

Women with Disabilities and the Labor Market

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OFFICE OF DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT POLICY
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Contents

Summary of Key Findings.....	3
Introduction	4
Figure 1. Disability Prevalence by Age (16-79), Gender, and Employment Status	5
Figure 2. Differences in Disability Prevalence between Women and Men, by Age and Disability Type.....	6
Figure 3. Change in the Employment-Population Ratio Relative to February 2020, Ages 16-64, by Gender and Disability Status	7
Figure 4. Labor Force Participation Rate for People Aged 16-64, 2009-2022, by Gender and Disability Status.....	8
Figure 5. Unemployment Rate for People Aged 16-64, 2009-2022, by Gender and Disability Status	9
Figure 6. Employment-Population Ratio, for People Aged 25-54, 2022, by Gender, Disability Status, and Racial/Ethnic Category.....	10
Figure 7. Disability Prevalence across Industries by Gender	11
Figure 8. Disability Prevalence across Occupational Categories by Gender.....	12
Figure 9. Disabled Workers in Skilled Trade Occupations by Age and Gender.....	13
Figure 10. Disabled Workers in Skilled Trade Occupations by Industry and Gender	14
Figure 11. Educational Attainment by Occupational Category and Disability Status	15
Figure 12. Poverty Rate by Year, Gender, and Disability Status	16
Figure 13. Median Earnings (2022\$) of Full-Time Year-Round Workers by Year, Gender, and Disability Status.....	17
Figure 14. Telework Status of the Employed, 2019 and 2021, by Gender and Disability Status.....	18
Figure 15. Barriers to Employment, 2019 and 2021, by Gender.....	19
Figure 16. Mental Health Condition Prevalence, by Gender and Disability Status, 2020.....	20
Conclusion.....	21
Authors.....	21
References	21

Summary of Key Findings

Disability Prevalence

- Disability prevalence follows a similar trajectory with age for both women and men, reaching 5% at age 38, 10% at age 52, and 15% at age 60. There is somewhat higher prevalence among men at the younger end of the range, attributable to greater incidence of cognitive disabilities, while in later life men are more likely to experience hearing disabilities, and women are more likely to experience ambulatory disabilities.
- Women workers have greatest disability prevalence in Transportation occupations and the industries of Transportation and Retail/Wholesale Trade.

COVID-19, Employment, and Telework

- The initial impact of COVID-19 on employment was greater for women than men and similar for people with disabilities and people without disabilities. By 2022, however, there was considerably stronger improvement for people with disabilities, possibly resulting from increased telework and other workplace flexibilities.
- In both 2019 and 2021, disabled women were more likely to telework than both disabled men and women without disabilities.

Labor Market Trends

- Labor force participation rates for the 'working-age' population (16-64) in 2022 were the highest on record for both women and men with disabilities, and the gap between women and men with disabilities, at 1.6 percentage points, was the smallest on record.
- Unemployment rates for people with disabilities have generally declined since 2011 and largely recovered from the 2020 increase.
- Substantial differences in employment-population ratios exist across racial categories, gender, and disability status.

Earnings and Poverty

- Poverty rates are consistently much higher for people with disabilities and women, but they have fallen substantially for both women and men with or without disabilities over the last decade.
- Earnings are consistently lower for disabled workers relative to non-disabled workers and for women relative to men, without strong longitudinal trends in the period 2008-2022.

Skilled Trade Occupations

- Women with disabilities in skilled trade occupations have far less representation than men with disabilities in skilled trade occupations across all age categories.
- Most women with disabilities employed in skilled trade occupations work in Manufacturing (150,000), while for men with disabilities it is Other Goods-Producing Industries (mostly Construction) with 540,000.

Barriers

- The proportion of men and women reporting lack of education/training, lack of job counseling, lack of transportation, loss of government assistance, and the respondent's disability itself as barriers to employment fell from 2019 to 2021.
- The prevalence of mental health conditions severity is higher for women than men.

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) prepared this brief to investigate the state of women with disabilities in the current labor market and related topics. This report uses data from the [Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Current Population Survey \(CPS\)](#), the [Census Bureau’s American Community Survey \(ACS\)](#), and the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s \(SAMSHA\) National Survey on Drug Use and Health \(NSDUH\)](#). It examines disability prevalence, employment, and other labor market characteristics, occupational distributions in skilled trade professions, educational attainment, earnings, and poverty rates, telework, and barriers to employment, and mental health.¹

The changing work environment produced by the COVID-19 pandemic and its lasting consequences have affected labor market disparities for women with disabilities.² Although vast disparities remain between people with and without disabilities, employment recovery has been stronger for both women and men with disabilities. Meanwhile, gender gaps in labor force participation and employment between disabled women and disabled men have substantially decreased, becoming the smallest since disability status has been tracked.

In addition, recent presidential executive orders have emphasized the inclusion of people with disabilities as one of several historically underserved communities.³ Another executive order indicated that the populations defined by underserved communities include those facing discrimination based on, among other things, gender and disability status, while noting the intersecting barriers faced by individuals belonging to more than one of these communities.⁴

In support of these executive orders, a core goal of the [Biden Administration’s Good Jobs Initiative](#) is to increase equitable pathways to good jobs in infrastructure for underrepresented groups, including women, people of color, and individuals with disabilities. Many infrastructure jobs, such as those in skilled trade professions, have training requirements that are shorter than a typical four-year degree program, allowing faster entry into the workforce. But there are gender gaps in who is employed in these occupations, and these gaps are larger than those in non-trade occupations. This is also the case for women with disabilities relative to men with disabilities.

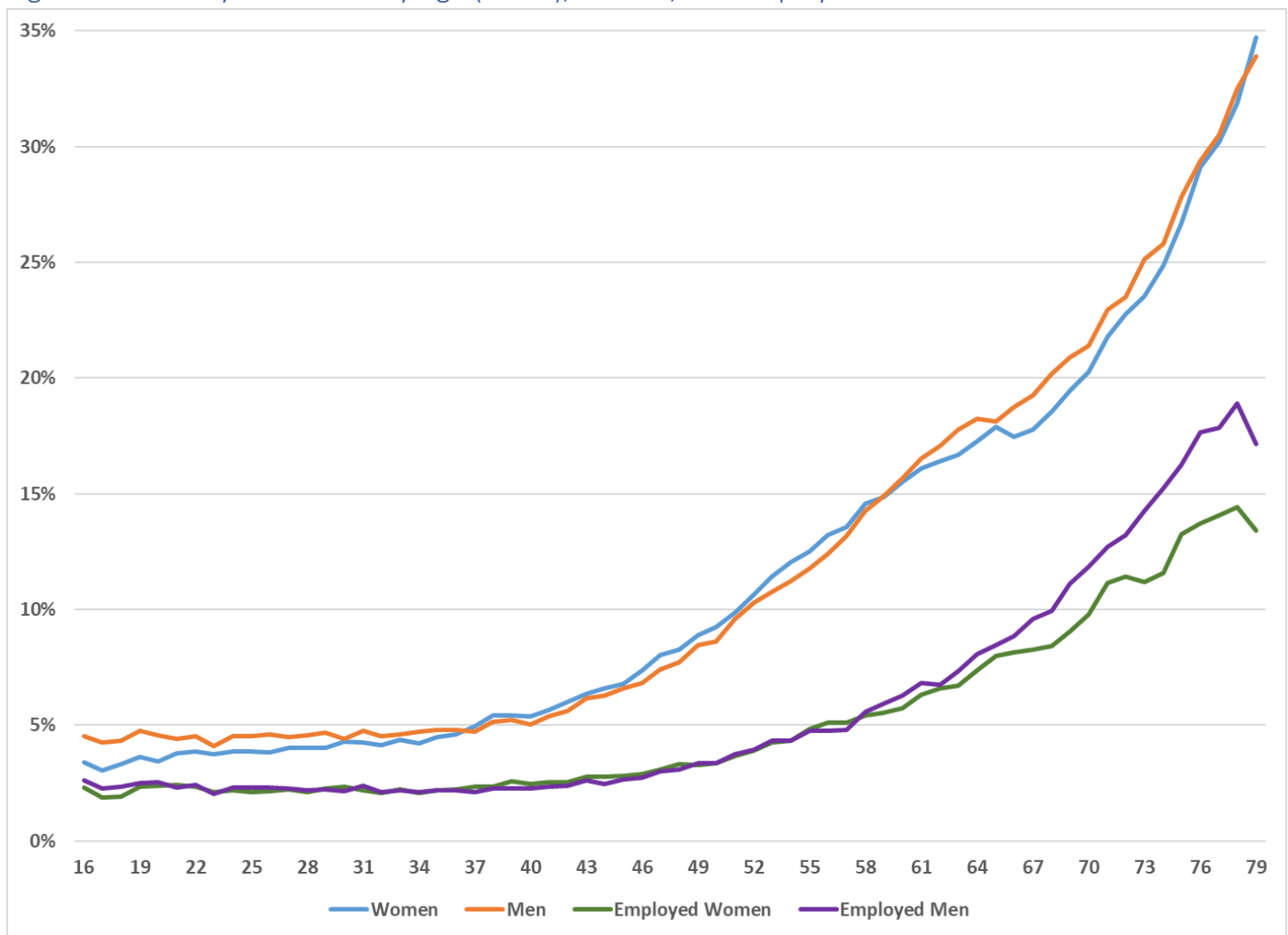
¹ Disability status is defined by affirmative response to any of the same six questions concerning functional limitations used in the CPS and ACS. The first four questions ask about serious difficulty with (1) hearing, (2) vision, (3) walking or climbing stairs, and (4) remembering, concentrating, or making decisions. The last two questions ask about difficulty with (5) dressing or bathing and (6) conducting errands alone. All surveys utilized in this brief possess this same definition of disability status.

² ODEP has [recently conducted research](#) into [employment trends for people with disabilities since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic](#), [internet use for people with disabilities](#), and [COVID-19 Supplemental Data integrated into the Current Population Survey](#).

