

THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (2021)

By John Shepard, Jean Winsor, John Butterworth, Alberto Migliore, Daria Domin, and Agnes Zalewska

The American Community Survey (ACS) offers a broad population view of employment outcomes for working-age people with disabilities, whereas the IDD Agency National Survey and RSA-911 dataset offer system-specific data sources. The ACS allows for the comparison of employment participation and outcomes for civilian working-age people with and without disabilities, and provides a population estimate that includes people who do not receive formal supports from a human service agency.

“Working-age people” are defined in this chapter as “civilian non-institutionalized people ages 16–64”. The data presented here will emphasize the ACS disability category of *cognitive disability* as the closest approximation for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). It is important to look at multiple demographic, economic, and employment outcome indicators to get the best understanding of the employment situation for people with IDD.

ACS TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

In assessing employment outcomes, it is important to understand how the ACS defines employment categories and disability subgroups. Employment categories in the ACS include:

Employed: People with jobs.

Unemployed: People who do not have jobs and have actively looked for work in the past four weeks. These people are considered part of the labor force.

Not in the labor force: People who do not have jobs and have not actively looked for work in the past four weeks.

Employment rate (also referred to as the *employment-to-population ratio*): Number of people employed / number of people in the working-age population.

Unemployment rate: Number unemployed / (number employed + number unemployed).

We focus primarily on employment rate as an indicator of successful employment outcomes for people with disabilities. A large proportion of people with disabilities are not in the labor force, therefore an **employment-to-population ratio** is a more useful descriptive measure of this population’s economic situation than the more commonly used unemployment rate (Brault, 2010). The unemployment rate as reported by the US Department of Labor does not include people who are not in the labor force in their calculation—a significant group when it comes to subpopulations of people with disabilities.

Questions that allow people to indicate specific disabilities like IDD are uncommon in large national surveys. Here is how ACS collects information on disability:

An individual is categorized as having any disability if they answer “yes” to one or more of six items:

- 1) hearing difficulty,
- 2) vision difficulty,
- 3) cognitive difficulty,
- 4) ambulatory difficulty,
- 5) self-care difficulty, and
- 6) independent living difficulty.

Someone with a cognitive disability has indicated that, because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition lasting six months or more, they have difficulty learning, remembering, and concentrating.

Analysis of the ACS dataset revealed these key findings:

- People with disabilities are much less likely to work than people without disabilities
- People with a cognitive disability who are receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) have the lowest employment rate of all people
- People with any type of disability have less success in the labor market compared to people with no disability
- People with disabilities are more likely to live in a household that is below the poverty line
- People with disabilities who are employed are less likely to live below the poverty line
- People with disabilities work fewer weeks per year than people without disabilities

People with Disabilities are Much Less Likely to Work than People without Disabilities

Table 1 displays indicators of labor market success for four groups of working-age individuals:

1. people who do not have a disability
2. people who indicated they have at least one disability (any disability)
3. people with a cognitive disability
4. people with a cognitive disability who received SSI[1] in 2021

People with any disability or a cognitive disability are employed at much lower rates (40% and 32.7% respectively) than those without disabilities (74.3%).

People with a Cognitive Disability who are Receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Have the Lowest Employment Rate of All People

People with cognitive disabilities who receive SSI have the lowest employment rate (7.8%). This finding is not surprising given that to be eligible for SSI, an individual needs to demonstrate that their disability is so significant that they cannot reasonably be expected to work for pay. Within the group of people with a cognitive disability, those who also receive SSI are likely to be people who have the most significant cognitive disabilities.

People with any Type of Disability have Less Success in the Labor Market Compared to People with no Disability

To fully understand the employment experiences of people with disabilities, this report examines:

1. the percentage employed, percentage unemployed, and percentage not in the labor force (indicators A, B, and C in Table 10)
2. the unemployment rate

People with disabilities are significantly less likely to be in the labor force. Those who are in the labor force experience higher levels of unemployment compared to people with no disability, indicating they have more difficulty finding a job (Table 1). Individuals who are considered to not be in the labor force are non-institutionalized, ages 16-64, unemployed, and who have not actively looked for work in the past four weeks.

The difference in poverty rates between people who are employed and people who are not suggests that work is critical to economic self-sufficiency.

