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for Economic Research on Employment  
Policy for Persons with Disabilities

Research Brief

## A User Guide to Current Statistics on the Employment of People with Disabilities

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This research brief is drawn from "A User's Guide to Current Statistics on the Employment of People with Disabilities," in *The Decline in the Employment of People with Disabilities: A Policy Puzzle*, David C. Stapleton and Richard V. Burkhauser, Eds., published by W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2003.

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**A MAJOR DEBATE** is taking place over reports of an unprecedented decline in the employment rate of working age people with disabilities over the 1990s business cycle (1989-2000) by those using currently available national representative data sources. See Figure 1. The debate is focused on the quality of the data, with some critics calling on the Federal government to end all its financial support for the dissemination of employment estimates for people with disabilities using currently available data. Others argue that although the current data are usable within certain limits, the declines in employment reported are quite sensitive to the definitions used to capture the “relevant” population with disabilities.

### Is the Decline in Employment a Measurement Aberration?

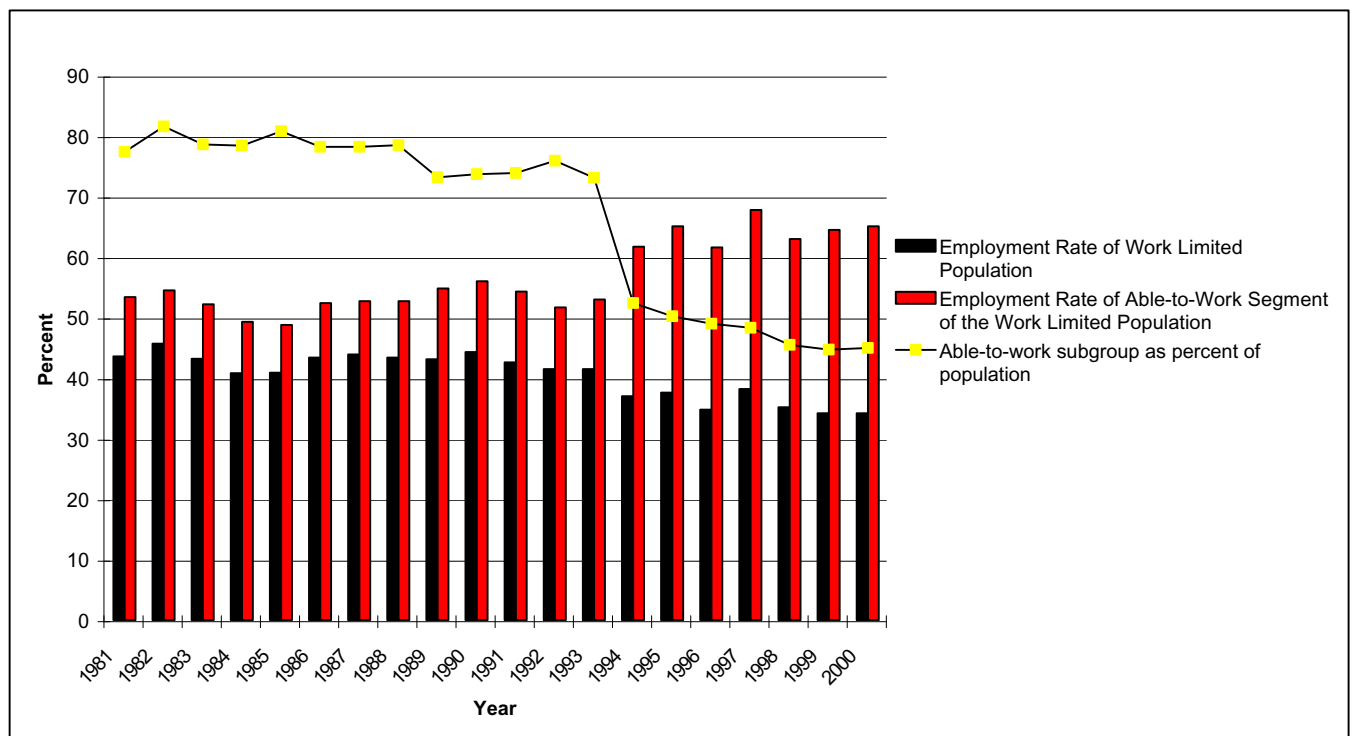
The root causes of the disagreement are the conceptual and practical difficulties in measuring disability in surveys. The old medical model, which posits that a disability is a deficiency within the individual, has been replaced by the widely held view that a disabili-

