

Sexual Violence Against People with Disabilities

Introduction

People with disabilities experience sexual violence at significantly higher rates than people without disabilities.¹ Disability itself is not the reason someone experiences sexual violence; rather, people who cause harm may take advantage of unequal power, dependence, or control. People with disabilities are a diverse group and may have physical, sensory, intellectual, developmental, cognitive, or mental health disabilities that affect people in different ways.²

Some people with disabilities may rely on others for daily care and support, including personal care, which can create opportunities for abuse. Other factors, such as social isolation, limited access to sexual education, and reduced ability to physically resist or communicate what happened may also increase vulnerability. People with disabilities may also lack accessible information about their bodies, sexuality, and consent, and perpetrators may take advantage of disabilities that affect communication.³

Statistics

- In 2017–2019, people with disabilities made up about **12%** of the U.S. population age 12 and older, but accounted for about **27%** of rape and sexual assault victimizations.⁴
- During the same period, people with disabilities experienced rape or sexual assault at a rate more than **four times higher** than people without disabilities: **4.1** compared with **0.9** victimizations per 1,000 people.⁵
- About **15.2%** of adults with intellectual disabilities in the U.S. studies reviewed had experienced sexual abuse during adulthood.⁶
- Children with disabilities:
 - Children with disabilities are about **three times more likely** to experience sexual abuse than children without disabilities.⁷
 - After accounting for demographic differences, children with internalizing disabilities, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or other anxiety disorders, had a **61% higher** risk of sexual victimization in the past year than children without those disabilities.⁸
- Women with disabilities:
 - About **39%** of women who have been raped had a disability at the time of the assault.⁹
 - In a 2010 survey, **6.5%** of women with disabilities experienced stalking by an intimate partner in the past year, compared with **2.1%** of women without disabilities.¹⁰
 - In the same 2010 survey, **7.1%** of women with disabilities experienced physical violence by an intimate partner in the past year, compared with **3.3%** of women without disabilities.¹¹

¹ Harrell, Erika, "Crime Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009–2019 – Statistical Tables" (November 4, 2021). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/capd0919st.pdf>

² National Sexual Violence Resource Center, "SART Toolkit Section 6.6: Victims Who Have Disabilities" (n.d.). National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://www.nsvrc.org/sarts/toolkit/6-6/>

³ "Get the Facts About Sexual Violence Against People with Disabilities" (last updated May 31, 2026). Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://rainn.org/get-the-facts-about-sexual-violence-against-people-with-disabilities/>

⁴ Harrell, Erika, "Crime Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009–2019 – Statistical Tables" (November 4, 2021). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/capd0919st.pdf>

⁵ Harrell, Erika, "Crime Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009–2019 – Statistical Tables" (November 4, 2021). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/capd0919st.pdf>

⁶ Tomsa, Raluca, et al., "Prevalence of Sexual Abuse in Adults with Intellectual Disability: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis" (2021). International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7921934/>

⁷ "Victims with Disabilities" (n.d.). West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information and Services. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://fris.org/sexual-violence/victim-populations/victims-with-disabilities>

⁸ Vanderminde, Jennifer, et al., "Victimization and Abuse Among Children with Disabilities: Age Adjusted Rates in a US National Sample" (2023). Child Abuse & Neglect. Retrieved July 24, 2026, from <https://www.unh.edu/ccrc/sites/default/files/media/2023-10/cv419-vanderminde-2023.pdf>

⁹ "Sexual Violence and Intimate Partner Violence Among People with Disabilities" (April 23, 2024). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://www.cdc.gov/sexual-violence/about/sexual-violence-and-intimate-partner-violence-among-people-with-disabilities.html>

¹⁰ Breiding, Matthew J., and Brian S. Armour, "The Association Between Disability and Intimate Partner Violence in the United States" (2015). Annals of Epidemiology. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4692458>

¹¹ "Sexual Violence and Intimate Partner Violence Among People with Disabilities" (April 23, 2024). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://www.cdc.gov/sexual-violence/about/sexual-violence-and-intimate-partner-violence-among-people-with-disabilities.html>

- Men with disabilities:
 - Nearly **24%** of men who experienced sexual violence other than rape had a disability at the time.¹²

Barriers to Reporting Sexual Violence Against People with Disabilities

- From 2017–2019, only **19%** of rapes and sexual assaults against people with disabilities were reported to police, compared with **36%** against people without disabilities.¹³
- Some survivors with disabilities may **rely on the person causing harm** for care, housing, transportation, or other daily needs.¹⁴
- Survivors with disabilities **may fear losing needed care, support, or housing** if they report.¹⁵
- Survivors may have difficulty reporting when interpreters, assistive technology, or other **communication tools are unavailable**.¹⁶
- **Support services, transportation, and information may not always be accessible** for survivors with disabilities.¹⁷
- **Stereotypes about disability** may cause police, service providers, or others to doubt or dismiss a survivor's report.¹⁸
- **Limited access to education about consent and healthy relationships** for people with disabilities may make abuse harder to recognize.¹⁹

Maryland Consent Laws

A person cannot consent to vaginal intercourse or a sexual act in circumstances where:²⁰

- The person is a **“substantially cognitively impaired individual, mentally incapacitated individual, or physically helpless individual,”** and the person performing the act knows or reasonably should know this; or
- The person is **under the age of 14 years**, and the person performing the act is **at least 4 years older**.

Maryland Mandatory Reporting Laws for People with Disabilities

If you know of or suspect sexual assault or abuse of a vulnerable adult, you can report it.

Call your local police station or 911 to contact law enforcement.

Healthcare professionals, police officers, and human service workers are **required to report** suspected abuse of a vulnerable adult by contacting their local Adult Protective Services Department.²¹

For survivor resources, please visit:

mcasa.org/survivors/culturally-responsive-services

¹² Breiding, Matthew J., and Brian S. Armour, “The Association Between Disability and Intimate Partner Violence in the United States” (2015). Annals of Epidemiology. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4692458>

¹³ Harrell, Erika, “Crime Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009–2019 – Statistical Tables” (November 4, 2021). Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/capd0919st.pdf>

¹⁴ National Sexual Violence Resource Center, “SART Toolkit Section 6.6: Victims Who Have Disabilities” (n.d.). National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://www.nsvrc.org/sarts/toolkit/6-6/>

¹⁵ National Sexual Violence Resource Center, “SART Toolkit Section 6.6: Victims Who Have Disabilities” (n.d.). National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from https://www.nsvrc.org/sarts/toolkit/6-6

¹⁶ National Sexual Violence Resource Center, “SART Toolkit Section 6.6: Victims Who Have Disabilities” (n.d.). National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from https://www.nsvrc.org/sarts/toolkit/6-6

¹⁷ “Get the Facts About Sexual Violence Against People with Disabilities” (last updated May 31, 2026). Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://rainn.org/get-the-facts-about-sexual-violence-against-people-with-disabilities>

¹⁸ “Get the Facts About Sexual Violence Against People with Disabilities” (last updated May 31, 2026). Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from <https://rainn.org/get-the-facts-about-sexual-violence-against-people-with-disabilities>

¹⁹ National Sexual Violence Resource Center, “SART Toolkit Section 6.6: Victims Who Have Disabilities” (n.d.). National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Retrieved July 22, 2026, from https://www.nsvrc.org/sarts/toolkit/6-6

²⁰ Maryland Code, Criminal Law § 3-304

²¹ Maryland Code, Family Law § 14-302