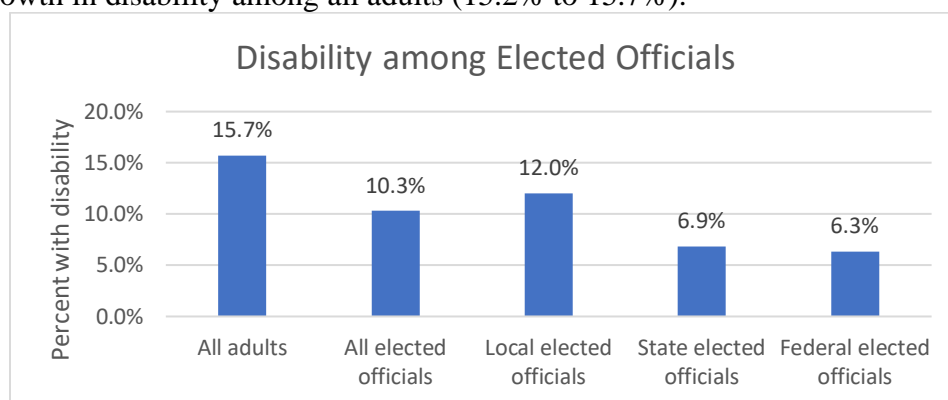


## Fact sheet: Elected Officials with Disabilities

Lisa Schur and Douglas Kruse<sup>1</sup>

### Key points:

- Close to one-tenth (10.3%) of elected officials have disabilities, based on Census data for the 2013-2017 period. This is less than the nearly one-sixth (15.7%) of all adults in the population who have disabilities.
- The likelihood of disability is almost twice as high among local officials (12.0%) as among state and federal officials (6.9% and 6.3%).
- The most common disabilities among elected officials are hearing impairments (5.4%), and mobility impairments causing difficulty in walking or climbing stairs (4.7%).
- The rate of disability is slightly lower among women elected officials (8.3%) than among men elected officials (11.4%), and is higher among military veteran elected officials (18.4%) than among non-veteran elected officials (9.0%). The likelihood of disability is higher among native American elected officials but does not otherwise differ significantly by race and ethnicity among elected officials.
- Older people are more likely both to have disabilities and to be elected officials. Over one-sixth of elected officials age 65 or older have disabilities, compared to only 5% of elected officials under age 35.
- The percent of elected officials with disabilities grew from 8.5% in the 2008-2012 period to 10.3% in the 2013-2017 period. This growth was slightly larger than the growth in disability among all adults (15.2% to 15.7%).



<sup>1</sup> Professors at the School of Management and Labor Relations, Rutgers University, 50 Labor Center Way, New Brunswick, NJ, 08901, [Lschur@smlr.rutgers.edu](mailto:Lschur@smlr.rutgers.edu) and [Dkruse@smlr.rutgers.edu](mailto:Dkruse@smlr.rutgers.edu). This is part of a joint project on politicians with disabilities being conducted with Professor Sally Friedman of SUNY-Albany, and Professor Richard Scotch of the University of Texas at Dallas.

This fact sheet presents data on elected officials with disabilities, based on analysis of data from the federal government’s American Community Survey conducted by the Census Bureau. We use the combined 5-year 2013-2017 files with a total sample size of over 12.4 million American adults and 2,508 elected officials.<sup>2</sup> The figures on elected officials do not include all elected officials, but only those whose primary jobs are listed as “chief executives and legislators” in government “executive offices and legislative bodies.” Therefore it does not include people who serve as elected officials in unpaid or part-time positions (such as most city councils or school boards).<sup>3</sup>

Disability is measured by 6 Census questions that capture four major impairments (hearing, visual, mobility, and cognitive) and difficulty with basic activities inside or outside the home (dressing or bathing, and going outside alone). It should be noted that the disability total may be understated because these measures may not capture several types of disability.<sup>4</sup>

After presenting the basic results, we provide breakdowns of disability among elected officials by level of government, type of disability, gender, race/ethnicity, age, and veteran status, and finish by comparing overall changes from the 2008-2012 period to the 2013-2017 period.

