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Sexual Violence Against People with Disabilities

Definitions

Sexual violence
Researchers who study sexual violence against people with disabilities use a wide variety of definitions for sexual abuse, sexual assault, and rape. In this fact sheet where we summarize the findings of many such studies, we include all of those definitions in the term sexual violence.

Studies of sexual violence in the general population usually distinguish between abuse during childhood and assaults or rape during adulthood. However many acts of violence against people with disabilities are labeled abuse regardless of the victims' age or the specific offenses committed against them.

Disability
This term also has a wide variety of definitions. In this summary, we define disability as "limitations in physical or mental function, caused by one or more health conditions, in carrying out socially defined tasks and roles that individuals generally are expected to be able to do." 6

Magnitude of the Problem

Comparing the percentages of sexual violence victims who have disabilities with the percentages of sexual violence victims who do not have disabilities is difficult because of the differences in the terminology and methods used to determine these rates. However, most data appear to indicate that people with disabilities are at higher risk for sexual violence than are people without disabilities. 1,3,5,7,10,11,14,16,18

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Sexual violence has been investigated more widely among people with disabilities related to cognitive impairments (including mental retardation and learning disabilities) than among people with other types of disabilities. For adults with cognitive impairments, reported rates for lifetime experience of sexual violence range from 25% to 67%.\(^2,10,15\)

Among women with disabilities, reported rates of sexual violence range from 51% to 79%.\(^9,15\)

Among adolescent boys with disabilities, reported rates of sexual violence range from 4% to 6%; for adolescent girls reported rates are around 24%.\(^3,16\)

### Study Parameters

For the most part, this summary does not include findings from studies that exclusively address sexual violence against people with disabilities who are institutionalized, mentally impaired, younger than 14 years old, or older than 65 years old. We need further research to address the special issues of these groups.

### Characteristics of Victims

From 72% to 82% of people with disabilities who have been sexually victimized are female.\(^4,8,12,13,17\)

Among adult victims whose level of cognitive impairment is known, 52% to 76% had a mild to moderate impairment, whereas 24% to 48% had a severe to profound impairment.\(^2,4,8,13\)

### Characteristics of Perpetrators

Most perpetrators are male (88% to 98%) and are known to the victim.\(^4,8,12,13\) Perpetrators include family members, acquaintances, other people with disabilities, and health care providers.\(^4,12,13,17\)
Where Sexual Violence Occurs

Residences, particularly the victim=s home, are the most common place for episodes of sexual violence. Other places include vehicles, places of employment, public areas, schools, and day or leisure facilities.

Description of the Sexual Violence

Published data that describe the type of violence perpetrated suggest that most cases involve multiple episodes of sexual contact. About 95% of sexual violence episodes involve sexual contact (e.g. intercourse, fondling, or masturbation). Only 19% to 23% of all sexual violence cases were limited to one episode.

References

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