

Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income for Undergraduates with Disabilities: An Analysis of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey (NPSAS 2000)

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Introduction

In addition to the intrinsic benefits of learning, postsecondary education may provide opportunities for students to improve their employment opportunities and economic independence. This may apply for both students with and without disabilities. For example, students with disabilities who earn four year degrees typically work at rates approximating nondisabled graduates and have commensurate earnings (Horn & Berkold, 1999). Research also suggests that any postsecondary education beyond a high school degree may significantly improve the likelihood of postschool employment. (Hayward & Schmidt-Davis, 2000). Such findings are important when considering recent efforts to improve employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, particularly those receiving federal cash assistance.

The Social Security Administration (SSA) is responsible for two federal disability cash assistance programs: the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs. SSDI provides benefits to individuals with disabilities who are "insured" by workers' contributions to the Social Security trust fund. That is, if an individual with a disability has previously worked and contributed taxes as required through the Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA), he or she may be eligible for SSDI cash assistance. In some cases, SSDI benefits are also based on contributions made by an individual's spouse or parents. Combined with cash assistance, SSDI participants may also receive health insurance benefits through Medicare after a two year waiting period.

SSI also provides cash assistance to eligible persons with disabilities, including children and youth under 18 years of age. Differing from SSDI, funding for the SSI program is derived from general tax revenues and previous employment is not required. Eligibility criteria for both SSI and SSDI generally include the presence of a severe, medically defined disability and an inability to perform a substantial gainful activity (SGA). SGA refers to earnings guidelines used for evaluating work activity. If an individual has demonstrated an inability to earn more than SGA (\$700 per month currently), he or she may be eligible for

SSI or SSDI if other disability criteria are met (SSA, 2001). In most states, individuals receiving SSI benefits are also eligible for Medicaid health insurance and associated benefits.

Reducing dependence on cash assistance programs such as SSI and SSDI and increasing economic dependence through paid employment are key federal and state policy goals. Declining employment rates for individuals with disabilities during the 1990's, a time of burgeoning economic growth, have underscored the need for improving both education and employment outcomes for students with disabilities (Burkhauser, Daley & Houtenville, 2000). As compared to nondisabled working age persons, individuals with disabilities are more likely to achieve less than a high school education, and even less likely to pursue postsecondary education opportunities. For young adults with disabilities, level of education is positively associated with employment even when controlling for factors such as severity of disability and SSI participation (Berry, 2000). Examining the characteristics of postsecondary students with disabilities, including SSDI and SSI participants, may therefore assist with the development of more effective policies aimed at increasing economic and social independence.

The purpose of this brief is to describe the characteristics of undergraduate students receiving SSDI and SSI benefits. Prevalence estimates, disability, sociodemographic, enrollment, economic, and financial aid characteristics are examined and discussed in the context of recent legislative and regulatory changes.

NPSAS 2000 Disability Questions

NPSAS 2000 disability screening questions were modeled after those designed for the Census 2000. After an introduction regarding the need for understanding educational services for students with disabilities, all respondents were asked whether they had a long-lasting condition such as blindness, deafness, or a severe vision or hearing impairment. The next screening question asked whether respondents had a condition that substantially limited one or more basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, or carrying. A third question was then asked to determine whether respondents had any other physical, mental, or emotional condition that has lasted six months or more. For all screening questions, interviewers were instructed to include intermittent conditions that may be long lasting (e.g., episodic mental illness). If a respondent answered affirmatively to any of these questions, detailed follow-up questions were presented. Respondents were then asked if their long-lasting condition resulted in activity limitation or difficulties with the following: (1) learning, remembering, or concentrating; (2) dressing, bathing, or getting around inside your home or dormitory; (3) getting to school to attend class; (4) getting around on campus; or (5) working at a job.

Next, respondents were asked about main disabling conditions. That is, individuals were asked if they experienced any of the following disability conditions: hearing impairment; blind or visual impairment that cannot be corrected by wearing glasses; speech or language impairment; orthopedic or mobility impairment; specific learning disability or dyslexia; attention deficit disorder (ADD); health impairment or problem; mental illness or emotional disturbance; developmental disability; brain injury or "other".

Subsequent questions focused on disability cash assistance programs. Specifically, respondents were asked if they were currently receiving SSI or SSDI. Responses were recorded as "no," SSI participation, SSDI participation, or both SSI and SSDI participation. "No" responses were imputed for respondents who did not report having a disability.

Data Analysis

Prevalence estimates and confidence intervals for SSDI and SSI participants were generated along with percentages of main disabling conditions. Nonparticipants with disabilities were defined as students with a disability who did not report SSI or SSDI participation.

