

Mistreatment of Older Persons: Federal Policy Definition - Explanatory Document

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1. Purpose of this federal policy definition of mistreatment of older persons

The federal policy definition on mistreatment of older persons presents the opportunity to provide federal leadership and share a common understanding of this issue. It is intended to serve as a vehicle for culture change and public awareness in support of efforts to prevent the mistreatment of older persons, and to help inform federal policies and programs aimed at countering this issue.

While a policy definition could overlap with other types of definitions, it has a different purpose and thus different characteristics. A definition for scientific purposes would need to be very precise for it to be measurable since it is intended for research and data collection. In contrast, a legal definition is rather complex as variations and inconsistencies exist across the country as a result of overlapping provincial, territorial and federal powers. A legal definition can also be implied, rather than stated directly, and use specific legal language. Within the provinces and territories, this includes different legislative approaches in many relevant areas, including adult protection, family relations, marriage, property rights, health and human rights. At the federal level, this includes the *Criminal Code*.

In summer 2021, the Government held national consultations to invite feedback on a federal policy definition. The consultations included roundtable sessions and an on-line survey. These engagement activities provided an important opportunity for the Government to hear the perspectives of stakeholders, experts, Indigenous organizations, and Canadians.

The Government also funded an exploratory study, [*Enhancement of Canadian Data on the Abuse of Older Persons: An exploratory study*](#), on the challenges and gaps in data collection. The public opinion research was based on the review of scientific literature, individual interviews with Canadian and international researchers as well as representatives of Canada's provincial and territorial governments, and a group interview with members of the Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse.

This definition was developed with a perspective of equity and diversity and inclusion. It was guided by a series of key influencing factors. To avoid a long list of references, priority has been given to synthesis of knowledge (a series being written by the authors) and milestone documents.

2. Federal policy definition of mistreatment of older persons

Through the analysis of various definitions and following consultations with representatives from the federal, provincial and territorial governments of Canada, as well as national and international experts in the field of countering mistreatment (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022), the following terms and definition (includes components and types) was elaborated.

Mistreatment of older persons is a single or repeated event that involves a person, a group, a community, or an organization and occurs within a relationship where there is an expectation of trust, when an act, word, attitude, or lack of appropriate action causes or risks causing negative consequences for an older person.

It includes events of physical, psychological, financial or material, and sexual mistreatment that can be expressed in the form of violence (act word or attitude) or neglect (lack of appropriate action).

The definition makes it clear that an event that has or that is likely to have a negative impact on an older person can constitute mistreatment even if it occurred only once. It also highlights that mistreatment is more than an interpersonal issue, as perpetrators can be individuals, groups, communities, and organisations with whom an older person has a relationship where there is an expectation of trust. As such, it excludes violence (acts, words, attitudes) and neglect (lack of appropriate action) by strangers. Moreover, the separation that it introduces between violence and neglect makes it explicit that the types of mistreatment can manifest themselves in many ways and that it is possible to mistreat without having acted or spoken against an older person. This document aims to explain the different components of the term and definition (including the types and forms of mistreatment), their importance and the nuances surrounding their inclusion.

3. Terminology used for the definition

3.1 Mistreatment

There is no unique way to refer to mistreatment of older persons. Since the concept was introduced in the scientific literature at the start of the 1970s as “dirty work with old folks” (Stannard, 1973) and “granny battering” (Burnston, 1975), it came to be known under many names, mainly elder abuse, mistreatment and maltreatment (McDonald, 2007). Used as synonyms of each other, maltreatment is sometimes understood as a subset of mistreatment used to refer to harsher physical manifestations of the issue (Merriam-Webster, s.d.; Rubina 2017).

Internationally, elder abuse has been the most used of the three (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022). However, mistreatment has seen its use increase rapidly over the years and has found its place in some prominent organizations in Canada. The *Canada Research Chair on Older Adult Mistreatment prevention* in Toronto and the *Research Chair on Mistreatment of Older Adults* in Sherbrooke being two notable examples. As for maltreatment, it is rarely associated or linked with abuse of older persons, being often associated with child abuse. Different terms seem to be naturally adopted depending on the affected group, noting that there is no clear rationale for this in the literature. Still, when including both older persons and children in searches, the term mistreatment comes up more often for older persons.

