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# A case study of the Edmonton Police Service's response to senior abuse

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In collaboration with

Senior Protection Unit, Edmonton Police Service

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A case study of the Edmonton Police Service's response to senior abuse

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## Executive summary

Seniors safety, including the elimination of neglect, abuse and violence against older persons (hereafter referred to as “senior abuse”), is a national and international priority.<sup>1</sup> In order to develop evidence-based solutions, data on the nature and extent of senior abuse are required. As law enforcement agencies are engaged to respond to some incidents of senior abuse, partnerships with police services can help shed light on what data are collected and how they are used. Justice Canada collaborated with the Edmonton Police Service’s (EPS) Senior Protection Unit to examine data collection practices and responses to senior abuse in Edmonton, Alberta.

Alberta has adopted a coordinated community response (CCR) model to help address senior abuse. Under a CCR model, community organizations and service providers collaborate to offer people-centred services for seniors and families of seniors affected by abuse. The goal is to connect clients with the appropriate supports and interventions with respect to housing, finances, legal aid, court support, health services, counselling, and dispute resolution. In Edmonton, the CCR model includes triaging senior abuse cases according to risk level, with the Elder Abuse Resources and Supports Program (EARS) managing low- to medium-risk cases, and the Seniors Protection Partnership (SPP) managing high-risk cases. The EPS’s Senior Protection Unit has dedicated detectives who handle complex and serious senior abuse cases and work in partnership with the SPP, the team managing high-risk cases, while also referring lower-risk cases to EARS, when appropriate.

This case study examined 691 senior abuse incidents or suspicions (hereafter referred to as “reports”) from 2015 to 2021, identified using two data sources: the SPP database and the Edmonton Police Reporting and Occurrence System (EPROS), a record management system used by the EPS. This represents all senior abuse reports that came to the attention of the Senior Protection Unit during this period. The study also included two group interviews with 10 key informants, including detectives from the Senior Protection Unit, representatives from the City of Edmonton, and community service providers who are members of Edmonton’s Elder Abuse Consultation Team via the SPP.

Although senior abuse is a significant public health and justice issue, it remains under-reported. Findings highlighted numerous methods for seeking help or reporting senior abuse in Edmonton other than calling the police. According to interviewees, reports of abuse primarily come to the attention of police through the public hotline (the “Elder Abuse Intake line”) from people other than the victim, such as a family member; a healthcare or social service provider (e.g., a doctor, nurse, physiotherapist, social worker); or others (e.g., a bank teller, neighbour). Several barriers prevent victims, witnesses or others from reporting senior abuse, the most common being the victim’s desire to protect their abuser—who may be a family member such as a child or grandchild, an intimate partner or even a friend—from any legal consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> The five priority themes are: combatting ageism; generating more and better data on prevalence, risk and protective factors; developing and scaling up cost-effective solutions; investing in generating data on the costs of abuse and on the cost-effectiveness of solutions; and raising funds for both research and intervention. These priorities should be developed using a life-course approach, a gender analysis, an intersectional approach, an inclusive and participatory approach, and a dual public health and advocacy perspective (World Health Organization 2022). The content developed in this case study aligns with the second theme, “generating more and better data on prevalence, risk and protective factors.”

According to interviewees, senior victims were often women, had low income and had some level of diminished cognitive capacity. Interviewees also shared that victims were most often White, Indigenous or Asian, a finding consistent with the population distribution in Edmonton. Abusers were predominately men, often the victim's adult child or grandchild who may be struggling with a variety of personal challenges, such as mental health and addiction issues.

Data showed that over two-thirds (67%) of reports involved at least some type of physical abuse, over one-quarter (28%) involved some type of financial abuse, and over one-tenth (15%) involved some type of psychological or emotional abuse.<sup>2</sup> Interviewees noted there is often more than one type of abuse in a case, and other types and forms, such as neglect, exist despite not being reflected in the data. Other types may be unrecognized by the victim as abuse, be subtle, or be difficult to prove. Though data were too limited to analyze statistically, interviewees noted that while some reports are closed relatively quickly (i.e., under three months), some may take much longer, even years, due to the complexities of the investigation.

Over four-fifths (80%) of senior abuse reports were addressed or resolved through means outside of the justice system, such as through the supports and services provided via the SPP. One-fifth (20%) of reports resulted in charges being laid, of which half (50%) resulted in a stay of proceedings or the charges being withdrawn, and less than half (42%) resulted in a finding of guilt. Most (80%) guilty verdicts led to a custodial sentence as the most serious sentence in the case, often for short terms (i.e., less than one year). The rest led to a probation order (17%) or fine (3%).

Findings highlighted that senior abuse may be reported and recorded under various disciplines or systems. As well, responses to senior abuse are multifaceted and the criminal justice system is only one option. Numerous challenges exist, particularly with respect to financial abuse, including power of attorneys, personal directives and other financial abuse-related claims. Interviewees also identified helpful responses to senior abuse, such as applying a multidisciplinary and people-centred approach, having dedicated senior abuse professionals and training, and providing peer-support groups for seniors.

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<sup>2</sup> Percentages do not add up to 100% as cases can include multiple types of abuse.



## 1. Introduction

Canada's population is aging, with a growing number of seniors<sup>3</sup> representing an increasingly larger share of the country's demographic makeup. According to the 2021 Census, there are now over 7 million people aged 65 and older in Canada, representing approximately one-fifth (19%) of the total population. By 2060, one-in-four people in Canada could be seniors.<sup>4</sup>

Alongside growing numbers of seniors, the rate of violence against seniors also continues to rise.<sup>5</sup> Segments of the senior population are at increased risk of experiencing abuse, such as those living in institutional settings (e.g., long-term care homes, prisons), those who are socially isolated, those with cognitive and physical impairments, and those who are dependent on others for care.<sup>6</sup> The consequences of abuse include the decline of mental or physical health, poor quality of life, hospitalization, nursing home placement, and even premature mortality.<sup>7</sup> As a result, eliminating abuse and neglect of and violence against older persons (hereafter referred to as "senior abuse")<sup>8</sup> is an increasing urgent priority in Canada and worldwide.

Though numerous definitions are currently used in Canada to identify senior abuse, the Toronto Declaration of 2002 on the Global Prevention of Elder Abuse remains a key reference for many stakeholders,<sup>9</sup> which defines senior abuse as: "a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person."<sup>10</sup>

Senior abuse can include physical abuse such as assault, financial abuse such as fraud, psychological or emotional abuse such as threats and harassment, and sexual assault. It can also include mental cruelty, irresponsible medication practices (e.g., overmedication, withholding medication), humiliation, intimidation, censoring mail, invasion of privacy, denial of access to visitors, violation of human rights, neglect, and spiritual, religious or cultural forms of abuse.<sup>11</sup>

In Canada, provincial, territorial and federal governments share constitutional responsibility in the area of senior abuse. Certain forms of abuse fall under the jurisdiction of provinces and territories through

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<sup>3</sup> There is no nationally agreed-upon age demarcation that defines a "senior." Unless otherwise noted, this report refers to "seniors" as individuals aged 65 or older, as 65 is the typical starting age for retirement and certain social services, either through federal (e.g., [Canada Pension Plan](#), [Old Age Security](#), [Guaranteed Income Supplement](#)) or provincial programs (in Alberta, for example, the [Alberta Seniors Benefit](#)).