Table 1. Labor Market Success Indicators by Disability Status 2021

	No disability	Any disability	Cognitive disability	Cognitive disability with SSI
A. Percentage Employed (Employment Rate)	74.3%	40.0%	32.7%	7.8%
B. Percentage Unemployed	4.6%	6.2%	7.3%	2.7%
C. Percentage Not in the Labor Force	21.0%	53.8%	60.0%	89.5%
Total (A+B+C)	100%	100%	100%	100%
Unemployment Rate (number unemployed / number employed + number unemployed)	5.8%	13.4%	18.2%	25.4%

People with Disabilities are More Likely to Live Below the Poverty Line

People with any disability and people with a cognitive disability are more likely to be living in a household that is below the poverty line than people without a disability. In 2021, only 10.6% of all working-age people without a disability lived in a household that was below the poverty line, compared with 24.4% of people with any disability, 28% of people with a cognitive disability, and 36.2% of people with a cognitive disability who received SSI payments as part of their income (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Eligibility for the SSI program includes having limited financial resources. Therefore, it is not surprising that people with a cognitive disability who receive SSI payments are more likely to be poor. Fifteen years ago, Stapleton et al. (2006) described this as living in a “poverty trap”. To maintain access to health care and support services through Medicare and Medicaid, people with disabilities must prove that they are poor; this leads to people either remaining out of the labor force or limiting their employment earnings. Little has changed since their report. A 2017 report by the National Council on Disability described the ongoing issue:

“..., due to the “all or nothing” requirement of the SSA (Social Security Administration), people with disabilities are faced with choosing between working or receiving needed cash, medical, and other in-kind support. If they choose to work, then they often find themselves in low-paying jobs with little or no benefits. If they select needed benefits, they cannot work and are often faced with the further challenge of navigating a complex system to obtain needed supports.” (p. 49).

People with Disabilities who are Employed are Less Likely to Live Below the Poverty Line

Table 2 compares poverty rates for population subgroups of working-age people who are employed and who are not employed. We ran chi square tests, which determine whether there is a statistical relationship between variables for each subgroup. The chi square test determined there was a relationship between people who are working and people who are not working in terms of living below the poverty line. These tests showed that people with a disability who are working are less likely to be living in a household that is poor than people with a disability who are not working.

The difference in poverty rates between people who are employed and people who are not suggests that work is critical to economic self-sufficiency. Of those people who had a cognitive disability, received SSI payments as part of their income, and were not working, 38% were living in a household that was below the poverty line, compared with 15.9% of people in this subgroup who were working.

People in disability subgroups who worked were less likely to be living in poverty than people in the same subgroup who were not working. However, the poverty rates for disability subgroups who did work were still higher than the poverty rates for people with no disabilities who work. This finding suggests that compared to people with no disability, people with disabilities have a greater likelihood of being underemployed, (i.e., working in jobs that do not provide them with sufficient income to exit poverty). This finding supports the conclusions of Stapleton et al. (2006) and the National Council on Disability 2017 report.

Table 2. Poverty Rates in 2021 for Disability Subgroups by Employment Status

	Percentage living below the poverty line (poverty rate)	
	Not employed	Employed
People with no disabilities	25.8%	5.5%
People with any disability	34.1%	9.7%
People with a cognitive disability	35.2%	13.2%
People with a cognitive disability who received SSI	38.0%	15.9%

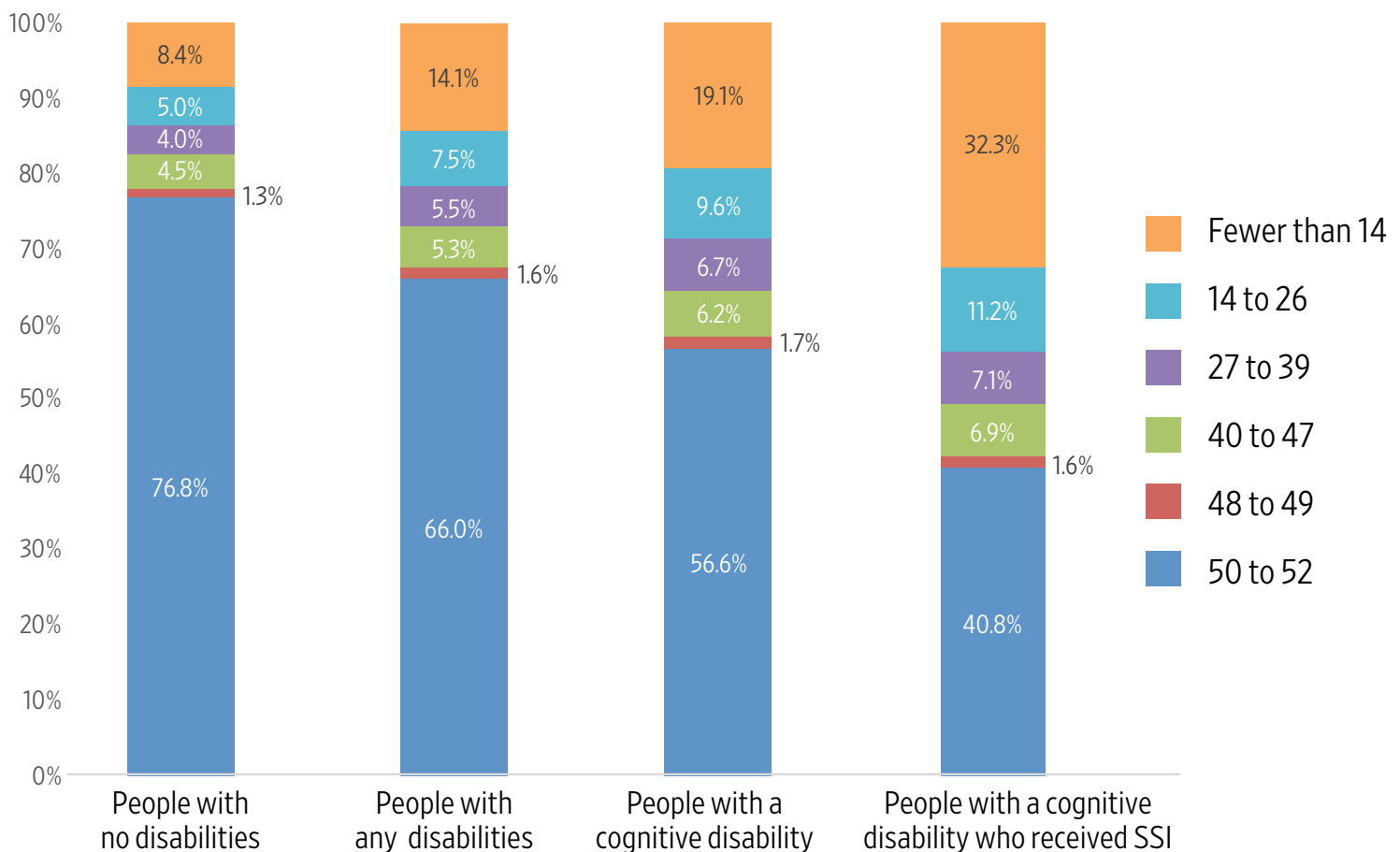
People with Disabilities Work Fewer Weeks than People without Disabilities

