

Prevalence of Disability: Individual and Household Context

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Introduction

How common is disability in America? Estimates vary, ranging from under 40 million to over 55 million people, depending on how disability is measured (von Reichert, Greiman, Myers & Rural Institute, 2014 and Brault 2012.)

One widely used source of disability data is the American Community Survey (ACS). The six ACS disability questions include four questions about physical impairments (hearing, vision, cognitive, and ambulatory impairments), and two questions about functional limitations (independent living and self-care difficulty.)

ACS data are released in two forms: as easy-to-use summary data, and as complex and detailed micro data called the Public Use Micro Sample, or PUMS. Researchers use the ACS PUMS as a powerful data source to gain insight about individuals and their households.

Prevalence of Individual Disability by Age

Based on the most recent ACS micro data (2011-2015), 40.8 million Americans, or 12.9% of the total population, experience at least one type of disability.

Disability is associated with age, and Figure 1 confirms the well-known fact that disability rates increase with age. Figure 1 shows the number of people with disabilities (gray area, with number of people on the left axis), and the disability rate, or percent of people with disabilities (black line, with percentage on the right axis) by age group. Disability rates start to increase as early as age 40, with a sharp rise for people 75 and older. However, half of all people with disabilities are under the age of 60, including over 3 million children and adolescents under the age of 20.

Disability, Age, and Household Context

The vast majority of Americans live in households (97%) with the remaining living in group quarters, such as dormitories, military barracks, prisons, or nursing homes (Census 2017 – ACS PUMS 2011-2015). The following takes a closer look at disability and age of the 308 million of Americans living in households (Figure 2).

Of those 308 million Americans who live in households, 230 million are people without disabilities who live in households where no members experience a disability (gray area of Figure 2), and 38 million are people with at least one type of disability who live in a household (black line). Additionally, there are 40 million people without disabilities living in households with one or more people with disabilities (patterned bars.)

As shown by the gray area of Figure 2, people in households without disability represent the majority for most age groups. Their numbers dwindle with increasing age. At age 75 and older, there are fewer people without disabilities than with disabilities, indicating that people age into disability.

The black line of Figure 2 shows that the number of people with disabilities is relatively low among younger age groups, from childhood through adolescence into mid-adulthood. However, there is a considerable rise in the number of people with disabilities starting around the age of 40. These numbers peak and plateau from the late 50s to the late 60s. At age 70 and above, the number of people

with disabilities gradually decreases because there are fewer people in these older age groups. Though absolute number of people with disabilities decreases as age increases, disability rates sharply increase with increasing age (Figure 1).

The patterned bars of Figure 2 highlight people without disabilities who live in households with someone with a disability. This group is not often recognized by disability statistics, but is clearly relevant for understanding the overall scope and impact of disability. This group includes many children, teenagers, and young adults, who experience the impacts of disability through a household member. Also notable is a slight rise for those between 40 and 60 years

Figure 1: Prevalence of Disability by Age: People with Disability and Disability Rates

