

Consultation on a federal policy definition of senior abuse: What we heard

October 2023



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1. Executive Summary

In June and July 2021, Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) held a national consultation to invite feedback on a federal policy definition of senior abuse. The key purpose was to:

- gather knowledge, views and expertise on a proposed federal policy definition
- raise public awareness of the issue and to support prevention efforts

The consultation included roundtable sessions and a public on-line survey:

- 87 stakeholder organizations participated in 2 Ministerial roundtables (English and French) and 5 regional roundtables (West, North, Ontario, Quebec, and Atlantic provinces)
- 588 respondents answered the on-line survey questions: 456 individuals (78%) and 132 organizations (22%)

These engagement activities provided an important opportunity for the Government of Canada to hear the perspectives of stakeholders, experts, Indigenous organizations, and Canadians. While the process was not intended to achieve consensus around a single definition, the consultations provided a broad range of participant views on the elements to include in a federal policy definition. While the Government of Canada leads in establishing policies, programs and services that support seniors, everyone in Canada has an important role to play in preventing senior abuse.

1.1 Importance of the issue of seniors abuse

Many participants across all roundtable sessions talked about the importance of addressing the issue of senior abuse. Key discussion points are summarized below.

- Senior abuse is a violation of basic rights and freedoms and a human rights issue. It often stems from ageism and is a serious, preventable public health issue known to be under-reported (a “silent epidemic”)
- More seniors are coming forward with experiences of harm (being taken advantage of, harassed, not being adequately cared for). Seniors may be targeted because of social isolation or other vulnerabilities such as diminished physical and cognitive resources. They may not be aware of their rights or be seen as an “easy victim”
- The pandemic has left seniors more isolated, increasing their vulnerability to abuse. Some seniors living in long-term care were neglected, confined to their rooms 24/7 and, in some cases, died from starvation or dehydration
- Seniors have been disproportionately affected by telephone fraud and internet scams. Pandemic isolation has made them more vulnerable to this type of abuse
- There are little or no consequences for perpetrators of abuse, but serious consequences for the person who experiences abuse, their family and society

Below are big picture considerations identified by participants for a federal policy definition.

- Highlight the contribution of ageism to senior abuse. Use the federal policy definition to promote respect, dignity and inclusion of seniors
- Frame senior abuse as a violation of the rights and freedoms
- Use an intersectional lens and public health approach to articulate:
 - the different groups that experience senior abuse
 - the risk factors that increase vulnerability (individual; social determinants of health)
 - the intersection of vulnerabilities with systemic forms of discrimination (ageism, racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia, spiritual/cultural discrimination, language barriers)
- Capture Indigenous-specific dimensions of senior abuse in official definitions, acknowledging historical and current experiences of trauma and systemic racism

1.2 Specific terms to use in a definition and elements to include

There were diverse views on terms to use in a definition, including several emerging points.

- Craft a clear, concise policy definition in plain language that can be used for raising awareness as well as policy development. The definition should be flexible enough to be adapted to regional context, diverse groups and changing conditions over time
- Ensure the definition is well-understood and meaningful in both official languages. Avoid direct translation, but aim for consistent data collection
- Build on the World Health Organization's definition to support international collaboration and provide continuity. Canada can be a leader in strengthening the definition to reflect emerging evidence and experience
- Be inclusive of all Canadians who experience senior abuse in all its forms, including older adults under the age of 65 who have additional vulnerabilities
- Avoid use of the term senior in the definition. Consider “elder” or “older adult”; include the general terms “abuse” and “neglect” in the English core definition
- Explicitly name violence against older women to highlight the higher rates of senior abuse faced by women (intimate and/or ex-partner violence; femicide), as well as violence against gender-non-conforming older persons. Not all intimate partner violence is gendered and also occurs in LGBTQ2S+ populations
- Do not limit the description of perpetrator to a person in a trusted relationship. Perpetrators not known to the senior may commit abuse as well as trusted people close to the senior (family member, friend, neighbour) or in a position of power, for example, personal support worker

Participants suggested striking a balance between using broad, inclusive terms to describe the main types of abuse and describing the specific behaviours and conduct.

- Include the 5 main types of abuse listed in the Discussion Guide: physical, psychological and emotional, financial, sexual and neglect
- Consider adding to the main types of abuse: organizational/institutional abuse or neglect; spiritual/cultural abuse; self-neglect
- Name specific conduct and/or behaviours that commonly occur and require targeted policy action:
 - fraud (financial and romance scams; phone and cybercrimes)
 - coercion, intimidation and controlling behaviours
 - intimate partner and gender-based violence
 - violation of rights and freedoms

1.3 Practical benefits of a federal policy definition

Key benefits most commonly identified within and across roundtable sessions.

- Common language among the public, researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to support coherent collective action
- Strengthened, more consistent data collection across jurisdictions and sectors to support evidence-informed policy. Elements that are counted become visible and guide meaningful, focused policy actions
- Coordinated awareness-raising and common messaging for prevention; and targeted efforts to raise awareness among seniors about their rights and available supports
- Greater accountability and more consistent sectoral standards, defined resources, training and approaches across jurisdictions (for example, for long-term care)
- Driver for policy action at the federal level in key senior abuse policy areas

1.4 Types of data/information required

Many participants across all roundtable sessions said that quality data is critical. Policy will not change without evidence. A better picture is needed of senior abuse across the country to support evidence-informed, targeted policy action. Participants provided several suggestions.

- Use an intersectional approach to data collection, including demographic data that allows disaggregated analysis by sub-group. This approach can uncover systemic inequalities and injustices that increase risk of abuse and neglect

- Collaborate with international and Canadian research networks to:
 - clarify operational definitions
 - develop shared indicators of success (to monitor progress on senior abuse prevention and response)
- Work with cross-sectoral agencies across the country to understand what data is currently available and to identify information gaps
- Reach out to hear the stories of seniors' from diverse communities in community and institutional settings to better understand their experiences of abuse
- Develop new reporting and follow-up options for seniors who experience abuse:
 - population-based self-reporting of senior abuse
 - alternatives to police reporting
 - restorative justice options for Indigenous communities
- Use and strengthen existing data collection mechanisms in each sector

2. Background

2.1 Context

Senior abuse is an important human rights issue. It is also a, social and public health issue. It can undermine an older person's quality of life and sense of security. Senior abuse is expected to increase over the next several decades, as the Canadian population ages.

The Government of Canada commits to strengthening Canada's approach to senior abuse. The Minister of Seniors 2019 mandate letter commitments included a commitment to:

- “work with the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada to strengthen Canada's approach to elder abuse, including to:
 - create a national definition of elder abuse
 - invest in better data collection and law enforcement related to elder abuse, and
 - establish new offences and penalties in the criminal code related to elder abuse”

All Canadians and levels of governments play a role in preventing senior abuse. Creating a federal policy definition could:

- provide a shared understanding for all Canadians
- support culture change and public awareness
- inform Government of Canada programming and policies
- support better federal data and research

2.2 A note on this What We Heard Report

This What We Heard report presents key findings from the engagement and consultation on a federal policy definition of senior abuse. The report describes:

- common themes from 2 ministerial and 5 regional roundtable sessions and a public on-line survey
- unique regional themes and viewpoints shared at the roundtable sessions

Please note:

The findings in this report reflect only the views of those who partook in the consultations. Results are not representative of the entire Canadian population, or of all Government of Canada stakeholders. These results are intended to provide deeper insight into the range of views on developing a federal policy definition of senior abuse.

The goal of the consultation is to capture the rich and thoughtful viewpoints of stakeholders across the country to help inform a federal policy definition of senior abuse. The engagement and consultation method was not intended to generate a consensus on the federal policy definition or to make formal recommendations.

For the purposes of this report, the term “senior” is used to describe the group of persons who experience this type of abuse. The term “senior” is not linked to a chronological age.

2.3 Consultation objectives

In June and July 2021, ESDC held a national engagement and consultation to invite feedback on a federal policy definition of senior abuse. The key purpose was to:

- gather knowledge, views and expertise on a proposed federal policy definition
- raise public awareness of the issue of senior abuse and support prevention efforts

2.4 Consultation questions

The consultation questions focused on different aspects of 6 broad areas:

1. importance of the issue of senior abuse in Canada
2. suggested terminology to describe senior abuse
3. suggested definition (or explanation) of senior abuse and contrasts from other types of abuse
4. elements (or actions) to include in the definition
5. practical benefits of developing a definition
6. types of information or data required (or currently collected) to inform senior abuse policies

3. Consultation methods

The consultation included 2 ministerial and 5 regional roundtables and an on-line survey. An option to send an e-mail submission was also given.

3.1 On-line survey

The on-line survey¹ was hosted on the Government of Canada website. Anyone interested could complete the survey between June 15, 2021 and July 22, 2021 in English or French.

The Government received a total of 588 responses from individuals (n=456; 78%) and organizations (n=132; 22%). Included in Section 6.2 are an overview of who responded, and limitations and key findings from the on-line survey. The survey key findings are integrated into this What We Heard report, along with the results of the roundtable sessions.

3.2 Roundtable discussions

To support the development of an inclusive definition, ESDC held 7 roundtables.

- 2 ministerial roundtables (English and French) hosted by the Minister of Seniors, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Seniors and the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada
- 5 regional roundtables (West, North, Ontario, Quebec, and Atlantic provinces) hosted by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Seniors in partnership with representatives from the [National Seniors Council](#). The Council advises the Government of Canada on matters related to the health, well-being and quality of life of seniors

A total of 87 stakeholders from across the country partook in the roundtables (ministerial – n=23; regional – n=64). A note on stakeholder selection is included with the list of participating organizations in Section 6.1.

Participants received a Discussion Guide in advance with background information and guided discussion questions to help prepare for the sessions.

3.3 Written e-mail submissions

E-mail submissions were received and combined into the roundtable analysis.

¹ The survey was not conducted as a random sample of Canadians. Because of this, the results cannot be generalized to the Canadian population as a whole.

3.4 Analysis and reporting on consultation results

The Government of Canada hired the consulting firm One World in June 2021 to support the consultation on a federal policy definition of senior abuse. The Government contracted the One World consultant team to:

- provide note-taking for roundtable sessions
- review e-mail submissions
- analyze results
- support the development of this What We Heard Report

Results of the on-line survey and the roundtable sessions were first analyzed separately for each of the 6 thematic areas of interest and then combined into this report.

The Government of Canada presents this report as an adapted version of the product prepared and submitted by One World Inc.

4. Summary of findings

4.1 Importance of the issue of senior abuse

4.1.1 Why the issue of senior abuse is important

Many participants across all roundtable sessions talked about the importance of the issue of senior abuse. They valued the chance to provide feedback and hope to move towards collective action to prevent and respond to senior abuse. A variety of main points emerged during discussions.

- Seniors are the fastest growing age cohort in Canada. They deserve dignity, safety and respect at any age. Yet more seniors are coming forward with experiences of serious incidents of harm (being taken advantage of, harassed, not being adequately cared for)
- Senior abuse violates basic rights and freedoms and is a human rights issue. It often stems from ageism.² The rights of older persons are at times overlooked or dismissed, despite aging being a natural process that affects us all. They may experience discrimination or be dismissed when they seek help

² Ageism refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) directed towards people on the basis of their age. It can be institutional, interpersonal or self-directed. Institutional ageism refers to the laws, rules, social norms, policies and practices of institutions that unfairly restrict opportunities and systematically disadvantage individuals because of their age. Interpersonal ageism arises in interactions between 2 or more individuals, while self-directed ageism occurs when ageism is internalized and turned against oneself. (WHO, 2021)

- Senior abuse is a serious, but preventable public health issue. Some participants described it as a “silent epidemic”, known to be under-reported. Older persons who experience abuse may feel ashamed to ask for help or powerless to change their state of affairs. They may interpret it as their fault. Perpetrators of abuse or neglect are most often a family member (partner, child, grandchild) or someone who is in a position of power. The person facing abuse may not come forward out of fear of being abandoned or to protect their loved one from consequences
- Some seniors may be targeted because of social isolation or other vulnerabilities such as diminished physical and cognitive resources. They may not be aware of their rights. Perpetrators may see them as an “easy victim”, assuming they would not be believed by others or that they would not fight back. As a society, there is shared duty to protect those who are vulnerable to abuse
- The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously impacted seniors. To reduce their exposure to the virus, they have become more isolated, increasing their vulnerability to abuse. Some seniors living in long-term care were neglected, confined to their rooms 24/7, or not allowed visitors for extended periods. In some cases, seniors died from starvation, dehydration or lack of care
- Telephone fraud and internet scams disproportionately affect seniors. Pandemic isolation has made them more vulnerable to this type of abuse
- There are little or no consequences for those who carry out the abuse. However, there can be serious consequences for the older person who experiences abuse and their family
 - Due to stage of life, seniors who experience abuse may have a limited ability to bounce back financially (in cases of financial abuse or fraud)
 - Physical, emotional/psychological, spiritual and sexual abuse can have harmful health impacts (limiting physical/cognitive abilities, guilt, shame, embarrassment, depression/suicide, loss of hope)
 - Senior abuse affects the whole family, not just the older adult
- Policy inaction to prevent different types of senior abuse results in hefty societal costs, for example, to the health care and social service systems, the justice system, housing, insurance, and financial bodies

4.1.2 How senior abuse is different from other forms of abuse

Some participants commented on how senior abuse is different from other forms of abuse. The main factors related to additional complexity, for example, compared to child abuse, and increasing vulnerability with age, including:

- issues of spirituality, sexual orientation, gender identity
- possibility of declining cognitive abilities or inability to speak for themselves (barrier to meaningful access of support if facing abuse)
- possibility of declining physical health and disability³ (may rely on others to get out of bed, use the phone, including someone who may be abusing them)

³ Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an

- experience of ageism (lack of credibility given to seniors reporting abuse or neglect)
- limited knowledge of how to access services or low computer literacy

4.1.3 Why the federal policy definition is important

Some roundtable participants focused their feedback on why the federal policy definition of senior abuse is important. They said a consistent definition is important because it can help determine policy actions:

- who gets counted (who is included as a person experiencing senior abuse)
- what related legislation will cover⁴
- where to direct prevention efforts
- where to intervene and with whom

4.2 Big picture considerations for the definition

Key takeaways:

- highlight the impact of ageism on senior abuse. Use the federal policy definition to promote respect, dignity and inclusion of seniors
- frame senior abuse as a violation of the rights and freedoms. Consider supporting a United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons
- use an intersectional lens and public health approach to articulate:
 - the different groups that experience senior abuse
 - the risk factors that increase vulnerability (individual; social determinants of health)
 - the intersection of vulnerabilities with systemic forms of discrimination (ageism, racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia, spiritual/cultural discrimination, access barriers faced by linguistic minorities)
- capture Indigenous-specific dimensions of senior abuse in official definitions, acknowledging historical and current experiences of trauma and systemic racism

Roundtable participants offered big picture considerations for strengthening Canada's approach to senior abuse, including ideas for policy action. This valuable input is outside the scope of this summary report, but will help inform other broad areas of government policy development.

individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. (WHO definition from the Federal Disability Reference Guide - Canada.ca)

⁴ The aim of a federal policy definition does not impact legislation.

4.2.1 Rights of seniors and the role of ageism

The impact of ageism on senior abuse was one of the clearest, loudest themes from roundtable sessions. Many participants across all roundtable sessions talked about how ageism feeds abusive conduct and can rob seniors of respect, dignity and their basic rights. Society loses the contribution of older adults who could be participating and involved in their communities.

Many participants said ageism is a main contributor to senior abuse and should be central in any discourse on the issue. Some suggested including ageism in the definition as a form of senior abuse. Others said ageism is an underlying reason that senior abuse happens, but should not be confused with abuse itself in the definition.

