

Research

The relationship between disability prejudice and disability employment rates



The Relationship Between Disability Prejudice and Disability Employment Rates

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Abstract:

BACKGROUND: Despite the ability to and interest in work, people with disabilities are employed at significantly lower rates than nondisabled people. Employment disparities highlight persistent social and cultural stereotypes that equate disability with unemployability.

OBJECTIVE: The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between employment of people with disabilities and disability prejudice in the United States. This study had the following research question: how does disability prejudice impact state disability employment rates?

METHODS: To explore these questions, we used secondary data about state disability employment (2016), as well as disability prejudice data from 270,000 nondisabled people residing in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

RESULTS: Findings from this study revealed states with higher disability prejudice scores have lower disability employment rates, suggesting employment disparities are intertwined with disability prejudice.

CONCLUSIONS: Cultures and systems must be rid of harmful disability stereotypes to ensure people with disabilities can truly partake in their human and civil rights.

Keywords: Employment discrimination; ableism; implicit prejudice; unemployment; disability

1. Introduction

As the United States Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (1) explains, “work is a fundamental part of adult life for people with and without disabilities. It provides a sense of purpose, shaping who we are and how we fit into our community” (p3). Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (1) continues,

because it is so essential to people’s economic self sufficiency, as well as self esteem and well being, people with disabilities and older adults with chronic conditions who want to work should be provided the opportunity and support to work competitively within the general workforce in their pursuit of health, wealth and happiness. All individuals, regardless of disability and age, can work – and work optimally with opportunity, training, and support that build on each person’s strengths and interests. Individually tailored and preference based job development, training, and support should recognize each person’s employability and potential contributions to the labor market. (p3)

Despite the ability and interest in work, people with disabilities are employed at significantly lower rates than nondisabled people in the United States [2-4]. In fact, employment is one of the largest gaps between people with and without disabilities [5]. As of April 2018, the labor force employment participation of people with disabilities was 20.9% in the United States [2]. The rate for nondisabled people was 68.3% [2].

People with disabilities have a deep and historied relationship with employment. Some Disability Studies scholars [e.g., 6, 7] maintain that it was the shift in modes of production from feudalism to capitalism that defined people with disabilities as a class for one of the first times. While feudalism offered some opportunities to work for people with disabilities, the shift to

capitalism centered on productivity, and as a result, excluded most people with disabilities from wage labor [8, 9].

Although there are still large disparities in employment rates of people with disabilities, United States policy has attempted to remedy employment discrimination. For example, Sections 501 and 503 of the Rehabilitation Act bar employment discrimination. Not only do they recognize people with disabilities' rights have to employment, but they also recognize people with disabilities are valuable components of the employment industry [10]. Another example is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990) [11], which has also aimed to reduce employment discrimination against people with disabilities.

Employment disparities highlight persistent social and cultural stereotypes that equate disability with unemployability [12]. Discrimination can make it harder for people with disabilities to get job interviews. For example, Ravaud, Madiot (13) found people with paraplegia were almost two times less likely to receive interview requests compared to nondisabled people of the same qualifications. Beyond just the initial interview, despite research demonstrating people with disabilities often have equal or better performance than nondisabled people, stereotypes about productivity and performance effect hiring decisions and produce disparities [14-16]. Once people with disabilities are employed, they may also face workplace discrimination, either in the form of overt discrimination, such as the denial of accommodations, or subtle implicit discrimination through workplace culture [14, 16-21]. For example, participants with psychiatric disabilities in Goldberg, Killeen (22) study "felt they would be unable to prove that discrimination had occurred. They seemed to perceive prejudice and discrimination as subtle and insidious rather than overt" (p490).

Expanding our knowledge of attitudes helps us to understand social interactions, socialization, and prejudice formation [23]. There are two levels of attitudes: explicit (conscious) attitudes and implicit (unconscious) attitudes [23, 24]. As people may feel pressured to conceal their biases, or may be unaware they hold biased attitudes, there are concerns that explicit measures do not capture all attitudes [23, 24]. This may be especially true for topics where it is socially undesirable to have negative attitudes, such as against people with disabilities. For this reason, much attitude research has shifted towards examining implicit attitudes. Implicit attitudes can relate to automatic processes triggered by external cues and reflect associations between attitudes and concepts; “‘implicit’ refers to [lack of] awareness of how a bias influences a response, rather than to the experience of bias or to the response itself” [24, p359].

