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Disability and Sexual Violence: Official Statistics from England and Wales

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Disabled people face a significantly higher risk to experience sexual violence, compared to non-disabled people. Yet, historically the attention paid to disability as a demographic risk factor in evaluations of official statistics has been sketchy at best. A recent development is that the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) now includes disability in releases reporting victim characteristics from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). This paper synthesises key findings about sexual violence, including that risk is nearly twice as high for disabled people. Nevertheless, some of the most at-risk disabled individuals, such as those in institutional settings, are excluded from these official statistics, which means these are likely underestimates. Still, it is hoped that mainstreaming awareness of the disproportionate risks experienced by disabled people will help to inform policy making and service design in the context of the UK government's violence against women and girls (VAWG) strategy.

Keywords: disability, sexual assault, rape, sexual violence statistics, intimate partner violence, violence against women and girls (VAWG), vulnerable victims

Points of interest

- Disabled people are hurt by sexual violence more often than people who are not disabled.
- For a long time, this problem was not looked at very much in official reports.
- Now, the UK Office for National Statistics has included disability in a report on who experiences sexual violence.
- The report show disabled people are at almost twice the risk of sexual violence.
- Some disabled people are left out of the numbers, so the real problem may be even bigger.
- Knowing that many victims may be disabled can help services to think about what they need to do to ensure they are accessible for everyone.

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Introduction

The Crime Survey England and Wales (CSEW) is an annual face-to-face victimisation survey, which asks approximately 75,000 randomly selected respondents aged 16+ across England and Wales about their experiences of crime in the 12 months prior to the interview (Verian, 2026).

“Sexual offences are often hidden crimes that are not always reported to the police. Therefore, data held by the police can only provide a partial picture. [...] one of the strengths of the CSEW is that it covers crimes that are not reported to the police. It therefore provides the best estimate of prevalence” (ONS, 2025e).

CSEW has included disability as a demographic victim variable in its data collection since the early 2010s, following the *Equality Act* (HMSO, 2010). The Office for National Statistics (ONS) regularly release descriptive summaries of key findings from the survey. However, disability is not routinely analysed, at least in releases relating to domestic and sexual violence. The 2024 annual release on *Domestic abuse victim characteristics* (ONS, 2024) was the first to feature data on disability. The disability variable reappeared in the most recent release (ONS, 2025c), alongside appearing, for the first time, in the biennial release on *Sexual offences victim characteristics* (ONS, 2025f).

This paper focusses specifically on sexual violence statistics from the CSEW. It briefly synthesises the available evidence and then explores shortcomings. The aim of this paper is to celebrate the opportunities that formally recognising disability as a significant risk factor for experiencing sexual violence offers in the context of the UK government’s tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG) strategy, whilst also reminding readers that the victimisation experiences of the most marginalised disabled people remain out of sight.

Gender and sexual violence statistics

The CSEW estimated that a significantly higher proportion of females (25.6%, 6.3 million) experienced sexual assault (including attempts) since the age of 16 years,

compared with males (5.9%, 1.4 million). (ONS, 2025f). These statistics confirm that sexual violence is a gendered crime, which happens predominantly to women, with over a quarter of women affected across their adult lifetime. Police recorded crime data confirms the gendered nature of sexual violence. Year ending (YE) March 2025 the victim was female in 82% of any sexual offences and in 90% of rape offences (ONS, 2025f). Additionally, 98% of police reported rapes or assaults by penetration are committed by males (ONS, 2025d), which is, in the case of rape, somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the *Sexual Offences Act* (HMSO, 2003) specifies rape as penile penetration without consent, meaning rape is a crime for which the perpetrator is required to possess a penis as the weapon with which he commits the offence (Ngaire, 2019).

The UK government's *Violence Against Women and Girls* (VAWG) strategy acknowledges that sexual violence is predominantly perpetrated by men towards women, although men can also be victims and on rare occasions, women can also be perpetrators (Home Office, 2021). To enable the government to monitor progress towards their ambition to halve VAWG in a decade ONS have developed a new combined measure of domestic abuse, sexual assault and stalking (ONS, 2025b). This exposes that in YE March 2025 **one in eight women (14%)** aged 16-59 responded that they had been victims of sexual assault, domestic abuse or stalking **within that past year** (ONS, 2025b). This is a sobering figure, but the End Violence Against Women Coalition (2025: unpaginated) believe it is still an underestimate. They claim that the “combined measure of domestic abuse, sexual violence and stalking fails to capture the full spectrum of VAWG incidents, including online abuse, so-called ‘honour’-based abuse, child abuse and sexual harassment”. Furthermore, this combined measure is not disaggregated by disability status. It therefore does not currently help to draw attention to what is likely a much-increased incidence for this group.

