



## Elder abuse in Brazil: an integrative review

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### Abstract

*Objective:* the present study aimed to carry out an integrative review of literature on the scientific knowledge relating to the occurrence of elder abuse produced in Brazil between the years of 2013 to 2017. *Method:* a bibliographic survey was carried out through publications indexed in the Virtual Health Library (VHL) database: the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SCIELO), Latin American Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS) and the CAPES Portal of Periodicals (CAPES). The data collection instrument, created by the authors, included characteristics such as: year of publication, main journals, research design, topics covered, main areas of knowledge, sampling and study objectives. *Results:* 28 publications were analyzed. The main types of violence were psychological (28%), physical (28%), unspecified (16%), financial (12%), self-abandonment (8%), neglect and verbal violence (4%). The majority of the victims were female (64%), of unspecified gender (28%) and male (8%). *Conclusion:* the present integrative review found that the main violence suffered was psychological together with physical, with the elderly the main victims. The main place of maltreatment was in the home. The research also found that there are gaps in information about the reasons that triggered the aggressions. It is therefore necessary to investigate this subject further and carry out new studies that seek to identify these factors.

**Keywords:** Elder Abuse.  
Domestic Violence. Health of  
the Elderly.

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## INTRODUCTION

Longevity can be considered one of the great modern-day achievements. However, the significant increase in the elderly population in Brazilian society has led to the emergence of new challenges in relation to the formulation of public policies and actions of health promotion and prevention<sup>1</sup>. Problems have also emerged from this new scenario, such as elder abuse, which has grown significantly in recent years and has already been recognized as a public health problem<sup>2</sup>.

Violence has been present throughout history and represents a relationship of the power of the strongest against the groups considered most vulnerable, including children, women and the elderly<sup>3</sup>. Violence can be understood, according to Reis et al.<sup>4</sup>, as a violation of the integrity of the victim, be it physical, sexual, psychic or moral.

Although violence against the elderly has existed from the earliest of times, the first articles dealing with "elder abuse" first appeared in 1975 in British scientific journals as "beating the grandparents"<sup>5,6</sup>. In Brazil, this theme has only become a subject for debate in the last two decades, due to the growing numbers of elderly people in the population and also because of an increasing number of reports of violence<sup>7</sup>.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence against the elderly as a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, intentional or unplanned, causing harm or unnecessary distress and a reduction in the quality of life of an older person<sup>8,9</sup>. It can be practiced inside or outside the home environment, by a member of the family or even by persons exercising a relationship of power over the elderly, such as caregivers<sup>9</sup>.

Brazilian scientific literature shows that the family context and the residence of the elderly person are the main locus for the occurrence of violence, with physical and psychological abuse and neglect the most notable forms<sup>9,10</sup>. However, violence is a social phenomenon that affects the elderly in different ways, on a daily basis, directly or indirectly, in the social, economic, political and institutional spheres, and remains a subject that is little explored in research<sup>11</sup>.

Elder abuse is a violation of human rights and a major cause of physical or mental injury, resulting in hospitalizations, morbidities, disabilities, depression, loss of productivity, isolation and despair in this population<sup>8,12</sup>.

To discuss violence against the elderly is to address a serious public health issue. However, Brazilian scientific production on the subject is still incipient. This reveals a need for further investigations, leading to reflections that will support society in the defense of the elderly and the fight against violence. We therefore used the following guiding question for the development of this study: which variables of violence are addressed in the scientific knowledge produced in Brazil in the period from 2013 to 2017 in relation to elder abuse? In order to answer this question, the present study aimed to analyze and systematize the scientific production about violence against the elderly in Brazil in the last five years through an integrative review of literature.

## METHOD

The present study consisted of an integrative bibliographical review. This approach allows theoretical and empirical studies carried out on a certain phenomenon which one wishes to investigate to be systematized and evaluated<sup>13</sup>. In the case of the study in question, the subject of interest is the profile of studies on elder abuse in Brazil in the last five years.

The study adopted the following steps: delimitation of the problem; definition of databases and descriptors; establishment of exclusion criteria and inclusion of articles to be selected to compose the sample; definition of the information extracted from the selected studies; analysis and evaluation of studies included in the integrative review and interpretation of data and results<sup>13</sup>.