Many theories about the roots of modern prejudice place its etiology within normal cognitive processes [25]. The amount of attention people have is finite, so cognitive mechanisms help perceive in the most effective manner. As a result, prejudice may be the result of cognitive mechanisms and feelings related to historical and contemporary prejudice. Another etiology theory relates to how people process information about their ingroup and outgroups differently [25]. People also “tend to seek out and prefer info that confirms their preconceptions and behave in ways that support their stereotypes” [25, p80]. Other theories about the etiology of modern prejudice suggest its roots may lie in the motivation for power, status, and/or control [26]. It may also be related to perceived or real economic competition as economic competition threatens traditional subordinate status [26-28]. Similarly, according to social identity theory, identity relates to the prestige of ones’ social group and discrimination separates one’s group from others [26]. Finally, its etiology may relate to socialization, including media portrayals and institutional prejudices [27].

As a result of all of these forces at play, prejudice not only impact daily interactions with people, such as microaggressions, although they can be problematic in and of themselves; prejudice can also have much wider implications. For example, unconscious attitudes can result in resistance to affirmative action because “‘when all things are equal’...they may not be perceived as equal, particularly when the minority is well-qualified and the situation has personal relevance to the nonminority person” [29, p92]. Prejudice can also impact selection decisions, such as who is selected for jobs. For example, in one study, participants stressed different qualifications depending on the candidate’s racial group [30].

As disability prejudice is embedded in systems and structures, as well as impacts daily interactions, attitudes towards disability may impact everything from federal and state employment programs and services to who is hired to how people with disabilities are treated in the workplace [31-33]. Exploring the attitudes and beliefs of community members can expose how societal level structural barriers are not only created but also reinforced. As such, a better understanding of these barriers is necessary. The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between employment of people with disabilities and disability prejudice in the United States. This study had the following research question: how does disability prejudice impact state disability employment rates? To explore this question, we used secondary data about state disability employment rates in 2016, as well as disability prejudice data from 270,000 nondisabled people residing in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

2. Methods

2A. Employment Rates

Data on state disability employment rates were obtained from *the Annual Disability Statistics Compendium* [34]. The Annual Disability Statistics Compendium “presents key overall

statistics on topics including the prevalence of disability, employment among persons with disabilities, rates of participation in disability income and social insurance programs, as well as other statistics” [34]. In particular, we obtained publicly available statistics regarding the percentage of people with disabilities employed by state in 2016. The Compendium defines employed persons as:

Individuals 16 years or older who are civilians and are not currently institutionalized and, during the reference week; (a) performed at least one hour of work as a paid employee, worked in their own business, profession, or on their own farm, or worked 15 hours or more as an unpaid worker in a business owned by a relative; and (b) all those who had jobs or businesses but are on leave because of vacation, illness, bad weather, childcare problems, maternity or paternity leave, labor-management dispute, job training, or other family or personal reasons, regardless of whether they were compensated for the time off or were seeking other jobs. [34, p108]

Using employment rates rather than the number of people with disabilities employed allowed us to control for state size.

2B. Disability Prejudice

The Disability Attitudes Implicit Association Test (DA-IAT) is one of the most common methods to measure implicit disability prejudice. The DA-IAT presents participants with ‘disabled persons’ and ‘abled persons’ categories, and ‘good’ and ‘bad’ attitudes, and asks them to sort word and symbol stimuli accordingly. The DA-IAT examines people’s associations and attitudes by measuring reaction time when items are sorted in stereotype congruent and incongruent ways; the quicker the reaction time, the stronger the association between groups and

traits [35]. Scores of 0.15 to 0.34 reveal a slight preference for nondisabled people, 0.35 to 0.64 a moderate preference, and 0.65 and greater a strong preference [36, 37]. Negative values of the same values above reveal preferences for people with disabilities, and scores from -0.14 to 0.14 reveal no prejudice [36, 37].

