Using Data to Cover Disability Issues:
A sampling of resources and how to use them

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When we report about disability issues, we throw around a lot of basic numbers trying to tell our readers, viewers and listeners how many people are affected. Editors always demand the number of people, so they can make the readers care about these issues. So we say things such as 54 million people have a disability or one-fifth of all Americans have a disability. We try to come up with a black and white measure of something that has a lot of gray areas. If a reporter is writing about lack of ramps at public buildings, that reporter might want to use numbers of people with mobility disabilities rather than all disabled people. Private organizations and government agencies have different numbers for many of these measures. Below are some good resources for gathering disability data. Keep in mind it’s just a small sample. Once you dig in the data, you’ll find some resources for better defining your population.

U.S. Census Bureau

2000 Census
factfinder.census.gov

The 2000 census changed significantly from the 1990. New 2000 questions covered the major life activities of seeing and hearing and the ability to perform physical and mental tasks. The 2000 census collected data on the disability status of children 5 years and over as well as adults. The 1990 questions collected data only for persons 15 years and over.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total disabilities tallied</th>
<th>89,142,962</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensory disability</td>
<td>9,305,275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical disability</td>
<td>21,151,506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental disability</td>
<td>12,435,853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-care disability</td>
<td>6,752,733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go-outside-home disability</td>
<td>18,210,025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment disability</td>
<td>21,287,570</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of people age 5 and older (non-institutionalized)
With a disability: 49,746,248
Without a disability: 207,421,279

Benefits of using this data:
- It goes down to small geographies, which would allow someone to look at it against transportation services or other demographics.
- It can be crossed against other variables using the PUMS data.

Barriers:
- It’s now four years old

Cautions:
- Number of disabilities is very different from number of disabled people.
- These numbers are for the non-institutionalized and non-military populations.
Current Population Survey
www.bls.census.gov

This survey asks questions that allow you to get an estimate of the numbers of people with work disabilities (severe and not severe.) This is a joint project of the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Benefits:
- This data is available every year

Barriers:
- This data is difficult to use for small-area estimates.
- It cannot be crossed by other variables.

Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP):
www.sipp.census.gov

This is a continuous survey of panels used to collect information on income, labor force information, program participation and eligibility data, and general demographic characteristics to measure the effectiveness of existing federal, state, and local programs.

Benefits:
- The variables go into much more detailed breakdowns

Barriers
- The data is delayed – the 2001 data is not yet available
- The data does not go down to small geographies
National Center for Health Statistics:  
www.cdc.gov/nchs

NCHS conducts annual surveys of health conditions, including disabilities.

**Disabilities/ Limitations**

(Data are for U.S. for year in parentheses)

All noninstitutionalized persons

- Number of persons with limitation(s) in usual activities due to chronic conditions: 52.6 million (2001)
- Percent of persons with limitation(s) in usual activities due to chronic conditions: 21.9 (2001)

Source:  
Summary Health Statistics for the U.S. Population:  
National Health Interview Survey, 2001

Noninstitutionalized adults

- Number of adults with a lot of trouble hearing (or are deaf): 7 million (2001)
- Percent of adults with a lot of trouble hearing (or are deaf): 3.4 (2001)
- Number of adults with vision trouble: 20.4 million (2001)
- Percent of adults with vision trouble: 10.0 (2001)
- Number of adults unable (or very difficult) to walk a quarter mile: 12.9 million (1995)
- Percent of adults unable (or very difficult) to walk a quarter mile: 6.5 (1995)
- Number of adults with moderate mobility difficulty: 25.2 million (2001)
- Percent of adults with moderate mobility difficulty: 12.4 (2001)
- Number of adults with severe mobility difficulty: 20.4 million (2001)
- Percent of adults with severe mobility difficulty: 10.0 (2001)

Source:  

Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services  
www.cms.hhs.gov

This is the first stop for getting data about spending on federal programs for people with disabilities. The agency keeps data on state-by-state spending on long-term care versus community care. It also keeps track of numbers of participants in programs such as Medicaid waivers. More detailed data on these programs will come from state agencies overseeing Medicaid.
The National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research
www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/nidrr

Part of the U.S. Department of Education, NIDRR conducts programs of research relating to people with disabilities. Its Web site is a great resource for getting disability-related statistics on a variety of topics. NIDRR funds the Disability Statistics Center at the University of San Francisco. The Center has an online collection of reporters on many different disability-related topics.

Survey Data
National Organization on Disability/Harris Polls: NOD, along with Harris conduct regular surveys which look at different issues relating to people with disabilities and often relate to current events. These usually are good sources for demographics of people with disabilities. Here’s a list of some of its surveys:

- 2000 Survey of Community Participation – data on disability and community life

Everything else
Organizations that deal with specific issues or specific disabilities also gather data on those topics. Federal, state and local agencies that provide services to people with disabilities also keep data.

Here are some examples:
- City public works departments often keep databases of curb ramps
- State/local disability agencies often have databases of complaints
- Transit authorities keep data on ridership, wheelchair lift repairs, bus stop locations

Build your own database
In some cases, reporters may have to build their own databases to track trends. At the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, we worked with an ADA consulting firm to audit hundreds of restaurants, hotels and polling places for accessibility. From that, we built a database for our analysis. For another story, we wanted to track bus driver behavior, so we designed a sample of bus routes and built a database of driver behavior.

Guidelines:
- Read the methodology and caveats
- Talk to the researchers/experts
- Check the data against other measures
- Come up with some standards for your newsroom, so you are consistent
- Watch the universe/base that you are using
- If you use local data, make sure it is consistent with any national data you use
- If you plan to do any ADA audits, keep in mind that you need to follow state and local guidelines and be prepared to spend a lot of time.
- Know the law
- If you’re working with data from a poll or survey make sure you know the sources of the data and the methodology.