



Hidden harm: Investigating elder abuse around us

America is aging. How does mistreatment of our oldest members reflect ageist attitudes? Research shows how to fight the least-recognized form of abuse.

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Robin Chenoweth: Here's a striking thought. In the year 2025, Generation X turns 60. We're talking about the generation representing J.K Rowling. Chris Rock. Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails. Maybe we're talking about you. Or maybe you're a millennial or a member of Gen Z, and you wonder, why does this matter? Here's why. Americans are living longer and having fewer children. In five years, the number of people who are 65 or older will edge out the number of children in this country for the first time in history, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And this is happening precisely at a time when ageist rhetoric is ramping up.

Kenneth Steinman: Ageism is a real issue. People have talked about how much American culture glorifies youth, and perhaps, indirectly devalues older adults. And yet our population is getting older. And so, I think there are some interesting cultural tensions happening about, how do we value older adults? And where political power should lie.

Robin Chenoweth: Kenneth Steinman is a senior research scientist in Ohio State's College of Education and Human Ecology. His latest work considers what administrative data tells us about how best to combat elder abuse in Ohio and throughout the country. He is among a handful of researchers studying the issue in the United States. His recent grant proposal cited research that societal tolerance for elder abuse within the United States reflects ageist attitudes.

Kenneth Steinman: I think there's a lot that informs people's willingness to address elder abuse and neglect. When I used to work in AIDS, people found it fascinating. If I said, what do you do, they were interested right away. When I talk about elder abuse, people often don't follow up. Not that that's because they're mean or bad. It's just of less interest to people. It's kind of gross to a lot of people; they don't want to think about it. I think that there's an important issue that needs to be considered; we need to recognize older adults as a part of our society. And this

issue is a real issue. And it's very common, and we need to be thinking about it and not just ignoring it because it's uncomfortable to think about.

Robin Chenoweth: Another statistic drives Steinman's work: About [one in 10 Americans over 60](#) have experienced some form of elder abuse. That means by 2030, more than 8 million older adults will suffer from neglect, physical, psychological or sexual abuse or financial exploitation. What can we do now to hedge off an avalanche of elder abuse cases as the aging population grows? How might American ageist attitudes and post-pandemic isolation be compounding the problem — even pushing many seniors to the leading form of abuse — self-neglect. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. The Ohio State University Inspire Podcast is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

Robin Chenoweth: Ageism and elder abuse are interconnected in complex and harmful ways, says the U.S. Department of Justice. Ageist attitudes perpetuate the dehumanization of older adults that can make it easier for abusers to rationalize their actions. After years of evaluating programs to prevent child abuse, Kenneth Steinman expanded his focus to study elder abuse. He conducts quantitative research, collecting and combing administrative data to answer questions like, are certain races and ethnic groups more likely to be reported to Adult Protective Services — which is roughly analogous to child protective services but with some important differences. I asked Steinman and others about how the pandemic impacted attitudes about older adults.

Robin Chenoweth with Kenneth Steinman: Was there a shift in how elderly people are perceived during the pandemic? Or is that something that's been in the United States for a long time?

Kenneth Steinman: During COVID, as many people I think would agree, there was a lot of controversy about the preventive measures being used to close schools or to require masks... And that some of that reflected ageism, in that some people were saying, well, all we're really doing is just trying to prevent some older people from acquiring COVID. They're going to die anyways. I don't want to have to have my kids school closed, because my kids might get COVID, and they might get sick, but it's not the end of the world. And if they pass it on to an older person, well, that older person is going to die anyway soon enough. And so I think that those ageist attitudes, I think were partly reflected in some of the political debates we had about how best society should respond to COVID. And I wouldn't be surprised if we have similar discussions in the future about that. That was one example of how it illustrated some of our underlying ageist attitudes.

Robin Chenoweth: Georgia Anetzberger has been researching and working in the field elder abuse for 50 years. She received her undergraduate degree in social work at Ohio State in 1966 before working for Adult Protection Services in Geauga County, Ohio, and later went on to Case Western to earn her PhD. She has collaborated with Steinman on his research and staffed the committee that wrote Ohio's Adult Protective Services law.

Georgia Anetzberger: I think the pandemic, was just terrible, absolutely terrible in terms of what it meant to older people. ... I mean, certainly one of the things that came out of it is so much more isolation, depression, that kind of thing on the part of older people, because they were so isolated, not just in nursing facilities, but otherwise as well. But it's, I think what's more troubling to me is almost a disregard of older people in and of itself, in the sense that certain countries, for example, when we had our own ways of doing this, but certain countries actually passed laws that past a certain age, you know, you weren't going to get the kind of medical care that you might need to live.

