Perpetrators of Elder Abuse

There is a tendency to focus on what puts elders at risk of abuse, but understanding the characteristics of abusers, and the wider contributing social factors, is a better predictor of elder abuse, and also a better prevention strategy (1).

Most elder abuse occurs in the community, in elders' homes (2). The abuser is most often trusted by the older adult. Most often an intimate partner or spouse; a child, grandchild, other relative (60%); a neighbor or friend; a caregiver or other professional in the community.

While all abusers must be held accountable for their behavior, experts have proposed a continuum of abusive characteristics to help us prevent elder abuse. For example, "bad actors", "ready exploiters", "reluctant exploiters", and "ignorant abusers" (3).

Personal Factors
- High levels of hostility and/or entitlement.
- Charming, attentive, and persuasive - to build trust.
- Lack of empathy and impulse control.
- Inability to cope with frustration.
- History of disruptive behavior, and underemployment.
- Substance abuse and/or mental health conditions, especially while being dependent on the elder.
- Caregiving responsibilities at an early age.

Relational Factors
- Problematic views about older adults (ageism), caregiving, and rights of others.
- Dependency on the elder they abuse.
- Difficulty establishing positive relationships.
- Social isolation and small social network.
- Exposure to abuse, especially as a child.
- Past family conflict.

Community Factors
- Limited access to health and community services.
- Inadequate preparation/training for caregivers.
- In institutional settings: staffing problems and lack of qualified staff, staff burnout and stressful working conditions.

Societal Factors
- Cultural values and expectations that devalue elders, and/or shape views about caregiving, and about what abuse is.
- Traditional and patriarchal views of the family.
- A culture of self-sufficiency and individualism.
- Cuts to State and federal funding.