

Housing and elder abuse

How housing has impacted HAAG clients' experiences of elder abuse 2020-24

Overview

This summary report explores the **experiences of older people facing housing insecurity** who presented to Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG) with suspected **elder abuse** between 2020 and 2024. Drawing on client records and case notes, the report aims to **better understand the relationship between housing and elder abuse**, how this presented in HAAG clients, and indicators of the circumstances in which elder abuse was likely to occur.

The findings highlight that **elder abuse is a complex and often hidden issue**, particularly when it occurs in familial settings or is exacerbated by housing insecurity and financial hardship, as these drive further dependence on the person(s) causing harm.

The study found that elder abuse often **occurs within close family relationships and within shared living arrangements**, either in the same home or property, often in circumstances where **older people are dependent on those causing them harm for housing or care**. Elder abuse can occur across different housing conditions, and it frequently arises from **external stressors such as insecure housing and financial hardship**, indicating a need for a **whole of government and sector approach to mitigate the further prevalence of elder abuse**.

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Case study

Farida is a CALD woman in her mid-70's who only speaks a language other than English, and who has complex health needs, including needing a wheelchair and assistance with most activities of daily living. Farida was living with her adult son. She had purchased a home for him using her life savings, with the understanding that he would care for her as she aged. However, her son completely neglected her. She had been confined to bed as he had cancelled all her external care supports. He also did not allow her to seek medical treatment, controlled all her finances and communication with the outside world. She said she felt like 'a prisoner'.*

Farida was connected to support services through a friend, and after many challenges due to language and physical barriers, elder abuse and her fearfulness of her son, Farida was able to access respite care while a more permanent housing option was found. Unfortunately, most housing options were not physically accessible and did not allow modifications for her mobility needs.

After advocacy from her case workers, Farida moved into a fully accessible modified and accessible unit in a suburb with appropriate cultural and community supports and was close to her medical services. Farida now lives independently, with a home care package in place, and her health has significantly improved.

**Name has been changed, and the person's consent was obtained to share the story*

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Overview cont'd

Many clients did not explicitly identify their situation as *elder abuse*, instead indirectly describing behaviours and harms that aligned with it. This reflects **both the challenge an older person faces in acknowledging they have experienced abuse and the difficulty of recognising harm within emotionally complex and close relationships**. For CALD clients, limited English proficiency and cultural stigma acted as further barriers to disclosure and access to support.

The **presence of multiple trusted people causing harm and overlapping forms of abuse** – particularly psychological, financial, and neglect – underscores the complexity of elder abuse and the challenges around its disclosure. Clients from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, may face additional challenges (e.g. cultural barriers and stigma) to admitting they have experienced abuse, particularly where they rely on others to seek support. There is opportunity for the **provision of culturally appropriate professional and community education to raise awareness and to encourage older people facing abuse to seek help**.

The findings of this report reinforce the importance of **secure and stable housing as a critical pathway out of abuse**. The rising costs and limited availability of affordable housing alternatives leaves many older people with no other option but to continue living with those causing them harm, trapping them in cycles of abuse. There is therefore a need **for increased investment in more public and community housing** to ensure that older people have access to affordable and secure housing alternatives. Integrating housing support within the broader context of elder abuse and family violence will also be critical to improving outcomes for older people facing abuse and mistreatment.

Case study

Evelyn is a CALD woman in her 70s who had been experiencing homelessness and was couch surfing between her daughter and son's homes. While living with her son, daughter in law, and grandchildren, Evelyn faced various types of abuse. Her son was financially abusive, controlling her income, accessing her bank account, and managing her finances against Evelyn's wishes. Her daughter in law was verbally and emotionally abusing her, making insulting comments toward her, controlling her actions in the home, and intimidating Evelyn at home.*

Evelyn spent most of her time shut-in in her room or at her daughter's home, which is cramped and overcrowded. Through the HAAG HAL service, Evelyn was able to upgrade her application on the Victorian Housing Register. With the support of her daughter and HAAG workers, Evelyn successfully secured and moved into a public housing unit.