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada 2019

<sup>5</sup> According to Statistics Canada's Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, the national rate of police-reported violence against seniors increased from 183 per 100,000 population in 2010 to 223 in 2020, representing a 22% increase over the past decade (Conroy and Sutton 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Brijnath et al. 2021; Conroy and Sutton 2022; Pillemer et al. 2016

<sup>7</sup> Beaulieu et al. 2021; Conroy and Sutton 2022; Yunus et al. 2019

<sup>8</sup> Various terms are currently in use in Canada to identify the problem of senior abuse, including: "elder abuse," "elder abuse and neglect," "abuse of older persons," "abuse of seniors," "mistreatment of older adults," and "abuse of vulnerable adults" (Beaulieu and St-Martin 2022). This report uses the term "senior abuse" to align with the language used by the Edmonton Police Service, the subject of this case study.

<sup>9</sup> Beaulieu and St-Martin 2022

<sup>10</sup> World Health Organization 2002

<sup>11</sup> Beaulieu and St-Martin 2022

their respective protection, guardianship and family violence laws.<sup>12</sup> Others are captured in the *Criminal Code* such as assault under section 266, fraud under section 380, and failing without lawful excuse to perform the duty of persons to provide necessities of life under section 215.<sup>13</sup> The *Criminal Code* also includes a provision under section 718.2, requiring the court to consider any relevant mitigating or aggravating factors related to the offence or offender in the sentencing process. This includes: an offence motivated by age-based bias, prejudice or hate; an offence that impacted the victim significantly considering their age; and that the offender, in committing the offence, abused a position of trust or authority in relation to the victim.

Senior abuse is a phenomenon, like sexual assault and intimate partner violence, that is under-reported due to the complex dynamics and vulnerabilities involved, and because of the methodological limitations of national prevalence studies, which exclude some relevant contexts (e.g., First Nations living on reserves, older persons living in long-term care facilities).<sup>14</sup>

In addition to being under-reported more generally, senior abuse is rarely brought to the attention of police, and if it is, rarely results in charges being laid or processed through the court system.<sup>15</sup> To address the challenges of under-reporting, some police services across the country have adopted mandatory police training to identify senior abuse and created specialized senior abuse units.<sup>16</sup> For example, the Ottawa Police Service (OPS) created an Elder Abuse Section in 2005, one of the first police forces in Canada to do so.

In 2011, Justice Canada conducted a case study on the OPS Elder Abuse Section, which involved reviewing case files from the inception of the section in 2005 until 2010.<sup>17</sup> The study report, *Empirical Examination of Elder Abuse: A review of files from the Elder Abuse Section of the Ottawa Police Service* (2013), recommended that conducting case studies on other police services with a specialized senior abuse unit would be valuable to further the knowledge and understanding of the responses to senior abuse.

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<sup>12</sup> Some provinces and territories have responded to the abuse of seniors through their respective protection, guardianship and family violence laws as a multisystem approach to protecting vulnerable adults. For example, in Alberta, the *Protection for Persons in Care Act* notes every person can report abuse of an adult who receives care of support services from a lodge accommodation, hospital, mental health facility, nursing home, social care facility, or other service provider.

<sup>13</sup> The *Criminal Code* also includes specific dispositions (sections 380.1, 718.02 and 718.04) that require the court to take age or vulnerabilities due to personal circumstances into account as an aggravating factor or disability-based bias, prejudice or hate, and consider whether, in committing the offence, the offender abused or neglected a position of trust or authority.

<sup>14</sup> See for example: House of Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights 2021; Beaulieu and St-Martin 2022.

<sup>15</sup> House of Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights 2021, page 18, see for example: JUST, Evidence, 6 May 2021 (Marie Beaulieu); JUST, Brief, May 2021 (Canadian Centre for Elder Law).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ha and Code 2013



## 1.1 Purpose of the study

This study examined the Edmonton Police Service's data collection practices and responses to senior abuse. The study was modeled after Justice Canada's case study on the OPS Elder Abuse Section.<sup>18</sup> The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What is the nature and outcome of incidents involving senior abuse that come to the attention of the Edmonton Police Service's Senior Protection Unit?
  - Who are the victims and alleged abusers? What are the demographic characteristics of the victims and alleged abusers?
  - What is the relationship between the victims and alleged abusers?
  - What are the types and forms of abuse being reported?
  - What charges are being laid? What alternatives to charging are being used?
  - What are the case outcomes?
  - What are successful police practices in responding to and investigating reports of senior abuse? What are the challenges?

## 2. Background: Edmonton's coordinated community response to senior abuse

Under Alberta's provincial strategy to prevent and address senior abuse,<sup>19</sup> Edmonton uses a coordinated community response (CCR) model, which involves community partnerships that use people-centred approaches such as skilled assessment and case management, in an effort to connect victims and families affected by senior abuse with appropriate supports or interventions. CCR models typically involve a variety of services such as counselling, dispute resolution, legal aid, crisis response, health services, safe and affordable housing or shelter services, court support, and financial assistance.<sup>20</sup> These models aim to provide a meaningful, coordinated and integrated approach to senior abuse by leveraging knowledge, services and expertise across multiple agencies and partners.

CCR models may look different in each community. Edmonton's CCR model, for example, includes triaging senior abuse reports into one of two streams, according to their risk level:

- The Elder Abuse Resource and Supports (EARS) Program: Provides support, assessment and referrals to seniors who are at low to medium risk of experiencing abuse in their home situation. EARS also provides education and awareness building to community members. EARS cases do not require police intervention.
- The Seniors Protection Partnership (SPP): Provides support, assessment, intervention and referrals to seniors who are at high risk of experiencing abuse. The SPP also provides education and awareness building to community members. SPP cases may require police intervention or

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<sup>18</sup> Though other police services with specialized senior abuse units were identified throughout the country, the subject of this case study was selected based on capacity and availability.

<sup>19</sup> See [Elder abuse prevention strategy | Alberta.ca](#); Alberta uses the following definition of senior abuse: "any intentional or reckless act or wilful and negligent disregard, occurring within a relationship of family, trust or dependency, directed at someone 65 years of age or older, that: causes physical harm; causes emotional or psychological harm; involves the misappropriate or misuse of money or other personal possessions or personal or real property; subjects an individual to non-consensual sexual contact, activity or behaviour; and fails to provide the necessities of life."

<sup>20</sup> See the Alberta Government's Elder abuse prevention strategy 2022-2027 ([Elder abuse prevention strategy | Alberta.ca](#)).

investigation. In cases where immediate support and intervention is needed, a police constable, a social worker and, if possible, a nurse will mitigate the risk and stabilize the situation. The victims and others involved in the incident may then be referred to other appropriate community supports and services. In some cases, further police investigation is required. The SPP involves a partnership between the City of Edmonton, Catholic Social Services, Covenant Health, the Sage Seniors Association, as well as the Edmonton Police Service (EPS).

