

Bridging the Gap: Addressing Inequality in the Well-Being of Disabled and Non-Disabled Children in the United States

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Abstract: The inequality in the well-being of the disabled and non-disabled children in the U.S. is an issue that demonstrates itself in education, health care and social support and protection. It is rooted in social prejudice and discrimination, economic disparity, and limited social service support. The existing measures, such as inclusive education, affordable public health programs, etc. have shown promise in narrowing the gap, but sustained efforts are crucial from both the government and individuals to enforce legislation, allocate sufficient funds and advocate for the rights and well-being of disabled children.

Keywords: Inequality; Disabled children; Non-disabled children; Well-being; ADA; IDEA

1. Introduction

In the US, over three million children had a disability in 2019 (Young & Crankshaw). The well-being of these children is of great concern and demands our consistent attention. Despite legislative frameworks like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), substantial disparities persist in the welfare of disabled and non-disabled children. This paper explores the current state of the well-being of the disabled children in the US, delves into the causes of the existing inequalities, and discusses some solutions to the problem, aiming to call for more attention to and better understanding of the welfare of the disabled children, so that the gap can be gradually bridged.

2. Current State

2.1 Inequality in Education

Education serves as a critical aspect of a child's development, but for disabled children in the U.S., significant disparities persist. Although IDEA guarantees that the disabled children have the right to free public education and appropriate special education services, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveals a significant gap in academic achievements in all subjects between students with disabilities and their non-disabled counterparts ("Achievement Gaps Dashboard") and the graduation rates for disabled students still fall behind, standing at 67.1% compared to the overall rate of 84.6%. ("Data on Disabilities.") In addition, quite some reports and journal stories highlight challenges disabled students face, including failure of accommodation (Bader), and setbacks and safety risks (Miller). All these are hard proof that disabled children are not enjoying an education on an equal basis with their nondisabled peers.

2.2 Inequality in Health Care

Disparities in health care further compound the challenges faced by disabled children. Disability is more prevalent among children living in poverty. 31.3% of children and youth with special health care needs (CYSHCN) living in poverty have disabilities compared with 20.8% of those living above 400% of the federal poverty level, and official survey shows that children with a developmental disability are more likely to: take medication; have seen a medical specialist or mental health provider than children without a developmental disability (Cogswell, et al.). Sadly, those living in or near poverty more commonly have unmet needs and limited access to a pediatric medical home and well-functioning system of care. (Houtrow, et al.) The existing health care system fails to adequately address the unique needs of disabled children, leaving them at a disadvantage of physical and mental well-being.

2.3 Social Support and Protection

Children with disabilities naturally need greater social support and protection than non-disabled children in communication, transportation, finance, etc. However, there are often multiple barriers that can make it extremely difficult for disabled children to function well, such as attitudinal, physical, programmatic, and policy barriers (“Common Barriers to Participation Experienced by People with Disabilities”). Families of disabled children face more difficulties in finding care (34% vs. 25%), and are three times more likely to experience job disruptions because of child care than those of non-disabled children (Novoa). What’s more, financial strain, health challenges, increased stress are all problems of concern for them, further underscoring the inadequacy of current support systems.

3. Root Causes for Inequality

3.1 Social Prejudice and Discrimination

Social prejudice and discrimination form a root cause for the inequality observed in the well-being of disabled children. Negative stereotypes of disabled people often result in their marginalized treatment in education, employment and social interactions. In an experiment on more than 20,000 principals at public schools in four states, results show that public school principals are less welcoming to prospective families with disabled children, and “the discrimination stems from perceptions of the children as more difficult and burdensome to educate (Rivera & Tilcsik).” Ames et al. carry out interviews with 30 families with children with medical complexity, and all these families perceive that the pediatric health care providers shun and reject their children (Ames, et al.). These disheartening findings reveal only a tip of an iceberg in terms of the social prejudice and discrimination disabled children have to face in their life, which is really suffocating.

3.2 Economic Factors

Economic factors also contribute substantially to the problem. Although it is hard to find updated official data, unofficial data are not rare and the cost of raising a special needs child is estimated at ten times that of raising a non-disabled child (Wilkes). The heavy financial burden contributes negatively to a disabled child’s access to quality education, health care and overall living conditions, etc., and the economic difficulties result in the disabled children’s families suffering from greater mental stress and psychological disturbance. It seems that the whole family is viciously trapped just because of the child with a disability.

3.3 Limited Social Service Support

Furthermore, limited availability of social service support exacerbates the well-being gap. Shortages in special education staff and inadequate health care services for children with special needs present the most prominent problems. According to National Center for Educational Statistics, in 2022, 45% of schools reported vacancies in special education (DeLaRosa), making it the teaching position with the most vacancies, and it is also the teaching position the most difficult to fill, as 78% reported difficulty in hiring special education staff (Delarosa & Elias). With the severe shortage of qualified staff in special education, it is hardly possible for disabled children to get proper education. Additionally, inaccessible health care facilities and equipment, lack of training among health professionals about specific differences and difficulties among children with disabilities result in health disparities (“Disability and Health Information for Health Care Providers”).

4. Solutions to Address Inequality

4.1 Existing Solutions

Several strategies have been implemented to address the inequality between the well-being of disabled and non-disabled children. “Inclusive education” has demonstrated positive outcomes (“5 Benefits of Inclusive Education”). Individualized Education Program (IEP) provides tailored support for disabled students and is now taken as the cornerstone of a quality education for each child with a disability. Affordable public health programs, such as Medicaid and CHIP, have contributed to ensuring disabled children’s access to necessary health care services. Various governmental and non-governmental organizations run programs or websites offering updated support and information to families of children with disabilities, contributing to a comprehensive approach in addressing their unique needs.

4.2 What’s Still Needed

However, consistent efforts are required on both governmental and individual levels to ensure the enforcement of laws and regulations designed to protect the interests of disabled children. The Government needs to ensure and continuously increase the allocation of funds to programs related to children with disabilities, and citizens may take up the responsibility of monitoring the various programs involving disabled children and their families and reporting timely to the relevant departments when they have

doubts, worries or suspicions. What's more, advocacy, fundraising, and raising awareness about the challenges faced by disabled children can further contribute to societal understanding and sensitivity.

5. Conclusion

The inequality in the well-being of the disabled and non-disabled children is a multifaceted issue rooted in social prejudice and discrimination, economic disparity, and limited social service support. Addressing this inequality requires a comprehensive approach, and inclusive education, individualized education plan, and affordable public health programs, etc. have shown promise in narrowing the gap. However, sustained efforts are crucial from both the government and individuals to enforce legislation, allocate sufficient funds and advocate for the rights and well-being of disabled children. Only through collective action can we bridge the gap that currently hinders the full and effective participation of disabled children in society.

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