

# Mistreatment of African American Elders

This Research to Practice Brief synthesizes recent information and research findings related to understanding the mistreatment of African American elders, particularly involving financial exploitation and psychological abuse. General cultural beliefs, views, and norms within the African American community offer both risk and protective factors that influence elder abuse in this population. Socioeconomic variables, such as poverty, institutionalized racism, and structural segregation also place African American elders at risk. While this population can also be referred to as Black or Black American, this brief uses the term “African American.”

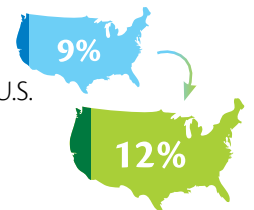
## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ There is limited research on elder abuse and neglect for the African American population.
- ▶ Elder abuse in the African American community is influenced by risk factors and protective factors that span from the individual level to the community level.
- ▶ Compared to their non-African American counterparts, African Americans are disproportionately impacted by financial exploitation and psychological mistreatment.

## Demographics

- In 2014 there were 4 million African Americans aged 65 and older, making up 9% of the older population in the U.S.
- This population is expected to triple to 12 million, comprising 12% of the older population by 2060.

(AoA, 2014)



## Background on Elder Abuse in the African American Community

The unique sociohistorical experience and cultural adaption of African Americans during and after slavery shape the ways in which elder abuse is both defined and manifested within the African American community (Tauriac & Scruggs, 2006).

### AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

Common characteristics among many African American families often serve as sources of strength and stability, yet may create a risk of conflict and maltreatment. Such characteristics include:

- Extended family networks
- Flexibility of family roles
- Shared living, inclusive of multi-generational, extended, and fictive kin



(as fully reviewed in Tauriac & Scruggs, 2006)

### PERCEPTIONS OF ELDER ABUSE

Several studies have reported that the African American population may be more likely to perceive situations as abusive when compared to other ethnic groups (as fully reviewed in Moon & Benton, 2000).

A study that examined African Americans' perceptions of elder abuse from an adult-child to an elderly parent found that **physical aggression** was the most frequently offered example of abusive behavior, along with **verbal aggression**. Physical forms of maltreatment were also significantly more likely to be depicted as “extremely abusive” by African Americans than were other forms of maltreatment (Tauriac & Scruggs, 2006).



### FINANCIAL STRAIN

Financial strain faced by many African American households and elders may place African American elders at greater risk for being abused (as fully reviewed in Tauriac & Scruggs, 2006).

# Research Findings on Financial Exploitation and Psychological Mistreatment of African American Elders

Beach, Schulz, Castle, and Rosen (2010) conducted a population-based study on financial exploitation and psychological mistreatment among 210 African American and 693 non-African American adults aged 60 years and older in Pennsylvania. In another study, Peterson and colleagues (2014), surveyed 788 African American and 3,368 non-African American adults aged 60 years and older in New York. The two studies provide complimentary and distinctive findings regarding financial exploitation among African American elders. Key findings from these studies are presented below.

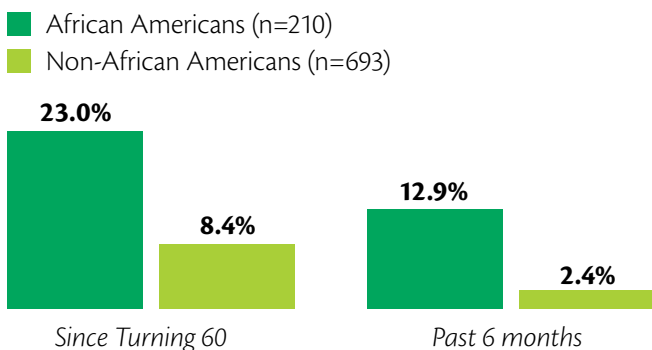
## FINANCIAL EXPLOITATION FINDINGS

**Definition:** Financial exploitation is defined as the improper use of funds, property or resources by another individual (Peterson et al., 2014).

