

## **Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation: National Data on Elder Abuse**

*This research will inform a report to Congress from the Secretary of Health and Human Services, which will address the feasibility of collecting uniform national data on elder abuse.*

### **Lead Agency:**

Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

### **Agency Mission:**

The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation advises the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services on policy development in health, disability and aging, human services, and science and data policy, and provides advice and analysis on economic policy. The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (OASPE) leads special initiatives, coordinates the Department's evaluation, research and demonstration activities, and manages cross-Department planning activities such as strategic planning, legislative planning and review of regulations. Integral to this role, OASPE conducts research and evaluation studies, develops policy analyses, and estimates the cost and benefits of policy alternatives under consideration by the Department or Congress.

### **Principal Investigator:**

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### **Partner Agencies:**

Department of Justice  
Administration on Aging  
Centers for Disease Control

### **General Description:**

Congress directed the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to conduct a study, in consultation with the Attorney General, assessing current elder

abuse data collection systems and examining the feasibility of establishing a uniform national elder abuse database to improve the quality and accessibility of data (P.L. 109-432). To develop the basis for its report to Congress, the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) contracted with The Lewin Group, and subcontractor Dr. Catherine Hawes, to conduct research to address these issues.

A focused literature review and inventory of existing elder abuse data collection and reporting efforts represents one component of that research. Findings are based on a review of the published literature on elder abuse data collection and reporting as well as information gleaned from telephone discussions with over 30 experts in related fields. This review addresses the following questions:

- a. How is elder abuse currently defined in Federal and state laws and by researchers and other organizations?
- b. How have studies measured the prevalence and incidence of elder abuse, and what are the strengths, challenges and limitations of these studies?
- c. What are the current practices in investigating, substantiating, and reporting elder abuse at the Federal, state, and local levels?
- d. How do confidentiality laws and policies affect the sharing of information about elder abuse among agencies?
- e. What are the shortcomings and strengths of existing data collection and reporting efforts?
- f. How are data collected on child abuse and intimate partner violence? How have these fields addressed challenges such as underreporting, differing definitions, and difficulties in detecting abuse?
- g. What state practices have been developed to enhance elder abuse reporting, investigation, and data collection?

Based on the findings, the report identifies areas that will need to be addressed in determining the feasibility of a national elder abuse database. The project's other major activities include: developing a memorandum that outlines key issues and approaches for establishing a uniform national dataset on elder abuse; obtaining input from government, research, advocacy, and industry experts; and preparing a report that synthesizes all findings and discusses implications for implementing a uniform national database on elder abuse.

This project will inform a report to Congress to be issued by the Secretary of HHS.

Older adults can be vulnerable to abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation perpetrated by caregivers, others in positions of trust, and relative strangers, as well as self-neglect. The true incidence of elder abuse in the United States is unknown, although several studies have attempted to measure the scope of the problem. Chronic underreporting and a lack of a standard definition are commonly reported problems that make it difficult to report precise figures. However, most experts agree that elder mistreatment is a large and growing problem that has only recently begun to attract the public attention it deserves.

The scope and purpose of definitions of elder abuse vary across states and local agencies, and data collection methods are similarly diverse, complicated by the involvement of many autonomous agencies operating under different mandates.

A national database or consistent national data collection strategy on elder abuse data have been recommended as possible solutions to the problems associated with varying and uncoordinated state and local data collection and reporting systems. As early as 1992, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary's Task Force on Elder Abuse recommended the development and funding of a national elder abuse research and data collection strategy. More recently, a number of studies have recommended increased standardization of elder abuse definitions and data collection systems.

This study will inform a report to Congress from the Secretary of Health and Human Services on the feasibility of collecting uniform national data on elder abuse. It will inform an important debate among policymakers and lawmakers currently considering strategies for tackling the growing societal problem of elder abuse and mistreatment in the United States.