

# **The Prevalence of Communication Disorders in Canada: A Need for a Reliable Canadian Data Base**

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Few studies related to the prevalence of communication disorders are available specific to the Canadian population. Most cited prevalence data on the speech-impaired population in Canada result from extrapolations of studies carried out in the United States or in Europe. The Government of Canada and provincial governments require a comprehensive and valid data base from which the planning of communicative, health, educational and other resource development needs can be undertaken. As well, the determination of adequate social policies is dependent on a reliable data base.

The Canada Health Survey (July 1978 - March 1979) was initiated by the Department of National Health and Welfare and by Statistics Canada in response to demands for better data on the health status of Canadians (Abelson, 1977). Prior to the Canada Health Survey, statistics on disability did not exist in Canada for the general population. The statistics which were available came from various government programs such as Workman's Compensation, social assistance programs and the Canada and Quebec pension plans (Romeder and Hill, 1977). Such statistics only reflected disabilities for those who qualified for benefits, and did not measure disability in the general population of Canadians.

The Canada Health Survey sampled 31,668 individuals in Canada. The measurement of disability on this survey did not yield any information on the prevalence of *communicatively-disabled* Canadians. Communication disabilities were included as part of the classification of general health problems and the prevalence of health problems was determined primarily on the basis of an activity limitation. The respondent was asked, for example, if he/she was limited in the kind or amount of his/her major activity (housework, work, school). The respondent could indicate that there was: some limitation in kind or amount of the major activity; some limitation in other activities; no limitations; or an inability to carry out major activity. The final report of the Canada Health Survey indicated that approximately 12 percent of Canadians were disabled (Department of National Health and Welfare and Statistics Canada, 1981). Unfortunately, the definition of disability in

this report did not permit differentiation among an impairment, a handicap and a disability. As well, the results did not provide prevalence estimates for disability types.

Other more recent surveys of the handicapped also yielded questionable prevalence data on the entire population of communicatively-impaired Canadians. A survey of non-institutionalized handicapped persons in Ontario which was recently completed (Ontario Ministry of Health, 1982), only addressed the physically handicapped. The sample for this study included 15,000 Ontario homes, 13,000 of which responded. Of the the population who were identified as physically impaired and who were then subsequently interviewed (1,764 persons), very few indicated that they had speech impairments in addition to their physical handicap.

As a result of the continuing requirement for statistical information on disabled persons in Canada, the Federal Government has endorsed and funded a 1983 survey specific to this population. Statistics Canada contacted all Federal departments and agencies, Crown Corporations as well as Provincial Government departments and associations of, and for, the disabled and the handicapped, in planning for this survey.

An initial test to determine the selection procedures for the Canadian Health and Disability Survey took place in January 1983 as a supplement to the monthly Labour Force Survey. The final survey undertaken in October 1983 was planned to provide more detailed information. An eighteen page disability questionnaire which included both the screen and follow-up questions was presented to 5/6 of the Labour Force Survey Sample. An interview was used to administer the follow-up portion of the disability questionnaire on a face to face basis. This follow-up questionnaire contained limited additional questions related to hearing and speech disabilities.

The Canadian Health and Disability Survey focused on physical disabilities and knowledge acquisition disabilities (including learning disabilities and mental retardation). The survey sampled approximately 137,000 people across Canada, but excluded the Yukon and Northwest Territories, residents of

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Indian reservations and persons in institutions, such as chronic care hospitals and homes for the aged. The population of communicatively-disabled persons within these excluded populations is likely very significant. As a result, the Statistics generated by Canadian Health Disability Survey are relevant only to the disabled within the household population of Canada. In addition, many of the criticisms leveled at previous prevalence studies of persons with communication disorders may well apply to this recent Canadian study. These issues are as follows: the diagnostic information provided may have been limited by the sophistication and reliability of the respondents and hence variable; where multiple disabilities exist, concomitant problems such as communication impairments may not have been identified; the sample used was not representative of all Canadian population groups; the sample was not sufficiently large so as to be able to specify disability groups according to age, sex or geographic factors unless the prevalence values obtained were very large.

Preliminary information obtained from the January 1983 test of screening questions for the Canadian Health and Disability Survey (sampling only one third of the regular Labour Force Survey sample) suggested the prevalence of the speech-disabled in households in Canada is approximately 99,000 persons (ages 15 years and above). Of these persons approximately one-third are over 65 years of age (Statistics Canada, 1984). Additional results on the Canadian Disability Survey will be forthcoming.

There is interest in a post-censal disability survey in 1986 if a census is carried out. A sufficiently large sample, such as one which can be provided by

a census is required if Canada is to be able to obtain fine data regarding the prevalence of communication disabilities. The results of this more extensive survey would produce information on communicative disabilities which relate to different geographic areas of the country, narrow age groups and a sufficient delineation of disability types. Without the large sample provided by a census, relatively rare conditions and finer categorizations are not possible.

It is hoped that subsequent studies will address the limitations of those to date, and that the Government of Canada will reconsider the scope of the 1986 Census.

#### References

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