

Notes and Brief Reports

Estimated Prevalence of Long-Term Disability, 1954*

The economic, social, and medical plight of men and women with long-term disabilities, the "long-term disabled," has attracted increasing public interest in the past few years. Three laws were enacted by the Eighty-third Congress to assist those who incur disabling injuries and ailments of an extended nature. One measure provides for a substantial expansion of the State-Federal vocational rehabilitation program for the restoration of disabled workers to productive employment. Another amended the Hospital Survey and Construction Act to authorize Federal assistance in constructing comprehensive rehabilitation facilities, chronic disease hospitals, nursing homes, and diagnostic or treatment centers. The third measure preserves the old-age and survivors insurance status of individuals with extended total disability so that their benefit rights will not be impaired when they reach retirement age or die. Earlier, in 1950, Congress had established a grant-in-aid program to help the States finance public assistance payments to needy individuals who are permanently and totally disabled.

This note presents current estimates by the Division of Research and Statistics of the number of persons in the United States with long-term disabilities and the effect of such disability on their availability for employment.¹

The category "long-term disabled," as used here, refers to those persons of all ages who, because of some physical or mental disease or impairment, have for more than 6 months been unable to work or to follow other normal activities—such as keeping house or attending school—

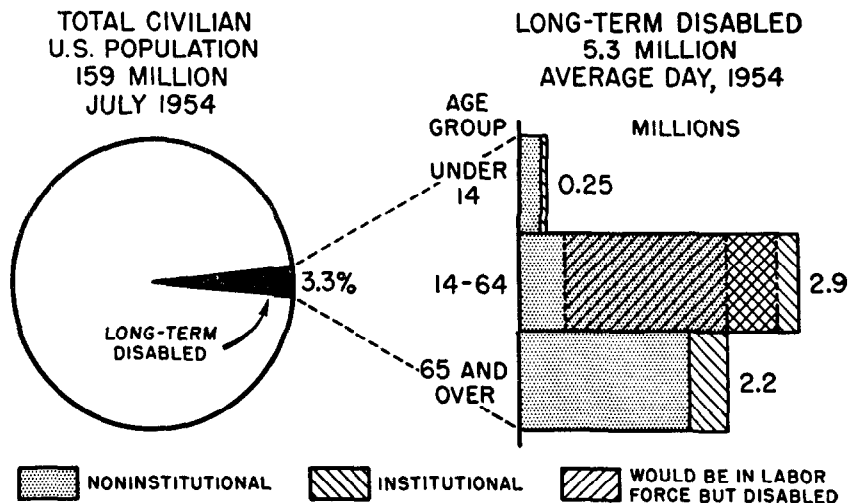
on a regular basis. It should be noted that long-term disability may be defined in various other ways, depending upon the context in which the term is used and the purpose for which the data are being collected. Under the disability freeze provisions of the old-age and survivors insurance program, for example, long-term disability means inability to engage in any substantial gainful employment for a specified period of time, while under a vocational rehabilitation program, disability is defined in terms of physical or mental impairments that constitute a substantial employment handicap. The definition used here excludes persons whose impairments resulting from chronic disease or injury are minor or non-disabling in the sense that they do not prevent the carrying out of regular work or nonwork activities.

On an average day in 1954 there were in the United States approximately 2.9 million persons aged 14-64 with long-term disabilities, as defined here. When children under age 14 and persons aged 65 and over are included, the total number is estimated at 5.3 million. These persons with long-term disabilities represented about 3.3 percent of the total civilian population in the United States. About 4.1 million of them were in the civilian noninstitutional

population, and 1.2 million were in institutions (table 1). As could be expected, the institutional population—inmates of resident institutions, such as mental and tuberculosis hospitals, homes or schools for the mentally and physically handicapped, homes for the aged and dependent, homes and hospitals for the chronically ill, and penal institutions—had a greater prevalence rate of long-term disability than the noninstitutional population—72.1 percent as against 2.6 percent.

Almost 2.2 million or more than two-fifths of all persons with protracted disabilities are estimated to be in the group aged 65 years and over. They comprise 15.7 percent of the aged population, compared with the 2.9 percent disabled for more than 6 months among the group aged 14-64 and the 0.56 percent among children under age 14. Estimating long-term disability among the aged and their availability for employment poses special problems, since it is difficult to distinguish between inability to work because of a disabling condition and inability to work because of the natural process of aging. What is certain, though, is that any realistic assessment of the extent to which additional workers could be recruited from among retired persons in times of national emergency must take into consideration the high proportion of aged persons with permanent disabilities.

Estimated prevalence of long-term disability in the United States, 1954



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¹ For an earlier estimate see I. S. Falk, Barkev S. Sanders, and David Federman, *Disability Among Gainfully Occupied Persons* (Bureau Memorandum No. 61), Bureau of Research and Statistics, 1945.