The bibliographical survey was carried out in publications indexed in the database of the Virtual Health Library (VHL): Scientific Electronic Library Online (SCIELO), Latin American Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS) and the CAPES Portal of Periodicals (CAPES). These databases were chosen to allow the identification of only works carried out in Brazil between the years of 2013 to 2017.

To select the articles, four researchers analyzed the databases by year of publication. The selection was standardized to ensure each researcher followed the following inclusion criteria: a) articles produced in Brazil; b) between the years 2013 and 2017; c) national studies; (d) available in full; e) with relevance and adherence to the proposed objective and which addressed the following descriptors: "elder abuse", "violence against the elderly", "neglect of the elderly" and "abandonment of the elderly". The exclusion criteria were: bibliographic review articles of any modality; duplicate articles; end of course work such as: monographs, dissertations and theses and international studies.

The articles were analyzed in full by four researchers and the extracted data were presented in a descriptive manner, in order to communicate to the readers knowledge of the main types of studies involving abuse and violence against the elderly in Brazil in the last five years. The theoretical references of previously published studies with the theme proposed by the authors were used to analyze the results obtained.

In order to organize and tabulate the results, the data collection instrument used and elaborated by the authors included characteristics such as: year of publication, main journals, research design, topics covered, main areas of knowledge, sampling and objectives to be described in the results and discussion sections.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the descriptors used, 121 articles were identified in the VHL, annexed to the databases: LILACS, SCIELO and CAPES. Most were found in the LILACS database (67 articles).

After analyzing and strictly following the inclusion and exclusion criteria, described in the methodology above, 28 articles on elder abuse were selected, published in Brazilian journals from 2013

to 2017. During the analysis, a prevalence of cross-sectional and descriptive articles was observed, with most published in 2016 (n = 9) and 2015 (n = 8). All the studies are described in (Table 1), according to the year of publication, the proposed objectives, the chosen research design and the sample size.

After analyzing the period established for the research, it was noted that despite the importance of the theme, studies related to violence against the elderly are not numerous (n = 28). Even four decades after the first publication on the subject, violence against the elderly remains a veiled paradigm in scientific productions and public affairs<sup>6</sup>. Such a phenomenon may be related to the difficulty in working with the theme, recognizing it or by the difficulty of directly approaching the victims.

In terms of the studies and periodicals analyzed (Table 2), there was a predominance of studies in the areas of Nursing (n=12), Collective Health (n=7) and Psychology (n=6), the majority of which were published in journals specific to gerontology and nursing. The main publications were the *Revista Brasileira de Geriatria e Gerontologia* (the Brazilian Journal of Geriatrics and Gerontology) (n=5) and the Journal of Nursing - UFPE (n=4). These data are in line with the results of another integrative review that addressed the same theme, carried out in 2013, but differed in relation to the increase in the number of articles in the areas of psychology and collection health and a reduction in the number of public health journals<sup>41</sup>. Journals specific to gerontology have increased since the integrative review on abuse published in 2013<sup>42</sup>.

Although the topic is considered a public health issue, only one article was published in a periodical focused on this area. The question therefore arises: is the scarcity of articles in health journals related to a lack of interest in the topic or the difficulty of performing and publishing articles in this area? There is therefore a need for greater investment in public health research to prevent elderly persons from continuing to suffer violence in silence.

