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It is Time to Stop Using the Washington Group Questions to Measure Disability in U.S. Federal Surveys

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Disabled people are an important health disparities population in the United States. It is critical to accurately capture disability status on federal surveys.
- The Washington-Group Short Set (WGSS) questions, currently used on the nation's gold-standard federal health survey (the National Health Interview Survey), purport to provide an estimate of disability prevalence as well as the severity of disability.
- Yet, from 2010 to 2018, the WGSS survey questions failed to accurately capture 35.7% of blind and 43.7% of deaf adults as being disabled, or as having a severe disability.
- For this reason, we call on the federal government to stop using the WGSS questions in their surveys.

Disabled people are a population with substantial health disparities in the United States. Having accurate data on disability status is critical to fully understand and reduce these disparities. The National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) is the primary survey used to monitor the health of the U.S. population. Currently, the NHIS uses the Washington Group Short Set on Functioning (WGSS) questions to: 1) create a disability indicator that can be used to estimate the size of the disabled population; and 2) ascertain the severity of a person's level of functional limitations.[1,2]

The WGSS measures the level of functional limitations in hearing, vision, cognition, mobility, self-care, and communication. The questions used to measure each of these functional limitations are based upon a four point scale: no difficulty, some difficulty, a lot of difficulty, and cannot do at all. The Washington Group suggests identifying any respondent who reports having a lot of difficulty or cannot do at all for any of the six

questions as disabled.[3] Additionally, the Washington Group states that respondents with some difficulty have a 'milder' disability, those with a lot of difficulty have a 'moderate' disability, and those who cannot do at all have a 'more severe' disability.[3]

Multiple studies document that the WGSS severely underperforms in estimating the size of the disabled population in the U.S.[4-6] There has been no empirical information on the performance of the WGSS in meeting its second aim in the U.S.: accurately ascertaining the severity of functional limitations. Our recent study[7] demonstrates that the WGSS fails to accurately identify the severity of functional limitations for two of their questions, specifically, the ones that measure functional limitations related to vision and hearing.

The WGSS Inaccurately Captures Blindness and Deafness

By definition, blindness is the most severe form of visual disability and deafness is the most severe form of hearing disability. As such, if true to their aim, the WGSS questions should capture people with blindness and deafness as having a severe level of functional limitations in these areas. People who are legally blind or legally deaf may have some vision or hearing. People who are totally blind or deaf would not be able to see or hear at all. Thus, if accurately capturing these disabilities, the WGSS should identify these people as having either a lot of difficulty or cannot do at all.

Figure 1 presents the percentages of blind and deaf adults captured by each of the WGSS categories. Among blind adults, 35.7% were inaccurately captured in the WGSS visual limitation question as either having no or some difficulty seeing. Among deaf adults, 43.7% were inaccurately captured in the WGSS hearing limitation question as having no or some difficulty hearing. In addition to not accurately identifying these blind and deaf adults as having a severe functional limitation, per the Washington Group suggested cut point for a disability indicator, these blind and deaf adults, who are disabled, would not be identified as being disabled at all in the WGSS questions.

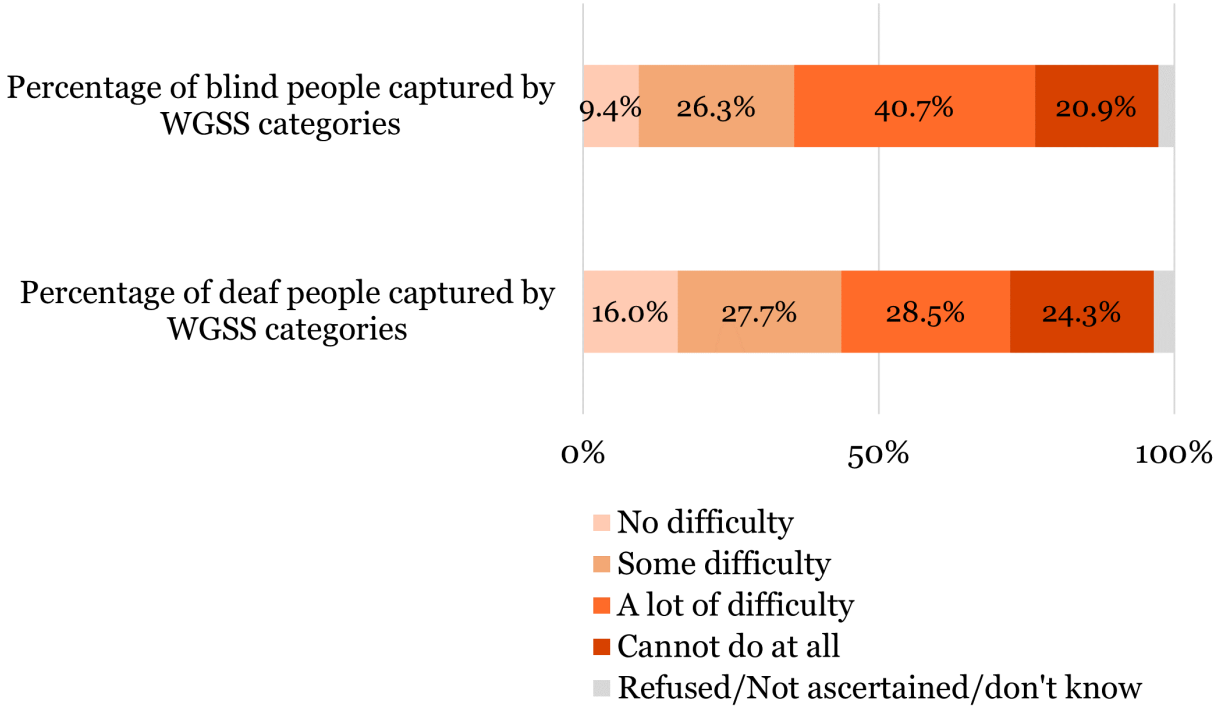

Figure 1: Percentage of Blind and Deaf People Captured by WGSS Categories, 2010-2018.

Data Source: National Health Interview Survey, 2010-2018. Blind respondents, N=642; deaf respondents, N=375.

Something is Wrong with the Washington Group Questions

A document addressing the performance of the WGSS on the National Center for Health Statistics' website explains that: "If someone who is blind says they have no difficulty seeing or if someone in a wheelchair says they have no difficulty walking then *something is not right* [italics added]."[8] Something is not right with the WGSS questions. Considering the problems already documented with the performance of the WGSS disability indicator, the results summarized in our recent study demonstrating the failure of these questions to accurately measure the severity of visual and hearing disabilities further cast doubt on the use of these questions. For this reason, we call for federal agencies to stop using the WGSS questions in their surveys. To continue measuring disability status in these surveys in the short-term, we suggest using the disability questions set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as the standard for measuring disability.[9] In the long-term, it will be necessary to consider developing new questions that provide a more accurate and inclusive measurement of the disabled population in the U.S.[10]

Data and Methods

This study used the 2010-2018 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) Sample Adult Files – a nationally-representative survey of US adults aged 18 and above. For these years, the NHIS included questions that specifically asked respondents to self-report whether they were blind or deaf in addition to the WGSS questions. Across these years, 642 respondents reported they were blind, 375 respondents reported they were deaf. Results in Figure 1 are based on distributions of the WGSS visual limitation question for blind respondents and the WGSS hearing limitation question for deaf respondents. Additional methodological details can be found in the published paper.

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