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The Course of Domestic Abuse Among Chicago's Elderly: Risk Factors, Protective Behaviors, and Police Intervention

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Introduction

Elder abuse is a complex phenomenon that still lacks a single consistent definition (Anetzberger 2005; Erlingsson 2007). Since elder abuse was first discussed as a social problem in the mid-1970s, research into the prevention, detection, and understanding of victims and perpetrators has increased. Much of the research that has been conducted on elder abuse to date has been centered on prevalence, typology, and defining issues, including detection and risk indicators (Erlingsson 2007). However, there still remain many issues that need to be examined in this field (National Research Council 2003; Erlingsson 2007). Other research has focused on the perpetrators, and the consensus is that most of the perpetrators are family members and, more specifically, often spouses of victims (Pillemer and Finkelhor 1988; Davis, Medina, and Avitabile 2001).

Two broad based national studies of elder abuse prevalence were published in 2008 (Laumann, Leitsch, and Waite) and 2009 (Acierno, Hernandez-Tejada, Muzzy, and Steve). Acierno and colleagues attained higher prevalence estimates for physical and financial abuse, attributing that to the different questions used to assess these forms of abuse. While Laumann's study used only a single, non-contextualized item for each form of abuse, Acierno included context statements to illustrate that the form of abuse may be inflicted by a person known to the respondent (family member, caretaker, spouse, etc).

A landmark 2003 National Research Council report identified a number of risk factors for elder abuse that had been substantiated by numerous studies. Some of the risk factors pertain to the victim while others pertain to the abuser, the latter being more suggestive as a predictor of abuse (Anetzberger 2005).

There is limited research on the extent to which elderly victims use various services or engage in protective behaviors, as well as their efficacy. And while there has been research addressing the effectiveness of second responders or law enforcement officers who respond to incidents of intimate partner violence (see e.g. Davis, Maxwell, and Taylor 2006; Police Foundation 2005; Pate, Hamilton, and Annan 1992; and Casey et al. 2007), there is a dearth of research examining such roles when dealing with elderly victims.

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The Study

In this study, we surveyed elderly residents of Chicago. Our goal was to examine potential differences between those elderly residents who experienced at least one incident of domestic abuse (victims) and received a visit from a senior services officer (SSO) or domestic violence liaison officer (DVLO) from the Chicago Police Department (CPD), and those who did not. We also included a sample of elderly residents who had no incidents of abuse (non-victims) in order to establish risk factors that differentiate victims from non-victims. Elderly was defined as those sixty years of age or over, consistent with CPD and Illinois Criminal Code definitions. Domestic abuse incidents were defined as incidents perpetrated by either a family member or a member of the victim's household (i.e., someone who lives with the victim but is not a family member). In addition, we defined abuse to include physical, psychological, or financial abuse, and neglect. Our definitions of abuse were taken from previous victimization research (Brownell 1998; Davis and Webster 2005; Wolf and Pillemer 1989).

Our study relied on examining two groups of elderly residents: (1) a statistically derived sample of all elderly residents in Chicago with phones, and (2) a convenience sample of elderly victims who were visited by a SSO or DVLO of the CPD. Participants were interviewed twice (Time 1 and Time 2), separated by about ten months. Using the community-based sample, we (1) determined the prevalence rates for elder abuse in Chicago, and (2) established whether there were any differences in demographic characteristics and risk factors associated with victims and non-victims. Using the community and police samples, we (1) assessed the extent to which victim groups differed on various demographic characteristics, risk factors, and protective behaviors; (2) identified differences between victim groups based on the type and frequency of victimization; (3) analyzed subsequent victimization; (4) calculated the proportion of cases in which abuse increased, decreased, maintained, or desisted; and (5) examined whether there were any demographic characteristics, risk factors, or protective behaviors that predicted the course of abuse over time.

Research Site and Methods

We selected Chicago as the site for our research primarily because of the Chicago Police Department's heavy emphasis on elder abuse. Specifically, the CPD has an established Senior Citizens Services Section staffed by twenty-five SSOs and twenty-five DVLOs who respond to crimes against the elderly and receive referrals from patrol officers, hotlines for the aging, and other provider agencies. These fifty officers also engage in prevention and outreach. The CPD provides a mandatory in-person follow-up with elderly victims of abuse by a SSO generally within two weeks of an incident to which police responded.

Phone interviews of community victims and non-victims were conducted by the Schaefer Center for Public Policy, University of Baltimore, Maryland, and phone interviews of victims from the police sample were conducted by Police Foundation staff. Total sample size was 1,795, from which we established there were 1,603 non-victims, 153 victims, and 39 for whom victimization status could not be determined.