**Table 1.** Profile of studies (N=28) of elder abuse carried out between 2013 and 2017. Campinas, São Paulo, 2017.

Author(s) Year of publication	Study design	N	Objectives	Research area
Araújo, L. F.; Cruz, E. A. e Rocha, R. A. (2013) <sup>14</sup>	<i>Ex-post facto</i> , cross-sectional type	100 individuals (50 community health agents and 50 health professionals)	To identify and compare the social representations of violence in old age among community health agents and health professionals included in the family health strategy.	Psychology
Santos, C. M., et al. (2013) <sup>15</sup>	Document analysis	2,304 complaints between 2004 and 2006	Assess the prevalence of elder abuse and analyze the database of reported lesions that could be identified.	Dentistry
Wanderbroocke, A. C. N. S. and Moré, C. L. O. O. (2013) <sup>16</sup>	Cross-sectional and qualitative	10 health professionals	Describe the professional approach to family violence against the elderly in a basic health unit (BHU).	Collective Health
Faustino, A. M., Gandolfi, L. and Moura, L. B. A. (2014) <sup>17</sup>	Cross-sectional population- based study	237 elderly persons	To verify if there is a relationship between the functional capacity of the elderly and the presence of situations of violence in their daily lives.	Nursing
Gonçalves, J. R. L., et al. (2014) <sup>18</sup>	Descriptive study with a qualitative approach.	12 health professionals	To identify the perception of health professionals about domestic violence against the elderly and to understand the conduct of domestic violence situations.	Nursing
Maia, R. S. and Maia, E. M. C. (2014) <sup>19</sup>	Transcultural adaptation	15 elderly persons	Promote the transcultural adaptation of VASS for Brazil.	Psychology
Pereira, J. K., Firmo, J. O. and Giacomin, K. C. (2014) <sup>20</sup>	Qualitative anthropological study	57 elderly persons	To investigate the elements involved in the construction of the meanings of disability for elderly residents of the city of Bambuí, Minas Gerais, Brazil.	Collective Health
Sales, S. D., et al. (2014) <sup>21</sup>	Exploratory and descriptive study with a qualitative approach	135 to 165 relatives of elderly persons, five of whom were the agents evaluated.	To identify the perception of community health agents (CHA) in relation to elderly victims of violence and analyze the flow of care of the cases of violence against the elderly identified by CHA.	Nursing
Aguiar, et al. (2015) <sup>22</sup>	Descriptive study	112 Incident reports	Describe cases of violence against the elderly in the municipal region of Aracaju, Sergipe, Brazil.	Nursing
Minayo, M. C. S., et al. (2015) <sup>23</sup>	Evaluative, quantitative and qualitative study	18 Integrated Centers for Attention and Prevention of Violence against the Elderly (CIAPVI)	"Lessons Learned" in the process of evaluation and monitoring of centers for the prevention of violence against the elderly, a program created in 2007 by the Human Rights Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic (SDH).	Collective Health
Musse, J. O. and Rios, M. H. E. (2015) <sup>24</sup>	Qualitative, descriptive and exploratory	17 nurses	To identify the performance of nurses when dealing with domestic violence against the elderly.	Nursing
Paiva, M. M. and Tavares, D. M. S. (2015) <sup>25</sup>	Home-based enquiry	729 elderly persons	To verify the prevalence and factors associated with physical and psychological violence against the elderly and trace the sociodemographic and clinical indicators.	Nursing

to be continued

Continuation of Table 1

Author(s) Year of publication	Study design	N	Objectives	Research area
Paraíba, P. M. F. and Silva, M. C. M. (2015) <sup>26</sup>	Descriptive cross-sectional study	242 notifications of violence	Describe the profile of violence against the elderly in the city of Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil.	Collective Health
Rodrigues, C. L., Armond, J. E. and Gorios, C. (2015) <sup>27</sup>	Cross-sectional; quantitative; descriptive and retrospective	602 cases of elderly persons	Characterize the population of elderly persons who have suffered physical and sexual violence and describe the characteristics of this aggression.	Public and Mental Health
Silva, E. A. e França, L. H. F. P. (2015) <sup>28</sup>	Quantitative and predictive study	284 Elderly persons	Examine the factors that influenced violence against the elderly in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.	Psychology
Trindade, R. F. C., et al. (2015) <sup>29</sup>	Ecological study	634 deaths from firearm projectiles	Describe the profile of victims of armed robbery resulting in death.	Nursing
Bolsoni, C. C., et al. (2016) <sup>30</sup>	Populational base	1,705 individuals	Estimate the prevalence of violence against the elderly and analyze its association with demographic, and socioeconomic factors and health conditions.	Collective Health
Damasceno, C. K. C. S., Sousa, C. M. M. and Moura, M. E. B. (2016) <sup>31</sup>	Explorative study with a qualitative approach	300 police incident reports	Analyze cases of violence against the elderly registered in a police station for the security and protection of the elderly.	Nursing
Faustino, A. M., Moura, L. B. A. and Gandolfi, L. (2016) <sup>32</sup>	Cross-sectional population based study	237 elderly persons	To determine if there was a relationship between the cognitive capacity of elderly persons and exposure to situations of violence.	Nursing
Garbin, C. A. S., et al. (2016) <sup>33</sup>	Cross-sectional; descriptive; retrospective document analysis study	572 police incident reports	To verify the occurrence of elder abuse and its characteristics based on the police records over a five year period.	Dentistry
Guimarães, D. B. O., et al. (2016) <sup>34</sup>	Observational; descriptive and retrospective study	225 police reports	Characterize elderly victims of violence.	Nursing
Irigaray, T. Q., et al. (2016) <sup>35</sup>	Document analysis	224 police incident reports	Verify the prevalence and types of abuse suffered by the elderly, registered at a Police Station for the Protection of the Elderly in the municipal region of Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.	Psychology
Maia, R. S. e Maia, E. M. C. (2016) <sup>36</sup>	Cross-sectional and analytical study	66 individuals	To present preliminary psychometric evidence of the cross-cultural adaptation of the Vulnerability Abuse Screening Scale (VASS).	Psychology
Moreira, W. C., et al. (2016) <sup>37</sup>	Descriptive theoretical-reflexive study	----	Abuse, the elderly and public policies.	Nursing

to be continued

Continuation of Table 1

Author(s) Year of publication	Study design	N	Objectives	Research area
Silva, C. F. S. and Dias, C. M. S. B. (2016) <sup>38</sup>	Descriptive study	13 individuals	Investigate violence against elderly persons in the family, from the perspective of the aggressor, specifically in terms of the motivations that impelled them to act violently and the feelings and needs felt by them.	Psychology
Avanci, J. Q., Pinto, L. W. and Assis, S. G. (2017) <sup>39</sup>	Cross-sectional	36 elderly persons	To analyze data on intrafamily violence witnessed by the emergency services according to the sociodemographic characteristics of the people receiving care, the act itself and the evolution of care, from childhood to old age by gender; and the factors that differentiate occurrences of intra-family violence from violence committed by non-relatives.	Public Health
Dantas, R. B., Oliveira, G. L. e Silveira, A. M. (2017) <sup>40</sup>	Adaptation and validation of scale	151 Elderly persons	Adapt and evaluate the psychometric properties of the Vulnerability to Abuse Screening Scale – VASS.	Medicine
Rodrigues, R. A. P., et al. (2017) <sup>41</sup>	Ecological, historical series type	2,612 police incident reports	To analyze the incident reports involving elderly persons who suffered violence in order to identify socio-demographic characteristics of victims and aggressors, type of violence, location, as well as comparing rates in three Brazilian municipalities from 2009 to 2013.	Nursing

**Table 2.** Distribution of articles on elder abuse between 2013 and 2017, by journal. Campinas, São Paulo, 2017.

Journal	N (%)
<i>Revista Brasileira de Geriatria e Gerontologia</i> (Brazilian Journal of Geriatrics and Gerontology)	5 (17.85%)
<i>Journal of Nursing – UFPE On Line</i> (JNUOL)	4 (14.28%)
<i>Ciência &amp; Saúde Coletiva</i> (Science and Public Health)	2 (7.14%)
<i>Caderno de Saúde Pública</i> (Reports Public Health)	2 (7.14%)
<i>Revista Brasileira de Enfermagem</i> (Brazilian Journal of Nursing)	2 (7.14%)
<i>Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre o Envelhecimento</i> (Interdisciplinary Studies on Aging)	2 (7.14%)
<i>Estudos de Psicologia</i> (Studies on Psychology)	2 (7.14%)
Other journals	9 (32.13%)
Total	28 (100%)

The results obtained from the analysis of these studies indicated that the main objectives proposed in the investigations were: analyze and describe the main types and prevalence of elder abuse (36%), categorize the profile of the victim and the aggressor (24%), analyze the consequences for the health of the victim (20%), adapt and validate scales of evaluating abuse (12%) and works on public policies and prevention (8%).

The content of the studies was limited to identifying the profile of the victims, as well as the prevalence of types of abuse. However, there are few studies that sought to identify the main motivations of the aggressor, intervention studies with health teams, proposals for innovation and strategies for prevention and diagnosis. Studies that specifically addressed other types of violence, such as discrimination and institutional, social and economic

violence are non-existent. Elderly persons often suffer financial abuse, such as theft, committed mainly by banking and health agencies and commercial establishments<sup>43</sup>. No research that attempted to understand this phenomenon was found, not even in relation to the frequency of occurrence, resulting in greater concealment of the problem.

Studies that carried out investigations directly with the victims were rare<sup>25,28,30,32,39</sup>. The main approaches used in the investigations were document analysis and data collection from incident reports available at police stations. This may be associated with the difficulty in approaching victims of violence, as the elderly do not generally report the abuses and aggressions they suffer due to embarrassment and fear of repression by their caregivers, who are often the aggressors<sup>11</sup>.

