

# The Sexual Assault Epidemic No One Talks About

By Joseph Shapiro SOURCE: <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/08/570224090/the-sexual-assault-epidemic-no-one-talks-about>

*Note: Folks, I have deleted graphic and disturbing descriptions of assault.*

## ABUSED AND BETRAYED: KEY FINDINGS

At a moment of reckoning in the United States about sexual harassment and sexual assault, a yearlong NPR investigation finds that there is little recognition of a group of Americans that is one of the most at risk: people with intellectual disabilities.

- People with intellectual disabilities are sexually assaulted at a rate seven times higher than those without disabilities. That number comes from data run for NPR by the Justice Department from unpublished federal crime data.
- People with intellectual disabilities are at heightened risk at all moments of their daily lives. The NPR data show they are more likely to be assaulted by someone they know and during daytime hours.
- Predators target people with intellectual disabilities because they know they are easily manipulated and will have difficulty testifying later. These crimes go mostly unrecognized, unprosecuted and unpunished. And the abuser is free to abuse again.
- Police and prosecutors are often reluctant to take these cases because they are difficult to win in court.

Pauline is a woman with an intellectual disability. At a time when more women are speaking up about sexual assault — and naming the men who assault or harass them — Pauline, too, wants her story told.

Her story, NPR found in a yearlong investigation, is a common one for people with intellectual disabilities.

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NPR obtained unpublished Justice Department data on sex crimes. The results show that people with intellectual disabilities — women and men — are the victims of sexual assaults at rates more than seven times those for people without disabilities.

It's one of the highest rates of sexual assault of any group in America, and it's hardly talked about at all.

Pauline was part of that silent population. But she says she decided to speak publicly about what happened to her because she wants to "help other women."

NPR's investigation found that people with intellectual disabilities are at heightened risk during all parts of their day. They are more likely than others to be assaulted by someone they know. The

assaults, often repeat assaults, happen in places where they are supposed to be protected and safe, often by a person they have been taught to trust and rely upon.

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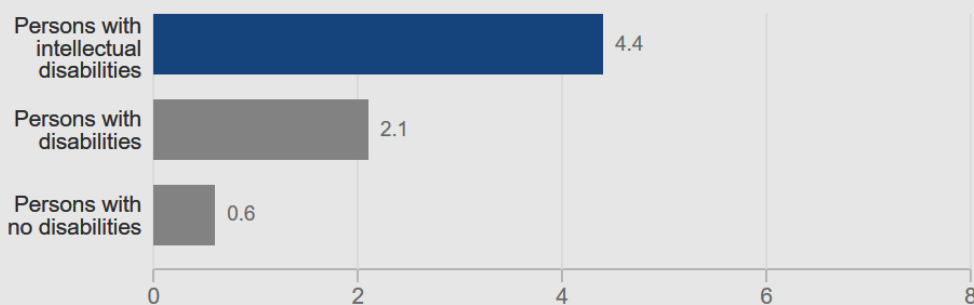
## Raise your hand

At a conference in a large ballroom, Leigh Ann Davis asked the audience in front of her a question: How many of them had dealt with sexual assault or sexual harassment in their lives? Davis was referencing the #MeToo campaign on social media. Almost every woman — about 30 of them — raised her hand.

### Sexual Assault Rates Among People With Intellectual Disabilities, 2011-2015

The rate of rape and sexual assault against people with intellectual disabilities is more than seven times the rate against people without disabilities. Among women with intellectual disabilities, it is about 12 times the rate.

#### RATE PER 1,000 PEOPLE



#### RATE PER 1,000 PEOPLE WITH AN INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY, BY GENDER



#### Notes

Based on the noninstitutionalized U.S. residential population age 12 or older

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, Special Tabulation

Credit: Katie Park/NPR

Davis runs criminal justice programs for The Arc, [a national advocacy group](#) for the 4.7 million people with intellectual disabilities, their families and the professionals who work with them. This was at the group's convention in November in San Diego. The room was filled with professionals and parents as well as people with intellectual disabilities themselves.

Then Davis posed a second question: How many in the audience knew someone with an intellectual disability who had been the victim of sexual harassment or assault? Only two hands went up.

"What does that say about where we are as a society?" Davis asked. "Where people with intellectual disabilities

are more likely to be victimized, but we don't see more hands being raised."

Davis focuses on the issue of sexual violence. She is familiar with the high number of rape reports among people with intellectual disabilities.

"It means people with disabilities still don't feel safe enough to talk about what's going on in their lives," she said. "Or we haven't given them the foundation to do that. ... That there are not enough places to go where they'll feel they'll be believed."

## **Unrecognized, unprosecuted and unpunished**

Intellectual disability is now [the preferred term](#) for what was once called "mental retardation." The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, which represents professionals and helps determine the official definition, describes an intellectual disability as "characterized by significant limitation in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive behaviors." Those adaptive skills include social skills — such as the ability to deal with other people, to follow rules and avoid being victimized — and practical skills, things like being able to work and take care of one's health and safety.

"Developmental disability" is another [commonly used term](#). And while this mostly refers to people with intellectual disabilities, it describes a larger group of people, including some without intellectual disabilities. People with cerebral palsy and autism, for example, are counted as having a developmental disability.