A senior abuse report is identified as high-risk if it requires more than one discipline to address and mitigate the risk, and if the report includes one or more of the following factors:

- presence of a criminal record or a history of violence;
- victim’s deterioration of physical or mental health, including diminished cognition or capacity;
- alleged abuser’s substance abuse or gambling difficulties;
- suspicion of mishandling, using or selling the victim’s medication;
- severe injury or financial loss;
- alleged abuser’s ease of access to the victim;
- previous intervention or services provided to the victim;
- social isolation of the victim;
- burnt-out of the caregiver; or
- codependent relationship between the victim and alleged abuser.

Edmonton also has the Elder Abuse Consultation Team (EACT), a team that meets monthly to discuss complex and serious senior abuse cases requiring assistance, support, guidance and intervention. The EACT includes representatives from the SPP and other community agencies and organizations such as Operation Friendship Seniors Society,<sup>21</sup> the Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee,<sup>22</sup> Sage Seniors Safe House<sup>23</sup> and ASSIST Community Services Centre.<sup>24</sup> Anyone can bring a case forward for consultation, whether it be an EACT member or someone from the community. Specialized identification and intervention models, such as CCRs, have been identified as promising practices in addressing senior abuse.<sup>25</sup> For a detailed overview explaining the five-step process to develop a CCR, see the toolkit developed by the Alberta government.

“The right partnerships can connect those who don’t need to be in the justice system with the right resources at the right time.” – Seniors Protection Partnership

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<sup>21</sup> Operation Friendship Seniors Society provides services to seniors aged 55 and older who are experiencing a variety of social issues such as mental health and homelessness.

<sup>22</sup> The Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee provides a variety of services such as: guardianship (e.g., assist with personal decision-making related to health care, where to live, who to associate with, participation in social activities, participation in educational, vocational and other training, employment, and legal proceedings); trusteeship (i.e., assist with financial decisions); capacity assessment information and court applications; investigation of complaints about decision-makers; and planning for the future (e.g., wills, personal directives).

<sup>23</sup> Sage Seniors Safe House provides information and services that promote socialization, intellectual stimulation, skill development, safety, and overall well-being of seniors.

<sup>24</sup> Edmonton’s CCR model for family violence more broadly.

<sup>25</sup> Alberta Government 2022; Beaulieu and St-Martin 2022; House of Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights 2021

### 3. Methodology

This case study used a mixed-methods approach. First, the EPS' Senior Protection Unit created a custom database of all incidents or suspicions (hereafter referred to as "reports"; N = 691) of senior abuse coming to their attention from 2015 to 2021. This was done by gathering information from two sources:

- The SPP database: Managed by Catholic Social Services and includes information<sup>26</sup> on all senior abuse reports coming to the SPP's attention, which may or may not include police involvement.
- The Edmonton Police Reporting and Occurrence System (EPROS): An electronic case management system that stores official police case files.

In addition, two semi-structured group interviews were conducted by Justice Canada to complement the report-based data and to contextualize the role of police in responding to senior abuse. The first interview was with the EPS's Senior Protection Unit, which included two participants. The second interview with the EACT involved eight participants, including representatives from the City of Edmonton, Covenant Health, Catholic Social Services, Seniors' Association for Greater Edmonton, Seniors Safe House, the Office of the Public Guardian and Trustee, the Edmonton Police Service and Operation Friendship Seniors Society. A total of 10 key informants participated in this study.

No ethical concerns were identified with the study. To protect the confidentiality of persons involved, personal identifiers were removed from the research database. All focus group participants were provided with letters of information about the study and consented to participation. None of the participants are directly identified in the report.

### 4. Limitations

Due to methodological challenges, and data quality and availability issues, a limited number of variables were included in the final dataset of police reports:

- victim and alleged abuser's age;
- victim and alleged abuser's gender;
- alleged abuser's relationship to senior;
- type of abuse (using the *Criminal Code* section as a proxy); and
- final outcome of an arrest or prosecution (i.e., disposition).

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<sup>26</sup> The SPP database includes information on the presence of various social issues (both for the senior victim and for the alleged abuser) such as addiction and mental health issues, low income, family disputes, vulnerability factors, housing issues, criminal history, and history of family violence. These variables, however, are not consistently reported on which ultimately limited the usability of the database for this study.

The EPS recognizes six types of abuse: physical,<sup>27</sup> financial,<sup>28</sup> psychological or emotional,<sup>29</sup> sexual,<sup>30</sup> neglect<sup>31</sup> and medication.<sup>32</sup> This study identified the type of abuse in a report using police charge data. Due to the low number of senior abuse reports that progress to police charges, this information was only available for one-fifth (20%; n = 141) of reports examined; these charges pertained to physical, financial, and psychological or emotional abuse.

## 5. Findings

This section presents the results of the case study. The first subsection examines the ways abuse is reported and at what points police intervention may occur. The following subsections provide a snapshot of victim, alleged abuser and incident characteristics, and report outcomes. The final subsection gives an overview of promising practices identified by interviewees. Qualitative information from the interviews are included, where appropriate, throughout the analysis.

### 5.1 Reporting abuse and police points of entry

Reports of senior abuse come to the Senior Protection Unit's attention directly from victims, families or witnesses via the police line or filtered through the Elder Abuse Intake line, a public hotline managed by Catholic Social Services where cases are triaged according to their risk level:

- low- to medium-risk cases are referred to EARS; and
- high-risk cases are referred to the SPP.<sup>33</sup>

The Senior Protection Unit might also receive reports of senior abuse through referrals from community organizations and agencies, as well as service providers.<sup>34</sup> According to the unit, complex and serious senior abuse reports primarily come to their attention through the Elder Abuse Intake line, often from someone other than the senior victim themselves such as a family member of the senior; a healthcare or social service provider (e.g., a doctor, nurse, physiotherapist, social worker); or others (e.g., a bank teller, neighbour). Interviewees noted that the most common barrier to reporting senior abuse was the

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<sup>27</sup> According to the SPP, physical abuse includes any kind of physical assault, such as slapping, pushing, kicking, punching, or injuring with an object or weapon. It also includes deliberate exposure to severe weather, inappropriate use of medication and unnecessary physical restraint ([Elder Abuse \(edmontonpolice.ca\)](#); accessed 19 December 2022).

<sup>28</sup> According to the SPP, financial abuse includes the misuse of a senior person's funds or property through fraud, trickery or force ([Elder Abuse \(edmontonpolice.ca\)](#); accessed 19 December 2022).

<sup>29</sup> According to the SPP, psychological or emotional abuse includes humiliation, isolation, intimidation, threats, and inappropriate control of the senior's activities, which includes the removal of decision-making power when the senior is still of sound mind ([Elder Abuse \(edmontonpolice.ca\)](#); accessed 19 December 2022).

<sup>30</sup> According to the SPP, sexual abuse include sexual contact without consent ([Elder Abuse \(edmontonpolice.ca\)](#); accessed 19 December 2022).

