

# America's Blind Spot:

What's Preventing Us from  
Including Those Who Are Blind  
in the Sighted World?

*“Alone we can do  
so little; **together**  
we can do so much.”*

—Helen Keller

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Why don't we **see**  
people who are blind  
in our **everyday**  
world?

## Executive Summary

Did you know that there are 7 million people who are blind in the U.S. – a population similar in size to Washington or Massachusetts – but that more than half of sighted people say they have not seen a blind person in the last year?

### Why don't we see people who are blind in our everyday world?

**We set out looking for answers.**

Perkins School for the Blind is a progressive, multi-faceted organization with a mission to

prepare children and young adults who are blind with the education, confidence and skills they need to realize their potential in a sighted world. While the organization boasts generations of successful graduates, with Helen Keller perhaps being the most notable student, the reality is that people who are blind face massive challenges in the sighted world. These challenges go beyond the physical challenges of being blind. While many individuals who are blind are capable of everyday tasks, the barriers that are put up by the sighted population block opportunities for full inclusion.

The blind population, despite being nearly twice as large as that of individuals using wheelchairs (more than seven million compared to 3.3 million), is being largely excluded from the everyday experiences of the sighted world. Perkins conducted this national study to gain insight into how sighted people view individuals who are blind, and to better understand if and how those perceptions (or misperceptions) are forming barriers to societal inclusion for the blind population.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*In the study, Perkins examined a range of topics, including:*

1. What the sighted population's comfort level is around someone who is blind
2. What the sighted population thinks people who are blind are capable of
3. How those who can see would feel if they were blind
4. Whether members of the sighted population interact with people who are blind

We discovered that while those who are sighted champion people who are blind in theory, many are uncertain of what people who are blind are truly capable of when it comes to personal interaction.

In addition, the lack of interaction between the sighted and people who are blind fosters misperceptions that perpetuate marginalization.

*In summary, these misperceptions manifest in four key ways that form barriers to societal inclusion for people who are blind:*

**1. Discomfort** When someone feels uneasy, anxious or unsure of what to do or how to act, they're uncomfortable. More than half of those we surveyed said they were not totally comfortable around

*discomfort  
pity  
fear  
stigma*



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

people who are blind. And one reason people are uncomfortable is that they rarely interact with a person who is blind: **55 percent** stated they hadn't seen a blind person in the past year.

**2. Pity** No one likes to be pitied. While pity may come from a compassionate place, feeling sorry for those we believe are less fortunate creates assumptions that they are lacking in something essential; that they are somehow inferior. This study revealed that an overwhelming percentage of the sighted population (**80 percent**) feels sorry for people who are blind. This staggering amount of pity can lead to assumptions that prevent the sighted world from embracing people who are blind into the fold of society.

**3. Fear** Respondents are not fearful of people who are blind, but they are fearful of becoming blind themselves. **74 percent** stated they did not think they could be happy if they lost their vision. Again, this highlights

the perspective of the sighted world. People are projecting their emotions onto a condition they know little about, forming assumptions and creating roadblocks where none may need to exist.

**4. Stigma** In many ways, the physical cues that someone is blind – whether they have a cane, wear glasses or have a seeing eye dog – lead to an automatic assumption that they cannot do or be certain things. The sighted population's perceptions of what they believe people who are blind can't do – whether it's performing at the same job they have (**72 percent**), traveling alone (**63 percent**) or being an athlete (**82 percent**) – create stigmas that can significantly disadvantage a very large population. Stigma puts the focus on what is different about a person, rather than on what makes him or her unique. Discomfort, pity and fear all coalesce to feed into this stigmatization, and if we're not careful, can turn into prejudice.

Based on the findings of this study, Perkins believes these four reactions to people who are blind have become barriers to their inclusion in the sighted world. This report explores the data behind these issues and better defines them, while offering solutions to connect the sighted population with people who are blind to overcome these challenges.

