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Rehabilitation Research and Training Center  
for Economic Research on Employment  
Policy for Persons with Disabilities

## ***State Estimates of the Prevalence of Disability in the US: Report Summary***<sup>1</sup>

By Andrew Houtenville, Ph.D.

Agencies serving people with disabilities and disability advocacy organizations may benefit from having access to information about the prevalence of disability in their specific state. For instance, with such information state vocational rehabilitation agencies could compare the number of people they serve to the estimated number of working-age persons with disabilities in their state. Using these numbers, they could then compare their service delivery rate to that of other states. In a similar manner, advocates for persons with disabilities might find such data useful in making comparisons over time and across states in their effort to change not only government policy but also the practices of private business. For example, in an effort to persuade businesses to increase access and/or marketing toward persons with disabilities, advocates can show both state government and private businesses the size of the population with disabilities within their states and how it is changing over time.

In response to this need for information, Cornell University has prepared a report that provides estimates of the prevalence of disability in the United States by state, from 1981 through 1999. This report is developed from data compiled from the Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is a monthly survey of the non-institutionalized population of the United States, conducted by the

<sup>1</sup>A full copy of this report, entitled *Economics of Disability Research Report #1: Estimates of the Prevalence of Disability in the United States by State, 1981 through 1999* prepared by Andrew Houtenville, Ph.D., is available from the Cornell University web site at [http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/ped/dep/dep\\_pubs.html?cat\\_id=8](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/ped/dep/dep_pubs.html?cat_id=8).

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Bureau of the Census on behalf of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Information is collected from approximately 50,000 households (about 150,000 individuals) on labor force characteristics (e.g., employment, earnings, hours of work). One person in the household answers questions for all household members. Disability is defined using a single question in the March CPS. Persons with a disability are defined as those who report having (or are reported by the household's respondent as having) "a health problem or disability which prevents them from working or which limits the kind or amount of work they can do." This definition puts disability in the social context of work. This simple definition of disability is not directly linked to program participation.

As previously mentioned, knowing the prevalence of disability among working-age people in a state in a given year can be useful in a number of ways. Working-age people (aged 25 through 61) are a heterogeneous group. State governments are able to track people who participate in categorical programs for those with disabilities, e.g., Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability

Insurance, state vocational rehabilitation services. But states are much less able to track their populations with disabilities who are not currently receiving state services. Yet it is important that states be able to identify both groups to determine the population that might be categorically eligible for state and federal initiatives targeted on the working-age population with disabilities. Furthermore, it is useful to track this population over time to allow state governments to better understand the changing population they serve and, if necessary, to reallocate their resources accordingly. By making such information available for all states, individual state governments can then compare their population with disabilities to those of other states. More importantly, they can better compare the size and scope of their programs targeted on those with disabilities to those of other states.

The Cornell University analysis of the CPS data ranks the states by the percentage of those with work limitations averaged over all years, 1981 through 1999. The *Figure 1* below presents the estimated percentages of non-institutionalized civilians aged 25



**Figure 1.** Estimated percentages of non-institutionalized civilians aged 25 through 61 with a work limitation for each state and the District of Columbia averaged over 1981-1999.

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The average annual estimated percentage of those with a work limitation ranges from 12.2 percent for West Virginia to 5.7 percent for New Jersey. The highest five states are West Virginia, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi, while the lowest five states are Hawaii, Utah, Nebraska, Connecticut, and New Jersey. These findings are consistent with those of McCoy and Weems (1989) who found the highest rates of Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance receipt occurred in these same areas. LaPlante (1993) reports a similar finding using the 1980 and 1990 Census.

Should more longitudinal information be useful, the full Cornell University report also analyzes the changes in the prevalence of work limitations over time (Houtenville, 2000). It shows the percentage of the working-age civilian population with a work limitation averaged over the first five years of available data, 1981 through 1985, and over the last five years, 1995 through 1999. Corresponding state rankings are provided. The top five states are remarkably stable: West Virginia, Arkansas and Tennessee are among the top five states in both the first five-year span and the last five-year span. The District of Columbia and Mississippi are ranked in the top five in the first five-year span and are replaced by Maine and Kentucky in the last five-year span. The percentage change from the first five years to the last five years and the corresponding state rankings are provided. Percentage change expresses the change in prevalence in terms relative to the magnitude of prevalence, which allows changes in high prevalence states to be compared to changes in low prevalence states. According to these calculations, Kentucky has the largest percentage increase—the prevalence of work limitation in the years from 1995 through 1999 is 34.4 percent larger than in the years from 1981 through 1985. Kansas, Wyoming, Massachusetts, and Maine follow Kentucky. Hawaii has the largest percentage decrease—the prevalence of work limitation in 1995 through 1999 is 20.6 percent smaller than in 1981 through 1985. Minnesota, Delaware, Mississippi, and Arizona follow Hawaii. The smallest percentage changes are in Florida, Washington, and New Mexico, between 1 and -1 percent.

There are two other reports by Cornell University providing state specific data that might be of interest to state providers of rehabilitation employment services and disability advocacy organizations. These reports provide estimates of employment rates for persons with disabilities and median household size-adjusted income for persons with disabilities in the United States by state from 1980 through 1998. Copies of report summaries on this information or the full reports are available on-line from Cornell University under “publications” at <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/rrtc>. Questions about the reports or the analysis should be directed to Andrew Houtenville, Ph.D., RRTC Senior Research Associate, Cornell University, at email [ajh29@cornell.edu](mailto:ajh29@cornell.edu) or phone 607-255-5702.

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