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Comment on Skoog and Toppino

By Jack McNeil¹

This comment attempts to clarify certain issues regarding the use of work disability data from the Current Population Survey in studies of worklife expectancy. In their 1999 article in the *Journal of Forensic Economics*, “Disability and the New Worklife Expectancy Tables from Vocational Econometrics, 1998: A Critical Analysis,” Gary Skoog and David Toppino (1999) state that “it will be demonstrated that the CPS data was never intended to be utilized, and is essentially unsuitable for use, as a disability-screening device for the purposes of forecasting differences in worklife expectancy.” More recently, the journal published “Disability and Worklife Expectancy Tables: A Response” by David Gibson and John Tierney (2000). In that article (Volume 13, Issue 3), Gibson and Tierney defended the use of CPS work disability data for forensic purposes and responded to the criticism contained in the Skoog and Toppino paper.

In their paper, Skoog and Toppino quote certain materials that I prepared and published while employed at the United States Bureau of the Census. They also quote from a letter written by Harvey Hamel while an employee of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, and from comments made by Corinne Kirchner of the American Foundation for the Blind at a 1995 forum. In the quoted materials, McNeil, Hamel, and Kirchner appear to comment in a negative way on the value of CPS work disability data. The comments are, in fact, negative, but they are aimed at the use of CPS as a data source for monitoring the employment status of individuals with a disability as defined in the ADA. The comments should not be used as evidence that the three analysts would agree that CPS work disability data should not be used for forensic purposes.

The CPS is not an appropriate source for monitoring the employment status of individuals with disabilities because the CPS disability questions are not designed to identify individuals who meet the definition of disability that appears in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). The ADA defines disability as (1) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities, (2) a record of such an impairment, or (3) being regarded as having such an impairment. Major life activities are described as including such things as caring for one’s self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working.

But the issue for forensic economists is not whether CPS work disability data are appropriate for monitoring the employment status of individuals with disabilities as defined in the ADA, but whether the data are useful for identifying populations with different worklife expectancies. The fact that the CPS data are not useful for the first purpose does not necessarily mean that they are not useful for the second. It is not appropriate for Skoog and Toppino to cite the words of the three authors mentioned above as evidence that CPS data should not be used in the analysis of differentials in worklife expectancies. In fact, it is worth noting that the CPS work disability

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questions are based on Social Security Administration (SSA) efforts to develop a method of identifying individuals with a condition that prevented them from working or a condition that substantially increased the risk that they would become unable to work.

The CPS disability questions are based on the survey development work carried out at the Social Security Administration in the 1960s. That work was summarized by Larry Haber in “Identifying the Disabled: Concepts and Methods in the Measurement of Disability,” *Social Security Bulletin*, December 1967. The survey work at the Social Security Administration led directly to the inclusion of work disability questions in the decennial censuses of 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000. The work disability question in the March supplement to the CPS has been asked since 1980, and work disability questions have been part of the core questionnaire of the SIPP since that survey began in 1984. The importance of the survey work is underlined by the fact that the Social Security Administration chose to republish the Haber article in its entirety in the May 1988 issue of the Bulletin. In a commentary that appears in that issue, Barry Bye of the Social Security Administration notes that the 1966 survey “marked the first time that a large-scale national survey was designed specifically to examine the consequences of work disability.”

For those analysts concerned with the relationship between disability and worklife, the CPS is an important data source. The reasons include the specific intent of the work disability questions, the large sample size of the survey, and a long and relatively stable survey history.

References

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