

Brussels, 17 March 2008

Protecting the dignity of dependent older people

What is elder abuse?

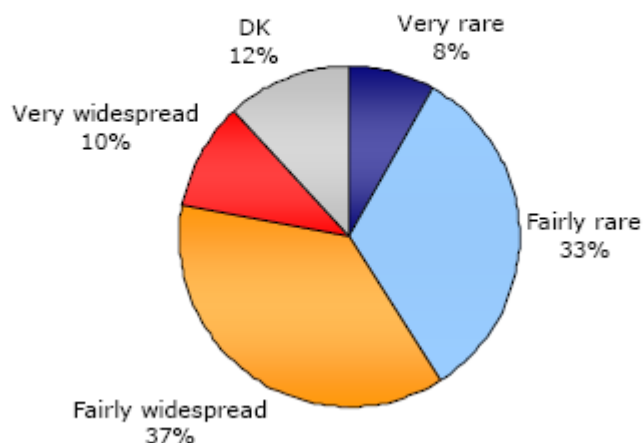
Elder abuse can take many different forms and takes place in different contexts. It includes poor treatment, neglect and abuse of dependent elderly people, both in institutional and family settings. But it is important to emphasise that the problem most often stems from a carer – a professional or a family member – being overwhelmed and unable to cope, rather than any intent to harm or abuse.

A Eurobarometer survey, carried out at the end of last year, sheds light on the phenomenon. The survey examined awareness of the risk of elder abuse in the various forms it can take and who the most likely perpetrators are thought to be. Respondents were also asked about what could be done to prevent neglect and abuse. Overall, nearly 29,000 people in all EU Member States and the two candidate countries were interviewed between 25 May and 30 June 2007. It should be noted, though, that people living in institutions are not included in Eurobarometer surveys.

How widespread is the problem?

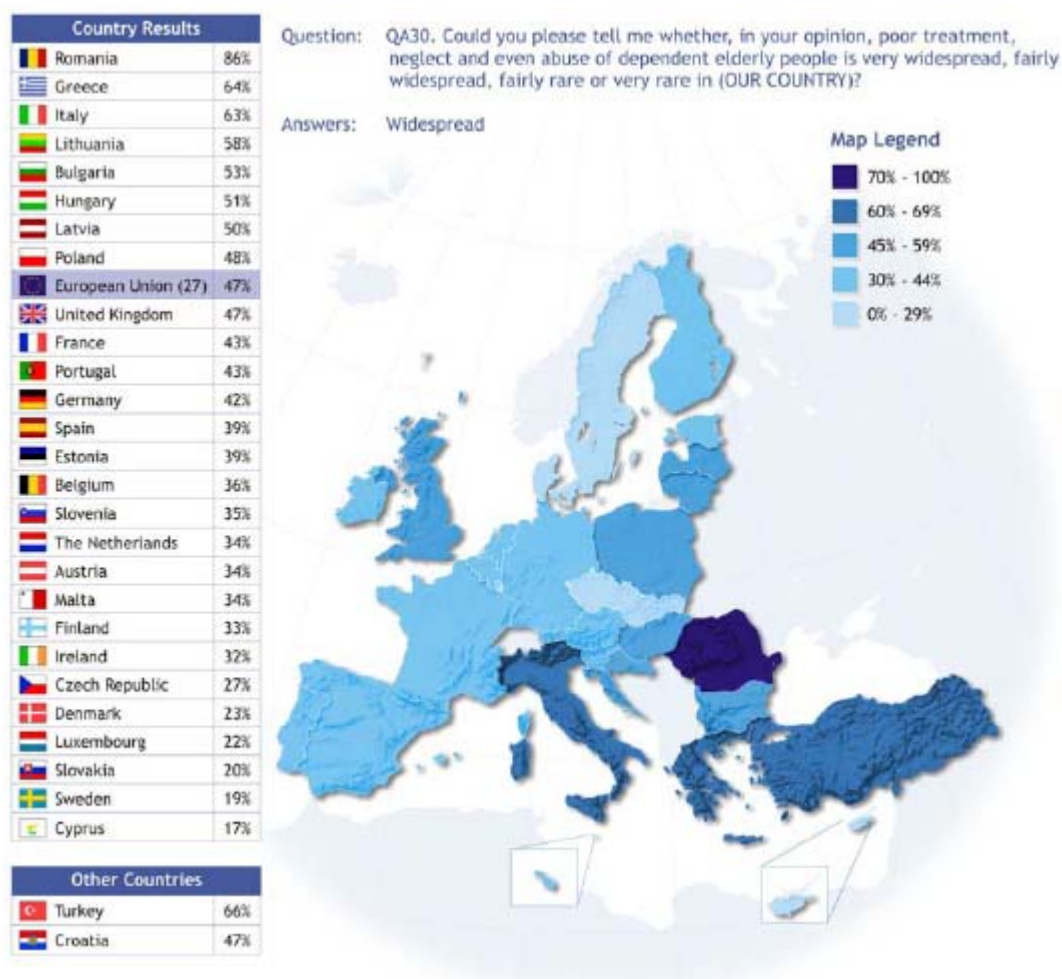
Nearly half of European citizens believe that poor treatment, neglect and even abuse of dependent elderly people is widespread in their country ('fairly or very widespread', 47%), whereas a significant minority of the population believes that elder abuse is rare (fairly rare: 33%, very rare: 8%).