For this definition, “mistreatment” was chosen to refer to the issue as it was found to be more inclusive. Indeed, it implicitly includes violence and neglect which is not the case for abuse, and it is not restricted to harsh physical events. Moreover, there are several advantages to this term. In particular, it is congruent with the evolution of concepts surrounding the issue (id est: well-treatment). “Abuse” also has a strong association with the legal world. It sometimes brings forth ideas of assault, robbery, extortion or sexual assault, which are all crimes under the *Criminal Code*. The use of “mistreatment” can thus help avoid the reluctance that some people may have when the term used to refer to the issue has a legal connotation. This is especially true when the perpetrator is a family member as there may be a fear of implicating the law in what is perceived to be a familial matter (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022).

3.2 Older persons

The use of “older persons” to refer to those who are affected by mistreatment conveys a sense of personhood. It is the term used by the United Nations to designate the universal day of older persons since 1990 (UN, 2022). It highlights that being older is simply an added characteristic to the fact of being a person. Moreover, the term older is flexible since it is not generally associated with a restrictive age or condition. As such, the expression is both respectful and inclusive of people who may have a different course of aging. The use of “older persons” rather than the more common “older people” is deliberate. It aims to show that those who are affected by mistreatment are all different individuals and that they do not belong to a homogeneous group (people). By using this term, it makes it clear that any person can experience mistreatment, regardless of culture, sexes, sexual orientations, genders, gender identities, gender expressions and perceived genders, beliefs, languages, ethno-cultural background, physical and cognitive capacity, etcetera (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022).

Other terms that are often used when referring to those affected by mistreatment were also considered but were rejected for varying reasons. “Senior”, which once was a popular term, is now interpreted by many as being particularly restrictive because of its association with the age of retirement and pensions. Moreover, senior is not a globally recognised term. “Elder” which remains in use through the expression “elder abuse” was avoided to be respectful of the Indigenous peoples for whom the term does not refer to age, but rather to a person who stands out as a model for their peers because of their spirituality, wisdom, values, teachings, and contribution to the community (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022). While there was no real opposition to the use of “older adults”, the governmental representatives as well as the researchers that were consulted had a slight preference for “persons”. It also happens to be the term used by the United Nations and is closer to the term “people” which is used by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022).

4. Components of the definition

4.1 Number of occurrences: “Single or repeated”

The mention of a “single” or “repeated” event indicates that even one occurrence of an inappropriate act, word or attitude, or lack of appropriate action is enough to consider that there was mistreatment if the other criteria are present.

However, this notion calls for caution. Taking into consideration any single situation as potential mistreatment can obscure the difference between a simple conflict and actual mistreatment (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022). In this regard, it is important to remember that occasional conflicts, defined as “active disagreements between people with opposing opinions or principles” (Cambridge Dictionary, s.d.) are normal parts of a relationship, even if they can sometimes get heated. In such cases, intensity, repetition and usual patterns should be considered.

4.2 Perpetrators: “Person, group, community or organization”

The definition introduces the idea that “a person, group, community or an organization” can be mistreating rather than being restricted to an individual as is often the case. This addition aims to fight against the perception that mistreatment is only an inter-individual or intra-familial issue and opens the door to a broader vision and better accountability.

This is particularly useful for targeting the changes that need to be made to resolve events of mistreatment. For example, in an institutional setting, the interventions required if a service provider does not meet the needs of an older person because they are unwilling to do so are different from if the organization does not provide the material or human resources needed to do so.

