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| IRIS Center logo. | Activity |

Disability Awareness:

State-by-State Prevalence Rates of Disability Categories

Est. Time: 30–45 minutes

Objective

Understand that differences in state definitions of disabilities can impact identification rates for individual disability categories.

Overview

During the 2022–2023 school year, approximately 15% of public school students received special education services. To qualify for these services, a student must have a disability defined by the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA), the federal law that guarantees students with disabilities the right to a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. IDEA recognizes 13 special education categories for which individualized services and supports can be provided:

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

Additionally, IDEA requires states to serve students who are not meeting age-appropriate developmental milestones under the category of developmental delay.

Although all disability categories are represented in this 15%, the rates of identification within these categories are quite different. Interestingly, the percentages of the overall student population who receive services under each disability category vary greatly from state to state.

Activity

In groups of three or four, have students complete the following activities. To do so, they will need to use the linked chart entitled [“Prevalence\* of Students Ages 5 through 21 Served in 2022 under IDEA ’04 Part B, by Disability Category and State.”](https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/mcontent/disability-awareness-state-by-state-prevalence-rates-of-disability-categories/)

1. Choose and review one disability category. *Note: You may want to assign each group a different disability category.*
2. Compare the prevalence rate of the disability across states.
3. Calculate the average prevalence rate of the disability across all 50 states and the District of Columbia.
4. For each disability category, determine the range of students—the difference between the highest percentage and the lowest percentage—identified for that disability across states (including the District of Columbia). Use the attached table, “IDEA Disability Categories: Highest and Lowest State Percentages: 2022–2023 School Year,” to complete this task.
5. In the second and third columns, record the states and their percentages for those with the highest percentages for each disability category.
6. In the fourth and fifth columns, record the states and their percentages for those with the lowest percentages for each disability category.
7. For the last column, calculate the range for each disability category. To do so, subtract the lowest percentage from the highest percentage.

*Note: If more than one state has the highest or lowest percentage, list all that apply. For more than five states, record the number of states with this percentage.*

1. Choose three states.
2. Compare the prevalence of all disabilities across those states.
3. Search each state’s department of education website to locate and analyze the definitions and eligibility criteria of the disabilities used to qualify students for services.

Questions/Discussion Topics

1. What do you notice when you compare prevalence rates across states?
2. Which category has the greatest variability among the states? The least?
3. Why do you think there is such variability?
4. What did you find when you compared the states’ disability definitions and eligibility criteria?
5. How might the differences in definitions and eligibility criteria impact the prevalence rates?

**IDEA Disability Categories: Highest and Lowest State Percentages**

**2022–2023 School Year**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Disability** | **State** | **Highest Percentage** | **State** | **Lowest Percentage** | **Range** |
| Total number of students with disabilities | Pennsylvania | 19.25% | Hawaii | 10.60% | 8.65% |
| Specific learning disabilities |  |  |  |  |  |
| Speech or language impairments |  |  |  |  |  |
| Intellectual disabilities |  |  |  |  |  |
| Emotional disturbance |  |  |  |  |  |
| Multiple disabilities |  |  |  |  |  |
| Hearing impairments\* |  |  |  |  |  |
| Orthopedic impairments |  |  |  |  |  |
| Other health impairments |  |  |  |  |  |
| Visual impairments |  |  |  |  |  |
| Autism |  |  |  |  |  |
| Traumatic brain injury |  |  |  |  |  |
| Deaf-blindness |  |  |  |  |  |
| Developmental delay |  |  |  |  |  |

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