³ [E.O. 13985 Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government](#)

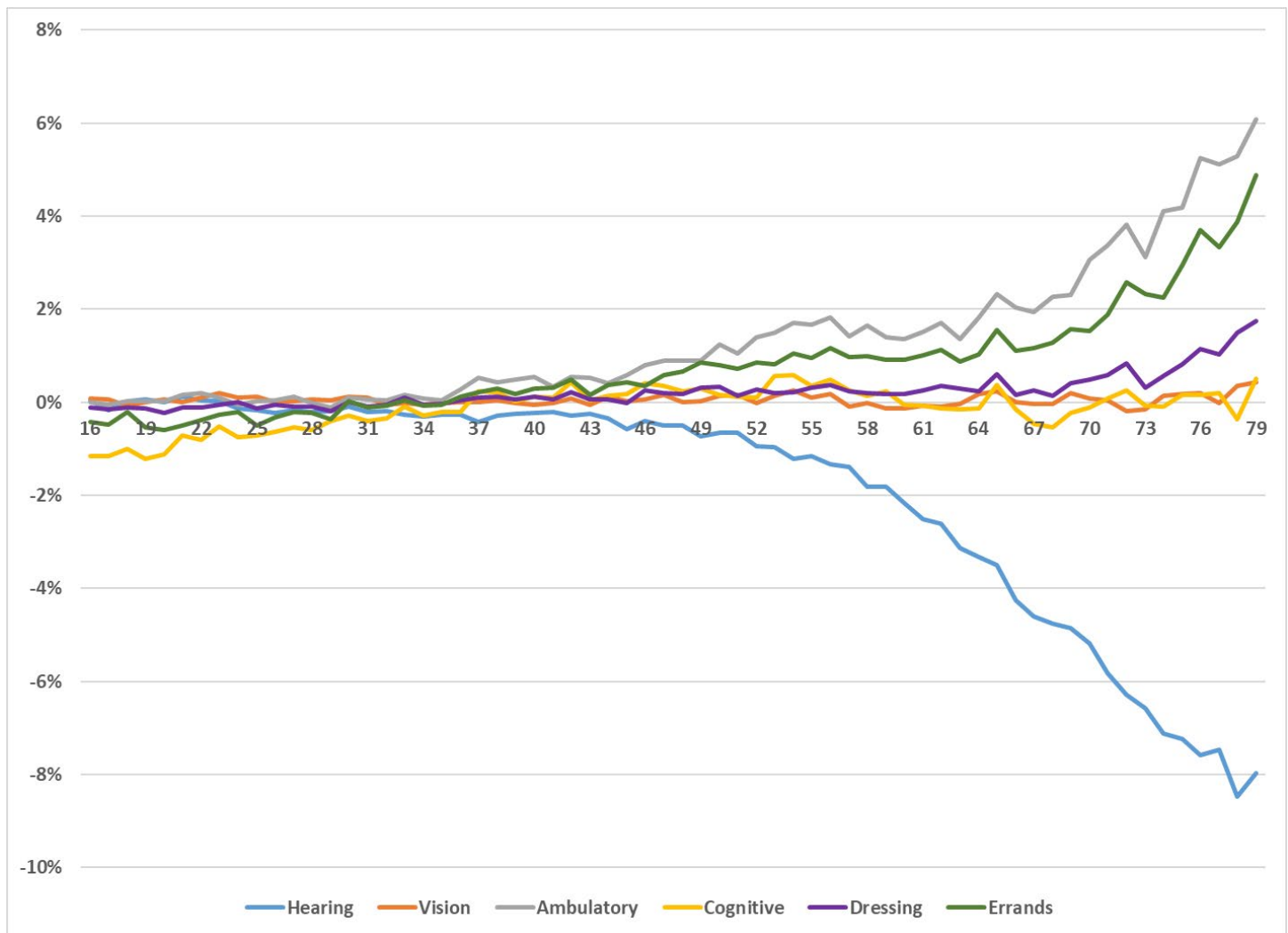
⁴ [E.O. 14035 Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce](#)

Figure 1. Disability Prevalence by Age (16-79), Gender, and Employment Status



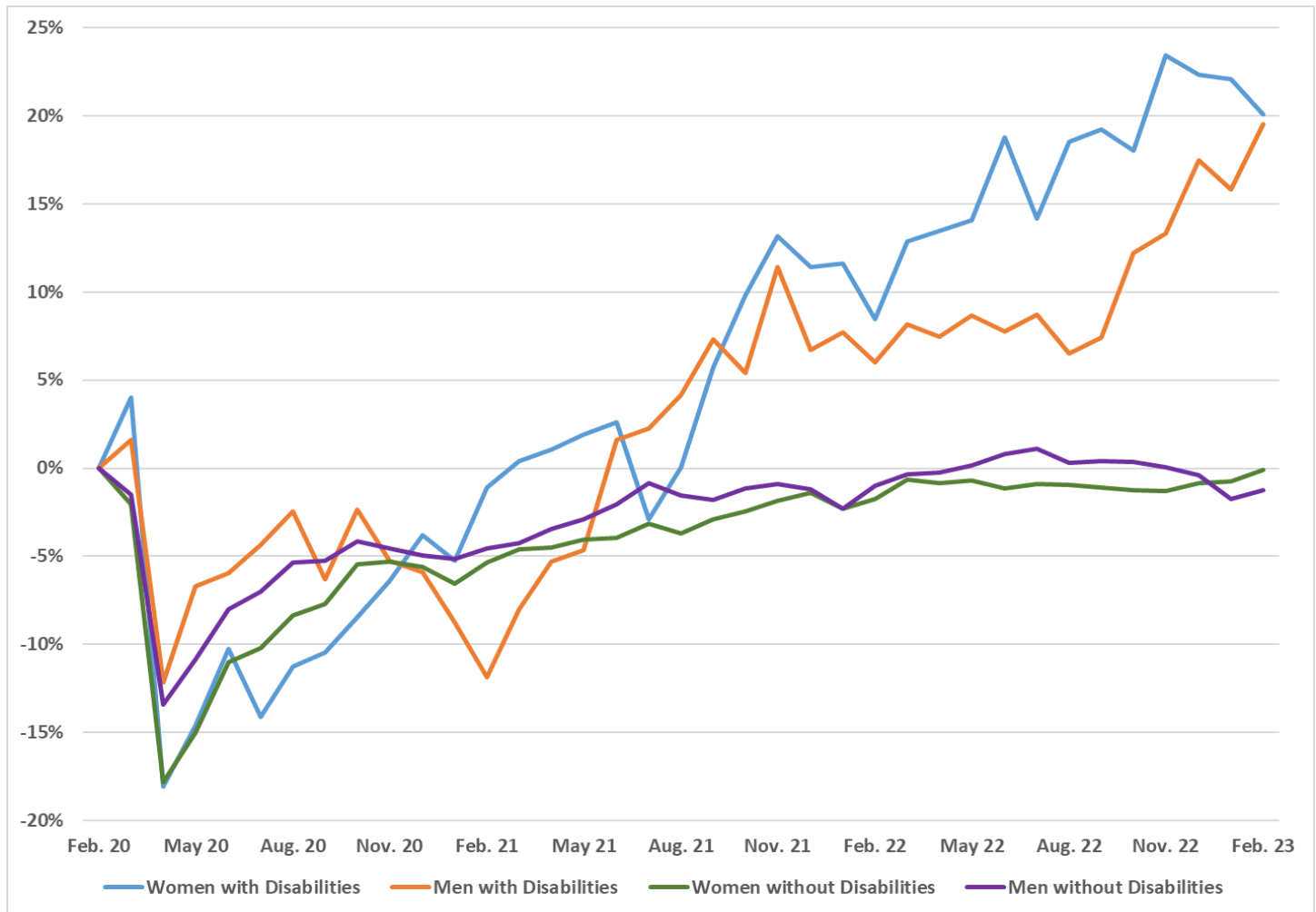
- Source: Authors' calculations from CPS micro-level monthly data.
- Cumulative data from January 2009 through December 2022 was utilized to calculate the proportion of women and men with a disability by year of age. CPS public-use data does not include exact year of age for individuals aged 80 and older.
- The overall prevalence of disability, including all ages 16 and older, for women was 12.2%, compared with 11.2% for men. For those currently employed, disability prevalence was much lower, at 3.6% for women and 3.7% for men, reflecting much lower rates of labor force participation and employment for disabled people.
- Disability prevalence increases greatly with age. For women, only 3.4% of 16-year-olds had a disability, but this prevalence increased to 4.3% at age 30, 5.4% at age 40, 9.2% at age 50, 15.5% at age 60, 20.3% at age 70, and 34.7% at age 79. Though not pictured in the chart, this increased further to 41.8% for women aged 80 through 84 and then to 62.3% for women aged 85 and older.
- Men followed a similar trajectory for disability prevalence, although disabilities were slightly more common for men at the lower end of the age range.
- Estimates of disability prevalence can vary considerably across surveys considered to be nationally representative. The ACS produces estimates that follow a similar trajectory to the CPS but with somewhat higher disability prevalence. Some health-focused surveys, such as the [Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System](#), report higher disability prevalence than the ACS.

Figure 2. Differences in Disability Prevalence between Women and Men, by Age and Disability Type