- **By person**, the definition refers to individuals who are in a relationship with the older person. It can be relatives, family members, life partners, service providers, friends, neighbours, etcetera
- **By group**, the definition refers to groups of individuals linked by common interests, organization, culture or geographical location. It can be an association that the older person frequents, a dance group, etcetera
- **By a community**, the definition refers to a set of interdependent individuals who influence each other and perceive themselves as members of the same social identity” (Free translation, Vallerand, 1993, p. 783-784). It can be a faith community, etcetera
- **By organization**, the definition refers to situations that result from the practices and management methods of an organization or an institution. It can be a hospital, a long-term care facility, a company, a banking institution, etcetera

4.3 Link between the older person and the perpetrator: “a relationship where there is an expectation of trust”

Mistreatment of older persons is often framed as occurring within a relationship of trust. This indicates that strangers cannot be perpetrators and leads to the exclusion of events such as theft and fraud by an unknown entity. This formulation is sometimes criticized, as in some cases it can be used to imply that older persons are responsible for the mistreatment they experience by giving their trust to someone who was undeserving (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022).

The use of “relationship where there is an expectation of trust” in this definition aims to counter this criticism and to take the blame away from older persons. The added clarification indicates that mistreatment occurs in relationships where it would be normal to expect trust. For instance, trust would be expected from a relationship with a service provider, a caregiver, a banking establishment, a religious community, a long-term care facility, etcetera.

The majority of experts agree on the fact that the notions of relationships and trust are very important to a definition to avoid ending up with all forms of victimization covered by it. However, there are debates about whether these concepts should be framed in such a way as to allow for the inclusion of frauds and scams involving persons assuming a false identity or title that induces trust. For example, pretending to be a grandchild, a government official, a computer technician, etcetera. The use of

“expectation of trust” keeps the door open to including these kinds of events at some point, but in its current form the definition would not include them (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022).

4.4 Manifestation of the issue: “act, word, attitude, or lack of appropriate action”

Mistreatment is always characterized by a certain form of violence often described as “actions”. This term is generally understood to encompass physical, verbal or attitudinal manifestations of mistreatment, although this is not always made explicit (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022). As such, when used in the context of mistreatment, the notion of violence goes beyond harming someone in a physical way. This is consistent with the WHO definition that describes violence as:

“The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” (WHO, 2002, p.5.).

Moreover, “in psychology, an attitude refers to a set of emotions, beliefs, and behaviours toward a particular object, person, thing, or event” (Cherry, 2023, n.p.). Attitudes can be either positive, neutral or negative. They are influenced by experiences, social roles and norms, classical and operant conditioning and, the observation of people in environment. This concept is broader than “acts or words” (as stated in the definition of mistreatment that is proposed), adds nuances to the definition and expands the notion of violence. The following scenario shows why this addition can be important in certain contexts:

A staff member in a residential facility is fulfilling the duties of his job adequately, follows his charts and provides proper care and medication to the residents. All the while, he shows a complete lack of interest for the older persons around him. He does not engage outside of the required task, never chats with the residents and is comfortable talking with other staff member as if there was no one around.

In this example, what is described could hardly be considered as an act or a word, but it still reflects an attitude by a person, group or organization that can lead to negative consequences for the older persons. To this, the idea of omissions or lack of appropriate action (often called neglect) is often added. As such, the approach of categorizing the manifestations under the forms of violence or neglect was adopted. **Violence** is used to refer to active mistreatment such as actions, words or attitudes, while **neglect** refers to passive mistreatment or a lack of appropriate action (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022). That is to say that not providing care to an older person, ignoring them, or not meeting their needs when required can be mistreatment.

This way of presenting the manifestations of mistreatment makes it explicit that it can be expressed in several ways and that it is possible to be mistreating without having acted or spoken against an older person. It also allows for a more in depth look at the different manifestations of neglect as it can be examined through a different lens for each type of mistreatment, as opposed to definitions where neglect is a type amongst the others.

4.5 Impacts of mistreatment: “causes or risks causing negative consequences”

The majority of definitions deal broadly with the notion of consequences, mentioning that mistreatment causes harm or distress, but some definitions seek to be more precise, detailing types of consequences that are similar to types of mistreatment (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022). Neither of these approaches were used for the definition. On one hand, the notion of harm and distress would be restrictive as it suggests that an event that did not reach the threshold for causing harm or distress could not be mistreatment. In contrast, mentioning every type of consequences would lead to a bloated definition. As such, the simple idea of “negative consequences” is used to implicitly describe any physical, psychological, social and financial consequences that could affect the health, security and well-being of older persons (WHO, 2022). Each of these four categories of consequences are often documented in population-based studies on mistreatment without being explicitly quoted in definitions (Gingras, 2020). Table 1 presents some examples of the possible consequences of mistreatment.