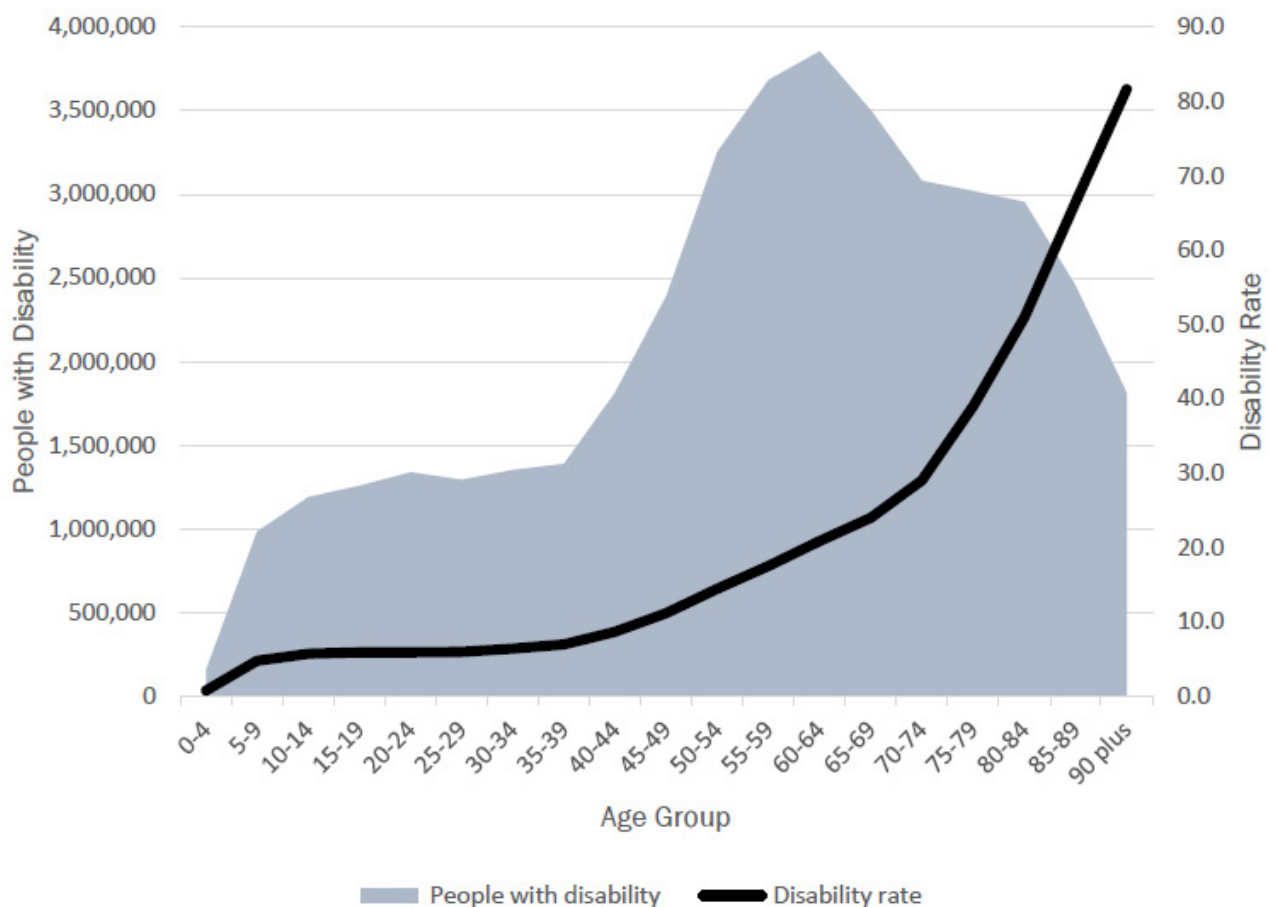
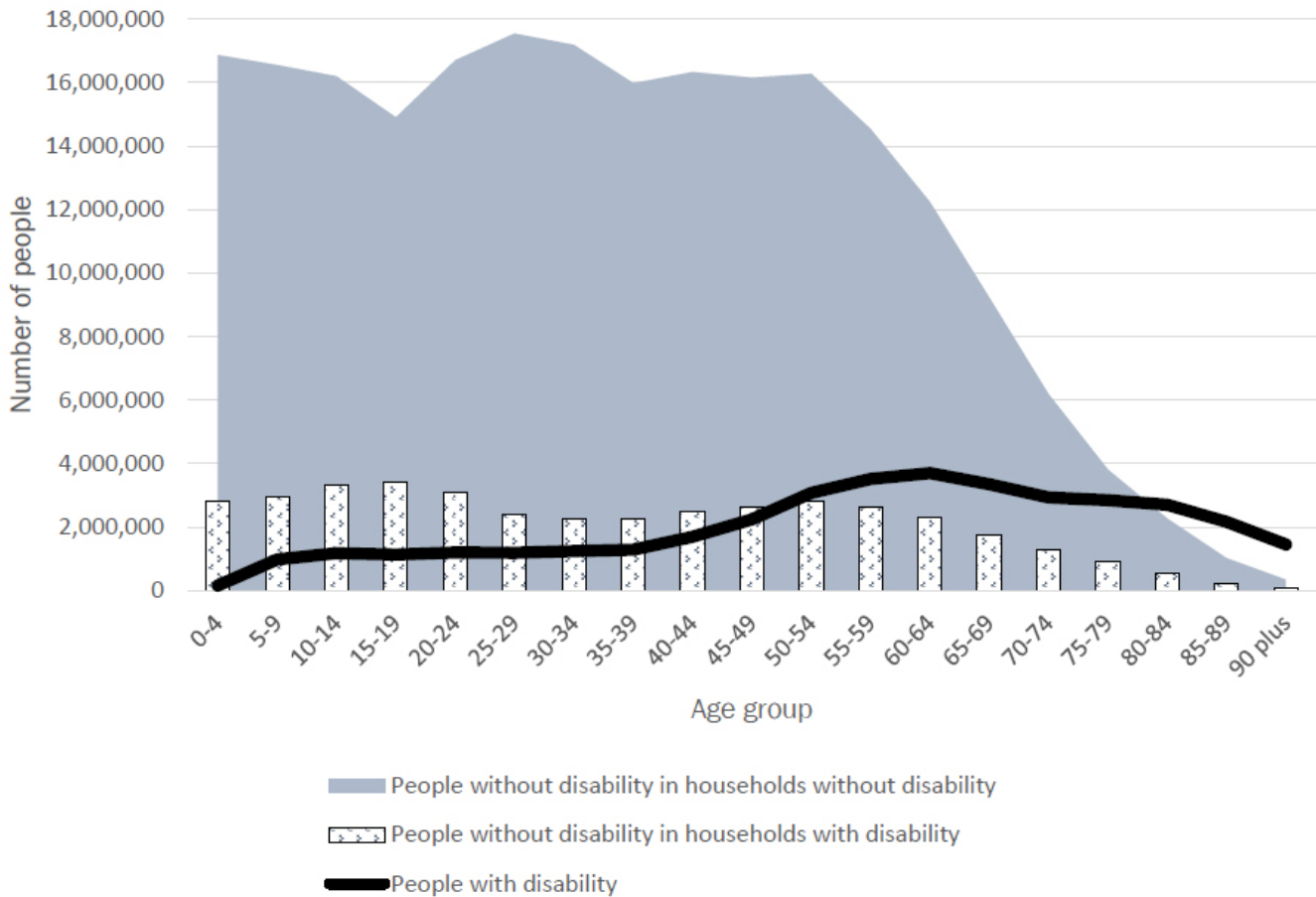


Figure 2: People in Households by Disability Status and Age



old, indicating that people without disabilities in these age groups are increasingly living in households with at least one member with disabilities. This could be a spouse, child, or aging parent.

As age increases, the number of people without disabilities living in households with a person with a disability decreases, potentially indicating diminished support for household members with disabilities.

ACS data generally put individual disability rates in the United States at 12% -13%, or 1 in 8. However, by considering the household context, the impact of disability is considerably greater than disability data for individuals would suggest. At the household level, disability affects approximately 78 million people, or 25% of the U.S. population.

Conclusion

The ACS PUMS data allow researchers to perform detailed analysis of both individuals and their households. The observations presented here imply that there is a benefit to look at disability beyond the individual level and to take the household context into account. This analysis shows that millions of Americans without disabilities are influenced by household member with disabilities, highlighting that the impact of disability at the household level goes beyond the number of individuals with disabilities. This valuable insight needs to be considered for future disability research and policy.

References

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Additional Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Disability and Health Data System (DHDS). (2016). Disability Status and Types [data set]. Retrieved from <https://dhds.cdc.gov/dataviews/view?viewId=1522>

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