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| IRIS Center logo. | Activity |

Disability Awareness:

Prevalence Rates of Disability Categories

Est. Time: 30–45 minutes

Objective

Determine the prevalence of disability categories in U.S. public schools and develop an understanding of high- and low-incidence disabilities.

Overview

As the overall number of students in America has increased, so too has the number of students with disabilities. During the 2022–2023 school year, approximately 15% of public school students received special education services. While all disability categories are represented in this 15%, the rates of identification within these categories vary greatly. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)—the federal law that guarantees students with disabilities the right to a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment—recognizes 13 special education categories for which individualized services and supports can be provided. Additionally, IDEA requires states to serve students who are not meeting age-appropriate developmental milestones under the category of developmental delay.

Autism Deaf-blindness Deafness

Emotional disturbance Hearing impairment Intellectual disability

Multiple disabilities Orthopedic impairment Other health impairment\*

Specific learning disability Speech or language impairment Traumatic brain injury

Visual impairment

Disabilities are sometimes classified in terms of the prevalence or frequency of a disability. Those that are more prevalent are referred to as *high-incidence disabilities* and those that are less prevalent are referred to as *low-incidence disabilities*. Educators might find that their assumptions regarding the prevalence of certain disabilities are influenced by their personal experiences (or lack thereof) or by media portrayals.

*\*Other health impairment can refer to health problems adversely affecting a child’s performance, such as asthma, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), epilepsy, diabetes, hemophilia, and Tourette syndrome, among others.*

Activity

1. Before calculating the data, consider whether the 13 disability categories fall into either high-incidence or low-incidence groups. Note your predictions below.

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| **High-Incidence** | **Low-Incidence** |
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Using the attached table, “Number of Students Ages 5–21 Served under IDEA: 2022–2023 School Year,” complete Questions 2 and 3.

1. **All public school students:** Calculate the percentage of all public school students served under each disability category (disability category ÷ total number of public school students × 100). Keep in mind that approximately 15% of all public school students received special education services in the 2022–2023 school year.
2. **Students with disabilities only:** Calculate the percentage of all students with disabilities served under each disability category (disability category ÷ total number of students with disabilities × 100).

Questions/Discussion Topics

After completing the activity, consider these questions.

1. Compare the number and percentage of students receiving services under each disability category.
2. Which disability category has the highest prevalence rate?
3. Which disability category has the lowest prevalence rate?
4. Were you surprised by any of the prevalence numbers among all public school students or students with disabilities only? Explain.
5. Review your high- and low-incidence predictions in the table above and compare them with your calculations.
6. Were your predictions accurate? Explain.
7. Which disabilities do you now think would be considered high-incidence disabilities?
8. Which disabilities do you now think would be considered low-incidence disabilities?

**Number of Students Ages 5–21 Served under IDEA: 2022–2023 School Year**

**Total number of students enrolled in public schools 2022–2023:** 49,618,464

**Total number of students with disabilities 2022–2023:** 7,095,053

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| **Disability** | **2022–2023** | **% of all public school students** | **% of all students with disabilities** |
| Autism | 909,055 |  |  |
| Deaf-blindness | 1,737 |  |  |
| Developmental delay | 277,283 |  |  |
| Emotional disturbance | 320,828 |  |  |
| Hearing impairments\* | 64,666 |  |  |
| Intellectual disabilities | 420,905 |  |  |
| Multiple disabilities | 123,000 |  |  |
| Orthopedic impairments | 28,735 |  |  |
| Other health impairments | 1,161,972 |  |  |
| Specific learning disabilities | 2,406,452 |  |  |
| Speech or language impairments | 1,265,819 |  |  |
| Traumatic brain injury | 23,918 |  |  |
| Visual impairments | 23,718 |  |  |

*\*\*Although deafness is a disability category, data for this disability are reported under hearing impairments.*

Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_203.40.asp) and [U.S. Department of Education](https://data.ed.gov/dataset/idea-section-618-data-products-static-tables-part-b-count-environ-table3/resources?resource=1c769deb-20d4-4d33-ac77-ace0388e6fe2).