Table 1: Examples of the Possible Consequences of Mistreatment

Types of Consequences	Examples
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporary or permanent physical repercussions • Deteriorating health • Decline in functional performance • Increase in the morbidity rate • Mortality
Psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Depression • Poor self-esteem • Sadness, low spirit, unhappiness and a feeling of dissatisfaction • Suicidal ideation • Increased feeling of insecurity • Shame • Guilt • Distrust
Material or Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of financial resources • Loss of material goods • Deprivation of essential goods • Debts • Insolvency • Bankruptcy
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loneliness • Losing contact with acquaintances • Conflicts • Increased dependency

Source: Beaulieu et al., 2022

Often paired with the concept of consequences is the notion of risk which indicates that mistreatment can occur even if negative consequences have not yet materialized. Although this introduces subjectivity to the definition, it is essential to avoid excluding situations that involve older persons living in vulnerable situations. Notably those with neurocognitive disorders, quadriplegia or who are unconscious, as they may not directly experience the consequences of mistreatment.

4.6 Intent: “Intentional or unintentional events”

Although the definition does not include the notion of intent, it is implied that there may be unintentional mistreatment and that those event(s) also need attention. Socially, people tend to see only intentional events as mistreatment and see unintentional events as accidents or blunders. Yet, even if an event is unintentional, it can still be unacceptable and have significant consequences for the person experiencing it (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022).

5. Types of mistreatment

The definition and examples provided for each type of mistreatment were elaborated following a thorough analysis of many definitions of mistreatment of older persons, including past and actual policy definitions, legal definitions and research definitions¹. Definitions emerging from elsewhere in the field of interpersonal violence, like child maltreatment were also a source of inspiration. They lead to the novel introduction of the caveat that physical neglect should be considered in relation to the resources available to the person or group that is seen as mistreating given that “cultural values, the standards of care in the community, and poverty may contribute to what is perceived as maltreatment” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019, p.3). In Quebec, for example, the Youth Protection Act defines physical neglect as:

“failing to meet the child’s basic physical needs with respect to food, clothing, hygiene or lodging, **taking into account their resources**” (Art 38).

¹ Some of the most influential definitions in this process were the fourteen definitions that are commonly used by the Canadian Provinces and Territories (Government of Alberta, 2022; Government of British Columbia, 1996; Government of Manitoba, 2000; Government of New-Brunswick, 1980; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2007; Northwest Territories Network, n.d; Government of Nova Scotia, 2005; Government of Nunavut, 2006; Government of Ontario, 2021; Prince Edward Island Government, 2015), Government of Quebec, 2017-2022; Saskatchewan Health Authority, 2021; Government of Yukon, 2003) the Toronto declaration definition (WHO, 2002) and the current WHO definition (WHO, 2021). The consultations with representatives from the federal and provincial governments of Canada, as well as national and international experts in the field of countering mistreatment that were done in the context of the exploratory study *Enhancement of Canadian Data on the Abuse of Older Persons* (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022) also contributed to the elaboration of this typology.

Indeed, in the context of mistreatment of older persons, it is also possible that a person or group fails to provide the necessities for a person they care for despite their best intent because they are unable to access the resources to do better. As such an exception to that effect was added to the definition.

Of note, the examples provided below are not all encompassing. Their purpose is to give a general idea of how mistreatment of older persons can manifest within each type but there are many potential events that are not described that could also constitute mistreatment.

5.1 Psychological mistreatment

Psychological mistreatment is characterized by acts, words, attitudes or lack of appropriate actions that cause or risk causing negative consequences on the psychological, emotional and moral integrity, health, security and well-being of an older person.

