Relative Earnings of Deaf and Hard-of-hearing Individuals

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Much has been written, over several decades, about the economic damage done by hearing loss. This article compares earnings of male and female deaf or hard-of-hearing college graduates to those of the general population with the same levels of education. Although those hard of hearing appear to reach lower levels of education, with education there is little or no evidence of an earnings lag relative to those without hearing loss.

There is a long history of concern about the economic impact of hearing loss (Schein, 1989). But, much that has been published is anecdotal, unverifiable, or antiquated. Most often, quantitative reports of the earnings of people who are deaf or hard of hearing focus exclusively on that population and fail to compare their earnings to those without hearing loss.

The National Health Survey (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1994) reports on employment, unemployment, and occupational class by age and degree of hearing loss. Employment and occupational status decline with increased hearing loss. But, the Department of Health and Human Services reports only family, not personal, income levels. Level of education is linked to degree of hearing impairment, but there is no report of earnings by level of education. From roughly the same time, data from a follow-up of 4,900 high school students who were deaf indicated “that when bachelor’s and higher level degrees had been earned, the occupational distributions of all adults, national [i.e., no hearing impairment] and deaf, men and women alike, were virtually identical. The implication is that deaf adults able to attain baccalaureate and higher degrees enjoy occupational accomplishments commensurate to those of hearing adults” (MacLeod-Gallinger, 1992). More recently, “studies of deaf and hard of hearing graduates of postsecondary education find persons with [reading skills between the 8th and 12th grade levels] achieve some socioeconomic parity with similarly educated peers who hear” (Watson & Boone, 1998). There is little quantitative support for these reports with respect to income. Little has been published about the earnings of people who are deaf and hard of hearing relative to the hearing population.

Based on published data, it is possible to compare the earnings of college graduates who are deaf or hard of hearing to those of the general population. Tables 1 and 2 include data from Schroedel and Geyer (2000a). Median income levels have been calculated. The population surveyed comprised 240 individuals tracked since graduation from college in 1983–1985. There were 71% who identified themselves as deaf, and 29% indicated they were hard of hearing. The level of educational attainment of those responding to the survey is shown on the right hand side of the tables under “S-G”: There were 52% with vocational or associate degrees, 32% with baccalaureate degrees, 15% with master’s degrees, and 1% with a doctorate. Although no gender breakdown of those surveyed was given by level of education, “disproportionately more

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males over females obtained vocational and associate’s degrees” (Schroedel & Geyer, 2000b).

The educational distribution of men and women in the general population is also shown under “CPR”, as reported in the Current Population Reports (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999), as is the median of those with earnings. This is the measure of earnings most directly comparable to that reported by Schroedel and Geyer (2000a).

For men who were deaf or hard of hearing, Schroedel and Geyer (2000a) reported median earnings of $35,880. More than half of those responding to their survey held less than 4-year degrees, men more so than women. For the male population as a whole, median earnings of those holding only an associate’s degree was $35,962, indistinguishable from their deaf and hard-of-hearing counterparts. So, the Schroedel and Geyer sample gave no sign of discrimination in salary or earnings impairment given level of education.

It appears, based on the Schroedel and Geyer (2000a) sample, that males who are deaf achieve lower levels of education than their hearing counterparts. Given a nonrandom sample of only roughly 110 men, this cannot be stated with statistical certainty. But, from this sample and numerous other reports, it seems to be a reasonable supposition.

Schroedel and Geyer (2000a) reported with some concern that males who are deaf and hard of hearing earned significantly more than females. This is certainly true, but it is also true in the hearing population.

In the hard-of-hearing sample, women achieved higher levels of education than the total distribution would indicate. In the hearing population, on average, women achieved slightly lower educational levels than

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salary</th>
<th>Deaf male college grads</th>
<th>Current Population Reports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bracket</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under $5,000 to $9,999</td>
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<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 to $19,999</td>
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<tr>
<td>$20,000 to $29,999</td>
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<td>35.3%</td>
</tr>
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<td>50.0%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>60.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000+</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
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males. Thus, the educational imbalance is less between hard-of-hearing and hearing women than men.

Median earnings of women who were deaf or hard of hearing in the Schroedel and Geyer (2000a) survey were $25,178. Eighty percent of the hearing females (26% with associate’s degrees and 54% with bachelor’s degrees) had earnings bounded by medians of $21,290 and $27,415. There is no evidence in this of a gross imbalance between the earnings of women who were deaf and those who were not and with at least 2-year college degrees. (Because “averaging” medians yields a nonsense number, we can say no more than this.)

Conclusion

Based on a small sample of men and women who were deaf or hard of hearing and held at least 2-year college degrees, there is no evidence of a significant difference in earnings from their hearing counterparts. To the extent that those who were hard of hearing earned less, it appears likely to be because of less education than the hearing population.

Further Directions

More questions remain unanswered about the relative earnings of those who are deaf or hard of hearing than have been answered. Schroedel and Geyer (2000a) provided an important insight into a group with a relatively high level of educational attainment. Disaggregation within the group they surveyed is not possible. It is important to address specifically the question of relative earnings by level of education: by those with 2-year degrees, 4-year degrees, and more. Perhaps a more important question is about the earnings of those hard of hearing with lower levels of educational attainment. The potential for an earnings imbalance there may be greater.

Little has been done to address questions of the effect of the degree of hearing impairment on earnings. It is likely that the earnings of those who are deaf and those hard of hearing are different.

The conclusions of any multivariate study can be upset by confounding variables. As many as 40% of the hard-of-hearing population have been reported to have additional handicaps (Schein & Delk, 1974). This must be taken into account to isolate the impact of hearing loss alone on earnings.

References


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