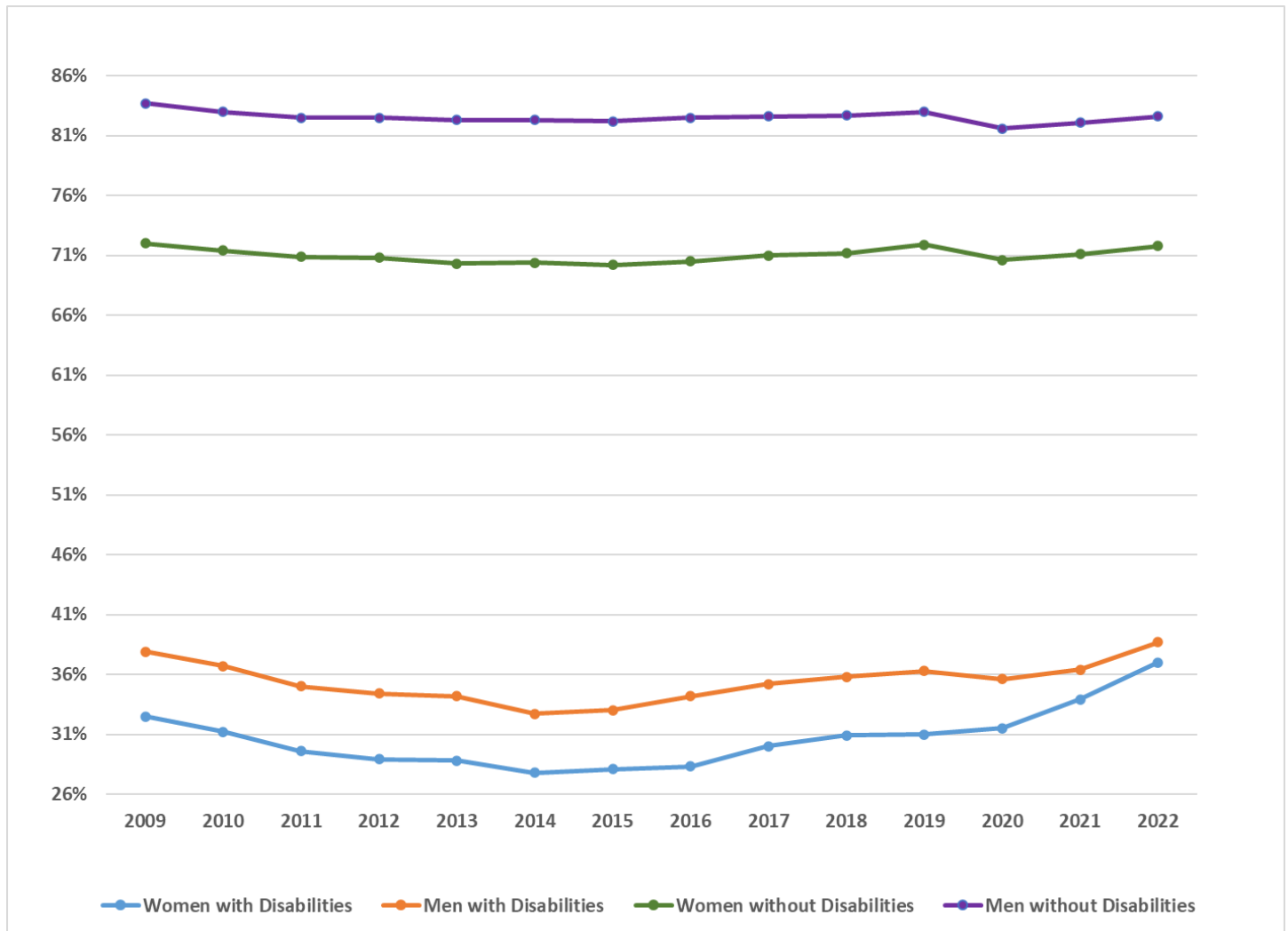
- Source: Authors' calculations from CPS micro-level monthly data.
- Cumulative data from January 2009 through December 2022 was utilized to calculate the proportion of women and men with each disability type by year of age. CPS public-use data does not include exact year of age for individuals aged 80 and older.
- For each category of disability, the chart displays the prevalence for women minus the prevalence for men.
- As age increases and the general prevalence of disability grows, larger gaps emerge between women and men for disabilities related to hearing, walking, and conducting errands.
- For serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs, a substantial gap opens between women and men by age 50, at which point 5.9% of women have an ambulatory disability versus 4.7% of men. This increases to age 79, at which point 24.5% of women have an ambulatory disability versus 18.4% of men. The overall numbers for those aged 16 and older are 7.9% of women versus 5.7% for men, which is affected by gender differences in age composition.
- A substantial gap in the proportion of people experiencing significant difficulty hearing starts to emerge in the 40s, and by age 50, 2.0% of men have a hearing disability versus 1.3% of women. This expands to age 79, at which point 18.3% of men have a hearing disability versus 10.3% of women. Overall, for those aged 16 and older, 3.9% of men have a hearing disability versus 2.8% of women.

Figure 3. Change in the Employment-Population Ratio Relative to February 2020, Ages 16-64, by Gender and Disability Status



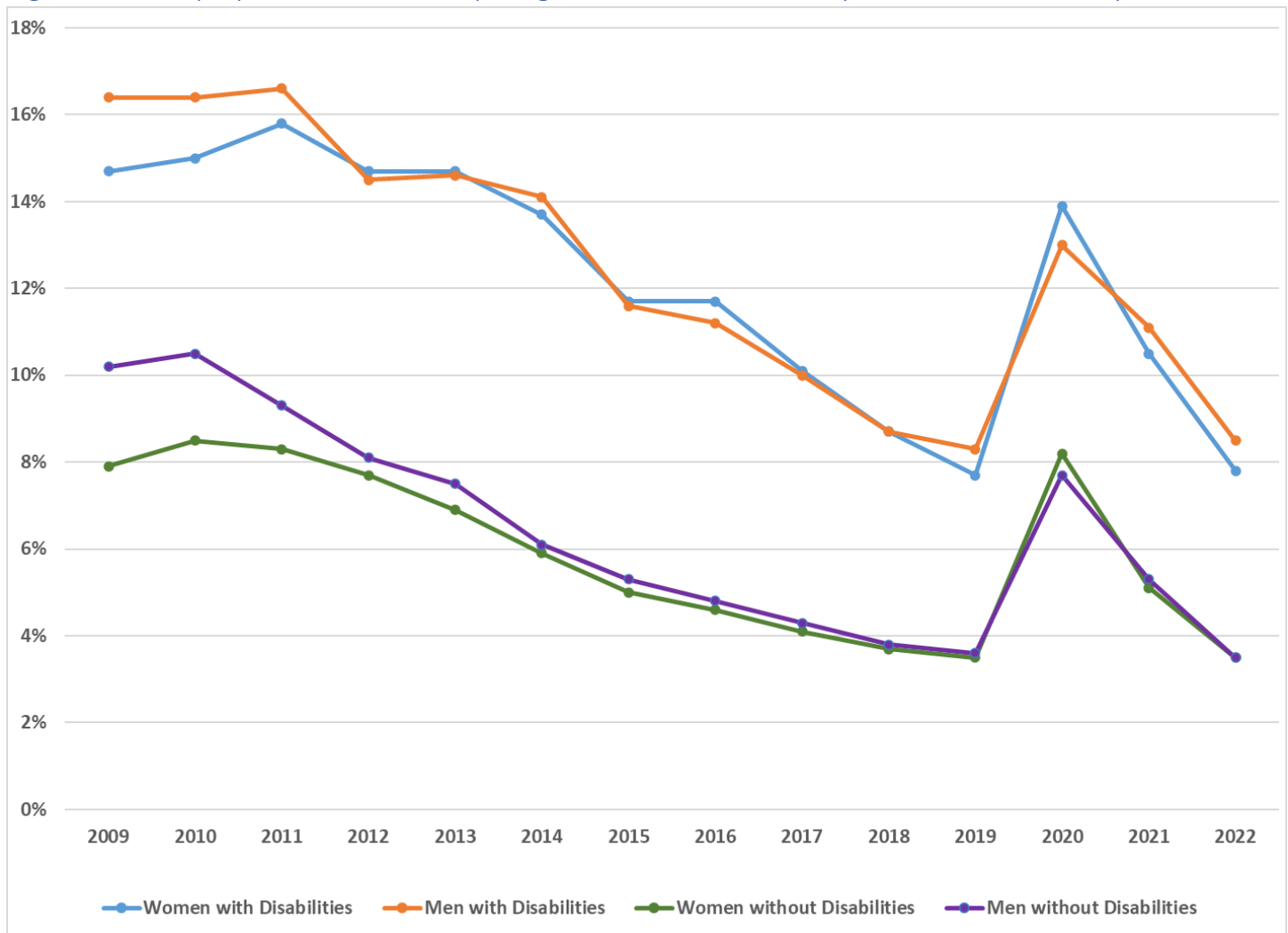
- Source: Authors' calculations from CPS micro-level monthly data.
- This chart shows the employment-population ratio in each month from February 2020 through February 2023, expressed as the cumulative change relative to the baseline of February 2020, restricted to the 'working-age' population (ages 16-64). The employment-population ratio is calculated as $\# \text{ Employed} \div \# \text{ Civilian Noninstitutional Population}$ (<https://www.bls.gov/cps/definitions.htm#epop>).
- The spread of COVID-19 and various measures implemented to combat it resulted in an overall downturn in employment in March 2020 followed by a plunge in April 2020, when employment-population ratios⁵ declined by 18.1% for women with disabilities and 17.8% for women without disabilities, while there were smaller declines of 12.2% for men with disabilities and 13.4% for men without disabilities.
- Since mid-2021, there has been stronger employment growth for people with disabilities, both women and men, relative to women and men without disabilities. In February 2023, both women and men with disabilities had about 20% higher employment-population ratios than three years earlier, whereas women and men without disabilities were both slightly below February 2020.
- Faster employment growth for disabled people might reflect greater workplace flexibilities, especially regarding telework, than existed before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it should be noted that CPS data are primarily cross-sectional and do not track the same individuals over extended periods of time.

Figure 4. Labor Force Participation Rate for People Aged 16-64, 2009-2022, by Gender and Disability Status