<sup>31</sup> According to the SPP, neglect is the lack of action required to meet the needs of an elderly person. It includes inadequate provision of food, clothing, shelter, required medication or other kinds of health and personal care, as well as social companionship ([Elder Abuse \(edmontonpolice.ca\)](#); accessed 19 December 2022).

<sup>32</sup> According to the SPP, medication abuse includes the misuse of an older person's medications and prescriptions on purpose or by accident, which can also include withholding medication, over-medicating or not complying with prescription refills ([Elder Abuse \(edmontonpolice.ca\)](#); accessed 19 December 2022).

<sup>33</sup> For more information, see section [Background: Edmonton's Coordinated Community Response to Senior Abuse](#).

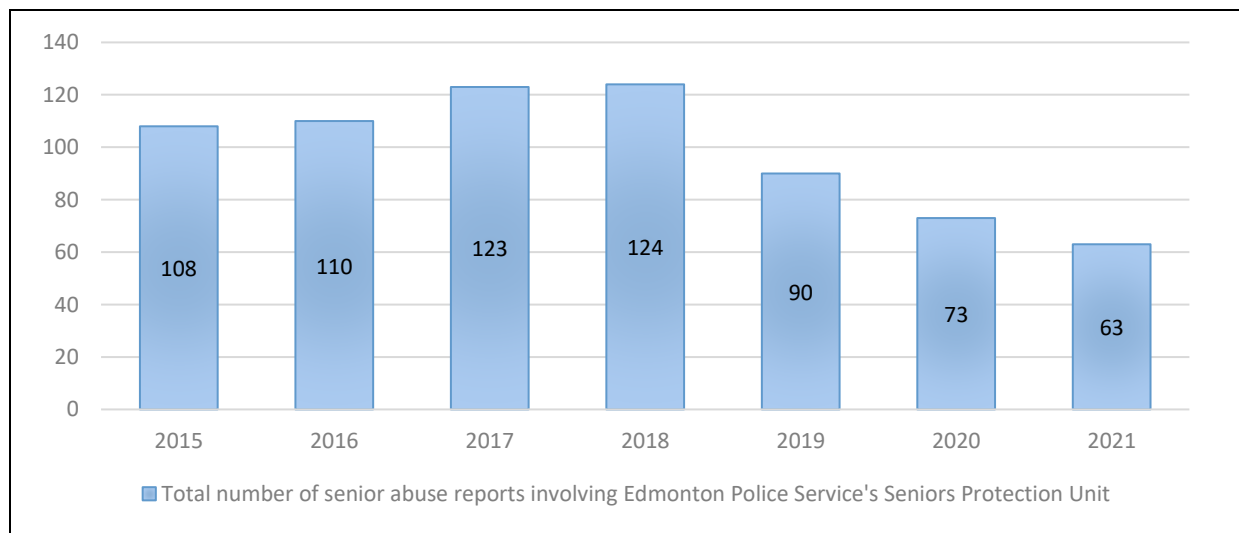
<sup>34</sup> Referrals can be sent to the EACT, which meets monthly to discuss cases that are in need of extra support. This includes referrals from the *Protection of Persons in Care Act* team under the Provincial Government; see section 5.1.1 on Abuse in long-term care homes for more information.

victim’s desire to protect the relationship with their abuser—who may be a spouse, a family member such as a child or grandchild, or a friend—from any legal consequences. Other reasons why the victim, or others, may not report a situation of abuse or seek help include:

- fear and distrust of the police;
- fear of retaliation and consequences (e.g., fear that the situation will get worse, fear of conflict);
- feelings of shame, embarrassment and guilt;
- abuse is unknown—this was identified by interviewees as particularly common in financial abuse cases, where the abuse can go undetected for years; and
- lack of awareness and knowledge of the signs of senior abuse and the available community supports and services.<sup>35</sup>

From 2015 to 2021, the Senior Protection Unit responded to 691 reports of senior abuse. The number of reports decreased 42% over the study period, from 108 reports of senior abuse in 2015 to 63 in 2021 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Number of senior abuse reports with involvement from the Edmonton Police Service’s Senior Protection Unit, 2015 to 2021**



**Source:** Edmonton Police Service, Senior Protection Unit, 2015 to 2021.

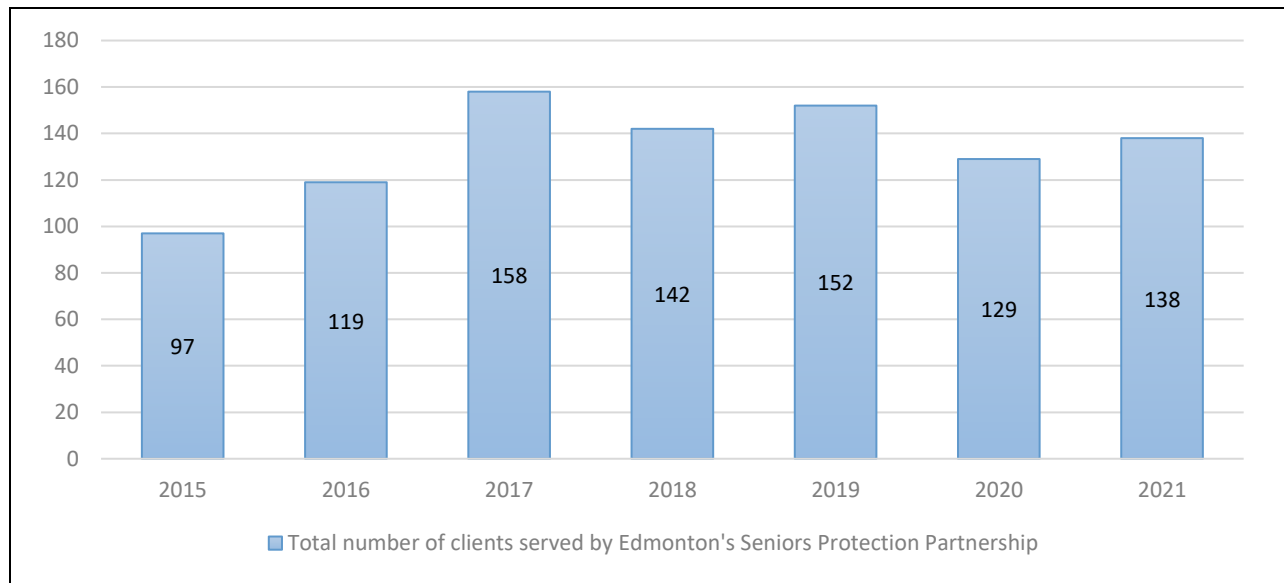
**Note:** Use with caution. While the data represent the total number of senior abuse reports with involvement from the Edmonton Police Service’s Senior Protection Unit from 2015 to 2021, some police reports that should be classified as senior abuse may not have been.

