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Understanding Deaf Culture

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Some deaf and hard of hearing people do not identify as having a disability or see themselves as experiencing a limitation. Instead, they identify as a member of a cultural and linguistic group. This group of people use the term Deaf with a capital "D" to reflect their cultural identification. Their culture, known as Deaf culture, was developed based in part on a shared language, which in the United States is American Sign Language (ASL). Like any other cultures, Deaf culture has its own values, norms, community institutions, and history that are important to understand and incorporate when serving Deaf survivors.



Implications for Service Providers

While not everyone who is deaf or hard of hearing identifies with Deaf culture, many members of the Deaf community do. Organizations must integrate knowledge of Deaf culture into and change their policies, practices, and attitudes to deliver culturally competent services that effectively meet the needs of Deaf survivors.

There has been significant movement within the Deaf community to develop culturally specific services. Over 15 Deaf-specific organizations and programs to address domestic violence and sexual assault exist around the country and more programs are currently being developed. However, since most communities across the country do not yet have these programs, hearing services have an important role to play in meeting the needs of Deaf survivors by offering culturally competent services that are accessible and welcoming.

In this Section

This section is designed to provide you with a basic overview of the Deaf community and its culture so you can begin to understand the cultural background of Deaf survivors. It includes information on:

- [statistics](#) on how many people are d/Deaf in the United States,
- the [Deaf community](#) and its diversity,
- key elements of [Deaf culture](#),
- [implications](#) for providers, and
- [promising practices](#) for effectively meeting the needs of Deaf survivors.

For information on hearing loss from an audiological or non-cultural perspective, go to [Understanding Disability](#).



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It is difficult to estimate the size of the deaf population in the United States because studies use different definitions of deafness. The Gallaudet Research Institute offers this summary of estimates for the size of deaf populations in the United States:

A Brief Summary of Estimates for the Size of the Deaf Population in the U.S.A. Based on Available Federal Data and Published Research:

- About 2 to 4 of every 1,000 people in the United States are "functionally deaf," though more than half became deaf relatively late in life; fewer than 1 out of every 1,000 people in the United States became deaf before 18 years of age.
- However, if people with a severe hearing impairment are included with those who are deaf, then the number is 4 to 10 times higher. That is, anywhere from 9 to 22 out of every 1,000 people have a severe hearing impairment or are deaf. Again, at least half of these people reported their hearing loss after 64 years of age.
- Finally, if everyone who has any kind of "trouble" with their hearing is included then anywhere from 37 to 140 out of every 1,000 people in the United States have some kind of hearing loss, with a large share being at least 65 years old.¹

Number of Culturally Deaf

The number of people who are culturally Deaf in the United States is also difficult to determine for a number of reasons.

1. Identifying as Deaf is not based on a specific level of hearing ability. Instead, it is based on identification with a specific culture and language. There are people with varying levels of hearing that identify as Deaf, and there are people with the same levels of hearing that do not identify as Deaf, but as deaf or hard of hearing.
2. No major federal survey activity inquires about special language use or social identification among those who are deaf (or hard of hearing). That is, there are no questions about American Sign Language (ASL) or any other signed language use on federal surveys.

According to Gallaudet University, there has only been one study conducted that attempted to measure the language use of deaf people in the United States. But, the study was conducted in 1972. According to this study, which was part of the National Census of the Deaf Population, in 1972, a little more than 1 of every 1,000 people in the United States was a deaf person who reported s/he was a "good" signer.²

If this proportion remained the same today, although there is no way of knowing that it has, a rough estimate of the number of deaf signers would be somewhere in the hundreds of thousands (360,000 to 517,000).

While the number of Deaf people in the United States may seem small, Deaf survivors experience significant barriers to accessing safety and other

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Deaf Community

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The Deaf community is made up of people, both deaf and hearing, who come together based on common interests and experiences. Of course, there is not just one Deaf community. Instead, many Deaf communities exist across the country and they vary based on their history, geography, and members. Moreover, there is an incredible amount of diversity *within* each Deaf community.

Participation in a Deaf community and receiving supports from it is an individual's personal choice, and that choice should be respected when serving Deaf or hard of hearing survivors.