Specific suggestions for the policy definition included:

- clearly “call out” ageism and its role in senior abuse
- frame senior abuse as a violation of the rights and freedoms
- use language that respects the dignity of older persons and empowers them rather than identifying them as “a weakened person”, for example, use vulnerable “circumstances” instead of vulnerable “person”

4.2.2 Intersection of age with other vulnerabilities

Many roundtable participants across all sessions talked about the complexities of understanding senior abuse. They encouraged thoughtful analysis using:

- an intersectional lens to better understand who faces abuse
 - This means recognizing that people have multiple and diverse identity factors that intersect to shape their perspectives, ideologies and experiences.⁵ For example, an immigrant woman senior with a disability is considered as a whole person with experiences related not only to her identity as a senior, but also as a woman, immigrant and person living with a disability
- a public health framework to:
 - identify prevalence, risk and protective factors (individual factors; environmental, social, economic and cultural factors)
 - understand systemic inequities and forms of oppression that increase vulnerability (ageism, sexism, racism, colonialism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, poverty)
 - identify targeted interventions that work
- principles focused on inclusion, choice and self-determination, diversity, safety and security

⁵ Government of Canada. [Introduction to GBA+](#)

4.2.2.1 Experiences of systemic oppression and marginalization

Participants said that complex identities increase vulnerability to senior abuse. Specific vulnerabilities include being very old, having limited functional capacity (mobility, chronic health condition, declining cognitive and physical function), being a woman, living on a low income, and being sexual or gender diverse. Seniors with these identities face challenges as individuals and, as a group, and can also experience forms of systemic oppression that increase risk of abuse.

Participants said that social isolation is an important factor that increases vulnerability to senior abuse. Social isolation can be magnified by the interconnected experiences of systemic oppression or living on a low income. Seniors in these circumstances can face many barriers to accessing services. They go unseen and may be left out of policy strategies.

4.2.2.2 Specific access barriers

Participants mentioned specific access barriers experienced at the intersection of age, forms of systemic oppression, low income and other factors that increase vulnerability:

- low computer literacy or no access to the internet
- not knowing about available supports or how the system works
- not having access to transport or affordable housing options
- limited social networks to ask for help
- not feeling culturally safe or welcome in the service environment
- loss of capacity to communicate in their second language (English or French) and not having access to services in their first language

4.2.3 Historical and current trauma of Indigenous peoples

The historical and current trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada adds to senior abuse. Indigenous roundtable participants talked about having a very different perspective and definition of senior abuse given:

- geographic, economic and social contrasts
- the legacy of the residential school system

They noted that viewpoints may not be attuned with an agreed federal policy definition. They suggested that the definition capture specific dimensions of senior abuse related to:

- overcoming the legacy of residential schools
- social isolation
- the marginalization of Indigenous peoples

Other participants shared similar challenges related to social determinants of health that contribute to senior abuse. Some examples are:

- lack of access to culturally-appropriate long-term care close to home or other housing options
- financial abuse by family members

4.2.4 Discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity

Participants in several roundtable sessions talked about abuse experienced by LGBTQ2S+⁶ seniors as a result of homophobia or transphobia. They shared examples of abuse experienced by seniors moving into long-term care or senior residences:

- historical trauma may be triggered in an institutional setting, for example, trauma of coming out/not coming out in the past; living through the period before decriminalization (fairly recent, 1967) or the HIV/AIDS crisis
- the senior may choose to go back into the closet out of fear of discrimination based on their gender identity or sexual orientation
- the senior may experience micro-aggressions causing psychological harm or physical abuse where a culture of discrimination is present

4.2.5 Violence against older women

Several participants across the roundtable sessions raised the issue of violence against older women. They stressed that senior abuse is not gender neutral and not just personal/interpersonal. Gender determines women's role, status in society and shapes social relationships.

Older women make up a higher proportion of the vulnerable older adults and they are more likely to experience certain kinds of abuse. They also may face barriers to accessing services, compounded by the effects of ageism and sexism.

For this reason, these participants said the federal policy definition should:

- recognize gender-specific implications of aging and women's experience of violence
- use language that specifically names violence against older women and femicide⁷ as types of senior abuse and intimate partners/ex-partners as common perpetrators
- apply an intersectional framework to understand who is facing senior abuse, considering all forms of systemic oppression that increase risk
- develop policies that target prevention and response to those most at risk

⁶ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two-spirit plus (to include other sexual orientation or gender identities, for example, asexual).

⁷ Femicide means women's lives lost to gender-based violence by intimate partners and known relationship.

4.2.6 Consideration of minority language rights

Separate from the terminology itself, some participants talked about the challenges of aging in a community where the senior is part of an Official Language Minority Community (OLMC). This includes English-speakers within Québec and French-speakers outside Québec.

Seniors with limited access to services in their first language may be at increased risk of abuse. Their wishes and needs may not be understood or disregarded. If they are facing abuse or neglect, they may not be able to self-advocate or seek help.

Some participants equated not providing adequate Official Language services to a form of systemic discrimination. They suggested that the federal policy definition mention:

- the provisions of the *Official Languages Act* of Canada
- the importance of ensuring seniors from linguistic minorities:
 - receive the same standard level of care, access to information, supports and justice in cases of abuse
 - have the same right to express and self-advocate

4.2.7 Consideration of ethnic diversity

Some participants said that greater sensitivity is needed to cultural practices that result in senior abuse. With some cultural groups, where seniors are part of a multigenerational family, different forms of abuse can be more prevalent.

4.3 Feedback on terms and what to include in a definition

Key takeaways:

- craft a clear, concise policy definition in plain language that can be used for raising awareness as well as policy development
- make the definition flexible enough to be adapted to regional context, diverse groups and changing conditions over time
- ensure the definition is well-understood and meaningful in both official languages. Avoid direct translation, but aim for consistent data collection
- build on the WHO definition to support international collaboration and provide continuity. Canada can be a leader in strengthening the definition to reflect emerging evidence and experience
- ensure the definition is inclusive of all Canadians and Indigenous peoples who experience senior abuse in all its forms, as well as older adults under the age of 65 who may have additional vulnerabilities
- avoid use of the term senior in the definition. Consider “elder” or “older adult”
- include the general terms “abuse” and “neglect” as part of the core definition in English
- explicitly name violence against older women to highlight the higher rates of senior abuse faced by women, including intimate and/or ex-partner violence and femicide
- do not limit the description of perpetrator to a person in a relationship of trust. Perpetrators not known to the senior may commit abuse (for example, phone and internet scammers)

4.3.1 Crafting a useful definition

Roundtable participants suggested broad points to help craft a definition that can be used for a range of purposes, such as:

- raising awareness among seniors and the general public
- education and training of people on the front-lines (health, social service, justice)
- research, policy and program development

Suggestions included:

- use clear, concise language to make it accessible for everyone (apply plain language principles)
- make the definition flexible enough to be adjusted to regional and cultural contrasts, and changing conditions over time
- ensure the definition is well-understood and consistent in both official languages
- use language that is broad enough to include everyone who experiences senior abuse and all types of abuse and neglect
- operationalize sub-categories of abuse and neglect for purposes of consistent data collection, research and targeted policy development

4.3.2 Preferred definitions

ESDC asked participants about use of the WHO definition of elder abuse or other preferred definitions for senior abuse.

The WHO definition uses the language of “elder abuse”:

- elder abuse is a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person (WHO, 2002)

Several participants in the ministerial roundtable (English) and a few participants in other roundtable sessions provided specific feedback on the WHO definition.

Of these participants, most said that the WHO definition of elder abuse is useful. It is viewed to be straightforward and generally covers the major elements of abuse. It is well-known worldwide and within Canada. Some organizations and networks use the WHO definition in their prevention and advocacy work on a regular basis.

At the same time, participants pointed out specific changes they would like to see in the WHO definition to improve it, such as:

- changes to language
- addition of elements
- indicators for monitoring

Some participants said the WHO definition is limited as the basis for measurement. Canada has provided leadership in the past in the area of elder abuse, and could potentially influence revisions to the international definition.

4.3.2.1 On-line survey

The on-line survey asked respondents if the WHO definition is an acceptable definition of senior abuse. Almost three-quarters of all respondents said the WHO definition is acceptable (324 individuals, 71%; 96 organizations, 73%).

In a separate question, the on-line survey asked respondents if there was anything missing from the WHO definition (concepts, wording). Many respondents offered changes or additions (162 individuals, 36%; 54 organizations, 41%).