The number of reports peaked in 2018 (124 reports of senior abuse), then began decreasing. Several factors may have contributed to decreasing reports of senior abuse. One possibility is that incidents of senior abuse that came to the attention of police decreased because a greater number of incidents were dealt with outside of the criminal justice system. This explanation is supported by a general increase in the number of clients served by the SPP, from 2015 onward (Figure 2). According to interviewees, the COVID-19 pandemic, starting in March 2020 and continuing throughout 2021, also affected the

<sup>35</sup> More information on barriers to reporting can be found in Beaulieu and St-Martin 2022.

prevalence, severity, identification and reporting of senior abuse as public health restrictions left some seniors without the kinds of social interactions where abuse is sometimes identified and reported (e.g., by a family member, a healthcare or social service professional, or others).

**Figure 2. Number of senior abuse clients served by the Seniors Protection Partnership, 2015 to 2021**



**Source:** Edmonton’s Seniors Protection Partnership, Catholic Social Services.

**Note:** Senior abuse clients served by the Seniors Protection Partnership may or may not have been involved in an incident that came to the attention of police.

### 5.1.1 Abuse in long-term care homes

Long-term care homes with similar characteristics have different names across the country (e.g., nursing homes, continuing care facilities, residential care homes) and are typically categorized into the following:

- ownership of publicly funded long-term care homes offering 24-hour care, which can be public or private; and
- privately owned long-term care homes, which can be subdivided into for-profit and not-for-profit organizations.

Of Alberta’s 176 long-term care homes, 57% are publicly owned; 30% are owned by private not-for-profit organizations; and 13% are owned by private for-profit organizations.

In Alberta, the *Protection for Persons in Care Act* (PPCA) provides a safeguard for adults receiving government-funded care or support services, such as in long-term care homes. This law requires that any incident or suspicion of abuse or neglect occurring in a long-term care home be reported either to: 1) the Protection for Persons in Care Information and Reporting Line (non-emergency); 2) the police (if criminal in nature); 3) a professional regulatory college or body (if the abuse involves a health professional); or 4) the Mental Health Patient Advocate (if the client is detained under the *Mental Health Act*, or if the client is or was subject to a Community Treatment Order at the time of the abuse).

The PPCA states that it is optional for victims to report experiences of abuse; however, should they choose to report, the victim must do so no later than two years following the date of the abuse.

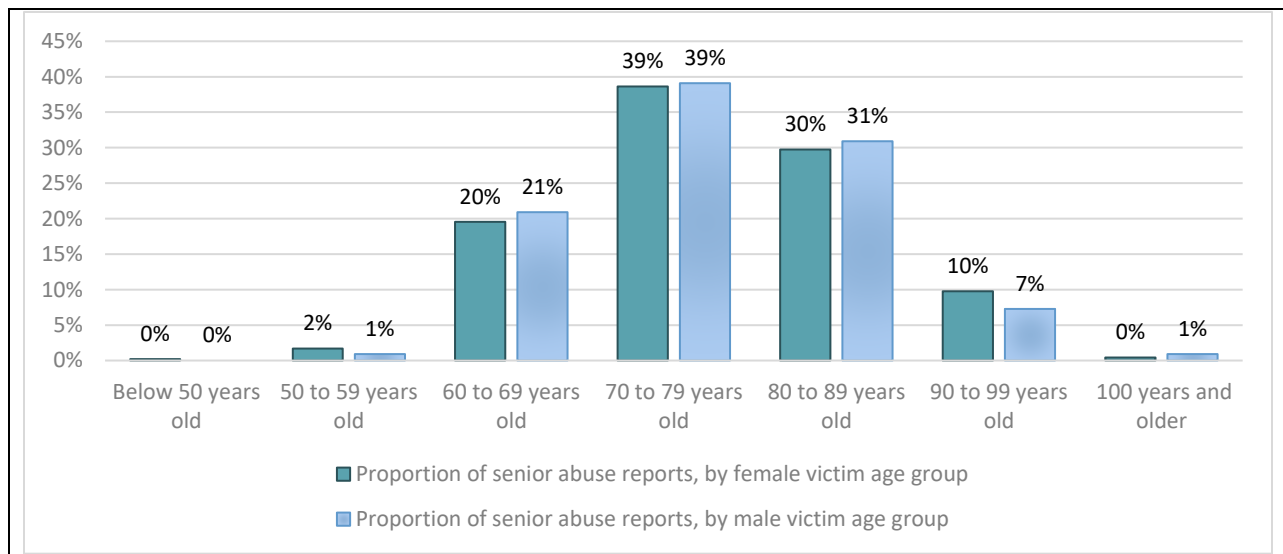
According to interviewees, cases involving abuse in long-term care homes are rarely brought to the attention of police as they tend to be reported and investigated by the PPCA. Though the PPCA may collaborate with police on a case, the Senior Protection Unit noted that the PPCA has the legislative framework to access information in long-term care homes quicker and more efficiently than the police.

Because of underreporting to police and the various methods to report and seeking help, police data do not appropriately capture the extent and nature of abuse in institutional settings such as long-term care homes.<sup>36</sup>

## 5.2 Victim characteristics

Of the 691 reports of senior abuse from 2015 to 2021, the average age of victims was 77 years, regardless of gender, with the most common age range being 70 to 79 (39%). Only one female victim was under the age of 50, while 10% and 8% of female and male victims were 90 years or older, respectively (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Proportion of senior abuse victims served by the Edmonton Police Service’s Senior Protection Unit by victim gender and age category, 2015 to 2021**



**Source:** Edmonton Police Service, Senior Protection Unit, 2015 to 2021.

**Note:** Use with caution. While the data represent the total number of senior abuse reports with involvement from the Edmonton Police Service’s Senior Protection Unit from 2015 to 2021, some police reports that should be classified as senior abuse may not have been.

Over two-thirds (68%) of victims were women, while the remaining third (32%) were men; this distribution was relatively stable during the study period. However, according to interviewees, the SPP recorded a recent shift in the gender of clients served. In 2021, the SPP served more men than women

<sup>36</sup> For more information, see: [Protection for Persons in Care | Alberta.ca](https://www.alberta.ca/protection-for-persons-in-care).

for the first time.<sup>37</sup> Interviewees also mentioned senior victims often have low income and diminished cognitive capacity as a result of a stroke or dementia, for example.<sup>38</sup>

Though data on ethno-cultural identity of victims or accused persons were not available, interviewees were able to provide anecdotal information based on their professional experiences responding to senior abuse reports. Interviewees noted that victims were most often White, Indigenous or Asian, a finding consistent with the population distribution in Edmonton.<sup>39</sup> They further noted that Indigenous seniors and seniors from racialized communities experience unique circumstances and cultural contexts that may affect their likelihood of reporting abuse or asking for help. For example, an immigrant senior sponsored by their abusive family member may be scared to report the abuse for fear of being deported back to their country of origin.<sup>40</sup> An interviewee noted an increase over the years in the number of Indigenous seniors in shelters as a result of abuse.

### 5.3 Alleged abuser characteristics

While victims of senior abuse were most often women, alleged abusers were most often men (68%). One-third (34%) of alleged abusers were between the ages of 46 and 60, close to one-quarter (23%) were aged 61 and over, followed closely by those aged 36 to 45 (21%); these findings were consistent regardless of gender of the abuser. There were few alleged abusers 20 years old or younger (1%).