Adding more evidence to the claim that people with disabilities are underemployed, people with disabilities who are employed work fewer weeks per year on average than people without disabilities. Figure 2 shows that in 2021, people with any disability were employed for fewer weeks out of the year than their counterparts without disabilities.

Sixty-six percent of employed people with any disability worked between 50 and 52 weeks in 2021. Slightly more than 35% of individuals with a cognitive disability worked fewer than 40 weeks and 50.3% of individuals with a cognitive disability who received SSI worked fewer than 40 weeks in 2021. By contrast, only 17.4% of individuals without a disability worked fewer than 40 weeks.

These data show that the amount of time worked by people with disabilities, and particularly people with cognitive disabilities (measured here in number of weeks worked per year) is an additional barrier to economic self-sufficiency. To achieve a path to self-sufficiency, people with disabilities not only need to be employed at higher rates, but also need to be working in jobs that promote stable and long-term employment.

Figure 2. Number of Weeks Worked in the 12 Months Prior to Responding to the ACS among Employed Individuals



This finding suggests that compared to people with no disability, people with disabilities have a greater likelihood of being underemployed, (i.e., working in jobs that do not provide them with sufficient income to exit poverty).

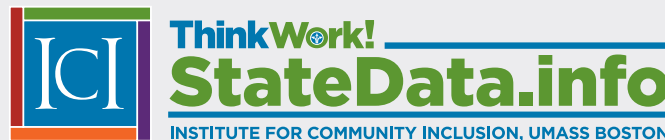
Method

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a national survey designed and administered by the US Census Bureau to better understand changing communities. The ACS collects information from all 50 states and DC on topics such as disability, age, race, income, and other demographic and personal data (www.census.gov).

To gather information on people with disabilities, the Census Bureau asks six questions on long-lasting conditions and functional impairments. Any person who indicates having one or more of these conditions or functional impairments is considered as having a disability. The individual items used to collect these data points are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3. ACS Service Definitions

Term	Explanation
Employment rate	The percentage of civilian, non-institutionalized working-age (16–64 years old) individuals who have a job.
Disability categories	<p>The ACS classifies individuals as having a disability based on answering affirmatively to one or more of the following items:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this person deaf or does he or she have serious difficulty hearing (hearing disability)? • Is this person blind or does he or she have serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses (vision disability)? • Does this person have serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs (ambulatory difficulty)? • Does this person have difficulty dressing or bathing (self-care difficulty)? • Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, does this person have difficulty doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor’s office or shopping (independent-living difficulty)? • Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, does this person have serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions (cognitive disability)?



Funding

This Data Note is a product of ThinkWork! at the Institute for Community Inclusion, University of Massachusetts Boston, supported in part by the Administration on Disabilities, Administration for Community Living, US Department of Health and Human Services, under cooperative agreement #90DNPA0002. The opinions contained in this report are those of the grantee and do not necessarily reflect those of the funders.

Data Source

American Community Survey 2021

Suggested Citation

Shepard, J., Winsor, J., Butterworth, J., Migliore, A., Domin, D., & Zalewska, A. (2023). American Community Survey 2021. Data Note Series, Data Note 83. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion.