

Rights for Disabled Improve

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May 4, 2017

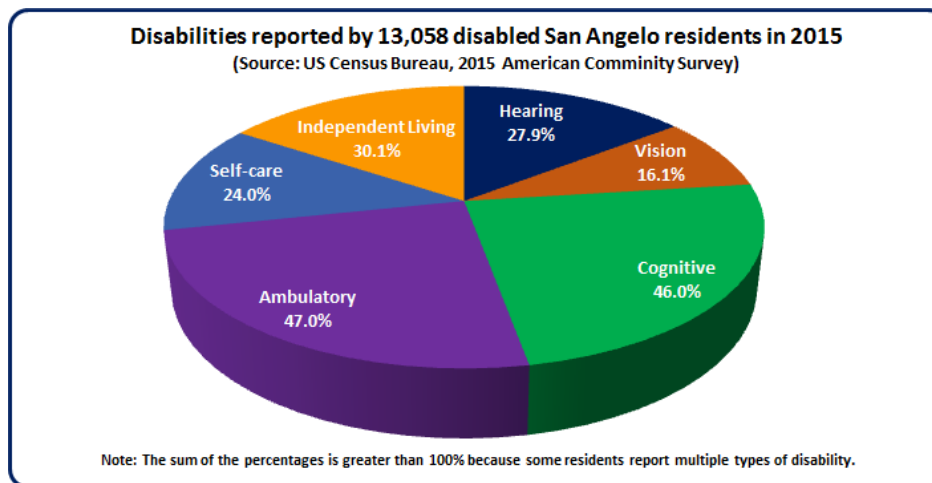
"The problems of the disabled are unpopular," quipped Itzhak Perlman in a 1982 New York Times interview. It would be another six years before a proposed Americans with Disabilities ACT (ADA) would make its way to the US Congress in 1988. Passing the ADA into law would wait until 1990, and another two years would go by before meaningful rules for implementing ADA provisions were adopted in 1992.

Before the interview with the Times, Perlman had emerged as a world renowned violinist. His career was jump-started when he struggled to the stage with his crutches for two stunning musical performances on the Ed Sullicvan Show in 1958. From there, he overcame the crippling effects of the polio he contracted as a four year old by making marathon musical tours like the ones that included more than 80 cities in the US and abroad between 1965 and 1968.

In the meantime, Perlman became one of the many thousands of people who made up the disability rights movement for over two decades leading up to the ADA. Indeed, the Times interview in 1982 was sparked by Perlman's lecture series for architects about what he called "universal designs." He was advocating the radical idea that, "You don't have to be in a wheelchair to walk through a wider doorway, ride an elevator or use a ramp."

Inspired by Perlman's story and those of other "differently abled" persons, we analyzed a comprehensive set of relevant data. We obtained material from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) to launch an analysis highlighting important demographic characteristics of San Angelo's disability population. The analysis also reveals challenges and progress made by these members of the local community in recent years spanning 2009 to 2015.

An estimated 10,731 residents or 12.3 percent of San Angelo's population experienced disability in 2009 according to ACS data. The following six years brought an increase, raising the city's disability rate to 13.7 percent for 2015.



