

Executive Summary: 2000 N.O.D./Harris Survey of Community Participation

The 2000 N.O.D./Harris Community Participation Study, an online survey of 535 people with disabilities and 614 people without disabilities conducted in March and April 2000, found that overall people with disabilities lag somewhat behind people without disabilities in their rates of community participation. The most striking differences are found when the experiences of those with somewhat or very severe disabilities are compared to those without disabilities.

In addition, four overall themes seem to underscore the major findings in the survey:

1. People with disabilities feel **more isolated from their communities**, participate in somewhat fewer community activities, and are less satisfied with their community participation than their counterparts without disabilities.
 - Perhaps, not surprisingly, due to traditional obstacles facing people with disabilities such as fear, discomfort, perceived negative attitudes, or the lack of transportation, people with disabilities are almost twice as likely to say they are isolated from others and one and one-half times as likely to say they are left out of things in their communities when compared to people without disabilities. Similarly, while a modest majority (55%) of people without disabilities agree that they are valuable and contributing members of their communities, slightly less people with disabilities (49%) say the same.
 - When asked explicitly how involved they are in their communities, 35% of people with disabilities say they are not at all involved, compared to 21% of their non-disabled counterparts.
 - Significant differences also exist with regard to involvement in certain community activities. The largest differences exist with regard to participating in religious services, local politics, cultural events, and community service organizations; a gap of approximately 10% exists between people with disabilities and people without disabilities who say they never participate in any of these activities. Most notably, 81% of people with disabilities, compared to 67% of people without disabilities, say they never participate in or avail themselves of the services of community service organizations.

- People with disabilities seem markedly less satisfied with their experiences with community involvement. Almost half (48%) say that they are not satisfied with their community involvement experience, compared to only one-third (33%) of people without disabilities. Even among those who say they are involved in their communities, satisfaction differs between people with and without disabilities. Almost 8 out of 10 of those with disabilities (78%) who are involved in their communities are satisfied with their experience, compared to almost 9 out of 10 people without disabilities (89%) who are involved in their communities. This satisfaction difference may be due to the presence of traditional obstacles that make the community participation experience more difficult for people with disabilities.
- Not surprisingly, due to larger physical and emotional hurdles, many of these differences are even more dramatic among people with severe disabilities. Four out of ten people with severe disabilities (40%) are not at all involved in their communities, almost twice the percentage for people without disabilities (21%) and almost one and one-half times the percentage for people with less severe disabilities (29%). In addition, a slight majority (51%) of people with severe disabilities are not satisfied with their experience with community involvement compared to 44% of their less severely disabled counterparts.
- The presence of a disability, even when controlling for age and employment, still noticeably impacts community participation and levels of satisfaction. Moreover, neither income nor employment status appears to have a dramatic effect on social and community isolation. Even when controlling for both, people with disabilities are much more likely to say that they are isolated from others and left out of things in their communities. On the other hand, age has an indirect impact on isolation: younger respondents, both those with and without disabilities, are more likely to express that they feel isolated from others and left out of things in their communities. These findings are somewhat counterintuitive in that often older people are thought to be more isolated. However, when looking at issues of community participation like political participation, civic involvement, and volunteering, research suggests the opposite - that older people are actually more active and involved.
- Not surprisingly, being involved in the community considerably increases feelings of connectedness and decreases feelings of isolation, both among people with and without disabilities.

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2. These participation gaps notwithstanding, people with disabilities and people without disabilities seem to be similarly **informed about opportunities to volunteer** in, receive assistance from, and give back to their communities.
- There appears to be very little difference between these two groups in terms of how informed they feel they are about community organizations that can assist them. Indeed, people with severe disabilities seem to be even more informed about these opportunities than are people with less severe disabilities. At first glance, this finding may seem surprising. However, it is important to recognize that this is a measure of knowledge, not participation. In that context, it is not surprising that people with disabilities know more about community organizations since they are more likely to avail themselves of organizations' services.
 - Similarly, a higher percentage of people with disabilities (53%) feel informed about how to participate in volunteer work or give back to their communities than people without disabilities (44%). Again, people with more severe disabilities appear to be as well-informed, if not more so, than are people without disabilities and people with less severe disabilities.
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3. Even though people with and without disabilities have similar knowledge about how to become involved in their communities, **the reasons for their lack of community participation are vastly different**. People with severe disabilities say that the lack of encouragement from community organizations is the main reason why they do not participate more in their communities, while people without disabilities and people with slight or moderate disabilities suggest that lack of time is the major barrier.¹