- **In the form of violence** it can manifest as (but is not limited to) emotional blackmail, manipulation, humiliation, insults, infantilization, belittlement, verbal and non-verbal threats, disempowerment, excessive, comments that are xenophobic, ableist, sexist, homophobic, biphobic, transphobic, invalidating the belief of the person, mocking and criticizing spiritual practices (example given: prayers), accusing someone of sorcery, using someone's spiritual beliefs to deceive them or lead them to do something they would not otherwise do, breaking a spiritual symbol, etcetera
- **In the form of neglect** it can manifest as (but is not limited to) rejection, social isolation, abandonment, disinterest, insensitivity, not considering the spiritual needs of the person, not providing conditions that are favorable to the exercise of one's spirituality, etcetera

N.B. Actions or words that devalue others on the basis of their sex, sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression are considered psychological mistreatment rather than sexual mistreatment since their main consequences are to the psychological, emotional and moral integrity, health, security and well-being of the older person. Still, in events that affect those aspects of an older person's life, there can be an overlap between the two types.

5.2 Physical mistreatment

Physical mistreatment is characterized by acts or lack of appropriate actions that cause or risk causing negative consequences on the physical integrity, health, security and well-being of an older person.

- **In the form of violence** it can manifest as (but is not limited to) shoving, brutalizing, hitting, burning, force-feeding, inadequate medication administration, inappropriate use of restraints (physical or pharmacological), etcetera
- **In the form of neglect** it can manifest as (but is not limited to) failure to provide a reasonable level of comfort and safety, failure to provide assistance with eating, grooming, hygiene or taking medication when the older person is in a situation of dependency, abandonment, etcetera

N.B. Failure to provide necessities with regard to food, clothing, hygiene or housing should be considered neglect only in cases where the person or group was able to obtain and use the resources required to do better.²

Events that are medical in nature, such as improper administration of medication and the use of physical and chemical constraints are sometimes classified under a separate type (medical mistreatment). This type was not retained for this definition. As such, most of these events would be classified under physical mistreatment.

5.3 Sexual mistreatment

Sexual mistreatment is characterized by acts, words or attitudes that disregard consent, are unwanted, coerced or forced, or by lack of appropriate actions that cause or risk causing negative consequences on the sexual integrity, health, security and well-being of an older person.

- **In the form of violence** it can manifest as (but is not limited to) degrading jokes or remarks of a sexual nature, sexual advances, contacts or behaviors known or that reasonably ought to be known unwelcome, sexual assault, etcetera
- **In the form of neglect** it can manifest as (but is not limited to) failure to provide privacy, systematically treating older persons as having no sexual attraction to others, or a lack of desire to have sex and/or preventing them from expressing their sexuality, etcetera

N.B. Considering the acts covered under this type can have consequences of a physical and psychological nature, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish under which type they should be classified. This is among other things the case of sexist, homophobic or transphobic comments which are sometimes under the psychological type and sometimes under the sexual type.

5.4 Material or financial mistreatment

Material or financial mistreatment is characterized by acts, words, attitudes or lack of appropriate actions that cause or risk causing negative consequences on the financial integrity, health, security and well-being of an older person or their property.

- **In the form of violence** it can manifest as (but is not limited to) pressure to change a will, banking transactions without the person's consent (use of a debit card, online banking, etcetera), misappropriation of money or assets, excessive price charged for services provided, forced or concealed contractual or insurance transaction, identity theft, signature of a lease under pressure, etcetera

² Inspired by the Quebec Youth Protection Act, CQLR C P-34.1 (art 38).

- **In the form of neglect** it can manifest as (but is not limited to) failure to manage the person's assets in his or her best interest or to provide the necessary goods and/or services as required, failure to assess the person's abilities, understanding and financial literacy, etcetera

N.B. Events of identity theft are usually considered under this type as their consequences tend to often be of a financial nature.

6. Key Influencing Factors

In developing the policy definition, the Government took into considerations the many lived realities to ensure they can be applicable to any older person despite their demographic characteristics. The policy definition must be viewed through an intersectional lens that is sensitive to the varying experiences of older persons identifying with different sociocultural identities.

