



Development of short-form measures to assess four types of elder mistreatment: Findings from an evidence-based study of APS elder abuse substantiation decisions

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ABSTRACT

Improving the standardization and efficiency of adult protective services (APS) investigations is a top priority in APS practice. Using data from the Elder Abuse Decision Support System (EADSS), we developed short-form measures of four types of elder abuse: financial, emotional/psychological, physical, and neglect. The EADSS data set contains 948 elder abuse cases (age 60+) with yes/no abuse substantiation decisions for each abuse type following a 30-day investigation. Item sensitivity/specificity analyses were conducted on long-form items with the substantiation decision for each abuse type as the criterion. Validity was further tested using receiver–operator characteristic (ROC) curve analysis, correlation with long forms and internal consistency. The four resulting short-form measures, containing 36 of the 82 original items, have validity similar to the original long forms. These short forms can be used to standardize and increase efficiency of APS investigations, and may also offer researchers new options for brief elder abuse assessments.

KEYWORDS

Adult protective services; Elder Abuse Decision Support System; elder abuse investigation/substantiation; Older Adult Mistreatment Assessment; receiver operating curve

Introduction

Due to prevailing aging trends, the problem of elder mistreatment is escalating with estimates that in the USA, one in 10 older adults has experienced some form of abuse, neglect, or financial exploitation (FE) (Acierno et al., 2010). Yet due to underreporting, these rates are likely underestimates (Gallione et al., *in press*). Worldwide, the annual prevalence of elder abuse and neglect may be even higher. For example, Dong (2015) estimates rates as high as 36.2% for older adults in China and 61.1% in Croatia.

Across the country, adult protective services (APS) budgets and support services have been cut drastically while abuse reports have increased by as

much as 24% (National Adult Protective Services Association, 2009). This results in insufficient time to carefully investigate and respond to abuse allegations. Such chronic underfunding means that both APS research and practice suffer from lack of a solid knowledge base and evidence-based tools and protocols (Mixon, 2010; Mosqueda et al., 2016; Sommerfeld, Henderson, Snider, & Aarons, 2014). Additionally, there has been scant research to address reporting, assessment, and intervention that is statewide or potentially national in scope (Jackson & Hafemeister, 2013).

A top priority for elder abuse researchers is to improve the quality, standardization, efficiency and cost-effectiveness of APS investigations through empirical research. In their review of 15 elder abuse assessments, Anthony, Lehning, Austin, and Peck (2009) stated, “Federal and state legislators and administrators provide descriptions of each type of abuse; however, they give little guidance to APS workers, who need specific criteria for determining elder mistreatment” (p. 819). Burnes, Rizzo, and Courtney (2014) also noted the unreliability of single caseworker judgments of mistreatment status at case closure, and called for standardized, validated measures. Jackson (2014) has documented the lack of research on abusers as well as the tendency to regard elder abuse as a single phenomenon rather than several distinct types, i.e., physical, emotional, financial, neglect, and sexual. In summary, improved efficiency and quality of assessment along with user-friendly reporting and intervention planning are urgently needed for research, clinical, and community-based use (National Academies Committee on National Statistics, 2010).

Elder Abuse Screening Tools

Most of the research efforts to date have focused on developing elder mistreatment screening tools as precursors to further inquiry, rather than brief assessments that generate reliable information for abuse substantiation decisions. In addition, the screening tools developed thus far have been designed for use in clinical or health care settings, not in the context of APS abuse investigations and substantiations. In her review, Cohen (2011) posited a typology of screening tools, based on the method and scope of inquiry. She classified a select number of instruments into three types: (1) direct questioning by caseworkers and self-report by older adults; (2) signs of abuse identified by caseworkers; and (3) risk indicators evaluated by caseworkers. Noting the considerable overlap across these three “modes” of screening tools, Cohen (2011) suggested that such overlap was potentially positive, as each mode identified cases of abuse that would possibly not have been identified by another. For example, the Hwalek–Sengstock Elder Abuse Screening Test (H-S/EAST) (Neale, Hwalek, Scott, Sengstock, & Stahl, 1991) and the Elder Abuse Suspicion Index (EASI) (Yaffe, Wolfson,