

Sexual Victimization of Men with Disabilities and Deaf Men: A National Snapshot

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October 2017
Brief

Introduction

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines disability as any “physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.”¹ Major life activities include seeing, hearing, reading, walking, and eating. Based on this definition, approximately 20 percent of Americans have a disability.² Unfortunately, research suggests that having a disability may increase a person’s risk for experiencing victimization. Based on the most recent national estimates, the rate of violent victimization against people with disabilities was more than twice the rate for those without disabilities.³ The rate of serious violent victimization (including sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault) was more than three times higher than the rate for people without disabilities. Studies also show that people with disabilities have a higher probability of repeat victimization, and by multiple perpetrators.⁴

Since 2005, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) has been working within communities to address victimization of people with disabilities. In those communities, we have heard a common refrain: At the intersection of violence and disability, men with disabilities experience domestic and sexual violence at rates higher than their counterparts without disabilities. Because so much of the narrative surrounding domestic and sexual violence has assumed that the primary victims are female, Vera sought to better understand the victimization experiences of male survivors with disabilities and those who are Deaf and delineate the challenges they face when accessing victim services. In partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), Vera’s Center on Victimization and Safety launched a project to explore these issues in depth. The goal was to raise awareness of these underserved survivors, build consensus about the barriers to services, and begin identifying potential solutions.

Understanding Deaf culture

Although the ADA definition of disability includes people who are hard of hearing and who are Deaf, many Deaf people do not identify as having a disability. Instead, they view themselves as members of a distinct cultural group in the United States. Like any culture, Deaf culture is defined by its unique language, values, behavioral norms, and traditions. An uppercase “D” in “Deaf” is used to reflect identification with Deaf culture, whereas a lowercase “d” in “deaf” reflects an audiological condition defined by hearing loss.

Most research studies pertaining to disability include deafness as a type of disability. In this brief, Vera distinguishes people who are Deaf from people who have disabilities. Therefore, in citing data that holds true for both people with disabilities and Deaf people, the brief explicitly names those groups as separate populations.

disabilities and the obstacles they may face when seeking services for both types of crime, the existing research on domestic violence was far too limited to draw any conclusions. As such, the focus of the project was narrowed specifically to understanding their experiences with seeking services for sexual victimization.

This brief presents the project findings. It gives an overview of the latest research on the incidence and prevalence of sexual violence in the lives of men with disabilities and Deaf men, identifies gaps in the field’s knowledge on the subject, and documents the unique barriers both groups face in accessing services. It concludes by looking ahead to how additional research, public policy changes, and educational efforts can contribute to ending the victimization of men with disabilities and Deaf men.

Approach

In the project’s initial phase, Vera conducted a comprehensive literature review. This review encompassed 33 peer-reviewed empirical studies that included men with disabilities and/or Deaf men in their sampling methodology and reported victimization-related findings by gender and disability/Deafness. Reviewing the literature revealed what researchers have

Doing so will help to lay a foundation to promote reforms that enhance services and justice-system responses for male victims of sexual assault who have disabilities or who are Deaf. While the entry point into this project was to gain a better understanding of domestic and sexual violence in the lives of men with

learned to date about sexual victimization of men with disabilities and Deaf men. However, to understand the context for that data and gain a fuller understanding of on-the-ground experience of advocates, male survivors, and service providers, Vera staff interviewed subject matter experts and key stakeholders in the areas of disability rights, Deaf advocacy, and male victimization, including self-advocates, survivors, and practitioners. In these interviews, the researchers asked questions about the experiences of male victims with disabilities, Deaf men, the victim resources available to both, and the barriers they face in availing themselves of those resources.

With the results of the literature review and interviews in hand, Vera staff created a framework for a two-day roundtable discussion to deepen the collective understanding of gaps in and barriers to services and policies related to male survivors with disabilities and those who are Deaf. The two days of discussion included many of the stakeholders and experts interviewed. They consisted of a series of facilitated conversations designed to elicit ideas about how to discuss and understand sexual victimization of men with disabilities and Deaf men, barriers to victim reporting and services, survivor needs, and the existing

organizational capacity of victim service programs to meet those needs. During the conversations, the group began identifying potential solutions to some of these barriers and needs and discussed overall implications for the victim services field.

