

Mistreatment of African American Elders

This Research to Practice Brief synthesizes scholarship and research exploring the mistreatment of African American¹ elders in the United States. Despite the rise in the older African American population and attendant increase in elder abuse and neglect, mistreatment within communities of color remains largely hidden and under-detected. A corresponding scarcity in research has hindered comprehensive assessment of the nature and extent of the phenomenon. Of the existing literature, it is clear that institutional racism across the lifespan and correlates of economic deprivation, social injustice, and health disparities expose older African Americans to a greater risk of abuse. Within the African American community, sociocultural values, beliefs, and traditions impact the ways in which elder mistreatment is defined, understood, and reported. Effective prevention and treatment of abused elders requires competent and culturally literate services, resources, education, and awareness.²

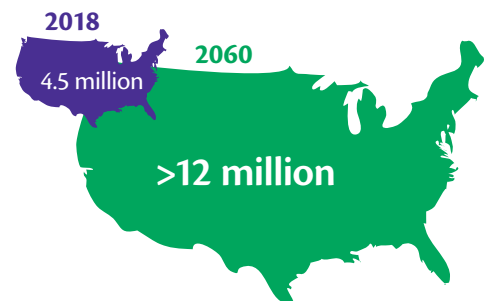
KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The legacy of slavery, structural racism, forced segregation, and the impact of ongoing oppressions contribute to systemic inequity and marginalization which increase older African Americans' susceptibility to abuse
- Ethnocultural perceptions and sensitivities impact how mistreatment is defined, described, and addressed by African American elders
- African American elders' conceptions of their capacity to access safety and healing through systems-based responses is multilayered, tainted by their experience of oppression and racial and complex traumas
- Understanding how the African American community conceptualizes abuse is essential to developing culturally relevant adult protections and abuse interventions
- Federal funding and legislation are needed to advance better understanding of cultural diversity and issues of elder mistreatment in the African American community

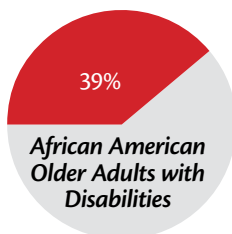
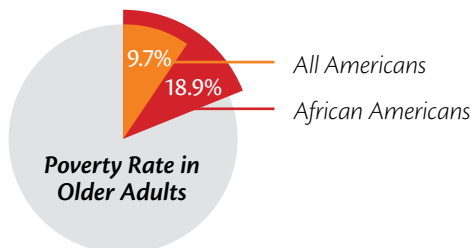
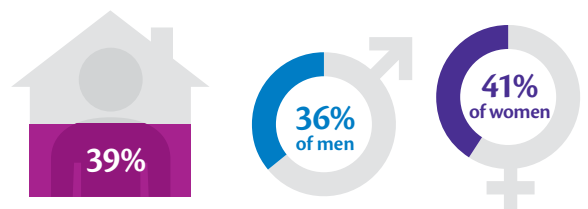
Demographics

- In 2018, there were approximately **4.5 million African Americans aged 65 and above** in the United States, comprising 9% of the older population
- By 2060, the African American cohort is expected to **grow to over 12 million**, constituting 13% of the elder population
- The **poverty rate in 2018 for African Americans age 65 and older was 18.9%**, nearly double the rate of 9.7% for all older Americans
- As of 2017, **39% of older African Americans had one or more disabilities**
- In 2018, **39% of African Americans aged 65 and over lived alone** (36% of men and 41% of women)^{3,4}

African Americans Older Adults in the United States



African Americans Older Adults Living Alone



DEFINITIONS OF MISTREATMENT

- Standardized definitions of abuse must be informed by the respective diverse **historical, experiential, and cultural lenses** among communities of color.⁵
- Notwithstanding cross-cultural variations in perspectives of abuse, studies have found **high levels of consistency across diverse communities** in identifying scenarios that constitute abuse or the risk of mistreatment.⁶
- African Americans and Caucasians have been found to **share similar views** of the causes of elder abuse.⁷



Historical Oppression and Institutional Racism

The unprecedented sociohistorical experience of slavery and transgenerational discrimination in its aftermath have produced economic, health, and social justice inequities within the African American community. For older African Americans at the intersection of racism, ageism, and sexism, multiple forms of oppression lead to compounding trauma.⁸ These systemic harms proximately contribute to the etiology of mistreatment, hinder accessibility to appropriate resources, and impact the efficacy of societal interventions.⁹ The cumulative burden of discrimination across the lifespan further exposes elders to heightened physical and mental health hardships.¹⁰ Past mistreatments resulting in polyvictimization can both precipitate and exacerbate debilities in later life.¹¹

Community Perceptions

Perceptions of elder mistreatment are often culturally construed and contextually determined.¹² Social frames and circumstantial factors influence how older adults from different racial and ethnic backgrounds define, experience, report, and respond to mistreatment.¹³ Individual preferences and objectives similarly impact the appraisal and relative acceptability of offending behavior as serious, actionable, or benign.