6.1 Chronological age: When is someone “old”?

Chronological age, which is often included alongside mentions of “older persons” to make clear who this term refers to, is absent from this definition. It was not included to ensure the definition would remain valid even if the age at which someone is considered “old” was to change. Moreover, experts often contest the use of chronological age to qualify advancement into older age, noting that physical, psychological and social indicators are more appropriate (Morgan & Konkel., 2016).

Yet, it is recognized that chronological age is the simplest method to define admissibility criteria to programmes or services. In Canada, the age of 65 is often used to qualify someone as an older person, since it is the age at which most people become eligible for the Old Age Security pension. Despite that, it is common for people who have experienced certain physical, psychological or cognitive health issues or gone through adverse life experience (incarceration, homelessness, violence, etcetera) to show advanced sign of aging and present characteristics associated with older people at the age of 60, 55 or even younger.

6.2 Diversity and intersectionality: Who experiences mistreatment?

“Aging does not mean breaking with one's past to enter a separate category of the population. On the contrary, aging is most often part of the continuity of an existence marked by one's individuality and by one's belonging to different groups” (Wallach, 2012, p.5).

As such, older persons represent a **diverse** part of the population. One with different sexes, sexual orientations, genders, gender identities, gender expressions and perceived genders, beliefs, languages, ethno-cultural background, physical and cognitive capacities, and lived experience. This diversity, while something worth celebrating can create unique challenges for some older persons. Especially those who belong to groups that experience marginalization or discrimination (example given: Indigenous Peoples, members of 2SLGBTQI+ communities, racialized communities, ethno-cultural groups, new immigrants, and persons with disabilities) (Walsh et al., 2010; Owen-Williams, 2012; Haukioja, 2016; Cooper et al., 2020; Gutman et al., 2020; Penhale, 2020; Beaulieu et al., 2022).

This diversity is also present in the various settings where older persons live (home, multi-generational home settings, residential facilities, rural and remote areas, and prisons) (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022). Individual and environmental factors such as language barriers, maladapted services, economic disparities, lack of social support and experiences of discrimination to name but a few, can all increase the risk of experiencing mistreatment or make seeking help in cases of mistreatment more complex. For example, for Indigenous Peoples, there is a need to consider the legacy of the residential school system, as well as their geographic, economic, and social contexts.

The fight against mistreatment therefore implies taking into account the role of structural factors in the difficulties encountered by older persons and the **intersection of their multiple characteristics and social positions** (Wallach, 2012). As such, adopting an intersectional approach to understand and counter mistreatment of older persons calls for an exploration of “the interactions with other social factors such as gender, sex, race, ethnicity, Indigenous identity, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, social status, place of origin and immigration status” (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2023, n.p.).

6.3 Context: What surrounds mistreatment?

Mistreatment of older persons is a complex issue that is influenced by a variety of individual and environmental factors. They can be linked to family history, neighborly relations, medical condition, socio-economic status, ethnicity, cultural background, sexes, sexual orientations, genders, gender identities, gender expressions and perceived genders, and more. This is what colors the context in which mistreatment occurs and makes each mistreatment event different (Lindenberg & al, 2013).

Considering these specific components and their impacts is crucial for all actors involved in addressing mistreatment. However, it is important to note that different people may have different interpretations of an event and its context. As such, to find a proper solution and the best actions to undertake, open communication is required. This not only means exchanging with the other actors addressing the situation but also listening to the perspectives, needs, preferences and wishes of the older persons.

6.4 Ageism: A global issue linked to mistreatment

Ageism is a multifaceted issue that operates on both the individual and the societal level. Defined as “the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age” (WHO, 2021, p.2), it can have tangible effects on various aspects of the personal and social life of older persons. Moreover, it can act as a conscious or unconscious motive or legitimizing factor for mistreatment. As such, recognizing ageism and its impacts and maintaining efforts to counter ageism is essential in the fight against mistreatment. In this regard, the WHO has identified combating ageism as the number one global priority to tackle abuse of older persons for the *Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030)* (WHO, 2022a).