ty is caused by an interaction between the individual’s functional limitation and the social environment. When you ask a person if he or she has a “disability,” or, more specifically, a “work disability,” the answer might depend on the person’s current employment status. A person who works despite a significant physical or mental impairment might say no, but the identical person might say yes if he or she is not employed.

In their paper, Burkhauser, Houtenville, and Wittenburg agree that the work limitation measure of the working age population with disabilities leaves much to be desired, but provide evidence that the decline in employment among those reporting a work limitation in the Current Population Survey (CPS) data is real, and not merely an artifact of that data set or the work limitation question by comparing employment trends from the CPS to employment trends from the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) and the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). NHIS and SIPP support a richer variety of disability definitions, including ones that they argue are less sensitive to the economic and policy environment.

**Figure 1.**

**Employment Rates of Working Age Men with Disabilities Aged 25-61 and Population Percentages (CPS data)**



Although estimates of the size of the working age population with disabilities vary significantly across surveys and across definitions of disability within surveys in any given year, the authors find declining employment trends regardless of the survey used, and whether the working age population with a disability is defined broadly, based on a self-reported impairment, more narrowly as a limitation in any major activity, still more narrowly as any work limitation, and most narrowly as a work limitation that is reported in each of two interviews, one year apart.

A related finding is that the proportion of people with disabilities who say they are able to work at all declined during the same period. For the male population with work limitations, the CPS shows a decline in the proportion able to work at all from 78.0 percent in 1988 to 73.2 percent in 1993, then, after a break in the series owing to a change in the CPS, an additional drop from 52.8 percent in 1994 to 45.4 percent in 2000. (See Figure 1) The NHIS shows a decline from 49.8 percent in 1988 to 40.7 percent in 1996, the last year of the data. Others find similar declines using slightly different years of NHIS data and definitions of the population with disabilities.

The behavior of such “able to work at all” rates plays a central role in the evidence concerning the causes of the employment rate decline. Researchers have consistently found that the employment rate for those with disabilities who say they are able to work at all has increased. As Figure 1 shows employment among the CPS male “able to work at all” population fell slightly during the recession, from 54.7 percent in 1989 to 51.7 percent in 1992, but then, after a break in the series, increased from 61.6 percent in 1994 to 64.2 percent in 2000. The employment rate based on a similar measure from the NHIS fell from 85.1 percent in 1989 to 82.8 percent in 1992 and then increased to 86.3 percent in 1996, the last year of the data. These increases are comparable to increases in the employment rate for people without work limitations. Hence as Figure 1 shows the fall in the employment of those with disabilities over the 1990s is consistent with an increase in the employment of the declining share of that population who report being able to work at all. Differences in employment trends thus are not caused by “bad” data but by researchers who are using

different definitions of the working age population with disabilities from that data.

### **Which Measure of the Employment Rate Should We Focus Our Attention On?**

Burkhauser, Houtenville, and Wittenburg argue that the best way to measure progress toward the broad goals articulated in the ADA—greater inclusion of people with disabilities in major social activities, including work, and greater economic independence—is to focus on the employment rate for all people with disabilities, regardless of whether they report being able to work at all. To do otherwise ignores the aspirations for increased economic independence and social integration of a large share of the population with disabilities.