4.3.3 General language and terms

4.3.3.1 Preferred term to describe the group who experience senior abuse

The Discussion Guide introduced various terms that refer to harmful actions targeting older persons. Finding a term that resonates with survivors, practitioners, partners and stakeholders can help improve prevention, detection, and reporting efforts.

With the exception of the Québec session, most participants across all roundtable sessions preferred the terms “elder”, “older adults” or “older persons”. The challenges of direct translation are presented in Section 4.3.3.5.

Participant reasons for not using the term senior centered on how the term could:

- mislead people into thinking only of people over 65 years
- exclude older persons who are not identified as being a senior
- have a negative connotation of vulnerability or frailty, or perpetuate ageism

Participants who preferred the terms “older adults” or “aging adults” or “older persons” said these terms are:

- more inclusive and less stigmatizing than the term senior
- are broad enough to consider both age and vulnerability
- avoid use of the term “elder”, out of respect for its distinct cultural meaning in Indigenous communities

In some cases, participants consulted directly with their older adult stakeholders. They reported mixed responses on use of terms. Some preferred the term “older adult” or “older persons” because they viewed senior as ageist or did not identify as a senior. Others had no strong preference.

Across all sessions (with the exception of Québec), most researchers, stakeholders from the legal field, organizations and networks involved in elder abuse prevention or response preferred continuing to use the term “elder abuse”. They said the term “elder abuse” is:

- known to people who work on the issue
- used internationally in fields of research, awareness-raising and advocacy. Continued use could support collaboration across jurisdictions, for example, World Health Organization definition, United Nations World Elder Abuse Awareness Day
- consistent with language used in the justice system in Canada
- used in the Government of Canada’s own policy work

Organizations and networks that use “elder” in their name were concerned about the effort and costs of rebranding.

Most Indigenous participants said they did not feel concerned about using the term “elder” abuse. However, they suggested the terms “older adult” or “older persons” could be more inclusive. Key points were:

- action to prevent and respond to systemic abuse faced by Indigenous peoples is more important to communities than the term itself
- within Indigenous communities, there is still work underway to build shared understanding of the term “elder”

Indigenous participants and others who work with seniors in awareness-raising, research, the legal system or service provision did not find the term “elder” problematic. They explain what the term means in a way that makes sense for each group. In addition, they talk about core issues such as respect, well-being and health.

If a word other than “elder” is used in the policy definition, the term “elder abuse” could still be leveraged for:

- consistent data collection
- collaboration with other jurisdictions on policy development

4.3.3.2 Use of terms “abuse” and “neglect” and “mistreatment”

Most participants in all roundtable sessions (with the exception of Québec) stressed the importance of including the general terms “abuse” and “neglect” as part of the core definition in English.

- The term “abuse” is clear and conveys the seriousness of the conduct and behaviours, requiring urgent reporting and serious consequences. It also aligns with language in the *Criminal Code*
- The term abuse is better than mistreatment because it is a serious behaviour deserving serious consequences
- The term “neglect” is important to name separately as its own form of behaviours (not simply to include under the general category of “abuse”). A range of behaviours fell under this category, for example, failure to provide adequate food/water, needed medication or medical care, prolonged isolation or confinement
- Within this context, the definition should specify “inaction” as well as “acts” that lead to harm, to include situations of neglect, such as individual as well as systemic neglect by organizations and institutions. This can include long-term care and senior homes, as well as services and supports for Indigenous seniors

Discussion of the term “mistreatment” was limited, with mixed views on its use.

- Mistreatment is not commonly used to describe domestic or intimate partner violence. Use of the term could water down the meaning of “abuse”
- The term “maltreatment” to align with approaches to preventing child abuse and neglect
- “Mistreatment” (mauvais traitement in French) does not translate well
- In French, the term “maltraitance” is commonly used to include both abuse and neglect. It is inclusive of any form of harm, for example, violence, exploitation, neglect, violation of rights

At the West regional roundtable, several participants from British Columbia urged that both “neglect” and “self-neglect” be included in the federal policy definition. The definition of negligence used in the [Adult Guardianship of BC Act](#) clearly describes what neglect includes. BC statistics show that about one third of cases of “self-neglect” are in vulnerable populations (for example, with acquired injury, substance abuse).

4.3.3.3 Use of terms “violence” and “violence against older women”

Some participants in several roundtable sessions encourage explicit use of the term “senior violence” in the federal policy definition.

Participants said the term “violence”:

- aligns with the widely-understood term “domestic violence”
- accurately describes the conduct and the seriousness of the impact

Participants who work with older women stressed the gender-based nature of senior abuse. They felt strongly that specific language should be included describing “violence against older women” or the more gender-neutral term “intimate partner violence”. Naming “violence against older women” or “intimate partner violence” can help focus prevention and response efforts, including supports for older women who experience abuse.

4.3.3.4 On-line survey responses

The on-line survey asked respondents to select their preferred term, from a list of possible terms. When all responses were included in analysis, preferred terms were:

- senior abuse (individuals: 44%; organizations: 35%), or
- “abuse of older adults or persons” (individuals: 27%; organizations: 33%)

However, caution is needed in interpreting these survey results.

- The term “elder abuse” was not an option in the online survey since the term “elder” holds unique meaning in Indigenous communities. Respondents were able to choose “Other” and write “elder abuse”. But, not having “elder” listed could make it less likely for someone to:
 - consider the term
 - take the extra step of clicking “other” in their response
- Many more respondents from Ontario and the West completed the survey than from other regions. The number of individuals responding from other regions was too small for meaningful regional analysis. This means the results are not a balanced representation of diverse views from across the country

Main reasons for choice of terms included:

- more inclusive (33%)
- consistent with terms used:
 - by Canadian organizations (20%)
 - in the media (17%), or
 - internationally (13%)

4.3.3.5 Meaningful English and French terms

Francophone participants within and outside Québec talked about the challenges of direct translation of English terms into French. They prefer continuity with the language that has evolved in Québec, using the accepted term of “maltraitance envers les personnes âgées”. This term is inclusive and describes the full spectrum of abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation faced by older adults.

Some participants suggested harmonizing the English and French definitions for the purposes of consistent data collection and policy development. Suggested approaches included:

- respect established French terms “maltraitance envers les personnes âgées” and underlying concepts
- use different broad terms in English and French, as needed, to ensure language is:
 - appropriate
 - meaningful in both official languages and within the context of senior abuse work in Québec
- craft and apply consistent operational definitions in English and French to describe and track the different elements of abuse and neglect
- adapt any translated language to reflect linguistic realities and regional contrasts

4.3.4 Defining who experiences senior abuse (for example, age, specific groups)

The Discussion Guide highlighted that seniors are not a homogenous group. The seniors population is diverse from many factors, including age, gender, culture, race, health and socio-economic status. Many will continue to function well and/or autonomously long after they reach 65. However, others might experience aging-related changes or life transitions before reaching 65 that leave them vulnerable to mistreatment.

Statements by most roundtable participants in all sessions aligned with the general statements in the Discussion Guide on age and risk of experiencing senior abuse. They said that getting older looks and feels different for different people. It is a combined experience of age and disability that can be compounded by discrimination, isolation or other social determinants of health. Taken together, these factors can put some older persons more at-risk to experience abuse, for example, a person with a developmental disability who is 55 years old and does not have family support.

Many roundtable participants across all sessions suggested that the federal policy definition:

- avoid artificial age cut-offs that could exclude people who experience senior abuse
- consider both age and vulnerabilities to abuse
- use an intersectional lens that goes beyond age or medical vulnerability to include the social and cultural factors built into the experience of aging

4.3.4.1 Age and vulnerability

Many participants across all roundtable sessions stressed that using a defined age limit could exclude some people who experience senior abuse. They strongly discouraged using the cut-off of 65 years or older used by governments to determine eligibility for certain financial assistance or program funding.