Robin Chenoweth with Georgia Anetzberger: Do you think that those attitudes toward the elderly, especially during that time, compounded the problem maybe of self-neglect or abuse by others? I guess what I'm saying is, society's attitudes would at some point get to a person...

Georgia Anetzberger: Oh, yeah.

Robin Chenoweth with Georgia Anetzberger: ... who is older themselves, and they start to, they start to internalize that and believe it?

Georgia Anetzberger: Exactly. ... All of a sudden, you begin to internalize your inability to do certain things, you know. So that maybe you don't see yourself as being able to contribute to society, work, do certain things like that, in a way that previously you hadn't thought that was the case.

Robin Chenoweth: Clinical Associate Professor Eugene Folden teaches about aging in the College of Education and Human Ecology.

Eugene Folden: COVID was not kind to older adults. It really shut older adults off from a support system that really helped them stay healthy and positive about their own aging. So, I think one of the things that we're continuing to work to reverse is there are these higher degrees of depression in older adults today. Depression, as you know, comes and goes, but we do tend to see a little spike as people grow older. But it's actually higher these days. And we think that has something to do with the effects of COVID. I think overall life satisfaction is something that we really have to work on and, and sort of get back to a base where people feel more positive about themselves as well as the world around them.

Robin Chenoweth: Research has long shown that social isolation is a risk factor for elder abuse and neglect. Caroline Rankin is assistant support director for the Franklin County Office on Aging, which includes Adult Protective Services.

Caroline Rankin: Social isolation, is really, really... we need to talk about it, and we need to address it however we can. It impacts older adults greatly. It was bad before the pandemic, and it just got worse during the pandemic. ... Social isolation has serious health risks along with it. I mean, there's a lot of data out there showing when someone is socially isolated the impact to their health.

Robin Chenoweth: When the situation goes too far elder abuse and neglect can happen. Because people and families are so different, each case of elder abuse and neglect is unique. But they fall into categories. Physical abuse by caretakers can happen. Sexual abuse is rare but does occur. Financial exploitation has become a major issue. Kenneth Steinman.

Kenneth Steinman: Perpetrators who might financially exploit an older or vulnerable adult, stealing their benefits checks, retirement savings, or moving into their home and sleeping in their bed and making them sleep on the couch.

Robin Chenoweth: There's emotional abuse, and also neglect.

Kenneth Steinman: Situations where a caregiver neglects to take adequate care of an older adult in their charge, perhaps having them eat pet food, or, or leaving them in their bed, to lay in their own waste for days at a time. ... The most common one is something called self-neglect, which might be briefly described as profound inattention to one's health or hygiene. So, people may be familiar with older adults who have hoarded belongings for decades or who have numerous pets who have overwhelmed the household and create unsafe living situations. ... There are a number of different systems that might respond to this. Could be health care. Could be law enforcement. But probably the primary system that is the only one that's devoted to investigating alleged abuse and neglect among older adults and then responding is something called Adult Protective Services or APS. Many people familiar with Child Protective Services but far fewer are familiar with, there's actually another system called Adult Protective Services.

Robin Chenoweth: Caroline Rankin.

Caroline Rankin: Many people don't know what Adult Protective Services is and they don't know what elder abuse is. Yet we are an aging society. So, it's critically important that we increase awareness. Adult Protective Services investigates allegations of abuse, neglect and exploitation against adults 60 and older here in the state of Ohio. Every county has their own program.

Robin Chenoweth: Georgia Anetzberger.

Georgia Anetzberger: Adult protective services started with the focus on self-neglect. That's where it started. Adult Protective Services really evolved out of the 1950s. You began to see it more conceptualized during the 1960s. And certainly, by the 1970s, you began to see it growing across the country, because there was funding for it through Title 20 of the Social Security Act. Ohio was one of the leaders, by the way.

Robin Chenoweth with Georgia Anetzberger: Really?

Georgia Anetzberger: I didn't know if you know that.

Robin Chenoweth with Georgia Anetzberger: No, I did not.

Georgia Anetzberger, : It had one of the first demonstration projects in the whole country; there was just over a half dozen such projects. And one of them was done at the Benjamin Rose Institute in Cleveland, Ohio. And it was probably the most famous and the most infamous as well, but that was another story.

