

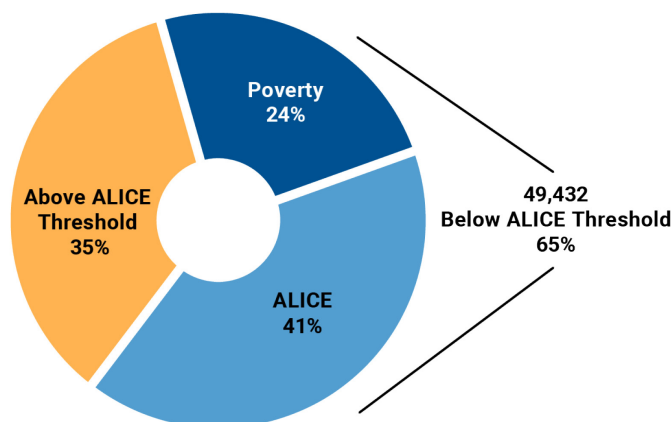
FINANCIAL HARDSHIP AMONG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: WASHINGTON, D.C.

Having a disability — whether apparent or non-apparent, physical or cognitive — can be a substantial barrier to financial stability. Yet traditional economic measures hide the full extent of financial hardship for the 11% of people in Washington, D.C. (76,380) who have a cognitive, hearing, vision, or ambulatory disability, or one that makes self-care or independent living difficult. According to the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), 24% of people with disabilities in D.C. (18,444) lived in poverty in 2019. However, [United For ALICE](#) data shows that another 41% (30,988) were also experiencing financial hardship, in households that earned above the FPL but not enough to afford the basics in their communities.

The reality is that almost two-thirds (65%) of all people with disabilities in Washington, D.C. lived in a household with income below the [ALICE Threshold of Financial Survival](#) in 2019. This includes households in poverty as well as those who were **ALICE**: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. ALICE households don't earn enough to afford the essentials of housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, a smartphone plan, and taxes — the basics needed to live and work in the modern economy (see Key Terms, pg. 3). This ALICE in Focus Research Brief shows that there are people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold of all ages, races/ethnicities, and educational levels, in a variety of living arrangements and employment situations. People with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold live in all [communities across the district \(PUMAs\)](#), at rates ranging from 31% in District of Columbia (West) to 74% in District of Columbia (East).

People With Disabilities, Financial Status, D.C., 2019

Number of People With Disabilities in D.C. = 76,380



Note: This research uses American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Samples (ACS PUMS) and focuses on people with disabilities, whose ALICE status is determined by their household's income compared to local cost of living. Percentages are rounded to whole numbers for ease of reading, which may result in percentages totaling 99% or 101%. See totals on the [ALICE Disability Data Dashboard](#).

Sources: ALICE Threshold, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, PUMS, 2019



KEY FINDINGS

- Almost two-thirds (65%) of people with disabilities in Washington, D.C. lived in households experiencing financial hardship in 2019. While 24% were below the FPL, an additional 41% were ALICE.
- People with disabilities in D.C. faced substantial barriers to employment: In 2019 they were more than five times as likely to be out of the labor force as people without disabilities (61% vs. 12%). But even for people with disabilities who worked full time, 20% were below the ALICE Threshold.
- Among people 25 and over with only a high school diploma or GED, 75% of those with disabilities were below the ALICE Threshold compared to 56% of those without disabilities. This trend continued throughout all levels of higher education.
- Access to high-speed internet can be a lifeline for people with disabilities, but only half (51%) of people with disabilities below the Threshold had high-speed internet in D.C. in 2019.
- During the pandemic, from July 2021 to February 2022, 39% of people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold in D.C. reported feeling anxious nearly every day.

DEFINING “DISABILITY”

The task of defining disability is [complex, dynamic, multidimensional, and contested](#). How disability is defined has significant implications for people with disabilities, including determining who has access to [federal programs and protections](#) under the law. The legal protections outlined in the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (ADA) give one of the broadest definitions, including anyone with a “physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is regarded by others as having such an impairment,” which also covers people with [chronic health conditions](#) such as cancer or diabetes, and those with service-related disabilities (military veterans will be the subject of the next ALICE in Focus Research Brief). But eligibility definitions, like the criteria used for [Social Security disability-related benefits](#), are often more limited. Individual experiences also vary greatly, and some people [do not want to disclose their disability](#) due to [real or perceived stigma](#).

In this Brief, “people with disabilities” include those who have an ambulatory disability, a cognitive disability, a hearing or vision disability, or a disability that makes self-care or independent living difficult, as reported in the 2019 [U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey](#) (ACS). This ALICE research uses the ACS definition and dataset because it is the only source that includes both disability status and the information needed to determine a person’s ALICE status – their household composition, income, and location. The ACS’s questions about disability – outlined in the table below – are asked for each member of a household. Of people with disabilities in D.C. in 2019, slightly over half had one of the six types of disability listed below (38,402), but almost as many (37,978) had two or more. People with two or more disabilities were more likely to be below the ALICE Threshold (73%) than people with one disability (56%) and people without disabilities (34%).

