

SURVIVORS WITH DISABILITIES

Gender-based violence impacts the lives of countless women and their families across the United States. Women and girls of all ages, income levels, racial and ethnic communities, sexual orientations, and abilities experience violence in the form of sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, trafficking, and stalking. Women and girls with disabilities are more at risk for violence, experience violence more often and more severely, and have more barriers to getting support.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), enacted in 1990, provides protections from discrimination for individuals with disabilities. Under Titles II and III of the ADA, domestic violence shelters must be accessible. To be accessible, shelters and offices are required to: admit people with disabilities into their shelter, provide reasonable accommodations, and eliminate structural barriers to access.

At YWCA, we know that not all violence is acknowledged or responded to equally and that some victims go unrecognized altogether. Women and girls with disabilities are often left out of the mainstream dialogue about gender-based violence altogether despite their heightened risk. YWCA is the largest network of domestic violence service providers in the country and is also dedicated to promoting women's health and safety through a variety of local programs, legislative advocacy, and issue education.

FACTS

- As many as 40% of disabled women experience sexual assault or physical violence in their lifetimes and more than 90% of all people with developmental disabilities will experience sexual assault.ⁱ In addition, women with disabilities may also feel more isolated, feel they are unable to report the abuse, or they may be dependent on the abuser for their care.ⁱⁱ
- In 2013, 96% of survivors with a disability could identify their perpetrator. Of those, 41% were victimized by an acquaintance, 31% were victimized by a stranger, and 15% were victimized by an intimate partner. An acquaintance is defined as someone who was well or casually known to the victim, including caregivers.ⁱⁱⁱ Some data has shown that abusers see people with disabilities as “ideal victims” because they are less likely to report, and less likely to be believed.^{iv}
- Domestic violence can cause disability — it is the leading cause of injury to women between the ages of 15 and 44 in the United States.^v
- Between 2011 and 2015, the rate of violent victimization against persons with disabilities was at least 2.5 times the rate for those without disabilities for every age group measured except those 65 and older.^{vi}

- Only 3% of sexual abuse cases involving people with developmental and cognitive disabilities are ever reported.^{vii} Yet, people with cognitive disabilities experience the highest rates of violence of all people with disabilities.^{viii}
- Women with disabilities have a 40% greater chance of intimate partner violence than women without disabilities.^{ix}
- Survivors with disabilities face additional types of abuse.^x They may:
 - Have their medications intentionally withheld or overdosed.
 - Experience financial abuse and extortion.
 - Receive threats of abandonment.
 - Experience inappropriate sexual touching during baths and dressing.
 - Have access to adaptive equipment restricted or taken away.
 - Have communication or mobility devices taken away.
 - Have their service animals threatened or harmed.
 - Have caretakers intentionally ignore personal care and hygiene.
- Survivors have barriers to seeking support from outside sources, including isolation, lack of communication devices and interpretation, lack of transportation, lack of privacy,^{xi} community spaces that are architecturally inaccessible, and societal attitudes about disability.^{xii}

HOW ADVOCATES AND NONPROFITS CAN HELP

- Believe survivors when they communicate their experiences in whatever way works for them, whether through interpretation, drawing, or speech.
- Don't make assumptions about people's disabilities and what they need based on appearance or communication style — let them communicate what they need from you.
- Partner with disability rights and service organizations in your community to ensure survivors with disabilities are able to physically and conceptually access your services.
- Respect their privacy while also understanding reporting mandates for your jurisdiction. While states have varying laws regarding privacy, especially for guardianship rights and abuse of vulnerable populations including some adults with disabilities, always check it out first and get the survivor's consent before talking to anyone else.
- Ensure that your safety planning measures include considerations for disability, service animals, and medical needs.
- Invest in recruitment, training, and leadership development of people with disabilities on your boards, on staff, and in advisory roles.

ⁱ Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://sapac.umich.edu/article/56>.

ⁱⁱ Violence against women with disabilities, Office on Women's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2018)

ⁱⁱⁱ Bureau of Justice Statistics, Crime Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009-2013 Statistical Tables, (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015), <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/capd0913st.pdf>.

^{iv} Hughes, K. Bellis, M.A., Jones, L., Wood, S. Bates, G., Eckley, L., McCoy, E., ... Officer, A. (2012). Prevalence and risk of violence against adults with disabilities: A systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *The Lancet*, 379, 1621-1629. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(11)61851-5.

^v Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women aged 15 to 44. *Can Fam Physician*. 1999;45:2317-2322.

^{vi} Harrell, E. Crime Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009-2015 - Statistical Tables, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics (2017).

^{vii} Valenti-Hein, D., Schwartz, L. 1995. The Sexual Abuse Interview for those with Developmental Disabilities.

^{viii} Harrell, E. Crime Against Persons with Disabilities, 2009-2015 - Statistical Tables, U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics (2017).

^{ix} American Psychological Association, Abuse of Women with Disabilities Fact Sheet. Retrieved 2019 from <http://www.apa.org/topics/violence/women-disabilities.pdf>.

^x National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, Power and Control Wheel: People with Disabilities and their Caretakers, Based on the model by the Domestic Violence Intervention Project, Duluth, MN. Retrieved from http://www.springtideresources.org/sites/all/files/People_with_Disabilities_and_Caregivers_Wheel.pdf.

^{xi} Elman, A. (2005, January). Confronting the Sexual Abuse of Women with Disabilities. Harrisburg, PA: VAWnet, a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence/Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Retrieved from <http://www.vawnet.org>.

^{xii} Id.