

Disability Statistics Abstract

Number 20

Vocational Rehabilitation in the United States

by H. Stephen Kaye

Putting people with disabilities back to work, or enabling them to remain at their jobs following onset of a disability, is one of the key elements of U.S. disability policy. To that end, \$2.0 billion in federal grants, matched by \$645 million in state and local funds, are allocated annually to state-run vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs. Some 1.3 million adults participated in such programs during fiscal 1995,¹ representing 12.0 percent of the 10.4 million Americans estimated to be severely limited in work due to health conditions or impairments.² Services include restoration of physical function (e.g., through surgery, prosthesis, or assistive technology) or mental function (e.g., via psychiatric counseling); academic, business, or vocational training; personal or vocational adjustment training; employment counseling; and job placement and referral.

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About 60 percent of persons receiving VR services eventually complete their programs and find jobs.

Participants in VR Programs

Of the 1.3 million served by VR programs, 75.2 percent (940,000 people) were classified as having severe disabilities.³ This fraction has been increasing in recent years, due to legislation requiring states to give first priority to rehabilitating persons with more severe disabilities. Because resources are limited, those with less severe disabilities may be forced to wait for services, or may leave VR without receiving services.

During the course of the 1995 fiscal year, 210,000 participants (including 159,000 with severe disabilities) were considered to have been rehabilitated, meaning that they had completed their rehabilitation program and had been suitably employed for at least 60 days. The figure represents 46.1 percent of all persons exiting the VR system, or 60.4 percent of those

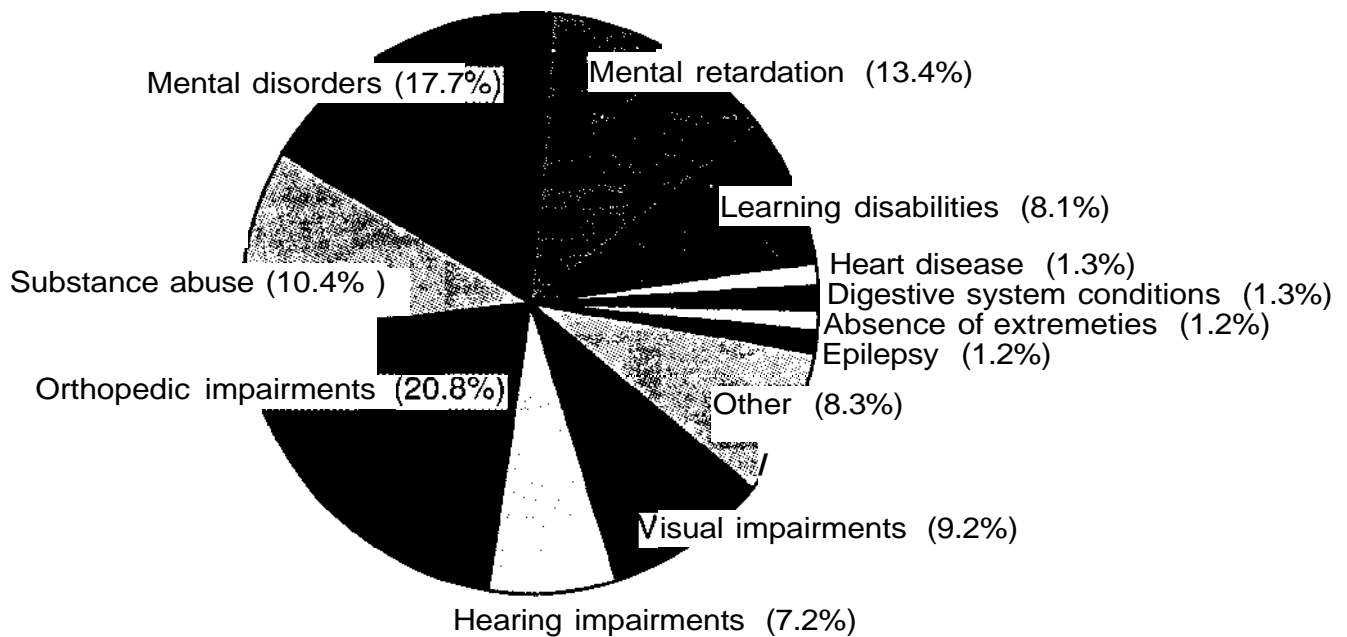
exiting after receiving services. Of those exiting without rehabilitation, a majority of cases cite lack of participation on the client's part (30.9 percent "refused services" and 19.0 percent "failed to cooperate") or inability to locate the client (26.0 percent), while only a small fraction of cases are reported to be dropped because the disability is "too severe" (3.6 percent).

Characteristics of Rehabilitated Clients

Among successfully rehabilitated clients, the most common primary causes of disability are orthopedic impairments (20.8 percent of participants, see Figure 1), mental disorders (17.7 percent), mental retardation (13.4 percent), substance abuse (10.4 percent), visual impairments (9.2 percent), learning disabilities (8.1 percent), and hearing impairments (7.2

The \$2.7 billion spent annually on VR translates to a total cost of about \$13,000 per rehabilitated client.

