

## Recovered Work Disability Variables, 1981–1987

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### Background

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The CPS March Supplement has included a work disability question since 1981: *“Does anyone in this household have a health problem or disability which prevents them from working or which limits the kind or amount of work they can do?”* Despite this long history, the disability variables are absent from standard public data sources—including both IPUMS and NBER—for survey years prior to 1988.

The existence of these earlier data is well documented in the published literature. Two sources confirm their original collection:

**Source 1** ([CRS Report RL30653](#))

“In March, the CPS includes supplementary questions about income. Respondents have been asked annually since **March 1980** whether a health problem or disability prevents them from working or limits the kind or amount of work they can do.”

**Source 2** ([Houtenville, FRBSF Working Paper 2001-20](#))

“In 1981 the March Demographic Supplement of the CPS began to ask a question about work limitations.” This source also uses the work disability variable in published findings (see Figure 4 of that report).

The data files for 1981–1987 were provided by **Andrew Houtenville** (University of New Hampshire), one of the original researchers who used them in published work. The data files he provided contain work disability variables, household and person identifiers, and limited demographic information to support record linkage.

These files fill a seven-year gap that affects any research requiring disability status in the early 1980s. Starting in 1988, the standard public sources (IPUMS, NBER) include the disability variables and these supplemental files are not needed.

## Variables in the Recovered Files

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The combined file covering 1981-1987 contains the following six variables, for all individuals age 15+:

Variable	Label	Coding	Role
hhseq	Household Sequence Number	—	Linking key
perid	Person Record Number	—	Linking key
sex	Sex	1 = male, 2 = female	Verification
age	Age	Age in years	Verification
dislim	Work Limitation	1 = yes, 2 = no	Analysis
leftjb	Health Retirement / Left Job	1 = yes, 0 or 2 = no	Analysis

Age and sex are included to enable verification that records are linking correctly. They are not intended as primary analysis variables from this source.

## Merging the Recovered Files into Your CPS Extract

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The correct merge keys depend on where you obtained your CPS data. The two most common sources are covered below.

### Path A — NBER Raw Files

If you downloaded raw CPS March Supplement files from NBER, the household and person identifiers use different names in the main file than in the recovered disability file. Merge on:

```
hhseqnum → hhseq
ppos     → perid
```

### Path B — IPUMS CPS Extract

IPUMS's default household serial identifier does **not** align with the recovered file. Before merging:

1. In your IPUMS extract, navigate to **Household variables** → **Core** → **Linking** → **HSEQ** and add it to your variable cart.
2. The person-level record number is **pernum**, which IPUMS includes by default.

Then merge on:

```
hseq → hhseq
pernum → perid
```

## Data Source and Attribution

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These data files were provided by **Andrew Houtenville**, Research Director at the University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability, who retained copies of the original CPS March Supplement files from 1981–1987 from his own research. This documentation was prepared by Melissa Gentry (Texas A&M University) as part of Texas RDC Project 3144, which examines the long-run outcomes of children of parents with disabilities using linked decennial census records.

If you use these data in your own work, please acknowledge both Andrew Houtenville (University of New Hampshire) for providing the original files and Melissa Gentry (Texas A&M University) for making them publicly available.

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