



Who commits elder abuse?

A 2021 national survey found that family members are the most likely group of people to commit elder abuse.

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Introduction

In late 2021 the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) reported its findings from the National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study. Alarmingly, the study found that intergenerational family members formed the largest group of perpetrators in the cases examined in the study.



Perpetrators and types of elder abuse

In late 2021 the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) reported its findings from the National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study. Alarmingly, the study found that intergenerational family members formed the largest group of perpetrators in the cases examined in the study.

- Adult children of the older people were responsible for just under 20% of all cases of elder abuse.
- Partners of adult children and grandchildren accounted for around 10% of all cases.
- In around 33% of financial abuse cases and over 20% of neglect cases, adult children were the perpetrators.
- Intimate partners were also significant perpetrators, particularly for physical abuse, sexual abuse and psychological abuse (around 10% for each) and neglect (over 20%).



Friends, neighbours and acquaintances accounted for around 25% of perpetrators – almost as much as the family group:

- Friends were particularly likely to be implicated in **financial abuse**.
- Neighbours and friends were also significant perpetrators of **physical abuse**.
- Friends accounted for 40% of **sexual abuse** perpetrators, followed by a small group of acquaintances.
- Friends and acquaintances represented just under 33% of **psychological abuse** perpetrators.

“The fact that it’s often the people closest to them who are committing the abuse is particularly concerning, as this can create a desire by the victim to keep the abuse a secret to avoid the shame, embarrassment and negative repercussions for the perpetrator – especially when it comes to family members,” said research director Dr Rae Kaspiew.”

Professional people were the smallest overall perpetrator group:

- Service providers and professional carers together accounted for around 10% of perpetrators of all types of abuse.
- Service providers and professional carers were associated with more than 25% of neglect cases examined in the study (which did not review many cases involving people needing high levels of care).
- Service providers were particularly linked to cases of financial abuse.

Overall, men outweigh women as perpetrators of abuse, accounting for more than 75% of abuse perpetrators for physical and sexual abuse and more than 67% for financial abuse.



Contributing factors to elder abuse perpetration

People who commit elder abuse often display a range of problems or risk factors.

- Perpetrators often have mental health problems (over 25%) and financial problems (nearly 20%).
- With **financial abuse**, the most common problems perpetrators have are financial.
- With **physical and psychological abuse**, the perpetrators are most commonly experiencing mental health issues.
- With **sexual abuse**, the perpetrators' problems mostly relate to alcohol.
- **Neglect** perpetrators are likely to have physical health problems.

Comparing adult children and friend perpetrators highlights the complex dynamics surrounding elder abuse. The data appear to suggest that abuse by friends is linked with victim vulnerability to a greater extent than abuse by adult children. In contrast, for abuse committed by adult children, perpetrator problems are a more significant factor. Moreover, in some instances, problems, such as gambling, may have led friend perpetrators to target older persons who were particularly vulnerable.

FRIENDS
ADULT CHILDREN
FAMILY MEMBERS
SONS-IN-LAW AND
DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW



Perpetrators and abuse of culturally and linguistically diverse older people

Sometimes people think that elder abuse happens more to culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) older Australians, but the AIFS study did not support this idea. It reported that the general patterns of perpetrator relationships for CALD older people were similar to other people's.

- Family members were the majority of perpetrators in the cases involving CALD people.
- Adult children accounted for 13% of the perpetrators.
- Sons-in-law and daughters-in-law were as likely to perpetrate abuse (11%) as adult children.
- Friends were the biggest subgroup (18%) among the friends, neighbours or acquaintances perpetrator group and a notably bigger group than adult children.

Resources

[Read the National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study final report.](#)

REFERENCES

National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study Final Report, April 2021, Australian Institute of Family Studies