## **Basic results**

In an average year over the 2013-2017 period there were an estimated 36,779 individuals who held elected positions as part of their primary jobs. Among these individuals, 10.3% have disabilities. This is lower than the 15.7% who have disabilities among all adults in the broader population.<sup>5</sup> This difference is large enough to be outside the survey’s margin of error.<sup>6</sup>

	Elected officials		All adults
	Number	Percent	Percent
<b>Total</b>	36,779	100.0%	100.0%
<b>With disabilities</b>	3,793	10.3%	15.7%
<b>Without disabilities</b>	32,886	89.7%	84.3%

<sup>2</sup> All figures reported in this fact sheet use the Census weights to better reflect the population.

<sup>3</sup> Counting all people elected to any government position, the Census Bureau found 513,200 in the 1992 Census of Governments. Combined with data from this fact sheet, this indicates that the large majority of all elected positions are not the primary jobs for the office holders (<https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/gus/tables/1995/gc92-1-2.pdf>).

<sup>4</sup> The disability questions measure the major sensory, mobility, and cognitive impairments, but may miss some learning disabilities, mental impairments, and physical conditions that do not necessarily limit mobility, such as epilepsy and cancer.

<sup>5</sup> For “all adults” we include all people age 18 or older, since many states have 18 as a minimum age of candidacy for some offices ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age\\_of\\_candidacy\\_laws\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_candidacy_laws_in_the_United_States)).

<sup>6</sup> The difference is outside the survey’s margin of error at a confidence level of 99.9%. Unless otherwise stated, all statements about margin of error use a 95% level of confidence.

## Level of government

The rate of disability is higher among local elected officials. Breaking the figures down by level of government, 12.0% of local elected officials have disabilities, which is almost twice the figures for state (6.9%) and federal (6.3%) government officials. The difference between the local government and the other two levels is large enough to be outside the survey's margin of error, while the difference between the state and federal government figures is within the margin of error.

<b>Percent with disability among elected officials:</b>	
<b>All levels</b>	10.3%
<b>Local government</b>	12.0%
<b>State government</b>	6.9%
<b>Federal government</b>	6.3%

## Type of Disability

The most common disabilities among elected officials are hearing impairments (5.4% of all elected officials) and mobility impairments that cause difficulty in walking or climbing stairs (4.7%). Among the six measures, each type of disability is less common among elected officials than among all adults, except that elected officials appear slightly more likely than all adults to have hearing impairments (5.4% compared to 4.6%). This partly reflects the higher average age both of people with disabilities and of elected officials in general, as will be seen in the age breakdown later in the fact sheet. Except for hearing impairments, the difference between elected officials and all adults is outside the survey's margin of error.

<b>Percent who have:</b>	<b>Elected officials</b>	<b>All adults</b>
<b>Vision impairment</b>	1.5%	3.0%
<b>Hearing impairment</b>	5.4%	4.6%
<b>Mental or cognitive impairment</b>	1.6%	5.7%
<b>Difficulty walking or climbing stairs</b>	4.7%	8.9%
<b>Difficulty dressing or bathing</b>	1.2%	3.5%
<b>Difficulty going outside alone</b>	1.5%	6.3%

## Gender

The rate of disability among elected officials is slightly lower among women (8.3%) than among men (11.4%). This difference is just large enough to be outside the survey's margin of error.

<b>Percent with disabilities among:</b>	<b>Elected officials</b>	<b>All adults</b>
<b>Women</b>	8.3%	16.1%
<b>Men</b>	11.4%	15.3%

Women are generally less likely than men to be elected officials. As shown below, only one-third (34.4%) of elected officials are women. As a percent of all elected officials, 2.9% are women with disabilities, while 7.4% are men with disabilities.

