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## Getting Ahead of the Curve to Prevent Elder Mistreatment in the United States

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### Abstract

Elder mistreatment is an important public health problem that can be prevented. By investing in upstream prevention and taking a multigenerational approach, the U.S. can help create communities where older adults are safe, thriving, and living out the remainder of their lives free from abuse and exploitation. The need to do so has never been more pressing as the U.S. is on the precipice of historic population changes that could place a substantial burden on families, communities, and systems of care and protection for older adults. This article describes these changes and how public health efforts can make a difference.

### Keywords

elder abuse; prevention; population; public health

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For nearly thirty years, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Injury Center has been the nation's leading public health authority on violence and injury prevention. The nature and frequency of violence, combined with its substantial impact on health, well-being, and opportunity across the life span, suggest that a public health approach is critical to achieving measurable progress in this area.

The CDC's approach involves the following three elements: a focus on prevention; a science-driven approach to document the problem, understand the factors that increase the risk for violence or buffer against it; and identify and disseminate effective solutions and advance multi-sector collaboration to address the problem and keep people safe, healthy, and productive at all ages and stages of life.

Getting ahead of the curve to prevent elder mistreatment in the United States and around the world has never been more salient. An estimated one in ten adults ages 60 and older in the United States (and one in six worldwide) have experienced some form of elder mistreatment (Acierno et al., 2010; Yon et al., 2017).

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Author's Note

CDC Disclaimer: The findings and conclusions in this update are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Even if the prevalence of elder mistreatment in the population remains about the same for the next thirty years, the numbers of people affected by mistreatment could grow exponentially. The most recent World Population Prospects indicate that the world's population continues to grow and that nearly all countries are experiencing population aging (United Nations [UN], 2019). The projected increase in the global population over the next thirty years is not expected to be evenly distributed around the world. More than half of this growth will be concentrated in nine countries, with the United States being one of these nine countries and the only high-income country (UN, 2019). The other countries are the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the United Republic of Tanzania (UN, 2019).

By 2035, persons older than age 65 will outnumber those younger than age 18 for the first time in U.S. history (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The support ratio, defined as the number of people of working age (ages 25 to 64 years), per person ages 65 years or older, is expected to drop from 3.0 in 2020 to 2.2 by 2050, creating substantial fiscal pressures and strain on systems of healthcare, pensions, and social protection for older persons (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

## Strategies to Prevent Violence Across the Life Span

Getting ahead of the curve to prevent elder mistreatment from a public health perspective involves investing in primary prevention, also known as upstream prevention, and taking a multigenerational approach. Decades of research tells us that unhealthy relationships can start early and last a lifetime. Addressing the various contexts and underlying risks that contribute to the development of these patterns can help to ensure safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for all adults later in life.

The CDC has developed a suite of technical packages to help states and communities prevent multiple forms of violence across the life span (CDC, 2019). A technical package is a group of strategies to achieve and sustain substantial reductions in violence-related risk factors or outcomes. Technical packages have the following three primary components: strategies (i.e., preventive direction or actions to achieve the goal of preventing violence); specific approaches to advance the strategies, which are accomplished through programs, practices, and policies; and research evidence supporting each approach. These packages are designed to help communities prioritize prevention strategies with the greatest impact potential.

To date, the CDC technical packages have been featured at all levels of government, adopted by key constituencies, and used by local and state health entities in their impact assessments and prevention programming, and in their work with local and state policy makers. They have been featured on 643 websites and cited in 462 scholarly articles. All of the CDC's new program funding cycles to prevent violence are implementing the strategies in the packages, with the aim to reduce violence across the United States.

The perpetration of elder mistreatment shares a number of risk factors with other forms of violence, including abusers' prior history of behavioral and mental health

problems, substance misuse, poor problem-solving and coping skills, financial or emotional dependency, family conflict, poor-quality relationships, and limited access to social support, among other community and societal factors (CDC, 2016; Pillemer et al., 2016). The CDC technical packages suggest that by strengthening economic supports to families; promoting social norms that protect against violence and abuse; teaching skills to handle stress, manage conflict, and tackle everyday challenges; creating protective environments; and strengthening connectedness these risk factors can be reduced, which can help prevent elder mistreatment from happening in the first place.

The CDC sees this work as complementary to all the fruitful work described in this Spring 2020 issue of *Generations*—efforts that are being made to recognize, respond, and support victims and survivors of elder mistreatment.

The field of public health cannot do this work alone. Rather, it needs to be done in partnership with many other sectors, including health services, social services, education, all levels of government, business and labor, public safety and justice, housing, media, and the many organizations that provide support and assistance to victims and survivors. By working together to prevent elder mistreatment from occurring, we can create communities wherein older adults are safe, thriving, and living out the remainder of their lives free from abuse and exploitation.

## Biography

Linda L. Dahlberg, Ph.D., is senior advisor to the Director, Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in Atlanta, Georgia.

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