**Name has been changed for anonymity.*

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Key findings

- Key finding 1:** CALD clients may be unaware of how to access assistance without relying on family and have additional stigma and shame around disclosing that the people closest to them are the ones who are mistreating them.
- Key finding 2:** Older adults of any age may be at risk of experiencing elder abuse in some aspect of their lives.
- Key finding 3:** The presence of multiple forms of abuse simultaneously suggests that elder abuse can range in severity and could increase when an older person is living with others.
- Key finding 4:** There may be an underreporting in the number of clients experiencing elder abuse, due to individual and social barriers that may discourage clients from disclosing, and the ways in which the identification of elder abuse overlaps with family violence.
- Key finding 5:** Family members and other people living on the same property were the most likely to cause harm against an older person and be the source of their elder abuse. This likelihood can increase where an older person is dependent on them for housing and care.
- Key finding 6:** Elder abuse that emerges from close relationships (e.g. parent-child) and occurs with more than one person causing harm, can leave older people trapped in patterns of abuse and make it difficult for them to plan their exit of these relationships.
- Key finding 7:** External factors, such as housing insecurity and financial hardship, and overlapping issues can create opportunities for elder abuse to occur within the home and contribute to its prevalence.
- Key finding 8:** Housing represents a crucial pathway for older people to escape elder abuse. It allows them to remove themselves from the abusive environment, while preserving their relationship to the person(s) causing harm.
- Key finding 9:** Elder abuse may be underreported by clients as they themselves may unknowingly obscure the elder abuse they experience behind other terms.
- Key finding 10:** There is no single response to solving elder abuse. Housing and other like services can support older people in various ways to achieve autonomy, safety, and housing stability without direct intervention.
- Key finding 11:** Different housing conditions alone do not determine risk as elder abuse can occur in any home and to any older person.
- Key finding 12:** Older people are likely to have been living with the person(s) who caused harm when the elder abuse occurred, either in the same home or property.
- Key finding 13:** 'Living with others' and 'living with family members' may be stronger indicators of risk of elder abuse as these are the conditions in which it is more likely to occur.

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Recommendations

- Recommendation 1:** Provide culturally appropriate community education to raise awareness of elder abuse, and to reduce stigma. This should include recognition of the negative connotations and misunderstanding of the term “elder abuse”, and appropriate terminology that better reflects the understanding of the community and encourages older people to seek help.
- Recommendation 2:** Further examination of HAAG’s client data to examine any key differences between the circumstances and demographics of those experiencing elder abuse compared to those who are not, to identify potential risk factors and early intervention opportunities.
- Recommendation 3:** Provision of professional education to the family violence and homelessness sectors on the unique ways in which elder abuse presents, so that older people are more visible.
- Recommendation 4:** To most effectively identify elder abuse, a combination of both MARAM and elder abuse specific screening instruments, using sensitive questions, should be used by those working with older people.
- Recommendation 5:** To address elder abuse, the external factors that create opportunities for elder abuse to occur must be addressed, such as financial hardship, housing affordability, and family pressures. This requires a whole of government and sector response.
- Recommendation 6:** Improved recognition amongst policy makers, funders and the sector of the link between elder abuse and unsuitable housing, and that providing housing prevents elder abuse. Most clients were more concerned with obtaining suitable housing for themselves or their adult children than seeking redress, law enforcement or support for the mistreatment they are experiencing.
- Recommendation 7:** Investment in more public and community housing to ensure older people (and their adult children) have affordable housing alternatives. Without these alternatives, older people remain trapped in cycles of abuse and unsafe conditions.

About HAAG

[Housing for the Aged Action Group](https://www.housingfortheaged.org.au) is one of the only Australian organisations specialised in the housing needs of older people. Coming from grass-roots beginnings over 40 years ago, HAAG today is over 900 members strong. We are committed to finding long term solutions to the housing crisis facing older people in Australia.

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