



No Age Limit:

the blind spot of older victims and survivors in the Domestic Abuse Bill

September 2020

Introduction

Just over a year ago we published a report about domestic abuse which called on the Government to ensure that older people's voices are heard, their rights are protected and their needs included in the Domestic Abuse Bill.

Unfortunately, the situation facing older victims and survivors has deteriorated significantly since then, due to the Coronavirus pandemic and lockdown. Many older victims will have faced an impossibly cruel situation in which they were afraid to go out for fear of contracting a life-threatening illness, and afraid to stay in for fear of being abused at home. Indeed, for many this situation still plays out, day after day. With further lockdowns and restrictions on activities a very real possibility, this will be a recurring nightmare for them.

We know that the majority of victims and survivors of domestic abuse are women and that domestic abuse can happen at any age, but there's no doubt that older victims can face unique barriers in being recognised and getting help.

First of all, they are systematically overlooked. Culturally, victims and survivors are usually portrayed as younger women who are married or live with a partner, often with young children. An older person being physically or mentally abused by their adult child or grandchild, family member or spouse of 50+ years is far less likely to be recognised for who they are: a victim or survivor of domestic abuse. Indeed, older victims and survivors might not recognise themselves as this either.

Secondly, we just don't know enough about them – but this is where the Domestic Abuse Bill can make a real difference. The Crime Survey for England and Wales, conducted by the Office of National Statistics, does not collect data on adults over the age of 74. The result is that while we know that older victims and survivors exist, we do not know the true prevalence of domestic abuse among the older population. Because 'what gets counted gets done', this lack of representation of older people within the data collection completely scuppers the appropriate allocation of resources to help them. Plus, we perpetuate a culture in which domestic abuse in later life remains invisible and older victims and survivors are silenced.

So, here we are a year on from our first call for the Bill to ensure that data is collected on **all** victims and survivors. In that time, many, many older people will have suffered, but their experiences will not have been captured within the official data and so their chances of receiving help will have been sharply reduced.

This injustice towards older people can be overcome through a simple amendment to the Bill or via secondary legislation. It's critical that we collect data on all victims of crime, including victims and survivors of domestic abuse, over the age of 74. The consequences of us not doing so are profoundly damaging to many older people's lives. So please let's make it happen.

Caroline Abrahams,
Charity Director, Age UK



Snapshot – the numbers around domestic abuse and older people:

The Crime Survey for England and Wales only collects data on victims and survivors of domestic abuse under the age of 75, so the statistics do not reflect the true extent of the problem. However, the figures we do have for older victims under 75 are stark:

- According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales for 2018/19, around 180,000 older women aged 60-74 and 98,000 older men aged 60-74 were victims of domestic abuse in England and Wales in the past year.

- Most victims of domestic homicides are female (67%) and perpetrators are male (81%).

- Older people are similarly likely to be killed by a partner/spouse (46%) as by their adult children or grandchildren (44%).

- Older people killed in their own home most commonly die as a result of stabbings (41%).¹

It is important to note that these statistics were collected before coronavirus and lockdown, which will have exacerbated the problems facing older victims.

The problem

We know that domestic abuse can happen at any age. For older victims of domestic abuse, however, supporting them towards recovery and safety is made much more difficult because as it stands, we don't know the true prevalence of domestic abuse amongst older people.

The Crime Survey of England and Wales (the survey that gathers data on people's experiences of crime including those which are not reported to the police) only gathers data on domestic abuse from people up to the age of 74.

This means that we're left with no reliable figures for older people aged 75 and above who might be experiencing domestic abuse. This lack of representation undermines the way resources are allocated to help older victims and survivors of abuse. It also means that older victims are not being identified nor being seen by specialist support services in the numbers that we would expect. Services are not effectively targeted at older victims, and do not always meet their needs.

This is why we are calling for the Domestic Abuse Bill, when it returns to Parliament, to legislate that **data on domestic abuse must be gathered for all ages, not just people aged under 75.**

There is a need to acknowledge the diverse identities of older people experiencing domestic abuse. Older people are not a homogenous group of people. Gender, ethnicity, sexual identity and physical and cognitive disability will shape their experiences of domestic abuse and also the way in which services need to respond. For this reason there is a need to consider the ways in which

data on equalities characteristics (age, gender, disability, ethnicity) is collected, as this will inform how we support older people and indeed all people experiencing domestic abuse.

The Covid-19 pandemic: the impact on older victims of domestic abuse

Older people have been very seriously affected by Covid-19, and 93% of deaths in England and Wales have been of people aged 60+.³ Hence, the most immediate issue they face during this pandemic is the risk of severe illness and death. Older people in need of care and support have been rendered acutely vulnerable by virtue of their circumstances, and there have been high numbers of deaths arising from Covid-19 amongst older people in care homes.

In addition to the loss of life, the implementation of 'lockdown' has had a wide-ranging impact on older people. Enforced isolation has exacerbated many of the existing challenges older people face in accessing essential goods, healthcare and other services.

We also know that lockdown has increased the risk of older people experiencing domestic abuse, despite misconceptions that those living with others are 'fortunate' and 'safe'. Such abuse victims are likely to be dependent on the person abusing them financially or for their care. They will face, in addition to fear, barriers to reporting this abuse such as lack of physical and mental capacity and a lack of access to digital or other services.

The big concern is that we don't really know

what is going on behind closed doors – older people aren't locked down so much as locked in. We are receiving an increase in calls from concerned relatives, but we have had few contacts from older victims themselves. This is deeply concerning and we suspect it is due to their limited opportunities to seek support rather than lower prevalence of abuse.

The national domestic abuse charity Refuge reported on May 27 that during the pandemic, contacts to its Helpline have increased by about 66 percent.⁴ Women's Aid Federation of England's *Perfect Storm* report highlighted that 61% of women living with their abuser during lockdown said the abuse had worsened, and 67% said that Covid-19 had been used as part of the abuse they suffered.⁵ On April 11, the UK's Home Office launched a campaign to support victims of domestic abuse during the pandemic.⁶ However, attention on Covid-19's impact on older people has focused on health risks, treatment in care homes, and isolation, not risk of abuse. It is clear that we are going to be living with this virus well into next year so, going forward, the needs of older people who are at risk of experiencing domestic abuse must be considered as part of the Government's response to the pandemic.

With lockdown measures changing regularly, healthcare practitioners, including GPs and practice nurses, need to be looking out for the needs of older people, particularly during hospital admission and discharge. Looking ahead, healthcare practitioners need better training to support older people experiencing

The different kinds of domestic abuse:

It must be remembered that domestic abuse is any type of abuse (violence, financial, psychological, sexual and patterns of coercive and controlling behaviour) that happens not only between partners and former partners, but is also perpetrated by family members, including children.

Domestic abuse does not go away with age, and its damaging impact certainly does not lessen. Age UK believes that, for older people, domestic abuse is a hidden issue with hidden victims.

Older people should not be regarded as a homogenous group and they experience domestic abuse in a number of ways, not all of which are linked to ageing. However, as we age, we may become less able to stop the harmful behaviours and face more barriers to accessing support. In addition, older people may not recognise what they are experiencing as domestic abuse, they may have more concerns about sharing information considered to be private, and feel shame about the situation they are in.

Long term abuse and undermining of an individual's self-esteem over many years can intensify these feelings. Research from SafeLives found that people over the age of 61 took twice as long to seek help when experiencing domestic abuse², and may find it harder because they are dependent on the abuser(s) financially and/or dependent because of health issues that are more prevalent in later life.⁷



Case study – Grace’s lockdown

Grace is 81 and has endured 57 years of physical, sexual, financial and emotional abuse by her husband, George. George now has some care needs and Grace is likely to be caring for him alone. The strain of caring without support or a break will be impacting on her, and her ability to ensure George is safe and following the guidance may create tension, which could lead to increased abusive behaviour.

The truth is no one really knows how Grace is coping during lockdown. After years of coercive control, she has no friends and has limited contact with family. She doesn’t know how to use a computer, let alone being able to access the internet for help. Older women like Grace face significant barriers to accessing support during ‘normal’ times. This is particularly true for older survivors who have been subjected to prolonged abuse or are reliant on their abuser

for money or care. If a family member or friend was concerned about Grace, even to make a telephone call to her is difficult because, more often than not, George is with her all the time. Serious as this abuse is, many older women don’t even recognise what they have experienced as abuse, considering abuse to be ‘something that happens to younger women.’

Lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic may likely increase the risk of older people experiencing domestic abuse, despite misconceptions that those living with others are the ‘fortunate’ and ‘safe’ ones. For Grace, the lockdown will be taking its toll. She is frightened about the virus and won’t leave the house to visit the local shops. Opportunities for professionals to reach out to Grace such as visits to the GP or hospital are virtually non-existent.

Safeguarding – the view from Age UK

Covid-19 has been used by perpetrators of domestic abuse as yet another way to scare and control their victims and to limit their engagement with the outside world. For older people who have lived with abuse their whole lives, this is just the next step in the tightening of controls placed on them by their partner and is often just accepted as part of what happens behind closed doors.

We must also remember that domestic abuse is not just perpetrated by partners. Any family member can cause harm, both physically and mentally. And of course, older victims and survivors can be abused outside of the traditional family context. We have seen a worrying increase in cases of adult children shutting their elderly parent away, not allowing them to enter certain rooms in the house, limiting their access to food, medication, fresh air and contact with friends.

We know that older people are typically less likely to speak up themselves, it is far more common for concerned neighbours or friends to notice changes in their appearance, mood or wellbeing. Throughout the last six months many older people have become less visible in their communities as they have lived their lives behind closed doors, and unfortunately for many home has not been a safe place for them.

For older people who already feel invisible and live in fear from this virus, the threat of control and abuse from family members can present an even greater risk. Reaching this group is an ongoing challenge, but we must start by raising awareness across all sectors of society. Without data collection for the over 74s we cannot begin to understand the true scale of the problem.

The solution

Few older victims of domestic abuse are accessing any kind of professional support and we believe this is because many older people suffering domestic abuse may be too frightened to go to the police, or simply unable to reach out for help.

For many older people, domestic abuse has been going on for so long it may just feel unresolvable. Others may be dependent on their abuser financially or for their care. They might face other barriers to reporting such as physical or cognitive disability, or they may be too afraid or ashamed to go to the police and report the abuse they are experiencing.

This makes the role of GPs and other medical and non-medical NHS staff crucial in recognising and supporting an older person who may be experiencing domestic abuse. This is why Age UK is calling for more training for healthcare practitioners, including GPs and practice nurses. Improvements could be achieved by establishing mandatory, ongoing training for these healthcare practitioners in how to recognise and support an older person who may be experiencing domestic abuse. This is particularly important for those who interact with older people during admissions and discharges from hospital.



Better links between the NHS and police are also needed to ensure older victims of abuse are properly protected and supported. There is a need for the police, NHS and Social Services to be able to more effectively differentiate between a social care need caused by a condition such as dementia, and a pattern of behaviour which can be considered abusive. Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs) could form an element in protective responses to older people with care and support needs who are experiencing domestic abuse, giving the victim room to consider their own wishes and feelings. The possibility of domestic abuse should be fully considered as part of social care needs and carer's assessments.