In This Section

We have organized this section into three areas that represent and impact the Deaf community:

- [identity](#)
- [communication modes](#)
- [experience](#)



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Identity

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People within Deaf communities across the country identify in a number of different ways. For example, people who do not identify with the linguistic or cultural elements of the Deaf community may refer to themselves as deaf with a lowercase “d.” On the other hand, people who identify with and participate in the language, culture, and community of Deaf people refer to themselves as Deaf with a capital “D.” Some people with hearing loss may call themselves hard of hearing, while others who lost their hearing later in life may call themselves late-deafened. There are also people within the community who have cochlear implants -- a device that is surgically implanted in an individual’s inner ear to stimulate the auditory nerve and allow some hearing. They may identify themselves in any number of ways include Deaf, deaf or hard of hearing. Some people may identify themselves first by their race or sex, while others may not identify as anything but their actual name.



One’s identity is the result of a process that can include many different elements including discovering one’s sense of self, embracing it, and then claiming an identity to other people that reflects how one sees themselves in the world. For this reason, respecting how people identify themselves and how they define their identity is important.

Because identity is highly individual, identities are hard to define. But, definitions can be helpful. Below, we have put together a list of common terms that people in the Deaf community use to describe themselves. The definitions are just one of many perspectives that exist.

Common Terms Used Within Deaf Communities

CODA

This acronym stands for “child of deaf adult,” and is used to describe hearing children of deaf adult(s).

deaf

This term refers to individuals with severe to profound hearing loss. The lowercase “d” reflects a physical or audiological perspective.

Deaf

This term refers to individuals who identify with and participate in the language, culture and community of Deaf people, based on sign language. The capital “D” reflects this socio-cultural point of view.

Deaf-blind

This term refers to individuals who have varying degrees of hearing and sight loss.

Hard of hearing

This term refers to individuals who experience hearing loss from a physical or audiological perspective. An individual who is hard of hearing may primarily use

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American culture.

Late-deafened

This term refers to individuals who grow up hearing or hard of hearing and, either suddenly or gradually, experience a profound loss of hearing later in life.



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Communication Modes

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While American Sign Language (ASL) is the primary language of the Deaf community, over 20 different communication modes or methods are used by people within the Deaf community. For example, some people sign. Some people speak. Some people may use a combination of signing and speaking. An individual's communication preference depends on their experience, and the nature and degree of their hearing loss. Moreover, an individual may choose different communication methods depending on the context. Understanding the most common or widely used modes of communication will help you improve your communication with Deaf survivors.

Most Widely Used Modes of Communication

American Sign Language

American Sign Language (ASL) is a manual or visual language, meaning that information is expressed through combinations of handshapes, palm orientations, movements of the hands, arms and body, and facial expressions rather than sounds as is the case with spoken languages. ASL is a complete language with its own grammar and syntax, separate from the English language. It is the primary language used by people who identify as culturally Deaf.

Auditory/Oral

In the auditor/oral method, listening is the primary means of understanding language and speech is the primary means of expressing language. In addition to listening (through the use of assistive technology such as hearing aids or cochlear implants), individuals watch the speaker for additional information from speech reading, facial expression, and gesture.

Cued Speech

Cued speech is a communication method designed to make visually available all the elements needed to understand spoken English. The system combines information that can be seen through watching lip movements with information from additional hand shapes and hand positions near the face, used to identify sounds that can't be seen on the lips or that look the same on the lips. For example, the sounds p, b, and m all look the same on the lips and as a result, the words pat, bat and mat all look exactly the same. There are different hand shapes for the p, b, and m which allow a person who knows the cueing system, to understand exactly which word is being said.

Manually Coded English

Manually Coded English is term used to describe a visual (signed) form of the English language. There are a number of systems for manually coding English such as Signed English or Pidgin Signed English. While these systems may use American Sign Language (ASL) signs as a base, they follow the grammar and syntax of English.



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system that uses a combination of methods such as signed, oral, auditory, and written aids depending on the particular needs and strengths of an individual.



