

Mistreatment of Korean Elders

This research brief synthesizes the latest available information and research relating to the mistreatment of Korean older adults living in the United States, providing insight into general cultural beliefs, views, norms, of Korean immigrant communities and how they relate to and influence elder mistreatment.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Filial piety, family harmony, and patriarchal values** profoundly shape the response to elder mistreatment in the Korean community.
- Definitions of **psychological abuse** and **financial exploitation** among Korean elders are unique compared to other populations
- Immigration and acculturation experiences shape an older Korean's experience of elder mistreatment.
- Korean elders are **less likely to seek outside help or disclose family problems.**
- Promising intervention strategies include providing educational information on financial abuse, improving communication between elders and adult children, involving indigenous healthcare providers and religious leaders in elder abuse education, and increasing help-seeking behaviors.

Background and Statistics

In 2018, there were an estimated **1.9 million** individuals of Korean descent in the United States.¹

Older Korean immigrants likely have limited knowledge and perception of elder abuse.² Reporting of elder abuse among this community is very low.^{2,3}



Perceptions of Elder Mistreatment

FILIAL PIETY AND OTHER CORE CULTURAL VALUES

Filial piety, a core cultural value emphasized by Korean elders, indicates adult children's obligation to provide caregiving, support, and respect to their aging parents.³

Core values of traditional culture, such as collectivism and family harmony, filial piety, marital and gender roles, spirituality, and social characteristics profoundly shape the norms and expectations regarding interpersonal and/or social interactions related to and in response to elder mistreatment within the Korean community.^{2,4} Korean community members in one study expressed that family members should **emphasize family harmony over individual rights.**⁵

Patriarchal values also have an influential role. In one study, Korean participants highlighted how beliefs in male dominance and traditional patriarchal values culturally condoned spousal abuse.⁵

One study discovered **substantial differences between subjective perceptions of abuse and actual experiences of abuse.**²



EMOTIONAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

Studies have demonstrated that older Koreans are likely to be sensitive to psychological abuse.⁶ Korean participants in one study agreed that being disrespected and ignored by their adult children were the worst forms of psychological abuse.⁴ A unique form of psychological abuse revealed in this study was the “**silent treatment**”, which was commonly perceived as an extreme form of psychological humiliation.⁴

Participants also identified the following forms of psychological abuse⁴:



Passing elderly parents from one child to another to avoid caregiving responsibility



Spreading gossip and rumors to blackmail an elderly person to inflict mental anguish



Male spouse's psychological domination and control of his female partner



FAMILY EXPECTATIONS AND FINANCIAL ABUSE

Cultural Definitions of Financial Abuse

One study found that many elderly Koreans defined financial abuse based on filial piety.⁴ The most frequently reported definition was “**not providing financial support to elderly parents.**”⁴ Other descriptions among Korean elders were:

- “social welfare benefit-related financial abuse”⁷
- “choosing not to repay borrowed funds”⁷
- “immigration-related financial abuse”⁴

Vulnerability to Financial Exploitation

Cultural norms of collectivism and family harmony might contribute to Korean elders' vulnerability to exploitation.

Korean older adult participants in one study reported a tendency to support their adult children financially even after they have married and moved away.⁵ Participants also commonly reported the unauthorized use of their income or savings by their adult children and the unauthorized transfers of legal titles.⁵ Another study found that many immigrant Korean elders relied on their children for things like managing bank accounts, using ATM cards, or receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security benefits.⁴ Such dependence might aggravate the elders' vulnerability to exploitation. Although all participants of this study considered the unauthorized use of an elderly person's money by a non-family member to be exploitive, **elderly victims were less likely to report financial exploitation committed by a family member.**⁴



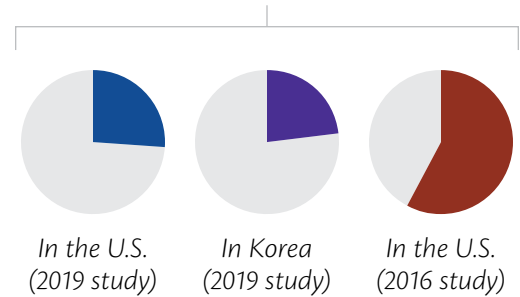
IMMIGRATION-RELATED ABUSE AND SEXUAL ABUSE

Korean participants in one study revealed that immigrant elders confronted additional forms of psychological, financial, and sexual abuse.⁴ Additionally, Korean experts commented that identifying elder sexual abuse is especially challenging since it is a culturally taboo subject.⁴