Data about implicit disability prejudice was obtained from Project Implicit [38], a database where people can test their implicit prejudices, including against people with disabilities using the DA-IAT. The Project Implicit data is available for researchers interested in doing their own analyses via an open source data archive [38]. A total of 380,314 nondisabled participants from all 50 states and the District of Columbia participated in the DA-IAT between 2004 and 2017. Approximately two-thirds of those participants (70.0%) also completed demographic information about their residency (state). 114,133 participants did not complete information about residence, or lived in United States territories, so their scores were not used. This resulted in a final n of 266,181 people or an average of 5,219 participants per state ($SD = 4,991$). Demographic information about the state participants lived in was then used to aggregate DA-IAT scores by state, with the state's mean score serving as the state's disability prejudice score.

2C. Analysis

This study's research question was: how does disability prejudice impact state disability employment rates? To explore this research question, a linear regression model was used with states' disability prejudice scores serving as the independent variable (IV) and states' disability employment rates (2016) serving as the dependent variable (DV).

3. Results

In 2016, the average state had a disability employment rate of 38.1% ($SD = 6.28$), ranging from 27.4% (West Virginia) to 54.0% (North Dakota) (figure 1). The average state implicit disability prejudice score was 0.51 ($SD = 0.02$), which is moderate prejudice (figure 2).

A multiple linear regression model was run with the IV *states' disability prejudice*, and the DV *state disability employment rate*. The model was significant, $F(1, 49) = 10.22$, $p = 0.002$, $R^2 = 0.17$.

The regression equation for predicting a state's employment rate from the state's disability prejudice is:

$$\text{Disability Employment Rate (\%)} = 103.35 - 128.50(\text{Disability Prejudice})$$

The disability prejudice score was significant at $t = -3.20$, $p = 0.002$.

According to the model (see equation above), the higher the state's disability prejudice, the lower its disability employment rate (see figure 3). For example, a state with an average disability prejudice score of 0.55 is expected have a disability employment rate of 32.7%. Whereas, a state with an average disability prejudice score of 0.45 is expected to have a disability employment rate of 45.5%.

4. Discussion

The unemployment rate of people with disabilities in the United States has gone relatively unchanged since before the civil war – for more than 150 years [3]. These employment disparities not only impact people with disabilities' economic well-being and social inclusion, they also cost state and federal governments billions of dollars annually because they lead to increased poverty amongst people with disabilities, and, as a result, to an increased reliance on government benefits and services [14, 39].

Findings from this study revealed states with higher disability prejudice have lower disability employment rates, suggesting employment disparities are intertwined with disability prejudice. Conceptions of people with disabilities as incapable, incompetent, or low ability are not only widely exaggerated, they may also result in employment disparities [33, 40-42]. One of the first steps in remedying this, as well as reducing disability employment disparities, is recognizing that the unemployment of people with disabilities is related to prejudiced views of disabilities, rather than simply about people with disabilities' abilities.

4A. Moving Forward and Implications for Policy and Practice

Conceptualizations of disability need to be shifted so that they more accurately reflect the lived experiences of people with disabilities, rather than simply reinforce harmful stereotypes and attitudes [31, 32]. Moreover, when attending to these changes to reduce discrimination and promote the employment of people with disabilities, it is important to remember that disability employment discrimination does not happen in a vacuum – people have intersecting identities which likely also impact if and how they experience discrimination. For example, Black people with psychiatric disabilities have lower employment rates than their White peers with psychiatric disabilities [43]. People with disabilities who are people of color, women, LGBTQ, and other social minorities, may experience dual discrimination [44, 45]. Even amongst disability itself, a disability hierarchy exists which privileges certain disabilities over others [46, 47]. These varying identities, and the prejudices that often accompanied with them, all must be attended to in order to promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities when it comes to employment.

In addition to larger cultural change, education targeted at employers may be particularly useful to reduce discrimination based on employer's stereotypes about low productivity and high

costs of accommodations [14]. This is particularly pertinent as the ADA has little power to directly change attitudes [48]. In addition, critics of the ADA have argued that the ADA not only lacks guidance and solutions, it also gives too much power to courts to “undermine” what is already “watered-down legislation”, resulting in “empty, under-enforced legislation” [48, n.p., 49]. This is likely due in part to the fact that interpreting reasonable accommodations as related to work rather than civil rights, and that courts have tended to rule that “the ADA must not overly regulate, limit autonomy, or remove control of the employer over the workplace” [48, n.p.].