Sickness and disability among the group aged 14-64 have the greatest impact on the manpower resources of the Nation. It is estimated that on an average day as many as 3.7 million persons aged 14-64 are prevented from working or seeking work as a result of both short-term sickness and long-term disabilities. Of these, an estimated 2.2 million would have been incapacitated for more than 6 months.²

Thus, approximately three-fourths of the 2.9 million persons aged 14-64 with disabilities lasting more than 6 months would have been in the labor force but for their disability. The remaining one-fourth consists of persons who, if not disabled, would have been engaged in some activity other than gainful employment—keeping house or attending school, for example. Recent studies of the age group 14-64 suggest that practically all men between the ages of 20 and 64 with long-term disabilities would be active members of the labor force if they were not disabled, while possibly as many as 50 percent of the women with extended incapacities would be at work. It is estimated that 3 out of every 4 persons prevented from engaging in regular employment on an average day as a result of permanent or prolonged physical or mental disabilities are men.

The estimates in this note are derived for the most part from data developed by two special 1949-50 studies of the prevalence of long-term disability in the civilian noninstitutional population aged 14-64, made jointly by the Social Security Administration, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Public Health

² These estimates are not necessarily incompatible with earlier estimates, which had indicated that disabling illness kept out of employment a greater proportion of persons with short-term disabilities (i.e., less than 6 months' duration) than persons with long-term disabilities. The current estimates give greater weight to the pronounced seasonal variation in disability rates, especially for temporary illness, which produces a range in the number of persons actually unable to work from 3.4 million on a summer day to 4.0 million on a winter day. With the aging of the population, also, the number of cases of long-term disability has increased more, both absolutely and relatively, than the number of short-term illnesses.

Table 1.—Estimated number of persons in the United States with disabilities lasting more than 6 months on an average day in 1954¹

[In thousands]

Age group	Persons with disabilities lasting more than 6 months		
	Total	Noninstitutional	Institutional
Total.....	5,310	4,100	1,210
Under 14.....	250	200	50
14-64.....	2,900	2,140	760
65 and over.....	2,160	1,760	400

¹ Based on 1949-50 Surveys of Disability, 1935-36 National Health Survey, and 1950 decennial census.

Service, utilizing the sampling facilities of the Bureau of the Census.³ Estimates for the age groups under 14 and over 64 were made by projecting the prevalence rates among the group aged 14-64 on the basis of the rate of increase with age for those disabled more than 12 months that was observed in the 1935-36 National Health Survey.⁴

The estimates of the number of long-term disabled in the institutional population are based on the 1950 decennial census, adjusted for 1954 population on the assumption that changes in the institutional population have paralleled those in the total population. All persons in long-term hospitals and in homes and schools for the mentally and physically handicapped are considered to have been disabled for more than 6 months. For persons in correctional institutions and for persons under age 45 in homes for the aged and the dependent, it is assumed that the prevalence rates are the same as the rates in the 1949-50 surveys for the noninstitutional pop-

³ Marjorie E. Moore and Barkev S. Sanders, "Extent of Total Disability in the United States," *Social Security Bulletin*, November 1950; *Estimates of Prevalence of Disability in the United States, September 1950*, Rehabilitation Service Series, No. 317, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, April 1955; and Theodore D. Woolsey, *Estimates of Disabling Illness Prevalence in the United States*, Public Health Monograph No. 4, August 1952.

⁴ For a detailed explanation of the methodology, see G. St. J. Perrott, Lucille M. Smith, Maryland Y. Pennell, and Marlon E. Altenderfer, *Care of the Long-Term Patient*, Public Health Service Publication No. 344, January 1954, pages 9-11.

ulation, and that for persons aged 45 and over in homes for the aged and dependent the rates are considerably higher. Other methods of estimating the number of long-term disabled in the population produce results of the same order of magnitude.

The estimates that are given here of the prevalence of disability among workers and "would-be" workers are based on an analysis of the employment status of disabled persons as reported in the 1949-50 surveys of disability. A somewhat lower estimate of potential workers among the disabled is obtained by applying to the disabled the labor-force participation rates of the nondisabled. Since it is thought that the latter method may not fully reflect the potential work status of disabled women, especially housewives with long-term disabilities, the first method was used.

Old-Age Benefits in Current-Payment Status, December 31, 1954

The old-age and survivors insurance program was paying old-age benefits on December 31, 1954, to almost 3.8 million persons—about three-fifths of a million more than in December 1953. The average monthly benefit amount is shown in the accompanying table, which also gives a percentage distribution of the number of beneficiaries according to the size of their benefit. The data are classified by the beneficiaries' State of residence at the end of 1954.

The average old-age benefit being paid in December 1954 was \$59.14, about \$8.00 higher than the average a year earlier. The increase was due chiefly to the higher benefit rates provided by the 1954 amendments. One out of 3 old-age beneficiaries were receiving monthly amounts of \$70.00-\$98.50 at the end of 1954. Slightly less than one-third of all old-age beneficiaries were receiving benefits in the \$50.00-\$69.90 range, and slightly more than one-third were receiving monthly benefits of less than \$50.00. Minimum benefits of \$30.00 were being paid to about 676,000 old-age beneficiaries, 80,000 more than at the end of 1953. As a