



People with Disabilities and Sexual Assault

Historically, people with disabilities have been discriminated against because of their disabilities, seen as incapable and helpless, separated from society at large, and denied opportunities for education and other life experiences. Misperceptions and stereotypes about people with disabilities and a subsequent history of oppression also put people with disabilities at an increased risk to experience sexual assault. Assaults are motivated primarily out of anger and/or a need to feel powerful. Hence, offenders seek victims they perceive to be vulnerable and isolated from services and support.

Sexual violence is an act (verbal and/or physical), which violates a person's trust and/or safety, and is sexual in nature. The term "sexual violence" includes date/acquaintance rape, partner rape, caregiver sexual assault/abuse, stranger rape, incest, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, exposure, and voyeurism. Sexual contact becomes assault when a person is unable to consent to an activity, does not consent, and/or when a service provider engages in sexual contact with a client. Victims/survivors of sexual violence can be forced, coerced, and/or manipulated into participating in sexual activity. Adults with disabilities who have been sexually assaulted may have experienced their sexual assault/abuse as an adult or they may be adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

- Among adults who are developmentally disabled, as many as 83% of the females and 32% of the males are the victims of sexual assault.
Johnson, I., Sigler, R. 2000. "Forced Sexual Intercourse Among Intimates," Journal of Interpersonal Violence. 15 (1).
- 15,000 to 19,000 people with developmental disabilities are raped each year in the United States.
Sobsey, D. 1994. "Violence and Abuse in the Lives of People with Disabilities: The End of Silent Acceptance?"
- 49% of people with developmental disabilities who are victims of sexual violence will experience 10 or more abusive incidents.
Valenti-Heim, D., Schwartz, L. 1995. The Sexual Abuse Interview for Those with Developmental Disabilities.
- In one study, 40% of women with physical disabilities reported being sexually assaulted.
Young, M. E., Nosek, M.A., Howland, C.A., Chanpong, G., Rintala, D.H. 1997. "Prevalence of Abuse of Women with Physical Disabilities." Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Special Issue. Vol. 78 (12 Suppl. 5) s34-s38.
- For individuals with psychiatric disabilities, the rate of violent criminal victimization including sexual assault was 2 times greater than in the general population (8.2% vs. 3.1%).
Hiday, V.A., Swartz, M., Swanson, J., Borum, R., and Wagner, H.R. 1999. "Criminal Victimization of Persons with Severe Mental Illness." Psychiatric Services 50: 62-68.

This information sheet was revised in 2003 by the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault (WCASA). WCASA is a membership organization of sexual assault centers, other organizations, and individuals throughout Wisconsin working to end sexual violence. For information sheets on other topics or to become a member, contact WCASA 600 Williamson St., Suite N-2, Madison, WI 53703, (608)257-1516, www.wcasa.org. For more information about sexual assault or to receive support with a sexual assault experience, contact your local sexual assault program. This sheet may be reproduced in its original format only.

- 15.2% of children who are sexually abused have disabilities.
NCCAN. 1993. A Report on the Maltreatment of Children with Disabilities.
- Males with disabilities are twice as likely than males without disabilities to be sexually abused in their lifetime.
Statistics Canada, Centre for Justice Statistics, 1994 in Roeher Institute (1995). Harm's Way. Ontario: Roeher Institute.
- 38% of women with disabilities who have been married experienced sexual violence by their partner.
Statistics Canada, Centre for Justice Statistics, 1994 in Roeher Institute (1995). Harm's Way. Ontario: Roeher Institute.
- It has been estimated that 83% of women with a disability will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime.
Stimpson, L. & Best, M. 1991. Courage Above All: Sexual Assault Against Women with Disabilities. Toronto: DisAbled Women's Network.
- Only 3% of sexual abuse cases involving people with developmental disabilities are ever reported.
Valenti-Hein & Schwartz, 1995. The Sexual Abuse Interview for Those with Developmental Disabilities.
- 1 in 5 female and 1 in 6 male psychiatric inpatients reported abuse involving genital contact, which was often recurrent.
Jacobson, A. 1990. The Relevance of Childhood Sexual Abuse to Adult Psychiatric Inpatient Care. Hospital Community Psychiatry. 41(7): 80(7.)
- 45% of female psychiatric outpatients reported being sexually abused during childhood. Respondents who had been abused in childhood had higher levels of depressive and psychotic symptoms and higher rates of sexual victimization in adulthood than those who had not been abused.
Muenzenmaier, K., Meyer, I., Struening, E., Ferber, J., Childhood Abuse and Neglect Among Women Outpatients with Chronic Mental Illness. 1993. Hospital Community Psychiatry. 44 (7): 666-670.)
- Lifetime risk for violent victimization was so high for homeless women with severe mental illness (97%) as to amount to normative experiences for this population.
Goodman, LA. Dutton, MA, Harris, M. Episodically Homeless Women with Serious Mental Illness: Prevalence of Physical and Sexual Assault. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry. 1995
- 88 to 98% of sexual abusers are male and are known by the victim/survivor who has disabilities.
Sobsey, D. & Mansell, S. 1994. An International Perspective on Patterns of Sexual Assault and Abuse of People with Disabilities.
- 33% of abusers or acquaintances, 33% are natural or foster family members, and 25% are caregivers or service providers.
Sobsey, D. 1988 "Sexual Offenses and Disabled Victims: Research and Practical Implications." *Visa Vis*, Vol. 6 No. 4.