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Employment disparity grows for rural Americans with disability

January 2019

Employment rates have increased since the recession, but these gains haven't reached all communities across the country, nor has everyone benefited from these gains. While overall employment rates have improved, employment for people with disabilities in rural areas has decreased.

This fact sheet uses the recently released American Community Survey 5-year estimates to explore changes in employment rates for people with and without disabilities across the nine divisions of the United States, and for metropolitan, micropolitan, and non-core counties.

This marks the first time longitudinal trends in ACS data can be explored across the rural-urban continuum using comparable definitions of disability.

How are rural people with disabilities recovering from the recession?

In 2008, the US economy went into a steep recession, and employment rates across the country declined steadily until 2011. Since then, employment rates have been increasing, but not equally for all groups.

It wasn't until December 2018, when the US Census Bureau released the 2013-2017 American Community Survey (ACS) summary data, that we were able to explore how people with disabilities in rural areas are recovering from the recession. These data gave us the unique opportunity to see how employment rates have changed for

THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

Historically, the U.S. Census only collected detailed data about rural America, including disability, every decade. In 2005, this long-form survey was replaced



with the American Community Survey (ACS). While new data about more urban areas is available every year, it takes five years of data collection to accumulate a large enough sample to run the same analyses for areas with populations under 20,000 due to error rates and confidentiality concerns associated with smaller sample sizes.

See [Data Limitations in the American Community Survey: The Impact on Rural Disability Research](#) for more information.

Although ACS data has been collected since 2005, current disability questions were not included until 2008. As such, this marks the first time in nearly two decades that trends among rural people with disabilities can be examined using Census data.

people with disabilities in the context of changing economic conditions. We found that rates vary significantly for different parts of the country, as well as for people with disabilities.

U.S. Census Divisions



Figure 1: Map of U.S. Census Divisions

This map shows the states included in the nine U.S. geographic divisions used by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The nine divisions are: New England, Middle Atlantic, East North Central, West North Central, South Atlantic, East South Central, West South Central, Mountain, and Pacific.

Change in Employment

Change in employment is calculated as the average employment rate from ACS 2008-2012 5-year estimates subtracted from the average employment rate from ACS 2013-2017 5-year estimates.

Positive values indicate increased employment over time, while negative values show decreased employment rates. For this analysis, we included people aged 18 to 64.

Looking at the county as a whole, we find that rates of employment increased for both people with disability (from 34.7% to 35.5%, a 0.8 percentage point increase) and people without disabilities (from 74.4% to 76.1%, a 1.7 percentage point increase). There is a notable disparity between the rate of employment for people with disabilities and people without, and the larger increase for people without disabilities has resulted in an increase in this disparity.

However, these data are for the nation as a whole. What do these data reveal about people with disabilities in rural areas? Chart 1 shows a bleak rural story. While across the county urban (metropolitan) areas showed employment gains across the board, rural (micropolitan and non-core) counties showed significant declines in employment for people with disabilities.

DISABILITY QUESTIONS AND THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

The ACS does not directly measure disability. Instead, it uses questions related to functional impairment to identify individuals who may experience a disability.

The ACS asks six questions about if the respondent has:

1. serious difficulty hearing or is deaf;
2. serious difficulty seeing or is blind;
3. difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions because of a physical, mental or emotional problem;
4. serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs;
5. difficulty bathing or dressing;
6. difficulty doing errands alone because of a physical, mental or emotional problem.

Respondents who say “yes” to any one of these questions are identified as having a disability.

