

Blog



Disabled employment is at a record high, but disparities remain

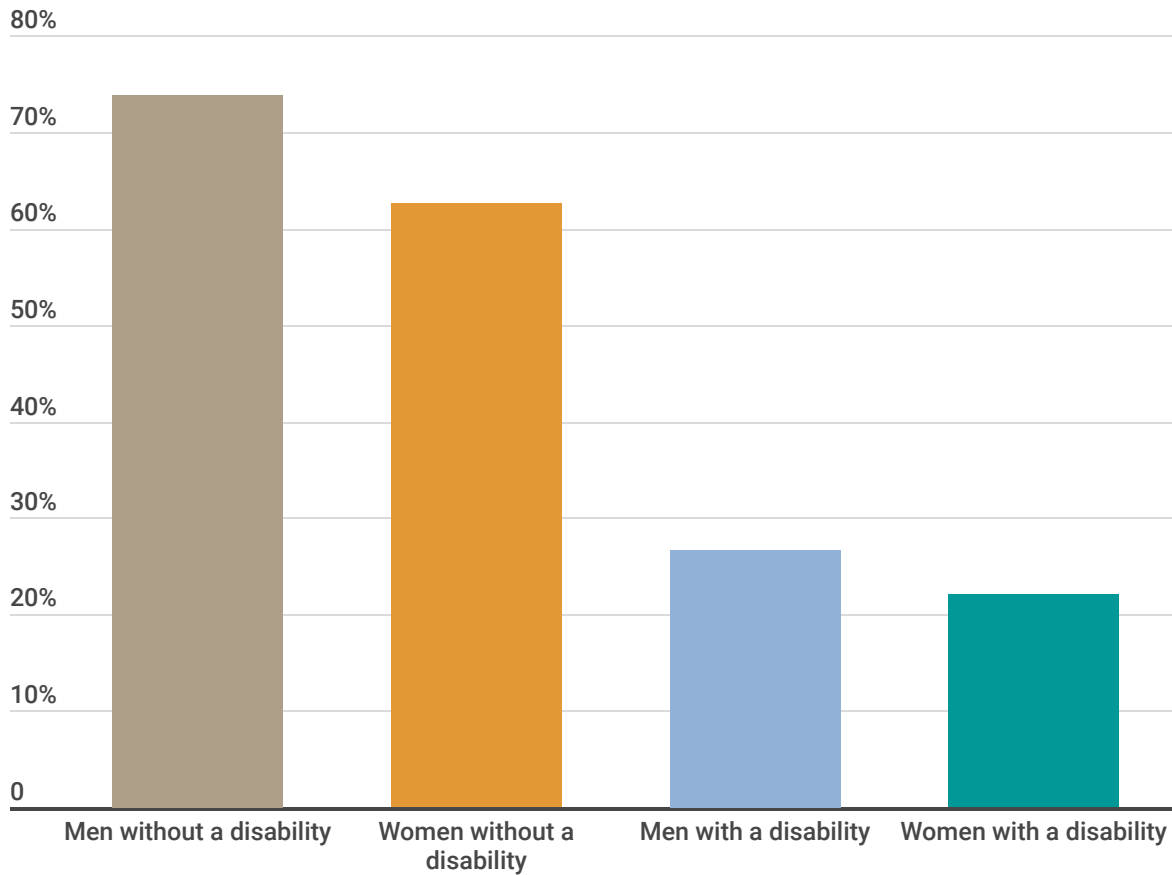
Marissa Ditkowsky, Anwesha Majumder | Feb 22, 2024

Today, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) released its annual data about disabled people in the U.S. workforce. The data reveal a continued upward trend in disabled employment. However, inequities remain for disabled people, particularly disabled women and disabled people of color. These inequities are the direct result of deliberate policy choices shaped by racism, sexism, ableism and other systems of oppression.

In 2023, 22.5 percent of disabled people were employed. According to the **BLS**, this number is “the highest recorded ratio since comparable data were first collected in 2008,” and an increase of 1.2 percentage points from the prior year. However, disabled people are still much less likely than nondisabled people to be in the labor force. Disabled people were only about 36 percent as likely to be in the labor force compared to nondisabled people. Disabled women are less likely to be in the labor force than

disabled men, but women are slightly more likely than men to have a disability, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

Labor Force Participation Rate by Gender and Disability



Source: National Partnership for Women & Families analysis of Current Population Survey (16+, annual averages)

Share



Despite a “tight” labor market last year, with more jobs than workers, disabled people were about twice as likely to be unemployed as nondisabled people, similar to 2022.



When looking at employment data, race and disability interact in important ways. For example, Black and Latinx or Hispanic people with disabilities had higher unemployment rates than white disabled people, at 10.2 percent and 9.2 percent, respectively. Black and Indigenous people are more likely than other working-age adults to be disabled. In addition, Black and Asian people with disabilities are less likely to be in the labor force than white people with disabilities.