Over two-thirds (69%) of alleged abusers were identified as the victim's adult child or grandchild,<sup>41</sup> while the rest were identified as either an intimate partner (13%),<sup>42</sup> other (8%),<sup>43</sup> other family member (6%),<sup>44</sup> or caregiver (4%).<sup>45,46</sup> According to interviewees, alleged abusers often struggle with mental health or addiction issues, and have a history of financial difficulties (e.g., debt, gambling) or other challenging personal circumstances (e.g., divorce, living at home, criminal history, controlling and aggressive behaviours, past trauma).

### 5.4 Outcome of police involvement

Of the 691 reports of senior abuse from 2015 to 2021, most (80%) were resolved or addressed outside the justice system, such as through the supports and services provided via the SPP including health, housing, and financial supports. Interviewees explained that reported incidents tend to be resolved this way due to the complexities in senior abuse cases, as well as the unique needs and vulnerabilities of the

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<sup>37</sup> This finding is for all SPP cases (i.e., with or without police involvement).

<sup>38</sup> Gilmour (2011) used the following definition of cognition: "the mental process of knowing, including aspects such as awareness, perception, reasoning, and judgement." Further, Gilmour notes "some decrease in cognition is expected at older ages, but the decline is not uniform across all cognitive tasks or for all individuals (Glisky 2007). Impaired cognition may reduce an individual's ability to communicate pain to health care providers (Tsai and Means 2005), carry out instrumental activities of daily living (Tomaszewski Farias et al. 2009), and cope with chronic disease symptoms, perform self-care and adhere to medication instructions (Huang et al. 2007; Gard 2010; Sinclair et al. 2000)."

<sup>39</sup> Anecdotal information on ethno-cultural identity was only mentioned in the context of the victims, not the alleged abusers.

<sup>40</sup> See Beaulieu and St. Martin (2022) for an overview of data limitations in the area of senior abuse among ethno-cultural minorities.

<sup>41</sup> Includes son, granddaughter, daughter, son-in-law, grandson, daughter-in-law, and fostered/adopted son.

<sup>42</sup> Includes husband, wife, spouse, common law partner, partner, and previous romantic relationship.

<sup>43</sup> Includes resident, friend, neighbour, roommate, stranger, long-time friend, and street friend.

<sup>44</sup> Includes other relatives, other family members, cousin, sibling, nephew, niece, brother, and sister.

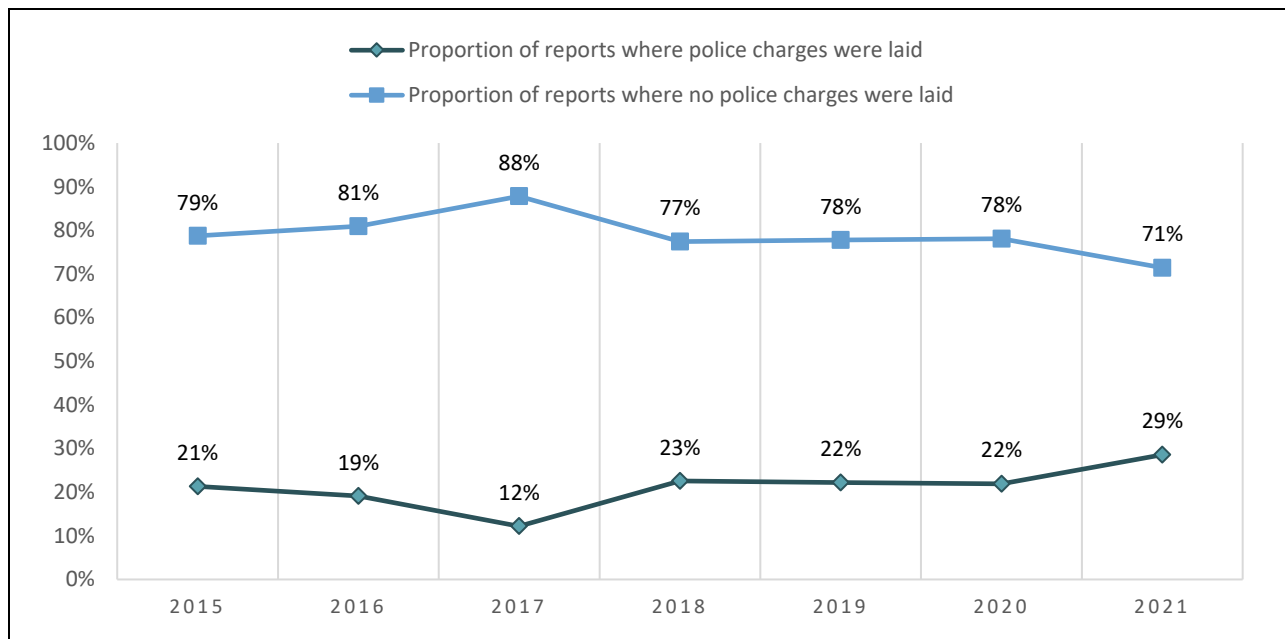
<sup>45</sup> Includes formal and informal caregiver.

<sup>46</sup> Trends remained the same regardless of the gender of the victim and alleged abuser.



victim. In reports resolved without criminal charges, police involvement typically includes conducting a risk assessment, safety planning, and connecting those involved in the incident with the appropriate supports and services. Police take a supportive and precautionary approach with the objective of mitigating the risk. According to interviewees, victims of senior abuse are often looking for help, not just for themselves, but also for the alleged abuser, noting that “victims just want the abuse to stop and for the alleged abuser to get some help” rather than seeking a legal outcome. The remaining one-fifth (20%) of reports resulted in a police charge being laid.<sup>47</sup> These trends were consistent throughout the study period, with the exception of in 2017 when there was a slight decrease in the proportion of reports where police charges were laid, and in 2021 when there was an increase (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Proportion of senior abuse reports with involvement from the Edmonton Police Service’s Senior Protection Unit, by report outcome, 2015 to 2021**



**Source:** Edmonton Police Service, Senior Protection Unit, 2015 to 2021.

**Note:** Use with caution. While the data represent the total number of senior abuse reports with involvement from Edmonton Police Service’s Senior Protection Unit from 2015 to 2021, some police reports that should be classified as senior abuse may not have been.

## 5.5 Type of abuse

Data on the type of abuse was only available for 20% (n = 141) of all 691 reports included in the study, as these are the reports that resulted in police charges which was used as a proxy for abuse type. The types

<sup>47</sup> In Alberta, police are unable to lay charges in cases where there are no complainants, even when there is clear evidence of a crime.

of charges laid were organized into the following three categories of abuse:<sup>48</sup> physical abuse,<sup>49</sup> financial abuse,<sup>50</sup> and psychological or emotional abuse.<sup>51</sup> Overall, about two-thirds (67%) of charges involved physical abuse, over one-quarter (28%) involved financial abuse, and over one-tenth (15%) involved psychological or emotional abuse.<sup>52</sup> Among victims of senior abuse, men were more likely than women to have experienced physical abuse (76% v. 62%, respectively) and psychological and emotional abuse (24% v. 11%, respectively), whereas men and women were equally likely to have experienced financial abuse (28%, each).