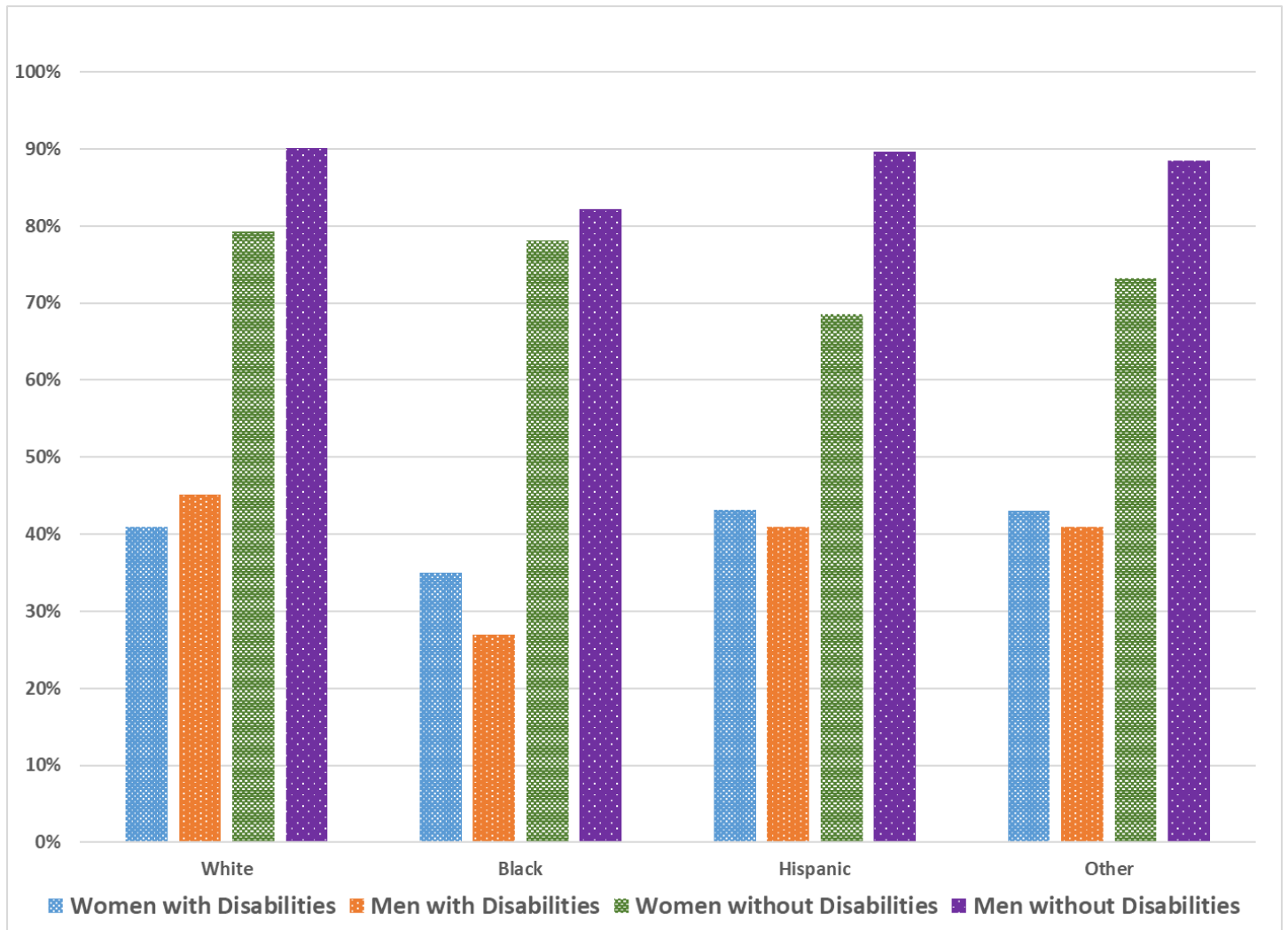
- Source: Authors’ calculations from CPS micro-level monthly data.
- The labor force participation rates for men and women, both with and without disabilities, have been relatively stable across the period reported and when compared to employment changes over the same period.
- Women with disabilities had a labor force participation rate of 32.5% in 2009. This fluctuated up and down through the years, hitting a trough of 27.8% in 2014 and a peak of 37% in 2022.
- Women without disabilities had a labor force participation rate of 72% in 2009, which is the highest across the period reported. This rate slightly fluctuated up and down through the years, hitting a minimum of 70.2% in 2015, while climbing back up to 71.8% in 2022.
- Men with disabilities had a labor force participation rate of 37.9% in 2009. This fluctuated up and down through the years, hitting a minimum of 32.7% in 2014 and a maximum of 38.7% in 2022.
- Men without disabilities had a labor force participation rate of 83.7% in 2009, which is the highest across the period reported. This rate slightly fluctuated up and down through the years, hitting a minimum of 81.6% in 2020, while climbing back up to 82.6% in 2022.

Figure 5. Unemployment Rate for People Aged 16-64, 2009-2022, by Gender and Disability Status



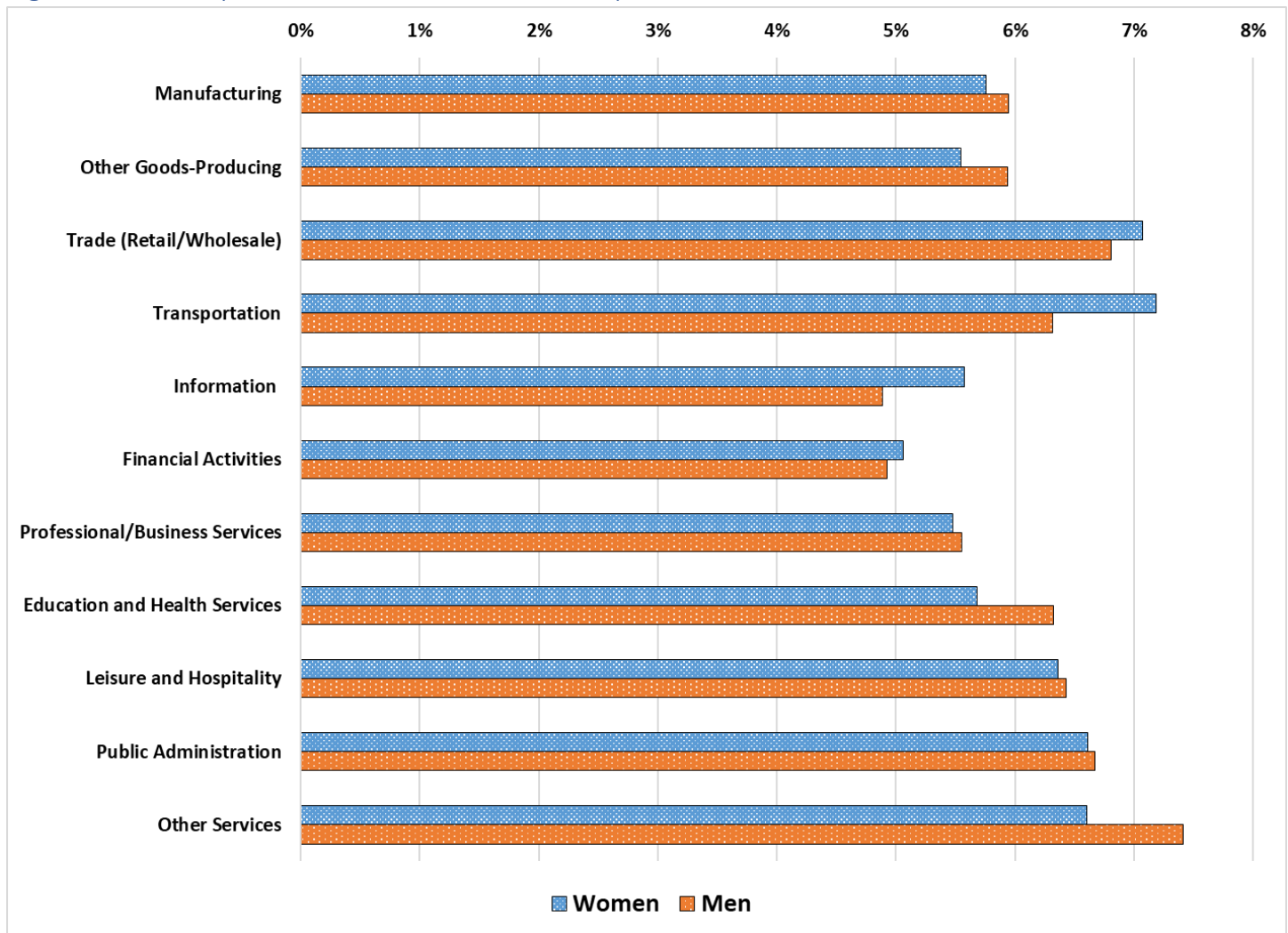
- Source: Authors' calculations from CPS micro-level monthly data.
- The unemployment rate for both men and women with disabilities increased from 2009 to 2011, hitting a relative maximum of 15.8% and 16.6%, respectively, before declining to relative minimums of 7.7% and 8.3%, respectively, in 2019.
- The unemployment rate for both men and women without disabilities increased from 2009 to 2010 to hit a relative maximum of 8.5% and 10.5%, respectively, before steadily declining to relative minimums of 3.5% and 3.6%, respectively, in 2019.
- All men and women, both with and without disabilities, experienced an increase in unemployment in 2020, reaching levels close to the respective rates in 2013.
- All men and women, both with and without disabilities, experienced a decrease in unemployment from 2020 to 2022. In 2022, women with disabilities had an unemployment rate of 7.8%, men with disabilities had an unemployment rate of 8.5%; for those without disabilities, the 2022 unemployment rates were 3.5% for both men and women.

Figure 6. Employment-Population Ratio, for People Aged 25-54, 2022, by Gender, Disability Status, and Racial/Ethnic Category



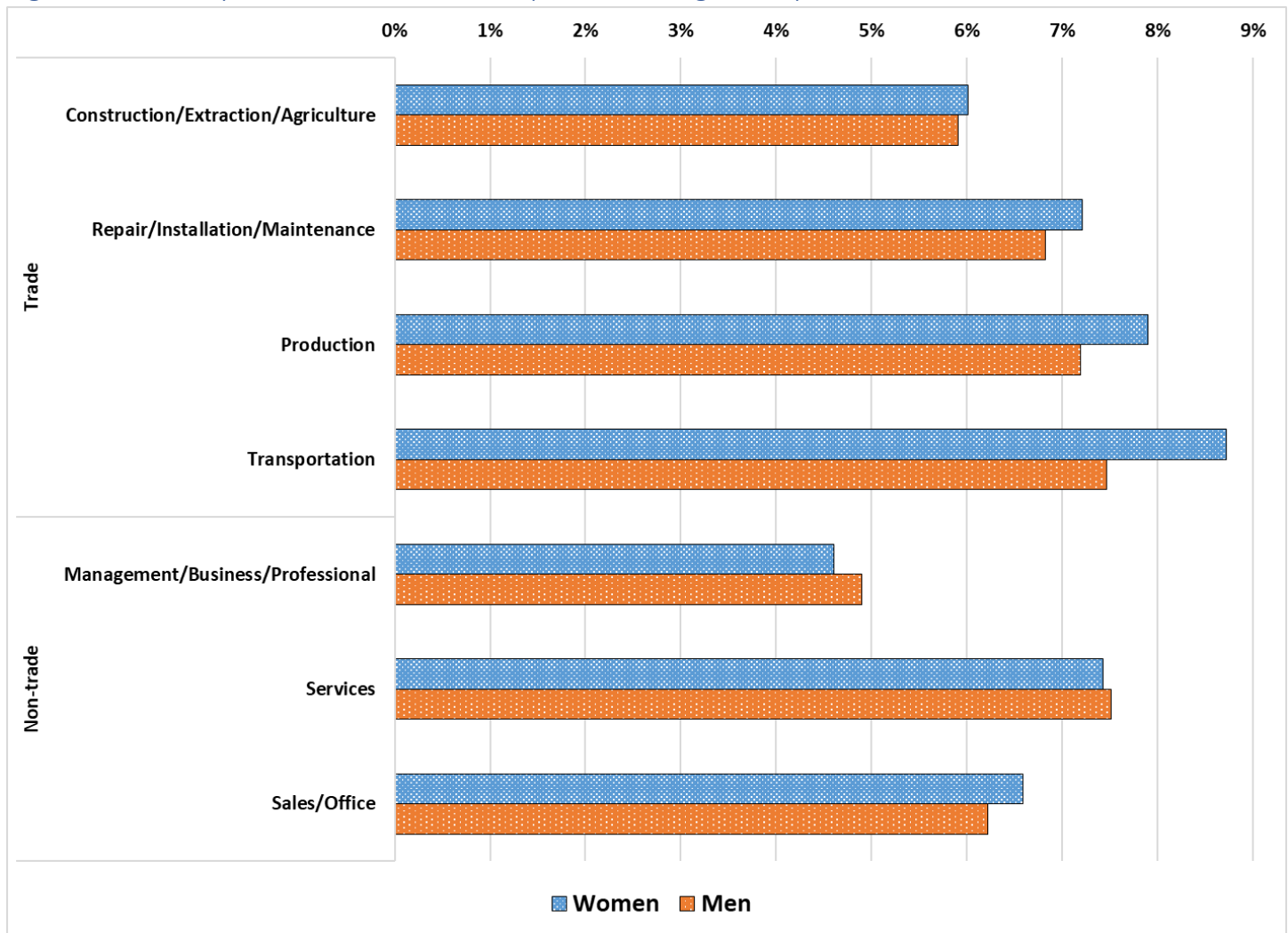
- Source: Authors’ calculations from CPS micro-level monthly data.
- The category labelled “Other” includes anyone who is not either Hispanic, single-race non-Hispanic White, or single-race non-Hispanic Black.
- In 2022, across all racial/ethnic categories, 40.6% of women with disabilities aged 25-54 were employed compared to 41.5% of men with disabilities (the difference is not statistically significant). The age range is restricted to improve comparisons between racial/ethnic categories.
- Black men with disabilities have the lowest employment-population ratio among all groups examined, with just over a quarter of the population being employed, followed by Black women with disabilities, who have just over one-third of the population employed.
- The employment-population ratio for White women with disabilities is lower than for White men with disabilities (the difference is statistically significant).
- No statistically significant differences in employment-population ratios exist between Hispanic men and women with disabilities, between men and women with disabilities in the “Other” race/ethnicity group, or all men and women with disabilities.

