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Broken Trust

A recent Congressional hearing and the poignant testimony of an unexpected victim — Mickey Rooney — have helped focus new attention on the abuse and exploitation of old people. Congress should seize the moment to help repair their threadbare web of protection.

The hearing of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, as well as several recent studies, make clear that elder abuse is a growing problem that far outmatches the resources available to fight it.

One national study estimated that in the last year 14 percent of older adults had been neglected, abused or exploited. The numbers could be far higher since the sample did not include people living in institutions or those with significant mental impairments. [A 2009 study on financial exploitation](#) estimated that elderly victims lost at least \$2.6 billion a year to fraud and abuse.

The loss of power and the isolation that come with age and infirmity make elders particularly vulnerable to abuse from unscrupulous caregivers but also, chillingly, from unscrupulous family members. “I felt trapped, scared, used and frustrated,” Mr. Rooney [told the committee](#), saying he had been defrauded by “someone close.” “But, above all, I felt helpless.”

The cost, on top of the human suffering, is immense: in stolen and squandered savings; the strain on the court system from abusive guardianships; the cost to Medicare and Medicaid from fraud; and from the care of fleeced victims who end up destitute in nursing homes.

The solutions begin with filling the gaps in data collection and services. The Government Accountability Office surveyed 25 of 39 states, finding that financing for adult protective services had fallen or flat-lined in the last five years, and that many were poorly trained and overwhelmed. The study also found that federal programs to fight abuse are scattered



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the Department of Health and Human Services. The report urged the department to create a resource center to collect and share abuse data among the states.

Only with coordinated efforts — like those urged by the offices and agencies created years ago to advocate for children and victims of domestic violence — will real progress be made. The committee's chairman, Senator Herb Kohl of Wisconsin, is sponsoring a bill to create an office of elder justice, in the Justice Department, to tighten reporting standards and definitions of elder abuse and to help states investigate cases and impose stricter protections for victims. Congress should pass it.