Robin Chenoweth: We'll get to the disheartening results of that early study by Margaret Blenkner at the Benjamin Rose Institute, and the lessons it taught, in a moment. Anetzberger was an adult protective services caseworker and manager well before the Ohio Adult Protective Services law was passed in 1981. Later, when she was doing her doctoral dissertation, she interviewed perpetrators — adult children who had abused their parents. Some of the cases underscore how tragically nuanced each circumstance can be.

Georgia Anetzberger: One of the saddest stories I came across, was actually an individual who was in the position of being a caregiver to an older parent. But he didn't have the mental capacity to do it; he was developmentally disabled. And he couldn't understand why his mother wouldn't do things that might be to her benefit in order to, to live well, eat well, all those kinds of things. And so, he would get, on a couple of occasions, physically abusive to her, because he couldn't manage those feelings himself. So, there's, there's a whole spectrum out there, not all of which are individuals that belong, let's say, under the criminal justice system, but rather need support, assistance, in order to do what they can do, what they're able to do.

Robin Chenoweth with Georgia Anetzberger: Wow. That's a really striking example. When we think about elder abuse, at least I do, I have a sort of a preconception about what that might be. But you never think about that type of situation. Kenneth Steinman also said that sometimes you have children who were abused, and now they're taking care of the parent who abused them. Is that something you've ever encountered?

Georgia Anetzberger: They sometimes perceived themselves as having been abused, or, in some cases maybe had been abused. ... I can think of one particular young man. He was probably at the time I interviewed him in his early- to mid-20s. And he was living with his father at that point in time. And he viewed his father as having been really not very diligent in caring for him as a young person, and going away, going oftentimes to Nevada, to gamble, leave him alone. Not being very responsive at all. And so he was one of the people that were very angry as perpetrators, and was so abusive, in fact, that he ended up in prison for a while because of it. One particular time when he was abusive, almost killed the individual, his father. And on the other hand, he really saw himself as a victim in the whole circumstances, because he didn't see his father as being the kind of parent that he would have wanted to have and felt he should have had. I think it's very complicated to be honest.

Robin Chenoweth with Georgia Anetzberger: It is complicated. Families are complicated, right?

Georgia Anetzberger: Yes, they are. They are.

Robin Chenoweth: Kenneth Steinman.

Kenneth Steinman: No one ever deserves to be abused or neglected. But that makes it that much more difficult when you're dealing with clients who are themselves irascible and difficult and you want to value their autonomy and reduce harm to them. And yet, at the same time, you're sympathetic to the alleged perpetrator, who had a really crummy childhood because of the person who is now your client. No easy way to get around that. That's a reality that then speaks to the need to look at a lifespan perspective when you're talking about family violence, including elder mistreatment.

Robin Chenoweth: Like Anetzberger, Steinman hopes to study perpetrators of elder abuse, and has submitted a grant proposal that would link adult protective service data with that in the criminal justice system.

Kenneth Steinman: We know very little about why people perpetrate elder abuse, why they abuse and neglect to exploit others. ... One of the few things we think we do know is that a lot of these people have been struggling with substance abuse issues, or gambling disorders, or other struggles that have put them in contact with law enforcement. But we know nothing about their past criminal history and how their previous criminal history might help us understand their likelihood of perpetrating elder mistreatment, getting involved in the adult protective services system, if not necessarily re-involved with the criminal justice system down the road. ... This observational research, one of the benefits, it's laying a foundation for us to then be able to do a better job of intervention research, which is what we ultimately need.

Robin Chenoweth: But back to that other, more common form of elder mistreatment — neglect and self-neglect. When families are taking care of older relatives, Eugene Folden says, they are often drowning in responsibility. The ensuing frustration can lead to abuse or neglect — even *unintentional* neglect.

Eugene Folden: Family members who are overworked and have taken on too much responsibility. They have their own life. They have their own job. They have their own children, grandchildren, and here they have an elderly parent that they've tacked on that responsibility. And so, neglect tends to be a bigger issue as a result of that problem.

Robin Chenoweth: Last year Franklin County received more than 3,000 referrals from mandated reporters — people like social workers, doctors and bankers — but also neighbors and concerned community members. The county's Office on Aging investigated 70% of those referrals. Caroline Rankin.