Figure 7. Disability Prevalence across Industries by Gender



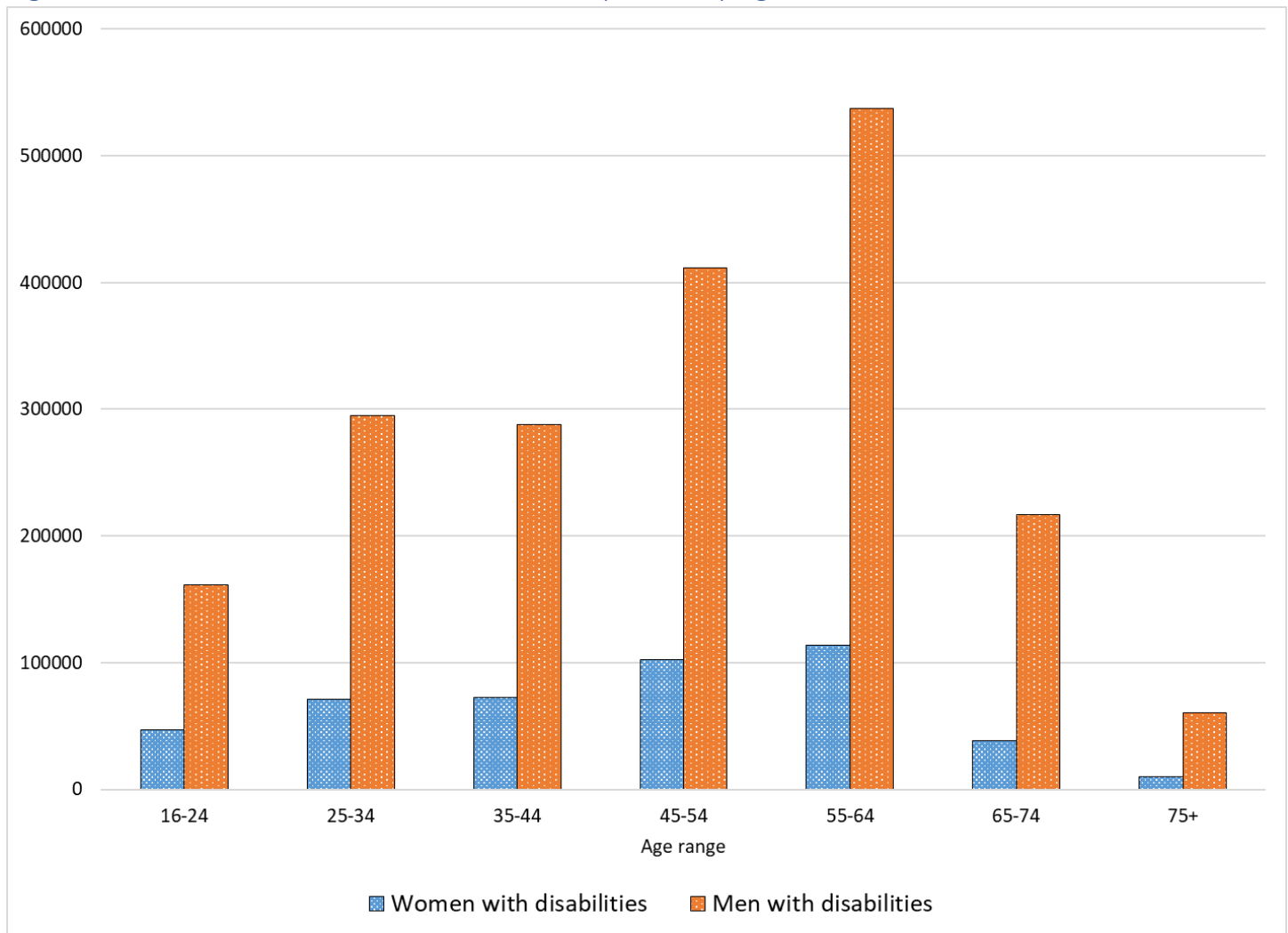
- Source: Authors' calculations from the 2017-2021 5-year ACS micro-level data.
- The industry where women workers have the highest disability prevalence is Transportation at 7.2%, followed by Retail/Wholesale Trade at 7.1%. For men, the industry with the highest disability prevalence is Other Services at 7.4%, followed by Retail/Wholesale Trade at 6.8% and Public Administration at 6.7%.
- The industry where women workers have the lowest disability prevalence is Financial Activities at 5.1%, followed by Professional/Business Services at 5.5%. For men, the industry with the lowest disability prevalence is also Financial Activities at 4.9%, followed by Information at 4.9%.
- Variation in disability prevalence across industries is limited.

Figure 8. Disability Prevalence across Occupational Categories by Gender



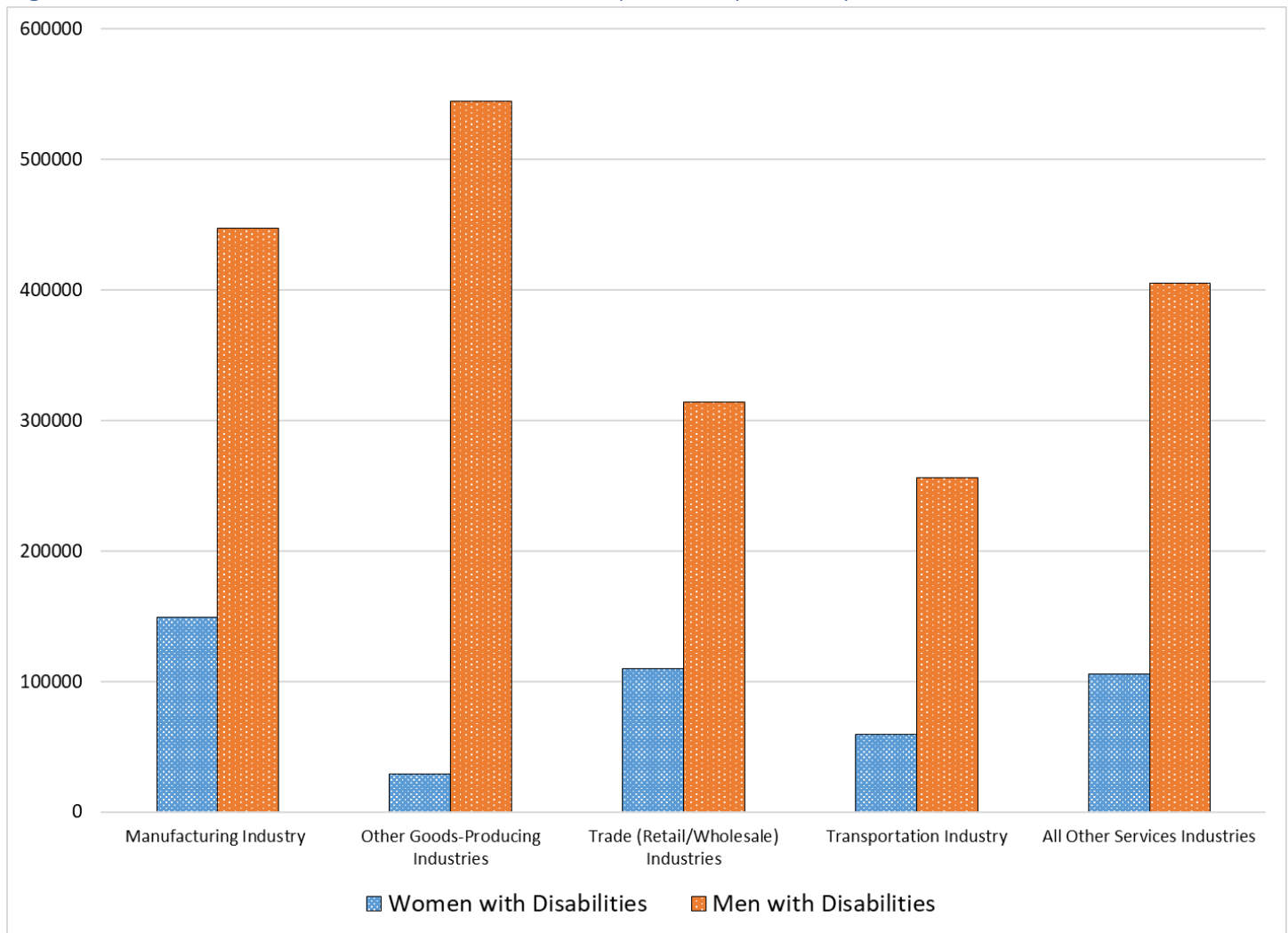
- Source: Authors' calculations from the 2017-2021 5-year ACS micro-level data.
- Skilled trades occupations, in all charts dealing with the distinction between trades and non-trades occupations, are defined as (1) Construction, extraction, and agricultural occupations, (2) Installation, maintenance, and repair occupations, (3) Production occupations, and (4) Transportation and material-moving occupations. Non-skilled trade occupations are defined as (1) Management, Business, and Professional occupations, (2) Services occupations, and (3) Sales and Office or Administrative Support occupations.
- For women, disability prevalence is highest in Transportation occupations at 8.7%, followed by Production occupations at 7.9%. For men, disability prevalence is highest in both Services occupations and Transportation occupations at 7.5%.
- Disability prevalence is lowest among Management/Business/Professional occupations, at 4.6% for women and 4.9% for men, followed by Construction/Extraction/Agriculture occupations at 6.0% for women and 5.9% for men.
- Overall disability prevalence in skilled trade occupations is substantially higher, at 8.1% for women and 6.8% for men, than in other occupations, at 5.8% for both women and men.