Several participants shared the age limit they use in their own organization. Most used 50 years or 55 years and older to describe their population served. Some participants pointed out that:

- people in their 50s and 60s may not think of themselves as seniors, but can be at risk of senior abuse
- older adults may become grandparents in their 50s and early 60s
- crisis and response services do not often distinguish who is helped based on age, for example, 24/7 crisis lines, police. Many calls come from adults in their 50s

Many BC participants in the West regional session and some participants from other sessions encouraged not including an “older” adult age limit in the definition.

- The goal is to not leave people out, for example, a young person living in long-term care or assisted living
- The federal policy definition could discuss assumptions about adults in vulnerable circumstances living in long-term care and community settings

4.3.4.2 On-line survey responses

The on-line survey asked respondents what age group should be included when defining senior abuse. The options provided were 65+, 60+, 55+ or other.

Results were similar for individuals and organizations.

- About half of respondents said that the 60+ or 55+ age groups should be included in the definition (60+: 21%; 55+: 34%)
- About one third of respondents said the 65+ age group should be included
- 46 respondents (8%) chose “other” and 10 respondents chose not to answer

Respondents who chose “other” said that:

- an age range is too restrictive (18), and/or
- that rather than age, the definition should include any adults with a condition that makes them vulnerable or frail (for example, early dementia, disability)

Most respondents said that the definition should apply to older persons who have specific vulnerabilities, impairments or dependencies (individuals: 84%; organizations: 80%).

4.3.5 Perpetrators of senior abuse

4.3.5.1 Position of trust

Many roundtable participants said that those who commit abuse or neglect are:

- most commonly people close to the senior (family member, friend, neighbour), or
- people in a position of power, for example, personal support worker

Trust is expected in these relationships. However, the definition of perpetrator should not be limited to “position of trust” or “trusted relationship”. This language could exclude:

- perpetrators not known to the senior, but who cause harm, such as a phone or internet scammer
- people who provide intermittent support, such as a personal support worker, who might manipulate the senior for their own personal gain

Participants suggested alternate language, such as:

- “position of trust, or where trust should be expected”, or
- “where there is power imbalance” (even if not in a trusted relationship)

4.3.5.2 Individual, organizational and institutional abuse

Many roundtable participants across all sessions said that senior abuse cannot be resolved at the individual level alone. They said that language in the policy definition should include organizations and institutions as potential perpetrators of abuse or neglect to increase accountability.

4.3.5.3 Intimate partner/ex-partner violence

Several participants suggested using explicit language that names intimate partners and ex-partners as perpetrators of violence against older women and femicide.

4.3.5.4 Senior who is abusive

Some roundtable participants suggested including special categories for abuse carried out by a senior resident in a long-term care facility or seniors residence. It was suggested that this category cover abuse against another resident or against a staff member.

4.3.5.5 On-line survey responses

The on-line survey asked questions about defining the perpetrator's relationship to the person facing harm, and the general nature of the abuse.

Most respondents said the definition should include situations where the perpetrator is in a position of trust relative to the victim (individuals: 87%; organizations: 89%). However, caution is needed; participant responses should not be interpreted as meaning "only" in situations of trust.

- Several respondents (31) suggested revised wording to include situations where there is no pre-existing relationship between the perpetrator and the person experiencing harm. They said that limiting to "expectation of trust" excludes frequent occurrences of abuse, for example, phone scammers not known to the person
- Several respondents (51) commented on the importance of the definition including cybercrimes and phone scams as forms of financial abuse

Many respondents said the definition should also include:

- willful behaviour on the side of the perpetrator
- intimate partner and gender-based violence
- repeated acts of violence

4.3.6 Types of abuse and other elements to include

Key takeaways:

- strike a balance between:
 - using broad, inclusive terms to describe the main types of abuse
 - naming and describing the specific behaviours and conduct (to identify areas where policy action is needed)
- include the 5 main types of abuse listed in the Discussion Guide: physical, psychological and emotional, financial, sexual and neglect
- consider adding to the main types of abuse listed:
 - organizational/institutional abuse or neglect
 - spiritual/cultural abuse
 - self-neglect
- name specific conduct and/or behaviours that commonly occur and require targeted policy action (to raise awareness, identify and respond):
 - fraud (financial and romance scams; phone and cybercrimes)
 - coercion, intimidation and controlling behaviours
 - intimate partner and gender-based violence
 - violation of rights and freedoms

4.3.6.1 Five main types of abuse

Roundtable participants were asked about the types of abuse, elements or behaviours to include in the definition.

Most participants across all roundtable sessions agreed with including the 5 main types of senior abuse listed in the Discussion Guide. Many participants also suggested other concepts or wording to include or encouraged naming, or specific conducts and/or behaviours in the definition.

4.3.6.2 Organizational/institutional abuse or neglect

Many participants across all roundtable sessions felt strongly that organizational or institutional abuse or neglect and systemic racism be named in the federal policy definition.

- Policies and practices of organizations and institutions can themselves be viewed as causes of senior abuse and neglect. This extends to high-level policies such as organizational standards of care or equitable access to services
- Given the recent pandemic experience in long-term care, they felt that this important language was missing from the WHO definition and the Discussion Guide
- Naming this type of abuse or neglect can encourage tracking and reporting of cases of abuse or negligence. For example, in long-term care facilities or senior residences. Implications for data collection are described in Section 4.5
- Better data could drive new standards and progressive organizational/institutional policies that prevent these types of abuse or neglect
- The language in the federal policy definition needs to be broad enough to include these types of abuse or neglect. For example:
 - “position of trust, or where trust should be expected”
 - “repeated pattern of behaviour”
 - “action or failure to act that causes harm”
 - “intentional or unintentional”
- Coercion, intimidation and controlling behaviours described in Sections 4.3.6.6 also apply to organizational/institutional abuse

Some participants shared examples of policies and practices they considered to be organizational abuse or types of systemic abuse or neglect.

A smaller number of roundtable participants said that organizational/institutional abuse or neglect should not be included in the federal policy definition. They felt that different strategies are needed to address these types of abuse and neglect.

4.3.6.3 Spiritual and cultural abuse

Some participants at all, but 1 roundtable session suggested including spiritual and cultural abuse in the federal policy definition. They described spiritual abuse as interfering with a person's spiritual practices, customs, or traditions. Examples included:

- older Indigenous peoples not having access to culturally safe housing or care options that allow them to follow their cultural practices
- an older person not being allowed to attend religious gatherings of their choice

Many participants felt the definition should name spiritual and cultural abuse as a separate type of abuse. This was due to recognizing the experience of Indigenous peoples in Canada and the systemic discrimination faced by diverse groups across the country. This gives visibility to the issue and can inform policies to prevent and respond to it.

4.3.6.4 Self-neglect

Several participants at the West regional roundtable from British Columbia and a small number of participants from other sessions encouraged inclusion of “self-neglect” in the federal policy definition.

BC statistics show that about one third of cases of “self-neglect” are in vulnerable populations (for example, with acquired injury, substance abuse).

Occurrences of self-neglect in Indigenous communities can be traced to historical and current trauma from residential schools and ongoing experiences of systemic discrimination.

4.3.6.5 Fraud (financial and romance scams; phone and cybercrimes)

Many participants across all roundtable sessions talked about the increase in reported cases of fraud. This included financial and romance scams over the phone or internet. Due to the pandemic, seniors are more isolated from friends, family and community. They are more vulnerable to financial abuse by strangers or by people providing services who may take advantage of their good nature.

Participants suggested explicitly naming fraud (financial and romance scams, telephone and cybercrimes). They also suggested using clear language to describe this conduct as a crime, with consequences.

4.3.6.6 Coercion, intimidation or controlling behaviours

Many participants across all roundtable sessions said that coercion, intimidation and controlling behaviours should be included in the federal policy definition.

Coercion and intimidation are used by the perpetrator for personal gain. For example, adult children or grandchildren might threaten to withhold care if they are not given money or assets.

Controlling behaviours go hand and hand with coercion and intimidation. Many participants said that specific controlling behaviours should be named in the definition. Behaviours most frequently mentioned included withholding of:

- assets or personal communications, for example, mail
- medical care or medication (or inappropriate use of medication to control)

- food or water
- contact with loved ones (prolonged isolation)

A small number of participants suggested that medication abuse be defined as a separate main type of abuse given its prevalence.