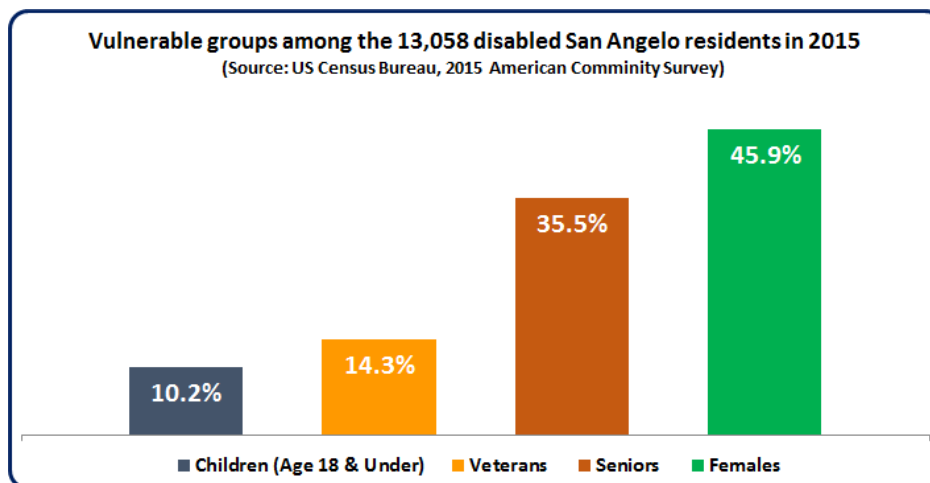
San Angelo had approximately 13,058 disabled persons by 2015. They experienced six different types of functional impairments, with many experiencing multiple types. Physical mobility (i.e. ambulatory) problems like Itzhak Perlman’s disability are sometimes coupled with vision or hearing difficulties. These, in turn, are sometimes paired with various challenges to daily living, such as problems processing information (i.e. cognitive disability), difficulties performing regular self care activities, or challenges to the ability live independently.

Even though the disability population increased in recent years, a sign of progress in the city is indicated by reduced numbers of certain types of disability. For instance, more than 6,000 or 58 percent of persons with disabilities in 2009 reported problems with self-care. This number fell to just over 3,100 or 24 percent by 2015. Similarly, the number experiencing challenges to independent living declined from 36 percent in 2009 to 30 percent for 2015.

Other types of disabilities increased over the six year period. Most notable was a jump in cognitive disabilities from 26 percent (1,760 persons) of the disability population in 2009 to 46 percent (6,012 individuals) in 2015.

Children, elderly citizens, females, and veterans were plentiful among the city’s 13,058 members of the disability population in 2015. Some analysts view concentrations of vulnerable groups like these in the disability community as significant because they may experience double jeopardy in a sense. They might run risks of falling through the cracks of community service systems because of disability, but also because they are children, or elderly, or female, or veterans.

Part of the good news for San Angelo, however, is that the presence of vulnerable subgroups in the disability population diminished from 2009 to 2015. The numeric count of disabled females and veterans changed little. Nevertheless, given growth in the disability population over the years, the percentage of women fell from 55 to 46 percent. The proportion of veterans diminished more slightly from 14.7 to 14.3 percent.

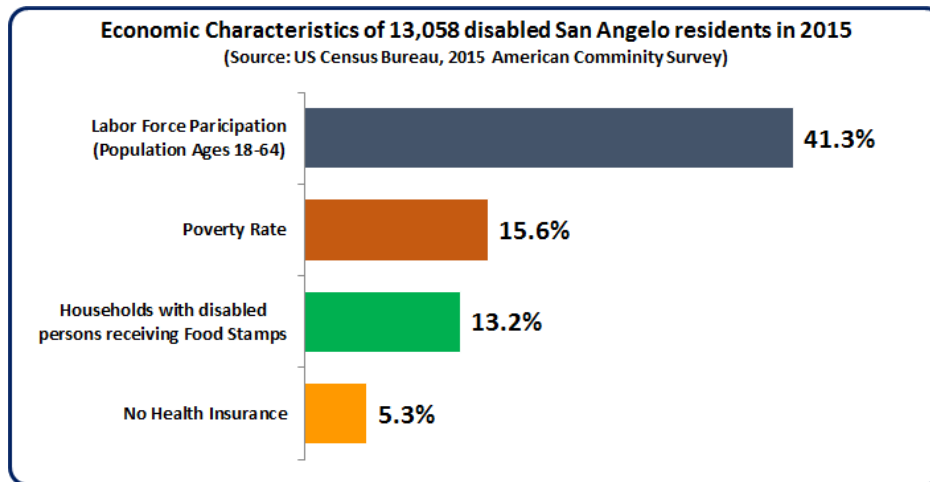


Perhaps the most significant shift in the composition of the disability population was the declining numbers of children and elders from about 6,111 (57%) to 5,974 (46%) of the disabled. This change, of course, means increasing prevalence of individuals of working age. Indeed, the number of people with disabilities between the ages of 18 and 64 grew from 4,461 in 2009 to 7,036 in 2015. They comprised 43 percent of the disability community in 2009; 54

percent in 2015.