What the research shows about men with disabilities and Deaf men

The research on the victimization of men with disabilities and Deaf men is sparse, but its findings are consistent: Virtually all of the studies illustrate high rates of victimization among men with disabilities and Deaf men. In particular, studies done over the past 20 years have found that they are at much greater risk for sexual victimization than men without disabilities.⁵

They experience higher rates of sexual violence and other forms of violent victimization than men without disabilities

An analysis of data collected from the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey found that men with disabilities and Deaf men were twice as likely as their counterparts without disabilities to experience sexual violence

other than rape—which included types of sexual coercion and unwanted sexual contact (and noncontact such as being flashed or forced to view sexually explicit media) that are not defined as forcible penetration.⁶

In 2007, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) began asking questions about disability. Every year since 2007, the data show that men with disabilities and Deaf men are victimized at a higher rate than both men and women without disabilities.⁷ Based on the 2013 survey, the rate of violent victimization (sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault) against men with disabilities and Deaf men was more than twice the rate of violent victimization of men without disabilities.⁸

In Massachusetts, researchers analyzed rates of sexual violence against men with disabilities and Deaf men compared with sexual violence rates against men without disabilities. They found that the prevalence of lifetime sexual violent victimization was 14 percent among men with disabilities/Deaf men, compared to 4 percent among men without disabilities.⁹

In one of the few studies that compared Deaf victimization rates to the rates of victimization among the general population, Deaf men were more than

three times as likely than their hearing counterparts to report lifetime and past-year forced sexual activity.¹⁰ In another study of 79 Deaf adults, nearly 45 percent of the men reported at least one form of sexual abuse (sexual assault or some other unwanted experience) in their lifetime.¹¹

What stakeholders shared about men with disabilities and Deaf men

Vera’s interviews and two-day roundtable discussion with stakeholders in the areas of disability rights, Deaf advocacy, and male victimization, including self-advocates, survivors, and practitioners, yielded a number of valuable observations. The following points summarize those conversations.

Gender creates unique barriers for male victims

Western society associates masculinity with physical strength, independence, and power. At the same time, it associates victimization, especially sexual victimization, with weakness. Because of this, it is difficult for any man who has experienced victimization, and in particular sexual victimization, to come forward. Advocates at the roundtable

Unanswered questions

Although existing studies demonstrate that men with disabilities and Deaf men are at increased risk for sexual victimization, they fail to explain the variations in rates of violence and experiences among people with different types of disabilities. They also do not characterize the perpetrators of this violence or the circumstances surrounding the abuse. There is a dearth of information on the types of violent victimization that are most common among men with differing disabilities, including physical disabilities, and Deaf men. Additionally, while existing data reveal high rates of sexual violence in the lives of men with disabilities, there has been little examination of their experiences with intimate partner violence. How often men with disabilities experience intimate partner violence, what some of the unique dynamics may be, and the relationship between intimate partner violence and abuse by personal care attendants all require additional research. Finally, although some studies have attempted to understand the relationship between sexual orientation and experiences of sexual victimization, there is limited information about the victimization experiences of gay and bisexual men.

In its analysis of sexual victimization experiences by sexual orientation, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 40.2 percent of gay men and 47.4 percent of bisexual men had experienced sexual violence other than rape, compared with 20.8 percent of heterosexual men.^a

Information about the relationship between gender identity and experiences of sexual victimization is also limited, but some estimates suggest that 50 percent of transgender people have experienced sexual violence.^b Understanding the sexual victimization experiences of men with disabilities who are gay, bisexual, or transgender requires additional research.

^aM.L. Walters, J. Chen, and M.J. Breiding, *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010 Findings on Victimization by Sexual Orientation*, (Atlanta, Georgia: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013), <https://perma.cc/HQ6C-852K>.

^bFORGE, *Transgender Rates of Violence: Victim Service Providers' Fact Sheet #6*, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: FORGE, 2012), <https://perma.cc/BHH4-HFFR>.

spoke about the silencing effect that this dynamic can have on male survivors, who may fear that their masculinity will be perceived as compromised if they come forward as a victim. For men with disabilities, societal stereotypes about disability may compound this barrier because people with disabilities are often viewed as dependent and weak. Because society values and privileges masculinity, the threat of having that masculinity undermined may make it nearly impossible to reach out for help.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that men with disabilities and Deaf men may experience additional barriers to services and the justice system associated with their gender, given that services designed to address sexual violence originally emerged to address the epidemic of violence against women. While services for survivors of sexual assault have made strides to be more inclusive of male survivors, barriers persist. For instance, victim outreach initiatives and prevention campaigns may not speak directly to male survivors. In some cases, men may not be able to participate in all services, particularly if programs have worked to preserve some women-only spaces such as support groups. In other cases, male survivors may want a male-only space that is not offered. Staff may not be trained to understand the unique trauma

male survivors experience. Curricula and other program approaches may not reflect male survivors or their experiences and needs. These dynamics may leave male survivors unable to receive supports that are appropriate and effective.

