

B. Ability Wasted: Unemployment and People With Disabilities

The need to create employment opportunities for disabled persons rests at the center of the set of issues involved in economic integration. Our success in the area of employment, indeed, can serve as a litmus test of the effectiveness of the whole universe of governmental policies, including the tax system, income support programs and the elimination of disincentives to work, education and training, transportation and access to facilities. More directly, it is a test of the effectiveness of employment programs themselves.

1. Employment levels

The facts of the employment situation are beyond dispute. Statistics Canada provided us with a valuable overview of the employment situation of people with disabilities, based on the 1986 Health and Activity Limitations Survey (HALS). This survey provides much-needed, non-anecdotal information about disability and we hope it can be repeated in the future so that longitudinal data, indicating trends, can be developed. Until this is done, the overall impact of recent governmental initiatives (with the partial exception of those in the employment equity area, which supply their own data) cannot accurately be determined.

According to our expert witnesses, approximately 40% of the population of 1.8 million adults with disabilities was employed as of 1986, in contrast to 70% of the comparable population without disabilities. Of the 896,000 people with disabilities who were not in the labour force in that year, 69% indicated that they were completely unable to work and relied upon various forms of social assistance, pensions, workers' compensation, or insurance. The remaining 280,000 indicated they were able to work, although about half indicated some limitation in the kind or amount of work they could do. The population not in the labour force includes both people who have given up seeking work because of discouragement and people who feel that they cannot afford to declare themselves able to work, or seek work, because this could threaten the loss of disability benefits.

A further category of adults with disabilities consists of the unemployed — those without work but actively seeking it. In 1986, 128,000 people with disabilities (mostly between the ages of 25 and 44) belonged in this category. The unemployment rate of persons with disabilities was thus 15.2%, almost double that of persons without disabilities. HALS identified that by far the most common barrier was "lack of suitable employment", followed by "inadequate transportation." It is important to keep in mind that the unemployment rate of persons with disabilities, although much higher than that of other Canadians, significantly understates the severity of the overall employment problem because of high levels of discouragement and withdrawal from the labour force in this