African American populations may be **more likely to view situations as abusive** when compared to other ethnic groups.¹⁴



Some African American elders subjected to abuse and oppression **may endure mistreatment** to preserve familial ties, satisfy caregiving needs, and avoid nursing home placement.¹⁵



Fear of institutionalization is particularly strong among older African Americans, many of whom identified nursing facilities as a source of mistreatment and endorsed a willingness to withstand abuse by family rather than live in a facility.¹⁶

Sociocultural norms may act as a buffer to deter abuse and exploitation, they may perpetuate structural inequalities and facilitate mistreatment, or they may have no impact on individual attitudes regarding mistreatment.¹⁷

RISK FACTORS

Among the general population, several risk factors have consistently been found to expose older adults to an increased threat of abuse. These factors are equally applicable to elders in underserved populations. They include functional deficits, cognitive impairment, social isolation, and limited economic resources.¹⁸ Perpetrator dependence on an elder, substance abuse, and criminal history may also heighten the likelihood of mistreatment. Ageism, endemic in social institutions, contributes to misperceptions of elder capabilities and is also causally related to abuse.¹⁹ Multiple intersecting forms of oppression borne of sustained systemic racism, ageism, classism, and sexism collectively incite elder susceptibilities to abuse. Additional factors specific to the African American experience increase the threat of elder mistreatment.²⁰

- Systematic oppression and discrimination create power imbalances and reinforce stereotypes that have put marginalized African Americans at an increased risk of abuse and exploitation.²¹
- Exposure to racism and segregation across the lifespan adds to the accumulated stress experienced by African Americans, substantially impacting overall health and increasing the risk of chronic disease and provoking greater susceptibility to abuse.²²
- Health disparities and economic hardships mediated by many African American families in the shadow of institutional racism place elders at greater risk.^{23,24}
- The burdens of informal caregiving within African American families contribute to both caregiver distress and elder vulnerabilities which foster a brittle balance and receptive host to mistreatment.²⁵
- African American mistrust of historically discriminatory law enforcement and governmental institutions compromises the community's ability to report abuse and seek helping resources.²⁶
- The inequitable distribution of health care, social services, and economic resources to communities of color compounds challenges and limits access to appropriate supports for older African Americans.²⁷
- The shortage of culturally relevant supports and community services has damped the efficacy of available interventions.²⁸
- The lingering traumas of slavery manifested biologically across generations at the cellular and molecular levels may attenuate or exacerbate responsiveness to abuse-related stressors.²⁹
- Older African Americans are more likely to live in neighborhoods that are poor, under-served, and beset by violent crime, exposing them to increased harm and greater susceptibility to mistreatment.³⁰
- Modernized and urbanized communities have led to eroding traditions and degraded respect for older adults heightening vulnerabilities.³¹

Protective Factors

Within the larger community of older adults, protective measures to prevent abuse have been identified. These include increased social supports, the presence of cohesive communities, access to justice, adequate health care, greater abuse awareness, and education and training on elder abuse.³² Reserves of strength and support specific to African American families have been found effective as well.



COMMUNITY

African Americans have a prominent tradition of **embracing community networks**, including extended family, neighbors, church, and service organizations, which have provided them with a sense of belonging, support, and safety through historical challenges.



SPIRITUALITY

Religious affiliations have been an important source of **strength and a protective buffer** during times of distress, providing support to both African American elders and their caregivers.



FAMILY

Family **loyalty and unity** has long been a source of resilience to African Americans through transgenerational oppression and maltreatment.



RESPECT FOR OLDER ADULTS

Older adults are revered within the African American community, admired for their **wisdom, strength, and dignity**.