Research reveals government employers have smaller disability gaps than private employers, which may be related to intentional attempts to hire disadvantaged groups [14]. Moreover, research suggests, federal contractors may be more likely to express interest in applicants with disabilities than other employers, likely reflecting government guidelines on hiring people with disabilities [14]. As such, one such mechanism for private sector employers to counter their disability prejudice may be to mirror these types of policies about affirmative action. For example, disability affirmative action in Argentina positively changed the attitudes of employers and co-workers about employees with disabilities because they “experienced the comparable productivity of persons with disabilities” [50, p64]. Quota systems, “reserved employment or financial incentives for achieving the equalization of opportunities of persons with disabilities,” [50, p14] may be a useful technique to do so, particularly if there are enforcement mechanisms, such as “sanctions for non-compliance,...regulatory measures, ... [and/or] tax incentives” [50, p46].

In addition to changing cultural attitudes about people with disabilities and business models which are more intentional about hiring people with disabilities, larger structural changes

are necessary to reduce the disability prejudice embedded within systems and structures.

Although the ADA aims to reduce employment discrimination against people with disabilities, it unfortunately does not address structural barriers that may prevent employment in the first place, such as implicit prejudice [51]. Moreover, terms such as ‘equal access’ and ‘reasonable accommodations’ are ambiguous and therefore legally weak [52]. This ambiguity allows for the potential for laws to be shifted from their intent of anti-discrimination [52]. In fact, at the time of this study, the American Congress was making one such attempt to water down the ADA. The ADA Education and Reform Act of 2017 (H.R. 620) [53] passed the House in February 2018. H.R. 620, which argues it will reduce frivolous lawsuits, makes it harder for people with disabilities to file complaints against businesses that do not comply with the ADA [54-57]. Although H.R. 620’s ‘notice and cure’ provision is not specifically aimed at employers, AARP warns, “an establishment that is not accessible to the public is also not accessible to employees with disabilities, leading to potential employment discrimination as well” [58, n.p.]. The American Civil Liberties Union (54) also cautions H.R. 620 not only harms people with disabilities by undermining the ADA, “it also removes any reason for businesses to proactively comply with the ADA” (p1).

Not only is it disproven that people with disabilities frivolously file ADA lawsuits [57], findings from this study suggest people with disabilities actually need *stronger* employment protections to counter the influence of disability prejudice on people with disabilities’ labor participation. In fact, individual

employment discrimination litigation... seldom provides systemic results, it largely does not deliver an impetus for the elimination of workplace discrimination. Employment discrimination litigation is not so much an engine for

social change, or even a forum for carefully judging the merits of claims of discrimination, as it is a mechanism for channeling and deflecting individual claims of workplace injustice. [59, p196]

If anything, people with disabilities' human and civil rights regarding employment need to be reinforced rather than watered down. In fact, Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reinforces “everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment” [60, n.p.].

4B. Limitations

When interpreting these findings, it should be noted that people volunteered to participate in the DA-IAT and, therefore, there is a chance of selection bias. It should also be noted that we did not explore interactions. It should be noted that correlation does not necessarily imply causation. Finally, it should be noted that this analysis does not include informal labor, and that people with disabilities might not identify as such which could impact disability employment rates.

5. Conclusion

The disability employment gap – the difference in employment rates of people with disabilities and nondisabled people – has existed for decades in the United States. Despite attempts to reduce employment discrimination, such as the introduction of the ADA, these disparities have gone relatively unchanged [14]. Findings from this study revealed a relationship between disability prejudice and disability employment, wherein states with less prejudice have higher disability employment rates. Although people with disabilities could benefit from more employment services and supports, workplace accommodations are not enough. Cultures and

systems must be rid of harmful disability stereotypes – ableism – to ensure people with disabilities can truly partake in their human and civil rights.