QA30 Could you please tell me whether, in your opinion, poor treatment, neglect and even abuse of dependent elderly people is very widespread, fairly widespread, fairly rare or very rare in (OUR COUNTRY)? - % EU27



People with personal experience of long-term care needs are more inclined to feel that poor treatment, neglect and even abuse of dependent elderly people are fairly or very widespread in their country.

There are striking differences across countries as far as the perceived risk of poor treatment is concerned. Romania stands out with a very high proportion of people who say that neglect and abuse of dependent elderly people are fairly or very widespread: 86% think that this is the case in their country. Conversely, in Cyprus (17%) and Sweden (19%), less than one person in five feels that poor treatment is widespread.



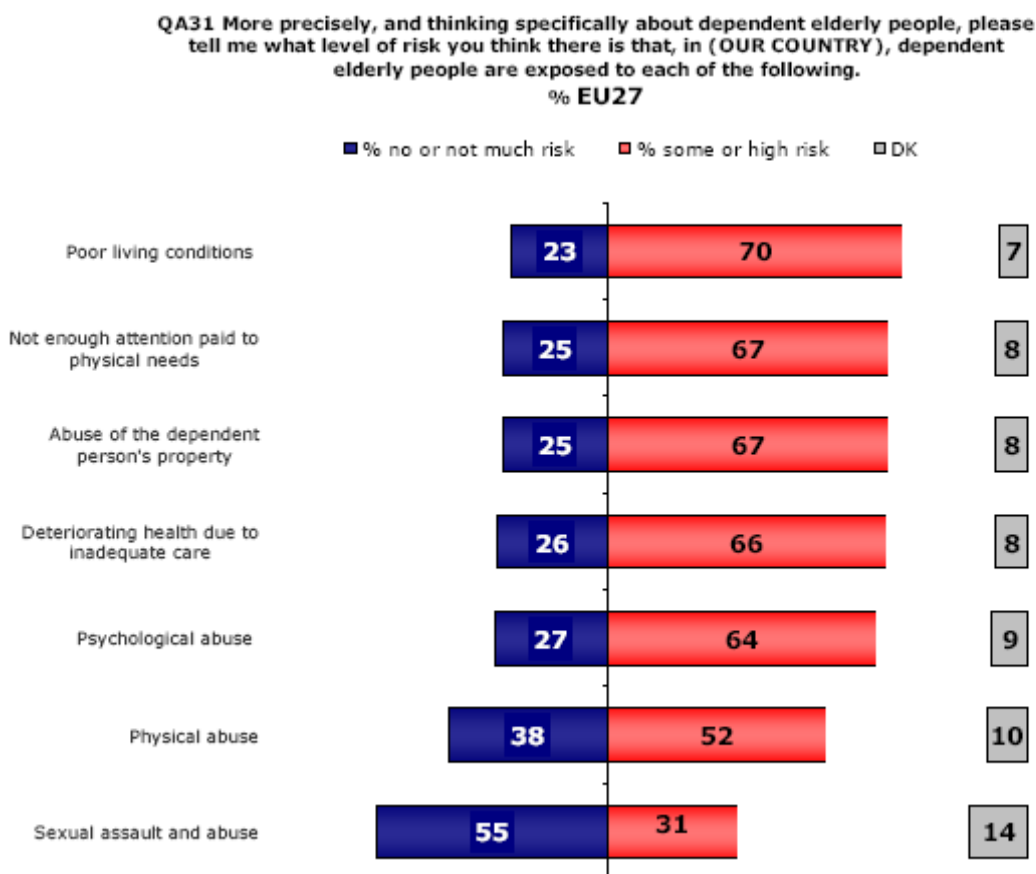
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What are the most common forms of elder abuse?