6.5 Rights violation: A transversal issue found in every type of mistreatment

It is important to recognize that older persons have the same rights as any other adult, and that these rights are susceptible to be infringed upon in all events of mistreatment. Addressing mistreatment requires a comprehensive approach that includes promoting and protecting the human rights of older persons. This involves not only addressing the immediate harm caused by mistreatment, but also addressing the underlying structural factors that contribute to these violations, such as ageism, discrimination, and inequality (United Nations, s.d.; Chaire de recherche sur la maltraitance envers les personnes âgées et al., 2022).

6.6 Interpersonal violence at all ages and in all contexts

Mistreatment can be experienced at various ages in life (from birth to death) and in various settings (home, school, work, institutions, prisons, etcetera). Depending on the population of interest, it is clear that the field of study, the advocacy and the interventions take on slightly different forms and are designated differently. Thus, we are exposed to concepts such as child abuse or maltreatment, intimate partner violence, mistreatment of older persons, resident-to-resident abuse, violence in the workplace, bullying, etcetera. All these fields share a concern for interpersonal violence and some include mistreatment committed within groups, communities and even organizations. Also, some of these fields, notably those dealing with children and older persons, explicitly include neglect.

Dialogue between all the fields that take an interest in interpersonal violence is essential as they often interact, intersect or overlap in part or in whole with one another. A central element to opening this dialogue is the adoption of a life course approach which promotes the documentation of the effects of mistreatment at any age, on both the short and long term. Several studies adopting this approach have already shown a strong correlation between experiencing mistreatment as an older person and having experienced mistreatment as a child (McDonald & Thomas, 2013).

7 Annex A - Overview

Definition of mistreatment of older persons

Mistreatment of older persons is a single or repeated event that involves a person, a group, a community, or an organization and occurs within a relationship where there is an expectation of trust, when an act, word, attitude, or lack of appropriate action causes or risks causing negative consequences for an older person. It includes events of physical, psychological, financial or material, and sexual mistreatment that can be expressed in the form of violence (act word or attitude) or neglect (lack of appropriate action).³

Types of mistreatment

Psychological mistreatment

Psychological mistreatment is characterized by acts, words, attitudes or lack of appropriate actions that cause or risk causing negative consequences on the psychological, emotional and moral integrity, health, security and well-being of an older person.

In the form of violence it can manifest as (but is not limited to) emotional blackmail, manipulation, humiliation, insults, infantilization, belittlement, verbal and non-verbal threats, disempowerment, excessive, comments that are xenophobic, ableist, sexist, homophobic, biphobic, transphobic, invalidating the belief of the person, mocking and criticizing spiritual practices (example given: prayers), accusing someone of sorcery, using someone's spiritual beliefs to deceive them or lead them to do something they would not otherwise do, breaking a spiritual symbol, etcetera.

In the form of neglect it can manifest as (but is not limited to) rejection, social isolation, abandonment, disinterest, insensitivity, not considering the spiritual needs of the person, not providing conditions that are favorable to the exercise of one's spirituality, etcetera.

N.B. Actions or words that devalue others on the basis of their sex, sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression are considered psychological mistreatment rather than sexual mistreatment since their main consequences are to the psychological, emotional and moral integrity, health, security and well-being of the older person. Still, in events that affect those aspects of an older person's life, there can be an overlap between the two types.

Physical mistreatment

Physical mistreatment is characterized by acts or lack of appropriate actions that cause or risk causing negative consequences on the physical integrity, health, security and well-being of an older person.

³ This definition (including the components and types) was elaborated through the analysis of multiple definitions and following consultations with representatives from the federal and provincial and territorial governments of Canada, as well as national and international experts in the field of countering mistreatment (Beaulieu & St-Martin, 2022).

In the form of violence it can manifest as (but is not limited to) shoving, brutalizing, hitting, burning, force-feeding, inadequate medication administration, inappropriate use of restraints (physical or pharmacological), etcetera.

In the form of neglect it can manifest as (but is not limited to) failure to provide a reasonable level of comfort and safety, failure to provide assistance with eating, grooming, hygiene or taking medication when the older person is in a situation of dependency, abandonment, etcetera.

