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Most disabled people have jobs in U.S.

But they usually get lower pay and don't get health insurance

By STEPHEN OHLEMACHER
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — More than half the nation's disabled people hold jobs, but they often have lower incomes and less education and are less likely to have health insurance than people without disabilities, the government reported today.

Nearly one in five Americans — about 51 million people — had physical or mental disabilities in 2002, according to the Census Bureau. About 33 million of them had severe disabilities.

The likelihood of disabilities, not surprisingly, increased with age: Fewer than one in 10 people 15 and younger had a disability, while more than half of those 65 and older — and 72 percent of those 80 and older — had them.

The Census Bureau surveyed 26,800 households for the report, asking people about their health and if they had difficulty performing various tasks, said Sharon Stern, chief of the bureau's poverty and health statistics branch.

People were classified as disabled if they had difficulty performing tasks such as seeing, hearing, bathing or doing light housework, or if they had conditions such as Alzheimer's disease or autism. They were considered to have severe disabilities if they were unable to perform any of those tasks, or if they had severe cases of specific conditions.

About 56 percent of disabled adults, ages 21 to 64, had jobs in 2002. Among those with severe disabilities, 43 percent had jobs.

"People are starting to look more at people's abilities instead of their disability," said Chris Privett, a spokesman for The Arc, a service and advocacy group for people with disabilities. "But in the advocacy community, our work is far from finished."