Interviewees noted that financial abuse often goes unnoticed by the victim, and typically comes to their attention when the victim seeks help to manage their finances. Interviewees also noted that the severity of financial abuse has worsened over the years. They explained a lack of technological skills can make seniors more vulnerable to financial abuse, particularly with respect to online fraud. Some examples shared involved cases of severe financial abuse of up to \$750,000, leaving seniors in danger of losing their home. Less severe theft (e.g., theft of a senior's monthly pension cheque), would be captured under a less serious offence of theft under \$5,000; this type of abuse, also occurs frequently and can be financially devastating to the senior.

Interviewees also noted an increasing number of financial abuse cases that resulted from ageism<sup>53</sup> imbedded in the laws, regulations and policies of financial institutions.<sup>54</sup> According to one interviewee, "ageism is the manure that allows senior abuse to flourish in our communities." Interviewees highlighted that one of the biggest challenges they face is when financial institutions reject legally drafted documents such as a power of attorney<sup>55</sup> and personal directives,<sup>56</sup> even when the senior is of sound mind. Challenges are further exacerbated in situations where the senior does not have anybody willing to take on the trustee and guardianship role, including the Office of the Public Trustee and Guardianship as a result of their strict mandate.<sup>57</sup> Interviewees noted that a review of Alberta's *Powers of Attorney Act* to better address and respond to the needs of the public, including seniors at risk of abuse, standardized processes, and reoccurring awareness or educational strategies for financial institutions would be helpful in building proper understanding and handling of cases with seniors, and ultimately improve outcomes.

Interviewees also discussed the issue of neglect at the hands of the senior's caregiver. Neglect refers to the non-willful failure to fulfill caregiver responsibilities such as providing food, housing or medical care.

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<sup>48</sup> Senior abuse reports that did not involve charges were removed from the analyses, as there were no data available for type of abuse and case outcomes and dispositions.

<sup>49</sup> Assault levels 1, 2 and 3 found under *Criminal Code* sections 266, 267 and 268.

<sup>50</sup> In these cases, the charges laid either involved robbery, theft or fraud under sections 334, 344 and 380 of the *Criminal Code*.

<sup>51</sup> In these cases, the charges laid involved harassment under section 264 of the *Criminal Code*.

<sup>52</sup> Percentages do not add up to 100% as cases can include multiple types of abuse.

<sup>53</sup> The World Health Organization (2012) describes ageism as "the stereotyping of, and discrimination against, individuals or groups because of their age," which is often linked to senior abuse and social isolation. This can manifest in numerous ways such as "prejudicial attitudes towards older people, old age, and the aging process; discriminatory practices against older people; and institutional practices and policies that perpetuate stereotypes about older people." (See [Ageism, Elder Abuse and Social Isolation \(nationalseniorsstrategy.ca\)](#); Nelson 2002; Wilkinson and Ferraro 2002)

<sup>54</sup> The *Bank Act* is the primary legislation governing banks and federal credit unions in Canada.

<sup>55</sup> A power of attorney is a legal document where a person authorizes another to act on their behalf for financial and property matters.

<sup>56</sup> A personal directive is a legal document where a person identifies instructions or a designated individual to make their personal decisions in the event of an illness or injury.

<sup>57</sup> See footnote 24.

Interviewees noted that neglect often results from inadequate caregiver knowledge, training and resources, as well as from caregiver burnout due to difficult working conditions, high patient-to-worker ratio, and high staff turnover at care facilities.

## 5.6 Outcome and disposition of police charges

Of the 141 reports that led to police charges, half (50%) resulted in a stay of proceedings or the charges being withdrawn,<sup>58</sup> while less than half (42%) resulted in a finding of guilt.<sup>59</sup> The majority (80%) of cases with a guilty finding received a custodial sentence as the most serious sentence in the case, of which most (83%) were a sentence of less than one year. The rest led to a probation order (17%) or fine (3%).

Although too few police reports contained information on the length of time to close a case to allow for a statistical analysis, interviewees noted that while many reports can take under three months to close, some may take much longer, even years, due to the complexities of the investigation.

## 5.7 Best practices

Interviewees shared practices, programs and services that have been helpful in responding to senior abuse. These include applying a people-centred approach, having dedicated senior abuse professionals and training, and providing peer-support groups for seniors.

### 5.7.1 Applying a people-centred approach

Interviewees emphasized the need to apply a people-centred approach in responding to senior abuse. For the Senior Protection Unit, this includes ensuring an inclusive and diverse workforce, and building client rapport by being flexible, patient and adaptive to the needs of victims. For example, the Senior Protection Unit noted many seniors feel more comfortable engaging with police officers that are wearing plain clothing as opposed to those wearing their official police uniforms. This was noted to be particularly true for Indigenous seniors as a result of laws, policies and practices that have led to profoundly traumatizing experiences in their interactions with police.

Another example is with respect to interviewing practices. While police interviews can last hours, the Senior Protection Unit highlighted that multiple short interviews, of no more than 40 minutes each, are more productive with senior victims to account for their diminished cognitive capacity. Further, conducting interviews during a time of day when the senior is most lucid and relaxed is also beneficial.

### 5.7.2 Dedicated senior abuse professionals and training

In addition to the Edmonton Police Service's Senior Protection Unit, the Crown Prosecution Office in Edmonton has dedicated prosecutors assigned to focus and consult on senior abuse cases. These professionals are trained to recognize the complex dynamics and risk factors of senior abuse. They collaborate with justice system stakeholders and community partners to promote the referral network and use of alternative approaches to the traditional criminal justice system response, in an effort to obtain the best possible outcome for the victim.

Training was also identified as a best practice to increase professionals' knowledge and understanding of senior abuse. For example, the Edmonton Police Service includes a senior abuse module in their police

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<sup>58</sup> Stay/withdrawn decisions refer to the court stopping or interrupting criminal proceedings against the accused.

<sup>59</sup> The remaining cases are pending, or resulted in "other" types of decisions.

recruit onboarding training program to help professionals recognize the signs, symptoms and risks of abuse. The [Elder Abuse Police Guidelines](#), developed by the provincial government for all police services in Alberta (including the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Municipal and First Nations police services), is also a helpful tool in sharing and promoting best practices for senior abuse police intervention and investigation.

### 5.7.3 Peer-support groups

Interviewees noted the value-add of providing peer-support groups for senior victims of abuse. Catholic Social Services runs an eight-week educational support group called Relationship with your Adult Children for women and men over the age of 60 experiencing challenges with their adult children. This group aims to teach seniors communication skills and how to establish appropriate boundaries and maintain overall personal wellness. According to interviewees, the Relationship with your Adult Children groups have led many seniors to build long-lasting relationships with other group members.

