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New Study Identifies More People with Vision Loss and Blindness Than Previously Estimated

CHICAGO (May 13, 2021) –In a study published in *JAMA Ophthalmology* today, "Prevalence of Visual Acuity Loss or Blindness in the US," researchers estimate permanent vision loss and blindness in Americans of all ages, including people younger than 40 years old, and adults in group quarters, such as nursing homes or jails. Researchers found more than 7 million people are living with uncorrectable vision loss, including more than 1 million Americans who are living with blindness.

"What makes this study different than previous national estimates of vision loss and blindness is that the methods we used allowed for a broader analysis of populations in the United States than were previously included," said David B. Rein, Ph.D., Program Area Director for NORC at the University of Chicago's Public Health Analytics Program and one of the study's co-authors. "While the addition of these various age groups is partially responsible for the increase, the growth in the number of older Americans has also contributed to more people with vision loss and blindness in the United States than previously estimated."

Additional findings from the study include:

- Of those living with vision loss and blindness in the United States, nearly 1 in 4 are under the age of 40.
    - More than 1.6 million Americans who are living with vision loss or blindness are under the age of 40.
    - Of them, 141,000 are blind, 13% of all people with blindness in the U.S.
- 358,000 people with vision loss and blindness are living in group quarters, such as nursing homes or jails.
    - Of them 130,000 are living with blindness, representing nearly 12% of people living with blindness.
- In the United States:
    - 20% of all people aged 85 and older experience permanent vision loss.
    - More females than males experience permanent vision loss or blindness.

- There is a higher risk of vision loss among Hispanic/Latino and Black people than among Whites.

"Prevalence of Visual Acuity Loss or Blindness in the US," was authored by researchers from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington (Seattle), NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Vision Health Initiative, with support from Prevent Blindness.

"Vision loss and blindness are often preventable. Vision loss is heavily influenced by access to eye care, general health care, geography, race/ethnicity, sun exposure, and underlying health conditions, like diabetes," said study co-author, Elizabeth Lundeen, PhD, MPH, epidemiologist, CDC. "These updated estimates help us better understand the problem, allow for strategic resource allocation, the development and implementation of policies and programs to reduce the burden of vision loss and blindness in the United States."

Study estimates were developed using data within CDC's Vision and Eye Health Surveillance System (VEHSS). The VEHSS houses diverse data sources for vision - including Medicare and private insurance claims data, electronic health record data, and self-reported and clinical evaluation data from representative national surveys. Researchers used a statistical methodology called Bayesian meta-regression which used the system's multiple data sources to produce new, more comprehensive national and state-level estimates of vision loss and blindness.

"Meta-regression helps us control for biases in less accurate data sources, such as self-reported vision loss, and use it to make more detailed predictions from stronger data sources, such as clinical evaluations of vision loss and blindness. This study essentially used data from more expensive clinical evaluations to estimate the total amount of vision loss and blindness at the national level. The meta-regression model incorporated self-reported vision loss data to estimate more detailed information about how vision loss and blindness were distributed across the states, and among young children and the oldest old." said Abraham D. Flaxman, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Health Metrics Sciences (IHME) at the University of Washington School of Medicine, and Prevalence of Visual Acuity Loss and Blindness in the U.S study co-author.

Prevent Blindness, the nation's oldest eye health and safety nonprofit organization and a primary stakeholder in the study, serves as an engagement and communication channel for the VEHSS, working directly with NORC, CDC, and other partners.

"Comprehensive, science-driven data provides us with the information we need to help address the scope of vision issues at the state and national level, and advance equitable approaches to public health policy for vision and eye health," said Jeff Todd, president and CEO of Prevent Blindness. "We thank the dedicated individuals at the CDC, NORC, IHME and all of our partners for their important work to save sight."

For more information on the ""Prevalence of Visual Acuity Loss or Blindness in the US" study, or the VEHSS, visit https://www.cdc.gov/visionhealth/vehss/. Or visit Prevent Blindness at https://preventblindness.org/vision-loss-and-blindness-us.

About Prevent Blindness

Founded in 1908, Prevent Blindness is the nation's leading volunteer eye health and safety organization dedicated to fighting blindness and saving sight. Focused on promoting a continuum of vision care, Prevent Blindness touches the lives of millions of people each year through public and professional education, advocacy, certified vision screening and training, community and patient service programs and research. These services are made possible through the generous support of the American public. Together with a network of affiliates, Prevent Blindness is committed to eliminating preventable blindness in America. For more information, visit us at preventblindness.org, and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn.

About NORC at the University of Chicago

NORC at the University of Chicago conducts research and analysis that decision-makers trust. As a nonpartisan research organization and a pioneer in measuring and understanding the world, we have studied almost every aspect of the human experience and every major news event for more than eight decades. Today, we partner with government, corporate, and nonprofit clients around the world to provide the objectivity and expertise necessary to inform the critical decisions facing society. www.norc.org

About the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME)

IHME is an independent global health research organization at the University of Washington School of Medicine that provides rigorous and comparable measurement of the world's most important health problems and evaluates the strategies used to address them. IHME is committed to transparency and makes this information widely available so that policymakers have the evidence they need to make informed decisions on allocating resources to improve population health. www.healthdata.org

About the Vision Health Initiative

CDC's Vision Health Initiative (VHI) works to improve vision health in the U.S. through collaborations with state and national partners to strengthen science and develop interventions that promote eye health and prevent vision loss and blindness in groups at high risk. VHI also seeks to address risk factors like glaucoma, reduce disparities in vision loss and eye disease, and improve health and quality of life for people with vision loss. VHI designs and implements public health surveillance at the state and national level, supports applied public health research, and promotes the dissemination of evidence-based vision health interventions. In collaboration with state and community partners, VHI works to integrate vision health activities into broader public health strategies and interventions. For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/visionhealth.

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