

Analysis - Older people and kaumātua

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Purpose

During May and June 2021, the Joint Venture engaged with people across Aotearoa New Zealand to inform [Te Aorerekura – the National Strategy to Eliminate Family Violence and Sexual Violence](#). A key part of this engagement was the conversation with older people and kaumātua impacted by violence. This paper reflects the experience for older people and kaumātua with the family violence and sexual violence systems and the opportunities for improving how Aotearoa New Zealand work to prevent, respond, heal and recover from these forms of violence. Communities, organisations and individuals were generous in sharing their experiences, and through their insight government agencies have worked to develop a 25-year Strategy designed to achieve the moemoeā, or vision: All people in Aotearoa New Zealand are thriving: their wellbeing is enhanced and sustained because they are safe and supported to live their lives free from family violence and sexual violence.

This paper sets out themes that came out of hui, written submissions and conversations with older people and kaumātua and uses, as much as possible, the words and voices of the people who shared their pūrākau (stories) and whakaaro (thoughts).

The engagement process for older people and kaumātua

The Joint Venture Business Unit (JVBU) worked closely with the Office for Seniors (OfS) to ensure the voices of older people were heard through the National Strategy engagement. OfS helped organise the engagements with community partners in each location. JVBU and OfS jointly delivered engagements with elder abuse providers, community leaders and government representatives e.g., local Police. There were fewer older people and kaumātua directly engaged, although those the JVBU spoke to work closely with older people.

The JV held engagements in Rotorua with a focus on kaupapa Māori elder abuse providers, Auckland with a focus on Asian communities and in Christchurch. A total of around 100 people participated in those engagements.

Age Concern New Zealand and OfS also actively promoted engagement through their social media channels, and a number of written submissions were received.

What we know about older people and kaumātua

Older people means people aged 65+ but recognises the diversity of this age group – people age differently and have different aspirations and needs.

The proportion of older people compared to the rest of the population is increasing. By 2034, there will be 1.2 million people aged 65+ (a fifth of the population). Sometime in the next



decade there will be more people aged 65+ than children aged 0-14 years. People are living longer than at any previous time in history, with life expectancy continuing to increase.

Aotearoa New Zealand is becoming increasingly diverse. Currently, Europeans make up around 88% of the 65+ population, Māori 6%, Asian 5% and Pacific peoples 2%.

Most older people live in the community with 55% living alone (living alone is more common for women than men). Some live in intergenerational households or retirement villages. There are distinct differences between ethnic groups. A significant number of older Māori, Pacific peoples and Asian peoples live in multi-generational households. Approximately 36,000 older people, the vast majority aged 80+, are in aged residential care.

Aotearoa New Zealand's population is highly mobile, and people are having fewer children. This is expected to result in more older people living alone, without family and whānau support in years to come.

Older people – needs, issues and gap analysis

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines elder 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.

There are analogies between elder abuse and neglect and other forms of family violence. Firstly, it is largely hidden, private and under-reported. It occurs within relationships characterised by abuse of power and control. Victims are often isolated, and/or in a weakened, powerless and dependent position. As with child abuse and partner violence, more than one type of elder abuse and neglect can occur at the same time.¹

In contrast to child abuse, older people are (generally) legally competent adults, able to make their own decisions about their lifestyle and living arrangements. They may choose to remain in a situation which is not physically, psychologically, or financially safe for them. Such a decision, made by a competent adult, needs to be respected.

Elder abuse can happen once or repeatedly and comes in many forms, including psychological, financial, physical, sexual, institutional and intentional or un-intentional neglect.

It is estimated that as many as one in 10 older people in New Zealand will experience some kind of elder abuse. Māori service providers report that older Māori experience higher levels of abuse than non-Māori. A total of 2,500 alleged cases were dealt with by Age Concern during the 2019 calendar year.

In reality it is extremely difficult to assess the prevalence of elder abuse and neglect. Most elder abuse goes unreported which means this issue lacks visibility. The understanding of elder abuse and who experiences it is also limited by the availability of good data.

Our understanding is also impacted by the level of engagement with services by older people experiencing abuse. For example, Pākehā, heterosexual, and cisgender older people are more likely to access services and take part in research, therefore, information about prevalence

¹ Wilber, K. H., & McNeilly, D. P. (2001). Elder abuse and victimization. In J. E. Birren & K. W. Schaie (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of aging* (pp. 569–591). Academic Press.

rates is often skewed to represent this proportion of the population, while other populations are under-represented.

Elder abuse lacks visibility when people talk about family violence, even though most people using violence are family members. It does not have the social and institutional visibility of the other forms of family violence, such as child abuse and intimate partner violence (IPV), which have both experienced significant political and social investment over the last decade. As a result, elder abuse does not receive the same level of political awareness, resources and funding.

Distinct dynamics of violence for older people and kaumātua

Elder Abuse Response Services (EARS) report that most, if not all, cases of elder abuse typically include elements of psychological abuse, which often erodes a person's dignity and makes them more vulnerable to other forms of abuse.