Beyond this, however, is there something to be learned for policy purposes from analysis of the employment rate for only those who say they are able to work at all? The answer depends on why the share of the population with disabilities who report being able to work at all has decreased. If the reason for the decline is an increase in the severity of medical conditions, then, trends in the employment rate for those who are able to work at all tell us something meaningful about those for whom work is a “realistic option.” If, on the other hand, reports of inability to work at all are sensitive to the economic and policy environment, then looking at rates for only those who report being able to work at all misses an important, perhaps definitive, component of the effects of the economic and policy environment on employment

Burkhauser, Houtenville and Wittenburg argue that if we can confidently rule out the hypotheses that change in the economic and policy environment affects the proportion saying they are able to work at all, then we can sharpen our understanding of the effects of the economic and policy environment by examining just those who are affected. But they are not convinced that the proportion saying they are able to work at all is immune to the economic and policy environment. They believe it is a mistake to rely on the employment rate of people with disabilities who say they are able to work at all as an indicator of the progress being made toward improving employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

This paper is being distributed by the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for Economic Research on Employment Policy for Persons with Disabilities at Cornell University

## Other Papers from the Cornell RRTC

- *A Brief Discussion of the Employment of People with Disabilities and the Definition of Disabilities* by Richard V. Burkhauser and Andrew J. Houtenville
- *A User Guide to Current Statistics on the Employment of People with Disabilities* by Richard V. Burkhauser, Andrew J. Houtenville, and David C. Wittenburg
- *Economics of Disability Research Report #1: Estimates of the Prevalence of Disability in the United States by State, 1981 through 1999* by Andrew J. Houtenville
- *Economics of Disability Research Report #2: Estimates of Employment Rates for Persons with Disabilities by State, 1980 through 1998* by Andrew J. Houtenville
- *Economics of Disability Research Report #3: Estimates of Median Household Size-Adjusted Income for Persons with Disabilities in the United States by State, 1980 through 1998* by Andrew J. Houtenville
- *Economics of Disability Research Report #4: Estimates of the Prevalence of Disability, Employment Rates, and Median Household Size-Adjusted Income Aged 18 through 64 in the United States by State, 1980 through 2000* by Andrew J. Houtenville and Adam F. Adler
- *Economics of Disability Research Report #5: Economic Outcomes of Working-Age People with Disabilities over the Business Cycle—An Examination of the 1980s and 1990s* by Richard V. Burkhauser, Mary C. Daly, Andrew J. Houtenville, and Nigar Nargis
- *Economics of Disability Research Report #6: Comparing the Robustness of Economic Outcomes in the CPS and NHIS Data* by Richard V. Burkhauser, Andrew J. Houtenville, and Nigar Nargis
- *Framing the Issues: Economic Research on Employment Policy for People with Disabilities* by Michael E. Fishman
- *Measuring Economic Outcomes of Working-Age Persons with Chronic Vision-Related Condition* by Andrew J. Houtenville
- *Policy Brief: Impacts of Expanding Health Care Coverage on the Employment and Earnings of Participants in the SSI Work Incentive Program* by David C. Wittenburg, Erica Chan, and David C. Stapleton
- *Policy Brief: Policies and Programs Affecting the Employment of People with Disabilities* by Gina A. Livermore, Mark W. Nowak, and David C. Wittenburg
- *Policy Brief: Summary Review of Data Sources for School to Work Transitions by Youths with Disabilities* by David C. Wittenburg and David C. Stapleton
- *Real Trends or Measurement Problems? Disability and Employment Trends from the Survey of Income and Program Participation* by Elaine Maag and David C. Wittenburg

■ *Review of Data Sources for School to Work Transitions by Youths with Disabilities* by David C. Wittenburg and David C. Stapleton

■ *State Estimates of Employment Rates for Persons with Disabilities: Report Summary* by Andrew J. Houtenville

■ *State Estimates of Median Household Size-Adjusted Income for Persons with Disabilities: Report Summary* by Andrew J. Houtenville

■ *State Estimates of the Prevalence of Disability in the US: Report Summary* by Andrew J. Houtenville

■ *The Economics of Policies and Programs Affecting the Employment of People with Disabilities* by Gina A. Livermore, David C. Stapleton, Mark W. Nowak, and David C. Wittenburg

■ *Transitions from AFDC to SSI Prior to Welfare Reform* by David C. Stapleton, David C. Wittenburg, and Erica Chan

The above papers are available on-line at <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/RRTC/papers.html>, together with a listing of other RRTC publications available on other sites.

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