

This is the first in a series of articles on financial exploitation of the elderly and disabled. The cases described are real, but names and identifying information have been changed.

And Then There Was None



Bank employees in a Southeastern Missouri town suspected foul play, but were hesitant to report the transactions conducted by Mrs. Harriet, 83, their longtime customer, with her middle-aged son, Johnny. On the first of every month, Johnny led his confused mother to the teller's window at the local bank, so she could cash her retirement check. After the check was cashed, Mrs. Harriet immediately handed the money to her son. Eventually, Johnny drained Mrs. Harriet's entire retirement account in this fashion, and she didn't even realize it. All the while, bank employees watched—worried, but silent.

Financial exploitation of the elderly has been called the crime of the 21st century. Even though it's on the rise in Missouri and nationwide, this crime is vastly underreported. Estimates indicate that less than one in 10 cases are reported.

Financial exploitation occurs when there is an illegal use of a vulnerable adult's resources for another person's profit or gain. The vulnerable adult—someone at least 60 years old, or disabled and between 18 and 59—is tricked or coerced into handing over his or her money to a son, daughter, relative or stranger. Other times, the victim is too confused to understand his or her behavior.

Mrs. Harriet is a typical victim: an elderly, Anglo-American female who lives alone and suffers some form of dementia or physical impairment, tends to be isolated, and is too confused, ashamed or emotionally dependent upon her son to report his behavior. Fear may also keep her lips sealed: What if her son abandons her? Further abuses her? Places her in a nursing home?

For his part, Johnny is the typical perpetrator. He, like other adult children, has easy access to his mother or father—the victim—and a longstanding, emotional bond. Interestingly, Johnny's victimization of his mother occurs regardless of her income, which can range from \$1,000 to \$1 million. Why? Access to the victim matters even more than the victim's wealth.

It can take months, even years before a financial exploitation crime is reported. Sometimes it never is. For Mrs. Harriet, the Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) eventually got a call from church friends, concerned she didn't have money to pay her utilities or buy food.

The call came after Mrs. Harriet had walked to the bank one day—alone. She said she wanted to make a withdrawal from her account. The bank employee told her there was no money left. Mrs. Harriet left the bank, but a few minutes later, came back. She told the teller she couldn't remember how to get home.

If you suspect an elderly or disabled customer is being financially exploited, call DHSS' toll-free hotline, 1-800-392-0210.