VALUE OF MOTHERHOOD

African American mothers are recognized as **protectors of the family** and respected for the fortitude and support they provide to their kin.³³

AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

Common attributes among many African American families may variously serve as sources of strength and stability or trigger dissent and maltreatment. Characteristics include:



Multigenerational and extended family networks



Flexible roles within families



Shared financial and familial responsibilities³⁴



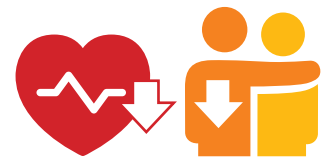
Utilization of informal supports³⁵

Help-Seeking Behavior

- A strong sense of filial and community loyalty underlies African Americans' reluctance to publicly disclose and report intra-family elder abuse. Older adults, protective of family member abusers, are disinclined to expose them to criminal justice and potential imprisonment. These practices suggest a tendency to under-report harms and explains the unwillingness to acknowledge offenses reported by others.³⁶
- Historically discriminatory law enforcement practices have led African Americans to distrust authorities and question their ability to render much needed, culturally appropriate services and redress mistreatment. More often, African American elders prefer to utilize informal networks of support that have attained community acceptance.³⁷

Significant Research Findings

- Though ethnic minority status has been cited as a risk factor for elder mistreatment, study data has not supported significant race-based differences in the prevalence of abuse. Researchers found that modifiable risk factors of **poor health and social support** were determined to be predictive of mistreatment among all groups surveyed.³⁸
- Differences have been found in the prevalence of various types of mistreatment among groups.³⁹ Compared with non-African Americans, African American older adults may be at **increased risk of financial exploitation and psychological abuse**.⁴⁰
- One study found that African Americans were **three times more likely to report financial mistreatment** and **four times more likely to report psychological abuse** than non-African Americans.⁴¹
- Race, ethnicity, age, gender, cultural beliefs and values, and contextual factors converge to increase the risk of elder mistreatment.⁴²
- Along with physical abuse, verbal abuse was the most frequently identified form of abuse for African Americans.⁴³
- Older African Americans reported less psychological abuse related-upset than non-African Americans in a study survey regarding the **impact of yelling and threats to hit or throw something**.⁴⁴



Caregiving

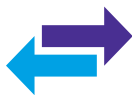
The remnants of slavery and forced segregation that have fomented economic and health disparities have sown discontent among many African Americans subjected to hardship. Family members, in particular, beholden to care for aging relatives, often find themselves frustrated with the demands of caregiving yet economically tethered to those for whom services are provided. They may be beleaguered by the scant resources to develop competent caregiving skills and the lack of access to professional resources. Older adults reliant on this informal family support are correspondingly discouraged by their increasing dependency, social isolation, and diminished exposure to external sources of engagement. The compounding stresses of this caregiving dyad may pose a significant risk of abuse.⁴⁵ On the other hand, it bears noting that studies have found that African American dementia caregivers generally exhibit greater psychological well-being than Caucasian dementia caregivers. Causal factors which contribute to this difference include higher levels of familism, community interdependence, and religiosity.⁴⁶

Theoretical Frameworks



SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

The Social Exchange Theory has been posited to explain why overburdened caregivers mistreat or exploit dependent elders in their charge.⁴⁷ Caregivers may become resentful and abusive of dependent elders, who are increasingly more reliant on their services, if they believe that they are inadequately compensated for the care provided.



NEUTRALIZATION THEORY

The Neutralization Theory has been proffered by researchers to describe variations in victim appraisals of the perceived seriousness of offending conduct. Victims may rationalize abusive behavior and minimize the severity of the misconduct where the mistreatment is perpetrated by family caregivers mediating situational stress and the victim considers themselves to be burdensome.⁴⁸



ECOLOGICAL THEORY

The Ecological Theory has been applied to illuminate the multidimensional and interrelated contextual systems which impact the lives of African American elders and their caregivers, including influences that perpetuate discriminatory practices, create structural impediments to equity and justice, and portend abuse. The model also identifies protective elements of family support, cultural strengths, and resilience to address environmental challenges.⁴⁹

BARRIERS TO INTERVENTION

A constellation of factors operates to impede older African Americans' access to needed elder abuse protections. Beginning with the historical legacy of slavery in the United States and the cascading harms that have followed, African Americans have been subjected to generations of oppression and exploitation which have adversely impacted relief and redress from abuse.

