

# Ending the Silence of Victims with Developmental Disabilities

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*"[I was raped] three different times... I'm  
worried that he might try to harm me again."*

*"He did it to other people besides me."*

*"... Every person that is in our lives thinks we're  
defenseless....."*

*"They ain't gonna believe you anyway.... Who  
do you tell? Nobody."*



## *Crime* against people with developmental disabilities.....

- Similar in scope ... women, children, & elderly
- Remains largely invisible and unaddressed.



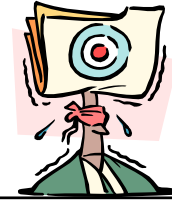
## *Levels* of major crimes

- 4 to 10 times higher
- Reported and prosecuted at much lower rates
- High rate of sexual assault
- Every race culture and social class at risk
- Repeat victims
- Often offender is well known to the victims

## *How* could this be true?


*“These were my exact questions when I first began to read these studies almost four years ago. As a parent of a 28 year old man who has been intellectually disabled since the age of six month and a former professional advocate for people with developmental disabilities, how could I ..... miss this serious problem?”*

(Sorensen, 1997)



## *Why??*

- Victims with developmental disabilities are frequently invisible **because**
  - Many cannot report their offenders
  - Crimes often go unreported
  - Reports are often discredited
  - Alleged offenders less likely to be tried and found guilty
  - When found guilty, offenders often receive a “lighter sentence”




## Audrey, mother of a daughter of a victim of rape:

*“We found ourselves questioning .... Will our daughter ever be free from the hurt, fear and the pain that she endures as a result of the rape that occurred just a few door from her home?.....*

*Would her right as a victim with special needs be ‘equal’ to that of the defendant’s, or would the ‘scales of justice’ be tilted to favor the perpetrator of this disgusting crime...?*

*Would the judge, the attorneys, and law enforcers involved in the case be prepared to communicate with someone limited in speech and limited in comprehending certain types of questions?”*

*(Badger, 1997)*



## **Why** is there such a **SILENCE**? Why are victims with developmental disabilities so **INVISIBLE**?

- Overshadowed by emphasis on other crimes (e.g., Atlanta, GA)
  - Cover-up in some communities (Sea Bright, NJ)
- Disability service providers often cover-up crimes in their agencies
  - Deemed unimportant and receive little coverage (e.g., California, 1993; Sante Fe, New Mexico, 1989).
- Criminal Justice research extremely limited regarding victims with developmental disabilities




***Data*** tells us that people with **Developmental Disabilities** are

- 4 to 10 times higher risk of becoming crime victims
- Differences in victimization rates most pronounced for sexual assault (10.7 times as high) and robbery (12.7 times as high)
- High probability of repeat victimization
- 50% of women with developmental disabilities who had been sexually assaulted had been assaulted 10 or more times.



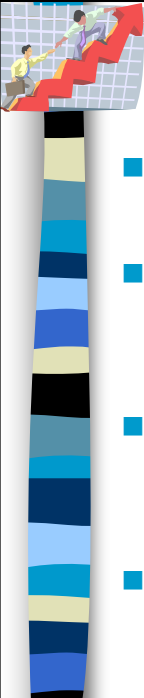
***Data*** tells us that

- children with disabilities more than twice as likely as children without disabilities to be physically and sexually abused
- roughly 5 million serious crimes are committed against persons with developmental disabilities in the U. S. each year
- no data collection programs for crimes against persons with developmental disabilities as there are for other specialized populations through the Hate Crime Statistics Act (this may be changing)




*Data* tells us that

- persons with developmental disabilities appear to have heightened risks of victimization regardless of their living situation
- offenders are often care givers
- offenders seek victims with disabilities specifically because they are considered to be vulnerable and unable to seek help or report the crime




*Data* tells us that

- More than half of the crimes committed are never reported
- when they are reported, they are often handled administratively rather than through criminal prosecution
- when crimes are reported, there are lower rates of police follow-up, prosecution and convictions.
- when convictions do occur, sentences are lighter, particularly for sexual assault