While overall, 68.1 percent of people without disabilities are in the labor force, only 24.4 percent of white people with disabilities are. Just 23.3 percent of Black people with disabilities, 18.5 percent of Asian people with disabilities, and 26.7 percent of Hispanic or Latino people with disabilities are in the labor force.

There are also large disparities across all genders and races in the employment-population ratio, the share of disabled people currently employed compared to the working-age population. While 65.8 percent of all nondisabled people are employed, only 20.5 percent of all disabled women are employed. Only about 17.2 percent of Asian people with disabilities are employed, the largest disparity of any group when compared to nondisabled people.

There are many reasons for this gap in workforce participation between disabled people – particularly disabled women of color – and nondisabled people. The National Partnership for Women & Families explores these factors in its “**Systems Transformation Guide to Disability Economic Justice: Jobs and Employment.**” In general, discrimination, occupational segregation, work disincentives, barriers to competitive integrated employment and the United States’ broken care infrastructure, among other factors – compounded by racism, sexism and other forms of oppression – play a role in these disparities.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, people with disabilities have grown as a share of the workforce, as well as the population at large. Labor force participation among disabled women in particular made a huge jump of 24% between 2019 and 2023.





The data also show that since 2020, there's been a small but clear uptick in the share of disabled people who are employed. Additionally, while the gap in employment between disabled men and women is still narrower than before the pandemic, the gap widened in 2023. There are likely a few reasons for this increase of disabled people, and particularly women, in the workforce.





First, it's possible that the number of Americans with long COVID has **impacted** the labor market. Long COVID may affect 10 to 33 million adults in the U.S. The **CDC reported** that, in 2022, nearly 7 percent of U.S. adults had ever had long COVID, while **U.S. Census Bureau Data** consistently shows that about 13 to 16 percent of adults have ever experienced long COVID. U.S. Census Bureau data also shows that transgender people and cisgender women are more likely to experience long COVID compared to cisgender men, and rates of long COVID are also elevated for disabled, Latinx and multiracial people.

Second, employer flexibility and options for remote work have expanded over the course of the pandemic, leaving doors open for disabled workers that had been closed before. Despite the precedent set during the pandemic that so many jobs can be accomplished remotely, about **90 percent** of companies plan to reinstate in-office

requirements by the end of 2024. About 30 percent of those companies plan to threaten to terminate, against employees who do not comply with these requirements. These policies could serve a huge blow to not only disabled employment but also employment for parents, families, caregivers and others. To promote equity and inclusion in our workplaces, we must ensure that employers who can do so continue to provide employees with flexibility as to where and when they conduct their work. Further, disabled people are **more likely** than nondisabled people to work in service positions – positions which may not be suitable for remote work. Let's also make sure these front-line disabled workers have the supports, flexibility and protections they need and appropriate COVID-19 precautions in place.

Third, the “tighter” labor market has put pressure on employers to expand their flexibility to recruit and retain employees, and to rethink assumptions about when, where and how to perform work that limit opportunities for disabled workers. We can't reverse this progress when the labor market changes in the future. Employers must continue to hire and support disabled employees, who are dedicated, loyal and quality employees. Continuing flexibility is a win for both employers and employees.

Each of these reasons are why it is even more important to make sure disabled people who want jobs have access to the supports and protections they need.

It is important to consider that, while employment does impact economic security, it should not – and cannot – be the only factor. Our inherent value should not be based on our ability to work. The three-quarters of disabled people who are not in the workforce – whether it is because they are 65 or older, cannot work, do not want to work or for any other reason – deserve to be able to achieve economic security too. That said, even though equitable employment and workforce policies are critical for disabled people, broader systemic change is also necessary for the economic health and wellbeing of disabled women.

Additionally, it is critical to note these data do not include adults in institutional settings. Disabled people are **more likely** than nondisabled people to have lived in punitive (i.e., prisons, jails) or therapeutic (i.e., residential treatment facilities, hospitals) institutions. Those individuals may even be earning subminimum wages. Under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), certain employers may pay disabled workers subminimum wages. Incarcerated workers may also be paid subminimum wages.

Today's Bureau of Labor Statistics' data continue to show a need for policy changes that improve inclusion and equity, not only for disabled workers, but also for those disabled folks who are not in the workforce. We must continue to fight to work toward achieving the following:

1. Modernize Social Security benefits, eligibility and asset limits to adjust for current levels of inflation and costs of living.
2. Eliminate the subminimum wage for disabled workers.
3. Raise the minimum wage for all workers.
4. Combat workplace discrimination with more robust enforcement of anti-discrimination laws.
5. Establish national paid family and medical leave and paid sick leave for all that allow employees to care for chosen and extended family (this is critical for disabled people, who are **more likely** to care for chosen family).
6. Support workplace flexibility, including remote work and flexible schedules, where possible.

Thank you to Anwesha Majumder and Jessica Mason for their significant contributions to the data analysis in this piece.

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1725 Eye St. NW, Suite 950

Follow Us

Washington DC 20006



202-986-2600



202-986-2539 (fax)

Email Us

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