



## Elder abuses during the COVID-19 pandemic

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### Abstract

With the establishment of social isolation, the COVID-19 pandemic caused the entire family to stay at home, with a greater level of stress in all, due to the unprecedented daily coexistence. Elderly people are more vulnerable to suffering various types of abuse, such as physical, verbal and financial, from their families and/or caregivers and even from scammers. Older women, with low education and income, who live with more residents, are more likely to be abused. The internet and telephone calls are means that can help in denouncing the various types of abuse of vulnerable people, including the elderly.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Elderly, Violence, Pandemics

## INTRODUCTION

In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, which causes COVID-19, a public emergency. In March of that same year, it was considered a pandemic, due to the exponential increase in several countries, becoming a global health problem.<sup>[1,2]</sup>

In this way, COVID-19 led to the establishment of social isolation and, consequently, the intra-household social permanence of the whole family. Many elderly people are more independent and live alone, staying away from their families during the period of greatest contamination.<sup>[3]</sup> However, aging implies an increase in the vulnerability, since the senile process influences the life and health conditions, causing loss of autonomy and dependence of the elderly, establishing the need for caregivers who, in most cases, are the own family members.<sup>[4]</sup>

During 2020, there was an increase in domestic violence against the elderly of 59%, compared to 2019, according to a survey carried out by the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights, through telephone records (Dial 100 or Call 180). Between March and June 2020, there were 25,533 complaints, while in the same period in 2019, there were 16,039 complaints.<sup>[5]</sup>

The objective of this work was to focus on violence against the elderly during the pandemic period.

## Material and Methods

This is a review study of recent literature on violence against the elderly, in the Covid-19 pandemic. The bibliographic survey was carried out in August 2021, through the online database: National Center for Biotechnology Information- NCBI (PubMed) (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/>), using the terms: “elder violence” OR “elder abuse” AND “pandemics” OR “elder abuse” AND “Covid-19”. Papers published in English were included and literature review studies and case reports were excluded. After the initial screening, the papers were read to verify their suitability for the topic. A manual search was also carried out in the paper references and epidemiological data from relevant national and international websites were also used.

## RESULTS

Six papers met the inclusion criteria and they were used in this work to review the literature about the theme.

### Literature Review

Xue *et al.* (2020) <sup>[6]</sup> analyzed 1,015,874 tweets, between April and July 2020, related to family violence and the COVID-19 pandemic, as follows: (1) increased vulnerability: COVID-19 and family violence (increasing rates, increase in direct phone calls, homicide); (2) types of family violence (child abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse); (3) forms of family violence (physical aggression, coercive control); (4) risk factors linked to family violence (alcohol abuse, financial restrictions, weapons, quarantine); (5) victims of family violence (LGBTQ community - lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer, women, black women, children, the elderly); (6) social services for family violence (hotlines, social workers, confidential services, shelters, funding); (7) law enforcement (911 emergency calls, arrest, protection orders, abuse reports); (8) social movements and awareness (victim support, raising awareness) and (9) news related to domestic violence. After analyzing the tweets, terms such as “increasing/increasing/rising violence” were frequently used, as were reports of an increase in help calls and complaints. Discussions about groups most at risk of abuse, such as women and children, were also observed. Twitter can be an alert social network, for real-time help with family violence, in addition to providing support, information and protection for victims.

Chang *et al.* (2021) <sup>[7]</sup> estimated, through a study with 897 American elderly people over 60 years old, their prevalence, risk factors and resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was carried out through two online platforms, between April and May 2020. The average age of respondents was 68.9 years, with the majority being female (64.3%), with university education (84, 0%), married (52.6%), in good health (40.0%). A total of 191 (21.3%) elderly people reported having suffered abuse (physical, verbal or financial), indicating an increase of 83.6% when compared to data prior to the pandemic. <sup>[8,9]</sup> Of the elderly who reported abuse, these significantly more occurred in: younger elderly people, living in houses with a greater number of residents, with poor health and financial problems. Also, no statistically significant differences were observed in terms of gender, race, education or marital status between the group of older adults who reported abuse and the group that did not.

Du and Chen (2021) <sup>[10]</sup> analyzed, through a cross-sectional study, the prevalence of elder abuse and the main risk factors related to the victim during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. For this, a questionnaire was applied to 10,362 elderly people over 65 years of age, the majority (54.9%) living in rural areas. The number of reported cases of abuse was 1,596 (15.4%), with 698 (6.74%) cases of neglect, 647 (6.24%) cases of financial abuse, 412 (3.98%) cases of emotional abuse and 163 (1.57%) physical abuse. 31.2% (n=498) of the participants reported two or more types of abuse. It was found that older elderly people with a greater number of sons and daughters were more likely to be abused and also those with lower education, income and self-care and cognitive abilities, and those with a lower frequency of social and religious participation. Abuses were also significantly more prevalent among divorced, widowed or single women and elderly people, as they would participate less frequently in social activities when compared to married or stable unions.