Sociodemographic characteristics such as sex, race, age, marital status, dependent children, and single parent status were also examined. Enrollment characteristics such as institution type (e.g., two year, four year), attendance intensity (e.g., full time, part time), and delayed enrollment were compared. In addition, economic characteristics such as of independent and dependent status (i.e., whether students primarily relied on parent income), annual income, and percentage of poverty were examined.

The Data Analysis System (DAS) software program was used for producing estimates and standard errors for undergraduate students attending less than two year, two year, and four year postsecondary institutions during the 1999-2000 academic year (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a). Unlike other statistical software programs, DAS takes into account the unique NPSAS 2000 survey design. Weighted estimates and standard errors generated through DAS were subsequently used to calculate tests of significance. Unless otherwise noted, an alpha of .05 was used with Bonferroni adjustments.

Highlights

- SSA program participants represented 8.3% of all undergraduates with disabilities or 125 thousand students. Of these, 57% or 71 thousand were SSDI participants, 36% or 45 thousand were SSI participants, and 7% or eight thousand received both SSI and SSDI.
- Students with disabilities, including SSA program participants, were more often female, white, and single.

- SSI participants were nearly three times more likely to be African American than SSDI and nonparticipants with disabilities.
- SSDI undergraduates more often had dependent and/or were single parents when compared to SSI participants and non-participants with disabilities.
- For all groups, students with orthopedic impairments represented roughly a third of all undergraduates with disabilities. Students with mental illness and health impairments were the second and third most predominant disabling conditions across groups.
- SSI students were significantly less likely than SSDI students and nonparticipants with disabilities to enroll in four year postsecondary institutions and more likely to enroll in two year colleges.
- SSDI participants were substantially less likely to attend full time when compared to SSI participants and nonparticipants with disabilities (44% versus 61% respectively).
- Both SSI and SSDI undergraduates showed mean delayed enrollment years that were at least two times greater than nonparticipants with disabilities (nine and eight years as compared to four years).
- For the mean age of starting postsecondary education, nonparticipants with disabilities began about 13 years earlier than SSDI participants, and 17 years earlier than SSI participants.
- SSI and SSDI participants reported significantly higher poverty and lower annual income when compared to nonparticipants.
- SSI participants were less likely to receive loans (18%) when compared to nonparticipating students with disabilities (31%).
- SSI participants were less likely to receive loans (18%) when compared to SSDI participants (24%)* and nonparticipating students with disabilities (31%), and also tended to borrow less than these groups.
- On average, both SSI and SSDI participants spent less on tuition and fees than nonparticipants with disabilities.

Discussion

This brief described the characteristics of undergraduate students participating in SSA disability benefit programs. Significant differences were

found between SSI, SSDI, and non-participant groups across disability, income, enrollment, and financial aid domains. The similarities and differences among SSA program participants in postsecondary education settings warrant consideration as they may relate to legislative and other efforts intending to promote employment outcomes for persons with disabilities:

1. Given that many SSDI participants had dependent children and/or were single parents, **findings presented here suggest that many of these students may face substantial personal and family obligations that may compete with those of postsecondary studies.** SSDI participants were also less likely to attend full time than SSI participants and non-participants with disabilities, also suggesting that SSDI beneficiaries may experience singular challenges to degree attainment that extend beyond disability alone. On the other hand, the goals of individuals with disabilities receiving SSDI may not necessarily include achieving a degree. Rather, focusing on education and training that may enhance short term employment opportunities may be a reasonable and urgent goal for parents with disabilities. While greater work earnings and opportunities may open with a four- year degree, the necessity of addressing immediate economic and family responsibilities may take precedence.
2. SSI participants experienced higher levels of poverty and were less likely to receive loans than nonparticipants. They were also more often enrolled in two- year or less postsecondary institutions than four-year colleges or universities. To some extent, **findings about economic circumstances of SSI participants may be influenced by program eligibility itself.** That is, earnings and assets restrictions in addition to the existence of severe disability may define economic status as well as discourage excessive loan or grant receipt. For example, if a student received a \$512 per month SSI payment, or \$6,144 annually, she may avoid loans or grants that would jeopardize her continued eligibility for cash and health benefits. From this perspective, program eligibility restrictions may inadvertently discourage increased attendance and degree attainment.
3. The late age of enrollment of SSI participants may suggest that **few children and youth (i.e., under 18 years) who are SSA participants succeed in gaining access to postsecondary education within a year after exiting high school.** Indeed, many high school students with disabilities, including SSI participants, fail to achieve a 12th grade education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b; Berry, 2000). This may be due, in part, to essential differences in the SSI child and youth population when compared to adult participants. That is, 63% of children and youth receiving SSI benefits have some type of mental disorder, and more than half of these were diagnosed with mental retardation (Pickett, 2002). While SSA and NPSAS disability categories are not directly comparable, it is also interesting that persons with orthopedic impairments represented the largest disability category for both

SSI and SSDI undergraduates in this study. Delayed enrollment is a significant issue for undergraduates with disabilities as a whole (Horn & Berkold, 1999), and improving access and retention in postsecondary education for SSA program participants may present an important challenge if positive employment outcomes and economic independence for individuals with disabilities is to be realized.