American Community Survey Question, D.C., 2019	Total Number of People With This Disability	Percent Below ALICE Threshold (Poverty + ALICE)
Ambulatory: Does this person have serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs? (Age 5+ only)	41,087	72%
Independent Living: Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, does this person have difficulty doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor’s office or shopping? (Age 15+ only)	30,242	75%
Cognitive: Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, does this person have serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions? (Age 5+ only)	29,826	67%
Self-Care: Does this person have difficulty dressing or bathing? (Age 5+ only)	13,103	63%
Vision: Is this person blind or does he/she have serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses? (All ages)	12,932	66%
Hearing: Is this person deaf or does he/she have serious difficulty hearing? (All ages)	12,643	59%
Any of the Above = Person With a Disability	76,380	65%

Note: Respondents who report any one of the six categories above are considered to have a disability. Respondents can respond “yes” to one or more questions; therefore, the number of “yes” responses for each question does not sum to the total for “Any of the Above.” People with more than one disability are only counted as one person in the total. Learn more about definitions of disability and other key issues on the [ALICE in Focus: People with Disabilities webpage](#).

The extent of financial hardship for people with disabilities, as outlined in this Brief, is substantial; yet the degree of hardship is likely even higher than estimated by the ALICE measures. There are two reasons for this. First, the Household Survival Budget includes the cost of household basics for all households, yet research shows that [costs for households that include someone with a disability are higher](#) than average. Second, approximately 7,600 people with a disability in D.C. were excluded from the ALICE analysis in 2019 because they lived in Census-defined “[group quarters](#)”: more than 3,300 were in institutional group quarters (such as nursing homes or correctional facilities) and almost 4,300 were in non-institutional group quarters (such as group homes, college dormitories, or military barracks). Because the cost of living in these settings differs substantially from the cost of living in a household, their ALICE status cannot be determined. This Brief also does not include people experiencing homelessness, who are not counted in the American Community Survey.

DEMOGRAPHICS

People with disabilities span all categories of age, sex, race/ethnicity, national origin, living arrangements, work status, and educational level. In general, people with disabilities are more likely to have income below the ALICE Threshold than people without disabilities. At the same time, certain demographic groups — including those that face [systemic racism](#) and [sexism](#) — have higher rates of disability. **This intersectionality also increases rates of financial hardship, especially for people with disabilities who are female; Black, Indigenous, and other people of color; and/or born outside of the U.S., as well as for other groups — like LGBTQ+ individuals — who are not fully represented in the ACS data.**

Age

There are people with disabilities of all ages, though disabilities are more common in older people. In 2019, 4% of children under age 18, 10% of people age 18–64, and 33% of seniors (age 65+) in D.C. had one or more disabilities. However, children with disabilities were more likely to live in households below the ALICE Threshold than adults or seniors with disabilities. In D.C. in 2019, 61% of children (under age 18) with disabilities lived in households below the Threshold, compared to 65% of adults (age 18+) with disabilities. Coupled with caregiving demands, the cost of raising children and the added expense of resources often needed for children with disabilities can [limit a parent's earning potential](#) and overall household income. This is especially true for [families who are not eligible for Medicaid, have limited private insurance coverage](#), and/or are not eligible for publicly-funded programs such as [Early Intervention](#) that provide therapies and services for free or at a reduced cost based on child and family need. Children with disabilities were also more likely to live in households below the Threshold (61%) than those without disabilities (54%).

While the rate of financial hardship was similar across adult age groups, seniors with disabilities were less likely to be in poverty (in part due to Social Security and [Supplemental Security Income](#)) but were more likely to be ALICE than younger adults with disabilities.

The type of disability also varied by age in D.C. For children, the most common was a cognitive disability (in 71% of children with disabilities over the age of five). For adults, the most common was an ambulatory disability, which was reported by 46% of people with disabilities age 18–64 and 73% of seniors (age 65+) with disabilities in D.C. in 2019.



Key Terms

- **People With Disabilities:** People with one or more of the disabilities listed on page 2.
- **ALICE:** Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed — households that earn above the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) but cannot afford the basic cost of living in their county. While the FPL for a family of four in 2019 was \$25,750, the average bare-minimum cost of living for a family according to the ALICE Household Survival Budget was more than \$100,000 in D.C. Despite struggling to make ends meet, ALICE households often do not qualify for public assistance.
- **ALICE Threshold:** Derived from the Household Survival Budget, the average income that a household needs to afford housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and a smartphone plan, plus taxes. Calculated for various household types for every U.S. state and county.
- **Below ALICE Threshold:** Includes people in poverty-level and ALICE households combined.

ALICE Disability Data Dashboard

Visit the ALICE Disability Data Dashboard to explore more than 100 variables related to people with disabilities living in financial hardship by:

- State, regional, and local geographies
- Demographic categories including age, race/ethnicity, sex, and nativity
- Household characteristics like work status and living arrangements
- Access to key resources

Visit UnitedForALICE.org/Focus-Disabilities

Sex

In 2019, the ACS included only one question on sex with only two options — “male” or “female” — and respondents were not able to report gender identity or sexual orientation. The ALICE data reflects these limited options.

Overall, in D.C., females were slightly more likely to have a disability than males (12% vs. 11%), which is partly a reflection of females’ longer life span — average [life expectancy](#) in the U.S. is 80 years for females vs. 74 for males — and the higher prevalence of disability among older seniors (age 74+). The two key exceptions in D.C. are that compared to females, males age 5–17 were more likely to have a cognitive disability and males over 18 were more likely to be deaf or have difficulty hearing.

Both males and females with disabilities faced high rates of financial hardship: In D.C. in 2019, 64% of females with disabilities were below the ALICE Threshold compared to 66% of males with disabilities.

While the ACS does not include data on this topic, additional research shows the intersectionality between gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability. People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender are more likely to [report having disabilities and facing financial hardship](#). LGBTQ+ people with disabilities [face challenges that can undermine wellness and financial stability](#): employment discrimination, bullying and harassment in school, higher rates of mental health conditions, and limited access to LGBTQ+ inclusive health and community services.