Financial exploitation included an elder signing forms or documents that they did not understand; someone asking an elder to sign anything without explaining what was being signed; someone taking an elder's checks without permission; and an elder suspecting that anyone was tampering with their savings or other assets (Beach et al., 2010). Some key findings include:

- **Financial exploitation disproportionately affects African American older adults when compared to non-African Americans** (Beach et al., 2010). Peterson and colleagues (2014) found similar results when comparing 3,368 non-African American and 788 African American cognitively intact community-dwelling adults ages 60 and older residing in New York state (Peterson et al., 2014).
- The majority of financial exploitation that occurred within the past 6 months was perpetrated by someone other than a family member or trusted other, thus suggesting **African Americans may be more vulnerable to stranger-initiated scams or other financially-related deceptions, than non-African Americans** (Beach et al., 2010).

### Financial Exploitation Reported



(Beach et al., 2010)

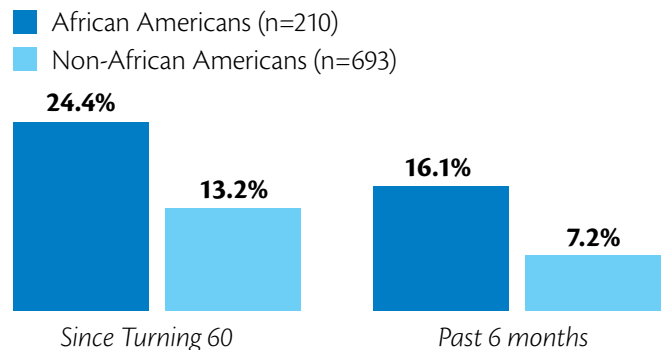
## PSYCHOLOGICAL MISTREATMENT FINDINGS

**Definition:** Psychological mistreatment is the infliction of anguish, pain or distress through verbal or nonverbal acts including, but not limited to verbal assaults, insults, threats, intimidation, humiliation, and harassment. Treating an older person like an infant; isolating an elderly person from his/her family, friends, or regular activities; giving an older person the “silent treatment” and enforced social isolation are examples of emotional/psychological abuse (NCEA, 2015).

Beach et al. (2010) measured psychological exploitation using a modified Conflict Tactics Scale. Psychological mistreatment included a family member or trusted individual screaming and yelling, insults, saying something to deliberately hurt, stomping out of the room after an argument, destroying something that belonged to an older adult, threatening to hit or throw something at an older adult, threatening to send an older adult to a nursing home, and threatening to abandon or stop taking care of an older adult. Some key findings include:

- Non-African Americans were more likely to report the spouse as a source of screaming and yelling, while African Americans reported **other family members** (non-spouse, non-child) (Beach et al., 2010).
- African Americans reported **less upset with screaming and yelling and threats to hit or throw something** than non-African Americans (Beach et al., 2010).

### Psychological Abuse Reported



(Beach et al., 2010)

# Factors that Influence Elder Mistreatment in the African American Community

One theoretical model conceptualizes elder abuse in the African American community using the Human Ecological Theory. Using this model, elder abuse in the African American community can be viewed as influenced by multiple systems that include both risk factors and protective factors that are present within subsystems ranging from the individual level to the community level (Horsford et al., 2011).

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS



### COMMUNITY

A **strong sense of community** provides African American elders and relatives with a unique sense of belonging, social support, and safety that helps them cope with the challenges of aging.



### SPIRITUALITY

**Spirituality and resilience** provide strength, support and comfort to African American caregivers, and in some cases, **religious communities** provide an important source of strength.



### FAMILY

**Loyalty to family** has helped some African American communities overcome legacies of oppression over time and provides a unique source of strength to preserve family unity in the midst of intense contextual challenges.



### RESPECT FOR THE ELDERLY

African Americans hold **values of admiration, respect and reverence toward the elderly** as they represent wisdom, honor, resilience and dignity in the community.



### HIGH VALUE ON MOTHERHOOD

African Americans tend to place a **high value on motherhood** as mothers are recognized as preservers and the backbone of the family instilling intense feelings of loyalty among children.