Figure 9. Disabled Workers in Skilled Trade Occupations by Age and Gender



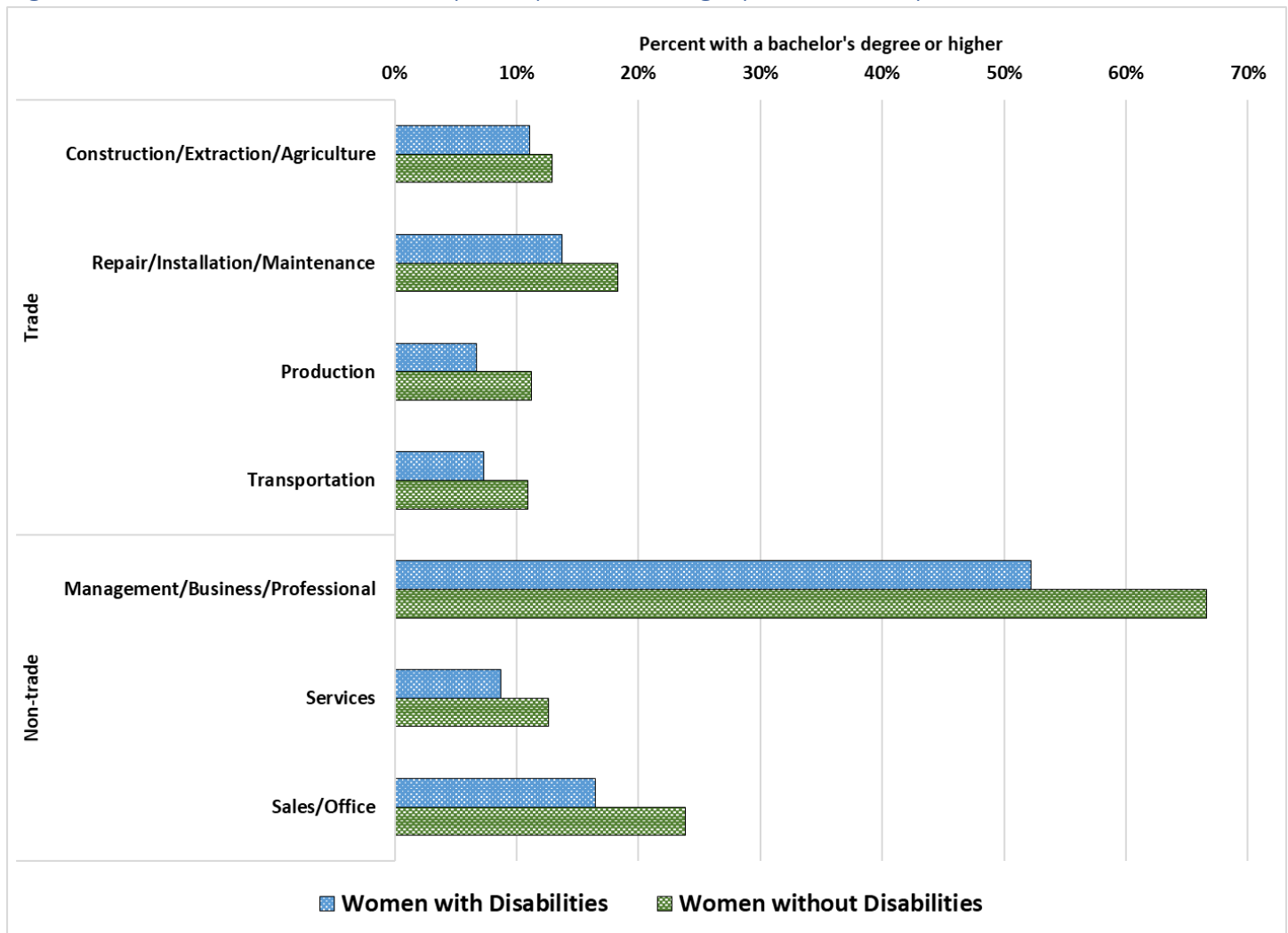
- Source: Authors' calculations from the 2017-2021 5-year ACS micro-level data.
- The age bracket containing the largest numbers of both men and women with disabilities working in skilled trade occupations is workers aged 55-64.
- The ratios of employment between men and women with disabilities in skilled trade occupations are largest for older age groups, 65-74 and 75+.
- Across all age groups, fewer women with disabilities work in skilled trade occupations compared to men with disabilities.

Figure 10. Disabled Workers in Skilled Trade Occupations by Industry and Gender



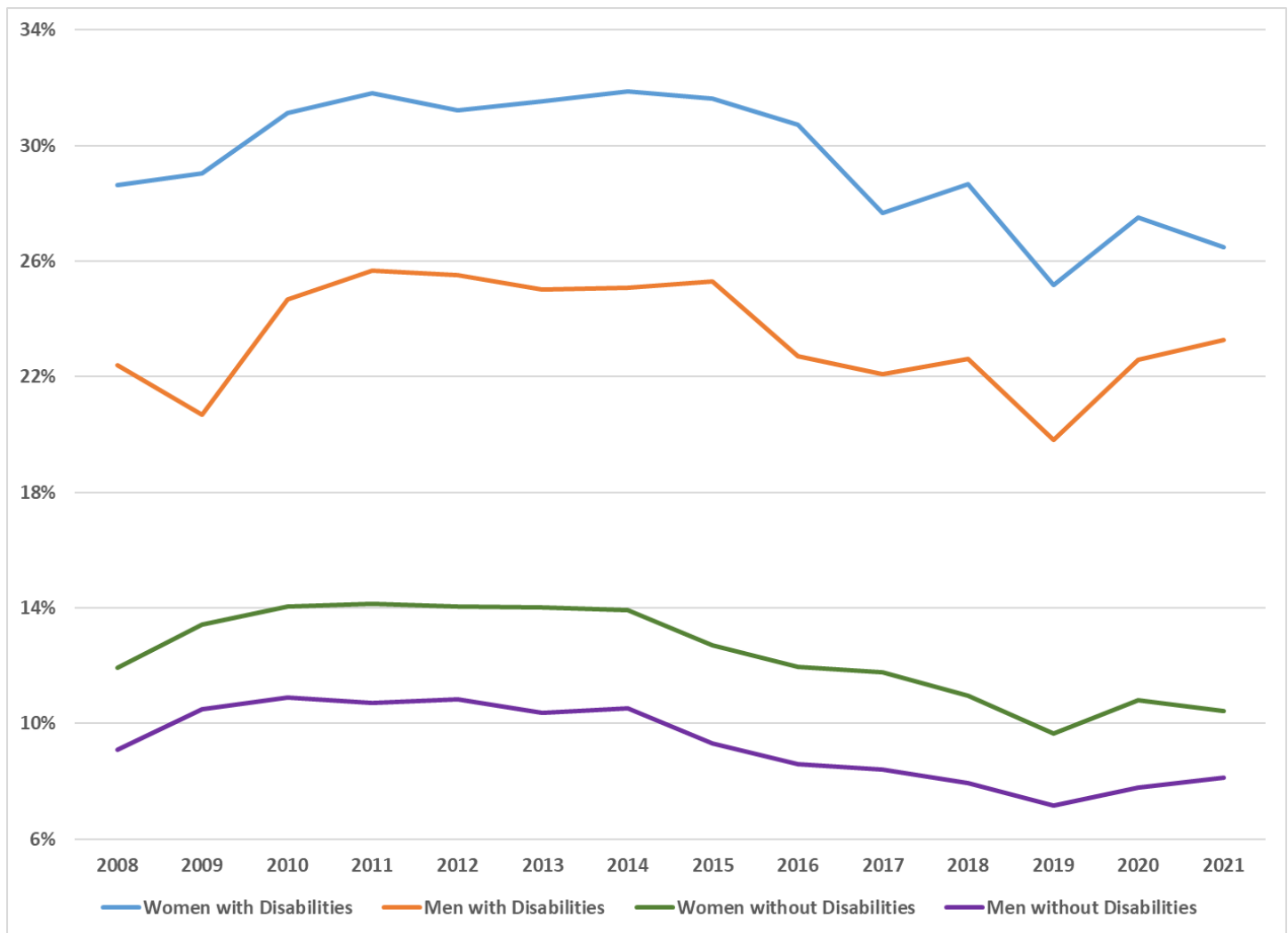
- Source: Authors' calculations from the 2017-2021 5-year ACS micro-level data.
- The industry with the greatest number of women with disabilities working in skilled trade professions is Manufacturing, with around 150,000.
- The industry with the greatest number of men with disabilities working in skilled trade professions is Other Goods-Producing (chiefly Construction but also including Agriculture and Mining) with around 540,000.
- Much greater numbers of men with disabilities work in skilled trades occupations across industries compared to women with disabilities.

