



## Study Reveals Unique Issues Faced by Deaf Victims of Sexual Assault

by Lauren R. Taylor with Nicole Gaskin-Laniyan, Ph.D.

### About the Authors

Ms. Taylor is a freelance writer. Dr. Gaskin-Laniyan is a social science analyst at the National Institute of Justice.

Sexual assault victims who are deaf face unique issues not encountered by the hearing, according to a recent study funded by the National Institute of Justice.<sup>1</sup> Researcher Jennifer Obinna and colleagues at the Minneapolis Council on Crime and Justice interviewed 51 deaf citizens, 15 service providers (both deaf and hearing), and 10 police officers in their investigation of the impact of sexual assault on members of the deaf community.<sup>2</sup> In their final report on the project, the researchers offered recommendations for improving the relationship between law enforcement and the deaf community.

“Deaf people face specific barriers,” said Obinna, the lead researcher on the project. “It’s important to distinguish their experiences as sexual assault victims from other sexual assault victims.”

Obinna noted, for example, that when deaf people report sexual assault, they encounter stereotypes about being a sexual assault victim *and* being deaf. Rape victims often have feelings of guilt and embarrassment because of the social stigma frequently attached to rape. These feelings can be compounded due to the small and generally close-knit nature of the deaf community, which, said the researchers, can contribute to a hesitancy to report a sexual assault. The closeness of the deaf community can compromise a victim’s anonymity and erode privacy. In addition, the researchers found, many deaf victims of sexual assault perceive a lack of support within the deaf community, particularly if the perpetrator is also deaf. Consequently, deaf victims can experience a profound sense of isolation.

The researchers found that another impediment to deaf victims seeking help is a lack of awareness about deafness and deaf culture among hearing people. Many view deafness from a medical perspective,

focusing on hearing deficits rather than viewing deaf people as members of a linguistic and cultural community. In fact, the researchers found that many of the deaf women interviewed do not view themselves as disabled, but rather as having a culture and way of communicating not recognized by the dominant hearing culture.

## Recognizing Deaf Culture

“Part of being in the deaf community is deaf culture,” Obinna says. “We can’t always make assumptions about how a particular culture experiences violence. Even though the experience and many of the reactions are similar, there are cultural differences that service providers and law enforcement must pay attention to. Making decisions about who to tell—or even whether to tell—is all filtered through a cultural lens.”

Many hearing people do not know how to initiate a conversation with a deaf person, which can make encounters awkward and frustrating and can contribute to a hesitancy among deaf sexual assault victims to reach out for help. Also, interpretations between American Sign Language (ASL) and English are inherently imperfect. Finally, the researchers point out that victims may have different communication styles: some lip-read and write; others are more comfortable with ASL; still others may have minimal language skills, which requires communication to be more visual or tactile.

Many deaf victims may be reluctant to reach out to agencies that serve sexual assault victims because most of the providers are hearing and do not have systems for effectively communicating with deaf people. For example, deaf sexual assault victims cannot count on service agencies having access to a TTY (teletypewriter), much less a staff member who knows how to operate it. Even if a social service or law enforcement agency has an interpreter, deaf victims, like hearing victims, may be reluctant to divulge intimate details to yet another stranger.

Some deaf victims of sexual assault also believe they cannot rely on interpreters to accurately represent their words and experiences. Service agencies that do not have

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qualified interpreters on site often use the victim’s family or friends to assist in interviews, which can further inhibit a sexual assault victim’s candor.

## Improving Police Response

Victims who were interviewed in the Minneapolis study had varied opinions on how helpful police could be after a sexual assault. Although most said they regarded law enforcement as a resource, few had actually called the police after they were victimized. Many related frustrating experiences when dealing with the police department, including 911 call-takers who could not operate a TTY machine and police officers who mislabeled a deaf person as drunk or mentally ill or who misread body language as aggressive when a deaf person was simply moving closer to lip-read.

Service providers and deaf community members agreed that law enforcement must improve its methods for communicating with the deaf community, whether they are victims, witnesses, or suspects. They also suggested that police officers need training, interpreters, and more clearly defined agency policies. For example, although this research project revealed that the Minneapolis Police Department has policies for locating an interpreter, its officers know very little about how to identify if a person is deaf or how to communicate with him or her in the field.

Despite these challenges, the researchers regard the Minneapolis Police Department as a model for other jurisdictions when it

## USING THE 'PAR' METHOD

Jennifer Obinna and her colleagues at Minneapolis' Council on Crime and Justice used the Participatory Action Research (PAR) method to recruit deaf participants into the study. Using PAR, the hearing-dominated team of researchers collaborated with deaf people to connect with deaf community members. The researchers reported great success in using the PAR model, attributing the success to several factors, including the participation of an advisory group with a diverse membership of law enforcement officials, hospital workers, and deaf and hearing service providers. Using the PAR model, they also recruited and trained deaf interviewers and a hearing interpreter and used a videotaped consent form and scenario-based interviews.

comes to serving the deaf community. The researchers cited the department's "Crime Prevention and Safety for People Who Are Deaf" program as fostering communication between law enforcement and deaf citizens. This community policing program is based on the premise that the deaf community is not identified by geography, but by a distinct language and culture. The program covers a variety of crime and safety issues for the deaf community and for families, churches, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and State and local agencies, including a 10-week course on ASL for police officers.

## Additional Recommendations

The researchers offer other suggestions for improving the relationship between law enforcement and the deaf community, including:

- Revising police report forms to include a category to track interactions with members of the deaf community.
- Developing the capability for querying databases to identify cases involving deaf people.
- Putting TTY links on police department outreach materials and Web sites.
- Training dispatchers on TTY protocols and etiquette.

Although more research is needed to help policymakers and service providers meet the needs of deaf people—the researchers note, for example, that sexual abuse at residential deaf schools must be addressed—the findings of this study should lead to a greater understanding of how law enforcement and other service providers can better address the needs of deaf people who have been sexually assaulted. Understanding deaf victims' perspectives on sexual assault, their help-seeking patterns, and the gaps in services is vital to improving the community response to sexual violence.

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## Notes

1. Obinna, J., S. Krueger, C. Osterbaan, J.M. Sadusky, and W. DeVore, *Understanding the Needs of the Victims of Sexual Assault in the Deaf Community*, final report submitted to the National Institute of Justice, Washington, DC: February 2006 (NCJ 212867), available at [www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/212867.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/212867.pdf).
2. *Editor's Note*: Within the deaf population in this country, there is a community that strongly identifies itself from a cultural—as opposed to a medical—perspective; this community uses a capital "D" when referring to the Deaf community. Nevertheless, in an effort to minimize any sense of exclusion among deaf citizens who do not identify as part of the Deaf community, this article uses "deaf" to embrace all deaf people.