

Sexual Violence & English as a 2nd Language

FACT SHEET

Overview

The United States is home to a diverse population of cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. With **over 350 languages** spoken, the United States is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world.¹ As of 2019, there were **67.8 million** people in the US who, while at home, spoke a language other than English.² Of those who speak a language other than English, around **26 million** of them rank themselves less than “very well” when it comes to their ability to speak English.

Speaking English as a second language, or not speaking it at all, not only increases the risk of sexual assault for individuals, but also makes it harder to access support after sexual violence has occurred. Prevention and awareness resources may not be widely accessible to people who primarily speak a language other than English. Additionally, it can be difficult to report and find resources that meet a survivor’s language and cultural needs. It is important that we adequately address existing barriers to get survivors the resources they need.

Facts

- Those who speak English as a second language, or do not speak English at all, face difficulties obtaining a Sexual Assault Forensic Exam (SAFE).³
 - **¾** of state sexual assault coalitions reported that it was harder for non-English speakers to get a SAFE due to difficulties understanding their rights as a victim.
- Survivors are less likely to report sexual violence because of language barriers.⁴
 - This empowers perpetrators, who may be more likely to commit the act if they know their victim: cannot report it; does not fully understand the laws and their rights; or may downplay what has happened to them due to cultural or religious beliefs.
 - If the perpetrator acts as the sole translator, they may falsify facts during the reporting process to protect themselves.⁵
- In some cases, family members, friends, or law enforcement are asked to translate for medical personnel, which leads to confidentiality and privacy risks for the survivor. This also risks traumatizing the family members and friends.
- Those who speak English as a second language also face cultural barriers in addition to their language barriers.⁶
 - Some cultures carry a stigma or shame around sexual violence victimization, making it hard for survivors to come forward and report.
 - Available resources may not be culturally competent, which can lead to a lack of sensitivity or patience towards survivors and their unique situations.

¹ Language data for the United States of America. Translators without Borders. (2022, July). <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/language-data-for-the-united-states-of-america#:~:text=There%20are%20between%20350%20and,other%20indigenous%20languages%20as%20official>

² Dietrich, S., & Hernandez, E. (2022, December). *Nearly 68 million people spoke a language other than English at home in 2019*. Census.gov. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/12/languages-we-speak-in-united-states.html>

³ Raja, D. (2014, May). *How language and cultural barriers prevent some victims from accessing sexual assault exams*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-language-and-cultural-barriers-prevent-some-victims-accessing-sexual-assault-exams>

⁴ *What is the connection between language access, sexual violence, and racism?*. National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (2023, March). <https://www.nsvrc.org/blogs/saam/what-connection-between-language-access-sexual-violence-and-racism>

⁵ Asian Pacific Institute on Gender Based Violence (2019), *Survivors with Limited English Proficiency: Barriers to Access*

⁶ Raja, D. (2014, May). *How language and cultural barriers prevent some victims from accessing sexual assault exams*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-language-and-cultural-barriers-prevent-some-victims-accessing-sexual-assault-exams>

Language Access for Survivors in Maryland

Despite language and cultural barriers, support is available to increase language access for survivors who do not speak English as their first language:

- MCASA's Sexual Assault Legal Institute (SALI) has trained bilingual advocates on staff to support survivors in English and Spanish. SALI can also access *Language Line*, which provides over-the-phone interpreting services in over 290 languages.
- SALI offers a [Safety Planning Tool](#) in English, Spanish, Chinese, French, Portuguese, and Amharic.
- MCASA's website can be translated into 132 languages, where survivors can find information on their legal rights, options, and how to access support services.
- MCASA has many brochures [available on our website](#) in Spanish digitally, to print, or to order physical copies for free.
- SAFE programs and hospital systems are required to provide interpretation services for survivors in hospitals, usually through a language phone line or an on-site interpreter.
- Maryland Courts are mandated to provide interpretation services during both criminal and civil proceedings.