



Setting Expectations for Claimant Ability to Work: Investigating the Occupational Requirements and Functional Capacity of Workers with Early Onset Health Conditions

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When determining a claimant's eligibility for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits, the Social Security Administration (SSA) assesses, in part, if the claimant's health condition is sufficiently severe enough that he/she is incapable of sustaining substantial gainful activity (SGA), defined in 2019 as earning more than \$1,220 monthly for nonblind claimants. The severity of some health conditions is such that their presence is sufficient to impair the claimant's ability to work above SGA. The severity of other health conditions is less observable and certain, and thus, the claimant's work-related functional capacity is assessed in comparison to the occupational requirements of the claimant's job, as well as other potential United States occupations based on vocational factors (e.g., age and the transferability of prior work experience). Understanding health-impaired people's abilities to fulfill occupational requirements is crucial for knowing what to

expect of claimants, however, there is little such population-based information.

Data sources

The 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) is a nationally representative household panel survey and a comprehensive source of employment, income, assets, program participation, health insurance, family relationships, education, childcare, and food security data. The 2014 SIPP SSA Supplement is a comprehensive source of health conditions and functional limitations data. Onset data only exists for a respondent's main condition. Early onset is defined as onset before age 17, including "since birth." The Occupational Requirements Survey (ORS) is a new, national survey of employers and a comprehensive source of occupational requirements data. Requirements include physical, mental and cognitive demands, environmental conditions, and vocational

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preparation, including education, experience, and training requirements. ORS occupation-level estimates are merged into SIPP individual-level data via a crosswalk of the 419 ORS occupation codes and the 475 SIPP occupation codes.

Sample and sample size considerations

The analytical sample is restricted to adults ages 18 to 72. Age 72 years is used as the upper bound to increase the number of employed persons with health conditions (i.e., increase the amount occupational information available on workers with health conditions). Imposing late onset as a sample exclusion criterion is highly restrictive. As a result, the analysis focuses on health conditions with larger samples: (1) back/spine problems, including chronic stiffness and deformity, (2) stiffness/deformity of the leg, foot, arm, or hand, and (3) mental/emotional problem or disorder. The occupational requirements that align well with these health conditions and have data for majority of occupations are as follows:

- ◆ For back/spine problems, maximum pounds required to be lifted/carried and whether climbing ramps or stairs is required for work tasks;
- ◆ For stiffness/deformity of the leg, foot, arm, or hand, whether reaching overhead is required and whether pushing/pulling with feet/legs is required;
- ◆ For mental/emotional problem or disorder, whether the pace of work has faster/slower periods and whether the work schedule changes.

Results

When analyzing occupational requirements, these three comparisons are consistent with the expectations that workers with a health condition would be less likely to be employed in occupations for which a relevant function is required.

- ◆ The mean “within-occupation average maximum pounds required to lifted or carried” is 25.9 pounds for workers with “back or spine

problems,” which is 1.3 pounds less than for workers without “back or spine problems.”

- ◆ The mean “within-occupation percent of workers for which climbing ramps or stairs, work-related is required” is 20 percentage points for workers with “back or spine problems,” which is 1.5 percentage points less than for workers without “back or spine problems.”
- ◆ The mean “within-occupation percent of workers for which the work schedule changes” is 45.6 percentage points for workers with “mental/emotional problem or disorder,” which is 3.4 percentage points less than for workers without “mental/emotional problem or disorder.”

Comparing occupational requirements by onset status (early onset versus late onset) reveals the following:

- ◆ The mean “within-occupation average maximum pounds required to lifted or carried” is 20.9 pounds for workers with early onset “back or spine problems,” this is 5.6 pounds points less than for workers with late onset “back or spine problems.”
- ◆ The mean “within-occupation percent of workers for which the pace of work has faster/slower work periods” is 64.9 percentage points for workers with early onset “mental/emotional problem or disorder,” which is 8.8 percentage points less than for workers with late onset “mental/emotional problem or disorder.”

Both of these comparisons support concerns that the health conditions workers experience later in life may be caused by occupational requirements.

Concluding remarks

Population-based survey data on the requirements of occupations held by workers with health conditions and functional limitations has the potential, in several ways, to inform the SSA disability determination process as a complement to program data and expert panels. Some of the estimates above demonstrate that claimants with certain health conditions may be able to fulfill the requirements

in certain occupations. A similar approach, with more expansive data, could be used to investigate the validity of the Listing of Impairments—which contains health conditions for which the documented presence is sufficient to deem (assuming earnings requirements are met) a claimant eligible for benefits—by looking at the employment, earnings, and occupational requirements of workers with conditions in the listings. Similarly, the validity of SSA's residual functional capacity forms, used to assess claimant physical and mental function, could be investigated by

looking at whether additional or fewer questions are needed to assess functional capacity relative to occupational requirements—e.g., an item reduction analysis. Decisions made via the Medical-Vocational Grid, a decision-making guide used in the fifth and last step of SSA's sequential review process to assess claimant residual functional capacity and vocational factors against relatively broad occupational requirements, could be simulated and examined to inform the upcoming development of SSA's occupational grid materials. ❖

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