



Victimization of Clients who use AAC

People who have complex communication disabilities and who use augmentative and alternative communication systems (AAC)* are highly vulnerable for all types of abuse and crimes.

Depending on the legal matter, it may be important for legal professionals to have some background information on the abuse experiences of people who use AAC.

Please note this document is one in a series of documents available at www.accpc.ca

The Facts:

- Research indicates that people with physical disabilities who also have severe speech disorders are two to six times more likely to suffer physical, mental, and sexual abuse as a result of their inability to communicate effectively (Sobsey, 1994)
- The risk of abuse appears to increase with the degree of disability experienced (Sobsey & Varnhagen, 1988)
- Victimization is likely to be repeated among people with disabilities (Bryen et al., 2003)
- Offenders are most often known to their victims and hold positions of trust and authority; for example, caregivers, attendants, family members, drivers, etc. (Brown & Mirenda, 1997)
- Negative attitudes, misperceptions, and stereotypes about people with disabilities, combined with a history of oppression, puts individuals at increased risk for sexual abuse

(Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2003)

- The social context of disability, which includes factors such as inaccessibility, reliance on support services, poverty, and isolation is critical to understanding the increased risks for abuse (Powers, et al., 2002)
- Offenders may perceive a person with a communication disability as an ideal victim in that they may not be able to tell (Collier et al., 2004)

Circumstances that inhibit the detection and disclosure of offenses against people who use AAC include:

- they may not have a way to tell someone what happened;
- they may not be aware of their rights and may not recognize when their rights are violated;
- if they do tell, they may not be believed;
- they may be intimidated;

- they may not know how to make a complaint or to navigate the justice system;
- they may have nobody to tell;
- police and legal professionals may be unable to communicate with them;
- they may feel vulnerable to report a complaint about someone due to their reliance on that person for their daily care;
- they may have no limited or no access to legal, social, health services as well as shelters and alternate living arrangements that can accommodate their physical and communication needs.

Resources:

www.accpc.ca - Equal Justice Project¹

www.aacsafeguarding.ca

* Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) refers to communication systems that people use to communicate. AAC includes picture, word and/or letter boards and voice output

¹ Resources for Legal Professionals.