

National Center for Health Statistics: Disability Statistics and Care

With a focus on the equalization of opportunities and social participation, this project provides a universal approach to the measurement of disability and functioning that is of particular relevance to an aging population that is often restricted by chronic and disabling conditions.

Lead Agency:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS)

Agency Mission:

The mission of NCHS is to provide statistical information that will guide actions and policies to improve the health of the American people. As the Nation's principal health statistics agency, NCHS leads the way with accurate, relevant, and timely data.

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Partner Agencies:

The United Nations Statistical Commission and representatives from National Statistical Offices from over 50 countries have been involved in this project.

General Description:

Internationally comparable disability measures are being developed by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics (WG), a "city group" established by and operating under the aegis of the United Nations Statistical Commission. The WG was established in response to the United Nations International Seminar on the Measurement of Disability held in June 2001 to develop questions and instruments that could be used in national surveys and censuses to measure disability among a variety of populations. It is a cooperative effort among national statistical offices of developed and developing countries, international statistical organizations, and international organizations representing persons with disabilities.

The primary objective of the WG is to promote and coordinate international cooperation in the area of disability statistics, focusing on measures that will provide basic, more comparable information on disability throughout the world. Activities include the development of a small set of general disability measures suitable for use in censuses, sample surveys, or other statistical formats; the design of one or more extended sets of survey items intended to be used as components of population surveys or as supplements to specialty surveys; and the conduct of methodological studies.

In keeping with its purpose, the WG has developed a small set of questions on disability that address the issue of assessing equalization of opportunity. In developing these questions, special attention was directed to international comparability of the resulting data. Cognitive and field tests have been conducted in 17 countries to determine how well the questions perform across different cultures. The results of the tests demonstrated that the questions were being interpreted as intended in countries in Africa, South America, North America, and Asia. The approach to data collection developed by the WG has also been incorporated into the UN Principles and Recommendations for the 2010 Census. At its eighth annual meeting, scheduled for October 2008, the WG will produce batteries of extended sets of questions on disability for use on surveys. These question sets will undergo cognitive and field testing over the next 12 months. All papers and products of the WG are available at www.cdc.gov/nchs/citygroup.htm.

In January, 2008, a disability module that is consistent with the approach and conceptualization outlined in the United Nations' recommendations was incorporated into the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS questions will also be added to the Current Population and the National Crime Victimization Survey in 2008. In addition, a joint research project is under way that will add the ACS disability questions to the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS). This project is part of a broader interagency effort to improve the collection and interpretation of information on disability. The NCHS will also be undertaking a review of the disability and functioning measures currently on the NHIS to identify design changes that would enhance its comparability with other national and international data collections and provide the more detailed information necessary to fully understand the complexities of disability.

Excellence: What makes this project exceptional?

The approach of the Washington Group on Disability Statistics to the operationalization and measurement of disability is unique and represents a milestone in recognizing the shift in attitudes and approaches to persons with disabilities that have been evolving over the past few decades. The WG recognizes the changing nature of disability and that it is manifested as a result of the interaction between persons with impairments and the barriers (both attitudinal and environmental) that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

Significance: How is this research relevant to older persons, populations and/or an aging society?

While the focus of the research is on producing global, comparable measures of disability and functioning, an aging society bears the burden of many chronic and disabling conditions. By focusing on the needs of this particular sub-population and their level of participation in society we can improve both their quality of life and their continued contribution to society.

Effectiveness: What is the impact and/or application of this research to older persons?

It has been demonstrated that life expectancy among the elderly has been improving for many decades, and there is also evidence to indicate that health among the elderly is also improving; however, while life expectancy at older ages has increased, so has the prevalence of chronic diseases and the associated effects of decreased functioning.

By providing a universal measure of disability and functioning that focuses on the equalization of opportunities it would be possible to focus efforts on improving the quality of life of the older population that is overburdened by the effects of chronic, disabling conditions.

Innovativeness: Why is this research exciting or newsworthy?

The project represents a novel approach to the conceptualization and measurement of disability – that builds the model of disability proposed by the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health.