Caroline Rankin: With the majority of cases that come through adult protective services, it's most often an adult needs assistance, or that family is overwhelmed and they're not sure what to do. And so, we work to get services in place because the adult wants to stay in the community. We know that's where they can do their best if they can stay there and so we work with them. ... So, our largest cases of referrals come in for self-neglect and exploitation.

Robin Chenoweth with Caroline Rankins: Can you describe some of the situations that older people find themselves in as they age and lose the ability to fully care for themselves like they once did?

Caroline Rankin: You have an 85-year-old husband caring for his 83-year-old wife, who is sick. He is doing the best he can. He sees it as his responsibility to take care of the woman he's been married to for 50 years, right? But he now is at the point where he needs help. It could be, not that he's intentionally trying to be neglectful, but he can't lift her the way she needs to be lifted. He can't change her if she has to be using incontinence supplies and so he's not changing her as regularly. The cost of caring for someone is a lot. It is a lot emotionally, financially and physically. And so, oftentimes with neglect, it's a situation where the family is doing the best they can, not realizing the outside resources they can get. ... Self-neglect, if you know seniors, they're always going to tell you they're fine. They don't need anything. ... Because we have gotten a referral on self-neglect, and we talk to family, and they're like, "Well, I live out of state and every time I talk to them, they say they're fine." I'm like, they're always going to tell you they're fine.

Robin Chenoweth with Caroline Rankin: Of course.

Caroline Rankin: I'm like, you need eyes on these people. You need to go see them. If you're noticing, they're struggling to keep up with things, don't make them feel bad. Offer, you know, how can we help you? ... This is in no way saying you're not doing the best job you can but let us help you. Because, again, we want you to stay in your home. But we need to make sure, one, you have enough food and you have your nutritional needs met. If you have doctor's appointments, but you no longer have access to transportation, that's a neglect situation. Let us help you set up transportation. ... If you can no longer keep up with the demands of just keeping your place clean, okay, can we set up a home health aide to come in a couple of days a week to help you?

Robin Chenoweth: But here's the caveat. Ohio law, like most other state laws protecting older adults, allows most seniors to make their own choices.

Kenneth Steinman: One of the central ethical issues that happens within Adult Protective Services and elder mistreatment is the issue of autonomy, in that Adult Protective Services wants to reduce harm to vulnerable adults who are being abused, exploited neglected. But they also want to do so in a way that maintains the autonomy of the person.

Robin Chenoweth: Georgia Anetzberger.

Georgia Anetzberger: Unless the person is mentally incapacitated, the older adult in question, whether they're self-neglecting, whether they're being physically abused, they get to decide whether or not there's going to be interventions.

Kenneth Steinman: You could imagine those two values come into conflict sometimes, so that sometimes people who have cognitive capacity might say, “No, I’m making a choice that I think is best for me. I know my son is not treating me well. But he’s my only family. And I’m going to ask that you leave us alone, because I would prefer that he be here, even if he’s harming me. Because I’m really scared about what would happen if you took them away. And I know he has a criminal record. And if I report him, he’s going to be back in prison. And so, leave us alone.”

Georgia Anetzberger: All of us that have done this kind of work can give you examples of it. Situations where if somebody’s, for whatever reason, mentally incapacitated — can make decisions — who’s going to say, no matter how horrendous their situation is, “I don’t want any help. I want to live my life this way. It’s better than the alternative.” So, I mean, everybody’s faced that, and to walk away from some of those cases can be really tough. But it’s also the right thing to do.

Robin Chenoweth: And here’s why. Remember that Ohio study in the early 1970s at the Benjamin Rose Institute? It became infamous because the findings were so disturbing. The intensive casework services that were given to the elderly people in the study, who badly needed assistance, backfired.

Georgia Anetzberger: There were no laws in place that talked about autonomy and decision-making in this regard. But Adult Protective Services, as it was done then was very aggressive in terms of having people accept services or placing them in nursing homes and that kind of thing. And so one of the outcomes of the study was that they, the older people in question were more likely to die.

Robin Chenoweth with Georgia Anetzberger: You mean, if you put them in a facility?

Georgia Anetzberger: In other words, because their rights were taken away, and they weren’t, in a sense, allowed to make their own choices about what they wanted to do.

Robin Chenoweth with Georgia Anetzberger: So when they were forced they died anyway.

Georgia Anetzberger: Exactly.

Robin Chenoweth: And that brings us to the question of reporting. Ohio agencies don’t reveal the names of reporters to those being investigated. But most elder abuse and neglect *never* gets investigated because it doesn’t get reported.