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Deaf Culture

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Deaf culture is an integral part of the Deaf community. To understand Deaf culture, it is helpful to consider the concept of culture in general. Culture is commonly defined as the values, traditions, norms, customs, arts, history, folklore, and institutions that a group of people, who are unified by race, ethnicity, language, nationality, or religion, share. In essence, it is the way of life shared by the members of a group.

The Deaf community then has its own culture. In the United States, one of the strongest unifying and central components of Deaf culture is the use of American Sign Language (ASL). It makes the group a linguistic and cultural minority. This shared language serves to bring together groups of people who are deaf and hard of hearing. In addition to a shared language, people within Deaf culture also share common beliefs, values, norms, customs, institutions, and history.



How Deaf Culture Is Learned

As with any culture, Deaf culture is learned and passed down from generation to generation. Most cultures are passed down within families. However, because 90 percent of Deaf people are born to hearing parents, only a small percentage of Deaf people learn their culture from their family. As a result, most Deaf people learn their culture through interactions with their peers and other Deaf people – often in Deaf schools and other community institutions.

Deafhood

For many Deaf people, developing a Deaf identity is the result of a process. Recently, many Deaf people have begun to refer to this process as "Deafhood." According to Paddy Ladd, who coined the term, Deafhood is "the process of defining the existential state of Deaf "being-in-the-world." Deafhood is not seen as a finite state but as a process by which Deaf individuals come to actualize their Deaf identity, positing that those individuals construct that identity around several differently ordered sets of priorities and principles, which are affected by various factors such as nation, era and class."

Despite the existence of a Deaf culture, it is important to remember that not everyone who is deaf, hard of hearing, or who has hearing loss identifies as culturally Deaf. Whether one identifies as deaf with a lowercase "d" or Deaf with a capital "D" (i.e., culturally Deaf) is a personal choice and should be respected.

In this Section

In this section you'll find more information on different elements of Deaf culture:

- [language](#),
- [community institutions](#),
- [values and norms](#), and

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Language

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A central component of Deaf culture in the United States is American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is a visual language, meaning that information is expressed through combinations of handshapes and movements, body movements, and facial expressions rather than sounds as is the case with spoken languages. It is based on the idea that sight is the most useful tool a Deaf person has to communicate.

A Distinct Language

Even though it is used in the United States, ASL is completely separate and distinct from English. It has its own rules of grammar and syntax (or word order). For example, in English, one would say, "I am going to the store." Whereas in ASL, one would sign, "Store me go." Other features are different. For example, in ASL, a person raises his or her eyebrows to indicate a yes or no question; whereas, in English, a person often signals a question using a tone of voice.

It is also important to note that ASL is not an international language. Like other speaking languages, different signed languages exist around the world.



An Evolving and Varied Language

Similar to other languages, ASL is an evolving language that changes overtime as its users do. It also varies as much as the people who use ASL do. For example, much like certain English words are pronounced and used differently in different parts of the country, ASL is regionally. The sign for some words may vary from region to region across the country. Other factors such as ethnicity, age, and gender, affect how ASL is used and its variety.

Etiquette

Because ASL is a visual language, there are a different set of rules for interactions or etiquette around communication than there is for English. For example, eye contact is extremely important in ASL. In English there is very little requirement for eye contact between the speaker and the listener and it is acceptable to look way from the person if other noises or activities divert our attention. In a signed conversation the people involved in the conversation must always look at each other. For Deaf people, then, breaking eye contact or no eye contact during a conversation shows indifference. Similarly, facial expressions and body language are integral parts of ASL and communication for Deaf people. Thus, Deaf people are skilled at using and reading nonverbal communication cues.

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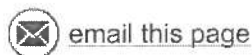
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Community institutions have played a critical role in the formation of the Deaf community and Deaf culture. These institutions include Deaf schools, clubs, theater, athletic, and political organizations. They serve as places for Deaf people to meet other Deaf people and share information, exchange ideas, offer support, and socialize – an invaluable resource for many Deaf people who are often the only Deaf person in their families and, in some cases, their communities. For many Deaf people, they offer the first real opportunity to meet other people like themselves and feel part of a larger community. Moreover, they offer opportunities for people to learn Deaf culture and develop their Deaf identity.

