

Coronavirus restrictions lead to rise in elder abuse cases, advocates say

By [Kate McKenna](#)

Posted 2h ago, updated 1h ago



Brian Rick was bashed by his own grandson. (ABC News: Chloe Chomicki)

Brian Rick's year started with a trip to hospital. His grandson's fists put him there.

Key points:

Social isolation is increasing the severity of elder abuse, lawyers say

Calls to UnitingCare's elder abuse helpline have risen 15pc

Queensland Care Army volunteers could soon be on hand to help older people

The bashing was so brutal that a nurse at the hospital could not do a blood test when the 79-year-old Townsville man was first admitted because he'd "lost that much blood".

"The way I looked after that boy was unreal," Mr Rick said.

"[His mother] couldn't look after him, so when he was six months old, we went to court and we got custody of him.

"He was bought everything. Then they turn around and do this to you."

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Mr Rick said the attack unfolded on January 5 when his grandson, Nathan Scott Rick, who is now in his 30s, started chasing Mr Rick's dog around the backyard with a bar.

The dog had knocked his partner over.

"I said, 'hey, that's my dog, leave it alone'," Mr Rick said.

"I turned around to turn the sprinklers on — and that's when I got punched."

The violence did not end there.

He recalled being slammed up against a wall, punched in the side, and thrown across the grass, before hitting a horse rail.

"I got horribly knocked around," Mr Rick said.

"It's knocked my thoughts around — I can't remember things properly. That's been a pretty bad thing."



Brian Rick in hospital shortly after he was assaulted. (*Supplied*)

This month Nathan Rick was sentenced to two years in prison after pleading guilty to the assault.

Mr Rick said he was "drained" by thoughts of what would happen when his grandson was released.

"You're always thinking about it," he said.

"I've got no strength left. If someone attacks you, or anybody, once you get older, forget about it. That's the worst part of it."

The case has drawn into sharp focus the issue of elder abuse — a phenomenon experts say affects one in six older people.

Community lawyers believe the COVID-19 pandemic has created a "perfect storm" for it to flourish.

Brisbane's Caxton Legal Centre chief executive, Cybele Koning, said more vulnerable situations were tipping into actual abuse, driven by social isolation and increased financial stress.



Mr Rick says he struggles to remember things properly now. (*Supplied*)

"What we do know is there has been an increase in the severity of the abuse," she said.

"Typically where a person has experienced one or two types of abuse — usually financial and psychological — we're now seeing the abuse [also include] serious physical abuse."

UnitingCare said calls to its elder abuse prevention unit helpline in Queensland had risen by 15 per cent between February and the end of March.

For cases where the caller indicated it was coronavirus-related, the rates of financial and social abuse were lower but physical and psychological abuse had increased, a spokeswoman said.

The perpetrator and the victim were living together in more than half of those calls in which COVID-19 was identified as a factor.

UnitingCare General manager Luke Lindsay said in many cases, the victim was "completely dependent" upon the perpetrator.

"And in our current pandemic, [they] actually can't escape that situation," he said.

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No-contact abuse

Ms Koning said Caxton Street Legal Centre had been closely monitoring the impact of coronavirus restrictions on its elder abuse clients.

"It's important to recognise that [COVID-19] restrictions that are actually saving the lives of older people, are, at the same time, contributing to this perfect storm of elder abuse occurring," she said.

She said one client had been denied access to her husband, who was being cared for by her daughter, and felt "powerless" that the prevention of contact was now justified under social isolation.

Family violence support services:

[1800 Respect national helpline](#) 1800 737 732

[Women's Crisis Line](#) 1800 811 811

[Men's Referral Service](#) 1300 766 491

[Lifeline](#) (24 hour crisis line) 131 114

[Relationships Australia](#) 1300 364 277

"They can't pursue their rights through the courts as easily," Ms Koning said.

In other cases, there was increased pressure on the older person to hand over money due to job losses or financial strain within the family, leaving them short for their own essential needs or bills.

Ms Koning said even though the abuse appeared to be worsening during the pandemic, the issue was even more hidden because victims were isolated from their usual support networks.

This could also include aged care packages being cancelled or fewer visits to the GP.

"There are less people in the community noticing the abuse because it's going on behind closed doors," she said.

"Sometimes an older person doesn't even know the situation they're in is abusive, so we need others to recognise it and others able to respond and make referrals to the specialist service."

'Care Army' volunteers ready to help

Last month, the Queensland Government announced it was rallying a "Care Army" of volunteers and professionals to support seniors during the pandemic by fetching their groceries or prescriptions, or giving them a call.

So far, about 25,000 people have signed up to the initiative.

