ifteen to 20 percent of the population—an estimated 53 million Americans, and some one billion people worldwide—live with some form of disability. Among the varied challenges they face is an increased risk of violence. Despite that link, there’s a paucity of research to describe who is most at risk, the types of threats they face, and how to prevent abuse and violence. “We live in a society which disrespects disabled people. Violence toward them is a function of that, and lack of research is a function of that,” says Tom Shakespeare, PhD, a professor of disability research at Norwich Medical School at the University of East Anglia.

Maltreatment of people with disabilities is a preventable tragedy that’s been hiding in plain sight for far too long, advocates say. “It’s a complex problem bound up with social inequality and a lot of other stuff,” Shakespeare adds. “We should be taking this very seriously.”

VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

In a previous position with the World Health Organization, Shakespeare reviewed studies from around the world to explore the connections between disability and violence in both children and adults. In one analysis, he and his colleagues found that children with disabilities are 3.7 times more likely than nondisabled children to be victims of violence (The Lancet, 2012). “That’s an astounding figure that merits much greater investigation,” he says. In a second paper, they reported that adults with disabilities had about a 50 percent greater risk of having been the victim of violence within the past year. Adults with mental illness were particularly vulnerable, with nearly four times higher risk of violence (The Lancet, 2012). “It’s a cliché that mentally ill people cause violence. They’re actually more likely to be victims of violence,” Shakespeare says.

Those statistics outline the problem in broad strokes. But drilling down into the specifics is much more difficult. “Statistical reporting is muddied at the federal level,” says Jennifer Reesman, PhD, a pediatric neuropsychologist at the Kennedy Krieger Institute, faculty member at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and chair of APA’s Committee on Disability Issues in Psychology. “This causes extensive problems with research.”

Despite that challenge, researchers can point to certain factors that put people with disabilities at greater risk of violence, abuse and neglect. Poverty is a known risk factor for abuse and neglect, and people with disabilities are more likely than those without to live below the poverty line, says Rhoda Olkin, PhD, a professor at the California School of Professional Psychology at Alliant International University. “It’s an impoverished group. They are more likely to be isolated, unemployed or underemployed, and receiving

CE credits: 1

Learning objectives: After reading this article, CE candidates will be able to:

1. Discuss how common violence is among people with disabilities.
2. Discuss the risk factors that make people with disabilities more prone to be victims of violence.
3. Discuss strategies to prevent violence against people with disabilities.

The broad category of “disability” can include physical, sensory, cognitive, psychiatric and developmental/intellectual impairments. In other words, while people with blindness might face very different risks than people with spinal cord injuries or people with autism, there is no easy way to tease those differences apart within the available datasets. It’s virtually impossible, for instance, to know how many deaf children are placed into foster care, or how many women with psychiatric illnesses are the victims of homicide. “We have over 40 federal definitions of disability,” says Michelle Balan, PhD, professor of social welfare and family, population and preventive medicine at Stony Brook Medical School, whose research focuses on individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. “This causes extensive problems with research.”

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CE Corner

CONTINUING EDUCATION
HOW PSYCHOLOGY CAN DO MORE TO PREVENT ABUSE OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

BY KIRSTEN WEIR

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government assistance.” People with disabilities are also often reliant on caregivers to help them meet their daily needs. For children who require aide(s) to help with activities such as feeding, toileting or catheterization, that can mean increased opportunities for abuse, Reesman says. “When an adult is alone with a child without other eyes around, there’s more opportunity for abuse to take place,” she says. That’s especially true when the child is nonverbal or has difficulty communicating.

Adults, too, can suffer maltreatment from caregivers, including aides, health-care workers and family members. A number of studies have found women with disabilities are at risk of both domestic abuse and sexual violence from romantic partners. A study of more than 7,000 Canadian women by Douglas Brownridge, PhD, at the University of Manitoba, for instance, found that women with disabilities had a 40 percent greater risk of partner violence than women without disabilities (Violence Against Women, 2006).

Given the limitations of the data, however, there’s still much we don’t know about partner violence among people with disabilities, says Ballan. She and her students spent three years combing through data from the University of Manitoba, for instance, to complete a meta-analysis and find that women with disabilities were more likely to report lifetime intimate partner violence than men without disabilities. Men with disabilities were also more likely to report past-year partner violence than either men or women without disabilities. More research is needed to determine why certain groups of people are at higher risk of abuse.

BARRIERS TO SAFETY

One important barrier for people with disabilities is the challenge of reaching out for help. Some face families of people with disabilities. Such families are often socially disadvantaged, she says, compounding the strain on parents who are struggling to care for a child with special needs. APA has recognized the urgent need for more data. The Association’s Resolution on the Maltreatment of Children with Disabilities makes a number of recommendations, including the creation of a national strategy to collect data, more investment in research, and greater development of evidence-based prevention and intervention methods.

While more research is sorely needed, psychologists can’t ignore the problem until more data roll in, Olkin says. “All mental health professionals should assess for abuse at intake, and that’s especially important for people with disabilities.” That means asking clients about types of abuse that aren’t always obvious, she adds, such as whether a woman’s spouse makes efforts to limit her mobility or whether a child is ever left alone with the van driver. “I had a client who was dependent on her husband for mobility, and he would put her on the toilet and leave her there [for long periods],” Olkin says. “It’s abusive, but not the kind of thing we’re on the lookout for.” When clients with disabilities are in abusive situations, psychologists may be able to help by teaching clients about ways to communicate

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Children with disabilities are 3.7 times more likely than nondisabled children to be victims of violence.

Children with disabilities are 3.7 times more likely than nondisabled children to be victims of violence.

ADDITIONAL READING

Prevalence and Risk of Violence Against Adults With Disabilities: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Observational Studies

Jones, L., Ballan, M.S., Frey, M.B., Jones, L., Wood, S., Bates, G., Eckley, L., McCoy, E., Mitton, C., Shakespeare, T., & Officer, A.

The Lancet, 2012

Self-Defense Among Women With Disabilities: An Unexplored Domain in Domestic Violence Cases

Ballan, M.S. & Frey, M.B.

Violence Against Women, 2012

To directly access the citations in this article, go to our digital edition at www.apa.org/monitor/digital.