Institutions Change Over Time

These institutions and their centrality within the Deaf community have evolved overtime. For example, Deaf clubs have experienced a decline in popularity since advances in technology (such as TTYs, videophones, email, and instant messaging) have allowed Deaf people to communicate with one another directly from their homes. New institutions, such as blogs, are emerging to take advantage of current technologies and facilitate information sharing and dialogue among Deaf people.

The existence of other institutions, such as Deaf schools, has been threatened for reasons other than advances in technology. For example, trends to mainstream students with disabilities, including Deaf students, in educational settings have led to a decline in enrollment at Deaf schools. Changes in school funding have also threatened the financial viability of Deaf schools.



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Values and Norms

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Values

While Deaf people have their own individual values, there are some communal values among Deaf people. In addition to the strong value placed on American Sign Language (ASL), these values include:

- **Collectivism** is one of the main values of the Deaf culture. Deaf people place a high degree of value on sharing information and resources. Learning is seen as a cooperative and shared process that helps to overcome the limited access to various facets of society that Deaf people experience because of cultural and communication barriers. Open communication and gathering with other Deaf people are essential as well.
- **Vision** is also a value, as Deaf people rely on it for communication. Most Deaf people gain the vast majority of their information through their eyes and they connect with people and things visually. For example, they see lights to indicate phone calls and doorbells, interpreters to translate information to and from English and ASL, and captioning to access television and movies.
- **Stories about Deaf people, poetry, arts, and literature** play an important role as well. As in any culture, they serve to pass down history, wisdom, and values. This is particularly important to Deaf people, many of whom do not Deaf parents or other means to access it.

Norms and Etiquette

While norms may also vary from community to community and person to person, there are some common norms and etiquette that are helpful to know when working with Deaf people.

- Maintaining eye contact.
- Being blunt and direct.
- Waving, tapping the shoulder, stamping on the floor and turning the lights on and off to get someone's attention.
- Touching during conversations.
- Hugging when greeting or leaving.
- Long goodbyes.
- Being in 3 feet proximate space between people for engaging into visual conversations.



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History is a central part of every culture. Deaf history includes a broad collection of experiences around community, education, language and culture. Because Deaf Americans have long been isolated from the mainstream hearing society, until the mid-1980s information about Deaf community, culture and history came almost exclusively from outsider observers: hearing people who worked with Deaf individuals- educators, doctors, and policymakers. Inspired by the social-political trends of Civil Rights movement, members of the Deaf community began to look at and establish their own history.

Although a shared experience and community has existed for centuries, Deaf culture began to establish itself in the 1970's. Deaf culture at this point became a more specific acknowledgement of shared history, shared culture, and shared language. These days, Deaf history can be found documented in a number of publications- profiling the places, people and languages of Deaf people in America. In the following pages, you will find brief introduction to the many events that contribute to a history of the Deaf people in the United States.



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Deaf-Specific Services

There has been significant movement within the Deaf community to develop services that are based on a battered women's shelter and rape crisis model but modified to incorporate elements of Deaf culture and other components that more effectively meet the needs of Deaf victims/survivors.

Since the establishment of Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services (ADWAS) in 1986 as the first Deaf-specific organization to address domestic and sexual violence, approximately 17 [Deaf-specific organizations and programs](#) have been founded across the country, many of which have replicated the ADWAS model.



Mainstream Services

Since most communities across the country do not yet have Deaf-specific services to address domestic and sexual assault, mainstream services (i.e., services that are not tailored to meet the needs of Deaf survivors) need to create accessible and welcoming environments for Deaf survivors. This will help to ensure that all Deaf survivors have access to services and support in the community. It will also increase the number of options Deaf survivors have when deciding where to go to get support.

Existing promising practices that can guide hearing service providers in creating welcoming environments for Deaf survivors are provided in Addressing Accessibility. As this field continues to evolve, service providers will invent their own solutions and contribute them to the ever-evolving knowledge repository of best practices in service design.



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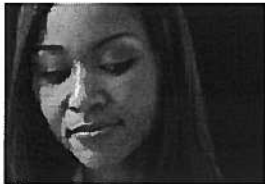
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