

Plain Language Summary of Report on Peer-to-Peer Abuse: Informing definitions and thresholds

Introduction

Safeguarding Ireland has published a research report on peer-to-peer abuse in residential care settings. The reports aims to raise awareness of the issue of violence, aggression and abuse that sometimes happens between people living in care settings. This is called peer-to-peer abuse.

The research was conducted for Safeguarding Ireland by the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA).

This report contains information on:

1. how peer-to-peer abuse is defined in different countries and settings
2. whether there are any thresholds (existing guidelines) that identify when peer-to-peer incidents become abusive
3. a review of information describing peer-to-peer aggression or abuse
4. a review of safeguarding* policies and guidelines in organisations in Ireland
5. a process to develop a definition of peer-to-peer abuse for Ireland
6. recommendations based on the research.

1. Definitions

There are many different words and phrases used when researchers discuss peer-to-peer abuse. Some use words like 'aggression' or 'violence' instead of abuse. The use of the term 'abuse' might suggest that the person carrying out the act might not have intended to commit abuse. This might be because the person was not able to understand their actions or how they might affect others. We found that 'peer-to-peer aggression' is the most accepted term for low-level incidents (for example,

*Safeguarding is about promoting people's rights, health and wellbeing when they are using any health or social care service. It is also about preventing harm happening to people, and working with them to protect them effectively if harm does happen.

shouting at someone, blaming someone for something, pushing someone) involving people in care settings.

2. Thresholds

The research identified several types of acts that might be thought of as aggressive or abusive. For example, biting, stealing, pushing or throwing objects. There are occasions when aggression can be considered abuse. However, it is difficult to decide when an act changes from being aggressive to abusive. Our findings suggest that, for an incident to be abusive, it would need to be clear that the person carrying out the act did it on purpose, and that they were able understand their actions.

3. Review of information describing peer-to-peer aggression or abuse

We reviewed information about peer-to-peer incidents that happened in nursing homes, centres where people with disabilities live, day services (where a person does not stay overnight) and mental health centres. The research found that peer-to-peer incidents happen often in all of these settings. However, most incidents involve low-level, minor disagreements or disputes. We found very few examples of where such incidents were reported to An Garda Síochána (Irish police), which suggests there was no concern that abuse took place.

The type of peer-to-peer aggression or abuse reported was different across each of the care settings we reviewed. In centres where people with disabilities live, most peer-to-peer incidents were reported as 'psychological' (emotional or mental abuse), followed by physical incidents. In nursing homes, the most common type was physical incidents. In day services and mental health services, verbal abuse was most common. It was often the case that the behaviours of people using these services were factors in the incidents that took place. For example, the behaviour of a person with dementia might cause upset to others and could be seen as aggressive or violent, even if the person did not intend to cause harm.

Our research suggests that there is over-reporting of incidents of peer-to-peer aggression to HIQA. This appears to be because services are not sure how to decide if abuse has taken place and they then make the decision to simply report all incidents.

4. Review of safeguarding policies and guidelines in Ireland

We searched the websites of a wide range of service providers organisations to find information on their safeguarding policies and guidelines. We found 79 documents. These mostly describe who should receive reports about abuse, principles for safeguarding, and the type of safeguarding training available. We found that most

organisations provided training on safeguarding. However, we did not find any training that covered incidents of peer-to-peer aggression or abuse.

5. Process to develop a definition

We carried out a process called a 'Delphi study', which is where experts are asked a selection of questions until they agree on a definition of a word or term. We did this to develop a definition for peer-to-peer abuse. The agreed definition for peer-to-peer abuse was:

"Offensive, aggressive and intrusive verbal, physical, sexual, and material interactions between service users that in a community setting would likely be unwelcome and potentially cause physical or psychological distress or harm to the recipient/victim".

We also asked the group to agree a threshold for when an incident can be thought of as abusive, but could not agree on a description for thresholds. However, they suggested a list of items that should be considered when reviewing an incident. The list included:

- examining if a person acted on purpose and was able to understand their actions,
- the feelings of the victim,
- the behavioural needs of the people involved,
- and the settings in which the incident took place.

The group also felt it was very important to remember that the victim likely felt they were subject to abuse and should be safeguarded as a result.

6. Recommendations

Based on the research, we have made a number of recommendations:

1. Move to the use of two terms, 'peer-to-peer aggression' and 'peer-to-peer abuse'. This would cover the common, low-level incidents that often occur in services and the more serious abuse incidents.
2. The definition for peer-to-peer abuse should be: "Offensive, aggressive and intrusive verbal, physical, sexual, and material interactions between service users that in a community setting would likely be unwelcome and potentially cause physical or psychological distress or harm to the recipient/victim."
3. Introduce a list of items for deciding if an incident is abusive. This list would include: the need for a person to mean to cause harm and to understand

their actions; how the person on the receiving side sees the way they are being treated; the behavioural history of the person who may be causing harm; and environmental factors such as the supports that have been provided to the person who may be causing harm and the positive or negative results of these supports. Any definitions and thresholds agreed should be used in the development of safeguarding policies.

4. Advocate to develop training on peer-to-peer aggression and abuse. This should include the need for a person-centred approach to preventing peer-to-peer abuse incidents and the need to separate the concept of abuse by the exhibitor/perpetrator from abuse of the recipient/victim.
5. Improve reporting requirements for peer-to-peer aggression and abuse and ensure reports include detail on the seriousness of incidents, including introducing a system that supports the assessment and review of these incidents.