

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.

16 Does this person have any of the following long-lasting conditions:

a. Blindness, deafness, or a severe vision or hearing impairment? Yes No

b. A condition that substantially limits one or more basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, or carrying? Yes No

17 Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition lasting 6 months or more, does this person have any difficulty in doing any of the following activities:

a. Learning, remembering, or concentrating? Yes No

b. Dressing, bathing, or getting around inside the home? Yes No

c. (Answer if this person is 16 YEARS OLD OR OVER.) Going outside the home alone to shop or visit a doctor's office? Yes No

d. (Answer if this person is 16 YEARS OLD OR OVER.) Working at a job or business? Yes No

Total disabilities tallied	89,142,962
Sensory disability	9,305,275
Physical disability	21,151,506
Mental disability	12,435,853
Self-care disability	6,752,733
Go-outside-home disability	18,210,025
Employment disability	21,287,570

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.

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of Civilians 16 to 74 Years Old With a Work Disability, by Educational Attainment and Sex: 2003
(Numbers in thousands)

	With a work disability						
	Total			Not severe		Severe	
	Total	Number	Percent of total	Number	Percent of total	Number	Percent of total
16 to 24 years old	35,779	1,395	3.9	471	1.3	924	2.6
Less than 7th grade	450	54	12.0	3	0.8	50	11.2
7th to 8th grade	751	55	7.3	9	1.1	46	6.1
9th to 12th grade (no diploma)	13,371	594	4.4	185	1.4	410	3.1
High school graduate	8,245	436	5.3	137	1.7	299	3.6
Associate's degree							
or some college with no degree	10,730	229	2.1	120	1.1	109	1.0
Bachelor's degree or more	2,232	27	1.2	17	0.8	10	0.4
25 to 34 years old	38,945	2,173	5.6	656	1.7	1,517	3.9
Less than 7th grade	1,197	96	8.0	21	1.8	75	6.2
7th to 8th grade	539	61	11.3	8	1.5	53	9.8
9th to 12th grade (no diploma)	3,335	341	10.2	62	1.9	278	8.3
High school graduate	11,306	908	8.0	215	1.9	692	6.1
Associate's degree							
or some college with no degree	10,848	564	5.2	251	2.3	313	2.9
Bachelor's degree or more	11,720	204	1.7	99	0.8	105	0.9

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

Table A. Selected Disability Measures: 1997
(August–November 1997 data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation)

Categories	Number with specified characteristic (In thousands)		Percent with specified characteristic	
	Number	90-percent confidence interval (+/-)	Percent	90-percent confidence interval (+/-)
All ages	267,665	(X)	100.0	(X)
With a disability	52,596	814	19.7	0.3
Severe disability	32,970	673	12.3	0.3
Needed personal assistance with an ADL or IADL	10,076	390	3.8	0.1
Age 15 years and over	208,059	(X)	100.0	(X)
Used a wheelchair	2,155	183	1.0	0.1
Used a cane, crutches or walker (not a wheelchair)	6,372	313	3.1	0.2
Had difficulty seeing	7,673	342	3.7	0.2
Unable to see	1,768	166	0.8	0.1
Had difficulty hearing	7,966	348	3.8	0.2
Unable to hear	832	114	0.4	0.1
Age 25 to 64 years				
With any disability	26,493	612	100.0	(X)
In poverty	5,669	295	21.4	1.0
With a nonsevere disability	9,794	385	100.0	(X)
In poverty	1,018	126	10.4	1.2
With a severe disability	16,700	496	100.0	(X)
In poverty	4,651	268	27.9	1.4
No disability	112,604	1,007	100.0	(X)
In poverty	9,376	377	8.3	0.3

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: 32.6 million (2001)
- Percent of persons with limitation(s) in usual activities due to chronic conditions: 11.9 (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 (1999)
- Percent of adults unable (or very difficult) to walk a quarter mile: 6.5 (1999)
- 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: [Summary Health Statistics for U.S. Adults, National Health Interview Survey, 1999 Summary Health Statistics for U.S. Adults, National Health Interview Survey, 2001](#)

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:

- 2004 Survey of Americans with Disabilities – latest omnibus survey of Americans with disabilities.
- 2000 Survey of Community Participation – data on disability and community life
- 2000 Survey of Americans with Disabilities – omnibus survey of Americans with disabilities.

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.