

Research In Focus: A Weekly Digest of New Research from the NIDILRR Community

New Study Finds Rural-Urban Migration Patterns May Differ for People with and Without Disabilities

A study funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR).

Studies of survey data have shown that, in the United States, a higher percentage of people living in rural areas have a disability, compared to people living in urban areas. Having a disability might influence people's migration patterns -- their decisions to move to, stay in, or move away from a particular geographic location. For example, while people without disabilities may move from rural to urban areas to pursue job opportunities, people with disabilities may stay in place in order to avoid the costs and stresses of moving, or move toward places that offer a better fit. In addition, people without disabilities, but who live with someone with a disability, may also make decisions about moving or staying depending on other household member's needs. In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers looked at the residence and migration patterns of Americans with disabilities, Americans without disabilities, and Americans living with a person with a disability. The researchers wanted to find out whether these three groups differed in the percentage of people who stayed in place. The researchers were also interested to know how decisions to move or stay differed by age or whether they lived in rural or urban communities. Among those who did move, the researchers also wanted to find out whether they tended to move to more rural or more urban locations.

Researchers at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for Place-based Solutions for Rural Community Participation, Health, and Employment looked at 2011-2015 survey data from the American Community Survey (ACS), a nationally representative demographic survey. In this survey, the respondents were asked whether they had impairments (hearing, vision, mobility, or cognitive) or functional limitations (self care or independent living). They were also asked to report their age, race/ethnicity, education, income level, and whether or not they had moved within the last year. The respondents who reported moving were asked to indicate where they had lived previously. The researchers coded the respondents' current and previous areas of residence on a scale from 1 (large metropolitan area) to 9 (small town not adjacent to any metropolitan area) derived from classifications developed by the Economic Research Service.

The researchers found that:

- Overall, about 13% of the respondents had a disability, and another 13% -- without disability of their own -- reported living with a person with a disability.
- A higher percentage of the respondents in more rural areas had a disability. Among respondents in mid-sized or small nonmetropolitan areas (coded 6-9), 16% or more reported having a disability. Specifically, in small nonmetropolitan

areas, up to 18% of the respondents reported having a disability. By comparison, 11% of the respondents in large metropolitan areas reported having a disability. This pattern of rural-urban differences held up even after accounting for differences in age, race/ethnicity, education, and income.

- Overall, the respondents without disabilities had the highest migration rate, with 5.4% reporting having moved to a different area within the last year. In contrast, 4.6% of the respondents with disabilities, and 4.2% of the respondents living with a person with a disability, had moved to a different area within the last year.
- Migration rates in all three groups varied by age: For the respondents without disabilities, migration rates were highest for the young adults, declining sharply in middle age. For the respondents with disabilities, migration rates were lower for young adults but decreased less rapidly for adults in their mid-30s and older. The respondents living with people with disabilities migrated much less often in young adulthood than the respondents without disabilities.
- Respondents who had moved showed a tendency to move from more rural toward less rural and more urban areas, or from large metropolitan toward smaller metropolitan areas. These patterns were similar for persons with or without disability.

The authors noted that, according to the ACS, about one in four Americans either has a disability or lives with a person with a disability, and that may influence their decisions about where to live. They may choose to stay in place more often than people without disabilities, particularly at younger ages. While people without disabilities may move away from rural areas in order to pursue opportunities in the cities, people with disabilities and their families living in rural areas may choose to stay where they are, perhaps to remain close to family and established support networks. However, the authors noted that this does not fully explain the higher percentage of people with disabilities living in rural areas. Future research may explore other factors influencing higher rural disability rates and the residential choices made by people with disabilities and their families over the life course.

[To Learn More](#)

The [Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for Place-Based Solutions for Rural Community Participation, Health, and Employment \(RTC: Rural\)](#) offers a wealth of evidence-based research and resources to support people with disabilities living in rural communities and the professionals they work with. These include the [Disability in America Map Series](#), which presents the geography of disability in full-color, sharable maps.

The US Census Bureau launched the 2020 Census, which will count every person living in the United States. Participation in the 2020 Census is important for all communities, from the largest cities to the most rural areas. Data collected will influence community funding and Congressional representation for the next decade, and will inform allocation of more than \$675 billion in federal funds for things like transportation, education,

Medicare and Medicaid, and other programs and services. Learn [more about the Census](#) and efforts to make it [accessible to all](#).

To Learn More About this Study

von Reichert, C., and Berry, E.H. (2019) [Rural–urban patterns of disability: The role of migration](#). Population, Space, and Place. 2019. This article is available from the NARIC collection under Accession Number J82290.

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