Indigenous participants talked about financial abuse faced by Elders in their communities and examples of controlling behaviour. Conditions in Northern and remote communities in combination with the legacy of the residential school system increase the vulnerability of Indigenous Elders to abuse. These conditions can include limited financial resources, housing options, employment and transportation.

4.3.6.7 Intimate partner and gender-based violence

Several roundtable participants said the federal definition should include statements that acknowledge intimate partner and gender-based violence as types of abuse. Gender-based violence includes violence against older women and against gender non-conforming older persons, for example, transgender, people who do not identify with their gender assigned at birth. Not all intimate partner violence is gendered and does occur in LGBTQ2S+ populations.

4.3.6.8 Violation of rights and freedoms

Some roundtable participants suggested describing some conducts and behaviours as violations of rights and freedoms. Examples included:

- denial of expression/opinion
- denial of voting
- denial of assets
- denial of food and water
- invasion or denial of privacy
- denial of intimacy
- interfering with spiritual practice

They suggested that the federal government take a leadership role in the development of a convention, recognizing senior abuse as a violation of human rights.

4.3.6.9 On-line survey responses

The on-line survey asked respondents about specific types of abuse that should be included in the federal policy definition. Results are similar to feedback received from roundtable participants.

Almost all respondents said the definition should include:

- the 5 types of abuse in the Discussion Guide
- abuse of power
- systemic abuse (for example, institutional practices), and
- neglect (intentional and unintentional)

Several comments (31) focused on the importance of including an act or a failure to act, where there is a reasonable expectation to do so. This could include situations of neglect and abandonment.

4.4 Practical benefits of the federal policy definition

Key benefits most commonly identified within and across roundtable sessions included:

- common language among the public, researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to support coherent collective action
- strengthened, more consistent data collection across jurisdictions and sectors to support evidence-informed policy
- coordinated awareness-raising with common messaging to focus attention on how to prevent and respond to senior abuse. Elements that are counted become visible and guide meaningful, focused policy actions
- targeted efforts to raise awareness among seniors about their rights and the resources available to prevent abuse (reduce vulnerability)
- greater accountability and more consistent sectoral standards, defined resources, training and approaches across jurisdictions (for example, for long-term care, community supports and services, legal system)
- drive policy action at the federal level in key areas that impact senior abuse prevention and response

Roundtable participants identified some of the practical benefits of developing a federal policy definition.

4.4.1 Common language among the public, researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to support coherent collective action

Many roundtable participants across all sessions said that common, well-defined terms ensure everyone clearly understands the complex issue of senior abuse. Shared understanding of the intersection of aging with other vulnerabilities can improve collaboration and coordinated actions.

They named many people working to prevent and respond to senior abuse, including:

- all levels of government across the country
- partners from many sectors: health care, community and social services, housing, legal and other support services, police and financial services
- researchers, policy-makers, practitioners serving seniors, advocates

Some participants mentioned how common terms can help in the areas of raising awareness, research, policy and program development, and practice.

4.4.2 Strengthened, more consistent data collection across jurisdictions and sectors to support evidence-informed policy

Many roundtable participants across all sessions said that every Canadian jurisdiction has a unique way of defining senior abuse. There is currently no consistency in data collection across jurisdictions. This creates barriers to evidence-formed policy development and coordinated responses. A federal policy definition could help by:

- guiding consistent data collection across jurisdictions and sectors
- helping to assess prevalence and to identify issues and trends across the country. This includes: who is experiencing abuse; who is perpetrating abuse; where is abuse happening; what types of abuse are most common; and what factors are contributing
- shifting policy and program development to target high priority areas and to groups of seniors most at risk of abuse. Policy will not change without evidence
- allowing comparison of information across Canadian jurisdictions and with other countries
- clarifying reporting protocols across jurisdictions and who is responsible for follow-up, that is, which federal, provincial, territorial Ministry keeps the information and who leads follow-up

4.4.3 Coordinated awareness-raising with common messaging to focus attention on how to prevent and respond to senior abuse

Many roundtable participants across all sessions stressed that:

- seniors are facing serious harm across the country
- many are falling under the radar without access to help

Reasons for under-reporting included:

- the stigma/shame of coming forward
- ageism (people may come forward, but are not believed; as a result, no action is taken that would lead to reporting)
- low public awareness of the signs of senior abuse
- no formal reporting mechanisms

Participants said that a federal policy definition could help coordinate awareness-raising. Below are practical benefits that a definition could include.

- Common language and terms to describe what senior abuse looks like
- Possible focus for a coordinated national prevention campaign (partnership of the federal, provincial and territorial governments). The campaign could draw attention to senior abuse and ageism. Some participants said that inter-generational awareness-raising programs that involve youth are critical to preventing abuse and supporting seniors

- Better identification of seniors at-risk through broader awareness of:
 - who experiences abuse
 - conditions that increase vulnerability (the public includes many people who provide services or interact with seniors every day)

Some participants focused on how to increase reporting of cases of abuse. The federal policy definition could provide the foundation for future actions. Participants shared ideas for policy action on awareness-raising and reporting. While outside the scope of this summary report, this input will help inform broader government policy work.

4.4.4 Targeted efforts to raise awareness among seniors about their rights and the resources available to prevent abuse (reduce vulnerability)

Many roundtable participants across all sessions said that the definition could be an important tool to help raise awareness among seniors about their rights. The federal policy definition could:

- equip seniors with language and knowledge to self-advocate (knowing that not everyone has a support network)
- provide organizations with a common tool to focus outreach activities to diverse seniors
- support targeted prevention to diverse groups of seniors

They said that targeted outreach and awareness-raising is essential to protect “at-risk” seniors from abuse, for example, Indigenous Elders (living in urban, Northern and remote communities), other groups who experience language, cultural and other barriers to accessing information and support. Targeted outreach and awareness-raising can help ensure seniors:

- understand their legal rights and how to protect their pension
- are informed of the importance of having signed Powers of Attorney and wills in place and the impact of signing over Powers of Attorney
- know about the patterns of behavior that lead to senior abuse (for example, for seniors moving into long-term care or retirement communities)

4.4.5 Drive policy action at the federal level in key areas that impact senior abuse prevention and response

Many participants focused their feedback on senior abuse strategies and policy actions in areas of prevention, response and enforcement. Suggestions were broad and far-reaching, and beyond the scope of developing the federal policy definition.

Important areas for policy action include:

- coordinated awareness-raising activities
- new senior abuse monitoring and reporting approaches (including tools for detection and reporting; training of front-line and decision-makers)
- actions to address social isolation and social determinants of health

- targeted actions to prevent and respond to abuse experienced by specific groups, such as:
 - older Indigenous peoples
 - older women who experience violence
 - seniors who face access barriers due to gender identity or sexual orientation, race, language, culture, low income or other forms of systemic oppression
- actions to strengthen legal protection and consequences
- actions to strengthen service accountability, standards and training in long-term and community care sectors

4.5 Types of data/information required

Key takeaways:

- collaborate with international and Canadian research networks to:
 - clarify operational definitions
 - develop shared indicators of success (to monitor progress on senior abuse prevention and response)
- work with cross-sectoral agencies across the country to understand what data is currently available and to identify information gaps
- use an intersectional approach to data collection and measurement, including demographic data that allows disaggregated analysis by sub-group
 - Disaggregated, race-based data can shed light on systemic inequalities and injustices that increase risk of abuse
- reach out to hear the stories of seniors' from diverse communities in community and institutional settings to better understand their experiences of abuse
- develop new reporting and follow-up options for seniors who experience abuse:
 - create opportunities for population-based self-reporting of senior abuse
 - include alternatives to police reporting to reduce fear and stigma
 - develop restorative justice options for Indigenous communities
- collect quantitative and qualitative data on senior abuse to better understand the experience and issues. Encourage academics, and front-line workers and practitioners to work together on research
- use and strengthen existing data collection mechanisms (for example, within health and social service systems, seniors' networks, criminal justice system, financial system, government administrative and survey systems)

Roundtable participants were asked about the type of information or data their organization requires or currently collects to develop senior abuse policies.