A sampling strategy using a databank of phone numbers in Chicago was used to obtain the community sample (victims and non-victims). In order to obtain our sample of victims from the police department, SSOs and DVLOs contacted elder abuse victims and provided a brief description of the phone survey and a volunteer form in which the victim would indicate his/her willingness to be contacted. The forms were returned to the Police Foundation to make contact with the willing victims.

Prior to beginning data collection, we conducted training sessions with the Senior Citizen Services Section and Domestic Violence Office, along with staff from the Research and Development Division, of the CPD. Training was also provided to all interviewers by the staff of the National Center for Victims of Crime.

We conducted interviews with a total of 121 victims in the community sample, 48 victims in the police sample, and 159 non-victims in the community sample. While our sample size was larger for the community groups, our response rate and cooperation rate was higher for the police sample, and the refusal rate and attrition were both lower in the police sample. The study's power was sufficient for detecting medium effect sizes or larger, though insufficient for detecting small effect sizes.

Measures

In order to address our research questions, we examined existing measures from a variety of sources (primarily Pillemer 1985; Bowker 1984), and used those to develop two surveys, one for victims and one for non-victims. The final surveys by Davis and Webster (2005) included questions about types of abuse (physical, psychological, financial, and neglect); dependency status of participants (dependence of the abuser on the victim and vice-versa); and service use or other protective behaviors. We used a standardized screener to assess cognitive capacity/dementia (Callahan et al. 2002) and four broad abuse screening questions.

Findings

Prevalence rates for our sample were similar to those found in other studies of elder abuse. For financial abuse/exploitation we attained a prevalence rate of 2.28 percent. For psychological/emotional abuse our rate of prevalence was 4.61 percent. We obtained a prevalence rate for physical abuse of less than 1 percent, and for neglect the rate was 1.37 percent. Using a 95 percent confidence interval, all of the ranges were reasonably small.

Our findings suggest a number of risk factors for abuse among our community sample participants, many of which are consistent with past research. First, victims and non-victims differ with regard to race and household size. Specifically, blacks were more likely to be elder abuse victims than were whites. This finding is consistent with other studies that have found racial differences in victimization (Tatara 1999; Laumann et al. 2008), and with past data generated by the CPD (2005). In addition, victims were significantly more likely to live with two or more people than were the non-victims, and non-victims were much more likely to live alone, consistent with Lachs et al. (1996).

Victims were significantly more likely to need assistance from their abuser in paying for their rent, groceries, or medicines, providing personal care, and assisting with daily activities, than were non-victims from their primary significant others (PSOs). Abusers were significantly more likely to be either entirely or somewhat dependent on their victims for a place to live, for having groceries or expenses paid, for cooking and cleaning, and for other daily responsibilities, than were the PSOs of the non-victims, consistent with past findings (Pillemer and Finkelhor 1989; Wolf and Pillemer 1989).

There were a number of characteristics that differentiate abusers from non-abusive PSOs. First, victims were more likely to report that their abusers had engaged in deviant behaviors in the past (destroyed other's property, been violent towards others, or been arrested) as compared to non-victims' PSOs. This is not surprising given that previous work by Lachs and Pillemer (1995) suggested that violence toward others was an abuser risk factor. In addition, victims were much more likely to report that their abusers had emotional problems, had been hospitalized for psychiatric reasons, and had both drinking and drug problems, compared to non-victims' PSOs. These findings, too, confirm past research on mental illness and elder abuse (e.g., Acierno et al. 2009; Godkin, Wolf, and Pillemer 1989; Wolf and Pillemer 1989). Similarly, substance abuse by perpetrators has been shown to be associated with elder abuse in other studies (e.g., Acierno et al. 2009; Reay and Browne 2001). In addition, abusers were more likely to have serious stress factors in the past year, such as job loss, relocation, serious illness, and death of a member of their household, compared to those of non-victims' PSOs, findings that are consistent with those of Godkin and colleagues (1989). However, this contradicts the assertion by Acierno et al. (2009) that caregiver stress does not appear to be associated with likelihood of perpetration, although they suggest that caregiver stress may affect the intensity of the abuse.