Improvements in economic standing reflect these changes in the composition of disability within the local community. Indeed, the poverty rate among individuals with disabilities plummeted from 20.8 percent in 2009 to 15.6 percent in 2015. In fact, the 2015 rate was 2.4 percent lower than the poverty rate among citizens with no disabilities. A key indicator of food insecurity, high levels of reliance on food stamps by households with disabled members also fell between 2009 and 2015.

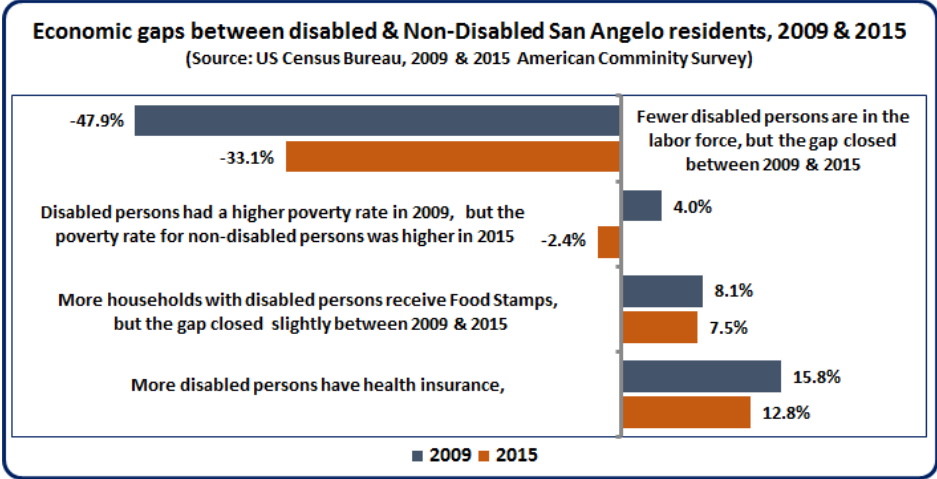
Evidence of increased attachment to the labor force is very positive news for people with disabilities in San Angelo. In 2009, about 4,600 disabled individuals were engaged in the labor force and nearly 1,600 were employed. These numbers translated to a 37 percent labor force participation rate and an employment rate of 91.6 percent. Of course, the population without disabilities had a much higher labor force participation rate at 85.2 percent, but a somewhat lower employment rate at 89.9 percent.



Interestingly, the members of the disability community participating in the labor force shot up from about 4,600 in 2009 to a little over 7,000 by 2015. Their labor force participation rate raised to 41.3 percent. At the same time, labor force participation dropped to 74.4 percent among able-bodied residents with no disabilities. Employment levels were high among both disabled (92.9%) and non-disabled (97.4%) labor force participants.

A major purpose of the disability rights movement and original ADA policy was to ban discrimination and ensure equal opportunity in employment. Ironically, when ADA provisions were first applied during the 1990s, critics worried about effects on employment that might stem from the costs of such radical changes.

That was when strong leaders like Arlene Mayerson, long-time directing attorney at the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, stared down the critics by declaring, “The ADA is radical only in comparison to a shameful history of outright exclusion and segregation of people with disabilities. From a civil rights perspective the Americans with Disabilities Act as a codification of simple justice.”



The history of civil rights tells us that moving from “codification of simple justice” to its realization in practice is a long, long struggle. Much remains to be done, but it is a very good thing to see signs of progress toward simple justice in San Angelo.