### Methodology

Research Now conducted a nationwide online panel with a random sample size of 1,000 respondents. The sample was a 50/50 gender split with specific quotas on age and geography to achieve a near equal representation from GenZ/Millennials, GenX and Baby Boomers in the Midwest, Northeast, South and West regions of the country. The survey was conducted between January 12 and January 15, 2016. For the purposes of this study, the term "blind" refers to individuals who are blind or have serious difficulty seeing, even with corrective lenses.





## BARRIER TO INCLUSION #1:

# Discomfort

### **7 million blind spots.**

The blind and visually impaired population in the United States is estimated at 7 million people, but when was the last time you remember seeing a blind person? According to this study, more than half (**55 percent**) stated they either haven't seen a blind person in the last year or can't even remember the last time they saw a blind person. Meanwhile, only **34 percent** of respondents personally know someone who is blind, with **58 percent** of those respondents only knowing one person who cannot see.

When asked where they noticed a blind person, responses paint a more troublesome picture: **34 percent** said they recalled seeing a blind person walking on the street and **27 percent** remembered seeing a blind person at a store or a mall, while only **10 percent** remembered seeing a blind person taking public transportation and **11 percent** saw a blind person at a social function. The **infrequency of interactions** – especially on public transit or in social settings – raises a serious issue.

When only **1 in 3** people say they know someone who is blind, and more than half of the population hasn't seen a blind person in the last year, it's not because people who are blind don't exist – there are **7 million** in the U.S. Rather, it means that many people who are blind are invisible and they are being excluded from the sighted world.

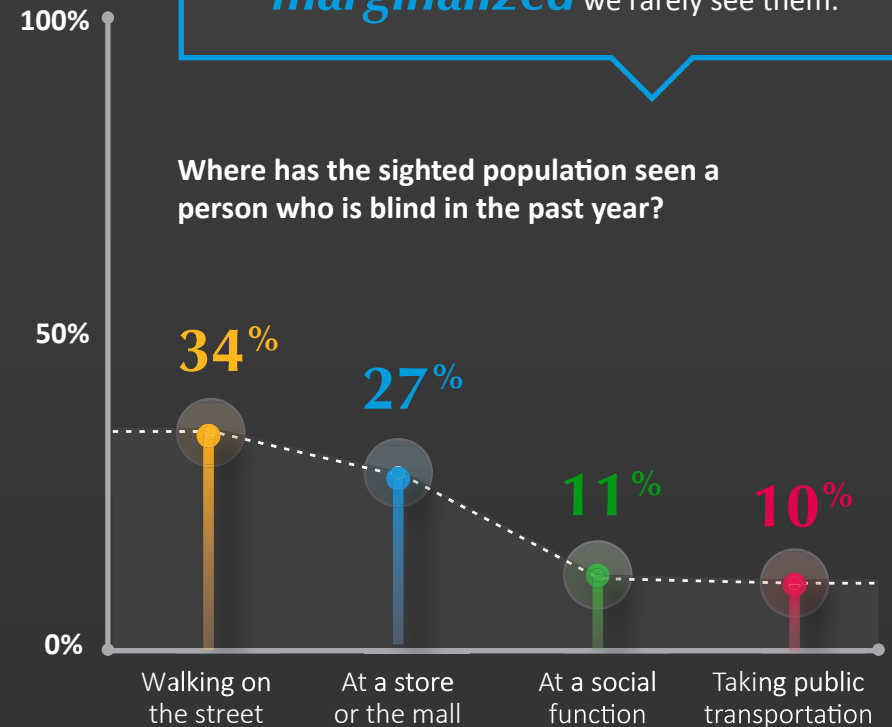
Because it's also human nature to be afraid of the unknown, the sighted world's lack of experience interacting with people who are blind leads to a high level of discomfort around those who cannot see.

## In 2016, the majority of the population in the U.S. is not fully comfortable around people who are blind.

Despite significant societal progress, we are often reminded that prejudices still exist. This rang true when more than half of respondents (**53 percent**) admitted that they are not fully comfortable being around a person who is blind. Baby Boomers came out as the least comfortable at **58 percent**, which begs the question: how can sighted people be inclusive and offer equal opportunity to members of a population we are anxious around?

