

Employment and Unemployment Rates of People who are Blind or Visually Impaired: Estimates from Multiple Sources

What Were We Trying to Learn?

It is often said that people with visual impairments have a 70% unemployment rate. However, this statistic is not correct. For this study, we used both older and current nationally representative data to determine employment and unemployment rates for people with visual impairments. We were interested in changes in these rates over time and in differences between rates for those with visual impairments and (1) people without disabilities and (2) people with other types of disabilities.

Key Terms

Labor force: all people who are either employed or unemployed. It excludes those who are not actively looking for work.

Employment rate: the ratio of the employed population to the entire population, including only those of working-age.

Unemployment rate: the number of unemployed people as a percentage of the labor force.

Research Takeaway

About 44% of the U.S. population with a visual impairment was employed in 2017, while 10% were unemployed. Over half of the U.S. population of people with visual impairments were not actively looking for work.

What Are the Most Important Things We Learned?

We found that about 44% of the U.S. population with a visual impairment were employed and 10% were unemployed. This compares to a 77% employment rate and 5% unemployment rate for people without disabilities and a 35% employment rate and 12% unemployment rate for people with other types of disabilities.

Specifically, we found that:

- Employment rates for people with visual impairments have been consistent across time and across different measurement methods.
- The employment rate for people with visual impairments has ranged from a low of 36% (in 2011) to a high of 44% (in 2017)
- The unemployment rate for people with visual impairments has ranged from a low of 4% (in 1994-1995) to a high of 20% (in 2011).
- The large gap in employment rates between people with visual impairments and people without disabilities has decreased over time.
- The employment rate and unemployment rate gaps between people with visual impairments and those with other types of disabilities have increased over time.

How Do These Findings Relate to Me?

- The outdated and inaccurate statistic that 70% of people with visual impairments are unemployed should not be used. Instead, we should recognize that about 10% of people with a visual impairment (who are in the labor force) are unemployed.
- However, more than half of the U.S. population of people with visual impairments are not in the labor force. To improve the employment rate for people with visual impairments, we must encourage more members of this population to enter the labor force.

How Was This Project Carried Out?

To calculate employment and unemployment rates, we used four data sources:

- National Health Interview Survey – Disability Supplement (NHIS-D)
- National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES)
- Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP)
- American Community Survey (ACS)

Learn More

Findings were taken from the following article:

McDonnall, M. C., & Sui, Z. (in press). Employment and unemployment rates of people who are blind or visually impaired: Estimates over time from multiple sources 1994 - 2017. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*.

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