

Disability Statistics: Educational Attainment and Employment Gaps between People with and without Disabilities

By Emily Cheng

The Institute on Disability (IOD), Center for Excellence in Disability (UCED) at the University of New Hampshire, examines the knowledge, policies, and practices related to individuals with disabilities as well as their families. IOD/UCED publishes the *Annual Report on People with Disabilities in America* to highlight differences between individuals with and without disabilities. The [2018 Annual Report](#)¹ focuses on national trends specifically looking at social and economic indicators of people with disabilities, such as employment, median income, poverty rate, school attainment, marriage status, and health insurance coverage. Houtenville and Boege (2019) observed that the educational attainment gap and the employment gap between people with and without disabilities statistically significantly² changed between 2016 and 2017.

As for high school attainment, Houtenville and Boege (2019) noted that 18.3% of individuals with disabilities did not attain a high school diploma in 2017, compared to 8.5% of their peers without disabilities. The educational attainment gap has been existing between people with and without disabilities for a decade. Based on their data trends, the average high school attainment gap between people with and without disabilities is around 11 percentage points³ for the last decade. Nevertheless, they noticed that the gap narrowed from 11 percentage points in 2016 to 9.8 percentage points in 2017. The narrower gap implies that the proportion of high school attainment for people with disabilities has a more significant increase than individuals without disabilities. Similarly, they observed that the gap of post-secondary education attainment between people with and without disabilities narrowed from 23.4 percentage points in 2016 to 22.9 percentage points in 2017.

The employment gap between people with and without disabilities narrowed from 2016 to 2017. In 2016, 34.6% of people with disabilities were employed, compared to 76% of their peers without disabilities (Houtenville & Boege, 2019). They highlighted that in 2017, 35.5% of people with disabilities were employed, compared to 76.5% of their peers without disabilities. As a result, they shared that the gap narrowed from 41.4 percentage points in 2016 to 41.0 percentage points in 2017. This statistically narrowed percentage gap demonstrates that as the employment rate of people without disabilities increases, the employment rate of people with disabilities increases more.

¹ Please find the full report here: https://disabilitycompendium.org/sites/default/files/user-uploads/Annual_Report_2018_Accessible_AdobeReaderFriendly.pdf

² Statistically significant difference/change means that the difference/change detected was not by chance.

³ A percentage point is the unit for the arithmetic difference of two percentages.

The narrowed gaps may suggest positive outcomes from previous initiatives that help youth with disabilities achieve educational attainment and job placement. Evidence-based evaluation will help in identifying the impact factors of these positive changes. It is necessary to keep carrying out those effective initiatives to narrow these gaps. On the other hand, since the gaps still exist, innovative strategies are needed to deal with the educational attainment and employment gaps between people with and without disabilities.

Reference

Houtenville, A. and Boege, S. (2019). *Annual Report on People with Disabilities in America: 2018*. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability.