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## Employment Statistics for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired: U.S.

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### What are these statistics?

This set of statistics starts with the broadest grouping as background, that is, the entire U.S. population. It then narrows down, step by step, to focus on the employment status of relevant groupings of people who are blind (legally blind); those who are visually impaired (other people with serious difficulty seeing that cannot be corrected with ordinary glasses); and, for comparison, the general public with no serious visual or other impairment. Also shown are statistics for broad age groups *within* the vision groupings.

### Where are these statistics from?

Most of the data come from a 1994-95 national survey conducted by the federal government's National Center for Health Statistics. That study provides details about employment status of legally blind and other visually impaired adults that are not available from other national studies. The specific definitions and methods of the study are explained in a report by AFB research staff (Kirchner et al., 1999).

### How are the statistics organized here?

Each numbered set, from 1 to 10, deals with a different grouping. For example, one set refers to blind and visually impaired people grouped together, whereas another set refers only to people who are legally blind and the next set refers only to people who are visually impaired, excluding those who are legally blind.

Within each set—starting with #4—the lettered items differ by referring, A, to the number and percentage of people who *are* employed, and B, to the number and percentage who *are not* employed.

The employment data are also provided in a question and answer format. The questions and answers section follows after the numbered items.

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**1. Total Population of the United States**

About 262 million (1994-95).

**2. A. Estimated number of blind & visually impaired people of all ages, *including* institutionalized and homeless people**

7 to 10 million (1994-5).

**2. B. Estimated number of blind & visually impaired people who live in households (i.e., *excluding* institutionalized and homeless) of all ages**

6 to 8 million (1994-5).

Note: Only people who live in households, including those who live alone, are covered by surveys used for statistics on employment. The range of estimates exists because various national studies use different definitions and methods.

**3. Estimated number and percentage of household-based blind & visually impaired people who are of working age, defined as 18 through 69 years old**

About 2 to 3 million (1994-95) or 35-40% of all blind & visually impaired household-based people.

**4. A. Employed: estimated number and percentage of working age (18 to 69 years old) blind & visually impaired people who are employed**

1 to 1.3 million people or 40-45% (1994-95).

**4. B. Not Employed: estimated number and percentage of working age (18 to 69 years old) blind & visually impaired people who are not employed**

1 to 1.7 million people or 55-60% (1994-95).

**5. A. Employed: estimated number and percentage of legally blind people of working age (18 to 69 years old) who are employed**

About 160,000 people or 30% (1994-95).

**5. B. Not employed: estimated number and percentage of legally blind people of working age (18 to 69 years old) who are not employed**

About 375,000 people or 70% (1994-95).

**6. A. Employed: estimated number and percentage of visually impaired (excluding legally blind) people of working age (18 to 69 years old) who are employed**

About 1.1 million people or 45% (1994-95).

**6. B. Not employed: estimated number and percentage of visually impaired (excluding legally blind) people of**

**working age (18 - 69 years old) who are not employed**

About 1.4 million people or 55% (1994-95).

**7. A. Employed: estimated number and percentage of blind & visually impaired people of working age, by age category, who are employed:**

- Ages 18 through 54 years—About 868,000 people or 54% (1994-95)
- Ages 55 through 69 years—About 217,000 people or 22% (1994-95)

**7. B. Not employed: estimated number and percentage of blind & visually impaired people of working age, by age category, who are not employed:**

- Ages 18 through 54 years—About 740,000 people or 46% (1994-95)
- Ages 55 through 69 years—About 769,000 people or 78% (1994-95)

**8. A. Employed: estimated number and percentage of legally blind people of working age, by age category, who are employed:**

- Ages 18 through 54 years—About 145,000 people or 42% (1994-95)
- Ages 55 through 69 years—About 17,000 people or 9% (1994-95)

**8. B. Not employed: estimated number and percentage of legally blind people of working age, by age category, who are not employed:**

- Ages 18 through 54 years—About 200,000 people or 58% (1994-95)
- Ages 55 through 69 years—About 171,000 people or 91% (1994-95)

**9. A. Employed: estimated number and percentage of visually impaired people (excluding legally blind) of working age, by age category, who are employed:**

- Ages 18 through 54 years—About 733,000 people or 59% (1994-95)
- Ages 55 through 69 years—About 149,000 people or 20% (1994-95)

**9. B. Not employed: estimated number and percentage of visually impaired people (excluding legally blind) of working age, by age category, who are not employed:**

- Ages 18 through 54 years—About 509,000 people or 41% (1994-95)
- Ages 55 through 69 years—About 598,000 people or 80% (1994-95)

**10. A. Employed: estimated number and percentage of the general population with no serious impairments, of working age, who are employed:**

- Ages 18 through 54 years—About 97,649,000 people or 82% (1994-95)
- Ages 55 through 69 years—About 1,453,000 people or 54% (1994-95)

**10. B. Not employed: estimated number and percentage of the general population with no serious impairments, of working age, who are not employed:**

- Ages 18 through 54 years—About 21,435,000 people or 18% (1994-95)
- Ages 55 through 69 years—About 9,756,000 people or 46% (1994-95)

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**Employment Statistics Questions and Answers**

**What percentage of working-age adults who are visually impaired (not including those who are legally blind) are employed in the U.S.?**

Please note that this older estimate is provided pending the availability of more current information. In 1994-95, approximately 46% of working-age adults (ages 18-69) who were visually impaired but not legally blind were employed.

**Definition and scope:** This estimate includes adults aged 18-69 years, who have a vision loss with a visual acuity better than 20/200, and a visual field of better than 20 degrees.

**Data source:** National Center for Health Statistics (1998), National Health Interview Survey--Disability Supplement, 1994-95, [www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm).

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**What percentage of working-age adults who are legally blind are employed?**

Please note that this older estimate is provided pending the availability of more current information. In 1994-95, approximately 32% of working-age adults who were legally blind were employed.

**Definition and scope:** This estimate included adults 18-69

years of age who were legally blind. Legal blindness is a level of vision loss that has been defined by law to determine eligibility for benefits. It refers to central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with the best possible correction, or a visual field of 20 degrees or less.

**Data source:** National Center for Health Statistics (1998), National Health Interview Survey--Disability Supplement, 1994-95, [www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm). For further information, see Kirchner, C., Schmeidler, E., & Todorov, A. (1999). Looking at employment through a lifespan telescope: Age, health, and employment status of people with serious visual impairment. Mississippi State: Mississippi State University, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision.

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**When age is taken into account, what percentage of working-age adults who are visually impaired (not including those who are legally blind) are employed in the U.S.?**

Please note that this older estimate is provided pending the availability of more current information. In 1994-95, over three-fifths of visually impaired individuals in the "prime working years" of 22-50 years old were employed. About two-fifths of those 50-59 years old, and one-fifth of those 60 and older, were employed.

**Definition and scope:** This estimate includes adults aged 18-69 years, who have a vision loss with a visual acuity better than 20/200, and a visual field of better than 20 degrees.

**Data source:** National Center for Health Statistics (1998), National Health Interview Survey--Disability Supplement, 1994-95, [www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm). For further information, see Kirchner, C., Schmeidler, E., & Todorov, A. (1999). Looking at employment through a lifespan telescope: Age, health, and employment status of people with serious visual impairment. Mississippi State: Mississippi State University, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision.

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**When age is taken into account, what percentage of legally blind adults are employed?**

Please note that this older estimate is provided pending the availability of more current information. In 1995, almost one-half of legally blind individuals in the 22-50-year-old range were employed. By contrast, fewer than one-quarter of legally blind people ages 50-59 years, and one-tenth of those older than 60 years, were employed.

**Definition and scope:** This estimate included adults 18-69 years of age who were legally blind. Legal blindness is a level of vision loss that has been defined by law to determine eligibility for benefits. It refers to central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with the best

possible correction, or a visual field of 20 degrees or less.

**Data source:** National Center for Health Statistics (1998), National Health Interview Survey--Disability Supplement, 1994-95, [www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm). For further information, see Kirchner, C., Schmeidler, E., & Todorov, A. (1999). Looking at employment through a lifespan telescope: Age, health, and employment status of people with serious visual impairment. Mississippi State: Mississippi State University, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision.

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**What is the explanation for the discrepancy in the rates of employment between younger (ages 22-50) and older (ages 50-59) visually impaired and legally blind working-age adults?**

The lower employment rates for older adults raise the following possibilities:

1. The younger workers have had better access to education.
2. There is age discrimination against older workers.
3. There are more economic disincentives to employment for those closer to retirement age.
4. Adults who have lost their vision late in life have fewer of the skills they would need as employees to cope with their visual impairments.
5. Health problems that might prevent employment increase with age.

**Definition and scope:** This explanation included adults 18-69 years of age with vision loss, including those who are legally blind. The term vision loss refers to individuals who are visually impaired and, thus, have trouble seeing, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses. These visually impaired individuals have a visual acuity better than 20/200, and a visual field of better than 20 degrees. The term vision loss also refers to individuals who are legally blind or unable to see at all. Legal blindness is a level of vision loss that has been defined by law to determine eligibility for benefits. It refers to central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with the best possible correction, or a visual field of 20 degrees or less.

**Data source:** National Center for Health Statistics (1998), National Health Interview Survey--Disability Supplement, 1994-95, [www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm). For further information, see Kirchner, C., Schmeidler, E., & Todorov, A. (1999). Looking at employment through a lifespan telescope: Age, health, and employment status of people with serious visual impairment. Mississippi State: Mississippi State University, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision.

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**When health is taken into account, how does it affect the rates of employment among visually impaired and blind working-age adults?**

Health has a major effect on rates of employment. For visually impaired adults under the age of 55, of those who were in "excellent" or "very good" health, 83% were employed, the same as the percentage for sighted adults. If, however, visually impaired adults under age 55 were in "poor" health, only 20% were employed.

The situation is similar for legally blind adults. Of those under 55 years old who reported "excellent" health, 60% were employed, in comparison to a 5% employment rate for those in "poor" health.

Please note that this older estimate is provided pending the availability of more current information.

**Definition and scope:** This explanation included adults 18-69 years of age with vision loss, including those who are legally blind. The term vision loss refers to individuals who are visually impaired and, thus, have trouble seeing, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses. These visually impaired individuals have a visual acuity better than 20/200, and a visual field of better than 20 degrees. The term vision loss also refers to individuals who are legally blind or unable to see at all. Legal blindness is a level of vision loss that has been defined by law to determine eligibility for benefits. It refers to central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with the best possible correction, or a visual field of 20 degrees or less.

**Data source:** National Center for Health Statistics (1998), National Health Interview Survey--Disability Supplement, 1994-95, [www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm). For further information, see Kirchner, C., Schmeidler, E., & Todorov, A. (1999). Looking at employment through a lifespan telescope: Age, health, and employment status of people with serious visual impairment. Mississippi State: Mississippi State University, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision.

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### **What is the explanation for the discrepancy in the rates of employment between individuals who are blind or visually impaired and those who are sighted?**

Seventy-four percent of the sighted working-age public are employed, compared to approximately 46% of working-age adults who are blind or visually impaired. However, the sighted public, as a group, is both younger and in better health than are people who are visually impaired or legally blind, and these two factors have major effects on rates of employment. Please note that the older estimate this explanation is based upon is provided pending the availability of more current information. More current information most likely resembles these older employment estimates.

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### **Definitions**

**Legal Blindness** is a clinical measure that, in the U.S., means a person's central visual acuity is 20/200 or less in

the better eye, when using the best correction that can be provided by ordinary eyeglasses, or he/she has a visual field of 20 degrees or less.

For the data used here, survey respondents reported if they were legally blind, after having responded "Yes" when asked whether they have "serious difficulty seeing, even with glasses." Others with "serious visual impairment" were respondents who answered "yes" to the question about serious difficulty seeing, and "no" to legal blindness.

"**Employment**" is based on responses to a survey question asking whether the person had worked at a job or business in the two weeks prior to the interview, or—for those who said "no"—whether they had a job but were on vacation, sick or on layoff. "**Not employed**" includes people who were actively looking for work as well as those who, for various reasons, were not actively looking for work, although they may have been interested in working.

### Reference

Kirchner, C., Schmeidler E., Todorov, A., (1999) *Looking at Employment Through a Lifespan Telescope: Age, Health and Employment Status of People with Serious Visual Impairment*, Mississippi State, MS: Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision.

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