Neglect and abuse of elderly people can take different forms ranging from poor living conditions to physical or sexual abuse.

Seven Europeans out of ten believe that dependent elderly people are at a high (24%) or some (46%) risk of living in poor conditions, i.e. being deprived of social contacts and stimulating activities and having to accept poor quality catering and accommodation. Almost the same proportion feels that dependent elderly citizens are at risk of suffering some degree of physical neglect, abuse to their property (both 67%) or of receiving inadequate care (66%). Furthermore, most Europeans feel that this group of vulnerable people is at risk of psychological or physical abuse (64% and 52%, respectively).

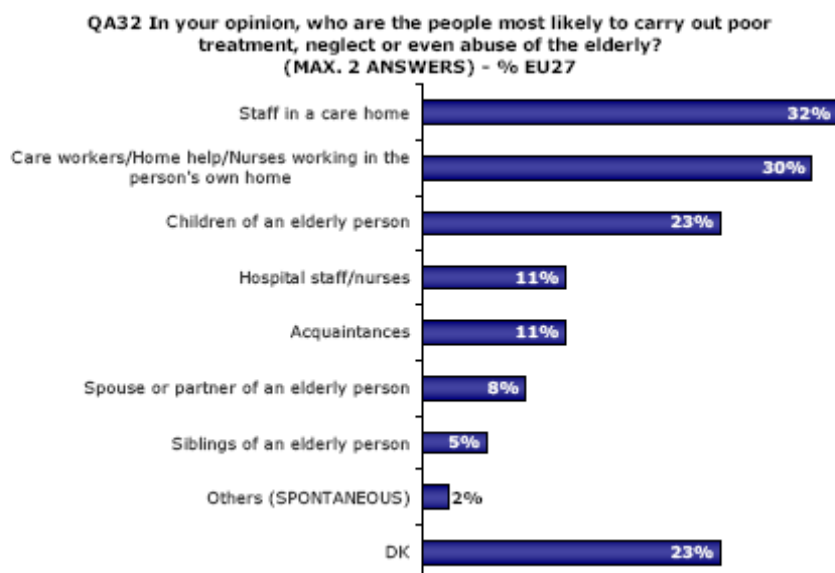
The only form of mistreatment that the majority of Europeans tend to regard as a lesser risk for dependent elderly people is that of sexual assault and abuse ('not much of a risk' + 'not a risk at all', 55%).



A country by country analysis reveals that particularly large proportions of respondents in Turkey, Romania and Greece think that elderly people are at risk of various forms of abuse. Malta has the lowest perceived risk levels regarding poor living conditions and Sweden has the lowest perceived risk levels whatever the form of abuse examined.

Who is considered most likely to carry out elder abuse?

Those believed to be the most likely perpetrators of abuse or neglect are staff in care homes (32%) and those working in the elderly dependent person's home (30%). However, nearly a quarter of Europeans think it possible that elderly people's own children could also be such 'offenders' (23%). Hospital staff or acquaintances are less frequently mentioned (11%). Fewer than one European in ten sees the dependent elderly person's spouse or partner as a likely perpetrator of abuse or neglect. The relatively high percentage of Europeans who lack an opinion in this respect needs to be highlighted (23%).



There are large differences across countries. In Greece, the attention is clearly focused on staff working in care homes (74% of respondents single them out as most likely perpetrators), while in Cyprus people working in the home of dependent people are least trusted (65%). In Finland, about half of the public feels that children of elderly people are most likely to mistreat, neglect and even abuse dependent elderly people (51%).

What are the best ways to prevent mistreatment?

The European public is divided over the best ways to prevent mistreatment of dependent elderly people. Four measures receive support from around a quarter of the public, two of which are stressing punitive action, and two presenting preventive intervention:

- severe punishment for perpetrators (26%)
- strict government controls (24%)
- better training of carers (24%)
- better pay for professional carers (22%).

Another four measures are each supported by fewer than 20% of the public: better organisation of care, pay for those giving up their job to provide care to relatives (each 19%), tougher regulations (15%) and less work pressure on professional carers (14%).

Personal direct or indirect experience of the care system has some influence on people's views: citizens who are currently dependent on care are more inclined to see better incomes for professional carers as a way of preventing maltreatment (31%, compared to an EU average of 22%).