

Bruising as a Forensic Marker of Physical Elder Abuse

Very little is known regarding the “red flags” that law enforcement and caretakers can use to look for signs of physical abuse of elderly people. This project will provide practical information to medical, forensic and law enforcement personnel on how bruises that are caused by abuse appear in the elderly population. In addition, it will greatly advance the science on physical signs and injuries that result from elder abuse.

Lead Agency:

National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs

Agency Mission:

NIJ is the research, development, and evaluation agency of the U.S. Department of Justice and is dedicated to researching crime control and justice issues. NIJ provides objective, independent, evidence-based knowledge and tools to meet the challenges of crime and justice, particularly at the State and local levels.

Principle Investigator:

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Partner agencies:

U.S. Department of Justice’s Elder Justice and Nursing Home Initiative

General Description:

In 2001, NIJ took a significant step in building the medical forensic literature on elder mistreatment by funding a project entitled *Bruising in the Geriatric Population*. This project systematically documented the occurrence, location, color, progression, and resolution of accidental bruising in a sample of adults aged 65 and older. Using the results of this first study, the research team is now systematically documenting bruising known to have occurred in elders who have been physically abused. This project will provide practical information to medical, forensic and law enforcement personnel on how bruises that are caused by abuse appear in the elderly population; and will advance the science on forensic markers of physical elder abuse.

Excellence: What makes this project exceptional?

This project is the first to attempt to delineate how injuries (bruises, in this case) that result from abuse differ from those that occur accidentally. The findings will greatly aid first responders in determining whether signs of bruising are cause for concern and additional investigation.

Significance: How is this research relevant to older persons, populations and/or an aging society?

As the American elderly population expands exponentially over the coming decades, law enforcement will need new tools and knowledge to detect signs of abuse of these members of this vulnerable population. These two projects lay the groundwork for the production and communication of such guidance.

Effectiveness: What is the impact and/or application of this research to older persons?

This research expands our knowledge of the signs of elder abuse and the ability (or inability) of medical and criminal justice personnel to detect such abuse in this population. These findings will lead to an increased ability of caretakers and law enforcement to detect and respond to these crimes, which are currently under-reported and go largely unaddressed.

Innovativeness: Why is this research exciting or newsworthy?

This project will give the field its first solid piece of evidence that bruises that result from abuse differ from those that result from accidental injury. This information has already changed investigative practices in Orange County, CA, and will hopefully influence the law enforcement practices across the country once results are reviewed and disseminated.