Sexual Violence Against People with Disabilities

People with disabilities are sexually assaulted at nearly three times the rate of people without disabilities. There are many reasons for these overwhelming numbers. People with disabilities are taught to be complacent and often dependent on others, which can lead them to be afraid to report sexual abuse. Dependency on others might cause those with disabilities to not fully understand what sexual assault is or that it is against the law. They may also lack information about their bodies, relationships, sexuality, and consent.

Statistics

- 83% of women with disabilities will be sexually assaulted in their lives.\(^1\)
- Only 3% of sexual abuses involving people with developmental disabilities are reported.\(^2\)
- 50% of girls and 54% of boys who are deaf have been sexually abused.\(^3\)
- Women with a disability are far more likely to have a history of undesired sex with an intimate partner – 19.7% vs. 8.2%.\(^4\)
- Approximately 80% of women and 30% of men with developmental disabilities have been sexually assaulted – half of these women have been assaulted more than 10 times.\(^5\)
- People with intellectual disabilities, both men and women, are victims of sexual assaults at rates more than seven times those for people without disabilities.\(^6\)
- Justice Department data on sex crimes shows people with intellectual disabilities (men and women) are the victims of sexual assault at rates more than seven times than those for people without disabilities.\(^7\)
- Nearly 1 in 4 male victims who experienced sexual violence other than rape had a disability at the time of the victimization.\(^8\)

Maryland Consent Laws

Consent: Words or overt actions by a person who is competent to give informed consent indicating a freely given agreement to have sexual intercourse or sexual contact. A person cannot consent to sexual contact or sexual intercourse in circumstances where:

- (a) the person suffers from a mental illness or defect which impairs capacity to appraise personal conduct;
- (b) the person is unconscious or for any other reason is physically unable to communicate unwillingness to an act. Wis. Stat. Ann. § 940.225(4).

Disabilities may make it difficult to communicate consent to participate in sexual activity, and perpetrators may take advantage of this.

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1 Disability Justice, “Sexual Abuse,” retrieved from https://disabilityjustice.org/sexual-abuse/
2 Ibid
3 Ibid
4 Ibid
5 Ibid
6 NPR News, “The Sexual Assault Epidemic No One Talks About,” January 2018
7 Ibid
Challenges to Reporting Sexual Violence

- Bias and stereotypes about people with disabilities may result in them not being taken seriously or believed when they report instances of sexual violence.
- People with mental illnesses have been told repeatedly that they lack credibility.
- Survivors may face challenges having their story taken seriously.
- Individuals with disabilities may rely on their perpetrator for care or support which creates an additional barrier to reporting and a dangerous power structure.
- Support and resources such as an interpreter, TTY phone, ASL certified interpreter, etc., may be limited or not provided during the reporting process making the process more difficult and timely.

Resources for survivors with disabilities include:

- **Sexual Assault Legal Institute** – Provides comprehensive legal services to survivors of sexual violence statewide. Call **301-565-2277** or toll free **1-877-496-SALI**
- **National Domestic Violence Hotline** – Provides help via video phones by calling **1-855-812-1001** or TTY phones at **1-800-787-3224**
- **DAWN** – Provides legal, medical, system advocacy, and support services for deaf survivors.
- **RAINN** – 24/7 chat line to anonymously and confidentially speak with a support specialist who is trained to help via hotline calls at **1-800-656-4673** or live chat online. Support specialists who answer hotline chats are specially trained to respond with respect, patience, and understanding.
- **National Disability Rights Network** – Investigates reports of abuse and neglect, and seek systemic change to prevent further incidents; advocate for basic rights; and ensure accountability in health care, education, employment, housing, transportation, and within the juvenile and criminal justice systems for individuals with disabilities.
- **Maryland Mandatory Reporting laws for persons with disabilities** – If you know of or suspect sexual assault or abuse, you can report it. Call your local police station or **911** to contact law enforcement.

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