The good news is that as long as sighted people are open to learning about how to engage with people who are blind, discomfort can be easily overcome.

**53%** of sighted people say they are not fully comfortable around people who are blind. That's because people who are blind have been so ***marginalized*** we rarely see them.







feel *sorry*  
for people  
who are *blind*

## BARRIER TO INCLUSION #2:

### Pity

#### *Don't feel sorry for me.*

When the sighted population feels uncomfortable around people who are blind, that feeling of discomfort leads to pity, and pity slams the door on opportunity.

In our study, we found that **80 percent** said they feel sorry for those who are blind. Even more troubling, **74 percent** of respondents stated that they don't know if they could be happy if they were blind themselves. When an overwhelming majority of the sighted population expresses pity for people who are blind, unintended consequences result.

Think about it this way: if you felt sorry for someone, would you think that they could accomplish the same things you are able to accomplish? Would you think they could be as happy as you are?

**More surprising was the way different generations answered this question. While we typically think of GenZ/Millennials as being more open-minded and accepting, they felt sorry for people who are blind at a higher rate than those who were older.**

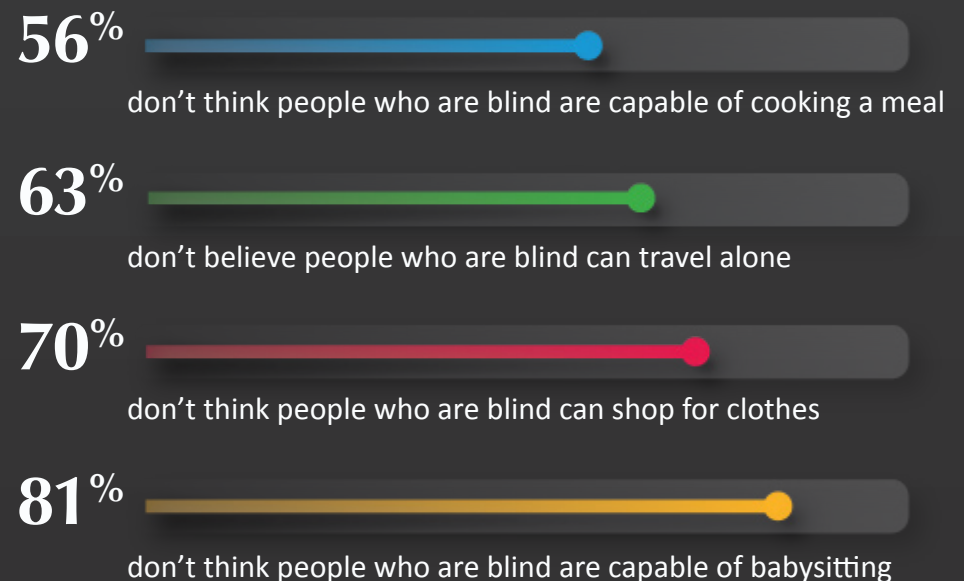


## When it comes to relationships, pity is even more pronounced.

**21 percent** stated that they would prefer their child not date a blind person because they believe it would be “too difficult” or pose too many obstacles to overcome.

This barrier extends further when participants were asked their thoughts on the capabilities of people who are blind in everyday life. More than half of all respondents don’t think that a blind person is fully capable of cooking a meal (**56 percent**), traveling alone (**63 percent**), shopping for clothes (**70 percent**), babysitting (**81 percent**) or playing sports (**82 percent**).