Of the elderly who suffered aggression, the majority were women (64%). This result agrees with another integrative review study on elder abuse, conducted in 2013, which identified a greater female presence among cases of violence against persons aged 60 years or older<sup>42</sup>. The study conducted by Rodrigues et al.<sup>42</sup> found higher rates of aggression against women (94.74%) aged over 60, 28.94% of whom reported verbal abuse, 13.15% of whom suffered physical aggression and 39.47% of whom experienced family neglect.

The main types of violence found in the present review were: psychological (28%), physical (28%), financial (12%), other types of violence (12%) or not described (20%). The study by Rizzieri and Barbosa<sup>43</sup>, undertaken in a basic health unit in the primary health care system, found that psychological violence was most common, followed by physical and financial violence<sup>43</sup>.

Another factor observed was the proximity between the victim and the aggressor. The violence was often committed by the sons or daughters of the victim (28%), and the majority of the occurrences of violence took place in the residence of the elderly person (60%). Among the reasons for the proximity of the aggressor is the family context, which is often stressful and includes the presence of unprepared or overburdened caregivers.

The descriptive document analysis carried out in the municipal region of Sergipe found that of the 112 incident reports analyzed, 96,4% of the cases of violence occurred in the home. The majority of the victims were widowed, while most aggressors were male (74.1%) and the children of the victims<sup>44</sup>.

This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that elderly persons with limited independence require constant interaction with a caregiver to perform the necessary and basic tasks of day to day living<sup>45</sup>. Elderly persons in a situation of dependency receive, in most cases, care in the family environment, as this is the main institution responsible for promoting the care of family members, as recognized and guaranteed in the Statute of the Elderly<sup>46</sup>. Although the family is the nucleus of support, it is not always able to meet all the needs that this group demands<sup>46</sup>.

Providing care for dependent elderly persons at home requires changes and adjustments in the lifestyle of caregivers, including a need to reconcile personal, professional and domestic tasks; a reduction in family income due to treatment and the purchase of medicines; family reorganization and the suitability of the home for the needs of care. The family begins to revolve around the demands that the role of being a caregiver imposes. This can sometimes make the task of caring a negative experience, capable of triggering physical and emotional exhaustion, and resulting in a variety of almost always harmful consequences for the life and health of the caregiver. The burdened caregiver, in turn, can threaten family balance and relationships and may be a risk factor for the abuse of their elderly relatives<sup>46</sup>. Queiroz et al.<sup>47</sup> carried out a study with caregivers of elderly persons, in order to verify the factors associated with neglect among this group. For the authors, the primary factor for neglect is the burden of the caregiver caused by the greater functional dependence of the elderly<sup>47</sup>.

Family members generally assume the role of caretakers of their elderly relatives voluntarily and informally, and are often unprepared for this role. The lack of knowledge and clarification of the aging process and the changes it entails means the task of caring is carried out intuitively and often in an incorrect manner. As a consequence, situations of neglect and abandonment can occur<sup>35</sup>.

Other factors related to the high prevalence of elder abuse in a family context should be considered, such as the lack of formal and informal support for caregivers, public policies or public support for families with dependent elderly persons, such as public day centers that could help families in a situation of care, reducing the burden and responsibilities of family members and their impact upon the individual. Deprived families, especially those lacking social and financial resources, are more likely to feel more overburdened and unprepared to care for their elderly relatives, since the task of caring requires a variety of resources, including emotional, physical and economic<sup>48</sup>.

It can then be concluded that many cases of abuse could be avoided if there was greater intervention and more educational actions aimed at the relatives and caregivers of elderly persons.

One of the limitations of the present study was the fact that most of the studies used data from police incident reports, which may not reflect the reality experienced by the elderly population

suffering violence or their relatives. We suggest that further studies are undertaken with a broader scope, encompassing other types of issues, not only the subject of violence in the family environment, directly involving elderly persons in the community and not taking data from incident reports, in order to gain more knowledge of the subject and devise more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

## CONCLUSION

The present integrative review found that the main forms of violence suffered are psychological and physical, with elderly women the main victims and the home the main location for abuse. The main reasons for aggression were not clarified. The increase in the aggression and abuse of elderly persons found in our research over the last five years is apparent, but little information is provided about the reasons that led the aggressor to carrying out the act, making new studies that seek to identify these factors necessary.

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