

Dismantling Barriers: How Disability, Race, and Other Characteristics Affect Employment Outcomes

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Key Words: Disability, Employment, Intersectionality, The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Background: Disability and Employment

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was groundbreaking legislation that provided comprehensive civil rights protections for people with disabilities, ensuring equal opportunity in employment, public accommodations, transportation, and government services. However, despite amendments and court decisions strengthening these rights, people with disabilities continue to lag behind people without disabilities in employment and other measures of economic empowerment. These disparities are intensified for people with disabilities who have additional marginalized identities, such as their race, ethnicity, gender, or age.

Years of research suggest that people with disabilities are less likely to be employed, more likely to live in poverty and tend to have less education and fewer assets.^{1,2} These same trends have also been observed among people of color.^{3,4} It has been noted that when the general population is simultaneously disaggregated by demographic characteristics like gender, race, ethnicity, and disability, certain disparities are magnified. For example, people of color with disabilities are less likely to be employed and more likely to be living in poverty than both white people with disabilities and Black and Hispanic people without disabilities.^{2,4}

Because understanding intersectionality is critical in creating inclusive and effective policies and practices that reach all people with disabilities, we at the Southeast ADA Center are undertaking a four-part research project to identify the ways in which multiple forms of discrimination can intersect and compound and lead to disparate ADA-related outcomes.

In this paper, we use data from the American Community Survey 2018-2022 for states in the Southeast Region (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee) to quantify existing differentials in employment rates between people with disabilities and people without disabilities. We further explore these differentials based on other demographic characteristics. To further investigate these disparities, we use statistical modeling to examine how someone's likelihood of being employed is related to several individual characteristics. Our analysis shows how disparities magnify when marginalized identities spanning gender, race,

Key Takeaways

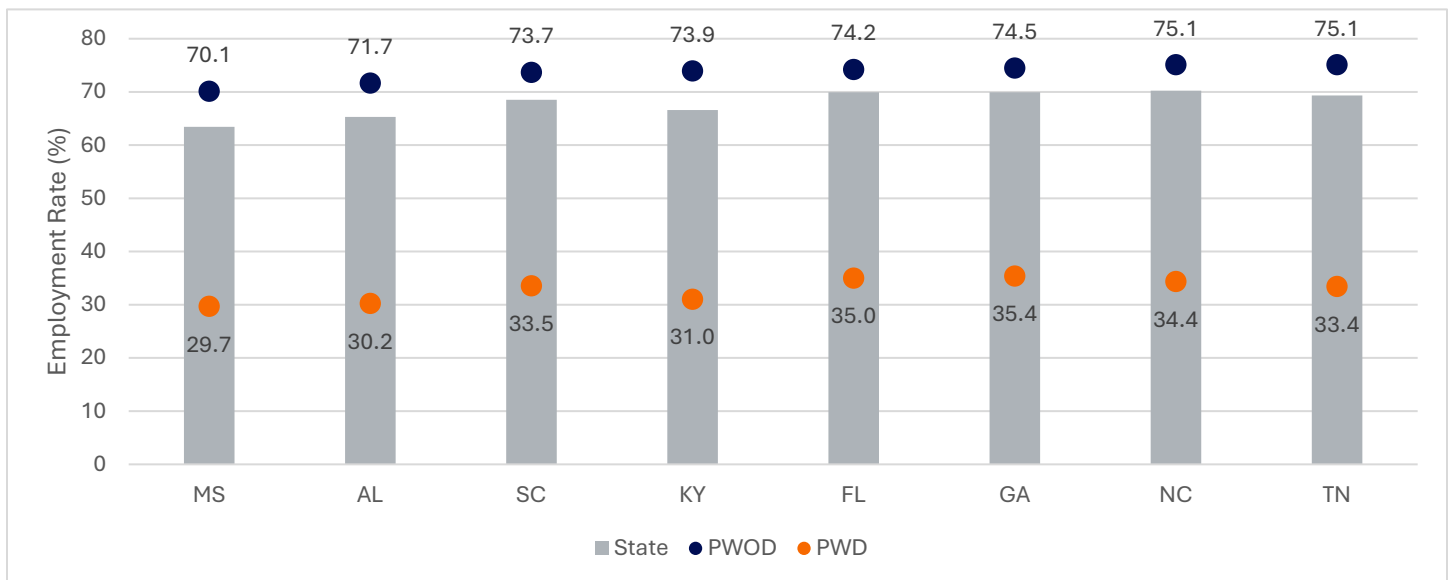
- Employment rates for people with disabilities across states in the Southeast region are less than half than those for people without disabilities.
- Employment rates among people with disabilities vary based on race and gender, with Asian men and American Indian and Alaska Native women having the highest and lowest employment rates respectively.
- Employment disparities faced by individuals with disabilities are amplified by specific combinations of gender and race and ethnicity.

ethnicity, and disability overlap.