Although sexual abuse does not appear to be as common as other forms of elder abuse, it does occur, with women more likely than men to be sexually abused. A 2019 report on the Current State of Elder Abuse Response Services (EARS)² highlighted that the level of sexual abuse against and amongst older people is probably higher than believed. However, abuse is rarely disclosed by a victim and/or reported by staff to authorities and in these settings, carers and staff are typically poorly trained to appropriately manage these issues. There is a risk that sexual abuse towards older people may not be taken seriously due to ageism and the notion that older people are asexual.

As a by-product of our ageing population and increasing life expectancy rates, adult children have to wait longer for their inheritance. In some instances, this may spark 'inheritance impatience', a term referring to the increasingly prevalent issue of elder financial abuse. That is, the illegal or improper use of an older family member's finances or property without their informed consent or where consent has been gained by fraud, manipulation or duress. Often these situations arise where a child or other family member misuses their position as the person's power of attorney and commonly involves misappropriating funds, property or valuables, or applying undue influence on the person to change their will.³ Inheritance impatience is a major factor causing financial abuse of older people.

Often financial abuse of older people does not involve physical violence and although cases of abuse are serious, they are not always criminal offences and may be difficult to resolve. For example, an older person who gives money to an adult child with the implication that money will be paid back, but doesn't have a contract, often has difficulties pursuing a judicial avenue due to the uncertain nature of the 'loan'. There are limited avenues to get back any funds, and Elder Abuse Response Services do not have any statutory power.

² Ministry of Social Development. 2019. *Elder Abuse in Aotearoa. The role and current state of MSD's Elder Abuse Response Services*. <https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/initiatives/family-and-sexual-violence/elder-abuse-response-services-in-aotearoa-nz.html#ElderabuseinAotearoacurrentstate>

³ Hefren-Tillotson. 2019. *Inheritance Impatience Can Lead to Elder Financial Abuse*. <https://www.hefren.com/blog/inheritance-impatience-can-lead-to-elder-financial-abuse/>

Gender differences are less clear-cut than in intimate partner abuse, with both men and women responsible for and experiencing elder abuse^{4 5} with women more likely to cause harm through neglect and men through physical and sexual abuse.

Family members are responsible for over 70% of elder abuse. In some families, violence is considered the normal reaction to stress, and it may continue from generation to generation within a family. Sometimes there is a history of family conflict, alcohol and/or drug abuse, and psychological problems.⁶

Carers, either formal or informal, may be perpetrators of elder abuse. The risk of abuse increases when the victim has cognitive impairment and disability, is over the age of 75, and is female. Often elder abuse by carers is associated with stress and intense workload of looking after a dependent person.

Risk factors

Elder abuse and neglect can be linked with broader societal issues such as older people's relatively low status in society and lack of economic power.^{7 8}

Prevalent risk factors for elder abuse include social and rural isolation and ill health. Ageist attitudes and lack of respect or empathy for older people (including dehumanising behaviours and infantilisation) means this issue is often overlooked or older people are not taken seriously, and their concerns downplayed. Shame also stops people from reaching out. Older people are often unwilling to report abuse because the perpetrators are family members who they may be dependent on.

Dementia is a major cause of disability and dependency among older people. People with dementia are especially vulnerable to abuse because their behaviour may be confronting to carers and because the disease may prevent them from reporting abuse or recognising it. Improving Dementia Services in New Zealand – Dementia Action Plan 2020 to 2025 was developed by a small group of dementia NGOs, clinicians, academics and providers to drive changes needed to improve the health, independence and quality of life of people living with dementia in a sustainable way. The implementation of this plan may encourage awareness of the condition and help to prevent abuse.

Older people in aged care settings (includes both residential and in home care and associated supports) can be vulnerable to institutional abuse by a person of trust, often a carer.

⁴ O'Keeffe, M., Hills, A., Doyle, M., et al. (2007) UK Study of Abuse and Neglect of Older People. National Centre for Social Research.

⁵ Fallon, P. (2006). Elder abuse and/or neglect literature review. Wellington: Ministry of Social Development/Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora – Centre for Social Research and Evaluation.

⁶ Lachs, M.S. and Pillemer, K. (2004) Elder Abuse. *Lancet*, 364, 1263-1272. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(04\)17144-4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(04)17144-4)

⁷ Wolf R (2000) "The Nature and Scope of Elder Abuse", *Generations*, 24(2):6–13.

⁸ Peri, K., J. Fanslow, J. Hand, J. Parsons (2008) *Elder Abuse and Neglect: Exploration of Risk and Protective factors*, Families Commission, Wellington.

Older people and kaumātua – services and support

The Government’s strategy *Better Later Life – He Oranga Kaumātua 2019-2034*⁹, sets the vision that “Older New Zealanders lead valued, connected and fulfilling lives”. It includes five key areas for action, based on feedback from nationwide consultation.

