

Issue Brief: Disabled Persons and Violence in the US

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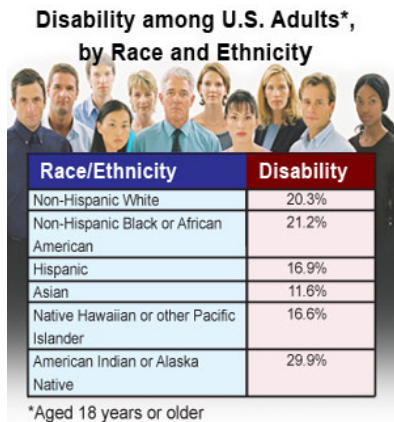
Key Words (4-6): Disabled, abuse, incarceration, group housing, disabled veterans, severely mentally disabled

Description: This brief encapsulates an effort to acknowledge the ways in which violence affects disabled individuals. It examines the abuse of mentally and/or physically disabled people as well as the physical and mental repercussions of the violence experienced by veterans.

Key Points (4-6):

- Disabled persons are often the victims of abusive crimes that are not likely to be properly reported, if at all.
- Public group homes for the disabled have been largely inadequate in providing sanitary and safe havens for disabled individuals.
- The resources of jails are likewise limited in addressing the needs of disabled inmates.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder is one of the most common mental health afflictions of veterans.

Images (2-4):



Source: Centers for Disease Control & Prevention – Disability and Health

Self-reported Health Status Among U.S. Adults* With and Without Disabilities

Self-reported Health Status	With Disability	Without Disability
Excellent/ Very Good	27.2%	60.2%
Good	32.5%	29.9%
Fair/Poor	40.3%	9.9%

*Aged 18 years or older

Source: Centers for Disease Control & Prevention – Disability and Health

Brief:

According to the US Census Bureau, there were 54.4 million disabled persons in the US in 2009, which is nearly 1 in 5 Americans or about 19% of the US population.¹ Even though disabled persons constitute the largest minority group in the US, they still face significant problems in American society. Violence and abuse affect many disabled persons and they have a high rate of incarceration. Likewise, disabled veterans constitute a less-frequently observed group of disabled persons affected by violence.

According to the National Council on Disability's May 2007 report, disabled persons are more frequently targets of crime than other members of the population. In many cases, the attack, whether verbally or physically harmful, is not premeditated, thereby highlighting the common notion that a disabled person is less likely to tell the proper authority about the abuse. It is not surprising then that the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund found that the hate crimes least likely to be reported are those committed against persons with disabilities. The disabled victim may not report the incident due to fear of future incidents, shame, a caregiver that does not report it or because their disability was not mentioned if the crime was reported.²

Many of the public housing centers for the disabled in Washington D.C. at the end of the 20th Century had serious issues concerning unreported crimes against people with physical and/or mental disabilities. The horrid living conditions, maltreatment and abuse by staff members of disabled persons living in the Forest Haven group home were characteristic of

¹ <http://jfactivist.typepad.com/jfactivist/2009/01/new-census-disability-statistics-released-one-in-five-americans-have-a-disability.html>

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<http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/discrimination/report.s.aspx?s=usa&p=violence-based-on-disability-bias>

many similar group homes in Washington D.C. (where there were 150 homes) during the 1990s. In Washington D.C. alone there were “more than 350 incidents of abuse, neglect, molestation or stealing...in group homes and day programs in the ‘90s,” which is only the number of those actually reported. Moreover, the District government did not fine any of the managers for the maltreatment incidents during this period, which clearly highlights the struggle that procuring any legal reciprocity for disabled victims of abuse entails. After nearly fifteen years of advocacy, a lawsuit closed the Forest Haven group home; however, the Community of the Ark home (one of the homes that remained in operation) could only accept eight of its more than one thousand patients.³

One of the consequences of the lack of appropriate and effective housing for disabled persons is that many end up being hospitalized or incarcerated. In 2003, there were over two million prisoners in the US jail system living with physical or mental disabilities. Due to physical disabilities, some must rely on other prisoners to help them with daily activities and many are excluded from work-assistance and educational initiatives for inmates because of learning impediments.⁴ This only exacerbates the dangers faced by disabled persons in the prison environment.

Isolation is often used as a means of discipline for unruly or disruptive disabled prisoners, which fuels depression and thus the potential for self-harm. Furthermore, such disciplinary actions make disabled prisoners more likely than “normal” patients to receive extended sentences.⁴

In a study of the incarceration of severely mentally disabled (SMD) persons in Summit County, Ohio, it was found that, of the 30 randomly selected criminals with SMD incarcerated in a three month period in 1995, none were employed, and 60% were African American (Summit County, however, is 86.8% white). Thus, economic status and race are two important factors inherent in examining the trends of incarceration for disabled persons and although initiatives have been taken to protect incarcerated prisoners with disabilities in Summit County, such as a Crisis Intervention Team and a mental health court (per cooperation with the Akron Police Department),⁵ the prisons’ insufficient resources aggravate the

already numerous problems faced by disabled prisoners.



Source: Able Veterans

Disabled veterans are another group affected by violence, albeit less-frequently addressed in discussions on the disabled and violence. In 2008, there were 23.2 million veterans in the US. Nearly one fourth of the veteran population was disabled in 2008: 5.5 million.⁶ Many of the disabled veterans today suffered their wounds fighting in Afghanistan and/or Iraq. Of those discharged for disabilities incurred in combat, more than 20% have mental disabilities.⁷

One of the most common mental disabilities suffered as a result of war is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In order to gain benefits from the federal government a veteran must apply for recognition. The fact that many do illustrates, according to a study by N.A. Sayer et al., that gaining PTSD recognition is “a step towards improvement” even if it means acknowledging the existence of a source of insecurity (Social Science & Medicine).⁸ In order to address the needs of disabled veterans affected by war a comprehensive approach is suggested that will include the veteran’s family.⁷

Disabled individuals, both veterans and citizens, are affected by violence; yet, this violence

³ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/daily/march99/grouphome14.htm>

⁴ http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/hww/results/external_link_maincontentframe.jhtml?DARGS=/hww/results/results_common.jhtml.43

⁵ http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/hww/results/external_link_maincontentframe.jhtml?DARGS=/hww/results/results_common.jhtml.43

⁶ <http://www.disabled-world.com/disability/statistics/veteran-statistics.php>

⁷ http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/hww/results/external_link_maincontentframe.jhtml?DARGS=/hww/results/results_common.jhtml.43

⁸ <http://www.sciencedirect.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/science?ob=MIimg&imagekey=B6VBF-49M0JN8-4-IJ&cdi=5925&user=18704&pii=S027795360300426X&origin=search&coverDate=06%2F30%2F2004&sk=999419988&view=c&wchp=dGLbVIW-zSkzV&md5=f821de665ecbf7f9dabde3aedba8d8ae&ie=/sdarticle.pdf>

comes by way of war for the former and abuse for the latter.

Groups like Disabled American Veterans, a non-profit organization “dedicated to building better lives for America’s disabled veterans and their families,” advocate on behalf of disabled veterans by promoting and supporting legislation and services that aid disabled veterans.⁹ Likewise, the Disabled Rights Advocacy Group seeks to “empower the disabled population...[by addressing] issues concerning discrimination in housing, public accommodation, education, total accessibility to federal, state, municipal and public buildings and transportation.”¹⁰ Yet, while such advocacy groups indeed obtain beneficial gains for disabled citizens and veterans, the number of such groups and the power they wield is still lacking.

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⁹ <http://www.dav.org/about/Default.aspx>

¹⁰ <http://www.draginc.com/about.htm>