

African-American seniors at twice the risk for mental abuse, 5 times for financial exploitation

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In the first population-based survey to indicate a racial disparity in the psychological abuse of senior citizens, University of Pittsburgh researchers found that African American seniors could be twice as likely to be mistreated than elders of other races. The survey also revealed that African American elders could be up to five times more susceptible to being swindled. Reporting the survey results in *The Gerontologist*, the researchers urged that health care and social service workers be especially vigilant for the possible mistreatment of African American seniors.

Lead author Scott Beach, assistant director of Pitt's University Center for Social and Urban Research (UCSUR) and director of the center's Survey Research Program, said the study is important to the developing field of elderly abuse research. Beach worked with coauthors Richard Schulz, director of UCSUR and the center's gerontology program; Nicholas Castle, a professor of health policy and management in Pitt's Graduate School of Public Health; and Jules Rosen, a professor of psychiatry in Pitt's School of Medicine.

The Pitt survey is among only a few that focus on race as a specific factor in elder mistreatment, Beach said. In addition, the population-based survey collected information directly from senior citizens through face-to-face and telephone interviews, the most effective way to document unreported abuse, he explained; typically, elder mistreatment

data is gathered from complaints filed with Adult Protective Services. In this way, the Pitt study helps fill a noted gap in elder mistreatment research: The National Research Council, in its 2003 report, *Elder Mistreatment*, described existing elder abuse research as having "a number of weaknesses," including a lack of clear, consistent definitions and an absence of population-based data.

The team interviewed 903 adults—a statistically large sample—aged 60 and older living in Pennsylvania's Allegheny County about instances of psychological abuse and financial exploitation occurring within the past 6 months and since they had turned 60. The sample contained 210 African Americans, or 23.2 percent of respondents, which is nearly twice the proportion of African Americans living in Allegheny County, Beach said.

Psychological mistreatment included being yelled at or insulted, having personal property destroyed, and receiving threats of injury, stoppage of care, or being sent to a nursing home. Among African Americans, 24.4 percent reported being abused since turning 60 and 16.1 percent reported psychological mistreatment within the past 6 months. Around half as many non-Black seniors reported abuse with 13.2 percent claiming [psychological abuse](#) since turning 60 and 7.2 percent saying it happened within the previous half-year. Interestingly, African Americans were usually less upset by aggressive behavior, yet more African Americans reported being "extremely upset" when deliberately insulted or when their belongings were destroyed.

African Americans reported even higher instances of financial exploitation, which was defined as having checks stolen, having money tampered with, and being made to sign documents they did not understand. Only 8.4 percent of non-African American elders reported being cheated since turning 60 and a mere 2.4 percent said it happened within the past 6 months. On the other hand, 23 percent of African

Americans claimed that someone meddled with their money since they turned 60 and 12.9 percent said it occurred recently.

Most striking about the team's findings was that the racial disparity in mental abuse or financial exploitation was not explained by additional factors such as education, health, age, or socioeconomic status, Beach said. On average, African Americans in the survey tended to be slightly younger, less educated, and more likely to be single, divorced, or widowed. Nonetheless, non-African Americans of similar means, years, schooling, and marital status were still less likely to report mistreatment or financial deceit, Beach said.

Beach plans to follow up on the [survey](#) by including seniors from other parts of the country, interviewing the perpetrators, and developing more standardized definitions of the various types of psychological mistreatment and financial exploitation.

Provided by University of Pittsburgh

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