

# New analysis: More US adults identify as disabled; ethnic and socioeconomic disparities persist

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A new analysis led by Johns Hopkins Medicine researchers finds that the number of U.S. adults who report they have a disability is 27%,

representing 67 million adults, an increase of 1% since the data were last analyzed in 2016. In this new study, which used data collected in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers found a wide array of disparities between socioeconomic and demographic factors that persists among those who identify as disabled and those who do not.

"To reduce ableism and create more inclusive communities, our country must be equipped with data on the prevalence of disabilities and who is most impacted by them," says Bonnielin Swenor, Ph.D., M.P.H., director of the Johns Hopkins Disability Health Research Center and associate professor of ophthalmology at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and Wilmer Eye Institute.

Swenor and her research team analyzed survey data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2019 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, a collection of health and behavior information from annual telephone surveys of more than 400,000 U.S. adults.

Results of the analysis were published Oct. 21 in *JAMA Network Open*.

Approximately 27% of American adults reported a disability. When compared with the U.S. adult population, this represents 67 million adults. An additional 6 million people reported a disability since data on disability prevalence were analyzed and reported in 2016.

In the current study, approximately 12% of American adults reported more than one disability. Mobility was the most often reported disability type, followed by cognitive/mental, independent living (requiring help for daily tasks and outings), hearing, vision, and self-care (needing help with bathing, dressing and other personal care tasks).

In addition, the researchers analyzed socioeconomic and demographic data to better understand the prevalence of disability across intersecting

groups.

"Developing effective measures and policies to include people with disabilities in all aspects of life needs to account for the variability in how people among different ethnic, socioeconomic, demographic and geographic groups experience disability," says Swenor. "With robust data, we can strengthen the foundation of our knowledge about disability and develop tangible solutions."

The [survey data](#) showed that, compared with adults without a disability, disabled adults were more likely to be older, female, Hispanic, have less than a [high school education](#), have low income, be unemployed, and be bisexual, transgender or gender nonconforming. Digging deeper, the team found differences in disability prevalence based on sociodemographic groups. For example, Black females had a higher prevalence of disability than females of other races, and Black adults identifying as gay or bisexual had a lower prevalence of disability compared with gay or bisexual adults of other races.

Swenor and the research team note that an aging population and other factors may contribute to the increase in reported disability. The data include information from before the COVID-19 pandemic, and Swenor says there may be an increase in people reporting a disability resulting from long-term symptoms of COVID-19.

The research team aims to use these [data](#) to continue studying the experiences of disabled populations, including identifying and finding support and resources for people with [disabilities](#) and ascertaining the capabilities of schools and employers in supporting disabled communities.

In addition to Swenor, researchers who contributed to the report include Jessica Campanile, Jennifer Deal, Ph.D., Nicholas Reed, Au.D., and

Varshini Varadaraj, M.D., M.P.H.

**More information:** Varshini Varadaraj et al, National Prevalence of Disability and Disability Types Among Adults in the US, 2019, *JAMA Network Open* (2021). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.30358](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.30358)

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