular, previous research suggests that perpetrators of older victims generally have histories of prior criminal behaviour, and are more likely to have convictions than those sexual perpetrators who assault younger victims.<sup>25</sup> Sexual abuse and violence against older people (especially older women) also appears to be more opportunistic than sexual violence and abuse committed against children or younger age groups.<sup>26</sup>

### **Chopin and Beauregard identified four types of older sexual abuse offenders:**

**Experimental** - lack of planning and control at the crime scene, but offender seems to know exactly what he wants out of this attack. Thus, the experimentally motivated offender is looking to accomplish certain sexual acts—the most intrusive ones.

**Sexual** - high level of sexual penetration, the possession of pornographic material and the involvement in deviant sexual behaviour, offenders presenting a sexual motivation are typically single, live alone, use alcohol and/or drugs, and tend to avoid contact with other people.

**Anger** - offenders typically use physical force, present an effect of anger prior to the crime and do not hesitate to humiliate the victim during the attack. Such humiliation can be verbal (e.g., insulting the victim) or physical. The focus of this attack is on the use of violence, not the sexual nature of the acts.

**Opportunistic** - lack of planning and an absence of penetration; these offenders will get involved in foreplay and fondling with the victim. Offenders are typically older (at least compared with the other three groups) and most of them are single.<sup>27</sup> Gerontophilia as a perpetration factor (defined as paraphilia and compulsion characterized by a sexual preference for older partners) has also been hypothesised, but academic attention and study on this is weak and limited.

As well as individual perpetration factors, environmental, social, structural, and cultural risk factors have also been theorised. These may be linked to prevailing ideas about older people and ageing, specifically ageism, or abuse/violence<sup>28</sup> may be exacerbated by governmental policies (or the lack thereof) linked to or governing violence and abuse. As Bows et al note, structural issues related to poverty or the cost of living or housing may also exacerbate or trigger perpetration of abuse, as Hourglass noted in a previous policy brief, poverty as a form of structural violence has an intrinsic link to victim-survivors suffering from abuse and violence.<sup>29</sup>

**Bows et al quote a DA prevention worker:**

*"I'll give you one example, where obviously with the London house prices rising, it's becoming more unaffordable for people to move out.... So, we have a lot more adult children who are living, and continuing to live with their parents, or move back to their parents' home, and you know, that's where the DV's escalating or happening. So, if there was more kind of support out there for perpetrators of abuse, whether it's, you know, accessing social services or mental health services.... we could have a joint type of support that would increase the safety around that older person."*<sup>30</sup>

*While it understood that specific generational cultural and societal milieus which many older people grew up in may be a barrier to help seeking behaviour for older victims of violence and abuse (especially older male victims who may have grown up in a traditionalised construction of manhood, masculinity, and patriarchal ideas), such attitudes and views may also normalise abusive or violent acts where older people are both the victim and the perpetrator.*

*"So, for those who are elderly now, for those who are kind of perpetrators now, where they've grown up in a world where, you know, if we think they were- they were young adults in the 1950s/1960s, then they're growing up in a changing world, but the UK didn't get its first refuge till the 1970s. You know, marital rape, bad marital rape wasn't challenged until the early 1990s, and it didn't become law until the 2000s. We've only just in 2020/2021, we've just got a domestic abuse DA Act. So, to some degree, you- you know, there's things that are still part of our society, behaviours that are still part of our society".*<sup>31</sup>

As seen above, perpetrators of abuse and violence against older people do not fit into commonly assumed or stereotyped boxes, perpetration exists both across and outside the family unit, and across the genders, while motives and dynamics behind abuse and perpetration can be structural, historical, cultural, or individual factors. By only seeing abuse against older people through a "victim" lens, support services and organisations are missing part of the puzzle to support victim-survivors and help target interventions towards perpetrators and recidivism. Only by understanding **who and why** in a perpetration-based sense can we truly tackle the abuse of older people in every aspect of society.

While perpetrator intervention programmes for tackling domestic abuse and intimate partner violence have multiplied over the past couple of decades, as noted above specialist intervention programmes and facilities to deal with perpetrators of violence against older victims do not exist. As with generalist support services for older victim survivors, the perpetrator programmes that do exist are likely not well suited to perpetrators who are older adults. As Bows et al puts it perfectly:

*"We...need to introduce and significantly increase the availability of perpetrator programmes and ensure that these take into consideration age-specific factors, including generational norms and values, lifestyles, history and futures, and are adapted as more research is conducted into risk factors and causes."*<sup>32</sup>

As well as this, while we have a limited understanding of the dynamics and motivations of perpetrators of abuse and violence committed against older people, this is far too slight and lacking. There is a need for a comprehensive focus on perpetration as part of a larger Government backed UK-wide prevalence study. A much-needed strategy on older people and abuse and violence committed against them should also have a focus on perpetrator intervention and perpetrator dynamics and how best to intervene and stop recidivism.