Many participants across all roundtable sessions said that quality data is critical. Policy will not change without evidence. A better picture is needed of senior abuse across the country to support evidence-informed, targeted policy action. General data and information challenges include:

- the fear and stigma of reporting
- siloed, fragmented data collection across government ministries, jurisdictions and the different sectors involved in senior abuse work (different mandates, different information and reporting systems)
- limited awareness of the signs of senior abuse and how to report it (general public, people on the front lines)
- no formal tools and mechanisms to coordinate consistent reporting and tracking of the different types of abuse
- limited senior abuse data from institutional settings such as long-term care and senior residences, hospitals

4.5.1 Specific data/information required

Participants identified specific data needed to inform their policy work on senior abuse prevention and response.

- Prevalence data on who is experiencing abuse, where the abuse is happening, the perpetrators, and the type of abuse
- Demographic data to allow disaggregated analysis by sub-groups who experience abuse, for example, age, gender, sexual orientation, Indigenous or racialized group, immigrant/refugee status, language, geographic and/or health region, setting (community, long-term care, seniors residences), vulnerability (social isolation, cognitive impairment). Disaggregated, race-based data can illuminate systemic inequalities and injustices that increase risk of abuse
- Information on perpetrators, including the perpetrators relationship to the senior reporting abuse, gender and age of the perpetrator, and contributing factors
- Clear operational definitions naming each type of abuse (and sub-categories of behaviours and conduct). Without naming the types of abuse and sub-categories, those affected will not be counted. In addition, actions will not be taken to prevent and address the form of abuse. Sections 4.3.6 describes participant views on the types of abuse or neglect to include in the definition
- Information on the type of response provided when abuse is reported (for example, health, housing, police, legal or financial support), and the outcomes of reporting, for example, number of charges laid, number of cases prosecuted and outcomes of prosecution

4.5.2 Direct experience of seniors

Several participants encouraged the collection of quantitative and qualitative data on senior abuse to better understand the experience and issues. They encouraged outreach to hear the stories of seniors from diverse communities and provide seniors with ways to directly report experiences of abuse. This should include an alternative to police reporting.

Some Indigenous participants suggested developing restorative justice approaches to senior abuse in their communities. This approach aligns with cultural understanding and practices. It can potentially encourage older Indigenous peoples to come forward who might be concerned about legal consequences to their family member, for example, in cases where a child or grandchild is the perpetrator.

4.5.3 Suggested methods/mechanisms of data collection

Many roundtable participants across all sessions said that consistent data collection across jurisdictions and sectors is needed to develop senior abuse policies. They suggested broad approaches to improve consistency in addition to possible mechanisms or tools for data collection. General suggestions included:

- collaborate with international and Canadian research networks to clarify operational definitions and develop shared indicators to monitor progress on senior abuse prevention and response
- review and build on work already done internationally and in Canada on measuring senior abuse
- work with cross-sectoral agencies across the country to understand what data is currently available and to identify information gaps
- build on the experience of national data collection in other issue areas, for example, through the Canadian Institute of Health Information
- look to other fields that use standardized approaches to data collection and measurement, for example, the child maltreatment field
- consolidate various points of national data collection into a single, measurable study to identify gaps
- use and strengthen existing data collection mechanisms (for example, within health and social service systems, seniors' networks, criminal justice system, financial system, government administrative and survey systems)
 - Create opportunities for population-based self-reporting
 - Document all forms of abuse reported through crisis calls and surveys
 - Collect institutional data using embedded tools and processes (hospitals, long-term care, senior residences, police reports, etcetera)

Some participants noted their organization's interest in aligning data collection with the federal policy definition. They shared the types of data they currently collect on senior abuse through their organizations. Some participants suggested using existing systems to collect consistent data across sectors, for example, screening tools in home care, police reporting, residential assessment tools in long-term care.

4.5.4 On-line survey responses

On-line survey respondents were asked about which type of information and/or data they require to develop senior abuse policies. In addition, they were asked how data on the victimization of seniors should be collected.

Most respondents (individuals and organizations) agreed or strongly agreed that the many types of information and data are essential to develop senior abuse policies. They suggested the following methods and mechanisms to collect data on victimization of seniors:

- police
- nursing
- senior residence and hospital records
- self-reported victimization reports from seniors
- proxy reporting

5. Conclusion

These engagement activities provided an important opportunity for the Government of Canada to hear the perspectives of stakeholders, experts, Indigenous organizations, and Canadians. While there was agreement from participants that senior abuse is an important issue, the consultations provided a broad range of participant views on the elements to include in a federal policy definition. Although the process was not intended to achieve consensus around a single definition, it was evident given the feedback received that there are diverse perspectives on the subject. These diverse perspectives make it challenging to reach consensus on the specifics of a definition. The Government of Canada has a leadership role to play in establishing and maintaining policies, programs and services that support seniors. All Canadians and levels of government have a corresponding role to play in preventing senior abuse.

6. Appendix

6.1 List of roundtable participants

Roundtable participants were selected to include a wide range of partners and stakeholders from a broad range of fields:

- researchers and academics
- service providers (for example: seniors-serving organizations, settlement service provider organizations)
- other experts and stakeholders (for example, national-level organizations focusing on the issue; leading academics; representatives from the legal, social, gerontological, disability, community, financial spheres and health care providers)
- Indigenous communities, governments and organizations
- general public, including seniors themselves

Roundtable session participants

Ministerial – English (14 organizations), June 22:

- Assembly of First Nations
- Canadian Association on Gerontology (2 representatives)
- CARP National
- Canadian Association for Long Term Care
- Canadian Centre for Elder Law
- CanAge
- Egale Canada
- Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime
- International Longevity Centre Canada
- Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse
- Cummings Centre
- McMaster Institute for Research on Aging
- National Association of Friendship Centres (2 representatives)
- National Initiative for the Care of the Elderly

Ministerial – French (9 organizations), June 29:

- L'appui pour les proches aidants
- Bureau de la recherche et de l'innovation Centre collégiale d'expertise en gérontologie
- Centre d'information juridique de l'Ontario (projet de l'AJEFO)
- Chaire de recherche sur la maltraitance envers les personnes âgées
- Faculté de droit, Université Laval
- Fédération des aînées et aînés francophones du Canada
- Fondation Émergence
- Jewish General Hospital and Mount Sinai Hospital
- Handicap Vie Dignité / McGill Center for Studies on Aging

Regional – Atlantic (9 organizations), July 8:

- CBDC du projet Impact-Aîné.e.s
- Growing The Voices: Festival 500 Senior
- MWONL, YWCA, CAVAE, Centre of Wellness Eastern, Hindu Temple, NLNPEA
- Native Council of Nova Scotia
- Nova Scotia Rainbow Action Project
- Reference Group on Age-Friendly Communities at Public Health Agency of Canada
- Seniors Advisory Council of Nova Scotia
- Seniors' Advocate – Newfoundland and Labrador
- SeniorsNL (2 representatives)

Regional – Ontario (15 participants), July 13:

- Community and Home Assistance to Seniors (CHATS)
- Community Legal Aid/University of Windsor
- Council on Aging - Ottawa
- Elder Abuse Prevention Ontario
- Fédération des aînés et aînées francophones du Canada (FAAFC)
- Fédération des aînés et des retraités francophones de l'Ontario (FARFO)
- Keepers of the Circle Indigenous Women
- Neighbours Helping Neighbours Committee
- Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses
- Ontario Coalition of Senior Citizens' Organizations
- Peel Institute on Violence Prevention
- Rexdale Women's Centre
- Ryerson University – National Institute on Aging
- Social Planning Council of Ottawa
- Western Ottawa Community Resource Centre

Regional – Québec (12 organizations), July 15:

- Aînés et retraités de la communauté
- L'Association féminine d'éducation et d'action sociale (AFEAS)
- Association Québécoise de Défense des Droits des Personnes Retraitées et Préretraitées
- Chaire de recherche sur la maltraitance envers les personnes âgées, l'Université de Sherbrooke
- Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture, Concordia University
- Centre for Research and Expertise in Social Gerontology, Sherbrooke University
- Conseil pour la protection des malades
- Cummings Center
- Quebec Community Groups Network
- Réseau FADOQ - Provincial Secretariat
- Seniors Action Quebec (2 representatives)
- Table de concertation des aînés et des retraités de l'Outaouais