Race/Ethnicity and Nativity

The occurrence of disability in D.C. varied by race/ethnicity. For example, in 2019, 19% of Black people had disabilities, compared to 9% of White people. In addition, Black and American Indian/Alaska Native people had higher than average rates of financial hardship — a result of [persistent racism, discrimination, and systemic barriers](#) that limit many families’ access to resources and opportunities for financial stability. In 2019, 74% of Black and 95% of American Indian/Alaska Native people with disabilities lived in households below the ALICE Threshold, substantially higher than the rate for White people with disabilities (17%).

The gap in financial hardship between people with and without disabilities by race/ethnicity is also striking. The biggest gap was among American Indian/Alaska Native people: almost all (95%) with disabilities were below the Threshold, compared to only 18% without disabilities.

Race/Ethnicity in D.C. 2019	Percent With Disabilities Below ALICE Threshold	Percent Without Disabilities Below ALICE Threshold
American Indian/Alaska Native	95%	18%
Asian	50%	23%
Black	74%	57%
Hispanic	62%	46%
Two or More Races	54%	20%
White	17%	9%

Note: All racial categories except Two or More Races are for one race alone. The Hispanic group may include people with disabilities of any race.

Additionally, the way schools address the educational needs of students with disabilities can contribute to the [perpetuation of educational gaps by race/ethnicity](#). There were substantial differences by [race/ethnicity in how K–12 public school students were identified as having a disability](#) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Nationwide, compared to all students with disabilities, Black students with disabilities were more likely to be identified with an emotional disturbance or intellectual disability and more likely to receive disciplinary removal; Asian students with disabilities were more likely to be identified with autism and graduate high school; and White students with disabilities were more likely to be served in a general education classroom.

English-speaking ability, and whether an individual was born outside of the U.S., also have an impact on financial hardship. Contrary to the national trend, in D.C., people with disabilities born outside of the U.S. were less likely to be below the ALICE Threshold (58%) than people with disabilities born in the U.S. (65%). Yet both rates were considerably higher than for people without disabilities born in the U.S. (34%). Rates were even higher (78%) for people with disabilities living in a family with limited English-speaking ability in D.C.

Educational Attainment

Research shows that [people with higher academic degrees generally have greater earning power](#), but also that [low income reduces educational opportunities](#), especially for graduate and professional degrees. Having a disability adds yet another dimension.

Among people age 25 and older in D.C. in 2019, those with disabilities were less likely to have graduated from high school or to have completed a GED (77%) compared to people without disabilities (95%). People with disabilities in this age group were also less likely to complete post-secondary education: 30% of people with disabilities attained an associate degree or higher, compared to 70% of people without disabilities.



Most notably, across all educational levels from high school on, people with disabilities were more likely than those without disabilities to be below the ALICE Threshold. For example, 75% of people 25 and older with disabilities in D.C. who graduated high school but didn't complete post-secondary education were below the ALICE Threshold in 2019, compared to 56% of their peers without disabilities.

[Educational disparities by race/ethnicity are well known, and having a disability expands these gaps further.](#) In 2019, 13% of Black and 26% of Hispanic people with disabilities in D.C. had a bachelor's degree or above, compared to 74% of White people with disabilities. And at every educational level, Black and Hispanic people with disabilities were more likely to be below the ALICE Threshold than White people with disabilities.

In D.C., there were more females with disabilities than males with disabilities who had a bachelor's, master's, professional, or doctoral degree. And at the associate degree level and above, females with disabilities were less likely than males with disabilities to be below the ALICE Threshold, the opposite of the national trend which shows higher rates of financial hardship for females across all levels of higher education.

Work Status

Employment: In D.C. in 2019, there were nearly 17,000 people with disabilities age 18–64 in the labor force, accounting for 4% of the total labor force population and making up 39% of people with disabilities in that age group. Whether working full or part time, they were more likely to be below the ALICE Threshold than people without disabilities: 20% of full-time workers with disabilities were below the ALICE Threshold compared to 16% of full-time workers without disabilities. For people with disabilities who worked part time, the rate of financial hardship was 63%, high than the rate for people without disabilities who worked part time (51%).

Rates of employment and wages for people with disabilities in D.C. vary based on the type of disability, as well as age, sex, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment. Wage gaps persist in part because employers are permitted to pay some workers with disabilities a [subminimum wage](#) in D.C.

For workers in D.C. with a high school degree, 56% of people with disabilities were below the ALICE Threshold, the same as people without disabilities. And while the overall rate of hardship decreases with higher education, there is a gap in rates between people with and without disabilities. In 2019, for workers in D.C. with an associate or bachelor's degree, 28% of employed people with disabilities were below the Threshold vs. 14% of workers without disabilities. Rates declined further with an advanced degree, with only 5% below the Threshold for those with and without disabilities.

Overall, people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold in D.C. were concentrated in occupations with low median hourly wages. For example, in D.C. in 2019, 29% of people with disabilities working as a janitor or building cleaner — the most common occupation for people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold — earning a median wage of \$15.93 per hour, were below the ALICE Threshold. The rate is even higher in jobs that are more likely to be part-time: 96% of people with disabilities working as a cook (median wage of \$15.63 per hour) were below the Threshold. Even people with disabilities earning a higher wage, such as a secretary or administrative assistant (except legal, medical, and executive) at \$23.67 per hour, were below the ALICE Threshold (46%).