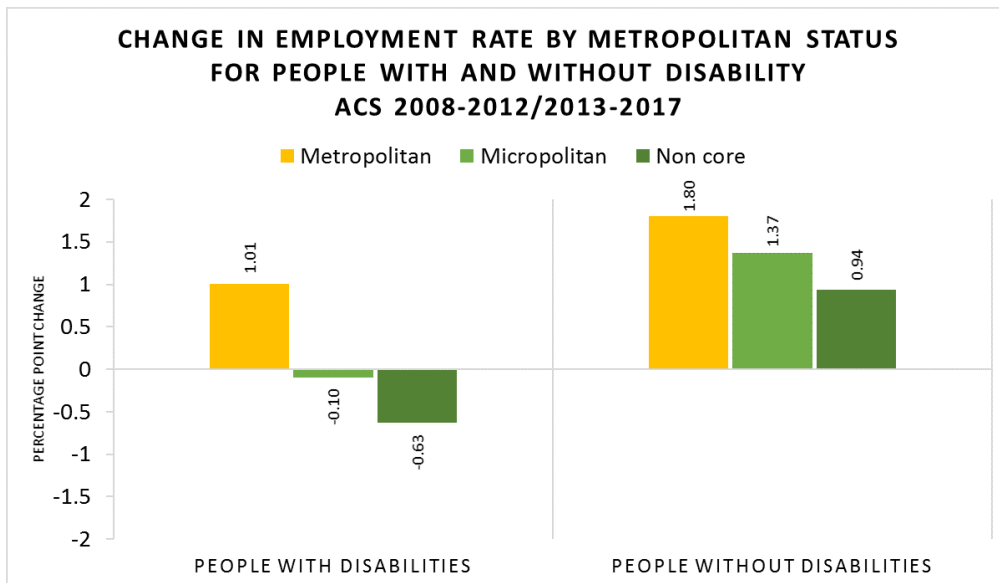


Chart 1: Change in Employment Rate by Metropolitan Status for People With and Without Disabilities

The percentage point change for each category is listed above each bar. All differences are significant at $p < 0.01$.

Change in Employment by Metro Status

Not only do we see variation in change in employment rates across the urban-rural continuum, we also see considerable variation across geography.

In particular, while people without disabilities experienced positive rate changes across nearly all U.S. Census divisions (with the exception of the West South Central division), people with disabilities living in micropolitan and non-core counties did not experience equally positive changes.

In fact, rural people with disabilities experienced lower rates of employment in over half of the US divisions with some rates in the most rural counties dropping by over 2 percentage points (in New England, West South Central, Mountain and Pacific).

Chart 2 and Chart 3 show these differences for people with and without disability by division and metro status. These results clearly indicate that people with disabilities in rural areas are being left behind in the recovery from the recession.

See Tables 1, 2 and 3 for the data used in these analyses.

DEFINING RURAL

In this fact sheet we use the Office of Management and Budgeting (OMB) classifications to group counties as metropolitan (urban) and nonmetropolitan (rural).

- **Metropolitan counties** include at least one urban core of 50,000 or more people
 - 1,167 counties* are classified as metropolitan

Nonmetropolitan counties can be further split into two categories:

- **Micropolitan counties** include an urban core of 10,000 to 50,000 people
 - 658 counties* are classified as micropolitan
- **Non-core counties** are counties with an urban core population of less than 10,000 people
 - 1,317 counties* are classified as non-core

