

# Commentary: Disability Research

By Barry V. Bye\*

The use of national surveys to obtain information on the extent of disability in the United States can be found as far back as the early 1940's. Prior to that time, the only information available concerning the prevalence of disability came from small geographically limited studies or from the National Health Survey (NHS) conducted by the United States Public Health Service.<sup>1</sup> Neither source provided the kinds of information about the number of disabled persons or the economic implications of disability that were needed for planning a disability insurance (DI) program.

Starting in 1942 and periodically since that time, questions on disability status have been added to the Current Population Survey conducted by the Bureau of the Census. This method of obtaining information on the disabled population was attractive because it provided national prevalence estimates of disabled persons at a fairly low cost. Still, the serious limitations of this approach in terms of both the identification of the disabled and the measurement of the social and economic

consequences of disability were evident.<sup>2</sup>

The Social Security Administration's (SSA) **1966 Survey of the Disabled Population** marked the first time that a large-scale national survey was designed specifically to examine the consequences of work disability in a broad social and economic context.<sup>3</sup> This survey and those that followed in 1972 and 1978 have provided an empirical basis for the evaluation of the social insurance provisions of the DI program.<sup>4</sup> Several examples demonstrate the wide variety of issues that SSA research has addressed using those surveys. Analyses of responses to the 1966 survey contributed to discussions that resulted in the extension of Medicare coverage to DI

beneficiaries in 1973. The survey data showed that disabled beneficiaries were in poorer health, used more health care services, and had less private health insurance protection and more out-of-pocket expenses than their nonbeneficiary counterparts.<sup>5</sup> An analysis of the replacement rates for beneficiaries receiving multiple benefits, based on data from the **1972 Survey of Disabled and Nondisabled Adults**, provided background information for the debate on the multiple benefit cap (MEGACAP) provision of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981.<sup>6</sup> Responses to questions from the **1978 Survey of Disability and Work** showed that DI beneficiaries continue to value work highly; these findings provide strong support for the current Research and Demonstration Program that SSA has undertaken to promote the reemployment of DI beneficiaries through alternative

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<sup>1</sup>Barkev S. Sanders and David Federman, "The Prevalence of Disability Recorded Through Four Monthly Sample Surveys," *Social Security Bulletin*, August 1943, pages 5-11; Marjorie E. Moore and Barkev S. Sanders, "Extent of Total Disability in the United States," *Social Security Bulletin*, November 1950, pages 7-14; and Alfred M. Skolnik, "Estimated Prevalence of Long-Term Disability, 1954," *Social Security Bulletin*, June 1955, pages 20-21.

<sup>2</sup>Lawrence D. Haber, "Disability, Work, and Income Maintenance: Prevalence of Disability, 1966," *Social Security Bulletin*, May 1968, pages 14-23.

<sup>3</sup>Donald Ferron (editor), **Disability Survey 72, Disabled and Nondisabled Adults: A Monograph** (Research Report No. 56), Office of Research and Statistics, Office of Policy, Social Security Administration, 1981; and Barry Bye and Evan Schechter, **Technical Introduction: 1978 Survey of Disability and Work**, Office of Research and Statistics, Office of Policy, Social Security Administration, 1982.

<sup>4</sup>Gertrude L. Stanley and Idella G. Swisher, "Medical Care Utilization by the Disabled," **Social Security Survey of the Disabled: 1966** (Report No. 5), January 1969, and Lawrence D. Haber, "The Disabled Beneficiary—A Comparison of Factors Related to Benefit Entitlement," **Social Security Survey of the Disabled: 1966** (Report No. 7), June 1969. These and other reports from the 1966 survey are reprinted in **Social Security Survey of the Disabled Population: 1966** (A Compilation), Office of Research and Statistics, Social Security Administration, 1977.

<sup>5</sup>L. Scott Muller, "Receipt of Multiple Benefits by Disabled-Worker Beneficiaries," *Social Security Bulletin*, November 1980, pages 3-19.

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<sup>1</sup>I.S. Falk and B.S. Sanders, "The Prevalence of Disability in the United States With Special Reference to Disability Insurance," *Social Security Bulletin*, January 1941, pages 2-8.

**Table M-24.—SSI: Number of persons, total amount, and average State payment to persons under State-administered supplementation programs, by reason for eligibility, 1974–87<sup>1</sup>**