Risk Factors Differentiating Victims in the Community and Police Samples

In comparing characteristics of victims in both sample groups, there were a number of differences. First, while females had a higher rate of victimization in both groups, males made up a higher proportion of those in the police sample, suggesting that they may be more willing to contact the police when they are being mistreated, as compared to females, although we do not know how many of the victims in the police sample had themselves contacted the police. While blacks were disproportionately represented in both samples, they were significantly more likely to be in the police sample than were whites. This is likely to be due to the fact that black victims are more likely to report violence to the police (Felson, Messner, and Hoskin 1999; Hart and Rennison 2003; Rennison 1999). Victims from the police sample were more likely to report that the perpetrators were non-family household members or other more distant family members, compared to community victims who were more likely to be abused by immediate family members. This may suggest that family members may be less willing to get police involved when their abuse is at the hands of a close relative. Victims in the police sample were more likely to report that their abusers depended on them for a place to live and to have their groceries and expenses paid by the victim than were those in the community sample. The fact that abuser dependency was greater for those in the police sample may be due to victims' unwillingness to throw out a dependent abuser and to instead resort to police assistance.

Victim respondents from the police sample were significantly more likely to indicate that their abuser had a history of violence towards others, had been arrested in the past, had emotional

problems, had been hospitalized for psychiatric disorders, or had drinking problems, than those victims in the community sample. This may be due to the fact that psychiatric, alcohol, and drug problems are often associated with deviant or illegal behaviors (see, e.g., Murdoch and Ross 1990; Hodgins and Müller-Isberner 2004; Boles and Miotto 2003), thereby requiring greater police intervention.

Abuse Types and Frequency Across Victim Samples

We examined victimization as reported by the broad categories of abuse and found no differences between the sample groups with regard to financial abuse, neglect, or emotional abuse (as assessed by the abuse screener). However, victims in the police sample were much more likely to have reported being physically abused, which is not surprising given that physical abuse is more likely to require or result in a police response. The fact that the screener did not detect sample group differences for the other three types of abuse may indicate lack of sensitivity of the screening instrument as suggested by Acierno and colleagues (2009), who asserted that when more context-specific questions about abuse are used, the level of reported abuse increases.

When using context-specific items to assess abuse, there were considerable differences across a number of forms of abuse. First, victims from the police sample were significantly more likely to have experienced a number of forms of emotional abuse, such as having a household member insult or swear at them, threaten to lock them out of the house, restrict their use of the telephone, or threaten to hit or throw something. With regard to financial abuse, victims from the police sample were significantly more likely to have had the abuser destroy their property.¹ Similarly, with regard to physical violence, those in the police sample were more likely to have reported that a household member had thrown something at them, pushed, grabbed, or shoved them, slapped them, threatened them with a weapon, injured them with a knife, kicked, bit, or hit them with a fist, beat them up, or threatened to kill or hurt them. However, in Time 2, these differences were not present, suggesting that the police intervention may have had an impact upon reducing the proportion of cases of subsequent victimization.

Poly-victimization. Victims in the police sample were also significantly more likely to have experienced multiple forms of abuse (poly-victimization) at the time of the initial interviews. Yet, this effect was not present in Time 2, suggesting the efficacy of the police intervention in reducing the proportion of those with poly-victimization. This trend should be further explored in subsequent research.

Frequently occurring forms of abuse. While there was a significantly greater likelihood of at least one subsequent abuse incident for those in the police sample, the number of forms of abuse that occurred frequently (>10 times) went down by almost 50 percent for the victims in the police sample, from about six forms of frequently occurring abuse to 3.5, suggesting that the police intervention by officers specially trained to deal with domestic abuse and/or elder abuse was efficacious.

¹ Because the financial abuse scale was not reliable, it is not certain whether destruction of property is actually a form of financial abuse or instead may represent a form of emotional abuse.

Sample Group Differences in Protective and Service-Seeking Behaviors

When controlling for demographic variables such as sex, race, and household size, victims in the police sample were significantly more likely to have engaged in protective behaviors and sought support than those in the community sample. However, a greater proportion of those in the community sample reported having sought help from the police than did those in the police sample. This is probably due to the fact that victims in the police sample had received a visit from a specially trained officer prior to our initial interview, so they did not need to contact the police again. The findings suggest that the SSOs or DVLOs may have been instrumental in encouraging victims to use available resources even if they had not called the police themselves. Additionally, the proportion of victims in the police sample who engaged in protective and service-seeking behaviors went up in Time 2, including seeking help from the police. This may mean that the victims in the police sample were satisfied with the initial contact they had with the police and were more likely to contact them in the future. Besides seeking help from the police, the only other behavior that Time 1 victims in the community sample were more likely to engage in than those in the police sample was talking with friends or family about abuse. It seems, then, that victims in the community sample resort to seeking social support as opposed to more formal means for protecting themselves or getting various support services, which could also be due to the fact that the type of abuse they experienced was less likely to be physical.

