

Survey: Most Americans with disabilities 'striving to work'

June 2 2015, byHolly Ramer

More than two-thirds of American adults with disabilities are "striving to work," according to a national employment survey being released just before the landmark legislation protecting their rights turns 25.

In contrast to census data on how many people with disabilities hold jobs, the survey being released Wednesday by the Kessler Foundation goes further by exploring the experience of finding and keeping a job. It also provides a snapshot of not just the obstacles people with disabilities face but how often they overcome them.

"There has been some work in previous surveys that looked at barriers but never asking the question, have they overcome the barriers? There was always this sense of doom and gloom," said Andrew Houtenville, director of research at the University of New Hampshire Institute of Disability. The UNH Survey Center conducted the survey for the Kessler Foundation, a West Orange, New Jersey-based nonprofit that funds research and initiatives aimed at improving the lives of people with neurological disabilities.

Among the 3,000 people interviewed, fewer than 6 percent had never worked. Just under 43 percent were currently working, 9 percent were looking for work and 17 percent had worked since the onset of their disability.

Researchers combine the last three figures into the category of "striving to work," and point to other findings they said demonstrate that people

with disabilities want to be productive members of the workforce. Those who are currently employed work an average of 35.5 hours per week, more than half work more than 40 hours per week and more than 40 percent said they want to work more hours.

"It's a way of describing how active people with disabilities are in the labor market. It's not just about sitting back and taking benefits," Houtenville said.

The most oft-cited obstacles to gaining employment were a lack of education or training, employers who assumed applicants couldn't do the job and a lack of transportation. But 42 percent of those who mentioned transportation said they overcame that obstacle. Once on the job, the top three barriers were getting less pay than others in similar jobs, difficult attitudes from supervisors and difficult attitudes from co-workers. More than half reported overcoming difficulties with co-workers, however.

Laurie McCray, whose 25-year-old son has Down syndrome and works four part-time jobs, credits his success to her unrelenting efforts to make him part of his community from an early age.

"If you segregate your child when they're young, they will not likely have successful employment in the community as adults," she said. "You have to have your antennas up looking for possibilities. My antennas are always up."

Kessler Foundation President Rodger DeRose said he hopes the results will lead to the development of more targeted strategies and programs. And he hopes it will lead Congress to take a fresh look at the federal disability benefits program, which he believes is outdated and serves as a disincentive for people to [work](#).

He said great strides have been made since the 1990 passage of the

Americans with Disabilities Act, which prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in jobs, schools, transportation and other areas of public life. But gaps remain in [employment](#) opportunities, DeRose said, which results in income disparity.

"If you look 10 years into the future, as baby boomers have gone out of the job force ... [people with disabilities](#) are going to be a population that will finally be recognized as a workforce that can make the transition into the workplace and be successful in overcoming barriers," he said. "This workforce—the disability community—and business have not made the connection yet."

The telephone survey of 3,013 people with [disabilities](#) nationwide was conducted between October 2014 and April 2015 and had a sampling margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points. The results were provided to The Associated Press ahead of the report's release in Washington.

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