A simple change to the Domestic Abuse Bill

The Domestic Abuse Bill has made slow progress over the last two years, but we know that the situation many older victims and survivors find themselves in is markedly worse since lockdown

started in March. The Bill is now finally making its way through the House of Lords for the remaining stages of legislative scrutiny. However, we are deeply concerned that the Bill still does not address the fact that data on victims and survivors of domestic abuse is only collected up to the age of 74.

We know that a law to address domestic abuse cannot prevent or stop instances of it – but a simple change to the Bill to ensure we collect data on victims and survivors of all ages would result in a fairer system for older people. It will make it easier for people to recognise or report domestic abuse, as well as improving the resources available to help victims and survivors.

Along with better training for health and care practitioners, a change in the law on how we record data on victims and survivors of all ages will make a real and lasting difference to what is understood as domestic abuse.

Removing barriers to recording domestic abuse

The Office for National Statistics's most recent assessment of data collection methods in the Crime Survey for England and Wales did not support raising the age limit for respondents above 74. A lower response rate meant that the data was not reliable enough to quantify accurately the domestic abuse experiences of older people. However, a low response rate is not a reason to exclude older victims and survivors.

Addressing the low response rate is of the utmost importance. We need to understand why older people are less likely to respond to the self-completion part of the Crime Survey for England and Wales than younger people. There are clearly barriers in place to older people completing the survey, and these must be tackled.

If we do not address the issue of data collection, we will remain unable to fully understand the domestic abuse experiences of older people, which will negatively affect the help and support available to older victims and survivors.

Now is the time to ensure that older victims and survivors are recognised and represented in discussions, interventions, and solutions around domestic abuse. Please help us to achieve this for them.

For more information in how you can help in Parliament, please contact Robert.Henderson@ageuk.org.uk

References

- 1 [Domestic Homicide of Older People \(2010-2015\): A comparative analysis of intimate-partner homicide and parricide cases in the UK](#)
- 2 Deaths registered weekly in England and Wales (released 15th September 2020): ONS
- 3 [Safe Later Lives: Older people and domestic abuse \(2016\): SafeLives](#)
- 4 [Refuge reports further increase in demand for its National Domestic Abuse Helpline services during lockdown \(2020\): Refuge](#)
- 5 Women's Aid. (2020) [A Perfect Storm: The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Domestic Abuse Survivors and the Services Supporting Them](#). Bristol: Women's Aid.
- 6 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/home-secretary-announces-support-for-domestic-abuse-victims>
- 7 Women's Aid (2019) The Domestic Abuse Report 2019: The Annual Audit, Bristol: Women's Aid.

If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this report or are worried about a friend or loved one, here are some sources of support;

Age UK Advice Line 0800 169 65 65
8am-7pm, 365 days a year, free and confidential

National Domestic Violence Helpline

(Run in partnership between

Women's Aid & Refuge)

0808 2000 247

(24 hours 7 days a week)

www.nationaldomestichelpline.org.uk

This helpline is for women and children who are experiencing or who have experienced domestic abuse.

Mankind

01823 334244

(weekdays 10am -4pm)

www.mankind.org.uk

This helpline is for men who are experiencing or who have experienced domestic abuse.

Galop

0800 999 5428

National LGBT Domestic Abuse Helpline

www.galop.org.uk

Galop is the LGBT anti-violence charity. They have a helpline dedicated to domestic abuse, but can also advise on other issues such as hate crime and sexual violence.

Respect

0808 802 4040

www.respect.uk.net

Helpline for perpetrators of domestic abuse.

