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Screening for Elder Abuse:
Exploring the Acceptability of the Elder Abuse Suspicion Index to Law Enforcement Officers for Field Use

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Background:

National surveys conducted on community-dwelling older adults have reported the overall prevalence of elder abuse to be approximately 10% in the US.[1] For every elder abuse case known to programs and agencies, an estimated 24 cases go unreported.[2] Since the criminalization of elder abuse in the 1990's, law enforcement officers (LEOs) are in a unique position to detect and respond to elder abuse cases. Despite increased interaction between LEOs and elderly persons in the community, LEOs report significant knowledge gaps in responding to elder abuse cases.[3,4] Currently, there are no known instruments used by LEOs to assess for risk of elder abuse. The Elder Abuse Suspicion Index (EASI),[5] a screening tool previously validated for use by physicians in clinical settings, shows potential for use by officers. This report presents findings from a survey and interviews with LEOs and community advocates in the state of Connecticut exploring acceptability of the EASI as a law enforcement screening tool.

Objectives:

- Assess officers' perceptions and knowledge on elder abuse
- Identify challenges/barriers faced in screening for elder abuse
- Identify factors that make an effective screening tool
- Assess acceptability to LEOs of the EASI for field use

FINDINGS:

96% of respondents consider elder abuse when responding to a call involving older adults.

72% of respondents have encountered elder abuse in the community they serve.

63% of respondents believe that elder abuse is a concern in the community they serve.

Methods:

A literature review guided development of the questionnaire to assess LEOs' perceptions, knowledge, challenges and barriers in detecting and responding to elder abuse cases in the community they serve. The survey consisted of both open and close ended questions. It was pilot tested with 3 police officers and a paramedic/firefighter, and revised to address their feedback. The final Survey was disseminated to contacts at 99 Police Departments in CT, and surveys were completed by 68 LEOs. Additional interviews were conducted with 4 police department representatives (from both rural and urban police departments) and a community advocate for domestic violence prevention. Data was analyzed using SPSS.

Results:

- The majority of officers were Caucasian (63.2%, n=43), male (52.9%, n=36), had some college education or higher (67.7%, n=46), had a mean age of 43.7 (SD=8.6), and an average of 19.1 (SD=8.3) years of law enforcement experience.
- Officers were least familiar with, and least confident of their ability to respond to, financial, emotional and sexual abuse (see figure, next page).
- Two additional barriers to addressing elderly abuse were identified: the need for collaboration and the vulnerability of the elderly population.

Key Findings and Areas of Need:

1 SCREENING INSTRUMENT
endorsed by 64% of officers.

2 TRAINING ON WARNING SIGNS
endorsed by 61% of officers.

3 TRAINING ON RISK FACTORS
endorsed by 61% of officers.

4 TRAINING IN THE AREAS OF
Financial Abuse
Psychological Abuse
Sexual Abuse

79% of officers said they could see themselves using the EASI out in the field.

94% of officers said it looked easy to use.

83% of officers said it did not look time consuming to the extent that it would interfere with police duties.
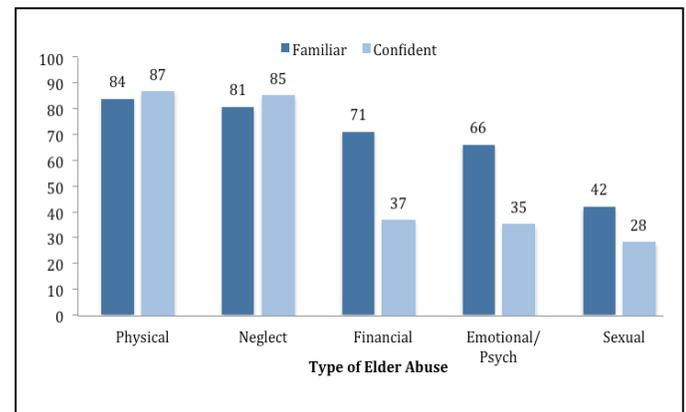
Recommended Modifications to EASI:

Overall, support for a modified EASI was positive. Officers identified **ease of use**, **clear instructions**, and **straight-forwardness** as the most important factors in a screening tool.

The EASI screening tool[5] was reformatted to add check boxes, additional questions, and an area for notes. Most importantly, questions that target multiple types of abuse were separated into their own checkboxes.

Moving forward, a benefit of this approach is that it standardizes investigations and assures that these basic questions are being addressed. Without it, as officers reported, these questions may not be asked at all, or an investigation may be mishandled.

Results of officer's familiarity and confidence with different forms of elder abuse

Legend: Familiar, Confident

Type of Elder Abuse	Familiar	Confident
Physical	84	87
Neglect	81	85
Financial	71	37
Emotional/Psych	66	35
Sexual	42	28

Recommendations:

- **Officers need a screening instrument, increased training on warning signs, and increased training on risk factors, primarily in the areas of financial abuse, psychological/emotional abuse, and sexual abuse.**

- **Officers with less experience are more likely to report being limited by these barriers. Hence, we recommend training on elder abuse for officers in the academy.**

- **Overall, officers need more information on services available to the elderly and increased institutional support.**

Limitations:

- No elderly were consulted during this process, so feedback on acceptability of the questions to potential victims of elder abuse is needed before moving forward with this tool.

- Our sample was limited in geography and size. Variation in state law and resources may limit the generalizability of these findings.

- No information is available on the demographics of the municipalities where the respondents are serving, and demographics may affect utility of the tool.

- While 92 officers started our survey, we only had viable data for 68, limiting our sample size.

Future Directions:

- Together with additional training, the Modified EASI for Law Enforcement holds promise for effective use in the detection of different types of abuse.

- In the future, the Modified EASI for Law Enforcement should be pilot tested within the community.

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