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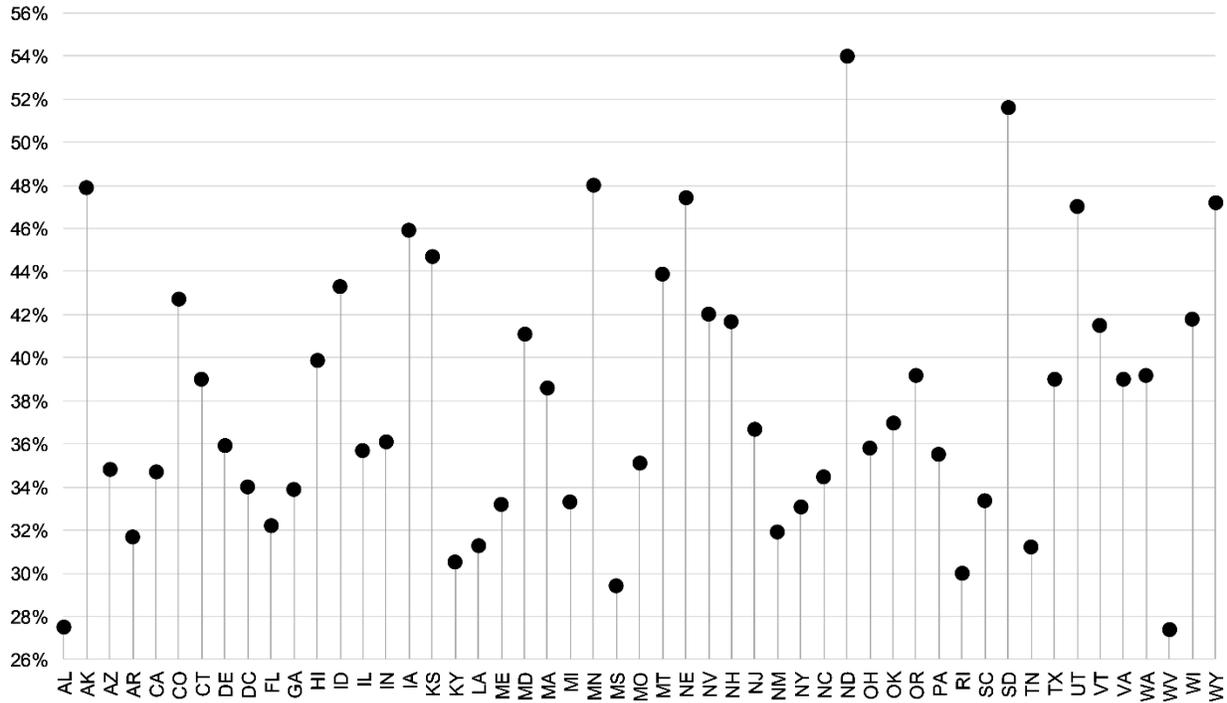


Figure 1. Disability employment rate by state (2016).