Figure 11. Educational Attainment by Occupational Category and Disability Status



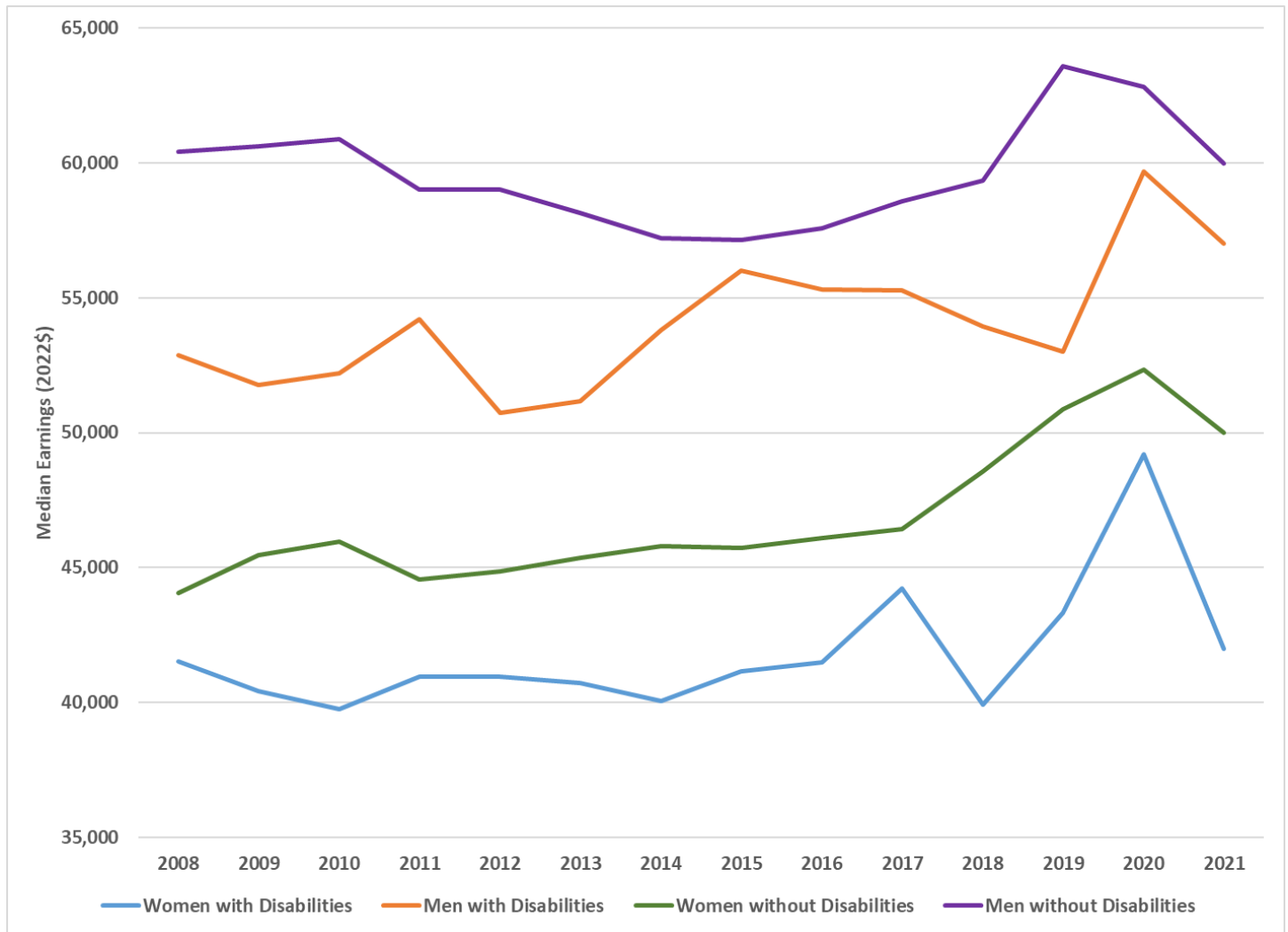
- Source: Authors' calculations from the 2017-2021 5-year ACS micro-level data.
- The occupational category with the highest percentage of women with bachelor's degrees or higher -- both with and without disabilities -- is Management/Business Professional: 52.2% of women with disabilities in this group have bachelor's degrees or higher, and 66.6% of women without disabilities in this group have bachelor's degrees or higher.
- The occupational category with the lowest percentage of women with disabilities who have a bachelor's degree or higher is Production, at 6.7%.
- In total, 25.8% of women workers with disabilities have a bachelor's degree or higher versus 40.0% of women workers without disabilities. These rates of educational attainment are higher than for men workers (not pictured in the chart), of whom 23.7% with disabilities and 34.5% without disabilities have a bachelor's degree or higher.

Figure 12. Poverty Rate by Year, Gender, and Disability Status



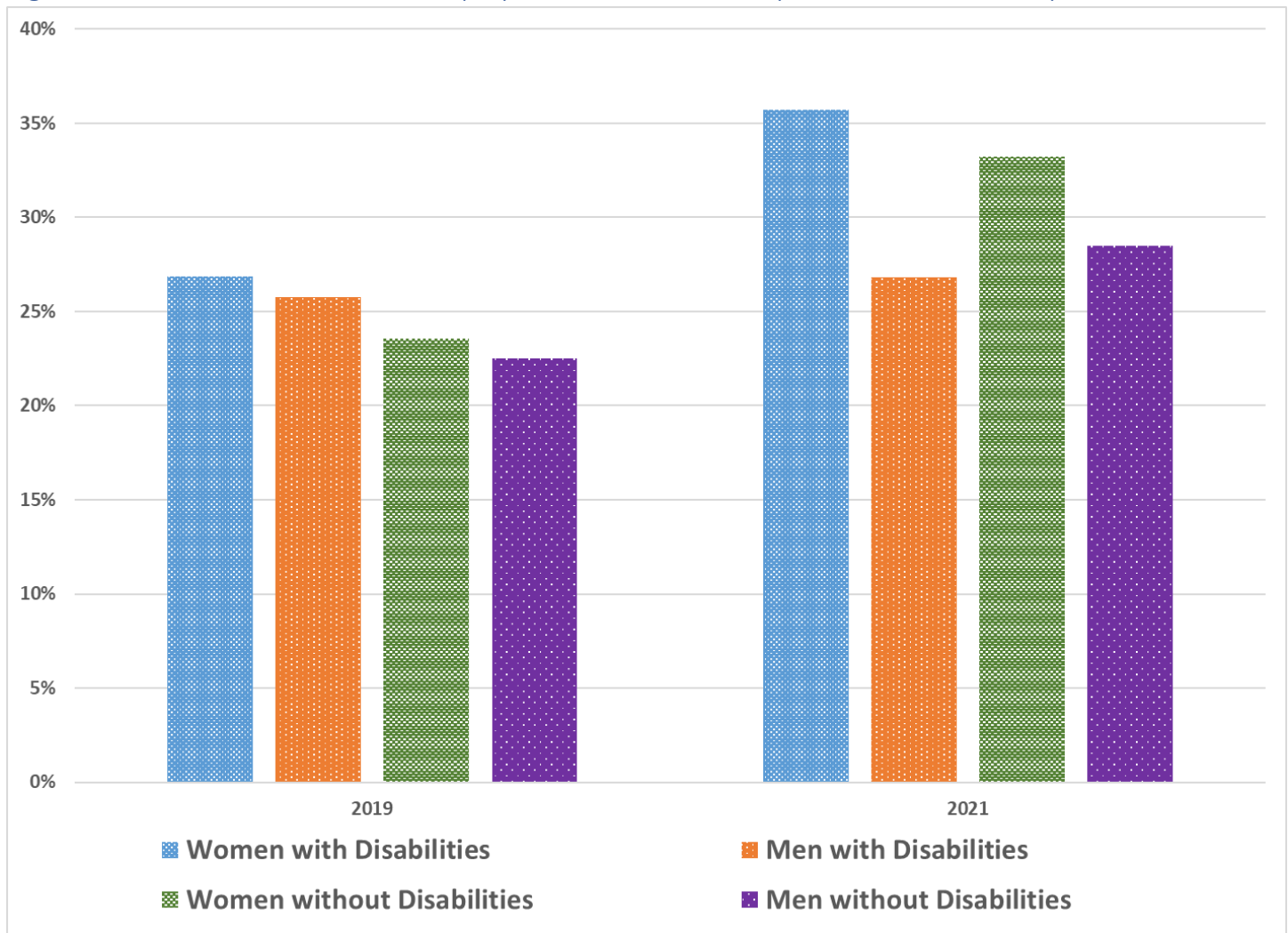
- Source: Authors' calculations from the 2022 CPS March Supplement micro-level data.
- The [Annual Social and Economic Supplement \(ASEC\)](#) to the CPS is conducted in March of every year. Questions are asked about earnings over the previous 12 months, and therefore information about poverty rates and earnings are for the previous year. The 2022 ASEC is the most recent available, providing poverty rates and earnings for 2021.
- Poverty is defined on a household basis, calculated according to a formula involving household earnings and household size, and this formula is adjusted annually. Poverty rates are calculated among those individuals 16 years and older.
- Poverty rates are substantially higher for disabled people, ranging from 25.2% to 31.9% for disabled women and from 19.8% to 25.7% for disabled men, whereas the ranges are 9.7% to 14.2% for non-disabled women and 7.2% to 10.9% for non-disabled men.
- For the period in which data on disability exists in the CPS (2008-2021), poverty rates reached their highest points in 2014 (at 31.9%) for women with disabilities, in 2012 (at 25.7%) for men with disabilities, in 2012 (at 14.2%) for women without disabilities, and in 2011 (at 10.9%) for men without disabilities.
- Poverty rates for all four groups reached their lowest points in 2019, at 25.2% for women with disabilities, 19.8% for men with disabilities, 9.7% for women without disabilities, and 7.2% for men without disabilities.
- Since COVID-19, poverty rates for all four groups have been somewhat higher than their lowest point in 2019.