Regional – North (6 organizations), July 20:

- Catherine Charles Long Term Care
- Kitikmeot Heritage Society
- Native Women's Association of the Northwest Territories
- Northwest Territories Seniors' Society
- Fort Mckay First Nation, Treaty 8
- Ontario Coalition of Indigenous Peoples (2 representatives)

Regional – West (22 organizations), July 22:

- A & O: Support Services for Older Adults
- Active Aging in Manitoba
- Alberta Elder Abuse Awareness Council (AEAAC) (2 representatives)
- Association des juristes d'expression française de l'Alberta
- BC Adult Abuse and Neglect Prevention Collaborative
- Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime
- Drive Happiness
- Lifelong Learning Centre (University of Regina)
- Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan

- Public Guardian and Trustee of BC
- Saskatchewan Seniors Mechanism
- Seniors Advocate, BC
- Seniors First BC
- Simon Fraser University
- Southern Alberta, Kerby Centre
- Sunshine Coast Resource Centre Society
- Trinity Place Foundation of Alberta
- University of Manitoba
- University of Saskatchewan - College of Law
- Vancouver Coastal Health
- Vancouver Health Authority
- Manitoba Association of Seniors Centres, Age-Friendly Manitoba

6.2 Key findings from the on-line survey

6.2.1 Who responded

Total of 588 responses were received:

- 456 individuals (78%)
- 132 organizations (22%)

Language of survey completed:

- 543 English (92%)
- 45 French (8%)

Place of residence of individual respondents:

- Ontario is overrepresented in survey responses (54% of responses compared with 39% of Canadian population)
- Quebec is underrepresented in survey responses (6% of responses compared to 23% of Canadian population)

Individual respondents were predominantly older Canadians:

- 64% of individual respondents were aged 55+

Gender:

- individual respondents were overwhelmingly female (76%)

Indigenous participation:

- a very small number of individual respondents identified as Indigenous (6%)

Disability:

- a very small number of participants identified as a person with a disability (8%)

Caregivers:

- 30% of individual respondents indicated they were caregivers for a relative or friend who they considered to be a senior

Experience of senior abuse:

- 18% of individual respondents indicated they identified as a person with lived experience of senior abuse

Organizations:

- responding organizations predominantly served Ontario (34%) or the West (33%). Organizations serving Quebec accounted for only 7% of responses
- responding organizations worked mainly in the areas of Social Services (30%) or Health (20%)

Limitations of the survey:

- this survey was not conducted as a random sample of Canadians. Because of this, the results cannot be generalized to the Canadian population as a whole
- because the total number of respondents was low (and therefore the numbers in subgroups is much smaller), the amount of analysis of responses of particular subgroups was very limited

6.2.2 Preferred terminology

Of the terms offered in the survey, the preferred term among all respondents was senior abuse (44% of responses), followed by “abuse of older adults” (18%).

Table 1: Preferred English Term Based on Survey Results (French term preference is noted below)

Preferred term	Respondents in agreement
Senior abuse	44%
Abuse of older adults	18%
Mistreatment of older persons	11%
Abuse of older persons	10%
Mistreatment of older adults	8%
Other	8%
I do not know	1%

However, caution is needed in interpreting these survey results.

- The term “elder abuse” was not an option in the online survey since the term “elder” holds unique meaning in Indigenous Communities. Respondents were able to choose “Other” and write “elder abuse”. But, not having “elder” listed could make it less likely for someone to consider the term and take the extra step of clicking “other” in their response
- Many more respondents from Ontario and the West completed the survey than from other regions. The number of individuals responding from other regions was too small for meaningful regional analysis. This means the results are not a balanced representation of diverse views from across the country

In French, the preferred term was “maltraitance envers les personnes âgées” (38% vs. 20% for “mauvais traitements envers les aînés”). While there seems to be a strong preference for this term, caution should be taken in drawing conclusions because of the relatively small number of francophone respondents.

There was some difference in the main reasons why respondents chose the term senior abuse. The most common reason given by Individuals was that it was more inclusive” (33%). Organizations said the term was “consistent with the term used in Canadian organizations” (31%).

For the age group covered by the term senior abuse, there was a range of responses:

- 55+ was the preferred age range for 33% of Individuals and 37% of Organizations
- 65+ was preferred by 36% of Individuals and 33% of Organizations
- individuals from Atlantic had a stronger preference for the 55+ age range (46%) than other regions. West, Ontario and Quebec preferred 65+ (accounting for 38% of responses for each of these regions)

- there were 38 comments that suggested that age range should not be the only factor, and that some combination of age and vulnerability should be considered

There was a high degree of agreement on the part of both Individuals and Organizations to include the elements outlined in Table 2 in a federal policy definition of senior abuse.

Table 2: Elements to be Included in Federal Policy Definition Based on Survey Results

Element to be included in federal policy definition of senior abuse	Individuals in agreement	Organizations in agreement
Abuse of power	96%	93%
The perpetrator is in a position of trust relative to the victim	87%	89%
Apply to older persons who have specific vulnerabilities, impairments	84%	80%
Willful behaviour on the side of the perpetrator	81%	73%
Repeated acts	75%	75%
Recklessness of perpetrator	66%	60%

6.2.3 Preferred definition of senior abuse

A strong majority of respondents (73% of Organizations and 71% of Individuals) found the WHO definition of “elder abuse” to be acceptable.

- This was consistent across regions with a higher percentage of Quebec respondents (85%) finding the definition to be acceptable.
- Many respondents felt the definition should not be limited to situations “where there is an expectation of trust”, since perpetrators could be strangers such as phone scammers.
- A large number suggested including “financial” in the types of senior abuse.

There was a high degree of agreement on types of senior abuse.

A strong majority of respondents (91% of Individuals and 84% of Institutions) agreed that types of senior abuse should be included in the federal policy definition.

Table 3: Types of Abuse to be Included in Federal Policy Definition Based on Survey Results

Type of abuse	Individuals in agreement	Organizations in agreement
Physical abuse (for example, hitting)	99%	97%
Emotional/Psychological abuse (for example, threats of violence or abandonment)	99%	98%
Financial abuse (for example, stealing money)	98%	97%
Sexual abuse (for example, unwanted touching or intimate partner violence)	95%	95%
Neglect (intentional and unintentional)	95%	94%
Gender-based violence (that is, any violence directed towards or against someone due to their gender)	79%	86%

6.2.4 Types of data required to inform senior abuse policies

There was a high level of agreement on the importance of gathering data on the factors outlined in Table 4 related to senior abuse.

Table 4: Types of Data Required to Inform Senior Abuse Policies Based on Survey Results

Type of data	Individuals in agreement	Organizations in agreement
Information/data pertaining to senior victim characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, income) is essential	73%	82%
Information/data on impacts of abuse on seniors is essential (physical, emotional, financial impacts)	92%	88%
Information/data pertaining to perpetrators of senior abuse is essential (age, sex, relationship to the victim, family member, authority figure, person of trust)	88%	85%
Information related to where the senior abuse occurred is essential (private residence, long-term care/short term care facility, etcetera)	90%	88%
Information/data related to the frequency and duration of the senior abuse is essential	86%	86%
Information pertaining to senior abuse can be obtained from a witness/third person in the event the victim is cognitively impaired	91%	84%
Information on senior abuse collected from institutions (both private and public) is essential	90%	89%
Information on whether or not the victim or third party reported their victimization to any authorities is essential	78%	77%

There was a high level of agreement that data should be collected from all of the sources suggested in Table 5.

Table 5: Data Collection Sources Based on Survey Results

Source of data	Individuals in agreement	Organizations in agreement
Police	91%	93%
Nursing, Senior residence records	92%	94%
Hospital records	89%	92%
Self-reported victimization reports from seniors	95%	95%
Proxy reporting (in instances where senior is unable to respond)	94%	91%

Comments suggested other important sources of data:

- community and social service organizations (14 comments)
- family and friends (7 comments)
- banks (5 comments)