



Strength, Safety, and Support: Addressing Abuse in Later Life Among Latin@ Elders

A Resource for Advocates and Service Providers

Abuse in Later Life

Abuse in later life is a critical yet often overlooked issue that threatens older adults' health, safety, dignity, and longevity. As the population ages, more older adults will experience abuse, yet cases remain under-identified and underreported.

Abuse in later life is linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety, chronic illness, and injuries. Chronic stress affects immune function and

Abuse in later life: the nexus between domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and elder abuse. The forms of abuse, which often co-occur, include physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, neglect, financial exploitation, and stalking.

recovery from illness. Some older adults may also avoid routine check-ups due to fear, shame, or dependency on the person causing harm.

Prevalence of Abuse in Later Life in Latin@ Community

Because there are few studies on abuse among older individuals in the Latin@ community, and those that exist vary in design, accurately determining prevalence remains challenging. Factors like limited English proficiency, economic insecurity, neighborhood seclusion, a tradition of resolving conflicts within the family, and mistrust of authorities may impede survey research and suppress abuse reporting.



- **Limited English proficiency** – Language barriers can create confusion around intake forms and survey questions. Language barriers may also create challenges for Latin@ elders in communicating their experiences. This can lead to misinterpretation, misrepresentation, and underreporting.
- **Economic insecurity** – Financial stress can make older survivors less likely to participate in surveys, especially if they perceive no direct benefit. It may also cause them to prioritize immediate survival over reporting abuse or engaging with researchers.
- **Tradition of resolving conflicts within the family** – Cultural values uplift and center the family as a foundation of identity, support, and cultural continuity in many Spanish-speaking cultures. Cultural norms also emphasize keeping family issues private, which may discourage individuals from disclosing abuse to outsiders, seeking help, or participating in surveys that ask sensitive questions.

- **Neighborhood seclusion** – Isolated communities may have limited access to outreach efforts, social services, or survey distribution channels, making it harder for researchers to reach Latin@ elders and for residents to report abuse.
- **Mistrust of authorities** – Fear or skepticism toward institutional figures can lead Latin@ elders to avoid surveys or reporting abuse, especially if they worry about discrimination, retaliation, or deportation.

Risk and protective factors

In Latin@ communities, abuse in later life is shaped by a mix of cultural, social, and structural factors. Understanding these factors helps tailor prevention and intervention strategies that honor Latin@ elders' cultural values while addressing systemic barriers. Here's a breakdown of key risk and protective factors that influence vulnerability and resilience in later life.

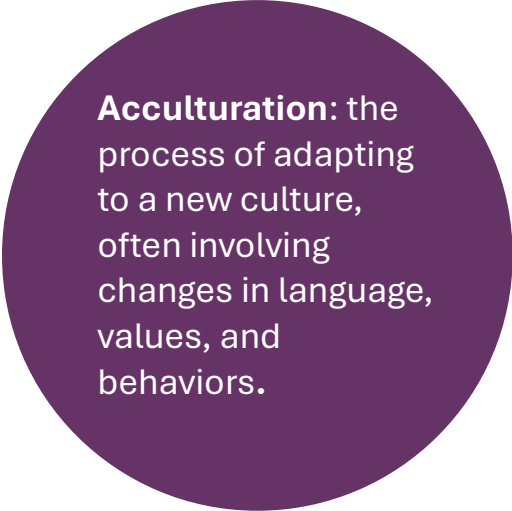


Risk factors

- **Social isolation** – Older adults who are socially isolated are more at risk for physical and mental health decline, which increases their vulnerability to abuse. Isolation also reduces an older adult's ability to seek help or report abuse and can increase their dependency on their abuser.
- **Limited English proficiency** – Language barriers impede Latin@ elders' access to legal, medical, and social services. Additionally, they may struggle to share their experience or understand their rights.
- **Reliance on family for housing or care** – Cultural norms emphasizing family loyalty may discourage Latin@ elders from reporting abuse or

confronting their abusers. Financial dependence on family or reliance on caregiving from family members can be exploited, especially in multigenerational households.

- **Acculturation** – Older adults who maintain traditional Latin@ cultural values may clash with younger family members who adopt mainstream U.S. norms. This can lead to disrespect, neglect, and abuse.
- **Lack of access to culturally responsive services** – Services that don't reflect Latin@ cultural values or language needs may feel alienating or unsafe to older victims. This fear of misunderstanding or discrimination can discourage seeking help and lead to underreporting and prolonged abuse.



Acculturation: the process of adapting to a new culture, often involving changes in language, values, and behaviors.

Protective factors

- **Familismo** – Family is a deeply rooted and culturally rich concept within Latin@ communities. It includes not just parents and children, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, godparents, and close family friends. In Latin@ communities, family is often the primary source of emotional support, guidance, and identity.



Familismo: A cultural value emphasizing loyalty, solidarity, and placing family needs above individual desires.

- **Strong intergenerational ties** – Multigenerational households are common in Latin@ communities, reflecting a strong sense of interdependence and shared responsibility.
- **Respeto** – Elderly family members are generally respected and revered for their wisdom and experience. Their opinions are highly valued, and their well-being is a priority.
- **Active participation in community and faith-based groups** – Regular involvement in community or religious activities helps older adults stay socially connected, which lowers their vulnerability to abuse. Latin@ elders may feel more understood and respected in culturally familiar environments, reducing feelings of shame or fear when discussing abuse.



Barriers to Seeking Help

Seeking help for abuse in later life can be especially difficult for Latin@ elders due to a combination of cultural, linguistic, legal, and practical barriers.

- **Language and access** – A lack of bilingual or culturally competent staff may discourage Latin@ elders from disclosing their abuse or reaching out for support. Language barriers can make it difficult to communicate with service providers and lead to confusion or mistrust.
- **Fear of losing family connections** – Deep cultural emphasis on **familismo** may cause Latin@ elders to prioritize family unity over personal safety. They may also fear shame, retaliation, or abandonment if they report a family member.

- **Immigration or legal concerns** – Latin@ elders may lack awareness about their rights and protections and fear legal consequences if they seek help.
- **Transportation and health challenges** – Limited mobility, chronic illness, or cognitive decline can make it physically difficult for older survivors to reach out for support services. Lack of accessible transportation, especially in rural or underserved areas, can also isolate Latin@ elders from help.

Promising Practices

Offering healing supports to Latin@ elders requires culturally responsive outreach, services designed with Latin@ elders’ lived realities in mind, trusted community partnerships, and community engagement. These practices aim to reduce barriers and draw upon the strengths and resilience of each older Latin@ survivor.

- **Outreach** – Many Latin@ elders rely on trusted community networks rather than formal institutions. Outreach should be bilingual, bicultural and community based. Partner with churches, senior centers, and Latin@ organizations to raise awareness. Host workshops and events that normalize conversations about abuse in later life. **Promotoras**, who are often trained in areas like domestic violence, elder abuse, health education, and resource navigation, can help to build trust, deliver information, and provide referrals.
- **Culturally responsive services** – Latin@ elders may feel alienated by mainstream services that don’t reflect their language, values, or traditions. Hire bilingual and bicultural staff, incorporate cultural values



Promotoras: trusted Latin@ community members trained to provide culturally relevant outreach, education, and support.


like **familismo** and **respeto** into service models, and offer materials and outreach in Spanish and other relevant dialects.

- **Trauma-informed and empowerment-focused safety planning and care** – Survivor-centered care honors autonomy and dignity while addressing safety needs. Avoid re-traumatization by respecting Latin@ elders’ autonomy and cultural identity.
- **Build and nurture relationships** – Seek out organizations trusted by the Latin@ community and get to know them, their goals, concerns and interests. Develop authentic relationships with these organizations and reach out to them regularly, not just when a crisis arises.
- **Cross-sector collaborations** – Collaborating is essential in providing effective service provision to older adult survivors. No one agency or organization can do this work alone. Take the time to engage in relationships in sectors such as aging services, faith communities, legal aid and assistance, Adult Protective Services, banks and financial institutions, and health care providers. These cross-sector partnerships organizations amplify impact.



- **Community engagement –**

Discussing abuse in later life at **charlas** may make the topic of abuse less intimidating, reduce isolation, and connect Latin@ elders to support and resources. Spanish-language media also plays a vital role in engaging Latin@ communities around the issue of abuse in later life by bridging cultural, linguistic, and informational gaps to foster awareness, trust, and action.



Charlas: small-group discussions often held in community spaces like churches, senior centers, or homes. They are conversational rather than lecture-based, making them more approachable and culturally familiar.

Resources

- **Esperanza United:** <https://esperanzaunited.org/en/>
- **National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life:** www.ncall.us
- **Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence Language Hub:** <https://api-gbv.org/language-hub/>

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