Employment rates vary by disability status across the Southeast Region

Figure 1 shows employment rates for people with disabilities (PWD) and for people without disabilities (PWOD) in each state of the Southeast region. In every state, the employment rate for people without disabilities is more than twice as high than for people with disabilities. Georgia has the highest employment rate for people with disabilities, at 35.4%, while Mississippi has the lowest employment rate for this population in the region, at 29.7%. Kentucky has the largest difference in employment rates; the employment rate for people without disabilities is 2.4 times higher than that for people without disabilities.

FIGURE 1: Employment rate by disability status and state in Southeast region, ages 18-69

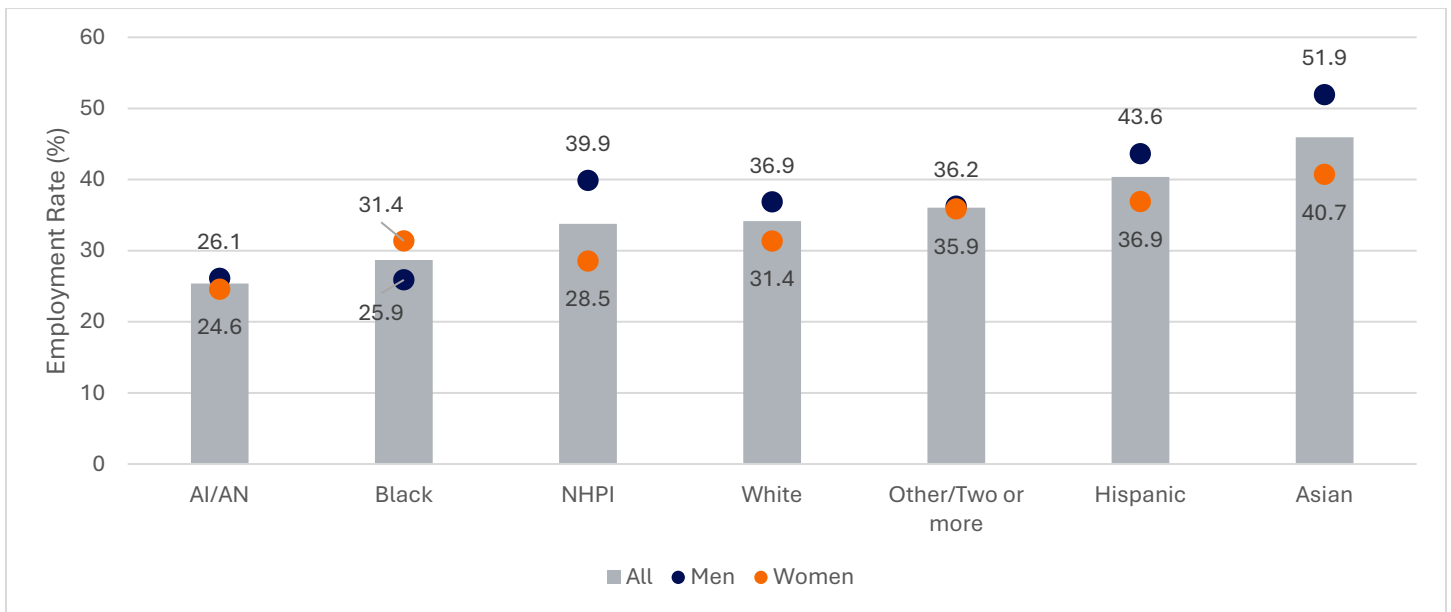


Note: For comparison, state employment rates for the overall population are also included. Data source: 2018-2022 American Community Survey.

Among people with disabilities, employment rates vary based on race, ethnicity, and gender

Figure 2 shows employment rates for people with disabilities in the Southeast region by race, ethnicity, and gender. People with disabilities who identify as Asian have the highest employment rate in the region at 46%. High employment rates among Asians remain even when disaggregating by gender; Asian men and women have the highest employment rates among men with disabilities and women with disabilities, at 51.9% and 40.7% respectively, across the Southeast region. American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) exhibit the lowest employment rate in the region at 25.4%. When disaggregating rates by gender, low rates for AI/AN women remain, as they have the lowest employment rate among people with disabilities in the region at 24.6%. Nevertheless, the lowest employment rate among men with disabilities is observed among Black men, with 25.9%. Except for Black women, who exhibit higher employment rates than Black men, women have lower employment rates than men across races and ethnicities.

FIGURE 2: Employment rate by race, ethnicity, and gender for people with disabilities in the Southeast region, Ages 18-69



Data source: 2018-2022 American Community Survey.