Period	Number				Total amount (in thousands)				Average payment			
	Total <sup>2</sup>	Aged	Blind	Disabled	Total <sup>2</sup>	Aged	Blind	Disabled	Total <sup>2</sup>	Aged	Blind	Disabled
January 1974	358,293	251,926	8,502	96,926	\$14,884	\$9,237	\$517	\$5,102	\$41.54	\$36.66	\$60.86	\$452.64
December 1974	300,724	193,057	5,898	101,769	11,354	6,824	330	4,200	<sup>3</sup> 37.75	<sup>3</sup> 35.35	<sup>3</sup> 55.95	<sup>3</sup> 41.27
December 1975	303,391	184,679	4,933	113,504	13,803	7,225	301	6,273	45.59	39.12	61.13	55.26
December 1976	274,377	160,360	4,731	109,248	13,720	6,882	327	6,511	50.00	42.91	69.04	59.60
December 1977	269,695	152,449	4,467	112,467	14,477	7,096	336	7,033	53.68	46.54	75.21	62.53
December 1978	265,518	146,854	4,188	107,524	15,641	7,886	363	7,279	58.91	53.70	86.68	67.70
December 1979	257,289	140,894	3,937	105,830	18,327	9,540	361	8,305	71.23	67.71	91.60	78.47
December 1980	249,474	134,555	3,649	104,367	19,920	10,435	356	8,995	79.85	77.55	97.45	86.18
December 1981	249,565	133,880	3,487	105,756	20,041	10,355	347	9,192	80.31	77.39	99.53	86.92
December 1982	247,995	130,582	3,419	107,198	21,844	11,304	389	9,979	88.08	86.56	113.70	93.09
December 1983	254,175	130,402	3,333	113,343	23,529	11,802	391	11,081	92.57	90.50	117.37	97.77
December 1984	268,045	131,276	3,219	125,615	25,913	12,312	370	12,795	96.67	93.79	114.91	101.86
December 1985	254,656	114,721	3,032	128,683	24,971	10,314	358	13,777	98.06	89.90	117.95	107.06
December 1986	279,297	123,291	3,123	143,981	29,586	12,584	374	16,017	105.93	102.07	119.69	111.24
1986												
November	278,519	123,384	3,134	142,696	29,338	12,578	374	15,870	105.31	101.90	119.31	111.04
December	279,297	123,291	3,123	143,981	29,586	12,584	374	16,017	105.93	102.07	119.69	111.24
1987												
January	279,520	122,928	3,116	144,815	29,656	12,569	368	16,107	106.10	102.25	118.25	111.23
February	280,780	122,571	3,136	145,543	29,763	12,595	374	16,328	106.00	102.76	119.35	112.19
March	282,190	122,439	3,142	146,919	30,138	12,662	380	16,637	106.80	103.42	121.08	113.24
April	268,170	113,085	3,093	142,231	28,423	11,331	370	16,220	105.99	100.20	119.49	114.04
May	268,376	112,685	3,092	142,943	28,497	11,321	373	16,307	106.18	100.47	120.76	114.08
June	268,247	112,455	3,100	143,048	28,505	11,326	370	16,294	106.26	100.71	119.47	113.91
July	268,404	112,336	3,120	143,213	28,896	11,455	376	16,481	107.66	101.97	120.46	115.08
August	268,902	111,752	3,119	143,993	29,098	11,483	382	16,671	108.21	102.76	122.41	115.78
September	269,763	111,939	3,104	144,451	29,270	11,592	378	16,717	108.50	103.56	121.91	115.73
October	270,205	111,749	3,089	145,340	29,372	11,556	372	16,863	108.70	103.41	120.55	116.02
November	269,316	111,032	3,097	145,271	29,864	11,794	402	17,068	110.89	106.19	129.90	117.49

<sup>1</sup> Data reported to the Social Security Administration by individual States. All data subject to revision. Excludes optional supplementation data for Missouri and North Dakota; for Maryland in December 1974 and 1975; and

for New Mexico in December 1976.

<sup>2</sup> Includes data not distributed by reason for eligibility.

<sup>3</sup> Excludes data for South Carolina.

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## Commentary

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work-incentive and vocational rehabilitation initiatives.<sup>7</sup>

The article by Lawrence D. Haber, reprinted in this issue, describes the methods and procedures used to develop a new survey instrument to identify the adult disabled population. A growing body of evidence suggested that previous national estimates understated the prevalence of work disability in the United States. The Haber article provides conceptual and

methodological explanations for the underestimates and describes the development and testing of the revised approach to the identification of the disabled that was used in the 1966 survey. The larger estimate of the disabled population provided by the new survey instrumentation was not only a more reasonable estimate for that time but also presaged the rapid growth in the DI program that occurred from 1966 to 1975.<sup>8</sup>

The size of work-disability estimates and the methodological issues associated with their measurement continue to be of interest today. Attempts to explain the increase in the reported disability prevalence rates during the last 30 years have been made more difficult by the variation in data collection methods over time and across surveys.<sup>9</sup> At the level of the individual survey respondent,

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Greenblum and Barry Bye, "Work Values of Disabled Beneficiaries," *Social Security Bulletin*, April 1987, pages 67-74.

<sup>8</sup> Mordechai E. Lando, Alice V. Farley, and Mary A. Brown, "Recent Trends in the Social Security Disability Insurance Program," *Social Security Bulletin*, August 1982, pages 3-14.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas N. Chirikos, "Accounting for the Historical Rise in Work-disability Prevalence," *The Milbank Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 2., 1986, pages 271-301.

