

Disability in India: Measurement and Some Findings

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The aim of this paper is to assess current status of methods used in population-based data collection to measure disability in India, particularly the population census of 2001 and the National Sample Survey, 58th round (July-December, 2002). In spite of a long tradition of collecting data on disability in the population censuses and through the National Sample Survey (NSS), India cannot claim to have accurate and reliable estimates of disability and its associated factors. Successive censuses and NSS did not follow identical concepts and procedures. After the 1981 census, the 2001 population census enumerated disabled persons according to the type of disability-visual, speech, hearing, locomotor, and mental illness. The NSS had included a disability schedule nearly every ten years, the last such survey being carried out in 2002. The earlier national sample surveys covered visual, hearing, speech and locomotor disabilities. For the first time the NSS of 2002 included a question on mentally disabled persons.

The 2001 census showed that there were 21.9 million disabled persons in India, or about two percent of the population. On the other hand the NSS of 2002 provided an estimate of 18.5 million in 2002. These figures may appear close for a country of over a billion people, but this is quite deceptive. If the data are examined by type of disability the differences between the two sets of figures are substantial. The visually disabled in the census is almost four times the number estimated from the NSS. On the other hand the NSS estimates of persons with speech, hearing and locomotor disabilities are two to three times the number observed in the census. The number of persons with mental health problems is nearly similar in the two. If we accept the higher of the two figures (Census and NSS) for each type of disability, the estimate of the number of disabled in India rises to 28.71 million. The World Bank estimate is even higher (40-50 million).

The first part of this paper presents the measurement procedures adopted in the Census and the NSS and the possible sources of discrepancies between the two sources. The census provides information on the sex, rural-urban residence, literacy and work status of disabled persons. The NSS classified the disabled by sex, cause of disability, marital status, educational level, living arrangement, activity status etc. The second part of the paper presents some observations based on the two sets of data. In the third part some recommendations are made to bring about improvements in the procedures adopted keeping in mind the needs of data users.