NPR reviewed hundreds of cases of sexual assault against people with intellectual disabilities. We looked at state and federal data, including those new numbers we obtained from the Justice Department. We read court records. We followed media accounts and put together a database of 150 assaults so serious that they garnered rare local and national media attention. We talked to victims, their guardians, family, staff and friends.

We found that there is an epidemic of sexual abuse against people with intellectual disabilities. These crimes go mostly unrecognized, unprosecuted and unpunished. A frequent result was that the abuser was free to abuse again. The survivor is often re-victimized multiple times.

"It's not surprising, because they do have that high level of victimization," says Erika Harrell, a statistician at the Bureau of Justice Statistics. "That high vulnerability is just reflected in our numbers."

Harrell writes the Justice Department's annual report about crime against all people with disabilities. But the report doesn't break out sex crimes against people with intellectual disabilities. When NPR requested those data, she came up with the [stunning numbers](#) that show people with intellectual disabilities are sexually assaulted at much higher numbers — "more than seven times higher than the rate for persons with no disabilities."

"If this were any other population, the world would be up in arms," says Nancy Thaler, a deputy secretary of Pennsylvania's Department of Human Services who [runs the state's developmental disability programs](#). "We would be irate and it would be the No. 1 health crisis in this country."

For people in the field, like her, the high rates of assault have been an open secret.

"Folks with intellectual disabilities are the perfect victim," says Thaler, who has been a leader in the field for more than 40 years — in top state, federal and national association jobs. She is also a parent of an adult son with an intellectual disability.

"They are people who often cannot speak or their speech is not well-developed. They are generally taught from childhood up to be compliant, to obey, to go along with people. Because of the intellectual disability, people tend not to believe them, to think that they are not credible or that what they saying, they are making up or imagining," she explains. "And so for all these reasons, a perpetrator sees an opportunity, a safe opportunity to victimize people."

Harrell could think of only one other group that might have a higher risk of assault: women between the ages of 18 and 24 — but only those who are not in college. Those young women tend to be poorer and more marginalized. Compared with women with intellectual disabilities, they have an almost identical rate of assault, just slightly higher.

But the rate for people with intellectual disabilities — the Justice Department numbers count people ages 12 and older — is almost certainly an underestimate, the government statistician said. Because those numbers from household surveys don't include people living in institutions — where, Harrell said, research shows people are even more vulnerable to assault. Also not counted are the 373,000 people living in group homes.

The 1998 law that requires the Justice Department to keep statistics on disabled victims of crime — the Crime Victims with Disabilities Awareness Act — actually only mentions people with developmental disabilities. It calls for a report to spur research to "understand the nature and extent of crimes against individuals with developmental disabilities." But the DOJ expanded its collection to look at people with all disabilities and made a more useful annual report.

## **Vulnerable everywhere**

Most rape victims — in general — are assaulted by someone they know, not by a stranger. But NPR's numbers from the Justice Department found that people with intellectual disabilities are even more likely to be raped by someone they know. For women without disabilities, the rapist is a stranger 24 percent of the time, but for a woman with an intellectual disability it is less than 14 percent of the time.

And the risk comes at any time of day. Half the sexual assaults take place during the day. For the rest of the population, about 40 percent of sexual assaults occur during daytime. The federal numbers, and the results of our own database, show that people with intellectual disabilities are vulnerable everywhere, including in places where they should feel safest: where they live, work, go to school; on van rides to medical appointments and in public places. Most of the time, the perpetrators are people they have learned to count on the most — sometimes their own family, caregivers or staffers, and friends.

Often it's another person with a disability — at a group home, or a day program, or work — who commits the assault. Pennsylvania, at NPR's request, compiled data from more than 500 cases of suspected abuse in 2016. Of those, 42 percent of the suspected offenders were themselves people with intellectual disabilities. Staff made up 14 percent of the suspects; relatives were 12 percent; and friends, 11 percent.

One reason for the high rates of victimization is that so many adults come in and out of the lives of people with intellectual disabilities, according to Beverly Frantz of [Temple University's Institute](#)

[on Disabilities](#). Frantz estimates that a typical person with an intellectual disability who lives in a group home or a state institution deals with hundreds of different caregivers every year.

"If you think two to three different shifts, five days a week, 365 days a year, it adds up pretty quickly," she says.

The high number includes the consideration of weekend shifts, too; high staff turnover, staffers on vacations or on sick leave, plus assistance from family members.

The vast majority are professional, dedicated and caring. But for someone who wants to be abusive, the opportunity is there. Caregivers have a role that gives them power. They may assist with the most intimate care — dressing, bathing, toileting — for some with significant physical disabilities. A person with intellectual disability is often very dependent upon those caregivers.

"We treat them as children," Frantz says. "We teach them to be compliant."

For many people with intellectual disabilities, caregivers — including professional staff — become their friends, often their best friends, among the people who know them best and care about them the most. But that, too, is a line that can be easily crossed.

"We use the word 'friend' a lot, and the boundaries are sometimes nonexistent," Frantz explains.

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