Many people with disabilities rely on [direct care workers](#) or [direct support professionals](#), who provide support for daily living and other essential activities. For years, both fields have faced significant challenges hiring and retaining staff, a situation made even more difficult by the pandemic as providers compete with offers of less demanding entry-level work at higher wages.

For example, in the direct care field, made up of workers who are [primarily women, primarily people of color, and often immigrants](#), staffing challenges were heightened during the pandemic as workers faced increased [levels of uncertainty and physical and mental stress](#). In D.C. in 2019, home health aides and personal care aides earned \$14.66 per hour. In addition, many direct care workers themselves have disabilities. In 2019, approximately 220 home health aides in D.C. had a disability, and all were below the Threshold.



Unemployment: In addition to physical and cognitive issues that make it difficult for some people with disabilities to work, people with disabilities face other [barriers to employment](#) including discrimination, accessibility issues, income and asset limits for public benefits programs, and transportation challenges. These barriers are most apparent in the difference in unemployment rates: In D.C. in 2019, people with disabilities were twice as likely as people without disabilities to be not working, but actively looking for work (12% vs. 6%).

Out of Labor Force: Almost 30,000 people age 18–64 in D.C. were out of the labor force (not employed and not looking for work) in 2019. People with disabilities in D.C. were more than five times as likely to be out of the labor force as people without disabilities (61% vs. 12%). And people with disabilities out of the labor force were more than twice as likely to be below the ALICE Threshold as people with disabilities in the labor force (84% vs. 37%).

Rates of labor force participation also varied by type of disability in D.C. In 2019, nearly half (48%) of people with a vision disability (age 18–64) were working or looking for work. But people with other types of disabilities were more likely to be out of the labor force — 70% of people with cognitive disabilities, 80% of people with disabilities that make independent living difficult, and 80% of people with disabilities that make self-care difficult.

Seniors: While seniors overall are [staying in the labor force longer](#), only 11% of D.C. seniors with disabilities were in the labor force in 2019, compared to 31% of seniors without disabilities. Of seniors in the labor force, half (51%) of those with disabilities were below the ALICE Threshold compared to 18% for seniors in the labor force without disabilities.

Living Arrangements

People with disabilities who are ALICE live in households of varying size and composition, both of which impact financial stability. Overall, people with disabilities in D.C. tend to live in smaller households. The most common household size for people with disabilities in D.C. in 2019 was two people (compared to four among people without disabilities).

People with disabilities age 18–64 in D.C. were much less likely to be employed (34%) compared to people without disabilities (83%). And only about one-third of people with disabilities in this age group lived with at least one working household member (32%).

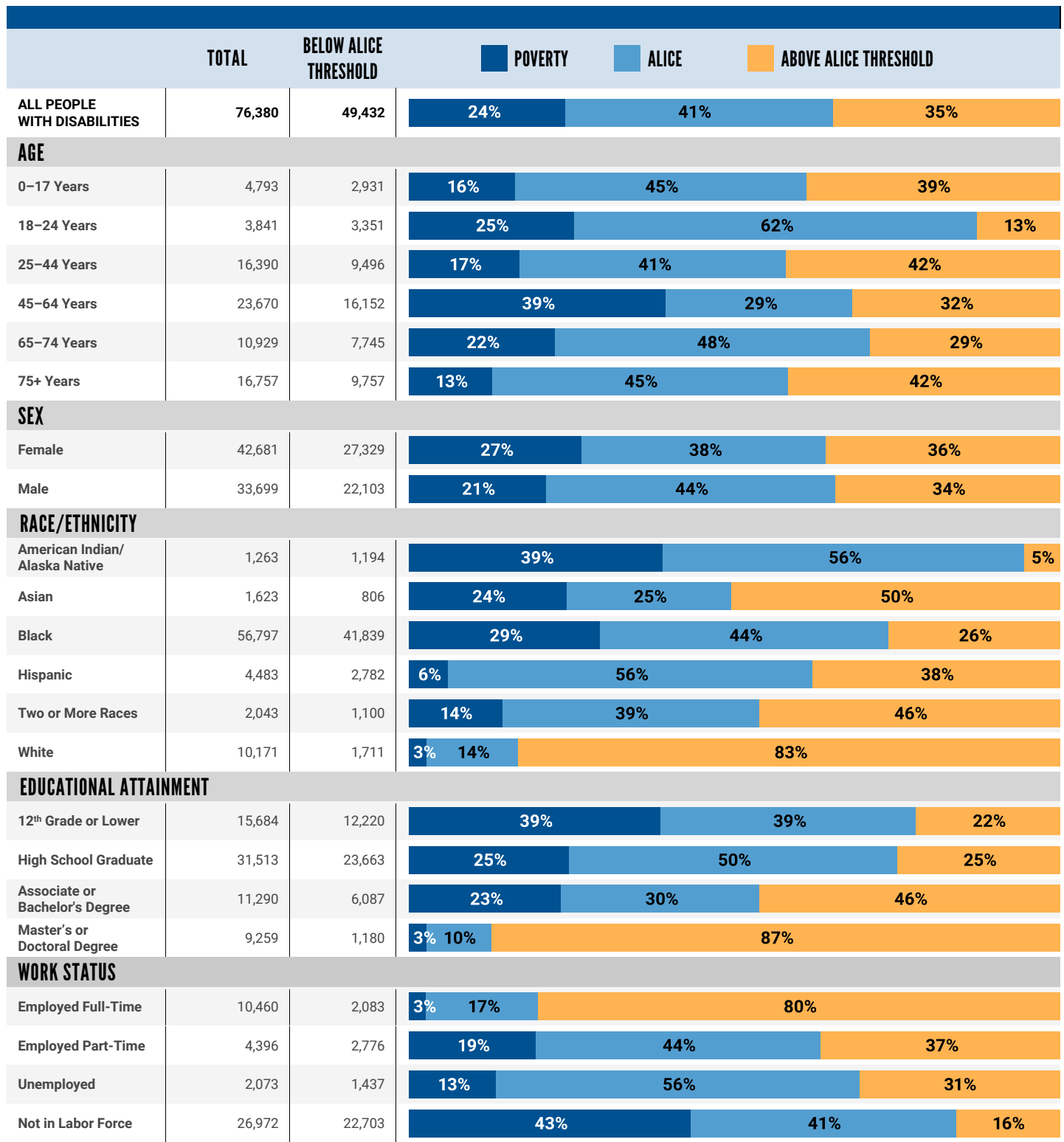
In 2019 there were 20,844 children in D.C. living in a household where someone had a disability, and 76% were below the ALICE Threshold. When a parent or guardian had a disability, the share of children below the Threshold rose to 87%.