Intersectional analyses

It is tempting to think of these disparate outcomes based on disability, gender, and race and ethnicity as “additive” - that is that Women of Color with disabilities face the same barriers as women, as POC without disabilities, plus the same barriers as white people with disabilities. However, an individual’s lived experience is greater than the sum of their identities. This concept, known as “intersectionality,” suggests that various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other.⁵ In other words, not all people with disabilities experience ableism in the same way. For example, Black people with disabilities experience ableism and they experience racism, but they may also experience a unique form of discrimination resulting from the intersection of their identities as a Black person with a disability that is not captured by racism or ableism alone.

Using statistical models, we explored the effect of a combination of characteristics (disability, race, ethnicity, and gender) on employment outcomes using interaction terms. Our analysis showed that the employment disparities faced by individuals with disabilities are amplified by specific combinations of gender, race, and ethnicity, even after we control for other relevant characteristics that might influence their chances of being employed.

To answer how the intersection of disability status, gender, and race and ethnicity affect employment rates, we explore the effects of these characteristics on the probability of being employed relative to a base group defined in this case as White men without disabilities. Importantly, we account for additional individual characteristics that might be related to the probability of employment including education, age, marital status, citizenship, military service, foreign born status, and receipt of government benefits. We estimate the intersectionality effect by comparing the probability of employment of each group as defined by the different combinations of disability status, gender, and race and ethnicity with that of White men without disabilities, keeping the additional characteristics constant across groups.

Table 1 presents our results showing the effect of the intersection of disability status, gender, and race and ethnicity on the likelihood of being employed relative to the base group. We find that among men without disabilities, almost all races and ethnicities have a lower probability of employment relative to the base group. American Indian and Alaska Natives have the biggest disadvantage on the likelihood of being employed relative to White men without disabilities, even if we assume that both groups have the same education, age, marital status, citizenship, military service, foreign

born status, and government benefits. The former group has a 10 percentage points lower probability of employment than the latter. On the other hand, Hispanic men without disabilities, have a slightly higher probability of being employed than the base group, by 5.6 percentage points. Among women without disabilities, every race and ethnicity present a lower probability of employment relative to White men without disabilities. Asian women face the biggest disadvantage in employment relative to the base group.

Table 1: Marginal effects on the probability of employment (%) relative to White men without disabilities

Data Source: 2018-2022 American Community Survey. *Note:* To distinguish the interaction effect of disability status, gender, and race and ethnicity, our analysis computes these probabilities keeping the same level of other characteristics (education, age, marital status, citizenship, military service, foreign born status, and government benefits receipt) constant across groups.

EMPLOYMENT	Without disabilities		With disabilities	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Race and Ethnicity				
White		-12.3	-29.4	-37.3
Black	-8.0	-6.4	-41.6	-33.3
AIAN	-10.1	-15.7	-42.6	-43.2
Asian	-3.1	-23.8	-23.1	-37.5
NHPI	-0.8	-14.9	-35.0	-45.8
Other/Two or more	-3.6	-11.2	-34.2	-34.8
Hispanic	5.6	-13.3	-25.0	-33.3

Among people with disabilities, both genders and all races and ethnicities have a lower probability of being employed relative to the base group. Among women, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander have the largest disadvantage in the probability of being employed relative to White men without disabilities. This group has a lower probability of being employed relative to the base group by 45 percentage points. Among men, it is American Indian and Alaska Natives, closely followed by Blacks, who face the lowest probability of being employed when compared to White men without disabilities.

Policy implications

Previous empirical research has shown that, despite the achievements of the Disability Rights Movement and the ADA, people with disabilities have lower employment rates than people without disabilities. It is also well-documented that people with disabilities from marginalized communities face even worse employment outcomes than people with disabilities from white communities likely due to compounded nature of the forms of oppression they face.

Previous research has often examined marginalized identities separately, thus overlooking intersectionality. As a result, studies have explored and documented how employment outcomes differ based on disability, race, and gender but they have failed to address and capture how different forms of oppression interact to create unique and compounded barriers. Understanding these interactions is essential to developing policies and practices that address the unique challenges faced by women and minoritized populations with disabilities. Our results highlight the need to develop policies and practices that address the way people with multiple marginalized identities experience the world with a

recognition that they experience not just one type of discrimination added on to another type, but rather experience a unique situation which intensifies the inequalities they face.

This requires recognizing that employment is not a static and one-time event but rather a result of lifelong challenges and opportunities. As such, greater effort should be made to address challenges such as access to education and other human capital resources. Finally, resources should be dedicated to document and address ADA-related challenges facing marginalized populations with disabilities to improve their labor force participation.

Data and methods

This research used the American Community Survey 2018-2022 survey data. Employment rates are computed among 18- to 68-year-old individuals.

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