Liu *et al.* (2021) <sup>[11]</sup> conducted a study that examined the experiences of elder abuse victims at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in San Francisco (USA). Interviews were conducted by telephone by the San Francisco Adult Protective Services (APS), with 934 successful contacts, in order to assess knowledge about COVID-19, and possible deficiencies (access to food, medication, medical consultation, loneliness). Among these contacts, 20 (2.14%) individuals refused to participate and 521 (55.78%) responded; as well as 393 (42.1%) family members or another trusted person/service provider. The results indicated that 850 (91%) participants were aware of COVID-19 and 853 (91%) were aware of the need for social isolation. It was found that 697 (75%) of the individuals had their essential needs met; 843 (90%) had food and the means to get more; 802 (86%) had access to medication; 778 (83%) were able to obtain medical consultations; 821 (88%) did not experience any other type of neediness and 678 (73%) did not feel lonely. Therefore, it was observed that when the needs are previously identified, the subsequent population damages (homelessness, exacerbation of mental illnesses, health problems, use of the emergency department) can be avoided.

Makaroun *et al.* (2021), <sup>[12]</sup> through a study involving 433 elderly caregivers, examined the self-reported changes in risk factors in elder abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also evaluated the consequences of the pandemic on employment, financial well-being, social interactions and the physical and mental health of these caregivers. Of the total number of caregivers, 75% were women, 70% were married, 32% received less than \$50,000 annually and 43% lived with the elderly. Respondents reported worsening (40%), increased concern (19.4%) and new difficulties (16%) in relation to financial life after the beginning of the pandemic and 15% claimed an increase in the consumption of alcoholic beverages. In addition, 64% answered they were lonely, so it became more difficult to take care of their emotional (48.5%) and physical (18.5%) health. These imbalances could jeopardize the care that the elderly should receive, by increasing the risk of abusive behaviors due to stress.

Payne (2020)<sup>[13]</sup> reviewed fraud data recorded by the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and compared the first quarter of 2020 with this same period in 2019, noting a significant increase in these frauds. The target of these crimes was, for the most part, individuals over the age of 50, mainly due to cyber crimes (such as tech support scams). Two types of fraud were considered during COVID-19: traditional and those adapted to the fear of coronavirus (medical, administration, social security and personal care fraud). It was found that 18% of fraud victims related to the new coronavirus scenario were individuals over 60 years old (although they represented 11.5% of the population), configuring a greater number of cases of financial abuse in this group. It was concluded that the coronavirus had more significant consequences on the financial health of older individuals, requiring public health approaches in order to reduce crimes against the elderly.

## DISCUSSION

In Brazil, there were almost 1.6 times more telephone reports of violence in 2020, compared to the same period in 2019.<sup>[5]</sup> The elderly are greatly affected by violence, not only domestic, as they have increased vulnerability, especially when the caregiver is under greater stress, with a greater chance of abusive behavior.<sup>[12]</sup> Other type of abuse to which the elderly are more vulnerable is financial, in which fraud related to the pandemic had 18.0% of elderly people over 60 as victims.<sup>[13]</sup>

Social networks, such as Tweeter, can alert in real time to family violence, not only among the elderly, but also in other vulnerable groups.<sup>[6]</sup> Telephone calls serve as a form of complaint.<sup>[5]</sup> Surveys can also be carried out by telephone and, according to Liu *et al.* (2021)<sup>[11]</sup> noted, when the population's needs are identified in advance, possible further harm, such as exacerbation of mental illness, health problems, and emergencies, can be avoided.

Chang *et al.* (2021),<sup>[7]</sup> when interviewing elderly over 60 years old, mainly women, married, with higher education, found that 21.3% reported having suffered some type of abuse (physical, verbal and financial). These occurred significantly in younger elderly, residents with more people, with poor health and financial problems. There was no relationship between abuse and gender, race, education or marital status. Du and Chen (2021)<sup>[10]</sup> presented similar results, in relation to income and house residents number, so they observed that elderly people with more children were more likely to suffer abuse, as they considered them a family burden, abusing them physically and verbally. However, these authors found results different from those of Chang *et al.* (2021),<sup>[7]</sup> in relation to gender, in which they found that women were more likely to be abused; and in relation to education, in which elderly people with less education suffered more abuse, and also in relation to marital status, in which they found that elderly people without a partner could suffer more abuse, as they participated less in social activities than those who had a partner.

## Final Considerations

Vulnerable people, such as older people and women, are more likely to experience different abuse types (physical, emotional and financial). The greater number of residents in the same house can also increase the chances of elder abuse. Internet and telephone calls are means that can denounce this type of violence.

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