*OMB 2015

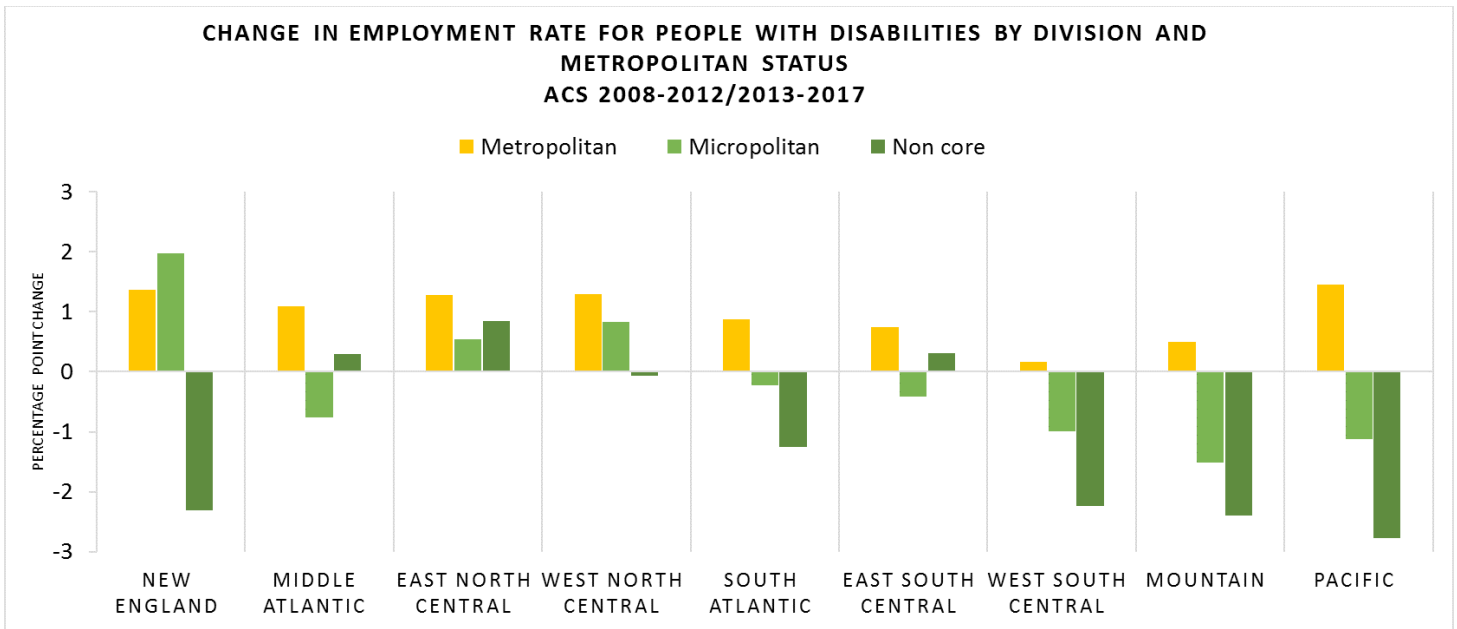


Chart 2: Change in Employment Rate for People with Disabilities by Division and Metropolitan Status

This chart shows the employment rate percentage point change for people with disabilities across division and metropolitan, micropolitan, and non-core counties. A positive value indicates an increase in employment rate; a negative value indicates a decrease. In urban areas, employment rates increased by varying percentage points. In some rural areas there were increases, but most experienced a decrease in employment rate.

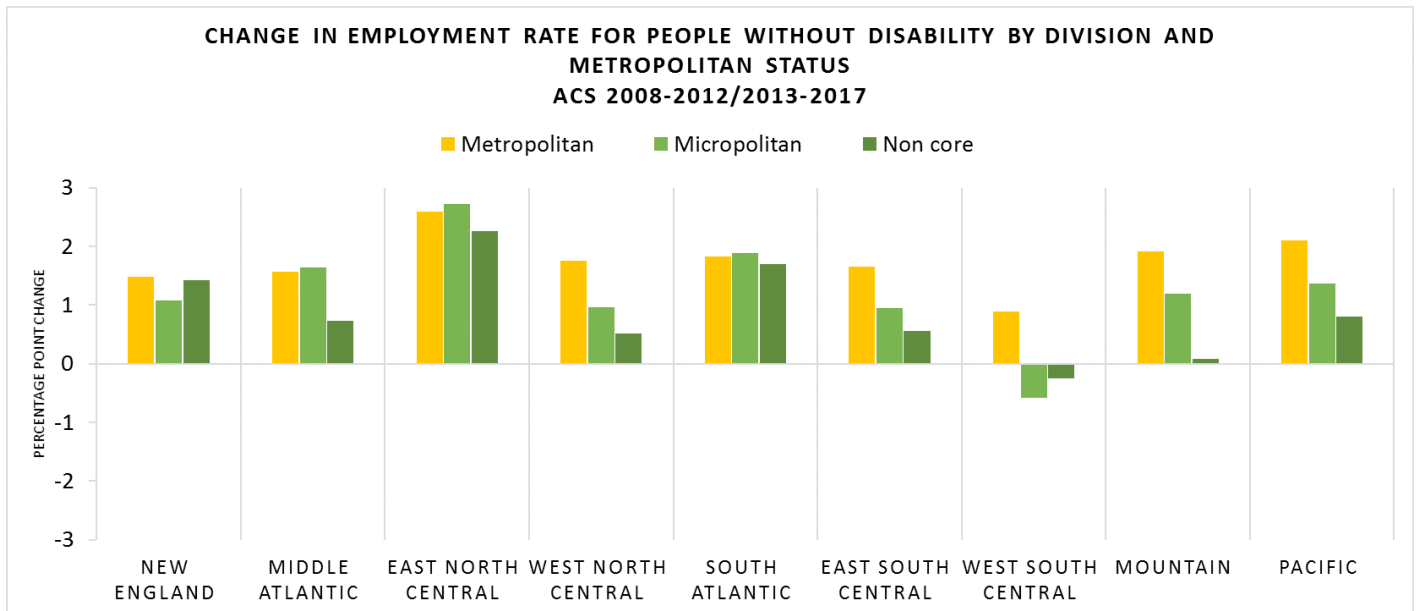


Chart 3: Change in Employment Rate for People Without Disability by Division and Metropolitan Status

This chart shows the employment rate percentage point change for people without disabilities across division and metropolitan, micropolitan, and non-core counties. A positive value indicates an increase in employment rate; a negative value indicates a decrease. Employment rates increased in all areas except West South Central, where they decreased for people in rural areas.

