

Statistics on Disability and Abuse Should Inform the Legislative Process

by Thomas F. Coleman, J.D.

The most recent report on abuse of people with disabilities was published by our own Disability and Abuse Project in 2013. ([Website](#), Victims and Their Families Speak Out: A Report on the 2012 National Survey on Abuse of People with Disabilities.) More than 7,200 people throughout the nation responded to this survey, including thousands of people with disabilities and their families.

Over 70 percent of people with disabilities reported that they had been victims of abuse. More than 63 percent of family members said their loved one with a disability had been an abuse victim. Focusing exclusively on those with developmental disabilities, 62.5 percent of this group said they had experienced abuse of one type or another.

Of the various types of abuse, victims with disabilities reported verbal-emotional abuse (87.2%), physical abuse (50.6%), sexual abuse (41.6%), neglect (37.3%), and financial abuse (31.5%).

Dr. Nora J. Baladerian, Executive Director of the Disability and Abuse Project, was not surprised by the results of our national survey. She is a recognized expert on abuse and disability and lectures on the subject at professional conferences throughout the nation. She trains law enforcement personnel, psychologists, social workers, and service providers.

Dr. Baladerian cites retrospective studies that summarize the accounts of adults about their experiences of abuse as children. These studies show that one in four women, and one in six men, report that they were victims of sexual abuse as a child. ([Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006](#)) In another study of adults retrospectively reporting adverse childhood experiences, 25.9 percent of respondents reported verbal abuse as children, 14.8 percent reported physical abuse, and 12.2 percent reported sexual abuse. ([Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009](#))

The findings of these studies are for the generic population. But what are the rates of abuse for people with developmental disabilities? Dr. Baladerian refers to a study by her Canadian colleague, Dr. Dick Sobsey,

whose research found that people with developmental disabilities are 4 to 10 times more likely to be victims of abuse than the generic population.

Studies cited by The Arc of the United States confirm the high rates of abuse for children with disabilities, especially with developmental disabilities. ([Davis, Abuse of Children with Intellectual Disabilities.](#))

The data on perpetrators is also very instructive. Perpetrators of abuse are generally not strangers. Most often, they are people close to the victim. In the generic population, more than 80 percent of child abusers were parents. ([Office for Victims of Crime, United States Department of Justice, 2009](#)) According to Dr. Baladerian, victims with developmental disabilities are often abused by household members.

Perhaps 20 percent of generic children are victims of child abuse. Children with developmental disabilities are at least 3.4 times more likely to be victims than the generic child population. Do the math. By the time they reach adulthood, a majority of people with disabilities may have been victims of abuse.

Proposed legislation that affects people with intellectual and developmental disabilities should be carefully scrutinized with these statistics in mind. A bill that makes it easier to avoid limited guardianships – and the scrutiny that such proceedings require – may be increasing the risk of abuse.

Such legislation may benefit benevolent parents who testify in front of a legislative committee. But it also affects a much larger class of vulnerable adults who are not so fortunate to have benevolent parents. ◇◇

Thomas F. Coleman is the Executive Director of the Disability and Guardianship Project of Spectrum Institute. (tomcoleman@spectruminstitute.org)



www.spectruminstitute.org