

# One in Five Americans Have Some Form of Disability

Closing the Gap, Disabilities • October/November 1999

Between October 1994 and January 1995, approximately 54 million Americans (1 in 5) reported some level of disability and 26 million (1 in 10) described their disability as severe, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. These data, the latest available, comes from the Survey of Income and Program Participation.

The Census Bureau defines a disability as difficulty in performing functional activities (seeing, hearing, talking, walking, climbing stairs and lifting) or activities of daily living (getting in or out of a bed or a chair, bathing, getting around inside the home, dressing, using the toilet and eating) or other activities related to everyday tasks or socially defined roles. A person with a severe disability is defined as one who is completely unable to perform one of these tasks or who needs personal assistance.

The likelihood of having a disability increases with age. In 1994-1995, the proportion of 22 to 44 year olds with a severe disability was 5.6 percent for Whites, 11.8 percent among Blacks, and 6.7 percent among Hispanics. In the 45 to 54 year age group, the rate was 10.5 percent among Whites, 18.4 percent among Blacks, and 15.7 percent among Hispanics.

Physical impairments are the most common type of disability, accounting for more than half of all disabilities or 27 million of the U.S. population. About 10 million adults reported having a severe mental or emotional condition in 1994. There were also about 11 million people who reported having a functional limitation, including performing activities of daily living. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, more than 8 million Americans had visual impairments in 1995, about 22 million Americans had hearing impairments, and almost 2.7 million Americans had speech impairments. ❖