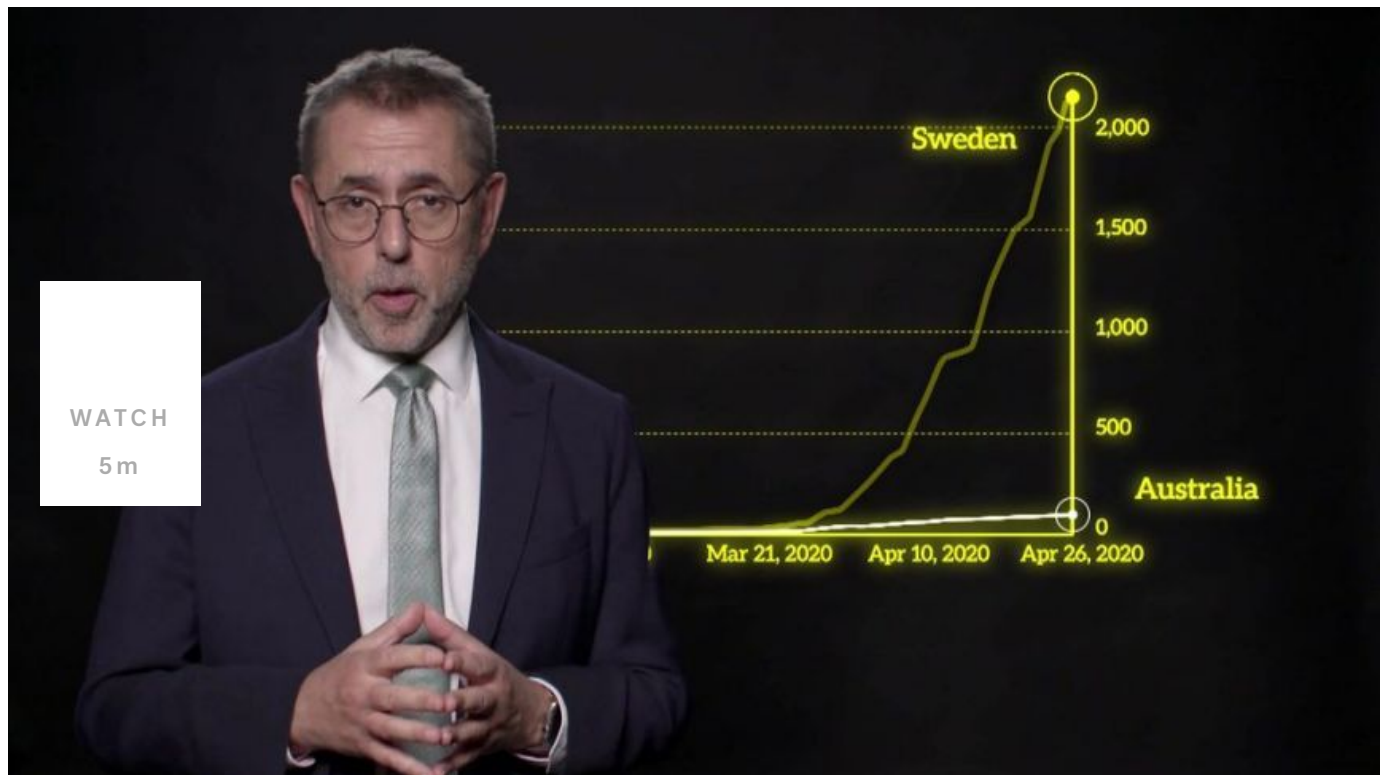
Townsville Community Law principal solicitor Bill Mitchell, who has appeared before the United Nations in debates around the rights of older people, said the Care Army presented a "once-in-a-generation" opportunity to look out for seniors at risk of abuse.

"When else can you galvanise 25,000 people who are keen to volunteer to look after the interests of older people?" he said.

"However, it does need to be supported by proper resources and ensure the people are probably screened ... and have an understanding of how to recognise, respond and refer cases of elder abuse, and how to have conversations with older people that are sensitive to their situation."

A spokesman from office of the state's Seniors Minister Coralee O'Rourke said the State Government was working with Volunteering Queensland and the Elder Abuse Prevention Unit to provide elder abuse resources for Care Army volunteers.

"The seniors taskforce, established by the Queensland Government, has reinforced the importance of protecting our seniors and ensuring volunteers have information and training to identify the warning signs of elder abuse," the spokesman said.



Dr Norman Swan compares Australia's coronavirus response to Sweden's.

"Organisations that take volunteers on board also undertake the necessary checks and provide any training required by Care Army volunteers."

The UN recently released a policy brief examining human rights during the COVID-19 response.

"Older persons have faced higher infection and mortality rates," the report said.

"While at the same time being subjected to ageism in public discourse, age discrimination in health care and triage decisions, neglect and domestic abuse at home, isolation without access to essential services, and greater exposure and poor treatment in care institutions."

If you or anyone you know are currently feeling threatened or unsafe it is best to call 000. If the situation is non-urgent, you can call the Queensland Government's Elder Abuse Helpline on 1300 651 192 for free confidential advice, or 1800 Elder Help (1800 353 374) for the National Elder Abuse phone line.

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