Figure 13. Median Earnings (2022\$) of Full-Time Year-Round Workers by Year, Gender, and Disability Status



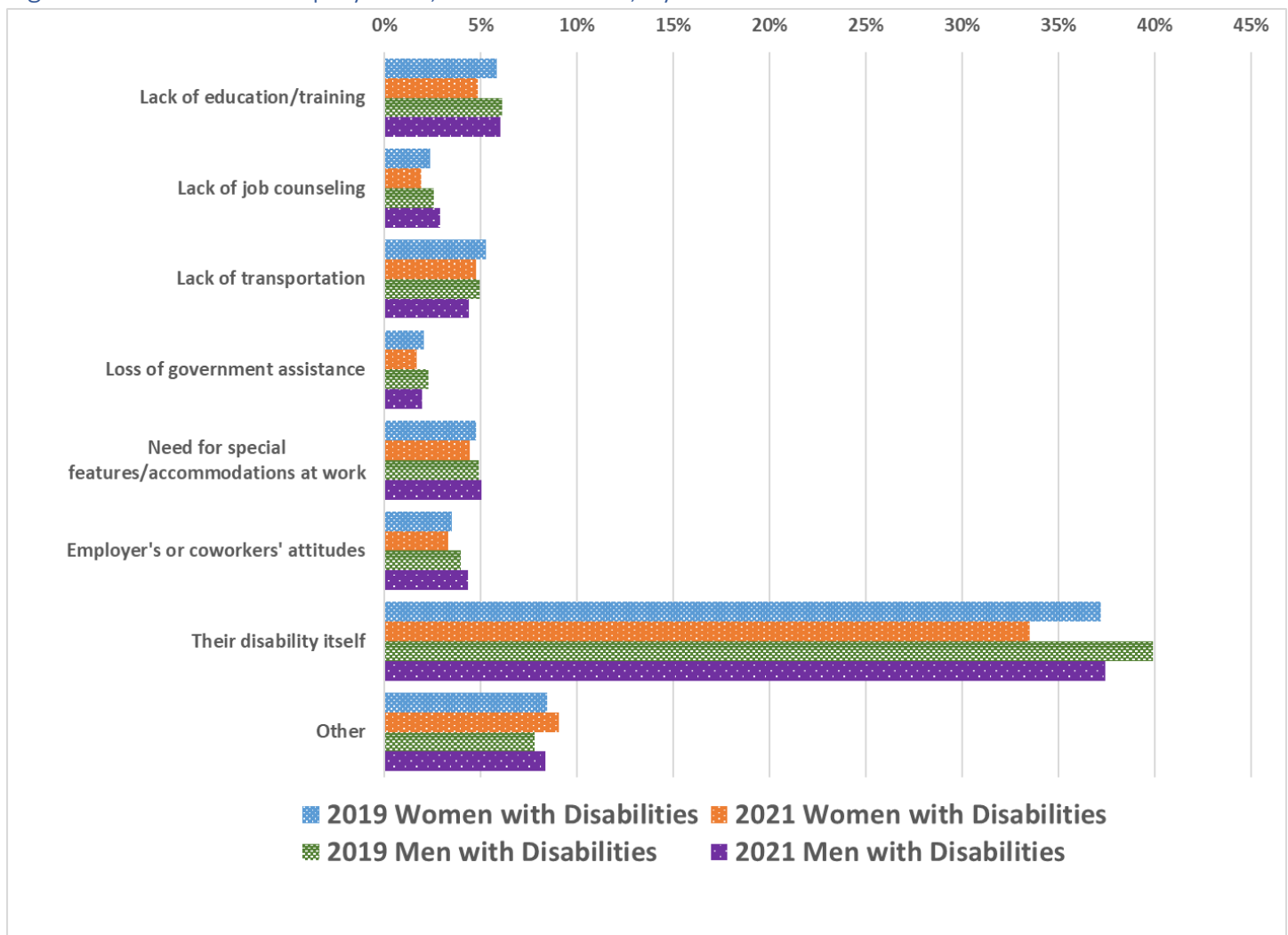
- Source: Authors’ calculations from the 2022 CPS March Supplement micro-level data (See notes in Figure 12 for more details).
- Earnings have been adjusted to constant 2022 U.S. dollars using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) inflation index.
- To improve comparability, median earnings as depicted in this chart have been calculated only for those workers who were employed full-time and for 52 weeks in the previous year, with positive earnings.
- Women with disabilities had the lowest earnings in every year from 2008 through 2021, generally between \$40,000 and \$45,000, where men without disabilities had the highest earnings in every year from 2008 through 2021, between \$57,000 and \$64,000. Both these groups had nearly the same earnings in 2021 as in 2008.

Figure 14. Telework Status of the Employed, 2019 and 2021, by Gender and Disability Status



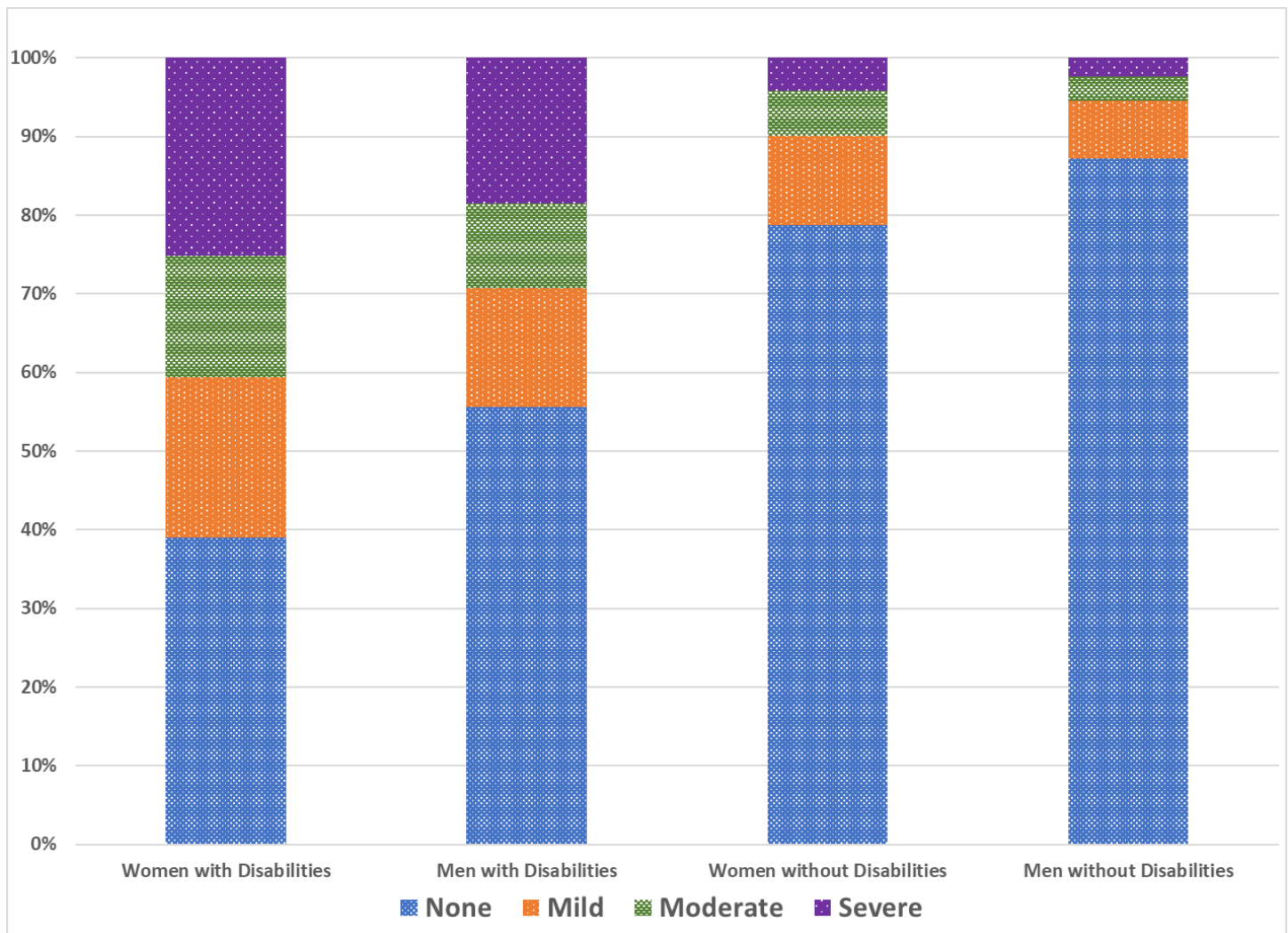
- Source: Authors' calculations from CPS Disability Supplements 2019 and 2021 micro-level data.
- In 2019, employed men and women with disabilities were more likely to work at home compared to people without disabilities, but that difference is not statistically significant.
- In 2021, employed women with disabilities were more likely to work from home than employed women without disabilities. However, employed men without disabilities were more likely to work from home than employed men with disabilities in 2021.
- In both years, a higher share of employed women, both with and without disabilities, worked at home relative to men in the same categories.
- A higher proportion of employed men and women, both with and without disabilities, worked from home in 2021 relative to their respective groups in 2019.

Figure 15. Barriers to Employment, 2019 and 2021, by Gender



- Source: Authors' calculations from CPS Disability Supplements 2019 and 2021 micro-level data.
- The respondent universe is limited to people with disabilities, ages 16 and older, and not currently employed.
- Regardless of year or gender, the individual's disability itself was the most commonly cited barrier to employment.
- In 2019, both men and women reported that lack of education/training, lack of job counseling, lack of transportation, loss of government assistance, and the respondent's disability itself were barriers at higher rates than in 2021.
- Loss of government assistance was reported as a barrier to employment at the lowest rates in 2019 and 2021 for both men and women with disabilities, at around 2.3% or less for each group.
- Apart from the disability itself and other barriers, lack of education/training was the next most cited barrier to employment in 2019 and 2021 for both men and women with disabilities.

Figure 16. Mental Health Condition Prevalence, by Gender and Disability Status, 2020



- Source: Authors' calculations from National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) micro-level data.
- The NSDUH determines presence and severity of mental health conditions based on responses to a variety of questions asking whether, in the past 12 months, the respondent's mental health interfered with their daily activities, about frequency of certain feelings indicating the presence of a major depressive episode, and about frequency of thoughts or actions indicating serious thought of suicide.
- In 2020, 61% of women with disabilities were estimated to have a mental health condition compared to 44% of men with disabilities, 21% of women without disabilities, and 13% of men without disabilities.
- Of those considered to have a mental health condition at any level of severity, a larger proportion of those with a disability were considered to have a severe mental health condition (41% for women and 42% for men) versus those without a disability (20% of women and 19% of men).

Conclusion

Between 2019 and 2022, the U.S. experienced unprecedented shifts in the labor market in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to impede its spread. Although women with disabilities experienced an immediate negative employment impact during the pandemic, people with disabilities experienced a stronger economic recovery than people without disabilities. The data indicates this stronger improvement is possibly attributable, in part, to increased telework and other workplace flexibilities. However, disparities between people with and without disabilities, as well as women and men with disabilities, remain in labor market outcomes, participation in skilled trade occupations, earnings and poverty rates, and prevalence of mental health conditions.

Authors

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- U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/data-we-collect/nsduh-national-survey-drug-use-and-health>

About ODEP

ODEP promotes policies and coordinates with employers and all levels of government to increase workplace success for people with disabilities. ODEP's mission is to develop and influence policies and practices that increase the number and quality of employment opportunities for people with disabilities. For more information please visit: dol.gov/odep.