**80%** feel sorry for people who are blind. This staggering amount of pity can lead to assumptions that prevent the sighted world from the *inclusion of people who are blind.*





### BARRIER TO INCLUSION #3: **Fear**

#### *More than fearing the unknown.*

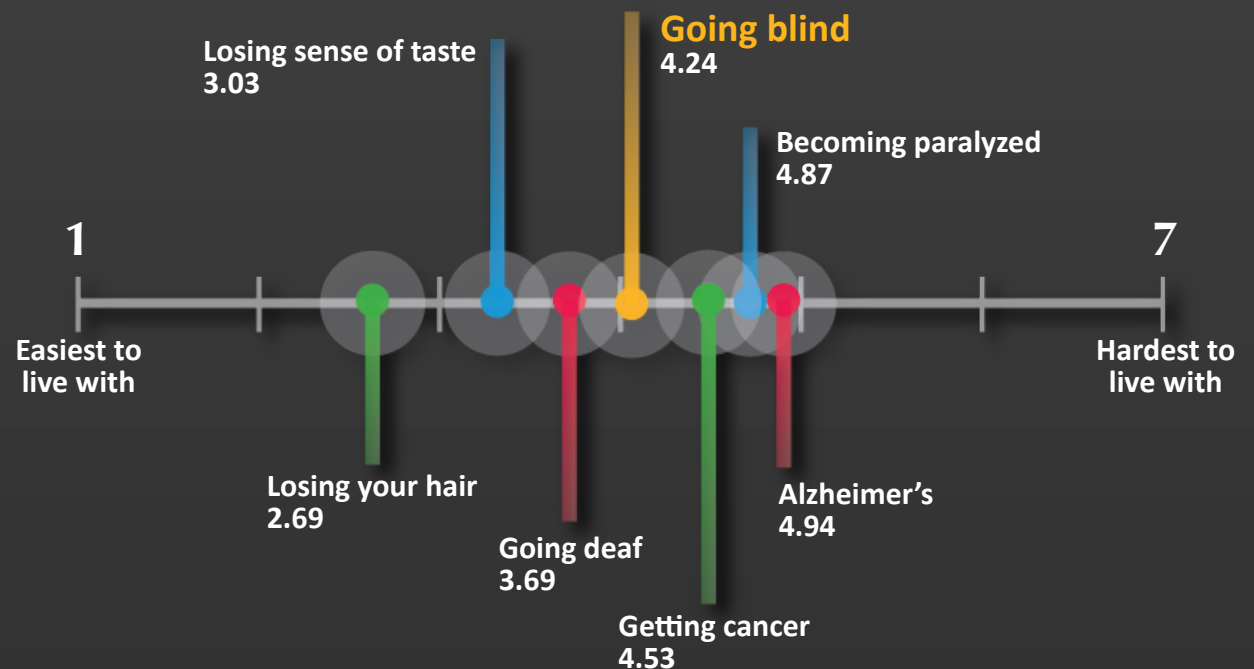
While it's understandable that the sighted population would be nervous about going blind, what's the implication when they put going blind on par with getting cancer, becoming paralyzed or developing Alzheimer's? In the U.S., cancer claims the lives of nearly 600,000 annually (American Cancer Society) while Alzheimer's claims an additional 83,000 (Centers for Disease Control).

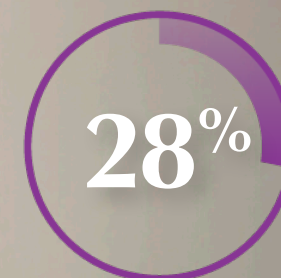
**Nearly half of all respondents (46 percent) stated that they could not think of a condition worse than being blind.**



**When asked whether or not they feared going blind, 56 percent admitted to being fearful** – the number jumped to **61 percent** for GenZ/Millennials. Add to that percentage the **18 percent** of people who said they are unsure or don't think they could be happy if they were blind, and a total of **74 percent** of people surveyed hold assumptions driven by fear.

**74%** don't think they could be happy if they lost their vision. This perspective projects emotions onto a condition the sighted know little about, forming assumptions and creating *roadblocks* where none may need to exist.





think a person who  
is blind could do  
*their job.*

#### BARRIER TO INCLUSION #4:

## Stigma

### *What do hidden biases say about the way the sighted population really feels about people who are blind?*

The majority of people want to seem open-minded and without bias, and that extends to the sighted population's view of people who are blind. When asked whether they would be ok with their child dating a blind person, **79 percent** said they would have no problem with this, but when asked if they would date a blind person themselves, the number dropped 10 percentage points. **73 percent** said that they think people who

are blind are capable of having children of their own, but when asked if they thought a blind person could babysit their children, the number plummeted to **19 percent**.

