



## Abuse of older people at ‘unprecedented levels’: 1 in 3 in Northern Ireland don’t believe “inappropriate sexual acts” directed at older people constitutes abuse - warns leading NI charity

*New analysis reveals ‘shocking’ scale of the abuse crisis facing over-65s*

- 1 in 5 UK residents (22 percent) have personal experience of abuse as an older person or know someone who has been abused - with almost 2.7 million victims thought to be affected across the UK
- Attitudes regarding what ‘counts’ as abuse are thought to be fueling the crisis, with 1 in 3 in Northern Ireland believing that inappropriate sexual acts directed at older people don’t constitute abuse
- Over half (55 percent) of those surveyed in Northern Ireland believe that the abuse and neglect of older people increased as a result of the lockdown
- Charity announces raft of new measures designed to protect older people from abuse and to promote safer ageing

NI safer ageing charity, Hourglass, has today [30 November] warned that abuse of older people is at ‘unprecedented levels’ as new data emerges revealing that nearly 2.7m UK citizens over the age of 65 are thought to have been abused.

The *Growing old in the UK 2020* survey - commissioned by the charity - of over 2,500 adults found that 1 in 5 (22 percent) people either had personal experience of abuse as an older person (aged 65+) or knew an older person who had been abused, and 55% of people in Northern Ireland felt that the abuse and neglect of older people had increased as a result of lockdown. Previous estimates have put the figure significantly lower, with the [World Health Organisation](#) estimating that – globally – 1 in 6 people aged 60 and older experienced some form of abuse in the last year.

In March, Hourglass warned that isolation and lockdown would act like a “pressure cooker” for the abuse of older people, with attitudes toward what “counts” as abuse fueling this crisis, and situations where older people are locked down with their abusers or isolated without care only making things

worse. Under lockdown conditions, older people lack the safeguards that would have previously existed through day-to-day contact with the outside world.

Among respondents from Northern Ireland, the survey revealed that over a third (36 percent) don't believe that 'inappropriate sexual acts directed at older people' count as abuse; likewise nearly 1 in 3 (31 percent) don't view 'pushing, hitting, or beating an older person' as abuse, while a third (33 percent) don't see 'taking precious items from an older relative's home without asking' as abuse. These figures fall just above those from the UK overall which stand at, at 35 percent, 30 percent, and 32 percent respectively.

Commenting on the findings, Veronica Gray, Deputy CEO and Director of Policy, who leads Hourglass's activity in Northern Ireland, said:

"These results are genuinely shocking. Although we've known for a long time that we live in a world prejudiced against older people, the results show how widespread the issue is. These figures really shine a light on the true scale of the crisis, especially here in Northern Ireland."

She added that the data confirmed what the charity has long suspected - that the abuse of older people has long been drastically under-reported to authorities.

"Our polling shows that while people know that abuse of older people is a problem in Northern Ireland today, there's a complete disconnect between awareness of the issue and a true understanding of the role we all play in preventing abuse."

Gray said the data reveals a disturbing level of tolerance towards abusive behaviours in our society.

"While I've no doubt that the vast majority of people don't consider themselves to be abusers, the truth is that a troubling proportion of those we surveyed don't actually see some very harmful behaviours as abuse. Without countering these perceptions, people are far more likely to perpetuate the cycle of abuse and are part of the problem."

Hourglass, the only UK-wide charity focused on addressing the abuse and neglect of older people, announced this week that it is expanding its points of service entry, both in response to this new evidence as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on its Helpline, the charity is creating the UK's first Knowledge Bank for people seeking support or advice from the charity and its partners. This will include an instant messaging service to signpost users to appropriate resources. Furthermore, the charity will begin to refer cases to a Community Response Team who will be able to take on casework for older people and their families.

Gray added:

“The additional points of entry into the charity will be crucial in expanding support and resources for those suffering from abuse in Northern Ireland as well as their loved ones. We want people to know what to do if they suspect an older person is being abused, and we want to ensure we are there to offer that lifeline.”

Commenting on the survey, Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick, former leader of the SDLP, said:

“Hourglass’s findings highlight a concerning and unacceptable issue. The abuse of older people is too often overlooked; these results underscore the efforts needed to address and change attitudes and perceptions, offer support to older people who have suffered abuse, and prevent it from happening in the future.

“The Covid-19 pandemic has further increased the risk of abuse for vulnerable older people, with lockdown making an already dangerous situation worse for some. Many older people lack the safeguards and day-to-day contacts with the outside world they would have had previously, making them less able to speak out if they are unsafe.

“It’s critical that people look out for and know how to spot signs of abuse in older people and are aware of the resources and support to which they can direct their loved ones. I commend Hourglass’s ongoing work in highlighting and taking on this issue.”

**ENDS**

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#### **Notes to editors**

#### **About the data: Growing Old in the UK 2020: Understanding the abuse of older people - Survey**

In February 2020, Hourglass commissioned research into the general public’s knowledge and understanding of the abuse of older people. Overall, 2,494 people took part in the survey, comprising:

- 1,245 respondents in the UK sample (including representative sub-samples of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland)
- 1,043 respondents in the England sample
- 472 respondents in the Scotland sample
- 500 respondents in the Wales sample
- 479 respondents in the Northern Ireland sample

The UK sample is representative of the UK population and each of the samples for the UK’s nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) are also representative of those nations.

In June 2020, Hourglass commissioned an update to the existing survey. Overall, 2,505 people took part in the follow-up survey, comprising:

- 1,207 respondents in the UK sample (including representative sub-samples of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland)
- 1,040 respondents in the England sample
- 496 respondents in the Scotland sample
- 484 respondents in the Wales sample
- 485 respondents in the Northern Ireland sample

### **About Hourglass**

Hourglass (formerly known as Action on Elder Abuse) is a UK-wide charity with a presence in all four nations. It aims to protect and prevent the abuse of vulnerable older people by raising awareness of the issues, encouraging education and giving information and support to those in need. It has the only national freephone helpline dedicated to this cause, open Monday to Friday between the hours of 9.00am and 5.00pm on 080 8808 8141 for confidential support and information.

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

Hourglass is a registered charity in England and Wales (1140543), and also in Scotland (SC046278)