*Data* tells us that

- the trauma suffered by victims with disabilities is just as severe as the trauma experienced by people without disabilities who survive crimes
- persons with developmental disabilities are assumed to have difficulty serving as credible witnesses in court
- A person with mental retardation usually receives no special accommodations in court to assist with testimony



*Data* tells us that

- existing crime prevention programs and victim services have largely failed to acknowledge the high risk of victimization among persons with developmental disabilities or their special needs
- there are very few treatment programs specifically targeted toward the special needs of victims with developmental disabilities

## We must *End the Silence*

- for the son of Daniel Sorensen
- For the daughter of Audrey Badger
- For the people who have boldly spoken out as victims and survivors of crimes, and
- For those who have not or cannot speak out



## *Ending the Silence* means

- Preparing advocates and self advocates
  - Service providers
  - Victims assistance personnel
  - Justice system professionals.....
- to address this far-reaching problem.

*This means cross-systems training*



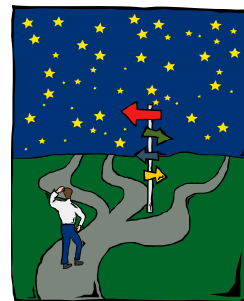
## *Ending the Silence* first means

- A better job helping people with developmental and other disabilities protect themselves from crime by
  - Providing training which includes self defense and personal safety
  - Communication boards with needed vocabulary
  - Educating about healthy sexuality and about sexual abuse



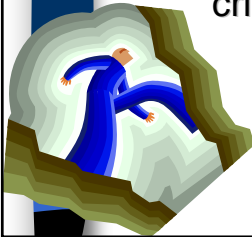
## *Ending the Silence* means

- Helping people with developmental disabilities learn what to do if they have been a victim of a crime



## *Ending the Silence* means

- Supporting parents and allies in:
  - Addressing their fears
  - Helping parents/allies teach their children about healthy sexuality, about ways to prevent crime, and about responding to crime against their loved ones



## *Ending the Silence* means

- Establishing partnerships between the justice system, advocates, and service providers
    - Police
    - Prosecutors and judges
    - Advocates and self advocate
    - Services providers
- On how to prevent, recognize, and report crimes



## *Ending the Silence* means

- Working aggressively with the justice system to support investigation, prosecution and the provision of victim assistance services



## *Ending the Silence* means

- Developing communication access for people with developmental disabilities who don't communicate in traditional ways
  - Interpreters/communication assistants
  - Communication boards
  - Relevant vocabulary in communication devices
  - Other accommodations, as needed



## *Ending the Silence* means

- Breaking the silence through personal stories



- Being counted in general national surveys on crime or target surveys



## *Ending the Silence* means

- Expanding existing legislation to include people with disabilities
  - Hate Crimes Statistics Act
  - National Victim of Crime Survey



## *Ending the Silence* means

- Aggressively applying civil rights laws (ADA) to the
  - Justice system
  - Victims assistance programs
  - Domestic violence shelters
- Aggressively applying human rights
  - UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities



## *Ending the Silence* means

- National and international public awareness campaigns to reduce the invisibility of people with developmental and other disabilities who are victims of crime and abuse



## We must and can, aggressively and effectively *End this Silence*

- for Dan's son,
- for Nikki,
- for Bob
- and for the many others who remain invisible victims.
- Listen to the voices of those bold enough to tell their stories.



## Each of us can help *End this Silence*

- I can help **End the Silence** by....
  - Educating future educators of this issue;
  - Observing behaviors & finding ways to “tell” and report if someone has been a victim of a crime’
  - Infusing this issue into training programs for counselors, therapists, and protective services personnel;
  - Improving “equal justice” so that crimes are treated as crimes, not simply unusual incidents when it happens to a person with a disability
  - Improving access [physical, communication, attitudinal] to the criminal justice system;
  - Increasing awareness about victims with disabilities; and
  - Incorporating training about improving personal safety and reporting, if needed, into self advocacy training.



■ **THANK YOU!**  
**Si yu'usma'ase!**

