

# THE DISABILITY COMMUNITY & SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The statistics on women in the U.S. and violence are staggering. On average, one in three women are victims of intimate partner violence and one in five women are survivors of sexual assault. These numbers underscore the epidemic of sexual violence in the U.S., which disproportionately impact women of color, immigrant women, LGBTQIA+ women, and the disability community.

## Sexual Assault & Disability: The Statistics

As a populace, the disability community experiences one of the highest rates of sexual assault in America and shockingly, this community is hardly included in conversations around sexual violence. Additionally, **lack of representation for the disability community in mainstream sexual assault and harassment advocacy isolates these survivors and their stories.** Statistics on sexual assault for women within the disabled community vary. This is largely because of **1) a low reporting rate and 2) varied definitions of mental, emotional, and physical disability.** However, here are a few statistics that underscore this staggering epidemic:

- According to Human Rights Watch, when compared to able-bodied women, **women with disabilities are three times as likely to be physically abused or assaulted.**
- According to the University of Michigan, it is estimated that **as many as 40% of women with disabilities experience sexual assault or physical violence** in their lifetimes and that **more than 90% of all people with developmental disabilities will experience sexual assault.**
- According to the Justice Department data on sex crimes, people with intellectual disabilities — women and men — are the victims of sexual assault at rates more than **seven times than those for people without disabilities.**

For women with disabilities, sexual assault and violence are routinely unreported and under-addressed. Women and girls with disabilities are susceptible to violence but are often ignored when it comes to trauma informed services that best meet their needs. While each survivor's experience is unique, below we break down what some of the barriers for this community.

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## Barriers for Women with Disabilities

Survivors with disabilities face many of the same barriers to support as able-bodied survivors, but because of societal norms that devalue and dehumanize individuals with disabilities, there are also a wide range of issues unique to their experiences.

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- Abusers can use an individual's disability to further exert power and control over the victim. An example of this could be a caretaker abusing a patient.
- Abusers can use their power to remove a victim's access to hearing or other support devices necessary for communication and quality of life. This coercion adds another barrier to reporting an assault.
- There are limited trauma informed services that address both sexual violence and limitations of the survivor's disability.

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## Challenges in Reporting

Due to limited trauma informed reporting services, persons with disabilities face additional barriers to reporting cases of sexual violence. Due to biases and stereotypes, the disability community is not taken seriously or believed when they report instances of sexual violence.

- Because people with disabilities are stereotyped as **not being sexual**, a survivor may face challenges having their story taken seriously.
- In some instances, individuals who have a disability may rely on the perpetrator for care or support. For the disabled community, caretakers, therapists, doctors, and others are positions of power. This can create a dangerous power-dynamic that adds another barrier to reporting.
- Depending on the severity and type of disability, survivors may not have the support and adequate resources--such as an interpreter or proper equipment-- to report their assault.

Combined, these barriers create a cycle in which survivors may fear disbelief or repercussion and may therefore may not report the assault at all.

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## The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA)

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a civil rights law passed in 1990 which guarantees that people with disabilities have access the same benefits and resources, such as employment and transportation, as people without disabilities. Because of the ADA, **all rape crisis centers are legally required to provide services to people with disabilities.**

Despite the protections granted by the ADA, lawmakers are attempting to repeal this landmark legislation instead of strengthening protections for individuals with disabilities. If passed, H.R. 620 will gut the ADA and provide more protections for businesses, not the disability community. **This dangerous bill has already passed the U.S. House of Representatives and is heading to the U.S. Senate for consideration.** To learn more about H.R. 620, click [here](#). To find out more about the ADA, click [here](#).

# Sources

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