The findings overall seem to suggest that the referrals and/or other information received in their initial contact with the SSOs or DVLOs were helpful to victims, by providing resources and guidance about what types of support they could seek to prevent, reduce, or stop subsequent abuse. And it also appears that these protective and service-seeking behaviors may have influenced the abusive outcomes. Since this study represents the first known data collection effort related to the role of police in elder abuse, more rigorous follow-up studies are necessary to confirm the differences found between victims who were visited by officers specially trained to deal with domestic abuse and/or elder abuse and those who were not.

Limitations of the Present Study

This study had a number of limitations including: (1) oversampling in areas within Chicago that had higher proportions of elderly (via census blocks); (2) underrepresentation of Hispanics and Asians, and overrepresentation of blacks; (3) not conducting interviews in Spanish; (4) using an abuse screener that was not highly sensitive; (5) using some measures that lacked historical evidence of reliability and validity data; (6) conducting interviews by phone; (7) excluding sexual abuse; (8) only considering domestic abuse of the elderly and not abuse perpetrated by others (e.g., abuse from strangers or internet scamming); and (9) conducting the study in just one site with specific and unique characteristics.

Implications

The results of this study suggest the need for future research in examining the role of police in intervention with elder abuse victims. Indeed, using a multivariate regression model, we found that those victims who received a visit by a specially trained officer were more likely to have engaged in service-seeking and protective measures than those who did not. Victims in the police sample were more likely to have experienced a range of abuse types and behaviors, including

poly-victimization, in the first interview, but by the follow-up interview these differences were no longer evident, suggesting that the visits by specially trained officers were efficacious in reducing the proportion of police victims. Additionally, when examining the course of abuse for those in the police sample, the number of frequently occurring (> 10 times in the past year) forms of abuse were reduced from about 6 to around 3.5, further illustrating the effectiveness of police contact. This certainly has implications for police agencies that are considering establishing elder abuse units or providing specialized training for their officers in domestic abuse of the elderly. Although this is the first exploratory study focused on the role of the police in elder abuse, future research using more rigorous designs would allow for more conclusive and comprehensive results.

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About the Police Foundation

The Police Foundation is a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting innovation and improvement in policing. Established in 1970, the foundation has conducted seminal research in police behavior, policy, and procedure and works to transfer to local agencies the best information about practices for dealing effectively with a range of important police operational and administrative concerns.

Our purpose is to help the police be more effective in doing their job. To accomplish our mission, we work closely with police officers and police departments across the country, and it is in their hard work and contributions that our accomplishments are rooted.

The foundation helps police departments to acquire both the knowledge gained through research and the tools needed to integrate that knowledge into police practices. Working with law enforcement agencies seeking to improve performance, service delivery, accountability, and community satisfaction with police services, the foundation offers a wide range of services and expertise.

The foundation has done much of the research that led to a questioning of the traditional model of professional law enforcement and toward a new view of policing—one emphasizing a *community* orientation. Sometimes, foundation research findings have challenged police traditions and beliefs. For example, when police agencies employed routine preventive patrol as a principal anti-crime strategy, a landmark foundation experiment in Kansas City showed that routine patrol in marked patrol cars did not significantly affect crime rates. To address the intense debate about how police should respond to incidents of domestic violence, the foundation conducted the Minneapolis Domestic Violence Experiment—the first scientifically controlled test of the effects of arrest for any crime.

The foundation has encouraged the creation of new forums for the debate and dissemination of ideas to improve American policing, and helped create independent organizations dedicated to the advancement of policing, including the Police Executive Research Forum, the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives, and the Police Management Association.

A guiding tenet of the foundation is that to advance, policing—like other public services—deserves the best of thorough, objective study, and the impetus of new ideas that have the widest possible dissemination. Foundation research findings are published as an information service and are widely used in college, university, and law enforcement training classrooms in the U.S. and abroad.

Independent and unconstrained by partisan imperatives, the Police Foundation speaks with a unique and objective voice. Our focus and perspective is the *whole* of American policing, rather than any single facet.

Hubert Williams is president of the foundation. A 30-year veteran of policing, Williams came to Washington and the Police Foundation in 1985, after serving for eleven years as director of police in Newark, NJ.

William G. Milliken, formerly governor of Michigan and chairman of the National Governors Association, is chairman of the foundation's board of directors.

Motivating all of the foundation's efforts is the goal of efficient, effective, humane policing that operates within the framework of democratic principles and the highest ideals of the nation.



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