**Table M-25.—SSI: Number of persons receiving State-administered supplementation, total amount, and average payment, by reason for eligibility and State, November 1987<sup>1</sup>**

State	Number				Total amount (in thousands)				Average payment			
	Total	Aged	Blind	Disabled	Total	Aged	Blind	Disabled	Total	Aged	Blind	Disabled
Total .....	<sup>2</sup> 269,316	111,032	3,097	145,271	<sup>2</sup> \$29,864	\$11,790	\$402	\$17,068	<sup>2</sup> \$110.89	\$106.19	\$129.90	\$117.49
Alabama .....	16,035	10,335	125	5,575	871	548	7	316	54.31	53.00	54.66	56.73
Alaska <sup>3</sup> .....	4,726	1,744	62	2,920	1,081	397	14	670	228.71	227.52	233.65	229.31
Arizona <sup>3</sup> .....	3,794	897	2	2,895	271	79	(4)	192	71.43	87.71	(5)	66.38
Colorado <sup>3</sup> .....	19,623	14,555	92	4,976	2,011	1,655	4	352	102.48	113.69	42.57	70.80
Connecticut .....	17,623	6,791	113	10,719	4,476	1,560	24	2,892	253.97	229.71	215.14	269.75
Florida .....	10,580	5,066	(6)	<sup>7</sup> 5,514	962	437	(6)	<sup>7</sup> 525	90.92	86.18	(6)	<sup>7</sup> 95.27
Idaho <sup>3</sup> .....	2,985	970	21	1,994	350	96	2	253	117.40	99.06	78.24	126.73
Illinois .....	51,572	5,490	263	45,819	4,915	320	20	4,576	95.31	58.21	75.65	99.87
Indiana <sup>3</sup> .....	655	303	4	348	282	111	2	170	430.80	365.07	408.50	488.29
Kentucky .....	6,864	3,464	89	3,311	816	407	6	403	118.93	117.48	66.25	121.86
Maryland .....	<sup>2</sup> 1,747	(6)	(6)	(6)	<sup>2</sup> 514	(6)	(6)	(6)	<sup>2</sup> 294.49	(6)	(6)	(6)
Minnesota .....	11,738	2,646	163	8,929	2,047	306	26	1,716	174.42	115.46	158.19	192.19
Missouri .....	8,673	6,584	343	1,746	337	203	64	70	38.91	30.89	187.78	39.93
Nebraska .....	7,554	2,380	99	5,075	450	95	4	351	59.61	39.71	44.32	69.25
New Hampshire .....	4,274	1,286	161	2,827	490	94	23	372	114.59	73.27	144.15	131.70
New Mexico .....	<sup>2</sup> 262	(6)	(6)	(6)	<sup>2</sup> 20	(6)	(6)	(6)	<sup>2</sup> 75.00	(6)	(6)	(6)
North Carolina .....	13,993	8,316	267	5,410	4,529	2,657	106	1,765	323.64	319.52	397.85	326.32
North Dakota .....	15	14	...	1	(4)	(4)	...	(4)	(5)	(5)	...	(5)
Oklahoma .....	55,120	32,035	538	22,547	2,762	1,516	30	1,216	50.10	47.31	55.17	53.94
Oregon .....	14,043	3,910	678	9,455	965	529	59	376	68.72	135.34	87.59	39.82
South Carolina .....	2,985	1,216	19	1,750	413	161	3	249	138.26	132.56	142.05	142.18
South Dakota <sup>3</sup> .....	325	207	3	115	48	33	(4)	15	148.70	160.43	(5)	127.84
Utah .....	<sup>2</sup> 7,907	(6)	(6)	(6)	<sup>2</sup> 70	(6)	(6)	(6)	<sup>2</sup> 8.80	(6)	(6)	(6)
Virginia .....	5,270	2,705	30	2,535	1,164	586	7	571	220.83	216.60	228.17	225.26
Wyoming .....	953	118	25	810	19	2	1	16	20.00	20.00	20.00	20.00

<sup>1</sup> Data reported to the Social Security Administration by individual States. All data subject to revision. Excludes optional supplementation data for Missouri and North Dakota.

<sup>2</sup> Includes data not distributed by reason for eligibility.  
<sup>3</sup> Estimated data.

<sup>4</sup> Less than \$500.

<sup>5</sup> Not computed on base of less than \$500.

<sup>6</sup> Data not available.

<sup>7</sup> Includes data for the blind.

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substantial propensity remains for response error to the disability questions in the personal interview setting.<sup>10</sup> Response errors make the description of the course and the duration of the individual's disability history somewhat less reliable and the identification of the factors associated with any change in

disability status over time more difficult to discern.<sup>11</sup>

The existence of unresolved methodological issues does not diminish the importance of this early work. The success that SSA has had in using survey research to address DI program issues is, in large part, a result of the rigorous methodological

foundation for the survey research program that began with the 1966 survey. In the future, changes in the social and economic circumstances of the disabled will raise new program issues. Survey research will play an important role in addressing these issues as the program continues to develop.

<sup>10</sup>Wendi Thelan, **Reinterview Results for the 1978 Disability Survey** (unpublished report), Bureau of the Census, 1979.

<sup>11</sup>Barry V. Bye and Evan S. Schechter, "A Latent Markov Model Approach to the Estimation of Response Errors in Multiwave Panel Data," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, June 1986, pages 375-380.