Figure 1: Major cause of disability among rehabilitated clients.



Source: Fiscal year 1995 administrative data from the Rehabilitation Services Administration.

percent). Spinal cord injuries resulted in disability for 5,865 clients, while traumatic brain injuries were responsible for 4,224 clients' disabilities. In all, injuries and accidents had resulted in disability for at least 14.6 percent of rehabilitated clients.⁴

Most rehabilitated clients are younger adults, with 61.9 percent between the ages of 20 and 44. A majority (55.5 percent) are male. Four-fifths (79.9 percent) are white, 17.8 percent are black, 1.5 percent are Asian or Pacific Islander, and 0.8 percent are Native American. Less than one-tenth (8.6 percent) are of Hispanic origin.

The VR Process

Successfully rehabilitated participants spend an average of nearly 2 years (23.7 months) in their programs, from application to closure. Most receive some form of training, with 16.3 percent of rehabilitated clients attending college classes, 16.5 percent attending business or vocational classes, 7.8 percent receiving on-the-job training, and 24.9 percent receiving personal or vocational adjustment training (see Figure 2). More than one-third (37.7 percent) of those classified as rehabilitated receive services aimed at restoring physical or mental functioning.

VR Outcomes

Upon successful completion of the vocational rehabilitation program, more than four-fifths (85.4 percent) of participants are competitively employed (see Figure 3), compared to less than one-fifth (18.8 percent) before rehabilitation. The remainder work in sheltered workshops (4.0 percent), in the home (7.6 percent) or a family-run business (0.3 percent), or are self-employed (2.7 percent, including 0.1 percent in state-run business enterprise programs).

Half find employment either in industrial or service jobs (26.3 and 25.0 percent, respectively). Most of the remainder work in professional,

Figure 2: Services received by rehabilitated clients.

