

This month, we will have a description of the Committee on Statistics and Disability. As I was naming new committee members, I corresponded with Joan Turek, chair of the committee, and learned a little about its functions. I think it's worthwhile to share committee members' perspectives and goals with the ASA membership.

- Tony Lachenbruch, ASA President

Committee on Statistics and Disability

The Committee on Statistics and Disability's two-fold mission is to advance and improve statistics used in disability research and to support ASA members and potential members by working to ensure their full participation in the association and related communities (e.g., academia, government, and industry).

Disability is a complex concept and difficult to measure. Federal disability programs account for 67 definitions, which can be pared down to 41 after accounting for overlaps. Hundreds more exist for state and local disability programs. An article now planned for the October issue of *CHANCE* by Michele Connolly, committee vice chair, will discuss the complexities involved in defining disability. In recognition of these complexities, committee members are drawn from a variety of areas focusing on persons with disabilities in different age groups (e.g., children, working-aged adults, the elderly) and persons in major condition groups (e.g., visually and hearing impaired, physically disabled, cognitively impaired, learning disabled, mentally ill). While many of the committee's nine members are, or have been associated, with federal programs, specialists are also drawn from academia and the nonprofit and international sectors.

Committee members have placed highest priority on ensuring that ASA activities, including the annual meeting, are fully accessible to persons with disabilities. While ASA staff members work hard to make meetings accessible, there is still room for improvement. For example, the long distance between convention sites and hotels and limited transportation poses challenges for those with mobility limitations. Committee members are working with ASA Executive Director Ron Wasserstein to consider additional steps that can be implemented to enhance accessibility.

Currently, few persons self identify that they are disabled and need accommodation at meetings, making it difficult to justify expenditures for shuttles or other accommodations. Unfortunately, committee members lack information about how many ASA members experience disabling conditions or what accommodations would help them. Committee members also are unable to determine the extent to which disabling conditions have limited participation in the statistics profession in general, so they have asked Ron to consider adding a question to the membership form that would have members self identify their limitations.

A major committee priority in 2008 is reaching out to other committees and sections of the ASA. Members are also interested in undertaking outreach activities involving universities to determine if persons with disabilities are majoring in statistics and to encourage them to do so. One committee member, Mary Grace Kovar, wrote a report, "Accessibility to ASA Facilities and Functions," that will appear soon at www.amstat.org/comm/cmtesd.

Committee members have also expressed concern about losses of information concerning disabling conditions on two census surveys: the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and the American Community Survey (ACS). SIPP is undergoing a major redesign, and the current disability module—which provides the only longitudinal data on disability available from any survey—will no longer be included. Instead, a short set of disability questions will be asked once on each SIPP panel. SIPP is, moreover, the only survey that covers all age groups and permitted modeling of the many definitions of disability contained in federal programs.

Also, the question about being "too disabled to work" was dropped from the ACS as part of the 2008 redesign because of difficulties with interpretation. However, work disability measures are critical for the major federal disability programs. Indeed, the two largest and most costly federal disability programs—Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income—are for persons too disabled to work. On April 10, 2006, then ASA President Sallie Keller-McNulty sent a letter to C. Louis Kincannon, director of the U.S. Census Bureau, urging the bureau to undertake continued research on technical and methodological adjustments so as to improve the measurement of work disability in the ACS.

Committee members have pursued other activities in support of the committee's mission, as well. In 2006, Carolyn Shettle led a member initiative to prepare webcasts, providing access to three plenary lectures to ASA members with disabilities and others who were unable to attend the meetings in Seattle. Other ASA committees joined the effort, and webcasts are continuing.

Other members put together invited panels covering differing issues: "Status of Disability Information in Surveys" (Michele Connolly) and "Valid and Reliable Disability Measurement in Surveys" (David Keer). At the 2008 meetings in Denver, Mary Chamie will chair an invited panel titled "Are Disability Statistics Relevant and Useful for National Policies and Programs?" Another committee member, John Drabek, is planning for the 2009 meetings in Washington, DC. His panel will be about recent developments in measuring disability and cognitive impairment.

Committee members are interested in hearing from ASA members, particularly those with disabilities, about activities the committee should pursue and their interest in being involved. Joan Turek, committee chair, can be reached at joan.turek@hhs.gov, jlturek@aol.gov, or (202) 690-5965. ■