

Disability in Washington

Susan Kinne

People with disabilities are a large and almost invisible minority group in Washington State. Almost one in five Washington residents is restricted in ability to perform normal activities because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition. The number and proportion of persons with disabilities continue to increase as better health care helps more people survive injuries, low birth weight, chronic disease, and other once fatal conditions.

The increasing prevalence and cost of disability push public health agencies to develop prevention strategies and to promote health and quality of life of people with disabilities. Changing community environments helps to achieve these goals. Disability results when a person's abilities do not match the demands of his or her environment, so someone with a physical or mental limitation can avert disability if the social and physical environment accommodates the person's needs.

Age is the most consistent risk factor for disability, which is more common among older people. About 5% of children have a disability, compared to 15% of persons aged 18–64 and 33–38% of those older than 65. Washingtonians with disabilities tend to be poorer and less educated and to be widowed, divorced, or separated rather than married, compared to the rest of the population, but these differences are mainly due to greater age. As our population ages, disability will increase.

Many people with disabilities enjoy excellent health, but as a group, adults with disability are only half as likely to report excellent or good health as are those without disabilities, and are much more likely to experience fair or poor health. As many as 75% of people with disabilities report depression, chronic pain, and difficulties with fitness and weight control as side effects of their conditions. People with and without disabilities are equally likely to report that they are “satisfied” with their lives, but many more people with disabilities are “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied.”

Other consequences of disability in adults include restrictions in opportunity, which the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines as economic self-sufficiency, independent living, equality, and full participation. People with disabilities are less likely to be employed, to have high incomes, or to take part in social and community activities than are similar people without disabilities. Many of these limitations result from social and environmental barriers — inaccessible buildings and walkways, prejudice against disability, and lack of accommodation — rather than from the person's limitation. Extending opportunity can reduce disability.

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