

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/casting-light-on-sexual-abuse-of-children-with-disabilities-and-deaf-people>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Despite the alarmingly high rates of violence people with disabilities and Deaf people experience in our country, the issue remains a hidden problem that rarely gets the attention it deserves. On March 27, Vera hosted a congressional staff briefing that provided an opportunity to raise the awareness of government officials and Hill staffers around this issue. Panelists included [Nancy Smith](#), the director of Vera's [Center on Victimization and Safety](#), Teresa Tudor, the program administrator for the Illinois Department of Human Services, Bureau of Domestic and Sexual Violence Prevention, and Erin Esposito, the executive director of Advocacy Services for Abused Deaf Victims, who is herself a courageous Deaf survivor who was willing to share her personal experience of child sexual and domestic abuse. The panel was also moderated by [Christine Leonard](#), the Director of Vera's DC office.

At the briefing, Vera released an issue brief that highlights this important and under-researched issue titled [*Sexual Abuse of Children with Disabilities: A National Snapshot*](#).

Available data show that children with disabilities and who are Deaf are three times more likely to be victims of sexual abuse than children without disabilities. The real numbers are certainly higher, because so many of these victims find it impossible to report the abuse, let alone get the help that they need afterward. Some of the barriers to the victim services or criminal justice agency assistance they need are physical, but they also face problems of communication, attitudes, and policy.

One of the contributing factors to children with disabilities increased risk for abuse is ableism: the systematic discrimination of people with disabilities in U.S. society. Because of misconceptions and stereotypes steeped in ableism, people with disabilities are less likely to be believed when they tell what happened to them. Children with disabilities are also systematically denied basic information about sexual health and relationships, and thus have no context in which to describe the abuse. Another risk factor for these children is society's neglect of primary prevention efforts around child sexual abuse in general.

Response to the Capitol Hill briefing has been encouraging. Along with the brief, it has begun to spur a growing dialogue to cast light on victims who have long been in the shadows.

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