



Sexual Abuse of Older People



Policy Brief

October 2023

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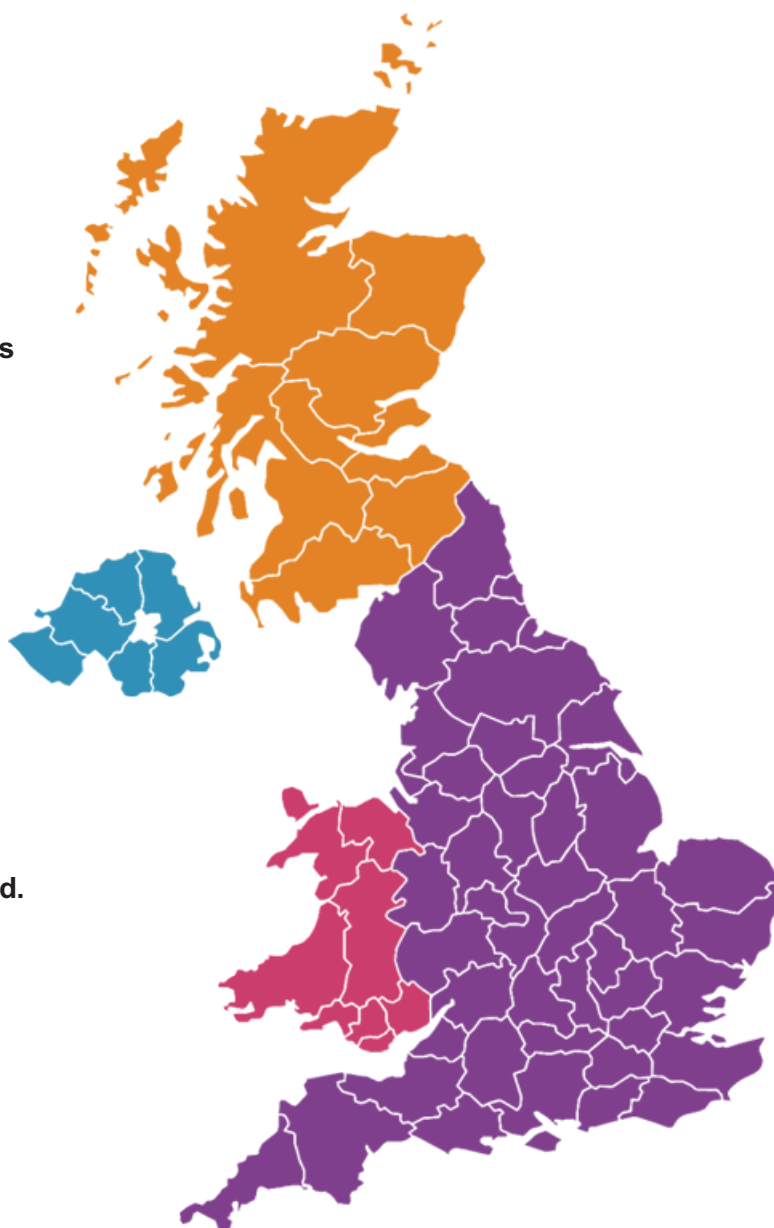
Key Issues:

Sexual abuse and violence against older victims is underrecognised and underreported.

Ageist attitudes about sexuality are barriers to understanding and help-seeking.

There is a lack of wider public understanding and awareness.

Greater understanding of the physical, psychological, and social consequences for older victims of sexual abuse is urgently needed.



Recommendations:

UK Government Research Focus

The UK government commissions a wide-reaching research project on the sexual abuse of older people in their own homes and community facilities, to ascertain the experiences, prevalence, and impact of sexual abuse and violence on the older population.

Sexual Violence and Rape Strategies

All police forces and local authorities/health and social care trusts across the UK, review their older people and sexual violence and rape strategies to ensure older people are actively included and reflected in their work and campaigns. These organisations need to proactively challenge ageism and the still prevalent cultural beliefs and myths surrounding older people as victim-survivors of sexual violence.

Dedicated Independent Sexual Violence Advocates (ISVAs) for Older People

Central support and funding provided to help place an older persons ISVA in every community. These roles would ensure specialist support and care for older victims of sexual violence and abuse.

Policy Problem:

While many aspects of violence, abuse and harm directed against older people are understudied and underknown, paramount among these is sexual abuse and sexual violence committed against people over the age of 60.

While global attention and research has recognised the nature of sexual violence as both a crime against human rights and as a health issue affecting millions, there has remained a lack of attention focused on sexual violence as an action against older people – as Hannah Bows notes “sexual violence sits awkwardly between elder abuse and domestic violence, and has been described as one of the last taboos in society.”¹ One key issue is a lack of public and practitioner understanding and interest in the sexual abuse of older people which can be attributed to stereotypical understandings of sexuality mixed with ageism, leading to preconceived notions around the sexual abuse of older victim-survivors.