Understanding Disability in Rural

ACS employment data show that recent economic recovery has not been experienced equally for people with and without disabilities across place.

For rural people with disabilities, inequalities are growing. Rural people with disabilities already experience high poverty rates, less access to health care and specialty services, and other barriers that prevent them from participating in their communities. Lower or falling employment rates can have dire consequences for this group.

While people with disabilities in urban areas experienced some economic recovery, it is important to study rural differences across

the U.S. so that we can continue to monitor inequalities among people with and without disabilities.

These findings are vital to understanding policy and associated economic outcomes across place and over time and inspire questions for further research. What is at the root of this geographic variation? Do state level policies, such as Medicaid expansion, play a role? What is the impact of regional factors such as demographic shifts and local economic trends?

These questions and more will drive our future research into better understanding disability throughout the rural U.S.



Table 1: Percentage Point Change in Employment by Metropolitan Status

U.S. Census Division	People with Disabilities				People without Disabilities			
	All Counties	Metro	Micro	Non-core	All Counties	Metro	Micro	Non-core
New England	1.17	1.37	1.97	-2.31	1.44	1.48	1.08	1.42
Middle Atlantic	0.94	1.09	-0.76	0.29	1.56	1.57	1.64	0.73
East North Central	1.14	1.28	0.54	0.85	2.59	2.59	2.73	2.27
West North Central	1.02	1.30	0.83	-0.06	1.47	1.47	0.96	0.51
South Atlantic	0.76	0.88	-0.22	-1.25	1.86	1.86	1.88	1.70
East South Central	0.56	0.75	-0.42	0.31	1.44	1.44	0.95	0.56
West South Central	-0.10	0.17	-0.99	-2.24	0.72	0.72	-0.57	-0.25
Mountain	0.04	0.50	-1.51	-2.20	1.76	1.76	1.19	0.09
Pacific	1.23	1.46	-1.13	-2.78	2.07	2.07	1.36	0.81

Table 2: Rates of Employment for People with Disabilities

U.S. Census Division	2008-2012				2013-2017			
	All Counties	Metro	Micro	Non-core	All Counties	Metro	Micro	Non-core
New England	36.23	36.24	37.55	34.33	37.40	37.61	39.53	32.02
Middle Atlantic	34.13	34.31	32.81	31.67	35.08	35.40	32.05	31.06
East North Central	34.24	34.47	34.27	32.19	35.41	35.74	34.81	33.04
West North Central	41.47	42.17	40.87	31.61	42.49	43.47	41.70	31.55
South Atlantic	32.68	33.95	27.70	26.26	33.45	34.83	27.48	25.01
East South Central	28.65	31.52	26.40	22.42	29.22	32.27	25.99	22.73
West South Central	37.03	38.12	33.71	32.88	36.92	38.29	32.72	30.64
Mountain	39.31	39.21	40.18	38.79	39.36	39.72	38.66	36.39
Pacific	34.54	34.65	32.49	35.42	35.77	36.11	31.36	32.64

Table 3: Rates of Employment for People without Disabilities

U.S. Census Division	2008-2012				2013-2017			
	All Counties	Metro	Micro	Non-core	All Counties	Metro	Micro	Non-core
New England	77.96	77.88	79.47	77.11	79.41	79.35	80.55	78.53
Middle Atlantic	74.42	74.46	73.92	73.94	75.98	76.03	75.56	74.67
East North Central	74.85	74.84	74.97	74.61	77.44	77.44	77.69	76.88
West North Central	80.07	80.16	79.72	80.03	81.54	81.91	80.67	80.54
South Atlantic	73.62	74.18	69.17	68.94	75.47	76.00	71.05	70.64
East South Central	72.49	74.21	69.75	67.24	73.93	75.86	70.70	67.81
West South Central	74.47	74.89	72.15	72.11	75.20	75.77	71.57	71.86
Mountain	74.44	74.72	73.26	72.63	76.20	76.63	74.44	72.72
Pacific	71.95	72.04	70.23	69.78	74.02	74.14	71.59	70.59



For Additional Information

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