Recommendations

Rather than discouraging students with disabilities from participating in SSA programs, as these programs can provide these students with much needed financial support, there is a need to provide students with disabilities with more information about financial aid options and SSA work/education incentive programs. Students need assistance in negotiating the process of taking advantage of the financial support that SSA programs can offer while seeking to obtain a postsecondary degree and become gainfully employed. It is also evident that further research is needed in order to investigate discrepancies among students with disabilities in SSA program and postsecondary education participation. Specifically:

- We need more information about the high representation of African American postsecondary students (30.5%), as compared with other racial groups, who are SSI participants. We also need more information about how students who face challenges in addition to those posed by disability, such as socioeconomic status, race and familial responsibility, are negotiating postsecondary education.
- There is a need to increase financial aid resources and information that is geared specifically towards postsecondary students with disabilities. Financial aid specialists and campus disability support providers need to be made aware of economic circumstances and financial opportunities that may be linked with having a disability.
- We need to look at how SSA work incentive programs can best be utilized in order to enable students with disabilities to work while they are going to school.
- We must consider how eligibility requirements for SSI and SSDI may be limiting opportunities for postsecondary students with disabilities. For example, age limits on educational incentive programs such as earnings exemptions may not be appropriate given the late entry to postsecondary education (average age 36-40) of students with disabilities who are SSA participants.

- Research is need to explore the reasons why students with disabilities, both SSA participants and non-participants, tend to attend two-year postsecondary programs rather than four-year postsecondary programs, especially given that completion of a four year degree tends to lead to better employment outcomes.

* $p < .10$

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Table 1.

Sociodemographic Profile of Undergraduate Students with Disabilities During the 1999-2000 Academic Year.

	<u>SSI Participants</u>		<u>SSDI Participants</u>		<u>Non-Participants with Disabilities</u>
	Percent	(S.E.)	Percent	(S.E.)	Percent
<u>Sex</u>					
Female	53.3	(7.2)	55.7	(5.6)	59.1
Male	46.8	(7.2)	44.3	(5.6)	40.9
<u>Race</u>					
White	62.9	(8.1)	74.7	(6.2)	77.1
Black or African American	30.5	(7.7)	12.0	(3.7)	11.1
Other	6.7	(3.0)	13.4	(5.1)	11.8
<u>Marital Status</u>					
Single, Never Married	44.1	(8.2)	37.9	(6.7)	57.0
Married	19.6	(6.5)	30.8	(6.5)	29.0
Other	36.4	(7.3)	31.3	(5.2)	13.9
<u>Dependent Children</u>	27.5	(6.3)	40.4	(6.1)	31.9
<u>Single Parent</u>	20.8	(5.9)	25.3	(5.2)	16.3

*Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS)

Figure 1. Main Disabling Conditions Among SSI, SSDI and Nonparticipant Undergraduates with Disabilities During the 1999-2000 Academic Year.