Intersecting disability with gender in sexual violence statistics

As stated earlier, the latest biennial ONS (2025f) release on *sexual violence by victim characteristics* includes disability for the first time. Prior to this point disability and sexual violence prevalence rates last appeared in a separate statistical bulletin on

Disability and Crime (ONS, 2019). Confining disability-related crime statistics to a separate bulletin (which was never updated), resulted in only individuals who were actively seeking disability data engaging with this information.

The latest statistics highlight that disabled people age 16+ are **almost twice as likely** to have experienced sexual assault in the year ending (YE) March 2025, compared to non-disabled people (3.1% vs 1.6%). The ONS (2025f) reports on gender and disability separately. It does not intersect these characteristics. A dataset relating to YE March 2020 makes it possible to decipher this data from an excel spreadsheet (ONS, 2022, tables 10-12). We learn that YE March 2020, 5.7% of disabled women experienced sexual assault compared to 1.1% of disabled men (ONS, 2022). Hence, **disabled women were more than five times more likely to experience a sexual assault, compared to disabled men**. Within gender groups presence of disability raises risk at more than twice the rate for women (from 3% to 5.7%), compared to men (from 0.8% to 1.1%).

Missing voices: Limitations to the available statistics

On 31 March 2025, 277,000 people aged 18 to 64 lived in care homes in England alone, representing 800 per 100,000 adults under 65 (Department of Health and Social Care, 2025). Moreover, there were 2,050 inpatients with learning disabilities and/or autism in psychiatric hospitals at the end of January 2026. 1,015 (49%) of these have had a total length of stay over two years (NHS England, 2026). Individuals residing in such group residences or institutions are not included in the CSEW sample (ONS, 2022). However, these segregated settings are known to be associated with a higher risk to experience derogatory treatment, abuse and violence (e.g. Tomsa et al., 2021). Thus, many disabled people are shut away in unsafe environments where they are not reached by mainstream survey instruments. In addition, accessibility concerns and reliance on an abusive partner-carer for help with communication can act as barriers to participation, even for those who reside in community households. Hence, an unknown proportion of disabled adults in high-risk situations institutional and domestic setting are not included in the CSEW.

A further complication is that most CSEW prevalence statistics rely on the victim's ability to self-report that they experienced sexual assault **within the past year**. Feminist research has long problematised that, regardless of disability status, many women do not realise they are experiencing sexual violence as the assault happens (Brown et al., 2023; Kelly, 1988; Tarzia, 2021), a point which was also recently raised by MP Charlotte Nichols, who spoke up about her rape trial in the House of Commons (Pidd, 2026). Disabled women appear disproportionately affected. Causes include a complex interplay between internalized disablist rape myths and intersectional structural inequalities inhibiting sexual agency and lowering expectations (Hollomotz, 2024; Hollomotz & Burch, forthcoming).

Delayed naming tends to be more prevalent for intimate partner sexual violence, whilst stranger sexual assault is more disruptive to one's everyday experiences and this easier to name (ibid). Male victims are significantly more likely to recall sexual violence by strangers, compared to women (37.5% vs 15%) (ONS, 2025d). CSEW findings furthermore highlight that 11.8% of women had experienced a **domestic** sexual assault since the age of 16, compared with 2.6% of men (ONS, 2025a). Hence, even if we do not account for delayed naming, risk for women in the domestic sphere increases four-fold, whilst males disproportionately self-report crime types that are more straightforward to name with minimal delay. This is an interesting observation to reflect on in terms of the hidden and missing victim populations in official statistics and suggests the hypothesis that the true disparity between male and female victimisation may be even greater than current figures indicate.

Conclusion

Despite the stark evidence they present, CSEW prevalence rates on sexual violence against disabled people are likely an underestimate, as some of the most at-risk groups are excluded from the sample or they under-report, even to CSEW. Addressing this issue necessitates a fundamental reconfiguration of survey instruments and sampling methodologies to ensure greater inclusivity.

Nevertheless, the addition of disability as a new victim characteristic in the most recent ONS releases is welcomed and it is hoped that this will now be routinely included.

Presenting evidence on the high victimisation rates of disabled people as part of mainstream ONS descriptive summaries on victim characteristics has the potential to inform targeted interventions and resource allocation in the context of the VAWG strategy. Data on disability status should therefore also be included in the next released of the VAWG combined measure (ONS, 2025b). Moreover, without routinely disaggregating statistics by both disability and gender, the disproportionate risks experienced by disabled women remain statistically invisible. Hence, ONS releases could more regularly acknowledge intersectional disadvantages, with data disaggregated by gender *and* disability and further protected characteristics beyond this.

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