<b>Percent of all elected officials who are:</b>	<b>With disabilities</b>	<b>Without disabilities</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Women</b>	2.9%	31.6%	34.5%
<b>Men</b>	7.4%	58.1%	65.5%
<b>Total</b>	10.3%	89.7%	100.0%

## Race and ethnicity

Among elected officials, the rate of disability is highest among native Americans (20.8%). The disability rate is next highest among black non-Hispanics (11.1%) and white non-Hispanics (9.9%). Looking just within elected officials, the higher rate among native Americans compared to the other race/ethnicity groups is outside the survey's margin of error, but the differences among the other categories are not. Comparing elected officials to all other adults, the difference in disability rates is strong enough to be outside the margin of error for white and black non-Hispanics, but not for the other categories. In particular, it is noteworthy that the disability rate for native American elected officials (20.8%) nearly matches the disability rate of native Americans in the overall population (22.9%).

<b>Percent with disabilities among:</b>	<b>Elected officials</b>	<b>All adults</b>
<b>White non-Hispanic</b>	9.9%	16.9%
<b>Black non-Hispanic</b>	11.1%	17.9%
<b>Hispanic</b>	8.2%	11.5%
<b>Native Americans</b>	20.8%	22.9%
<b>Asian and other race</b>	9.4%	10.6%

As a percent of all elected officials, 7.9% are white non-Hispanic people with disabilities, while 0.9% are native Americans with disabilities, 0.8% are black non-Hispanic people with disabilities, 0.4% are Hispanic people with disabilities, and 0.3% are people with disabilities who are Asian or another race.

<b>Percent of all elected officials who are:</b>	<b>With disabilities</b>	<b>Without disabilities</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>White non-Hispanic</b>	7.9%	72.0%	79.9%
<b>Black non-Hispanic</b>	0.8%	6.4%	7.2%
<b>Hispanic</b>	0.4%	4.8%	5.2%
<b>Native Americans</b>	0.9%	3.2%	4.1%
<b>Asian and other race</b>	0.3%	3.3%	3.6%
<b>Total</b>	10.3%	89.7%	100.0%

## Age

The rate of disability increases with age among elected officials as it does among the population in general. Among officials age 65 or older, almost one-fifth (18.7%) have disabilities, compared to 5.0% among those age 18-34. The rate of disability is lower among elected officials than among all adults in each age category, and the difference is large enough to be outside the survey's margin of error in all age categories except the youngest (18-34).

<b>Percent with disabilities among:</b>	<b>Elected officials</b>	<b>All adults</b>
<b>Age 18-34</b>	5.0%	6.3%
<b>Age 35-49</b>	3.8%	8.9%
<b>Age 50-64</b>	9.0%	17.5%
<b>Age 65+</b>	18.7%	37.1%

Elected officials are older in general, with nearly one-third being age 65 or older (29.8%), and over one-third being age 50-64 (37.7%). Combined with the low rate of disability among younger people, this means that only a very small number of elected officials have a disability and are age 21-34 (0.6%) or age 34-49 (0.7%). Most elected officials with disabilities are age 50 or older: among all elected officials, 3.4% have disabilities and are age 50-64, and 5.6% have disabilities and are age 65 or older.

<b>Percent of all elected officials who are:</b>	<b>With disabilities</b>	<b>Without disabilities</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Age 18-34</b>	0.6%	12.2%	12.8%
<b>Age 35-49</b>	0.7%	19.1%	19.9%
<b>Age 50-64</b>	3.4%	34.2%	37.6%
<b>Age 65+</b>	5.6%	24.2%	29.8%
<b>Total</b>	10.3%	89.7%	100.0%

## Veteran status

The rate of disability among elected officials is higher among military veterans (18.4%) than among non-veterans (9.0%). Their disability rate is lower, however, than among all adult veterans (28.4%). The disability rate is higher among elected officials who are pre-Gulf War veterans (20.3%) compared to all adults (36.0%). Each of the differences between elected officials and other adults is large enough to be outside the survey's margin of error, except for the disability difference among Gulf War veterans where the rates of disability are similar between elected officials (12.4%) and all adults (13.2%).

