

Growing Number of Americans Report Trouble With Memory and Focus

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A growing number of adult Americans—particularly those under 40—are reporting problems with their memory, concentration and decision-making abilities.

Self-reported rates of cognitive disability nearly doubled among 18–39-year-olds, according to a 10-year study by Yale School of Medicine, University of Utah Health and Mass General Brigham researchers.

“Cognitive disability—defined by the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) as serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition—has become the most commonly reported disability among U.S. adults,” the authors wrote in the paper.

The rate of cognitive disability in the U.S. rose from 5.3 percent in 2013 to 7.4 percent in 2023, with the first increase appearing in 2016, according to data analysis of more than 4.5 million survey respondents.

The researchers detected the largest increase in adults under 40, from 5.1 percent in 2013 to 9.7 percent in the same period.

Rates among those aged 70 and older, however, declined from 7.3 percent to 6.6 percent.

Researchers analyzed Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data from adults across the decade. They excluded responses from people with self-reported depression and dementia and from the year 2020 due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants were asked: “Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, do you have serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions?”

While those who answered “yes” were classified as having a cognitive disability, it should be noted that this is based on subjective reports.

“The disproportionate growth in cognitive disability among younger adults seems to be the primary driver of the overall national trend,” the authors wrote.

Looking at the impact of household incomes, researchers found that those below \$35,000 consistently reported the highest rates—rising from 8.8 percent to 12.6 percent across the study period.

However, those with household incomes over \$75,000 had much lower rates, increasing from 1.8 percent to just 3.9 percent.

When education was considered, rates among adults without a high school diploma rose from 11.1 percent to 14.3 percent, while rates among college graduates rose from 2.1 percent to 3.6 percent from 2013 to 2023.

Rates also rose across nearly all racial and ethnic groups, such as from 7.5 percent to 11.2 percent in Native American and Alaska native adults, from 6.8 percent to 9.9 percent in Hispanic adults, 7.3 to 8.2 in Black adults, 4.5 to 6.3 in white adults and 3.9 to 4.8 in Asian adults. Most respondents were white, according to the study.

“These findings suggest we’re seeing the steepest increases in memory and thinking problems among people who already face structural disadvantages,” study author Dr. Adam de Havenon of Yale School of Medicine and fellow of the American Academy of Neurology said in a statement.

“We need to better understand and address the underlying social and economic factors that may be driving this trend.”

“More research is also needed to understand what’s driving the large increase in rates among younger adults, given the potential long-term implications for health, workforce productivity and health care systems,” de Havenon added. “It could reflect actual changes in brain health, better awareness and willingness to report problems, or other health and social factors. But regardless of possible causes, the rise is real—and it’s especially pronounced in people under 40.”

Further limitations of the study include data gathered through telephone surveys and people providing responses that may not have been 100 percent accurate, growing public awareness of cognitive health (raising the question of whether it’s more recognized now) and the broad definition of disability.

“These findings warrant further investigation, given their potential long-term implications for population health, workforce productivity, and health care systems,” said the authors.