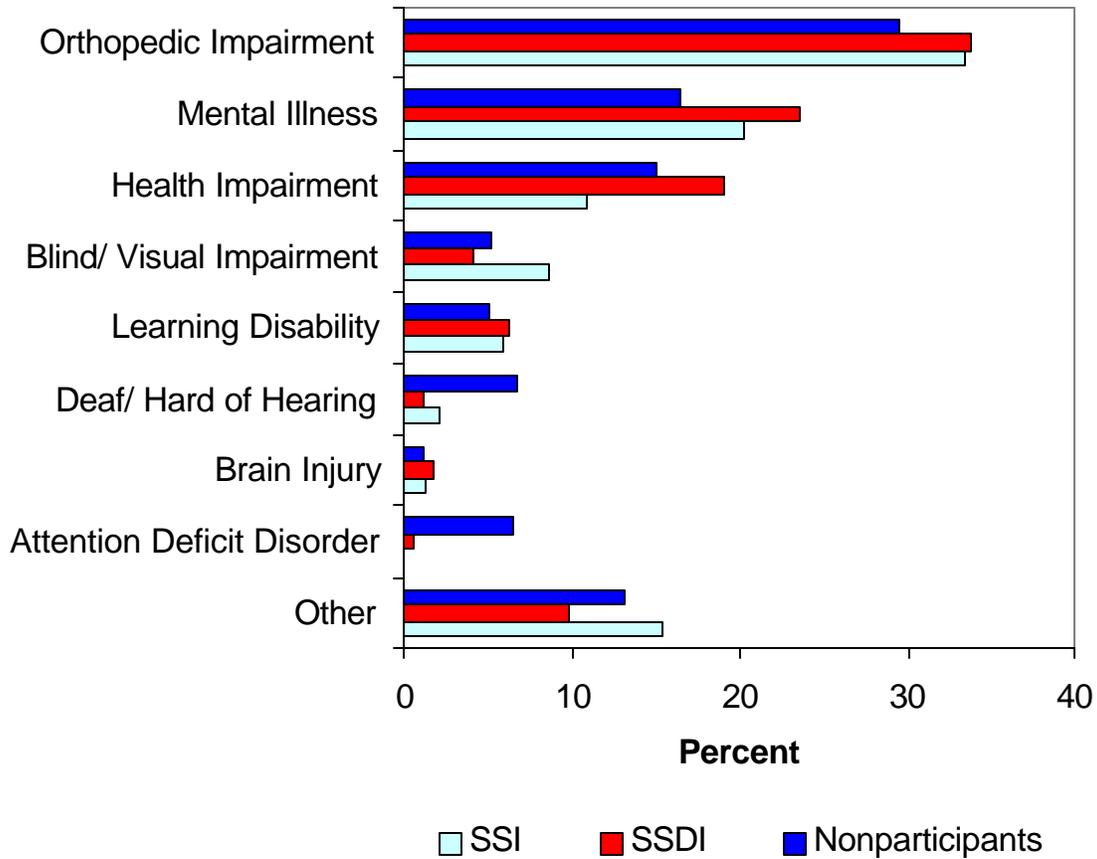


Table 2.
Economic Profile of Undergraduate SSA Program Participants and Non-Participants During the 1999-2000 Academic Year.

	<u>SSI Participants</u>		<u>SSDI Participants</u>		<u>Non-Participants with Disabilities</u>
		(S.E.)		(S.E.)	
<u>Dependency Status by Percentage</u>					
Independent	81.3	(5.3)	89.3	(4.2)	61.8
Dependent	18.7	(4.2)	10.8	(4.2)	38.2
Percent of Poverty	167.4	(23.1)	199.7	(25.3)	297.0
<u>Mean Annual Income</u>					
Independent Students	\$15,710	(3,411)	\$23,372	(3,227)	\$30,368
Parents of Dependent Students	---	---	---	---	\$62,912

*Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

Table 3.
Enrollment Profile of Undergraduate SSA Program Participants and Non-Participants During the 1999-2000 Academic Year.

	<u>SSI Participants</u>		<u>SSDI Participants</u>		<u>Non-Participa</u>
	Percent	(S.E.)	Percent	(S.E.)	<u>with Disabiliti</u>
					Percent
<u>Institution Type by Percent</u>					
Four Year	23.3	(5.1)	30.4	(4.3)	42.3
Two Year	74.6	(5.2)	65.7	(4.5)	54.2
Less Than Two Year	2.1	(0.8)	3.9	(1.1)	3.5
<u>Attendance Intensity by Percent</u>					
Full Time	61.2	(7.8)	44.4	(6.0)	60.5
Half-Time	9.9	(4.1)	30.4	(7.3)	23.4
Less Than Half Time	29.0	(7.4)	25.2	(6.9)	16.1
<u>Mean Years for Delayed Enrollment</u>	8.5	(1.6)	7.8	(1.2)	3.7
<u>Mean Age at Start of Postsecondary Education</u>	40.1	(2.8)	36.1	(1.4)	22.5

*Note: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).

Table 4.
 Financial Aid & Budget Profile of Undergraduate SSA Program Participants and Non-Participants During the 1999-2000
 Academic Year.

	<u>SSI Participants</u>		<u>SSDI Participants</u>		<u>Non-Participants with Disabilities</u>	
	Percent	(S.E.)	Percent	(S.E.)	Percent	(S.E.)
<u>Percent Receiving Loans</u>	18.0	(4.6)	23.9	(4.2)	31.2	(1.4)
<u>Percent Receiving Grants</u>	55.4	(8.9)	48.6	(5.8)	47.1	(1.3)
<u>Total Loans During Year</u>	---	---	\$5,684	(477)	\$5,867	(165)
<u>Total Borrowed as of 2000</u>	\$7,238	(1765)	\$11,529	(1657)	\$10,879	(378)
<u>Total Grants</u>	\$2,550	(469)	\$2,830	(337)	\$3,091	(116)
<u>Tuition and Fees</u>	\$1,906	(342)	\$1,636	(193)	\$2,906	(121)
<u>Student Adjusted Budget</u>	\$6,836	(773)	\$7,577	(521)	\$8,811	(194)

*Note: Mean dollars above zero only.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999-2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2000).