The presence of a disability may make it even more difficult to access help

Roundtable participants highlighted that having a disability can create barriers for male survivors with disabilities when they attempt to access services, often citing the experience of their female counterparts. Stakeholders noted common barriers that exist within victim services and disability agencies that make it difficult for people with disabilities to get help in the aftermath of a sexual assault. For instance, victim services often have physical barriers—such as steps to the entrance, narrow doorways, and inaccessible restrooms—that prevent survivors with disabilities from using their services. On the other hand, disability organizations are often not equipped to respond to the unique dynamics of violence against women. Moreover, a lack of cross-system collaboration prevents the sharing of resources and knowledge to address the gaps between service providers—victim services and disability—and the criminal justice system.

Victim services present programmatic barriers as well—for both male and female survivors with disabilities—who may have unique experiences of violence related to having a disability. For instance, perpetrators can be caregivers or other service providers such as drivers or personal care assistants, who are connected to their victims through their disability. Victim service providers may not fully understand how these relationships create unique power and control dynamics that pose greater safety risks for people with disabilities. Personal care attendants, for example, typically have access to most aspects of a person’s life, including daily activities, relationships, and finances. People with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual or cognitive disabilities, may have been taught to comply with those who control their daily activities, or they may not have received any education about sexual health or appropriate boundaries. These realities may make it difficult for some people with disabilities, including men, to recognize abuse by an authority figure. If these unique experiences, perpetrators, and dynamics are not reflected in the victim-services providers’ programmatic tools and resources, staff at these agencies may

not be able to fully support survivors with disabilities.

Other important and critical concerns for all survivors with disabilities, including men, are the unique dynamics and risks related to where they receive services for their disabilities. For instance, men with disabilities who live in congregate settings such as group homes and long-term care facilities may experience abuse by another resident or a staff person from whom they have very little separation. Reporting the assault may trigger a number of responses that the victim may not want, including transfer to another facility, perhaps even in another city. Additionally, men with disabilities who are sexually abused in group homes, long-term care facilities, or day programs within disability organizations may not have access to outside help in reporting the assault to the authorities, especially if the organization attempts to address the issue internally. For their part, victim service providers may not fully understand how central disability organizations are in the lives of people with disabilities. Often, people with disabilities have longstanding relationships with these organizations and rely on their services to help them maintain their independence, autonomy, and sense of community. Thus,

experiencing abuse within these settings may be especially devastating for these survivors, who may experience a loss of community in addition to the trauma of the violence. Victim service providers, who do not regularly work with disability organizations or people with disabilities, may not appreciate the magnitude of that loss and, therefore, may fail to address it as part of the healing process.

Survivors who are Deaf face unique challenges to seeking help

Deaf male survivors may be isolated from outreach efforts and victim services because of communication barriers. If the service provider is able to supply an interpreter, that may address the communication barrier, but it may also raise concerns for the survivor about confidentiality. Deaf survivors may also encounter well-meaning and skilled professionals who, nonetheless, have never received training or education about Deaf culture.

Looking ahead

There is much more to learn about male survivors with disabilities. More analysis into the unique experiences men with disabilities have because of intersecting identities of being male

and having a disability is crucial to acquiring that knowledge. And more research needs to be done to understand how these dynamics shift when other factors such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation are layered into the equation. To do this work well, the stakeholders at Vera's roundtable discussion agreed that sexual assault advocates and service providers (such as sexual assault nurse examiners), disability advocates, Deaf advocates, criminal justice professionals, researchers, self-advocates, male survivors, and other allies need to work together to better understand this issue and to create appropriate avenues for supporting male survivors with disabilities. Specifically, stakeholders expressed the need to collaborate in order to:

- › conduct research to better understand the unique dynamics, perpetrators, and contexts surrounding sexual abuse of men with disabilities and Deaf men;
- › develop programmatic resources specific to male survivors with disabilities and Deaf men;
- › establish guidance for victim service providers on how to craft policies and practices that make male survivors

with disabilities and Deaf men feel welcome and supported;

- › ensure that therapeutic interventions and training curricula reflect the experiences and needs of male survivors with disabilities and Deaf men;
- › create educational and prevention materials for consumers of various services (including victim, disability, and Deaf) that are accessible to and take into account male survivors with disabilities and those who are Deaf; and

- › promote sustainability by advocating for ongoing, dedicated funding that builds the capacity of organizations to effectively address sexual violence against men with disabilities and Deaf men.

Efforts like these should help to increase public awareness of abuse against men with disabilities and Deaf men, improve outreach to these underserved survivors, and result in the development of accessible and culturally competent resources and services.

Endnotes

- 1 Americans with Disabilities Act, “Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, As Amended,” <https://perma.cc/ATJ8-4AZG>.
- 2 Matthew W. Brault, “Americans with Disabilities: 2010,” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau, 2012) <https://perma.cc/FLU8-EUZ4>.
- 3 Erika Harrell, *Crime Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009–2013 – Statistical Tables*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015).
- 4 James Schaller and Jennifer Lagergren Fieber, “Issues of abuse for women with disabilities and implication for rehabilitative counseling,” *Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling* 29 (1998): 9–17; Dick Sobsey and Tanis Doe, “Patterns of sexual abuse and assault,” *Sexuality and Disability* 9, no. 3 (1991): 243–258.
- 5 Harrell, *Crime Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009–2013 – Statistical Tables*.
- 6 Matthew J. Breiding and Brian S. Armour, “The association between disability and intimate partner violence in the United States,” *Annals of Epidemiology* 25, no. 6 (June 2015): 455–457.
- 7 Michael R. Rand and Erika Harrell, *Crime Against People with Disabilities, 2007* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009). Harrell, *Crimes Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009–2013 – Statistical Tables*. In these reports, the researchers used age-adjusted rates to make comparisons between victims with disabilities and those who are Deaf and those without disabilities. They report that victimized people with disabilities and Deaf people are generally older than persons without disabilities and that violent victimization rates vary significantly by age. By using age-adjusted rates, the researchers can show what the victimization rate would be if people without disabilities had the same age distribution as those with disabilities and Deaf people.

- 8 See Harrell, *Crime Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009–2013 – Statistical Tables*. In this report, the researchers report that 37 per 1,000 men with disabilities were victims of violence, compared to a victimization rate of 16 per 1,000 men without disabilities.
- 9 Monika Mitra, Vera E. Mouradian, and Marci Diamond, “Sexual violence victimization against men with disabilities,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 41, no. 5 (November 2011): 494–497.
- 10 Robert Q. Pollard, Erika Sutter, and Catherine Cerulli, “Intimate Partner Violence Reported by Two Samples of Deaf Adults via a Computerized American Sign Language Survey,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 29, no.5 (October 2013): 948–965.
- 11 Sven Schild and Constance Dalenbert, “Trauma exposure and traumatic symptoms in deaf adults,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 4, no. 1 (January 2012): 117–127.

For more information

The Vera Institute of Justice is a justice reform change agent. Vera produces ideas, analysis, and research that inspire change in the systems people rely upon for safety and justice, and works in close partnership with government and civic leaders to implement it. Vera's Center on Victimization and Safety is currently pursuing core priorities of expanding healing services to underserved victims of crime, improving access to victim services for people with disabilities and Deaf people, and ensuring that justice systems more effectively serve America's increasingly diverse communities. For more information, visit www.vera.org.

An electronic version of this brief is available for download on Vera's web site, at www.vera.org/sexual-victimization-men-disabilities-deaf.

Requests for additional information about this brief should be directed to the Center on Victimization and Safety, cvs@vera.org.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2014-TA-AX-K002 awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Office on Violence Against Women (OVW). The opinions, findings, conclusions and recommendations, expressed in this

publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of DOJ, OVW.

The authors would like to thank the stakeholders who participated in interviews and the roundtable discussions to help develop this brief. Those stakeholders include: Nora Baledarian, Kelly Buckland, Leigh Ann Davis, Aaron Gutzke, Mary Hettle, Dave Kot, Steve LePore, Randy Lizotte, Dan Maley, James Meadors, Michael Munson, Julie Petty, Roberta Sick, Eric Stiles, Karen Topper, and Nancy Ward.

Thank you also to Johnny Rice and Jaclyn Smith for their contributions to this report. The authors are also indebted to the contributions of Amy Judy, who passed away before the brief's completion. The authors would also like to thank the victims and survivors of violence who have disabilities who have voiced their experiences and informed our work and practice over the past decade. Thank you to Mary Crowley, Ram Subramanian, and Erika Turner of Vera's Communications Department for their guidance in bringing this publication to fruition, Alice Chasan for her editorial oversight, and Stephanie Grey for the design and layout.