Prevalence

One study found the prevalence of elder mistreatment to be comparable among older Korean immigrants in the U.S. and older Koreans in Korea. Out of 240 Korean elders living **in the U.S., roughly one fourth (26.3%) experienced elder abuse**. Out of 240 older Koreans **in Korea, 23.3% had experienced elder abuse**.³ Another study found that out of 200 Korean elders in the U.S., **over half (58%) experienced one or more types of elder abuse**.²

Korean elders experienced elder abuse



Forms of Abuse Reported

Emotional abuse was the most frequently reported among Korean elders.^{2,3} Below are findings from two different studies on the forms of abuse reported.^{2,3}

Form of Abuse	Study 1: Chang, 2019 (n=240)	Study 2: Chang, 2016 (n=200)
Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 50.4% given the “silent treatment” 40% experienced “name calling” 37% were “insulted, threatened, intimidated, and humiliated” 31.3% were “isolated from regular activities” 13% were “isolated from family and relatives” 12% were “treated like an Infant” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 37.5% reported being given the silent treatment 28.5% reported name calling 28.0% reported insults, threats, intimidation, and humiliation
Neglect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 30% reported a “lack of in-home service provider” 22% reported “refusal to pay for necessary care services” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12.5% reported a lack of in-home services (e.g., housekeeping)
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10.4% reported “check cashed without consent” 5% reported that someone had “forged signatures forged” 5% reported “improper effort to have a guardian” 2.5% reported “stolen money or property” 1% reported “coerced or deceived into signing any legal documents” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 14.0% reported having money or possessions stolen
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 29.2% experienced “hitting, beating, pushing, shaking, slapping, and kicking” 17.5% reported “inappropriate use of drugs” 7% experienced “physical restraints” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10% reported being hit, beaten, pushed, shoved, and shaken
Sexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2% reported “unwanted touch” 1% reported “nonconsensual sexual contact.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.5% indicated unwanted touching.

Perpetrators

One study reported that **about half of Korean participants that reported abuse identified the perpetrator as a spouse.**³ In another study, the most frequently identified perpetrators were the son (21.5%) and spouse (20.5%).²

RISK FACTORS



Education Level

Out of 200 participants in one study, 81.1% of those who had middle school or lower level education had experienced elder abuse.²



Health Status

One study found that the odds of elder abuse were 97% lower for Korean elders with fair/good health status versus very poor health status.³



Older Age

In one study, older Koreans (75-79 years) were found to be at higher risk of elder abuse than younger Korean elders (60-74 years).³

Help-Seeking Behavior

Older Korean immigrants tend to prefer using informal resources for help, such as family members and relatives. One study found that **almost half of the respondents indicated that if an older adult is abused by a family member, individuals outside the family should not intervene.** Only half of the respondents knew about formal agencies that could help if they were abused.² Participants in another study stated that expressing needs for support or complaining about adversity were seen as a weakness and source of disharmony. Participants expressed that elder mistreatment was **especially challenging to report when the perpetrator was their own child.**⁴ In another study, Korean participants expressed strong agreement about **exclusive family ties and beliefs in the prohibition of disclosure about family issues.**⁵



Tips for Working With Korean Elders and Advancing Research



Be Sensitive to Different Cultural Definitions of Elder Mistreatment

When assessing elder mistreatment, particularly financial abuse, practitioners should be aware of how culture shapes definitions of abuse.^{2,7}



Consider the Impact of Governmental Aid

Service providers working with immigrant populations from countries where no governmental financial aid is available should consider this unique dynamic. The U.S. government's financial assistance for elders can lead to family behaviors experienced as financial abuse by Korean elders.⁷



Intervention Recommendations

The following intervention strategies have been recommended for protecting Korean elders:

- Provide education about cultural definitions for financial abuse to help adult children engage in healthy financial relationships with their parents.⁷
- Create educational programs to enhance elderly Korean immigrants' financial literacy.⁷
- Provide services entailing improved communication, understanding, and relationship building between aging parents in Korean communities and their adult children's families.⁴
- Focus on increasing help-seeking behaviors through the alleviation of negative consequences, reduction of stigma, and promoting education on reporting and advocacy.⁴
- Reach out to indigenous health-care professionals and religious leaders and provide them with information about what constitutes elder abuse and how to help victims.^{2,3}
- Adult Protective Services (APS) agencies and community-based organizations could develop outreach programs targeting undereducated, older Korean immigrants in urban areas and provide programs to increase awareness, enhance prevention, and help victims cope.²

RESEARCH NEEDED

Additional research is needed on the **immigrant-related social context**, particularly in the area of how elders' traditional expectations of their children's financial support become diluted over time, as they receive governmental financial benefits and experience acculturation.²



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