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More Than 50 Million Americans Report Some Level of Disability

About 18 percent of Americans in 2002 said they had a disability, and 12 percent had a severe disability, according to a report released today by the U.S. Census Bureau. Among people with disabilities, more than half of those 21 to 64 years old had a job, more than 4-in-10 of those ages 15 to 64 used a computer at home and a quarter of those age 25 to 64 had a college degree.

“The demographic snapshots contained in this report help planners and decision-makers assess the needs of this important segment of our population,” said Census Bureau Director Louis Kincannon. Americans with Disabilities: 2002 was compiled from the Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Approximately 51.2 million people said they had a disability; for 32.5 million of them, the disability was severe.

About 56 percent of people ages 21 to 64 who had a disability were employed at some point in the one-year period prior to the interview. People with a severe disability status reported the lowest employment rate (42 percent). This compared with the employment rates of people with a nonsevere disability (82 percent) and those with no reported disability (88 percent).

Similarly, 32 percent of people ages 25 to 64 with a nonsevere disability and 22 percent with a severe disability were college graduates. The corresponding rate for those without a disability was 43 percent.

Among other findings, people with a severe disability had an increased likelihood of having Medicare or Medicaid coverage, living below the poverty level, reporting their health status to be “fair or poor,” receiving public assistance and having a household income below \$20,000. For

instance, the poverty rate for people 25 to 64 with no disability was 8 percent, compared with 11 percent for those with a nonsevere disability and 26 percent for people with a severe disability.

The report defines a person as having a disability if they have difficulty performing a specific activity such as seeing, hearing, bathing or doing light housework, or had a specified condition, such as Alzheimer's disease or autism. (See attachment.) People are considered to have a severe disability if they are completely unable to perform one or more of these tasks or activities, need personal assistance or have one of the severe conditions described in the report.

Other highlights:

- Four million children ages 6 to 14, or 11 percent, had a disability. The chances of having a disability rise with age: 72 percent of people age 80 and older had disabilities.
- Approximately 11 million people ages 6 and older, or 4 percent, needed personal assistance with an everyday activity. Among the population age 15 and older, 2.7 million used a wheelchair and 9.1 million an ambulatory aid such as a cane, crutches or a walker.
- About 7.9 million people age 15 and older had difficulty seeing the words and letters in ordinary newspaper print, including 1.8 million who were unable to see.
- There were 7.8 million people age 15 and older who had difficulty hearing a normal conversation, including 1 million unable to hear.
- About 14.3 million people age 15 and older had limitations in cognitive functioning or a mental or emotional illness that interfered with their daily activities, such as Alzheimer's disease, depression or mental retardation. This group comprised 6 percent of the population.
- Among adults ages 16 to 64, 11.8 million or 6 percent reported the presence of a condition that makes it difficult to remain employed or find a job.
- Median earnings for people with no disability were \$25,000, compared with \$22,000 for people with a nonsevere disability and \$12,800 for those with a severe disability.
- Of those ages 15 to 64, 36 percent with a severe disability used a computer and 29 percent used the Internet at home.

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These data were collected from June through September 2002 in the Survey of Income and Program Participation. As in all surveys, these data are subject to sampling variability and other sources of error.

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