# Recommendations

**Policy and practice around the abuse of older people must be both victim focussed and also advocate for interventions and specialist tools targeting perpetration.**

**The UK government needs to back a UK-wide prevalence study on the abuse of older people, within this there should be an equal focus on typologies, motives, and dynamics of perpetration.**

**The government needs to urgently develop a strategy to tackle abuse and violence committed against older people, and within this, perpetrator intervention should be one the key priorities, alongside awareness raising measures designed to support the general public to identify the signs of abuse.**

**The UK Government, working with key universities should institute a research programme focused specifically on perpetrators of domestic abuse or violence, sexual violence, and coercive control. This must include a key component focused on perpetration on older victims of abuse.**

1. Susanne Knittel and Zachary Goldberg (2019) Introduction, *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*.
2. Susanne Knittel and Zachary Goldberg (2019) Introduction, *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*.
3. Shelley Jackson (2014) All Elder Abuse Perpetrators Are Not Alike: The Heterogeneity of Elder Abuse Perpetrators and Implications for Intervention. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 60, (3).
- 4 <https://drivepartnership.org.uk/about-us/the-drive-project/>
- 5 Hannah Bows, Bridget Penhale, Paige Bromley, Merilli Pullerits, Natalie Quinn-Walker, and Asmita Sood. (2022) *Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse Against Older Adults: Characteristics, Risk Factors and Professional Responses*. Durham: Durham University
- 6 Hourglass CRM Data (Accessed 5/5/2024)
- 7 Hourglass CRM Data (Accessed 5/5/2024)
- 8 Hourglass, "Growing Old Under Lockdown in the UK Survey" (2020)
- 9 Hourglass, "Growing Old Under Lockdown in the UK Survey" (2020)
- 10 Hourglass CRM Data (Accessed 5/5/2024)
- 11 M.S Lachs, and J Berman. (2011), *Under the radar: New York State elder abuse prevalence study*. New York, NY.
- 12 M, O'Keefe, A. Hills, M. Doyle, C. McCredie, S. Scholes, R. Constantine..., . . . B, Errens. (2007). *UK Study of abuse and neglect of older people: Prevalence study report*. London, England: King's College London
- 13 M, O'Keefe, A. Hills, M. Doyle, C. McCredie, S. Scholes, R. Constantine..., . . . B, Errens. (2007). *UK Study of abuse and neglect of older people: Prevalence study report*. London, England: King's College London
- 14 M, O'Keefe, A. Hills, M. Doyle, C. McCredie, S. Scholes, R. Constantine..., . . . B, Errens. (2007). *UK Study of abuse and neglect of older people: Prevalence study report*. London, England: King's College London.
- 15 M, Lithwick, M, Beaulieu, S Gravel., and M. S Straka. (1999). *The maltreatment of older adults: Perpetrator-victim relationships and interventions*. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 11, 115-112.
- 16 Silvia Fraga Dominguez, Bee Ozguler, Jennifer E. Storey, and Michaela Rogers (2022). *Elder Abuse Vulnerability and Risk Factors: Is Financial Abuse Different from Other Subtypes?* *Journal of Applied Gerontology*. 41(4).
- 17 K. M Budd, and M.A Liddic (2020). *Incidents of Sexual Assault Against Older Adults: A Comparison Study*. *Sexual Abuse*, 107906322094029. doi:10.1177/1079063220940298. K.A Robert0, P.B Teaster, and K.A Nikzad (2007) *Sexual abuse of vulnerable young and old men*. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 22(8),
- 18 J.S Jones, L Rossman, R Diegel, P Van Order, and B.N Wynn (2009) *Sexual assault in postmenopausal women: Epidemiology and patterns of genital injury*. *The American Journal of Emergency Medicine*, 27(8), 922–929.
- 19 K. M Budd, and M.A Liddic (2020). *Incidents of Sexual Assault Against Older Adults: A Comparison Study*. *Sexual Abuse*, 107906322094029. doi:10.1177/1079063220940298
- 20 Hourglass CRM Data (Accessed 5/5/2024)
- 21 K. M Budd, and M.A Liddic (2020). *Incidents of Sexual Assault Against Older Adults: A Comparison Study*. *Sexual Abuse*, 107906322094029. doi:10.1177/1079063220940298
- 22 K.A Robert, P.B Teaster, and K.A Nikzad (2007) *Sexual abuse of vulnerable young and old men*. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 22(8),
- 23 Hannah Bows, Bridget Penhale, Paige Bromley, Merilli Pullerits, Natalie Quinn-Walker, and Asmita Sood. (2022) *Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse Against Older Adults: Characteristics, Risk Factors and Professional Responses*. Durham: Durham University
- 24 Jennifer Storey (2020). *Risk factors for elder abuse and neglect: A review of the literature*. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour*, 50, 101339.
- 25 K Jeary (2005). *Sexual abuse and sexual offending against older adult people: A focus on perpetrators and victims*. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 16(2), 328–343.
- 26 Louise Almond, Martha Sainsbury, and Michelle McManus. (2022) *Sex Offenses Perpetrated Against Older Adults: A Multivariate Analysis of Crime Scene Behaviours*. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* Vol. 37(7-8)
- 27 Julien Chopin and Eric Beaugard (2018) *Sexual Abuse of Elderly Victims Investigated by the Police: From Motives to Crime Characteristics* *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 1–23.
- 28 Hannah Bows, Bridget Penhale, Paige Bromley, Merilli Pullerits, Natalie Quinn-Walker, and Asmita Sood. (2022) *Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse Against Older Adults: Characteristics, Risk Factors and Professional Responses*. Durham: Durham University
- 29 Hannah Bows, Bridget Penhale, Paige Bromley, Merilli Pullerits, Natalie Quinn-Walker, and Asmita Sood. (2022) *Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse Against Older Adults: Characteristics, Risk Factors and Professional Responses*. Durham: Durham University
- 30 Quoted in Hannah Bows, Bridget Penhale, Paige Bromley, Merilli Pullerits, Natalie Quinn-Walker, and Asmita Sood. (2022) *Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse Against Older Adults: Characteristics, Risk Factors and Professional Responses*. Durham: Durham University
- 31 Quoted in Hannah Bows, Bridget Penhale, Paige Bromley, Merilli Pullerits, Natalie Quinn-Walker, and Asmita Sood. (2022) *Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse Against Older Adults: Characteristics, Risk Factors and Professional Responses*. Durham: Durham University
- 32 Hannah Bows, Bridget Penhale, Paige Bromley, Merilli Pullerits, Natalie Quinn-Walker, and Asmita Sood. (2022) *Perpetrators of Domestic Abuse Against Older Adults: Characteristics, Risk Factors and Professional Responses*. Durham: Durham University



# Hourglass

Safer ageing · Stopping abuse



You can contact us in many ways:

**24/7 Helpline: 0808 808 8141**

Our helpline is entirely confidential and free to call from a landline or mobile, and the number will not appear on your phone bill.

**Text message: 07860 052906**

Texts from outside the UK will be charged at their standard international rate which will differ depending on location and service charges of your phone provider. The number will appear on your bill and in your phone records but will not be identified as Hourglass.

Instant messaging: [www.wearehourglass.org](http://www.wearehourglass.org)

Chatbot: [www.wearehourglass.org](http://www.wearehourglass.org)

Knowledge Bank: [knowledgebank.wearehourglass.org](http://knowledgebank.wearehourglass.org)

Email: [helpline@wearehourglass.org](mailto:helpline@wearehourglass.org)

## Hourglass England

Office 8, Unit 5,  
Stour Valley Business Centre,  
Brundon Lane, Sudbury,  
Suffolk, CO10 7GB.

T: +44 (0) 20 8835 9280  
E: [enquiries@wearehourglass.org](mailto:enquiries@wearehourglass.org)  
W: [www.wearehourglass.org](http://www.wearehourglass.org)

@wearehourglass\_  
 [facebook.com/wearehourglass](https://facebook.com/wearehourglass)

## Hourglass Cymru

C/o - Office 8, Unit 5,  
Stour Valley Business Centre,  
Brundon Lane, Sudbury,  
Suffolk, CO10 7GB.

T: +44 (0) 20 8835 9280  
E: [cymru@wearehourglass.org](mailto:cymru@wearehourglass.org)  
W: [www.wearehourglass.cymru](http://www.wearehourglass.cymru)

@HourglassCymru  
 [facebook.com/hourglasscymru](https://facebook.com/hourglasscymru)

@Hourglass  
 @we\_are\_hourglass  
 @wearehourglass

## Hourglass Scotland

PO Box 29244,  
Dunfermline, KY12 2EG.

T: +44 (0) 20 8835 9280  
E: [scotland@wearehourglass.org](mailto:scotland@wearehourglass.org)  
W: [www.wearehourglass.scot](http://www.wearehourglass.scot)

@HourglassScot  
 [facebook.com/HourglassScotland](https://facebook.com/HourglassScotland)

## Hourglass Northern Ireland

PO Box 216,  
Newry, BT35 5DH.

T: +44 (0) 20 8835 9280  
E: [nireland@wearehourglass.org](mailto:nireland@wearehourglass.org)  
W: [www.wearehourglass.org/ni](http://www.wearehourglass.org/ni)

@HourglassNI  
 [facebook.com/hourglassNI](https://facebook.com/hourglassNI)

