


OPINION

# COVID-19 pandemic proves fertile territory for burgeoning elder abuse

Elder abuse, a silent scourge in normal times, has jumped dramatically under the shadow of the coronavirus.



By **Rosie DiManno** Star Columnist  
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Imagine being in a coffin. Imagine being alive inside that coffin.

Expand the space, the confinement, just a little bit and that describes the existence of too many old people in our midst.

Nobody can hear you scream.

Hardly a day has gone by during this pandemic era without reports of more frail individuals who've died in a long-term-care home because of COVID-19. Alone, forbidden the comfort of a loved one because of quarantine protocols, maybe with a support worker to hold their hand. In the worst cases of institutional neglect, abandoned where they lie on soiled sheets. Because nobody missed them.

But only eight per cent of Canadian seniors are living in retirement and care facilities. The rest continue to reside – abide – in their own homes.

Secluded, indeed further isolated by writ of lockdown orders, reliant on kindly neighbours who might do a health check – from the other side of the front door – or deliver groceries.

A great many dwell with a family member. And you might think that's a godsend in these times. But not always. Sometimes that kin, or even a live-in caregiver paid for the company, is a tormentor. They maltreat emotionally, physically, financially.

Predators inside the home, predators outside the home.

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The pernicious adult child who may never have left the family domicile at all or returned out of financial necessity because most parents will always take them in. The preying grifter scamming her way into a lonely person's narrow world, making himself indispensable, incrementally encroaching on savings, bank accounts, credit cards, wills.

Elder abuse, a silent scourge in normal times, has jumped dramatically under the shadow of the coronavirus, a tenfold increase in pleas to helplines, according to authorities in the field of elderly advocacy. And those are just the tiny fraction who reach out. Most won't, might not even know how.

They're trapped. That is but one of the unseen harms caused by social isolation, compounded by public health directives that lead them to burrow further into reclusiveness and invisibility.

"It's hugely unreported," says Sgt. Jason Peddle, for four years, until last month, vulnerable persons co-ordinator for the Toronto Police Service, a support worker and activation therapist at a long-term-care home for years before that. "And it takes all forms."

It could be name-calling that shames and threatens the target. "Saying, I can't wait for you to die." It can be physically restricting. "Making them stay in one room in the house or in the basement." It can be fists or slaps or denial of food and medicine.

And, from the outside, it can be a stranger who builds up a pretence of trust, then exploits it.

"Predators who go to bingo games and other community events where elderly people tend to gather," explains Peddle. "They offer friendship to people who are lonely, maybe they don't have families or their families don't have time for them. Next thing, they're living in the house, they're offering to go buy groceries, just give me your credit card. They get them to change their wills."

Victims are vulnerable to the proffered friendship of strangers. Phone-scamming — police are warning about this particular phenomenon under social-distancing proscriptions — is remote fraud, a warm voice down the line using a slew of coronavirus cons to separate isolated elderly persons from their money. How can they be so easily taken in? Because they're lonely, may only rarely get the chance to talk to anybody, already depressed, perhaps cognitively impaired.

What's worse, though, is covering under the abuse of a quasi-custodial child or other close relative. Even when they know it's happening.

"They might have a son who's been in trouble with the law, a drug user. And they won't report it because they think, 'He's trying to get his life together again. If I report, he might go to jail,'" says Peddle. "Or, 'If the police take him away, I'll be all alone, who'll look after me?'"

Sometimes the grandparent has raised that child. Or it's the one adult child among siblings who is geographically close to the victim, the abuse unknown to the rest of the family. And sometimes they don't really care much.

While we're now well familiar with grown children waving from outside to their parent or grandparent at a locked-down nursing home, the tableau isn't the entire picture. As a support worker at a Toronto residential facility told me recently: "A lot of these old people never get any visitors at all. The families don't come. We're the only people they ever see."

Typically, when police do get summoned, it's either a sibling or neighbour who's raised the alarm, says Peddle. "They suspect something's wrong. On an eight-hour

shift, I used to spend maybe six hours a day on cold calls.”

Investigations rarely lead to charges or prosecution except in the most extreme of cases, when an old person has been severely assaulted, even killed. “It’s very difficult for an elderly person to go into court and testify against their child.”

In some instances, the abuser had been abused in their childhood by that parent. “So it’s payback time,” says Peddle.

The COVID pandemic is proving fertile territory for burgeoning abuse.

“We’re seeing a big spike in elder neglect,” says Laura Tamblyn Watts, executive director of CanAge, a national seniors’ advocacy association. “The sheer numbers of absolute abuse and neglect are rising. Financially, their bank accounts are being drained by abusers who are using this crisis to access money and control their lives. The elderly person puts their name on a joint bank account of an ownership deed. They don’t realize that makes the other person a joint-owner, that they can go into a bank account and withdraw everything.”

Many victims were already dealing with the pressures of being under the thumb of a family member who’s become the dominant personality in a household. Conforming to isolation edicts from the city has caused them to rub even more abrasively against each other. Tempers snap, even where there not have been physical abuse before.

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“Elderly people may have no social engagement at all outside their homes,” says Tamblyn Watts. “This has made it worse. It’s not as if these people will go to a shelter if they’re being abused. What’s really shocking is that we’ve had almost no response to this issue in Canada, no intervention.”

While the federal government has designated \$50 million to support women’s shelters and sexual assault counselling for women and children fleeing violence during the pandemic, “zero dollars have been given to resources for abused elderly,” notes Tamblyn Watts. “Not a single jurisdiction has received financial assistance specifically in the area of elder abuse. The whole system is being held together with tape and baling wire.

“It’s a scandal.”

Marta Hajek is executive director of Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario, which operates the Seniors Safety Line and publishes a resource sheet “tool kit” on its website. The safety line has fielded an unprecedented number of desperation entreaties in recent weeks, such that its operators can’t even deal with all the calls. Where there were maybe 800 calls in a “normal” month, there are now that many within a few days.

“People are feeling quite distressed and lost. The (pandemic) has just exacerbated it. The long-term-care homes have been overwhelmed. But so are elderly people living at home, in the community. A lot of them have no support mechanisms. Are they getting the medication they need? Are they eating properly? Is anybody checking in on them?”

The desire for independence is fierce, which is why most elderly Canadians will accept any alternative to long term care, unless they can afford private and expensive senior citizen accommodation. They’re aware of the horrors that have befallen long-term facilities where COVID-19 has run rampant.

So they endure, where they are, even if that means absorbing disgraceful levels of abuse

“They know they have only two choices,” says Jason Peddle. “Put up with it or go into care. And they’ve seen what that looks like. Anything but that.”



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