- Reluctance of African American elders with cultural expectations of a strong family unit to denounce intra-family mistreatment.⁵⁰
- Older African Americans' reliance on informal family caregiving rather than formal supports and services.⁵¹
- Lack of culturally appropriate community services for diverse communities.⁵²
- Distrust of governmental authorities derived from years of oppressive interactions.⁵³
- Shortage of culturally and ethnically attuned health care providers.⁵⁴
- Unwillingness to report mistreatment to authorities given the history of negative encounters with the criminal justice system.⁵⁵
- Dearth of African American researchers to explore the prevalence, characteristics, and impact of elder mistreatment.⁵⁶
- Paucity of anti-racism scholarship and elder mistreatment research within communities of color.⁵⁷
- Lack of culturally valid and reliable research measures in underserved populations which has stifled efforts to assess cultural understandings of abuse, detection and reports of mistreatment, and the quality of interventions.⁵⁸
- Historical clinical and academic racism within the research community has led to the development of onerous protocols by university institutional review boards to prevent harm to "protected classes" of individuals, including those who are older, and ethnic minorities. The benevolent use of these boards to make research ethical and impactful has created barriers for researchers to elicit scientifically valid data in communities of color.⁵⁹

Proposed Interventions

Elder abuse is a pervasive public health issue, yet there are significant gaps in research, practice, education, and policy efforts to address this phenomenon. Representative longitudinal research is needed to better define, assess the prevalence, identify risk and protective factors, and appraise the consequences of mistreatment among diverse racial and ethnic populations. Effective practices must be buttressed by a federal, state, and community charge to develop culturally sound training and education and implement policy mandates to respond to the needs of the increasingly diverse older cohort.⁶⁰



RESEARCH

- Examine the individual, relational, societal, and institutional risk factors that predispose older African Americans to an increased risk of mistreatment and the protective factors which may mitigate, prevent, or redress harm.⁶¹
- Explore the influence of power and privilege dynamics on older African Americans subjected to multigenerational discrimination.⁶²
- Conduct community-based participatory research studies to better understand elder mistreatment in communities of color and develop culturally relevant preventions, aligning scholars from universities, health and social service providers, faith-based and community organizations, and key stakeholders in the research design, protocols, and process.⁶³
- Create qualitative sub-surveys using culturally appropriate and validated measures to glean a nuanced understanding of elder mistreatment in communities of color.⁶⁴
- Assess the variables impacting help-seeking behavior of African American elders, the consequences of reporting abuse, and mechanisms to encourage service utilization.⁶⁵
- Increase minority representation among the cadre of elder abuse researchers.⁶⁶
- Investigate the impact of systemic racism, including health, economic, and other contextual disparities on African American elders' transgenerational susceptibility to mistreatment.⁶⁷
- Consider whether existing theories can explain abuse in underserved communities or new theories need to be developed to better elucidate the unique dynamics within culturally diverse groups.⁶⁸
- Probe the cultural impact of older adults' perceptions of abuse and the contextual factors that impact those understandings.⁶⁹



PRACTICE

- Integrate cultural humility into health care, law enforcement, and social service practices to increase understanding of the relational systems and systemic inequalities that impact older adult lives, and use that knowledge to enhance the delivery of competent aid to elders who have been abused.⁷⁰
- Implement community-based programs to educate and improve filial caregiving practices, provide caregiver respite support to allay the burden of caregiving, and develop cultural acceptance and trust with professional caregiving services.⁷¹
- Develop and increase access to culturally informed interventions grounded in the intrinsic resilience and strength of the African American community, including money management education and services to protect against financial abuse.⁷²
- Increase social engagement, disseminate abuse prevention education, and conduct targeted screening and intervention through faith-based supports, local churches, community centers, and social networks.⁷³
- Expand multidisciplinary teams to improve the response to elder mistreatment in underserved communities by promoting cultural awareness among the diverse team members, increasing directed access to resources, and enhancing the quality of care for older adults.⁷⁴
- Facilitate the design and delivery of trauma-informed abuse prevention, mitigation, and recovery for elders who have been abused⁷⁵ through a holistic lens that embraces the history of oppression, remnants of structural exclusion, and effects of polyvictimization.⁷⁶



EDUCATION

- Develop culturally appropriate education and training for healthcare professionals, law enforcement personnel, protective service agencies, and others who have contact with older adults to alleviate factors that exacerbate abuse and enhance protective measures to prevent recurrence.⁷⁷



POLICY

- Enact federal legislation to advance understanding of cultural diversity and issues of elder mistreatment in minority communities.⁷⁸
- Increase funding to support research, training, and education that improves the cultural competence of service providers and researchers.⁷⁹
- Increase funding for research on aging in diverse communities.⁸⁰

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¹In this context, the phrase “African American” refers to the descendants of Africans enslaved in America.

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