What is a Disability?

Disability can be defined in many ways. There are dictionary definitions of disability, and many professional organizations have developed their own definitions. Disability groups and individuals with disabilities may define disability differently. Government organizations and funded projects have developed definitions of disability and attempted to estimate the prevalence of disability in the United States. According to the National Health Interview Survey, conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, a person is considered to have a disability if he or she has a chronic physical or mental problem that limits the ability to perform one or more major activities associated with his or her age group. Examples of activities include ordinary play for young children, working or keeping house for adults, and self care. The National Health Interview Survey reported that 15% of the U.S. non-institutionalized population or approximately 38 million people experience some activity limitation due to a chronic health condition or impairment.

The Survey of Income and Program Participation, conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, also provides information on the prevalence of disability. According to this survey, 19.7% of the population, approximately 52.6 million people, have some form of disability and 12.3%, or about 33 million people, have a severe disability.

Why do definitions of disability and estimates of prevalence vary so widely? Disability is not an objective medical condition. Who is or is not disabled depends on who is doing the defining and with what purposes. Estimates of the prevalence of mental retardation have ranged from 1% to 16% of the population. This is because different people have used different standards to determine how far below average in intelligence, according to tests, a person must be to be considered mentally retarded.

Disability also depends upon social, economic, environmental, and technological factors. In a highly technological and literate society, more people will be considered to have intellectual or learning difficulties than in a less complex and technologically sophisticated society. For example, if the ability to read is not required of people to participate in the society, persons who are unable to read will not necessarily be defined as disabled or different. Further, the same person may be considered disabled in some situations, but not in others. Many children defined as disabled in school function perfectly well at home and in their communities. The availability of

assistive technology and corrective devices also affects who experiences difficulties performing major activities and is defined as having a disability. If eyeglasses were not available, many more people would be seen as having a severe visual impairment.

What is a disability? Who has a disability? These questions can be answered in different ways.

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