Hourglass

0808 808 8141

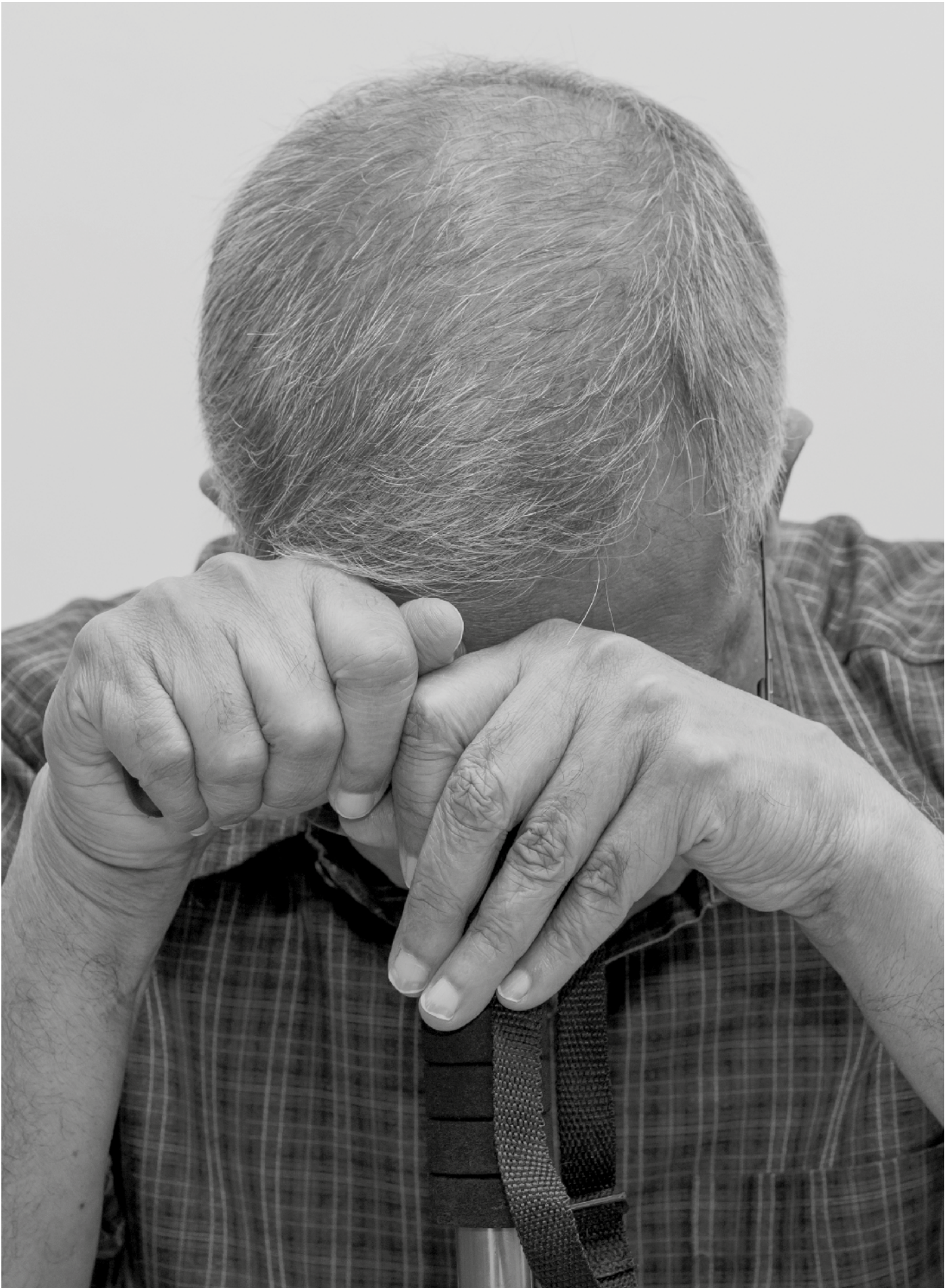
www.wearehourglass.org/helpline

Helpline provides information and support to anyone concerned about harm, abuse or exploitation of an older person.

You can also download the Brightsky app onto a smartphone.

Brightsky helps people experiencing domestic violence to record evidence of their abusive relationships and seek professional help by encouraging people to log private journal entries in the form of text, photos and videos, which are then sent to a designated email address. This information can be sent to the authorities at a later date.

If you are in immediate danger, please call 999.



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