

Sexual Abuse of Adults with Learning Disabilities

A survey of new cases of sexual abuse of adults with learning disabilities in the area of a Regional Health Authority during 1989 and 1990 is reported. This is the largest ever such study.

How widespread is sexual abuse of adults with learning disabilities? At least 1.67 new cases per 100,000 population can be expected each year. In a typical district of 250,000 this means about four new cases per year. These are conservative figures. The true figures could well be somewhat higher.

What kind of sexual abuse occurred? A very high percentage of the cases involved serious assaults. Contact abuse occurred in 95% - touch (87%), masturbation (31%), penetration or attempted penetration (67%). Non-contact abuse occurred in 23% (e.g. pornography, indecent exposure, harassment).

How much distress did victims experience? Some emotional trauma or distress was reported in 55% of the victims. Changes in behaviour reported as a consequence of abuse included onset of anxieties or phobias, and increase in disruptive or aggressive behaviours.

Who were the perpetrators? Overwhelmingly perpetrators were men (over 97%), known and familiar to their victims (87%). In only 5% of cases was the perpetrator a total stranger. The largest group of reported offenders was made up of other people with learning disabilities (42%). 18% of offenders were family members, 14% were staff or volunteers, and 17% were other known and trusted non-disabled people such as family friends. This is probably not an accurate picture. People with learning disabilities are more likely to be detected while abuse by close family members is less likely to be disclosed. Many of the cases involved one perpetrator offending against several people with learning disabilities. This indicates that where sexual abuse is suspected, other potential victims of both sexes, to whom the alleged perpetrator had access, should be interviewed to see if abuse of others has occurred. Suspected or known perpetrators who are service users and potential vulnerable victims often continue to be congregated together.

Are women more likely to be victims of sexual abuse than men? Yes. 73% of victims are women

but the proportion of cases involving men as victims (27%) is still significant.

How old are victims? Most were in the range 21-30 years but age of first occurrence of current abuse ranged from 5 to 60 years.

What levels are victims' learning disabilities? 20% were assessed as having a severe or profound learning disability, 40% severe or moderate and 40% mild or borderline.

What additional disabilities did victims have? 25% had two or more disabilities in addition to their learning disability e.g. communication difficulty, psychiatric or behavioural problem, epilepsy, medical, physical or sensory handicaps.

Where were victims living? 31% lived with their families. Nearly all the rest lived in managed properties run by: social services (23%), health (23%), or private/voluntary agencies (19%). Most lived in staffed housing (36%), smaller numbers lived in hostels (14%), or hospitals (7%).

Where did the abuse occur? Most of the abuse took place in the home either of the victim (48%) or perpetrator (10%). 14% occurred in the victim's day or leisure facility, 12% in a public place such as a park or bus station, and 16% on transport, or in multiple or unspecified locations.

Who reported the sexual abuse? In over two thirds of cases it was the victim who reported the abuse (68%). Reporting by paid service workers was low (less than 25%), and by family members even lower (4%). Abuse of clients with poor communication skills is probably less likely to be detected and reported as they will be unable to make their concerns clear.

For full details see: Turk, V., & Brown, H., 1993. The Sexual Abuse of Adults with Learning Disabilities: Results of a Two Year Incidence Survey. *Mental Handicap Research* 6, 3, 193-216.

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