One of the guiding principles is keeping people safe. The strategy aims to reduce the prevalence of elder abuse and neglect, and for those who experience abuse to be well supported. To do this the strategy suggests the following is needed:

- Creation of a co-ordinated system-wide approach to preventing, identifying and eliminating elder abuse and neglect
- Awareness and understanding of the risk factors and occurrence of elder abuse and neglect
- Those who experience elder abuse and neglect get the support they need. Those providing support receive professional training.

A significant step was made when the Family Violence Act 2018 came into effect. The Act clarified that a carer and a recipient of care can be a type of “family relationship”. This extended understanding of a family relationship is particularly important for older people, given that the carer(s) providing them with ongoing care and support may be perpetrators of abuse.

In 2017, elder abuse services underwent significant changes with more emphasis on intervention and more providers entering the sector. The main aspect of these changes was the establishment of a 24/7 helpline which provides a referral service to contracted community organisations.

Budget 2020 provided \$25 million to the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) over four years to increase funding available to the elder abuse support services. This service currently consists of a national 0800 number, and 28 regional service providers, with the Office for Seniors leading work to raise awareness.

In 2020, MSD published the proposed future strategy for Elder Abuse Response Services. This includes a three-phase approach of stabilising, strengthening and growing the service. Regional services have received increased funding. Future steps include investing in Māori, Pacific and culturally diverse services and prevention and awareness-raising activities.

A Budget 2021 announcement was the inclusion of an aged care commissioner role. The role will be based in the Office of the Health and Disability Commissioner. It will give older people and their whānau greater confidence in the quality and safety of aged care, and in the investigation of their complaints. The commissioner will also provide leadership to the sector and advocate for quality improvements on behalf of consumers and their whānau.

⁹ Office for Seniors. *Better Later Life - He Oranga Kaumātua 2019 to 2034*. <https://officeforseniors.govt.nz/better-later-life-strategy/>

Emerging themes for older people and kaumātua

What the National Strategy needs to do

Communities told us that the National Strategy needs to make elder abuse visible. Older people do not feel included in the term ‘family violence’ as usually defined. They said that language is important and so the National Strategy needs to make explicit the inclusion of elder abuse so they are visible.

Actions for eliminating family violence and sexual violence

Raise awareness and visibility of elder abuse

There needs to be enhanced public awareness of elder abuse and the supports available. This includes building understanding and awareness of the drivers, symptoms and risk factors for elder abuse.

Improve primary prevention and address ageism

Primary prevention efforts should address ageism and societal attitudes and behaviours that put older people at risk by promoting empowerment and respect for older people.

Primary prevention should also focus on wellbeing, which encompasses protective factors including a liveable income, social connection, transport, stable housing, financial freedom and involvement in family and community.

There are opportunities to learn from strengths-based attitudes and behaviours towards older people that exist within some cultures in Aotearoa New Zealand. Perhaps, most importantly, people said government must listen to our older people and kaumātua as they have the answers.

Fostering intergenerational relationships between tamariki and kaumātua were considered key to prevention. Whānau-centred approaches are needed to shift thinking that elder abuse is an ‘older person issue’, to one that recognises that the abuse of older people affects family, whānau, and communities.

It’s important that information is available in formats and in places that are accessible to older people and reflect their cultural and linguistic diversity.

Improve access to diverse services

People advocated for increased funding so that there are more services that consider the local context, with more diversity of services on offer. People also wanted support to access and to have the ability to navigate the ‘system’.

Some people talked about the need to go beyond ‘joining-up’ government and to look instead to coordinate the efforts of agencies and NGOs as they found it difficult to engage with so many different organisations (while also noting the need for services to meet different and diverse needs). This might be a ‘one stop shop’ that puts the older person at the centre and helps them get all of the support they need whether it relates to housing, income, social services or other welfare needs.

Appropriate legal protections

To prevent violence, people said it was necessary to address the inappropriate use of existing legal measures including Enduring Power of Attorney, advance directives and capacity assessments. Noting that the misuse of these measures can be part of the ways older people are abused it was suggested that everybody needs to understand what these measures are and ensure that they are applied correctly. This includes older people understanding their rights.

Workforce and advocacy

People talked about the need for a skilled elder abuse workforce with cultural competence, and for more education and training in services providing support to older people (governmental, private and NGO) to recognise all forms of elder abuse, in all settings (including rest homes). In addition, specific knowledge and training is needed to understand and respond to sexual abuse which occurs within the context of the cognitive decline of both people who use violence and victims.

Prevention of elder abuse requires professionals to be able to work collaboratively across their silos.

Some people said there was a need for stronger government levers/advocacy for older people such as the establishment of a Ministry for Seniors.

The emergent themes from engagement with older people were:

- Awareness – raise awareness and visibility of elder abuse
- Prevention – improve primary prevention and address ageism
- Access – improve access to diverse services
- Protections – appropriate legal protections and understanding of measures such as Enduring Power of Attorney
- Workforce – ensure a skilled elder abuse workforce, with cultural competence and collaborative working.