Children with disabilities who lived with two adults were more likely to be financially stable than children living with a single parent or guardian. Despite this, even in households with two working adults, 38% of children with disabilities were below the ALICE Threshold. When only one out of two adults worked, the rate increased to 84%. And almost two-thirds (64%) of children with disabilities who lived in a household with a single working parent or guardian were below the Threshold.

Overall, people with disabilities in D.C. were more likely than people without disabilities to live alone (33% vs. 18%). More than 25,000 people with disabilities in D.C. lived alone in 2019. People with disabilities who lived alone were more likely to be below the ALICE Threshold (73%) than people with disabilities who lived with one or more other people (61%).

Seniors (age 65+) lived alone at even higher rates than people age 18–64 in D.C. (37% vs. 22%). Yet seniors with disabilities living alone were more likely to be below the ALICE Threshold (72%) than seniors with disabilities living with one or more other people (56%).

People With Disabilities by Household Financial Status and Key Demographics, D.C., 2019



Note: Percentages are rounded to whole numbers for ease of reading, which may result in percentages totaling 99% or 101%. The groups shown in this figure overlap across categories (Age, Sex, Race/Ethnicity, Educational Attainment, and Work Status). Sex includes the sex reported by the respondent for household members; the ACS only includes the options "male" or "female." All racial categories except Two or More Races are for one race alone. The Hispanic group may include people with disabilities of any race. The Educational Attainment category includes people age 25+ and is based on the highest level of educational attainment. The Work category includes only people age 18–64. View more on the [ALICE Disability Data Dashboard](#).

Sources: ALICE Threshold, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, PUMS, 2019

ACCESS TO RESOURCES

[Despite legislation that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities](#) in areas such as employment, housing, access to health services, education, and public transportation, people with disabilities still often confront barriers to accessing basic resources. This is especially significant because people with disabilities who are below the ALICE Threshold are much more likely to lack stable housing, quality child care and early education, private health insurance, and home internet access. At the same time, many people with disabilities who struggle to afford the basics are not eligible for public assistance programs. When these household necessities are at risk, there are both [short- and long-term cumulative consequences](#).

Stable Housing

Housing instability has a profound impact on overall well-being. A lack of stable housing puts people with disabilities at risk for poor physical and mental health, and may even undermine their ability to live independently in the community. [Discriminatory housing practices, a lack of affordable housing, and limited accessible housing stock](#) make it difficult for people with disabilities to find a safe and affordable place to call home. In many states there are long waiting lists for housing assistance, including [the Medicaid Home and Community Based Services \(HCBS\) waiver program](#), but [there is no wait list in D.C.](#)

People with disabilities living in rental housing units and in households that are housing cost burdened (paying more than 35% of income on rent or mortgage) are more likely to experience [housing insecurity](#) and are therefore also at [greater risk of becoming homeless](#). Overall, almost two-thirds (65%) of people with disabilities in D.C. were in renter households and more than one-third (35%) were in owner-occupied housing in 2019. However, there were differences by age and income:

- **For people with disabilities under age 65:** Those below the ALICE Threshold were more likely to live in renter households than owner-occupied housing (87% vs. 13%). Those above the Threshold were less likely to be renters (44% vs. 56%).
- **For seniors with disabilities (age 65+):** Seniors were more likely to live in owner-occupied housing, but there continued to be a gap by income. Below the Threshold, 64% of seniors with disabilities were renters and 36% were in owner-occupied housing, compared to seniors with disabilities above the Threshold: 29% in renter households and 71% in owner-occupied housing.

By race/ethnicity, in 2019, Black people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold in D.C. were more likely to live in renter households than White and Hispanic people with disabilities below the Threshold (80% vs. 53% and 54%, respectively).

In D.C., half (51%) of people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold living in renter households were rent burdened (paying more than 35% of income on rent), similar to the rate for people without disabilities below the Threshold (52%). In contrast, for people above the Threshold, only 7% with disabilities and 8% without disabilities were rent burdened.

The rates of cost burden were lower for people in owner-occupied households, but there were still large gaps by income in D.C. More than one-third (37%) of people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold in owner-occupied households were housing cost burdened (paying more than 35% of income on mortgage, plus utilities, taxes, and insurance), slightly less than 41% for people without disabilities below the Threshold. Yet for people above the Threshold, only 8% with disabilities and 5% without disabilities were owner cost burdened.