## RISK FACTORS

- ▶ African Americans face alarming rates of health and economic disparities resulting from **systematic racism and structural segregations** in the U.S. due to a legacy of slavery.
- ▶ **Internalized racism** may place African American elders at risk for abuse and neglect if elders embrace a cultural heritage that their caregivers are attempting to minimize or negate.
- ▶ African Americans may have **few opportunities to secure wealth** for retirement, leading to reliance on social security income, disability income, or financial support from caregivers.
- ▶ African American elders may **distrust institutions**, and be reluctant to seek help in the community, particularly if they consider that they or their families are at risk of being discriminated against on the basis of race.
- ▶ Recognizing and denouncing abuse or neglect may be particularly painful for African American elders and lead to **denial of abuse** due to the cultural expectations of a strong family unit and respect for the elderly.
- ▶ The victim may feel **obligated to maintain a caretaker role**, avoiding becoming a burden for their relatives, not sharing their emotional needs, which could lead to loneliness, isolation, or depression.
- ▶ Little research has been done on culturally adapted interventions for African American families at risk of elder abuse, which may lead to **reluctance to seek specialized services** that could support them as they adapt to the demands of caring for an aging relative.
- ▶ A lack of external sources of support causes more internal stressors leading to **stressed family networks**.
- ▶ Special challenges such as racial discrimination, structural segregation, or anger and hopelessness associated with economic and health disparities may lead to **stress, burden of care, and mental health concerns** for caregivers in the African American community.

## African American Family Caregivers

One of the largest studies comparing Caucasian (n=425) and African American (n=295) family caregivers of persons with dementia from four cities (Birmingham, Memphis, Boston, and Philadelphia) found that African American caregivers generally reported better well-being than Caucasian caregivers and lower anxiety scores. The relative lack of psychological distress found in African American caregivers may be due largely to **strengths of internal resources** such as appraisal and religious coping. There are also possible mechanisms through which African American family caregivers cope with caregiving such as prior experience with caregiving roles, expectations that caregiving will occur, cultural support for caregiving, and prior experience with adversity (Haley et al., 2004).



## Tips for working in the African American Community



### RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Additional research is needed on how elder abuse impacts the health of the African American community.
- Research is needed to identify community and professional resources needed to prevent harmful behaviors from reoccurring in African American families (Horsford et al., 2011). These resources can assist health care providers, social service and law enforcement agencies working with African American elders and their families.
- The Elder Justice Roadmap report is a general resource that identifies and prioritizes actions that direct service providers, educators, and researchers can take to benefit older adults facing abuse, neglect or financial exploitation. The full report can be accessed at [https://www.justice.gov/elderjustice/research/resources/Final%20EJRP%20Report+Appendices\\_7.8.14.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/elderjustice/research/resources/Final%20EJRP%20Report+Appendices_7.8.14.pdf).



### PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

- Assist African American families and service providers to remain attentive to the socio-historical experiences of African Americans in the U.S. such as racism and structural exclusion, thus ending the cycle of violence (Horsford et al., 2011).
- Focus on cultural strengths to prevent abuse or neglectful behaviors (Horsford et al., 2011).
- Be cognizant of the lasting effects of historical oppression experienced by African American populations as well as structural racism and exclusion that continue to influence the etiology and maintenance of abuse and neglect (Horsford et al., 2011).
- Engage families from a collaborative stance and explore perceptions of abusive or neglectful behaviors (Horsford et al., 2011).
- Help families to identify healthcare, community, and familiar resources available to prevent harmful behaviors from reoccurring.
- Identify points of entry for service delivery systems located in the communities rather than expecting African Americans to reach out to formal institutions that they may not trust (Horsford et al., 2011).
- Target public awareness campaigns in African American neighborhoods (flyers in shopping areas, public transportation, etc.) (Beach et al., 2010).
- Encourage informal caregivers and family members of African American elders and health care and other professionals who interact with older African Americans to be vigilant for signs of financial exploitation among this population (Beach et al., 2010).

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