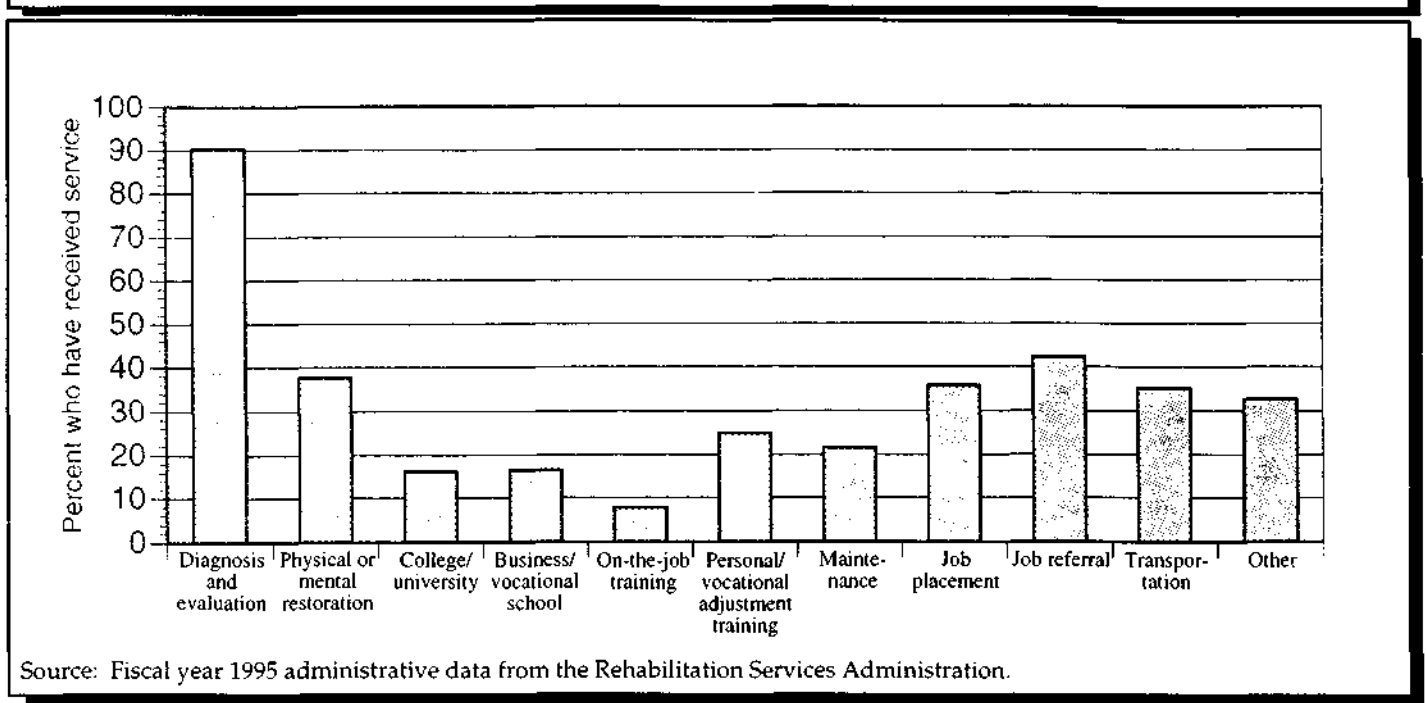
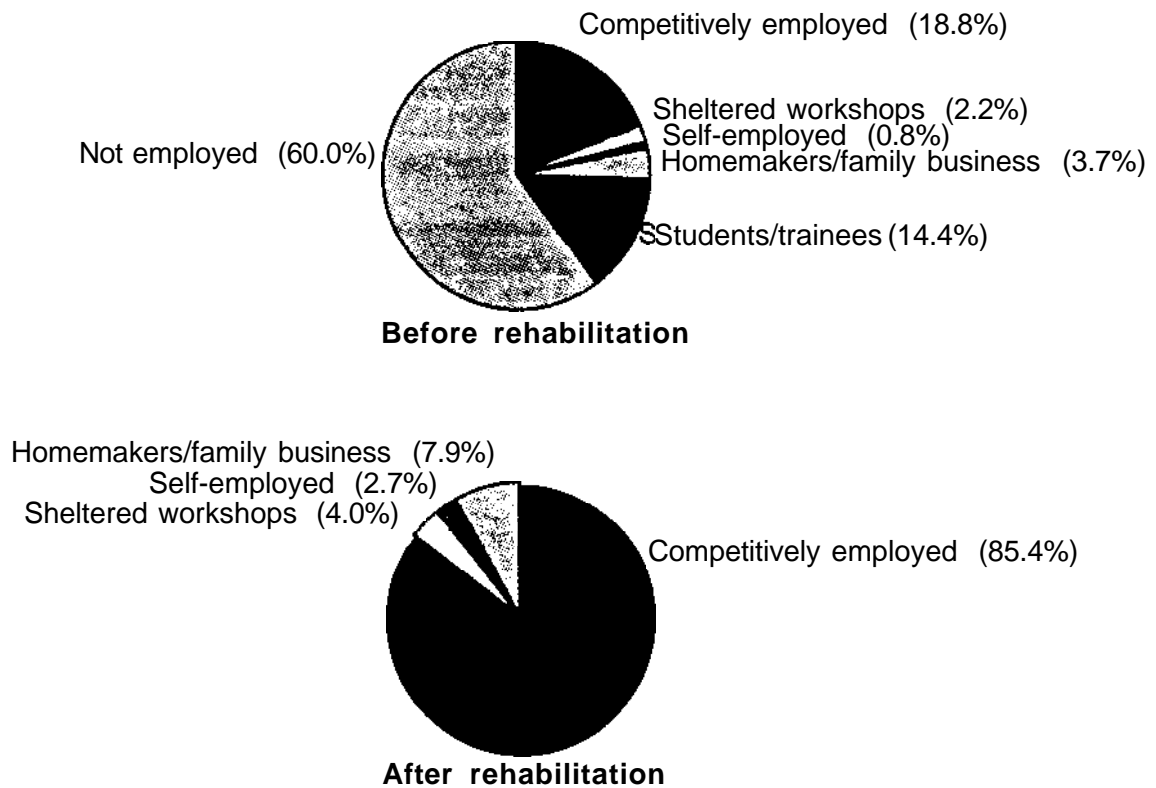


Figure 3: Employment status of rehabilitated clients before and after rehabilitation.



Source: Fiscal year 1995 administrative data from the Rehabilitation Services Administration.

technical, or managerial occupations (15.8 percent of those rehabilitated) or in clerical positions (13.9 percent).

The degree of self-sufficiency increases dramatically for those who complete their program and obtain jobs. While only 17.8 percent of vocational rehabilitation applicants report that they are able to support themselves through earnings, three-quarters (73.2 percent) of rehabilitated clients cite earnings as their primary source of support. Weekly earnings average \$215—up from \$41 at application—and only 7.9 percent reported no earnings at all.

Notes

1. All VR statistics in this abstract pertain to fiscal year 1995 and are derived from administrative data provided by the Rehabilitation Services Administration to be published in:

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (1998). *Annual Report to the President and to the Congress on Federal Activities Related to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as Amended, Fiscal Year 1995*.

2. Data from the 1995 Current Population Survey obtained from the Census Bureau Web site at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/disable/disablecps.html>

3. "Severe disability" is defined as a severe limitation in employment-related physical or mental functioning that is expected to necessitate extensive vocational rehabilitation services.

4. Although RSA collects and tabulates extensive data on successfully rehabilitated clients, relatively little information is available on other participants in VR programs. It is therefore impossible to break down rehabilitation rates by cause of disability, gender, or race.

Credits

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