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Who Gets a Home Visit?

Investigating Racial and Ethnic Bias in Adult Protective Services Investigations of Older Adult Mistreatment

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Issue

America's population is rapidly aging. The number of adults aged 65 years or older is projected to rise from 52.4 million to 94.7 million by 2060. At the same time, America's older adult population is also becoming more racially diverse. The proportion of non-white older Americans is projected to rise by more than 10% to comprise 34% of the population by 2040 – a pace expected to accelerate over the next few decades.

Older adults are uniquely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. As they age, older adults are more likely to experience financial difficulties, lose power over their legal rights, and experience stigma and loneliness due to their social position. Older adults of color, in turn, are more likely to lack the financial, social, and cultural resources to successfully advocate for their needs in the U.S. context.

Adult protective services (APS) are the primary form of state intervention in cases of elder mistreatment in the U.S. APS investigations can result in life-altering outcomes like the application of conservatorship, public guardianship, or involvement with law enforcement. Accurate and unbiased identification of elder abuse and neglect is crucial to protect elders from mistreatment and also to reduce the overpolicing of vulnerable groups. Addressing the role of bias in older adult mistreatment cases can improve social outcomes among America's aging population.

As the American older adult population becomes increasingly diverse, this brief examines evidence of racial and ethnic disparities in APS investigations. In particular, this brief investigates evidence of racial bias in older adult mistreatment cases that are confirmed by APS investigators. The research finds that systematic racial disparities emerge in APS

decisions, meaning that older adults of color have varying access to services compared to their white counterparts.

Study Approach

Using secondary data from over 14,000 elder abuse and neglect reports to a county social services agency in Southern California in 2018 and 2019, the researcher conducted a multivariate logistic regression analysis to determine the effect of an older adult's racial identity on the outcome of their APS case. The statistical model controlled for client gender, age, English proficiency, the type of reported mistreatment, and poverty levels in the client's ZIP code. Nation-specific ethnic information was used to divide the Asian and Pacific Islander racialized group into ethnic categories. Following the United Nations M49 classification standard, persons who reported a specific country of Asian and Pacific Islander descent in the dataset were placed into discrete and mutually exclusive regional categories (East Asian, Southeast Asian, and Oceanian).

Key Findings

- » **Adult protective services investigations have a structural racialized bias.** The study results do not clarify whether this results from institutional bias in APS or differences in access and help-seeking behavior of older adults, both scenarios point to a need for culturally informed education and outreach in older adult mistreatment cases.
- » **Bias leads to large racial and ethnic disparities in investigation outcomes for victims of older adult mistreatment.** Southeast Asian and Latino older adults who report mistreatment are significantly less likely to

receive decisions of confirmed mistreatment than their white counterparts, while East Asian and Southeast Asian non-English-speaking clients are significantly more likely than whites to be confirmed victims of mistreatment.

- » **Low English proficiency also results in higher rates of confirmed mistreatment for Southeast Asians.** While, overall, Southeast Asian APS clients (33%) are significantly less likely to receive decisions confirming mistreatment than their white counterparts (39%), those who did not speak English are actually significantly more likely to have confirmed cases (41%).
- » **Grouping all Asian American and Pacific Islander respondents masks significant differences between East and Southeast Asian experiences with APS.** APS case outcomes for Asian American and Pacific Islanders as a whole were similar to those of white respondents. However, grouping those respondents masked the differences between rates of confirmed abuse/mistreatment cases for East Asians (42%) and Southeast Asians (33%).

Recommendations

- » **Improve training for APS investigators.** APS investigators could undergo training to recognize and challenge implicit bias. The agency could also develop quality assurance programs that record evidence of individual bias from APS case workers.
- » **Develop culturally specific outreach campaigns.** Agencies that serve the older adult population should acknowledge the low levels of APS engagement with Southeast Asian and Latino communities. Funds should be allocated for programs and services that specifically address barriers to access for these groups in their native languages.
- » **Establish data disaggregation practices for API communities.** Data disaggregation practices are key to moving culturally sensitive policymaking to the level of specificity necessary to make meaningful changes for vulnerable populations. API communities are not a monolith, and agencies should establish data-collection practices that recognize and support diversity.

- » **Review mistreatment intervention methods to prepare for future generations.** Patterns of older adult mistreatment and help-seeking behavior within communities of color are not static and will likely continue to evolve as the current generation of older adult immigrants are replaced by future generations. As such, institutions aimed at preventing older adult abuse must adapt to a rapidly shifting environment as these groups age into older adulthood.

For More Information

Ahn, T. (2022). Examining Disproportionality in Adult Protective Services Decisions in Southern California (Master's capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/845458g5>.