

# Sexual Violence Against People with Disabilities

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## Introduction

People with disabilities are sexually assaulted at nearly **3x** the rate of people without disabilities. It is important to note that the disability itself is not the reason for individuals to be sexually assaulted, but by individuals who seek power and control over another. Individuals with disabilities is a broad term that encompasses everyone with a long-term physical, intellectual, or sensory impairment which, in interaction with additional factors (environmental and personal), may hinder their full participation in society on an equal basis to others.<sup>1</sup> People with disabilities may be dependent on others for care, which may make reporting more difficult.

People with disabilities may experience a greater risk of sexual violence due to other factors such as social isolation, limited sexual education, dependence on others, including intimate hygiene, reduced physical defenses, and community barriers that prevent disclosure of the abuse.<sup>1</sup> People with disabilities may also lack information about their bodies, sexuality, and consent that could help them identify and express experiences of sexual abuse. Disabilities may make it difficult to communicate consent to participate in sexual activity and perpetrators may take advantage of this.

## Statistics

- **83%** of women with disabilities will be sexually assaulted in their lives.<sup>2</sup>
- Only **3%** of sexual abuses involving people with developmental disabilities are reported.<sup>2</sup>
- **50%** of girls and **54%** of boys who are deaf have been sexually abused.<sup>2</sup>
- Women with a disability are far more likely to have a history of undesired sex with an intimate partner—**19.7%** vs. **8.2%**.<sup>2</sup>
- 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**.<sup>2</sup>
- People with intellectual disabilities, both men and women, are victims of sexual assaults at rates more than **7x** that of those for people without disabilities.<sup>3</sup>
- Nearly **1 in 4** male victims who experienced sexual violence other than rape had a disability at the time of the victimization.<sup>4</sup>

## Maryland Consent Laws

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

- The person is a “substantially cognitively impaired individual, mentally incapacitated individual, or physically helpless individual”; or
- The person is under the age of 14 years, and the person performing the act is at least 4 years older. Maryland Code, Criminal Law, § 3-304

## Challenges to Reporting Sexual Violence<sup>5</sup>

- 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.

<sup>1</sup> Amborski, A., Bussieres, E., Vaillancourt-Morel, M., & Joyal, C. (2021). Sexual Violence Against Persons with Disabilities: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*.

<sup>2</sup> Disability Justice, “Sexual Abuse,” Retrieved from <https://disabilityjustice.org/sexual-abuse/>

<sup>3</sup> NPR News, “The Sexual Assault Epidemic No One Talks About,” January 2018

<sup>4</sup> Basile, K.C., Smith, S.G., Lui, Y., Kresnow, M.J., Fasula, A.M., Gilbert, L., & Chen, J. (2018). American Journal of Preventive Medicine, “Rape-related pregnancy and association with reproductive coercion in the U.S.”

<sup>5</sup> National Organization for Women, “The Disability Community & Sexual Violence,” Retrieved from <https://now.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Disabled-Women-Sexual-Violence-4.pdf>

- Individuals with disabilities may rely on their perpetrator for care or support which creates additional barriers 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 it more difficult and time consuming.

### **Maryland Mandatory Reporting Laws for Persons 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 and police officers are **required** to report suspected abuse of a vulnerable adult by contacting their local Adult Protective Services Department. Maryland Code, Family Law § 14-302

### **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**
- [Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network](#) – The nation’s largest anti-sexual violence organization. National Sexual Assault 24/7 Hotline: **1-800-656-4673**
- [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) – Provides help via video phones by calling **1-855-812-1001** or TTY phones at **1-800-787-3224**
- **Deaf DAWN** - Located in Washington DC, provides direct services for Deaf, DeafBlind, Deaf-Disabled, Hard of Hearing, and Listened-Deaf Survivors. Emergency hotline: [hotline@deafdawn.org](mailto:hotline@deafdawn.org) Text: **202- 945-9266**