

Clarifying Data on Disability and Crime Victimization

In an [article](#) published in January 2018, a story produced by National Public Radio said that “People with intellectual disabilities are sexually assaulted at a rate seven times higher than those without disabilities.” The story based this assertion on federal crime data provided to NPR.

Each year the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) issues a [report](#) about “Crime Against Persons with Disabilities.” The data is taken from crimes reported to law enforcement agencies throughout the nation. It does not include data for crimes against children. It focuses only on crimes against teenagers and adults (people over 12 years of age). Therefore, any statement regarding rates of victimization would be more accurate to say “rates involving teenagers and adults with disabilities” rather than rates for “people with disabilities.” NPR used the generic term “people” which could cause the audience to infer that included people of all ages.

There can be a big difference between actions which are “abusive” and actions which are “criminal.” Whereas [other federal agencies](#) track abuse of children or adults, the Department of Justice only tracks crimes. Much of the abuse that is tracked by federal agencies is not criminal. Emotional and verbal abuse, for example, harms the victim but does not constitute a crime. Therefore, any statement about the BJS statistics should refer to crime victimization and not abuse. NPR got that right since it referred to “assault” and not “abuse.”

The NPR statement was incorrect when it asserted that this heightened rate applies to people with “intellectual disabilities.” That term is generally understood to apply to a subset of people with developmental disabilities who have limited cognitive functioning. By using the term “intellectual disabilities,” the story gave the impression that, as a class, people with this type of developmental disability were sexual assault victims at a rate seven times higher than people without disabilities. BJS statistics do not support this assertion.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics uses data collected by the American Community Survey (ACS) of the United States Census Bureau. The ACS survey is done annually. The BJS report tracks data for people over the age of 12 who have a “cognitive” disability. That is the same term used by the ACS survey. Neither the BJS or ACS has data for people with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Therefore, it is not correct to cite BJS reports for rates of victimization for this population.

The ACS asks respondents if they or someone in their household has “a serious difficulty remembering, concentrating, or making decisions.” Therefore, crime victimization rates for individuals with a “[cognitive difficulty](#)” track those who answered yes to this [question](#).

Those with a “cognitive” difficulty in the ACS survey and BJS reports would include a wide range of conditions that cause such symptoms, including: dementia, anxiety disorder, diabetes, alcoholism, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, insomnia, OCD, hypertension, and hypothyroidism, as well as those suffering from the side effects of medications. The rate of sexual assault victimization for those with cognitive disabilities would include individuals in any of these categories.

What NPR told its audience is generally correct. Vulnerable populations have higher rates of crime victimization. But educators and advocates speaking about disability rates should be more precise. They should refer to the original source and cite rates for the categories that BJS actually tracks. Neither intellectual or developmental disabilities are specified in BJS reports.