The highest rates of rent burden for people with disabilities in D.C. were in District of Columbia Northeast and East, at 54% and 49%, respectively; while the highest rates of owner cost burden for people with disabilities were in District of Columbia Central at 33%, and Northeast at 22%.

Health Insurance

Access to health insurance is critical to both wellness and financial stability for people with disabilities. Because of Medicare, all seniors in D.C. — with and without disabilities — had health insurance in 2019, as did 93% of people under 65. People with disabilities below the Threshold were slightly more likely to have health insurance than people without disabilities below the Threshold (97% vs. 92%), which likely reflects the [increased need for health services](#) in this population.

The majority of people with disabilities below the Threshold in D.C. had public insurance (71%), while the majority with disabilities above the Threshold had private insurance (70%).

Medicaid and Medicare, programs designed specifically to provide medical coverage to people with low or fixed incomes and some people with disabilities, were also not fully available to people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold. Only 8% of people with disabilities under the age of 65 and living below the ALICE Threshold in D.C. were not enrolled in Medicaid or Medicare in 2019, much better than the national rate of 31%. Within the district, there was significant variation in this rate, ranging from 4% in District of Columbia North and Northeast to 36% in District of Columbia West.

D.C., 2019	With Disabilities Under 65		Without Disabilities Under 65
Health Insurance	Below ALICE Threshold	Above ALICE Threshold	Below ALICE Threshold
Medicare	24% (7,792)	10% (1,737)	2% (4,101)
Medicaid	88% (27,988)	36% (6,045)	53% (94,930)
TRICARE/VA	1% (323)	9% (1,475)	3% (6,115)
No Health Insurance	3% (835)	2% (292)	8% (14,256)

Access to Technology

Access to the internet, digital devices, and [assistive technology](#) can be a lifeline for people with disabilities, yet there is a [digital divide by disability status](#), in addition to broader digital divides by [income](#), [race/ethnicity](#), and [location](#). While internet access has become almost ubiquitous across D.C., in 2019, people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold had some of the lowest access rates to even the most common technological device: a smartphone. Only 66% of people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold in D.C. had a smartphone, compared to 90% of people without disabilities below the Threshold, 85% of people with disabilities above the Threshold, and 97% of people without disabilities above the Threshold.

In D.C. in 2019, 81% of people with disabilities had some type of internet access at home, but rates were lower for people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold (74%). And with the increase in remote work and education, a high-speed internet connection has become more important; yet only half (51%) of people with

disabilities below the Threshold had high-speed internet in 2019, well below the rate for people without disabilities below the Threshold (66%), people with disabilities above the Threshold (77%), and people without disabilities above the Threshold (91%).

Access to high-speed internet also varied by location across the district. High-speed internet access for people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold was lowest in District of Columbia North and West at 36%, and highest in District of Columbia Northeast at 65%.

Even with internet access, people with disabilities often face additional barriers online, as most websites do not meet [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) (WCAG) for accessibility.

Public Assistance

For a [variety of reasons](#), public assistance does not reach all people in households that are struggling. While most people in poverty are eligible, those in ALICE households often earn too much to qualify for assistance. In addition, income and asset limits for public assistance can create “[benefits cliffs](#)” that limit economic mobility.

Supplemental Security Income (SSI) [provides financial assistance](#) to people with disabilities who have limited income and resources. Yet the criteria are so limited that less than one-third (31%) of people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold in D.C. received SSI payments in 2019; in other words, two-thirds (69% or 34,170 people) did not. To be eligible, applicants cannot have assets greater than \$2,000 for an individual and \$3,000 for a married couple — a level that has not been updated in nearly 40 years, and that creates a [substantial barrier to saving and wealth-building for people with disabilities and their families](#).

While the eligibility threshold for the [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program](#) (SNAP, formerly food stamps) is higher than that of SSI (200% of the FPL), it still does not reach all households in need. Even though all people with disabilities living in households with income below the FPL should be covered by SNAP, in D.C., only 67% of people with disabilities in poverty (12,441), and a mere 35% of people with disabilities in ALICE households (10,742), participated in SNAP in 2019. This left a gap of over 26,000 people with disabilities whose families were struggling to make ends meet in D.C. but not participating in SNAP.

While low, D.C.’s rate of SNAP coverage for people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold is higher than in neighboring states: 38% in Maryland and 28% in Virginia.

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

The inequities and barriers to financial stability that many people with disabilities face were exacerbated during the dual health and economic crises of the COVID-19 pandemic. The [challenges](#) included a higher susceptibility to severe illness and death, a risk of being triaged out of COVID-19 treatment when supplies became scarce, limited options for those in congregate settings to transition to community settings, lack of access to in-person special education services and supports, low priority for vaccine distribution, an extensive shortage of direct care and support workers, and substantial communication barriers due to mask-wearing and social distancing (especially for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind, or blind). For people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold, there were added challenges related to finding and keeping employment, limited income/savings, and additional costs associated with living with a disability (such as those related to personal assistance, home accommodations, and transportation).

As shown in our recent report, [The Pandemic Divide](#), households below the ALICE Threshold suffered disproportionately during the pandemic. Expanding on those findings, our analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Surveys* (July 2021–February 2022) reveals that people with disabilities and their households were more likely than people without disabilities to be adversely impacted by the pandemic — financially, physically, and emotionally. And these negative impacts were even more substantial for people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold:

- **Work loss:** In D.C., respondents with disabilities were twice as likely as those without disabilities (24% vs. 12%) to report that they or someone in their household had experienced a loss of employment income in the last four weeks. Respondents with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold were even more likely to have experienced loss of employment income in the household, at 35%.
- **Paying bills:** In D.C., people with disabilities were more likely than those without disabilities to report that their household had difficulty paying for usual household expenses, including food, rent or mortgage, car payments, or medical expenses (53% vs. 20%). And it was even harder for respondents with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold, with 73% reporting difficulty paying usual expenses.

