Disabilities Affect One-Fifth of All Americans
Proportion Could Increase in Coming Decades

About 1 in 5 Americans have some kind of disability and 1 in 10 have a severe disability (see box for definitions). And, with the population aging and the likelihood of having a disability increasing with age, the growth in the number of people with disabilities can be expected to accelerate in the coming decades.

If current trends continue, Americans 65 years old and over will make up 20 percent of the total population by the year 2030 compared with about 12 percent currently. In the October 1994 - January 1995 period, for example, about 16 million of an estimated 31 million seniors age 65 and over reported some level of disability.

The Need for Personal Assistance
About 9 million people of all ages have disabilities so severe that they require personal assistance to carry out everyday activities. About 80 percent of the people who take on the role of primary helper are relatives, and nearly half of these primary helpers live with the person with a disability.

Differences by Age and Race
Disability is no respecter of age, sex or race. Even among children ages 6 to 14, for instance, about 1 in 8 had some type of disability. Nevertheless, the likelihood of having a disability increases with age — half of seniors 65 years old and older have a disability. (See figure.)

Although age is the main factor affecting the likelihood of having a disability, there are also differences by race and ethnicity. For example, within the 55- to 64-year-old group, the proportion with a severe disability was 20 percent among Whites not of Hispanic origin, 35 percent among Blacks and 28 percent among people of Hispanic origin (who may be of any race).

What Constitutes a Disability
A person is considered to have a disability if he or she has difficulty performing certain functions (seeing, hearing, talking, walking, climbing stairs and lifting and carrying), or has difficulty performing activities of daily living, or has difficulty with certain social roles (doing school work for children, working at a job and around the house for adults). A person who is unable to perform one or more activities, or who uses an assistive device to get around, or who needs assistance from another person to perform basic activities is considered to have a severe disability.
RELIANCE ON PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

More than three-quarters (77.4%) of Americans age 22 to 64 with disabilities do not receive public assistance. However, disability is relatively common among those who do receive government cash, food or rent assistance. About half the beneficiaries of these programs had either a severe or non-severe disability.

Data on the number of people with disabilities in the United States and the nature of those disabilities, plus their work activity and the help they receive from public programs are collected by the Census Bureau as part of its Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). SIPP currently is the best source for periodic data concerning the economic situation of people with disabilities, but Census Bureau analysts note that the federal government is still in the early stages of determining how best to monitor statistically the status of people with disabilities.

KINDS OF DISABILITIES AND EMPLOYMENT

(|persons age 21-64|
|Disability..................|Percent employed*|
|Difficulty hearing .......|64.4|
|Difficulty seeing ........|43.7|
|Mental disability ........|41.3|
|Difficulty walking .......|33.5|

*Persons may have more than one type of disability


Percent with disabilities by age

![Bar chart showing percent of people with disabilities by age group]

Any disability

Severe disability