Understanding the Dynamics of Elder Abuse in Ohio Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction: With its older adult population expected to increase by 30% by the year 2030, the state of Ohio confronts the challenges of elder abuse as a significant public health issue. The U.S. Government Accountability Office emphasizes the correlation between the growing older population and the anticipated surge in elder abuse incidents. Current statistics reveal that around 200,000 older adults in Ohio endure various forms of abuse, encompassing physical, emotional, sexual, exploitative, and neglectful mistreatment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated elder abuse in Ohio, with older adults experiencing heightened distress due to lockdown measures. Social distancing protocols also contributed to an increased risk of elder abuse, and reports indicate a significant rise in such incidents according to the American Bar Association. Counterintuitively, the lockdown during the pandemic's early wave reduced opportunities to detect elder abuse as social distancing measures minimized contact with the support systems of older adults.

Study Objectives and Methods: This study aims to fill gaps in existing research by investigating the rates and characteristics of elder abuse in Ohio, specifically during different waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors focused on referrals made to Adult Protective Agencies in the state during State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2020 (7/19-6/20) and compared them to SFY 2021 (7/20-6/21), suggesting a higher percentage of referrals alleging exploitation and neglect during the pandemic's first wave.

The study concentrates on five of the seven subtypes of elder abuse, namely exploitation, neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. The data was obtained from Adult Protective Service agencies across Ohio, utilizing descriptive analyses and chi-square tests to identify statistical differences.

Results and Discussion: The findings reveal a statistically significant difference in the frequency of elder abuse referrals between the two waves of the pandemic. Neglect and exploitation were identified as predominant subtypes during both the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods. The study aligns with previous research suggesting an increase in domestic violence during the pandemic, emphasizing the intensified vulnerabilities faced by older adults.

While some differences emerge in comparison to other studies, particularly regarding the rate of physical abuse referrals and variations in data sources likely contribute to these disparities. Notably, Adult Protective Services did not

receive more referrals during the first wave, possibly due to preventive measures like social distancing limiting reporting opportunities.

Conclusion: Despite limitations, this study sheds light on the subtle dynamics of elder abuse in Ohio during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings underscore the importance of considering multifaceted factors contributing to elder abuse, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and support systems to safeguard the well-being of older adults in evolving societal contexts.