



“You Only Pray that Somebody  
Would Step In”:

Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public  
Understandings of Elder Abuse in America

*A FrameWorks Research Report*

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# ELDER ABUSE

- a matter of collective concern
- Situate individual stories in larger social contexts
- Advance policies and systems-level solutions that prevent abuse and address it when it happens



- Can identify physical, emotional and neglect and > financial exploitation
- Reinforces that older people are vulnerable and helpless
- Fuels fatalistic attitudes
- Don't think about sexual abuse....because think of older people being nonsexual

Challenges in Public Thinking

# Testing of Alternative Messages

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Key: systematic assessment of  
where and how public thinking  
differs from expert consensus



# Mapping the Gaps



**How salient is Elder Abuse?**

**Why does Elder Abuse happen?**

**How should older adults be engaged and addressed?**

**Who is responsible for dealing with elder abuse?**

**Can anything be done?**

**What should be done?**

Priority

Social structure

Subjects to empower

Society

Meaningful solutions

Systemic solutions

Off the radar

Individual moral deficits

Objects of care

Everyone/no one

Nothing much

Individual solutions



# General Narratives

experts vs. public

# *Societal Structures – vs – Individual Moral Deficits*

experts

- Societal structures interact and provide resources and support
- We put people in positions to commit abuse



public

- Focus on character & personality traits
- Border on victim blaming
- Intergenerational “payback”

# *Modern Life is the Problem*

experts

- aligns with caregiver stress
- BUT leads to fatalistic attitudes

public

- due to shifts in American life
  - Family life and work
  - Pushes care givers to emotional limits
  - Nursing homes are unfortunate necessity



# *Subjects to Empower – vs – Objects of Care*

experts

- Aging: aspirational
- Can include distinctive vulnerabilities
  - It is different for different people
  - Influenced by a wide variety of social factors
  - Aging does not = decline
- Older Adults as full community participants

public

- Process of ***Deterioration***, decline and increasing dependency
- Paternalism: older people treated as objects to be cared for and protected
  - Rather than empowered and engaged
  - Leads to inability hear the voices of older people
- Are able to think of older adults as equal subjects: ***Elders as Agents***





A close-up photograph of two pairs of wrinkled, aged hands. The hands are positioned in the center of the frame, with fingers slightly spread. The skin is heavily textured with deep wrinkles, particularly around the joints and on the palms. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the skin. The background is dark and out of focus.

# Who is responsible for dealing with Elder Abuse?

## experts

- Society
- Agree that we are all responsible for preventing elder abuse
  - through social institutions
- We the People

## public

- Everyone/No One
- Agree that all are responsible for prevention
  - IF it comes up in their lives
  - Take steps when we see elder abuse happen
- Each of us individually

Can anything  
be done?



experts

- Meaningful Solutions
  - Funding and reform of Adult Protective Services
  - Strengthening community supports
  - Instituting multidisciplinary teams
  - Funding research

public

- Nothing Much
- Can't identify an agent responsible for fixing the problem
- Fueled by Modern Life is the Problem
- Is inevitable aspect of modern life
- Assume the gov is incompetent and unable to solve difficult social problems

# What should be done?

## public

- Individual Solutions
  - Better surveillance
  - Better screening of care givers
- Tech to monitor care givers
- Friends and neighbors to check in
- Education and public awareness campaigns to change behavior of abusers to prevent it

## experts

- System solutions





Strategically redirects thinking away from patterns such as:

- Paternalism • Fatalism • Spotlight on Individuals • Modern Life Is the Problem
- Only Solution = Surveillance and Prosecution



The story you're telling:

Creating a just society includes treating older people as equal members of that society. It also means making sure we are all connected to our communities as we age, so that we can prevent and address elder abuse.

Value

Justice

Why does it matter? What's at stake?

## I. What is at stake?

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### ***Justice***

Use the value of *Justice* to promote collective responsibility for preventing and addressing elder abuse.

## II. How does it work?

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### ***Social Structures***

Use the *Social Structure* explanatory metaphor to explain how social supports prevent elder abuse.

## III. How to include individual cases of abuse?

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### ***Structure of Justice***

Embed individual cases within the *Structure of Justice* narrative.

## IV. What should we do?

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### ***Explanatory Chains***

Use *explanatory chains* to illustrate how to prevent and address elder abuse.

“Creating a just society includes treating older people as equal members and making sure we are all connected to our communities as we age, so that we can prevent and address elder abuse.”

# Justice



Refer to our shared belief in justice and equal treatment for all people, regardless of age, and inoculate against the tendency to see older people as “others.”

We believe in a just society that recognizes that all people are equal. No matter how old we are, we are entitled to be treated as full members of our communities.



“All people are created equal.”



We need policies that connect people to our communities at all stages of life. But our current policies increase social isolation. This puts older people at greater risk of neglect and abuse. It means all members of our society are not truly equal.

# Equal members of our communities

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Demonstrate that current policies do not treat older people as equal members of our communities, which increase the risk of elder abuse.



