



The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Improve the Health and Wellness of Persons with Disabilities



What Is Disability? Who Is Affected by Disability?

Disabilities have been defined in many ways. In general, disabilities are characteristics of the body, mind, or senses that, to a greater or lesser extent, affect a person's ability to engage independently in some or all aspects of day-to-day life.

- Different kinds of disabilities affect people in different ways.

Disability can become a fact of life for anyone at any time.

- Today, 54 million people in the United States are living in the community with a disability. That's one in every five people. According to the most recent census data, around 52 million of them live in their community (U.S. Census Bureau 2002). Additionally, about 2 million live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities.
- Some people are born with a disability; some people get sick or have an accident that results in a disability; and some people develop a disability as they age.

- The reality is that just about everyone—women, men and children of all ages, races and ethnicities—will experience a disability some time during his or her lifetime.
- As we age, the likelihood of having a disability of some kind increases. For example, 22.6 percent of 45 to 54 year olds have some form of disability; 44.9 percent of 65 to 69 year olds have some form of disability; and 73.6 percent of those 80 years and older have some form of disability.

Disability is neither inability nor sickness.

- Most persons with disabilities are just as healthy as people who don't have disabilities; however, for a variety of reasons, persons with disabilities can be at greater risk for illness.
- Most people with disabilities can, and do, work, play, learn, and enjoy full healthy lives in their communities.

Figure 2: Prevalence of Disability by Age Group, 1997*

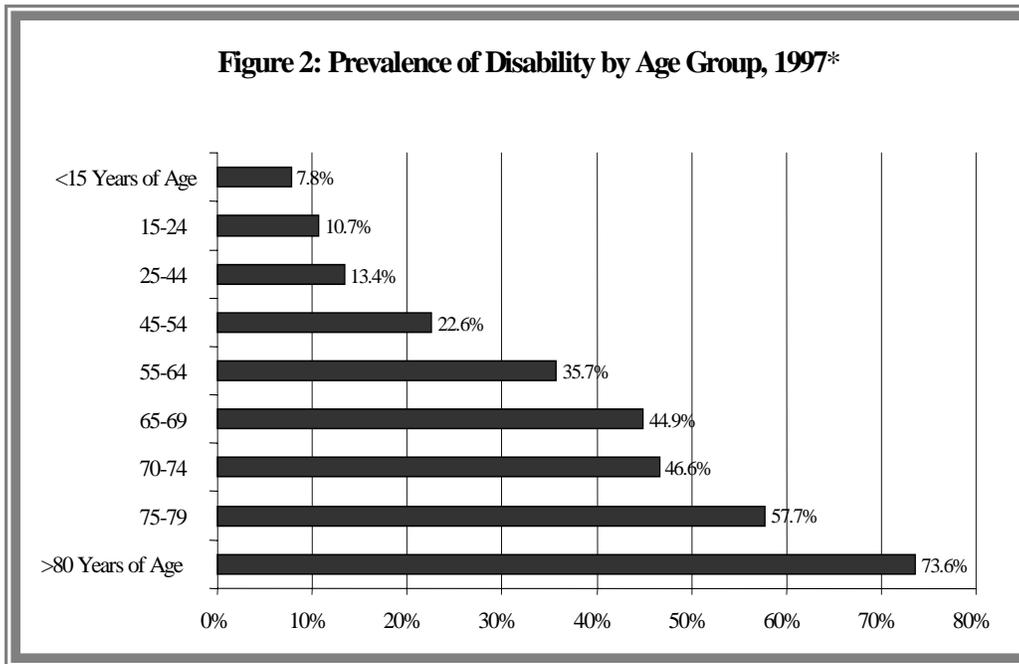


TABLE 3: Population by Age and Disability

Characteristic	Total	Total %
Population, Age 5 and over	257,167,527	100.0
With any disability	49,746,248	19.3
Population, Ages 5-15	45,133,687	100.0
With any disability	2,614,919	5.8
Sensory	442,894	1.0
Physical	455,461	1.0
Mental	2,078,502	4.6
Self-care	419,018	0.9
Population, Ages 16-64	178,687,234	100.0
With any disability	33,153,211	18.6
Sensory	4,123,902	2.3
Physical	11,140,365	6.2
Mental	6,764,439	3.8
Self-care	3,149,875	1.8
Difficulty going out	11,414,508	6.4
Employment disability	21,287,570	11.9
Population, Age 65 and Over	33,346,626	100.0
With any disability	13,978,118	41.9
Sensory	4,738,479	14.2
Physical	9,545,680	28.6
Mental	3,592,912	10.8
Self-care	3,183,840	9.5
Difficulty going out	8,795,517	20.4

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 3 (adapted from Panko Reis et al 2004)