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Understanding disability statistics

How many persons with disabilities are there in the U.S.?

It depends how you define disability. There is no universally accepted definition of disability, and the definition used makes a tremendous difference in how many people are counted or left out. Below are the most commonly quoted estimates of the number of persons with disabilities in the U.S.

American Community Survey (ACS 2011):

37.3 Million, 12.1% of non-institutionalized persons¹ of all ages

18.9 Million, 10.5% of non-institutionalized working age (21-64) persons

The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP 2010):

56.7 Million, 18.7% of the civilian non-institutionalized persons of all ages

29.5 Million, 16.6% of non-institutionalized working age (21-64) persons

The Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) defines disability more broadly than the ACS or SIPP, and data are not currently available to estimate how many individuals have disabilities under its definition.

¹ The non-institutionalized population excludes persons residing in institutions such as nursing homes, prisons, jails, mental hospitals, and juvenile correctional facilities. Institutions house approximately 4 million persons of whom 2.1 million (52.7%) have a disability (ACS 2011).



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Why such different numbers?

The ACS uses six basic disability types in their definition of disability:

1. Visual (blind or has serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses)
2. Hearing (deaf or has serious difficulty hearing)
3. Cognitive (serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition)
4. Ambulatory (serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs)
5. Self-care (difficulty dressing or bathing)
6. Independent living (difficulty doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor's office or shopping because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition)

The ACS definition may not capture persons with upper body disabilities (e.g., back, arm or shoulder issues) or persons with psychological /mental illnesses, even though both of these types of disability account for a large proportion of people with disabilities.

The SIPP uses much more detailed disability criteria than the ACS. This more expansive definition means that the SIPP identifies more individuals with a much wider variety of disabilities, including, but not limited to, those with upper body and mental health disabilities as well as those with difficulties with activities of daily living; these individuals are unlikely to be captured by the ACS questions.

So which one is right?

It depends on the definition of disability that best meets your criteria. While the ACS provides very current estimates (it is an annual survey), and its sample is large enough to enable state and local estimates, it uses a relatively narrow definition of disability. The SIPP likely provides a better estimate of how many individuals are covered under the ADAAA, but its sample is such that it is only useful for national-level estimates.



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Where can I find more information?

American Community Survey (ACS):

For easy access to ACS disability estimates: www.DisabilityStatistics.org

U.S Census Bureau's main ACS website: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>

Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP):

<https://www.census.gov/sipp/>

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<http://www.northeastada.org/>

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