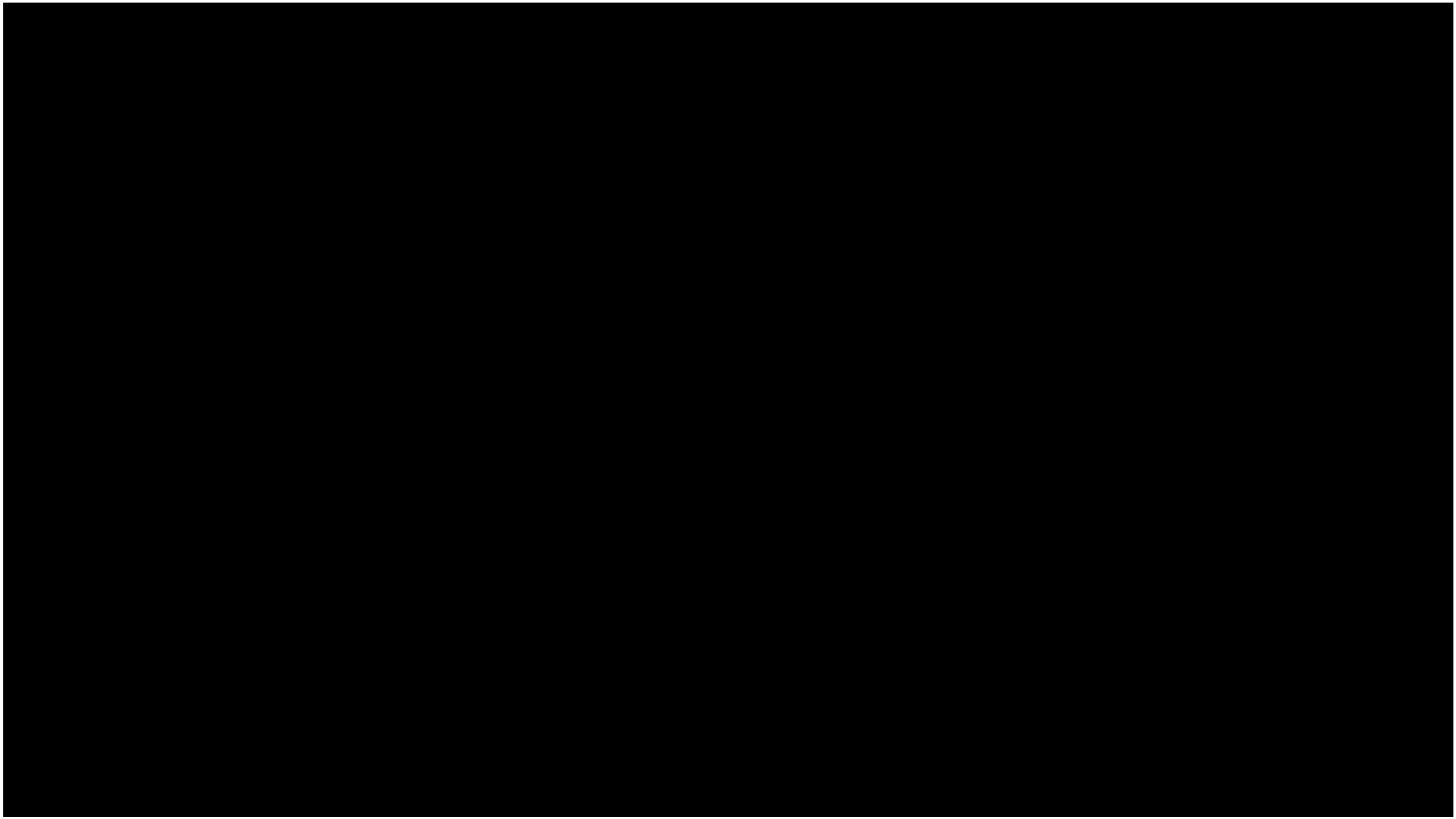
Our communities should be set up to prevent and immediately address elder abuse. This is what justice looks like.

# Justice

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**Connect initiatives to prevent and address elder abuse to the ability to fulfill our commitment to a just and equal society.**







Traps to  
Avoid

**Elder abuse is a difficult  
problem that affects us all—  
but solutions are available.**

- Sympathy Trap → Treating people fairly
- Tragic Story
- Financial Exploitation Trap

# How to include individual cases of abuse?


## Embed them within the Structure of Justice narrative

Our society is like a building:  
It needs strong supports and secure beams to remain strong.

We need solid “social” beams in our society so that we can all participate fully in our communities as we age and live free from abuse.

## Explain systems-level causes


When these supports are not in place, it is less likely that someone will notice if an older person is being abused or that survivors will be connected to health care providers or other professionals.



What should  
we do?

When older people are socially isolated, the risk of elder abuse increases because no one is around to detect it or assist if it occurs.

- Use Explanatory chains to illustrate how to prevent and address elder abuse
- Connect underlying causes and visible problems.



Framing the  
narrative

Safe and reliable public transportation reduces social isolation and helps prevent elder abuse.

- Social Isolation
  - Results from a lack of resources:
    - Public transportation... explain how they prevent problems
- Highlight collective solutions that are driven by structural changes.