For older victims in particular, ageist attitudes that revolve around deterioration and decay posit a view of older people as asexual.² While older people continue to both engage in normal sexual relationships³ and suffer from sexual abuse and rape⁴ – because of such attitudes and the taboo nature of older sexuality, understanding, belief, and research of the sexual abuse of older people is lacking among the general public, police, and the judicial system.⁵ As Bows and Westmarland note with their investigation into the notion of “real rape,” the stereotype of rape and sexual violence typically focuses on a young white victim, who is attacked at night by a stranger.⁶ This concept and other stereotypical notions around sexuality and sexual abuse excludes those victims and victim survivors who do not fit into this narrow dynamic like older people, and can lead to reluctance to report sexual assault and rape offences, and increased disbelief in victim-survivors’ stories from criminal justice agencies.⁷

As with the stereotyped view, most older victims of sexual abuse are women (sexual abuse of older males has been extremely under researched), there are a number of differences relating to the characteristics of older victims. In Chopin and Beauregard’s comparison study of sexual abuse of older people to sexual abuse of victims aged 18-45, they found that “elderly victims were more often assaulted when they were at home, vaginal intercourse was committed in the majority of cases, and physical violence was more prevalent, compared to younger victims.”⁸

The research literature on the subject suggests that a common characteristic of sexual abuse against older victims and victim-survivors is the high level of violence used by offenders. As with other forms of abuse featuring physical acts, the heavy nature of violence utilised by sexual abuse perpetrators can have a disproportionate effect on older victims and victim-survivors. Older victims are on the whole more physically fragile than younger victims and as such sexual violence can have differing complications and effects for those aged over 60. As a number of scholars have noted, the physical consequences of sexual violence in later life can include genital trauma, gastrointestinal, and musculoskeletal problems,⁹ as well as pelvic problems, broken bones, and dislocated joints.¹⁰ Mental health issues can also occur, with reports of anxiety and depression.¹¹ Jeary noted that other long term and life changing effects could result, with older victims feeling unable to continue living in their homes, suffering insomnia, incontinence, and nightmares.¹²

Wider social consequences can also be an effect of sexual abuse and violence on older victim-survivors. Bows notes that less trust of people (notably the gender that perpetrated the violent or abusive act), social isolation,

breakdown of relationships with family and friends, and low engagement/disengagement of community support networks were the most common social consequences described by practitioners and older victim-survivors.¹³

Sexual abuse cases to the Hourglass helpline include a broad range of sexual acts and violence committed against older people, “A handy man who has done jobs in the past...asking if he could take a shower. Asked if he could masturbate.” “Abuse in hospital. Inappropriate touching of a patient in a cubicle.”¹⁴

While sexual abuse is the least common abuse type that Hourglass sees, since 2019, Hourglass’ Helpline has seen an increase year on year in the amount of cases where sexual abuse is mentioned.

- 2019 – 21 cases where sexual abuse was mentioned (0.85% of total cases)
- 2020 – 34 cases where sexual abuse was mentioned (1.2% of total cases)
- 2021 – 68 cases where sexual abuse was mentioned (1.8% of total cases)
- 2022 – 106 cases where sexual abuse was mentioned (1.9% of total cases)

Hourglass knows that sexual abuse is often unreported with 83% of women who are raped not reporting this to authorities. It is, as such, likely that our 229 reported cases in the last four years are the tip of an invisible iceberg. Older victim survivors deserve real support, care and attention focused on sexual abuse, not ignorance, taboo, and stereotypes.

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¹ Sexual violence against older people – Hannah Bows

² Jones, H., & Powell, J. (2006). Old age, vulnerability, and sexual violence: Implications for knowledge and practice. *International Nursing Review*, 53(3), 211-216. doi:10.1111/j.1466-7657.2006.00457.x

³ <https://www.cqc.org.uk/publications/major-report/promoting-sexual-safety-through-empowerment>

⁴ <https://wearehourglass.org/sexual-abuse>

⁵ Bows, H., & Westmarland, N. (2015). Rape of Older People in the United Kingdom: Challenging the 'Real-rape' Stereotype. *British Journal of Criminology*, 57(1), 1-17. doi:10.1093/bjc/azv116

⁶ Bows, H., & Westmarland, N. (2015). Rape of Older People in the United Kingdom: Challenging the 'Real-rape' Stereotype. *British Journal of Criminology*, 57(1), 1-17. doi:10.1093/bjc/azv116

⁷ Brown, J. M., Hamilton, C., & O'Neill, D. (2007). Characteristics associated with rape attrition and the role played by scepticism or legal rationality by investigators and prosecutors. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 13(4), 355-370. doi:10.1080/10683160601060507

⁸ Chopin J, and Beauregard E (2020). Elderly sexual abuse: An examination of the criminal event. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*. Sep;32(6):706-726.

⁹ Bows, H. (2019). Sexual Violence Against Older Women in the UK. *Violence Against Older Women*, Volume 1, 81-95. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-16601-4_5

¹⁰ Fisher, B. S., & Regan, S. L. (2006). The Extent and Frequency of Abuse in the Lives of Older Women and Their Relationship with Health Outcomes. *The Gerontologist*, 46(2), 200-209. doi:10.1093/geront/46.2.200

¹¹ Bows, H. (2019). Sexual Violence Against Older Women in the UK. *Violence Against Older Women*, Volume 1, 81-95. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-16601-4_5

¹² Jeary, K. (2005). Sexual abuse and sexual offending against elderly people: A focus on perpetrators and victims. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 16(2), 328-343. doi:10.1080/14789940500096115

¹³ Bows, H. (2020). The other side of late-life intimacy? Sexual violence in later life. *Australasian Journal on Ageing* 39(1), 65-70.

¹⁴ Hourglass Helpline 2023



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.

You can also get in touch Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm.

Free 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 SERVICE: www.wearehourglass.org

ONLINE SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE 24/7:

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