The development of questions on disability for the Current Population Survey

After a decade of development, questions aimed at identifying people with disabilities were added to the Current Population Survey.

In June 2008, six questions designed to identify people with disabilities were added to the Current Population Survey (CPS). In February 2009, monthly labor force estimates of people with disabilities were released to the public via a website that was updated each month with the newest data. One year later, a table with data on the labor force status of people with disabilities was added to the monthly Employment Situation news release.1

The release of the first CPS data on people with disabilities was preceded by a 10-year development period that began in the late 1990s. In the early stages of the process, and in accordance with President Clinton’s Executive Order 13078,2 the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), along with several other federal agencies, identified the goal of placing a small set of questions within the CPS to measure the employment status of people with disabilities as a means of tracking their employment progress after the adoption of the Executive order. Extensive research efforts in support of this goal resulted in the identification of a set of seven questions, which were then tested in the February 2006 CPS. Analysis of the February 2006 CPS data revealed that the additional questions did not adversely affect the response rates for the survey, but the questions did function in a different way than was anticipated on the basis of previous testing. As a result of these unanticipated consequences, in lieu of further testing of the same questions, the decision was made to adopt a set of questions that had been developed for use in the American Community Survey (ACS).3

The purpose of this article is to document the process by which BLS and other federal agencies developed questions to identify the disability population in the CPS.
Formation of interagency working group

In early 1998, Executive Order 13078 established the Presidential Task Force on Employment of Adults with Disabilities, an overarching organization that provided an operating base for several committees and workgroups with mandates specified in the order. The Executive order directed BLS to work with several other federal agencies to develop a measure of the employment rate of people with disabilities that was to be published on as frequent a basis as possible. Pursuant to the mandate, the task force established the Employment Rate Measurement Methodology (ERMM) Work Group, to include members from 17 federal agencies. The effort received financial support primarily from the Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) and the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitative Research (NIDRR).

The task of developing questions to identify the disability population was challenging because there is considerable disagreement on how to define disability. In fact, there are numerous definitions of the term that are used throughout the federal government. The definition of disability given in Executive Order 13078 states, “An adult with a disability is a person with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits at least one major life activity.” This definition views disability as a function of the interaction between an individual with an impairment and his or her environment.