### *Equal opportunity for employment? Not for people who are blind.*

Although **73 percent** of respondents thought a blind person could hold a job, **28 percent** think a blind person could do *their job*. These hidden biases create barriers to inclusion, resulting in treatment of people who are blind as second-class citizens.

While there are laws that demand equal opportunity employment based on race, religion, age and even disability, the sighted population holds very strong biases about the capabilities of people who are blind in the workforce.

**While 77 percent of respondents said that they would consider hiring a blind person, 32 percent did not think that their workplace could accommodate a blind person.**



## BARRIER TO INCLUSION #4: Stigma

Consider this statistic from the American Community Survey in 2014: **40 percent** of working-age adults with a visual impairment are employed, compared with over **75 percent** of the total population of working-age adults. Less than half of Americans with a visual impairment participate in the workforce, and of that group **15 percent** are unemployed, roughly twice the rate of those without a disability. This is not because people who are blind are unqualified, it's because there are barriers even beyond the ones listed in this report that are holding the blind population back from employment opportunities.

### Consider some of the barriers people who are blind face when attempting to land an interview:

- **Driver's license** – employers often ask for one during the application process to screen for legal and security purposes, but it's an inhibitor for someone who is blind
- **Job fairs** – applicants come to job fairs to find employment, but companies attend job fairs to raise corporate profile
- **Websites** – career websites are often not in compliance with accessibility standards for persons with disabilities, including those who are blind
- **Disclosure** – divulging a disability too soon may hurt a candidate's chances for an interview; too late may send an interview off track
- **Lack of training** – hiring managers without prior experience working with people who are blind may not appreciate or understand the capabilities and skills of such candidates

only **28%** think a person who is blind can do *their job*. Stigmas like these shut the door on *equal opportunity*.

**73%**

believe someone who is blind could hold a job, but only 28% think a blind person could do *their job*

**77%**

would consider hiring someone who is blind, but 32% don't think their workplace could accommodate a person who is blind



## Conclusion

The blind population is estimated at 7 million people in the U.S., yet only 34 percent of respondents personally know someone who is blind, and 55 percent of respondents haven't seen a blind person in the past year. To many, the blind population is non-existent. But the issue isn't just that the majority isn't aware of people who are blind's existence, it's that people who are blind are being excluded in a sighted world. These barriers to inclusion - discomfort, pity, fear and stigma - can prevent people who are blind from reaching their full potential.

In 2016, despite significant societal progress, people who are blind aren't being afforded the same access to opportunities as the rest of the population – or even the rest of the disabled population. We need to change the sighted population's misperceptions of people who are blind and promote full inclusion.

Where does one start? How about close to home.

***What would happen if a blind person moved into your neighborhood?***

You may have seen a sign while driving that notified you of a blind person in the area, but have you ever wondered how inclusive your community is for someone who is blind? Think about your own neighborhood. According to the study, **35 percent** did not believe their community was inclusive, while an additional **38 percent** did not know.

### ***Is technology part of the solution?***

There is some good news about the sighted population's perception of people who are blind. A resounding **88 percent** do believe that



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## CONCLUSION

technological advances are making life better for people who are blind. Things like screen readers that read the content on websites and electronic braille with built-in GPS navigation, media players, social networking capabilities and word processing are making the world a more accessible place. But even with these advances, it's up to the sighted population to welcome and embrace the potential of individuals who are blind.

The bottom line: we must recognize these four barriers to inclusion - discomfort, pity, fear and stigma – and actively work to eliminate them.

**By doing so, we engage millions of people in our communities, develop a greater understanding and appreciation of their lives and benefit from the contributions they are able to make to society.**



## About Perkins School for the Blind

Perkins School for the Blind, founded in 1829 as the first school of its kind in the U.S., is a multifaceted organization working around the world to prepare children and young adults who are blind with the education, confidence and skills they need to realize their full potential.

Perkins SCHOOL  
FOR THE  
BLIND

