

# Abusive relatives drive up crimes against over-65s

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Family and friends who are abusing positions of trust are driving up violent crime against the over-65s, campaigners have said.

Pensioners are being beaten and raped in their homes, with incidents reported but going largely unpunished, according to figures obtained by *The Times*. Responses to freedom of information requests from 23 of the 43 police forces revealed that the number of violent crimes against over-65s more than trebled between 2013 and 2017 from 9,030 to 28,598, as did sexual crimes, from 468 to 1,445. The overall charge rate has fallen from 6.6 per cent to 4.5 per cent.

Action on Elder Abuse said that the figures were symptomatic of a failure to recognise the signs of abuse and accept that the perpetrators were often those closest to the victim. Gary FitzGerald, its chief executive, said: "I don't want to blame the next-door neighbour, but I want people to understand what's happening in our communities. We need to be able to recognise the signs and act."

Charities described the figures as a wake-up call, saying that an ageing population was providing a growing pool of easy targets for criminals and that the low level of prosecutions was a poor deterrent. They said the government must take action as the Law Commission considers whether offences against older victims should be recognised as hate crimes.

Frontline workers said a number of factors contributed to the rise, including growing levels of loneliness and isolation, which make older people more vulnerable to crime, pressures on safeguarding in care homes, and a rise in re-

## Soft targets

### Offences against over-65s

(selected crimes)



Source: Times research. 23 police authorities responded to the Times' freedom of information requests

porting of sexual crimes. The freedom of information responses showed that crimes against the over-65s increased from 128,620 to 168,387 between 2013 and 2017, a rise of 31 per cent. Although the rate is in line with the national increase across all age groups, sexual and violent offences rose faster.

Theft and criminal damage still make up a large portion of crimes against older people. Theft offences increased by 10 per cent to 39,392 and criminal damage by 15 per cent to 27,022.

Richard Powley, head of safeguarding at Age UK, described the figures as shocking. He stressed the importance of tackling "hidden crimes" not typically associated with older victims.

"It was previously thought that older people were at less risk of sexual crimes but they're not," he said. "The time is now to look into why it's happening so

we can drive better prevention. We've seen a huge amount of work in the areas of fraud and scams and the results have been encouraging. But we now need to focus on these serious crimes."

Mr FitzGerald said loneliness and isolation among older people was making them soft targets for these crimes. "Criminals prey on isolated people looking for company and make them feel dependent and then take advantage of them," he said. "It's often done for money but it can also be done for sex."

He cited the growing financial pressure on care homes, which he said was affecting the quality of care. "We're understaffing care homes, we're not training people properly and we're not providing adequate supervision. It's being done on the cheap," he said.

There have been several cases involving people being assaulted by fellow care home residents. Allan Wallace, who had dementia, died less than three weeks after being assaulted at Mapleford Nursing Home in Accrington, Lancashire, in 2015. The 86-year-old was found bleeding from the head after being kicked by a resident wearing steel toecap boots.

This year, Monica Holt, a 98-year-old resident at Heathercroft Care Home in Warrington, Cheshire, was left with severe bruising and swelling after she was attacked in her sleep twice by a fellow resident.

Mr Powley warned that elderly people living outside of care homes can "lose their independence quite quickly after falling victim to crime. They will begin relying on the NHS and go into care much earlier than necessary, which has a wider impact on public resources."

Additional reporting: Beatrice Guzzardi