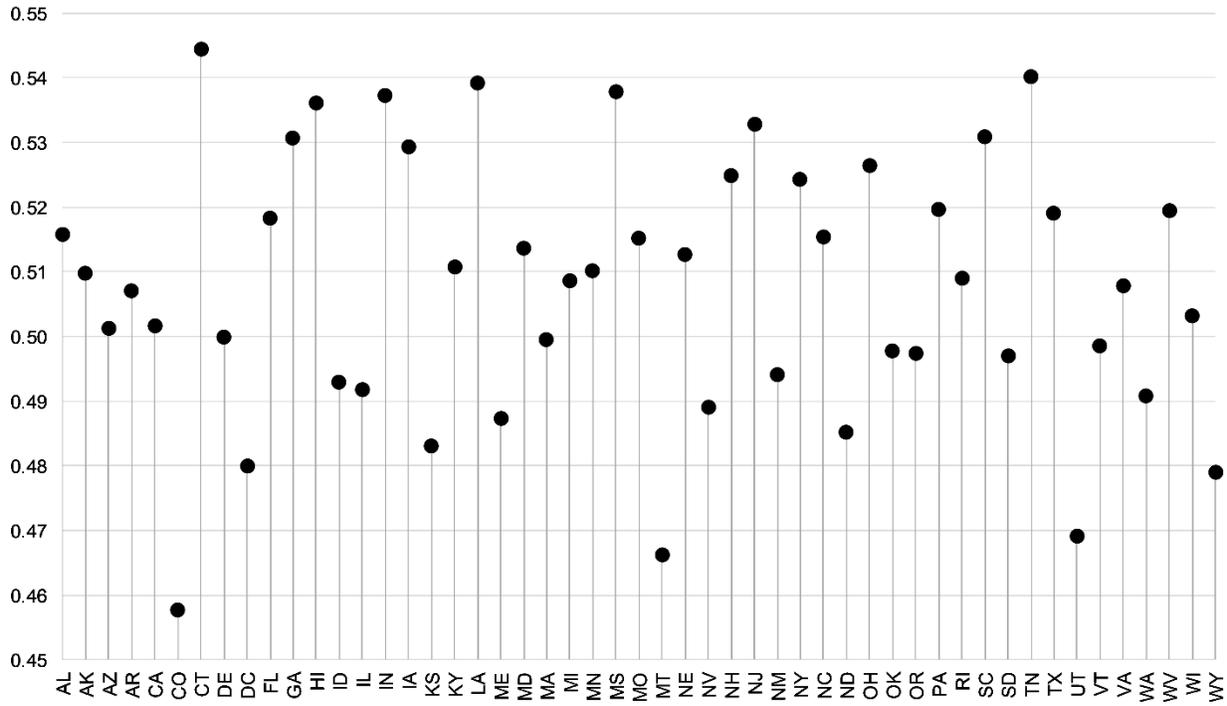


Figure 2. Disability prejudice by state.

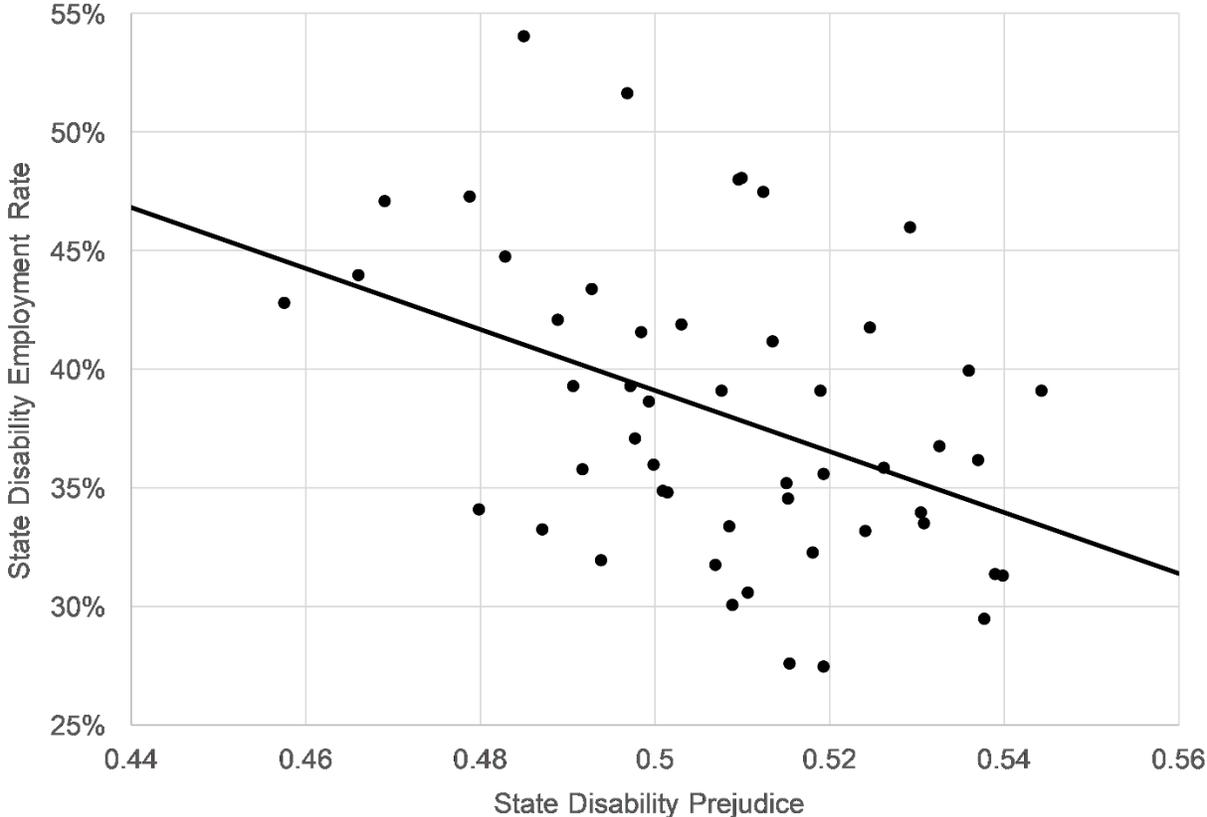


Figure 3. Scatterplot of the relationship between state disability prejudice and disability employment rate.