<b>Percent with disabilities among:</b>	<b>Elected officials</b>	<b>All adults</b>
<b>Non-veterans</b>	9.0%	14.6%
<b>All veterans</b>	18.4%	28.4%
<b>Pre-Gulf War veterans</b>	20.3%	36.0%
<b>Gulf War veterans</b>	12.4%	13.2%

Counting veterans both with and without disabilities, veterans represent close to 1 in 7 elected officials (14.5%), of which most are pre-Gulf War veterans (10.9% of all elected officials). As a percent of all elected officials, 2.7% are veterans with disabilities, of which most are pre-Gulf War veterans (2.2% of all elected officials compared to 0.5% for Gulf War veterans with disabilities).

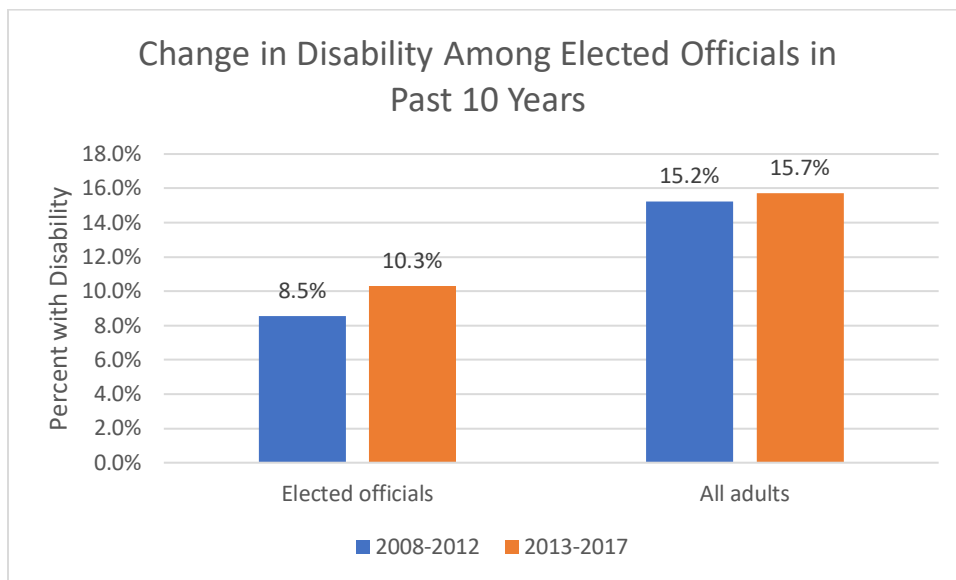
<b>Percent of all elected officials who are:</b>	<b>With disabilities</b>	<b>Without disabilities</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Non-veterans</b>	7.7%	77.9%	85.5%
<b>All veterans</b>	2.7%	11.8%	14.5%
<b>Pre-Gulf War veterans</b>	2.2%	8.7%	10.9%
<b>Gulf War veterans</b>	0.5%	3.2%	3.6%
<b>Total</b>	10.3%	89.7%	100.0%

## Change over time

The Census Bureau has been asking a consistent set of disability questions since 2008, allowing us to do a comparison since that time. As shown below, the percent of elected officials with disabilities has grown from 8.5% in the 2008-2012 period to 10.3% in the 2013-2017 period.<sup>7</sup> This is greater than the growth in disability among all adults (15.2% to 15.7%).

While the 1.8% increase in disability prevalence among elected officials is noteworthy, a caution is that this estimated change is within the survey's margin of error, which means we can be confident of a true change only at a 90% level of confidence, and not the 95% level of confidence generally used by researchers.

Percent with disabilities during:	Elected officials	All adults
<b>2008-2012</b>	8.5%	15.2%
<b>2013-2017</b>	10.3%	15.7%



<sup>7</sup> The sample size for the 2008-2012 sample is 11.9 million individuals, including 2469 elected officials.