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# Sexual assault of people with disabilities: Results of a 2002–2007 national report in Taiwan

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### ABSTRACT

Sexual violence against people with disabilities is widespread and linked to negative public health and social outcomes. The objectives of the present study were to describe and analyze and thus provide an overview of the current state of affairs concerning sexual assault among people with disabilities, including reported prevalence and trends, over the period from 2002 through 2007 in Taiwan. The present study analyzed nationwide data from the 2002–2007 “Sexual assaults report system” derived primarily from the Council of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assaults Prevention, Ministry of the Interior, Taiwan. The data took into account the number of cases and disability type in persons reported to have been sexually assaulted, and to analyze the reported rate of sexual assaults among this section of the population in Taiwan. In addition, the study used a linear estimation model to examine with time (2002–2007) in the rate of reported sexual assaults. The rate of increase of sexual assault reported among people with disabilities was 2.7 times that of the general population (469–173%) during the period of 2002–2007. Government statistics showed that intellectually disabled persons accounted for the largest proportion (>50%) of reported sexual assault cases among the disabled, followed by persons with chronic psychosis, who accounted for one-third of the reported sexual assault cases among the disabled population. The reported rate of sexual assault increased from 0.9 to 2.42 per ten-thousand people in the general population and from 1.24 to 5.74 per ten-thousand disabled persons. Intellectual disability, chronic psychosis and voice and speech impairments were consistently associated

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with a higher prevalence of sexual assault than the general population. The line of best fit estimated from a linear model showed a significant change over the study period in the reported number of sexual assault cases among disabled people. The results highlight the requirement for further study to explore the needs of people with disabilities with regards to education and other strategies to prevent sexual assault, particularly in the most vulnerable group—those with intellectual disability.

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## 1. Introduction

Sexual assault can involve verbal, visual, or any other behavior that forces a person to join in unwanted sexual contact or attention, including inappropriate touching, vaginal, anal, or oral penetration, non-consensual sexual intercourse, attempted rape or child molestation (National Women's Health Information Center, 2005). Results of a national telephone survey conducted by the U.S. CDC in 2001–2003 indicated that 1 in 59 U.S. adults experienced unwanted sexual activity in the previous 12 months and that 1 in 15 U.S. adults had been forced to have sex during their lifetime (Basile, Chen, Black, & Saltzman, 2007).

Higher levels of disability are associated with an increased risk of sexual abuse (Hershkowitz, Lamb, & Horowitz, 2007). Nannini (2006) analyzed data from 16,672 women survivors of sexual assault who sought state-funded sexual assault victim services in Massachusetts from 1987 through 1995, and found that more than 10% of female victims reported that they have disabilities. Casteel, Martin, Smith, Gurka, and Kupper (2008) also examined the association between the level of disability impairment and physical and sexual assault in a sample of U.S. women aged at least 18 years, and found that women with disabilities that severely limited their daily living activities were at increased risk of sexual assault.

Among the physical and sexual assault cases, boys appear to suffer more physical abuse and neglect, but more girls suffer from higher rates of sexual abuse. In a study by Sobsey, Randall, and Parrila (1997), boys with disabilities, however, were over-represented in all categories of abuse. Sexual abuse of boys still appears to be common, but it is under-reported, under-recognized, and under-treated (Holmes & Slap, 1998). In an interview-based study carried out in Canada, women with disabilities had 40% greater odds of being victims of violence in the 5 years preceding the interview compared to non-disabled women, and these women appeared to be at particular risk of being subject to severe violence (Brownridge, 2006). Multivariable analysis revealed that women with disabilities were not significantly more likely than women without disabilities to have experienced physical assault alone within the past year; however, women with disabilities had more than 4 times the odds of being subjected to sexual assault in the past year compared to women without disabilities (Martin et al., 2006). Children with disabilities often have limited access to critical information pertaining to personal safety and prevention of sexual abuse. Furthermore, parents may object to their child being provided with education on human sexuality (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001a).

With regard to disability type and sexual assault, there is growing recognition that children, adolescents, and adults who are intellectually disabled are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation and need intervention services. These people are especially vulnerable due to their often life-long dependence on caregivers, as well as their relatively powerless position in society, emotional and social insecurities, and lack of education regarding sexuality and sexual abuse (Tharinger, Horton, & Millea, 1990). Pan (2007) interviewed 336 persons with intellectual disabilities and revealed that the prevalence of sexual abuse for this population was 5.4%; she suggested that development of effective service programs for abuse prevention and strategies in Taiwan was needed. However, there is a significant under-reporting of incidents of rape and sexual assault among people with an intellectual disability and very few cases end up in courts of law (Aylott, 1999).

One study of the Norwegian Deaf Register (Kvam, 2004) indicated that deaf children were at greater risk of sexual abuse than hearing children. In deaf females aged 18–65 who lost their hearing

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