## 6. Conclusion

The literature shows that seniors, especially those dependent on others for care, are at increased risk of experiencing abuse—such as physical, financial, psychological or emotional, or sexual abuse, as well as neglect<sup>60</sup>—at the hands of family members, intimate partners, caregivers and others.<sup>61</sup> Senior abuse remains an unspoken reality for many, with incidents rarely brought to the attention of police. Further, research suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the prevalence and severity of abuse against older adults.<sup>62</sup>

To better understand the nature and extent of senior abuse and to gain sight necessary to improve related data collection, Justice Canada collaborated with the Edmonton Police Service’s Senior Protection Unit to examine their data on, and to understand their responses to, senior abuse. Findings from the study show that senior abuse often remains a hidden phenomenon and is frequently addressed through means outside of the justice system, which ultimately impacts knowledge and prevalence estimates, particularly among Indigenous and racialized communities who may experience additional barriers in seeking help. Victims, witnesses and service providers face a number of other barriers with respect to asking for help or reporting abuse. These include logistical and institutional barriers,<sup>63</sup> emotional and moral barriers,<sup>64</sup> and a lack of awareness of the signs as well as the reporting mechanisms.<sup>65</sup> These barriers are further compounded by the various modes available of seeking help and reporting abuse outside of the police.

This case study included a total of 691 senior abuse reports, from 2015 to 2021. The data gathered showed the most commonly reported type of senior abuse was physical assault, followed by financial

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<sup>60</sup> Birjnath et al. 2021; Burnes and Beaulieu n.d.; Conroy and Sutton 2022; Marrocco et al. 2021; Pillemer et al. 2016; United Nations 2020

<sup>61</sup> Miskurka et al. 2016

<sup>62</sup> See for example Chang and Levy, 2021; Weissberger et al. 2022

<sup>63</sup> These barriers may include a lack of communication between professionals, a lack of community supports and services, challenging reporting methods, and an absence of protocols and procedures.

<sup>64</sup> These barriers may include fear and possible distrust in reporting authorities such as medical professionals and police.

<sup>65</sup> Beaulieu et al. 2018; Beaulieu and St. Martin 2022; Garma 2017; Government of Alberta 2022; Hirst et al. 2016; Mercier et al. 2020; Van Den Bruele et al. 2019. For more details, see Beaulieu and St. Martin 2022

abuse and psychological or emotional abuse. This trend is consistent with national self-reported data obtained via the General Social Survey on Canadians' Safety (Victimization), as well as national police data obtained via the Uniform Crime Reporting Survey. However, the complexities of senior abuse are not usually reflected in these data, as multiple types of abuse are usually involved in a case but may be unrecognized by the victim as abuse, be subtle, or difficult to prove. This further adds to the challenges in generating prevalence statistics on senior abuse that more accurately reflect their experiences.

Interviewees noted some anecdotal trends such as the increasing frequency, severity and complexity of financial abuse, and challenges with respect to powers of attorney, personal directives and other financial abuse-related claims.<sup>66</sup> Interviewees also talked about ageism and its connection to further discriminatory behaviours such as neglect, abandonment and isolation. Ageism is also a barrier for seniors to accessing protection, services and justice.<sup>67</sup>

This case study showed that very few senior abuse reports resulted in charges being laid (20%), and only 42% of those resulted in a finding of guilt; half (50%) resulted in a stay of proceedings or the charges being withdrawn. Qualitative and quantitative data from this study suggest that some traditional police performance indicators, such as the charge rate, are not appropriate measures of "success" for complex cases such as senior abuse. Though police involvement is at times necessary, charging the alleged abuser is often not what the senior victim wants.

The knowledge gathered through this case study includes limited quantitative information on the nature and outcomes of senior abuse brought to the attention of police. Additional data would be helpful in providing a more comprehensive examination of senior abuse incidents reported to police in Edmonton. This could include information on various victim and alleged abuser characteristics (e.g., substance use and mental health history, occupation, type of residence, ethnicity, immigration status), the nature of abuse (e.g., location of the incident, weapon involved, types of abuse involved, victim injuries), and outcomes of senior abuse incidents that did not result in a police charge being laid.

Future research could explore senior abuse incidents reported to others outside of the justice system, such as abuse occurring in long-term care homes reported to legislative bodies, as required by the *Protection of Persons in Care Act* in Alberta. Examining community responses to senior abuse in a northern or rural context would also be beneficial to understanding the different contexts where senior abuse may occur.

Despite its limitations, this study provides valuable qualitative information on broader community practices and approaches where various supports, services and disciplines work together to better address the needs of senior abuse victims. The findings can help guide work to improve data collection in this area and provide updated evidence to inform decision-making.

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<sup>66</sup> Also see Popovic-Montag and Hull's *Financial abuse of seniors is on the rise in Canada*.

<sup>67</sup> See [Understanding Ageism – Perceptions and Realities of Aging \(alberta.ca\)](https://www.alberta.ca/understanding-ageism-perceptions-and-realities-of-aging.aspx) for more information.

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*Mental Health Act*, RSBC 1996, C 288.

*Protection for Persons in Care Act*, S.A. 2009, c. P-29.1.



## Annex I: List of requested variables

### Alleged perpetrator demographics

- Date of birth (if not on file, look for the age)
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Immigrant status
- Language
- Marital status
- Children
- Education
- Occupation
- Type of residence

### Alleged perpetrator – drug abuse and mental health history

- Alcohol abuse history
- Illicit substance abuse history
- Type of substance abused
- Were mental health problems suspected during the commission of incident(s)?
- Was the alleged perpetrator a victim of family violence (as a child or an adult)?

### Victim information

- Date of birth (if not on file, look for the age)
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Immigrant status
- Language
- Marital status
- Children
- Education
- Occupation
- Victim relationship with alleged perpetrator
- Was the victim living with the perpetrator at the time of the incident?
- Location of incident
- Type of residence
- Does the alleged perpetrator have Power of Attorney over the victim?
- Does the alleged perpetrator have Power of Personal Care over the victim?

## Narrative of incidents being investigated

- Number of incidents being investigated
- Time frame of incident(s)
- Nature of incident(s)
  - Verbal and/or psychological abuse (intimidation, threats, calling names)
  - Physical abuse against victim
  - Sexual abuse against victim
  - Victim injuries
  - Financial abuse
    - If financial, what type
  - Use of weapon
  - Who reported the alleged incident to the police?
  - Were other witness(es) present during the alleged incident(s)?
  - Barriers to the investigation of the incident

## Outcome of incident

- Charges laid
  - If no charge, why
- Other action taken by police
- If charges laid, list charges
- Did the case go to court?
- If the case went to court and there was a conviction, was there a victim impact statement?
- Court disposition
- Date of disposition
- Sentence

## Annex II: Abbreviations

CCR	coordinated community response
EACT	Edmonton Abuse Consultation Team
EARS	Elder Abuse Resources and Supports Program
EPROS	Edmonton Police Reporting and Occurrence System
EPS	Edmonton Police Service
OPS	Ottawa Police Service
PPCA	<i>Protection for Persons in Care Act</i>
SPP	Seniors Protection Partnership