Robin Chenoweth with Kenneth Steinman: I’m guessing that because a lot of people don’t even know about Adult Protective Services that maybe it’s vastly underreported.

Kenneth Steinman: It is. But there’s excellent evidence suggesting that it’s vastly underreported. And it’s difficult, as you can imagine, to quantify that. Some people tossed around about 1 in 24

cases are actually reported to Adult Protective Services. But at the end of the day, we just don't know.

Robin Chenoweth: More research is needed. I asked Caroline Rankin about why people might hesitate to report elder abuse and neglect.

Robin Chenoweth with Carline Rankin: I think that some people might feel like if they called Adult Protective Services, that they're just going to immediately usher that person out and into a long-term facility.

Caroline Rankin: We can't. We don't have the ability to do that. We're not Children's Services. ... If an adult has capacity, they have a right to live the way they want to live; they have the right to self-determine. And so again, what our approach is, let us help you. What is your desire? "I want to stay in my home." Okay, you're a falls risk. Let us come in and put up grab bars; let us get you a walker; we got to make sure you have clear pathways; let us set up home delivered meals so you're not worrying about cooking. Because you're kind of forgetting sometimes to turn off the stove. ... Unless there is an immediate risk to someone like it could be immediate harm or death, we cannot remove someone from the home. We cannot. ... And then if someone doesn't have the capacity to make decisions for themselves, we are then going to recommend a guardian for them. But again, that is a very, very, very small percentage of our cases. ... I shared with you we had over 3000 referrals, we screened in over 2000 ... We investigated them. We sent 34 cases for guardianship — to just give you an understanding of how low the number is. We really, we will work with the adult to keep them in the community.

Robin Chenoweth: Steinman directed a landmark study in 2021 that assessed all 85 Ohio adult protective services programs, examining a year's worth of allegations and responses to them. The study concluded, among other findings, that most financial exploitation is perpetrated by family and community members, not strangers. Also, that non-English speaking seniors are likely being underserved. A current project aims to improve best practices and identify gaps in service across the state.

Kenneth Steinman: What we really need is a lot more intervention research to be able to say we can be confident that if someone reports and if the person gets the care that, it's going to, they're going to benefit from it. They're going to be happier. They're going to be healthier. And we're at this point, we're just not sure. It doesn't mean we shouldn't do anything. But it means that we need to be able to evaluate these types of programs more rigorously. And that depends on also just funding them adequately. ... Adult Protective Service programs are starting to get more resources. And so, we're hopeful that we can now start to evaluate them and begin to build an evidence base to say these types of approaches work and these types don't. At this point, we're trying our best, but we just don't have an evidence base to be confident about how we can really help people.

Robin Chenoweth with Kenneth Steinman: Didn't you tell me earlier that it's almost not researched; there's just so little research in this area. Whereas, you know, with children, you see a lot of it.

Kenneth Steinman: Yeah, and yet that's changing. So there's much less research in this area, there's much, much less intervention research, and recognizing, even with children, that took decades to develop.

Robin Chenoweth: What's the best prevention for elder abuse and neglect? I asked Eugene Folden, whose mother lives alone at 91.

Eugene Folden: The only thing that really prevents people from being victims of abuse is that you have a large social support system that's going in and out and in and out of your home or in and of the nursing home, monitoring what's happening there. You need people. I mean, it's true. You need money, of course. You need help, of course. But it's people who prevent other people from taking advantage of older adults. ... I really do think that one of the things that our generation needs to do is spend more time building community with the people around us. I love the fact that my neighborhood, there's a lot of front porches. ... Be outside so we can see each other, so we can, we can build that kind of rapport with each other. Because if we don't, I think it just creates that sense of isolation for people and that sense of separateness from other people, distrust. And then unfortunately, it just builds more ageism and stereotypes against aging.

Robin Chenoweth: Again, knowing that, if we are so lucky, we're all heading that same direction, you might want to check that ageism that you picked up on the nightly talk shows or in the greeting card aisle. And while you're at it, check on your older neighbor, your aunt, your mother, too. Get eyes on them, as Caroline Rankin says. Take a cue from Theo and Vivienne, Folden's young neighbors who stop by from time to time with lemonade or cookies. Recognizing that elder abuse is really ageism in extreme. And if you appreciate the value in that older person you know — one day — hopefully, someone will recognize all the beautiful complexity in the older you.

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