* Note: The definition of disability in the Household Pulse Survey is slightly narrower than the ACS definition and includes vision, hearing, cognitive, and mobility difficulties.

- **Food insufficiency:** Throughout the pandemic, people with disabilities in D.C. struggled to afford food: 25% of people with disabilities reported that their household sometimes or often did not have enough to eat, compared to 7% of people without disabilities. And respondents with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold were even more likely to report that they did not have enough to eat (37%).
- **Interrupted learning:** The pandemic has [disrupted elementary, secondary, and higher education](#) for more than two years, and students with disabilities — of all income levels — have been disproportionately affected. For example, the more than [7 million students](#) nationwide (age 3–21) who received educational services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act faced [unique barriers](#), as students with disabilities were not as easily transferred to online learning and families tried to provide support typically provided in the classroom.



It was also a challenge for older students in D.C.: Respondents with disabilities were more likely than respondents without disabilities (19% vs. 17%) to report that they or another adult in their household canceled plans to take post-secondary classes. And respondents with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold were even more likely to report that they canceled such plans (29%).

- **Depression and anxiety:** In D.C., people with disabilities were five times as likely as people without disabilities to report that nearly every day over the last two weeks they had been bothered by feeling down, depressed, or hopeless (30% vs. 6%). Respondents with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold were even more likely to report feeling depressed nearly every day, at 38%. Similarly, 37% of people with disabilities reported that nearly every day over the last two weeks they had felt nervous, anxious, or on edge, compared to 11% of people without disabilities. And people with disabilities below the ALICE Threshold were even more likely to report feeling anxious nearly every day, at 39%.

ALICE IN FOCUS: DISABILITIES – INCOME STATUS BY STATE, 2019

State	TOTAL		Household Income Status		
	% of Total Population With Disabilities	Number of People With Disabilities	% People With Disabilities, Poverty	% People With Disabilities, ALICE	% People With Disabilities, Below ALICE Threshold
United States	13%	40,434,657	18%	34%	51%
Alabama	16%	769,303	21%	33%	54%
Alaska	11%	79,509	16%	28%	43%
Arizona	13%	922,089	17%	32%	48%
Arkansas	18%	514,950	23%	33%	56%
California	10%	4,021,107	15%	39%	55%
Colorado	11%	592,807	14%	36%	50%
Connecticut	12%	403,194	16%	32%	48%
Delaware	13%	126,113	13%	30%	44%
D.C.	11%	76,380	24%	41%	65%
Florida	14%	2,853,249	16%	37%	53%
Georgia	13%	1,304,551	18%	39%	57%
Hawaii	12%	158,166	12%	33%	45%
Idaho	14%	243,291	16%	29%	45%
Illinois	11%	1,397,737	17%	28%	45%
Indiana	14%	883,592	18%	29%	46%
Iowa	12%	367,405	17%	26%	43%
Kansas	14%	397,383	16%	30%	46%
Kentucky	18%	770,522	25%	30%	55%
Louisiana	16%	716,266	24%	35%	60%
Maine	17%	219,249	18%	36%	54%
Maryland	11%	655,840	16%	34%	50%
Massachusetts	12%	765,568	17%	40%	57%
Michigan	14%	1,368,811	19%	28%	48%
Minnesota	11%	580,489	16%	30%	45%
Mississippi	17%	484,021	23%	35%	58%
Missouri	15%	877,364	20%	33%	53%
Montana	13%	136,694	16%	27%	43%
Nebraska	12%	225,574	14%	29%	43%
Nevada	12%	370,117	16%	31%	47%
New Hampshire	13%	169,791	13%	36%	49%
New Jersey	10%	892,076	14%	33%	47%
New Mexico	16%	322,997	21%	31%	52%
New York	11%	2,167,144	21%	37%	58%
North Carolina	13%	1,355,008	18%	34%	52%
North Dakota	11%	81,249	18%	24%	42%
Ohio	14%	1,581,356	20%	29%	48%
Oklahoma	16%	607,461	21%	29%	49%
Oregon	15%	598,976	15%	39%	55%
Pennsylvania	14%	1,760,256	19%	31%	50%
Rhode Island	13%	131,554	20%	35%	54%
South Carolina	14%	716,796	19%	34%	53%
South Dakota	12%	99,428	14%	28%	42%
Tennessee	15%	1,019,172	20%	37%	57%
Texas	11%	3,250,934	18%	33%	51%
Utah	9%	286,502	13%	26%	39%
Vermont	15%	88,783	14%	38%	52%
Virginia	12%	994,957	15%	35%	50%
Washington	13%	934,774	13%	30%	43%
West Virginia	20%	346,842	21%	33%	54%
Wisconsin	12%	670,110	16%	27%	43%
Wyoming	14%	77,150	16%	23%	39%