N.B. Failure to provide necessities with regard to food, clothing, hygiene or housing should be considered neglect only in cases where the person or group was able to obtain and use resources to do better. Also, events that are medical in nature, such as improper administration of medication and the use of physical and chemical constraints are sometimes classified under a separate type (medical mistreatment). This type wasn't kept for this definition. As such, most of these events would be classified under physical mistreatment.

Sexual mistreatment

Sexual mistreatment is characterized by acts, words or attitudes that disregard consent, are unwanted, coerced or forced, or by lack of appropriate actions that cause or risk causing negative consequences on the sexual integrity, health, security and well-being of an older person.

In the form of violence it can manifest as (but is not limited to) degrading jokes or remarks of a sexual nature, sexual advances, contacts or behaviors known or that reasonably ought to be known unwelcome, sexual assault, etcetera.

In the form of neglect it can manifest as (but is not limited to) failure to provide privacy, systematically treating older persons as having no sexual attraction to others, or a lack of desire to have sex and/or preventing them from expressing their sexuality, etcetera.

N.B. Considering the acts covered under this type can have consequences of a physical and psychological nature, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish under which type they should be classified. This is among other things the case of sexist, homophobic or transphobic comments which are sometimes under the psychological type and sometimes under the sexual type.

Material or financial mistreatment

Material or financial mistreatment is characterized by acts, words, attitudes or lack of appropriate actions that cause or risk causing negative consequences on the financial integrity, health, security and well-being of an older person or their property.

In the form of violence it can manifest as (but is not limited to) pressure to change a will, banking transactions without the person's consent (use of a debit card, online banking, etcetera.), misappropriation of money or assets, excessive price charged for services provided, forced or concealed contractual or insurance transaction, identity theft, signature of a lease under pressure, etcetera.

In the form of neglect it can manifest as (but is not limited to) failure to manage the person's assets in his or her best interest or to provide the necessary goods and/or services as required, failure to assess the person's abilities, understanding and financial literacy, etcetera.

N.B. Events of identity theft are usually considered under this type as their consequences tend to mainly be of a financial nature.

Key influencing factors

When is someone “old”?

In Canada, the age of 65 is typically used to qualify someone as an older person, but it is common for people who have had adverse life experience to present characteristics associated with being “old” at a younger age.

Who experiences mistreatment?

Older persons represent a diverse part of the population. One with different sexes, sexual orientations, genders, gender identities, gender expressions and perceived genders, beliefs, languages, ethno-cultural background, physical and cognitive capacities, and lived experience. The fight against mistreatment therefore implies considering the intersection of their multiple characteristics and social positions.

What surrounds mistreatment?

Mistreatment of older persons is a complex issue that is influenced by a variety of individual and environmental factors. They can be linked to family history, neighborly relations, medical condition, socio-economic status, ethnicity, cultural background, sexes, sexual orientations, genders, gender identities, gender expressions and perceived genders, and more. This is what colors the context in which mistreatment occurs and makes each mistreatment event different.

Ageism: A global issue linked to mistreatment

Ageism is how we think, feel and act towards others or oneself based on age. It can have tangible effects on various aspects of the personal and social life of older persons and be a conscious or unconscious motive for mistreatment. Recognizing ageism and its impacts and maintaining efforts to counter ageism is essential in the fight against mistreatment.

Rights violation: A transversal issue in every type of mistreatment

Older persons have the same rights as any other adult, and these rights are susceptible to be infringed upon in all events of mistreatment. Therefore, addressing mistreatment requires a comprehensive approach that includes promoting and protecting the human rights of older persons.

Interpersonal violence at all ages and in all contexts

Interpersonal violence can be experienced at various ages in life (from birth to death) and in various settings (home, school, work, institutions, prisons, etcetera). Concepts such as child abuse or maltreatment, intimate partner violence, mistreatment of older persons, resident-to-resident abuse, violence in the workplace, bullying, can often interact, intersect or overlap with one another. Dialogue between all the fields that take an interest in interpersonal violence is therefore essential. The adoption of a life course approach to interpersonal violence can help open this dialogue.

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