

What are developmental disabilities?

Developmental disabilities are mental impairments resulting in an IQ less than 70 (average is 100). They usually become evident before age 22 — and often much earlier — leading to lifelong limitations on learning, working and physical movement.

Mental retardation, autism, cerebral palsy, epilepsy and other impairments of the brain and central nervous system are included under the developmental disabilities umbrella.

Nearly 2 percent of non-institutionalized Americans are developmentally disabled. Of those, about half are retarded, according to the American Association on Mental Retardation.

There are two types of developmental disabilities, which can occur before or after birth: Organic disabilities are genetically or biologically based; non-pathological disabilities arise from adverse environmental conditions.

Down and Fragile X syndromes are genetically based organic disabilities; biologically based organic disabilities include those that spring from exposure to certain infections, such as neonatal herpes, streptococcus, and bacterial meningitis.

Non-pathological disabilities can develop in a fetus if a woman uses drugs or alcohol during pregnancy; in a newborn, if he or she suffers from a lack of oxygen during birth; or in a child, if he or she is exposed to certain contaminants, such as lead. Child battering, accidental head injuries and near drowning also can cause developmental disabilities.

Still, Ms. Petersilia says, many confuse mental retardation, which basically is low intelligence, with mental illness, which can greatly impact moods and emotions and can lead to violent outbursts.

"Mental retardation is about intellect, but you can

be brilliant and be mentally ill," she says. "(Mental retardation) simply means low-intellect functioning. It is not about erratic behavior. In fact, routine is important (to the mentally retarded). They love routine. It's a very different model, but unfortunately in the public's mind they are one and the same."

"People with mental retardation and developmental disabilities are very much like you and me," says Deborah Rausch, a spokeswoman for the OMRDD. "They have the same goals, the same needs and the same desires that everyone else does. There's no reason to think that they would behave in any other manner than you or I."

Other common characteristics of the developmentally disabled can include childlike thinking; slowness in learning; little long-term perspective; and the inability to understand the consequences of actions.

They tend to be eager-to-please followers who trust authority without question.

"Developmentally, they are not the same as they are physically and chronologically," says Donna Long, director of community relations and development for On Your Mark, a West Brighton-based human services agency. "As there are differences in levels of intelligence in all of us, so it is with them."

Some common traits, she says, include "kindness, innocence and sincerity."

No more likely to commit crimes

Because the developmentally disabled tend to take circumstances at face value and can be manipulated easily, they are more likely to become crime victims than crime perpetrators.

"Studies have shown their rates of crime are similar to those of non-disabled persons, and consist mostly of less serious felonies and property offenses," says Ms. Petersilia. "The data are consistent. (The mentally retarded) have extremely low rates of crime."

In fact, she says, a developmentally disabled person is nearly 11 times more likely to become a victim of sexual assault than a non-disabled person and is almost 13 times more likely to become a robbery victim.

Crimes against the developmentally disabled are divided evenly among those committed through "service provider contact," such as house staff and transportation workers; immediate family members; and strangers and "others," usually housemates who do not give or are unable to give consent to sexual activity, Ms. Petersilia says.

In the wider community, she adds, the developmentally disabled are most likely to find themselves in trouble by their proclivity to hug, a common practice encouraged by many in the human services field to reinforce love and acceptance, much like one would do with a child.

"I think sometimes they are inappropriately affectionate," Ms. Petersilia says. "They use physical touching much more than people who are not disabled are comfortable with."

But, she adds, she is not aware of any case where hugging a stranger as a greeting or sign of affection has led to an overt sexual act.

Human services providers and the developmentally disabled themselves insist their presence only enhances a neighborhood.

"People should understand that they are lucky to have us as neighbors," says Nancy Santanello, manager of a Rossville house for 10 developmentally disabled men. "It's much more important for us to follow the rules and we have a much higher standard of living that we have placed upon ourselves so that we will be accepted."

Says Andrew, 23, who calls his four years in a West Brighton community residence "the best years of my life": Community residences are "all about togetherness. ... We want to be like everybody else. We want to be liked."