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Perceptions of Sexual Assault Among Adults with Lower Cognitive Functioning and/or Mental Disorders: A Scoping Review Protocol

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Abstract

Sexual assault is a significant public health concern, with individuals with lower cognitive functioning or mental disorders facing disproportionate vulnerability in The Netherlands. Cognitive limitations can impair the ability to understand consent, recognize coercion, and interpret interpersonal boundaries, thereby increasing susceptibility to exploitation in the context of sexual abuse. Additionally, stigma, psychiatric symptoms, and social power imbalances may further undermine the credibility of individuals when reporting abuse, creating barriers to disclosure and support. While previous research has examined prevalence rates and general vulnerability factors, there is currently no comprehensive synthesis of how individuals with lower cognitive functioning and/or mental disorders perceive and interpret sexual assault experiences. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to how others, including professionals within legal and clinical contexts, assess their credibility. This scoping review aims to map the existing literature on the perceptions, interpretations, and lived experiences of sexual assault among adults with lower cognitive functioning and/or mental disorders, as well as how their credibility is evaluated. Following the PRISMA-ScR and adapted PRISMA-P guidelines, the review will include qualitative, mixed-methods, and relevant grey literature. Findings will be synthesized thematically and presented narratively and in tabular form, with the aim of identifying key conceptual, theoretical, and methodological gaps to inform future research and practice.

Keywords: Sexual assault; cognitive impairment; intellectual disability; mental disorders; vulnerability; consent; credibility; lived experience; trauma; qualitative research.