ALICE IN FOCUS: DISABILITIES – KEY INDICATORS BY STATE, 2019

	TOTAL	Rent Burden	Owner Burden	Internet	SSI
State	Number of People With Disabilities Below ALICE Threshold	% With Disabilities Below ALICE Threshold Paying 35% or More on Rent	% With Disabilities Below ALICE Threshold Paying 35% or More on Mortgage	% With Disabilities Below ALICE Threshold with High-Speed Internet Access	% With Disabilities Below ALICE Threshold Receiving SSI
United States	20,777,392	57%	38%	53%	17%
Alabama	415,876	53%	29%	41%	16%
Alaska	34,245	57%	33%	41%	14%
Arizona	446,074	57%	36%	52%	13%
Arkansas	288,004	46%	30%	42%	15%
California	2,203,884	63%	45%	60%	20%
Colorado	298,177	58%	42%	59%	12%
Connecticut	193,006	60%	59%	58%	18%
Delaware	54,968	60%	41%	61%	14%
D.C.	49,432	51%	37%	51%	31%
Florida	1,506,796	65%	39%	57%	15%
Georgia	745,324	52%	33%	54%	17%
Hawaii	71,290	61%	40%	62%	13%
Idaho	110,020	55%	37%	49%	13%
Illinois	629,632	57%	46%	48%	18%
Indiana	407,723	56%	37%	50%	15%
Iowa	158,972	51%	39%	43%	14%
Kansas	184,575	54%	31%	52%	12%
Kentucky	422,925	49%	30%	50%	19%
Louisiana	426,424	53%	29%	48%	18%
Maine	118,497	50%	45%	56%	19%
Maryland	329,966	63%	45%	57%	15%
Massachusetts	436,768	55%	49%	59%	20%
Michigan	654,982	59%	38%	53%	18%
Minnesota	263,560	58%	41%	54%	17%
Mississippi	280,024	48%	25%	37%	17%
Missouri	467,480	51%	34%	47%	16%
Montana	58,287	52%	39%	49%	12%
Nebraska	97,905	46%	43%	51%	13%
Nevada	175,314	70%	43%	58%	13%
New Hampshire	82,756	56%	50%	62%	11%
New Jersey	418,963	61%	60%	56%	15%
New Mexico	169,474	49%	34%	40%	15%
New York	1,250,913	59%	49%	56%	22%
North Carolina	702,910	53%	35%	50%	15%
North Dakota	34,229	55%	35%	53%	11%
Ohio	765,493	55%	37%	52%	19%
Oklahoma	299,423	50%	30%	40%	16%
Oregon	327,224	58%	38%	60%	13%
Pennsylvania	887,097	59%	41%	54%	19%
Rhode Island	71,588	51%	49%	49%	24%
South Carolina	380,383	48%	31%	47%	14%
South Dakota	41,761	59%	31%	53%	13%
Tennessee	580,080	47%	31%	45%	15%
Texas	1,670,058	57%	34%	48%	16%
Utah	111,977	57%	38%	55%	14%
Vermont	46,446	64%	50%	58%	17%
Virginia	495,935	55%	35%	52%	15%
Washington	402,857	60%	42%	60%	17%
West Virginia	187,546	46%	25%	49%	19%
Wisconsin	289,880	60%	42%	52%	19%
Wyoming	30,269	59%	36%	51%	11%

NEXT STEPS

Capturing the true extent of disabilities in D.C. and across the U.S., and the role of financial hardship for people with disabilities, is critical for the appropriate allocation of [funds for programs](#) in areas such as education, health care, food access, housing, and employment. There is a lot more to be done to change the trajectory for people with disabilities who are struggling to make ends meet. Visit UnitedForALICE.org to learn more, then share this data with stakeholders in your community.

Learn more with:

- The [ALICE Disability Data Dashboard](#), to dig deeper into demographics and local geographies
- [Resources related to people with disabilities and financial hardship](#), including the references linked in this Research Brief, as well as additional resources that offer important context and even deeper analysis
- [The Pandemic Divide: An ALICE Analysis of National COVID Surveys](#) (2021) and other resources on the [COVID-19 and ALICE](#) webpage, to see the impacts of the pandemic on ALICE
- The [ALICE Wage Tool](#), to explore wage levels by geography and occupation

Connect with stakeholders:

- [Contact your local United Way](#) for support and volunteer opportunities.
- [Connect with members of the committees that support this work](#), including the ALICE in Focus National Research Advisory Committee for People with Disabilities, and the ALICE in Focus National Leadership Committee for People With Disabilities.
- Find your state and federal representatives and see ALICE household data by legislative district with our [ALICE Legislative District Tool](#).

Be an ally and advocate for better data:

- Advocate for more accurate data collection by the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) for people with disabilities who have been [historically undercounted](#), including (but not limited to) people with varying types of disabilities, people experiencing homelessness, people of color, individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, and people in low-income and hard-to-count geographic areas.
- [Be an ally for people with disabilities](#): Work to combat stigma, amplify the voices of people with disabilities, and be a champion for accessible workplaces and community spaces.
- Explore data from various sources to better understand the prevalence of disability in your community and across the U.S. For example, in 2019, 7.3 million children across the U.S. had an IEP (a document outlining the educational services public school children with a condition covered by the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) receive) — more than twice as many children as those identified as having a disability by the ACS.
- Support collection of data on [long or long-haul COVID-19](#), a condition that could [leave as many as 25 million COVID-19 survivors in the U.S. with a lasting disability](#).

United For ALICE is a driver of innovative research and action around financial hardship, with a commitment to [racial and economic justice](#) for ALICE. The ALICE data and analysis are shared with United Ways, corporations, foundations, government, and nonprofits, to inform policy and promote positive change.

The **ALICE in Focus Series** utilizes ALICE measures — the Household Survival Budget and the ALICE Threshold — to analyze the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS). Each "Focus" in the series highlights a different demographic group. For more details about the methodology for the ALICE in Focus Series, go to UnitedForALICE.org/Methodology.

PARTNERS AND SPONSORS

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