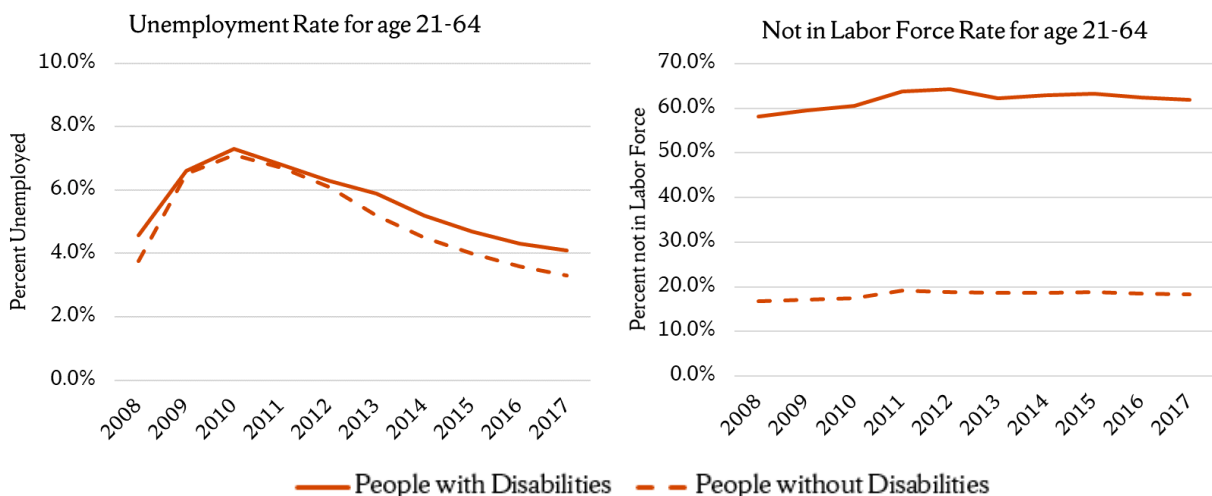


A Tale of Two Statistics: Has Unemployment among Adults with Disabilities Really Declined?

Jennifer D. Brooks

In his 2019 State of the Union address, President Donald Trump boasted that the unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities has reached an all-time low. But what does this actually mean? According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate is the percentage of adults in the civilian labor force who do not have a job but who are *actively looking for one*. The first graph supports Trump’s claim. The unemployment rate for adults ages 21 to 64 with disabilities has declined since its peak in 2010. However, the unemployment rate does not account for everyone who does not have a job. Therefore, the official unemployment rate masks the gap in labor force participation (the percentage of people who are actually working) between those with and without disabilities. Adults with disabilities are far more likely than their non-disabled peers to be out of the labor force. In 2017, about 60% of working-age adults with disabilities reported that they were not working in paid employment nor looking for a job. This is compared to only 20% for working-age adults without disabilities. The actual employment rate for those without disabilities has remained well above 70% since 2008, whereas the employment rate for people with disabilities has not risen above 40%. In fact, in 2017 the employment rate for people with disabilities was only 34% compared to 78% among those without disabilities—a gap of 44 percentage points. Although the unemployment rate has declined among both those with and without disabilities, the percentage of working-age adults in both groups who are out of the labor force altogether (i.e., not looking for work or unable to work) is higher than a decade ago.

The Official Unemployment Rate Masks the Low Rate of Labor Force Participation among Adults with Disabilities



Data Source: American Community Survey (ACS) one-year estimates, 2008-2017. Figures include individuals ages 21 to 64 who were born in the United States; Analysis: Jennifer D. Brooks

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