- While approximately half of people with disabilities (and more than 6 out of 10 people with severe disabilities) agree that community organizations have not reached out to them to participate, only 35% of people without disabilities say the same. Among people with disabilities, this finding is magnified by being unemployed, lower income, or older. This may help to explain the lower participation rates by people with disabilities.
 - A significant majority (76%) of people without disabilities say that lack of time is the primary reason that they are not able to participate more meaningfully in their communities.
 - While people with less severe disabilities agree that lack of time is a major barrier, they assert that lack of income and lack of awareness are almost equally large obstacles.
 - For people with severe disabilities, time is rarely, if ever, an issue. Instead, the lack of encouragement from community organizations, mentioned by 6 out of 10 respondents, tops the list as the primary reason why people with severe disabilities are not as involved in their communities as they would like to be. Lack of income and lack of awareness are distant second choices.
 - Not surprisingly, for both people with and without disabilities, time is the greatest barrier to community participation among those who are employed.
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4. While **the Internet has significantly increased the opportunities for community involvement** for both people with disabilities and people without disabilities who are online, it has had a much more dramatic impact on the lives of people with disabilities, especially those with less severe disabilities.

- Typically, people with disabilities who are online spend 20 hours per week on the Internet, while people without disabilities who are online spend an average of 10 hours per week.
- Typically, people with disabilities who are online spend 10 hours per week writing, reading, sending, or receiving e-mail compared to 5 hours per week for people without disabilities who are online.
- Overall, 48% of people with disabilities who are online say that the Internet has significantly improved their quality of life, while only 27% of people without disabilities who are online say the same.
- The Internet has been a tremendous vehicle for decreasing the social and community isolation of people with disabilities. Specifically, the Internet seems to have had a dramatic impact on people with disabilities who are online by allowing them to be better informed and feel more connected to the world around them, and to reach out to people with similar interests. It has had a similar, but more modest, impact on people without disabilities who are online.
- The Internet has had an even more pronounced impact on the social lives of people with slight or moderate disabilities, by significantly increasing their ability to socialize with friends and family and to reach out to other people with similar interests, considerably more than it has for people with severe disabilities. This discrepancy may be explained by the fact that the Internet has not yet become accessible or user-friendly for people with severe disabilities. For example, there may be practical obstacles having to do with use of the keyboard or the screen that may hinder people with severe disabilities from taking full advantage of the Internet.
- These findings also differ according to age. For people with disabilities, those who are younger (less than 30) tend to use the Internet more often. However, those who are older (65 or older) say the Internet has more significantly improved the quality of their lives. Conversely, for people without disabilities, Internet usage increases with age, but younger people (less than 30) say the Internet has more significantly improved the quality of their lives.

Implications

Since people with and without disabilities have similar rates of participation in specific community activities and express a similar level of interest in participating further, the presence of a disability does not appear to be the prohibitive factor in keeping people with disabilities from participating in their communities. Rather, the increased feelings of isolation and detachment for people with disabilities and the greater level of dissatisfaction may stem from fear, discomfort, perceived negative attitudes, lack of encouragement from community organizations, or another factor that holds them back from participating more.

In addition, as the barriers to community participation seem to be quite different for people with disabilities, these findings suggest certain actions that should be taken by community organizations. It seems that organizations need to take a different, more concerted approach to reaching out to this group, in particular those with severe disabilities.

The Internet may serve as an effective vehicle for doing so. Almost half of the online population with disabilities are steadily becoming quite proficient Internet users, and almost six out of ten spend more than 15 hours online in a given week, compared to slightly more than one-third of the non-disabled population. Moreover, almost half of the people with disabilities who are online feel that the Internet has significantly improved their quality of life, and clear majorities have used the Internet to reach out to people with similar interests and to increase their knowledge of and connection to the world around them.

To date, the Internet has yet to reach its enormous potential for increasing participation in community organizations, volunteer work, and local politics. However, it offers organizations a means to circumvent some of the primary barriers to participation (such as awareness, income, and transportation) that confront people with disabilities. Making better and more inclusive use of the Internet for these purposes, therefore, should be a top priority.

Notes:

¹Previous survey research suggests that people often offer time as an excuse when, in fact, the real reason people are unable to do something is that it is not a priority or does not interest them.