

CENSUS BRIEF

U.S. Department of Commerce
Economics and Statistics Administration
BUREAU OF THE CENSUS



Disabilities Affect One-Fifth of All Americans Proportion Could Increase in Coming Decades

ABOUT 1 IN 5 AMERICANS HAVE some kind of disability, and 1 in 10 have a severe disability (see box for definitions). And, with the population aging and the likelihood of having a disability increasing with age, the growth in the number of people with disabilities can be expected to accelerate in the coming decades.

If current trends continue, Americans 65 years old and over will make up 20 percent of the total population by the year 2030 compared with about 12 percent currently. In the October 1994 - January 1995 period, for example, about 16 million of an estimated 31 million seniors age 65 and over reported some level of disability.

severe disability was 20 percent among Whites not of Hispanic origin, 35 percent among Blacks and 28 percent among people of Hispanic origin (who may be of any race).

WORK AND DISABILITY

A major purpose of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was to increase the employment rate of people with disabilities by making it illegal to practice discrimination against individuals who happen to have a disability. The October 1994 - January 1995 survey data confirm that employment, while gradually increasing, continues to be a problem for people with disabilities.

In the prime employable years of 21 to 64, for example, 82 percent of people without a disability had a job or business compared with 77 percent of those with a non-severe disability, and 26 percent of those with a severe disability. The latter figure actually represents a gain since a previous

THE NEED FOR PERSONAL ASSISTANCE

About 9 million people of all ages have disabilities so severe that they require personal assistance to carry out everyday activities. About 80 percent of the people who take on the role of primary helper are relatives, and nearly half of these primary helpers live with the person with a disability.

DIFFERENCES BY AGE AND RACE

Disability is no respecter of age, sex or race. Even among children ages 6 to 14, for instance, about 1 in 8 had some type of disability. Nevertheless, the likelihood of having a disability increases with age — half of seniors 65 years old and older have a disability. (See figure.)

Although age is the main factor affecting the likelihood of having a disability, there also are differences by race and ethnicity. For example, within the 55- to 64-year-old group, the proportion with a

What Constitutes a Disability

A PERSON IS CONSIDERED to have a disability if he or she has difficulty performing certain functions (seeing, hearing, talking, walking, climbing stairs and lifting and carrying), or has difficulty performing activities of daily living, or has difficulty with certain social roles (doing school work for children, working at a job and around the house for adults). A person who is unable to perform one or more activities, or who uses an assistive device to get around, or who needs assistance from another person to perform basic activities is considered to have a severe disability.

1991 survey when the employment rate of people with a severe disability was only 23 percent.

As shown in the table below, the likelihood of being employed varies by type of disability among people 21 to 64 years old.

KINDS OF DISABILITIES AND EMPLOYMENT

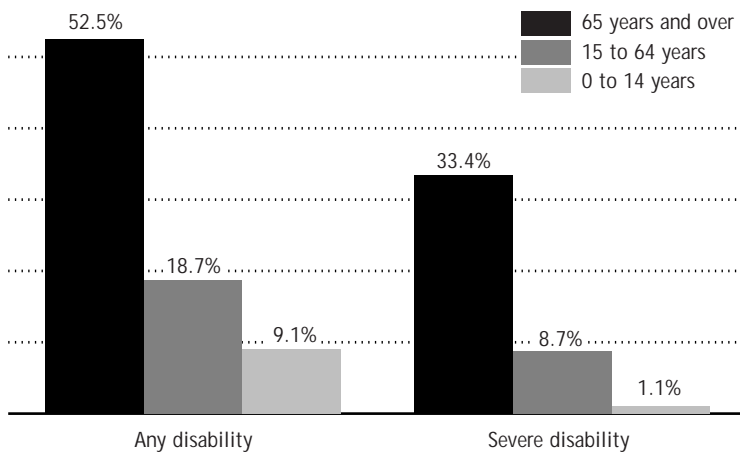
(persons age 21- 64)

Disability	Percent employed*
Difficulty hearing	64.4
Difficulty seeing	43.7
Mental disability	41.3
Difficulty walking	33.5

*Persons may have more than one type of disability

DISABILITIES AND AGE: OCTOBER 1994-JANUARY 1995

Percent with disabilities by age



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Survey of Income and Program Participation.

RELIANCE ON PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

More than three-quarters (77.4%) of Americans age 22 to 64 with disabilities do not receive public assistance. However, disability is relatively common among those who do receive government cash, food or rent assistance. About half the beneficiaries of these programs had either a severe or non-severe disability.

Data on the number of people with disabilities in the United States and the nature of those disabilities, plus their work activity and the help they receive from public programs are collected by the Census Bureau as part of its Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). SIPP currently is the best source for periodic data concerning the economic situation of

people with disabilities, but Census Bureau analysts note that the federal government is still in the early stages of determining how best to monitor statistically the status of people with disabilities.

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This Brief is one of a series that presents information of current policy interest. All statistics are subject to sampling variability, as well as survey design flaws, respondent classification and reporting errors, and data processing mistakes. The Census Bureau has taken steps to minimize errors, and analytical statements have been tested and meet statistical standards. However, because of methodological differences, use caution when comparing these data with data from other sources.