Australian Government
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

education

Disability in Australia

Extracted from **Australia's welfare 2009**
Chapter 4, pages 143–145

There are two measures of disability in the Australian population. The broadest measure, 'all people with disability', refers to all people with a long-term condition (lasting or expected to last at least 6 months) who experience impairments, activity limitations or participation restrictions.

The second measure, referred to as 'severe or profound core activity limitation' includes those people who sometimes or always need help with at least one of the core activities of daily living: mobility, self-care and communication.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, in 2003 about 3.9 million people (20% of the population) had disability. This includes around 1.2 million people (6.3% of the population) with severe or profound core activity limitation. When considering people aged 0–64 years:

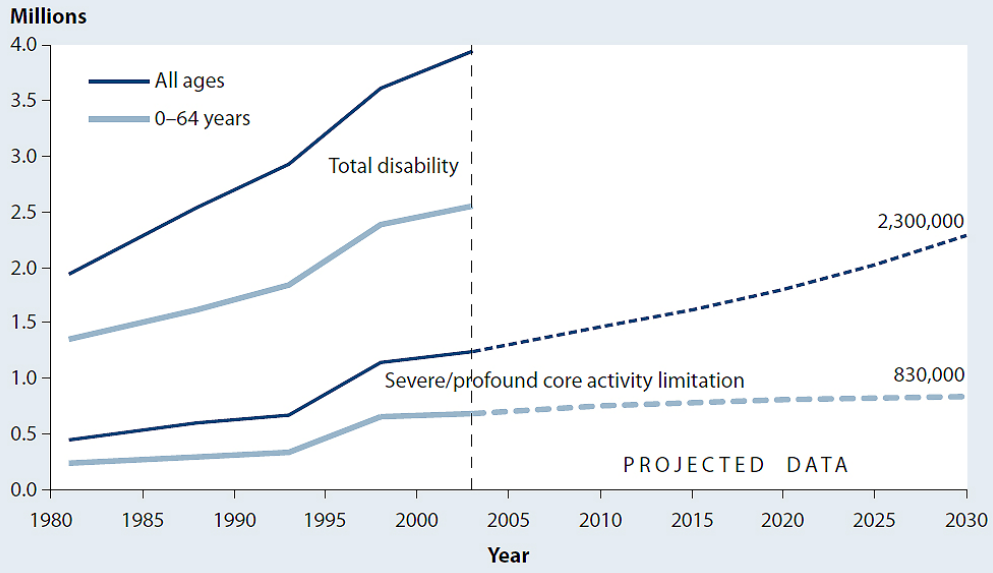
- about 15% had disability (2.6 million people)
- 3.9% had severe or profound core activity limitation (0.7 million people).

Generally speaking, disability rates increase with age throughout adulthood, from 1 in 10 people in their 20s and early 30s to 1 in 3 people in their late 50s and early 60s. Similarly, the prevalence of severe or profound limitation varies from around 2% of young adults to almost 9% of people aged 60–64 years. These patterns reflect the accumulation of risks to health and functioning over the lifespan, including the long-term effects of injury and chronic health conditions.

Patterns of disability are somewhat different in childhood and adolescence. The percentage of the population with severe or profound limitation, and disability more generally, is relatively high among school-aged children and lower in adolescence and early adulthood. This is particularly pronounced among boys: 6.5% of boys aged 5–9 years had severe or profound core activity limitation, compared with 3.3% of girls the same age. The effects of early intervention services and the school environment, as well as the way the survey collects information about children and young people, may contribute to increased identification of disability among children compared with teenagers and young adults.

Between 1981 and 2003 the total number of people with disability doubled; the total number of people with severe or profound core activity limitations rose 173%, or by around 790,000 people; the number of people aged 0–64 years with severe or profound core activity limitations rose 183%, or by almost 440,000 people;, and the number of people aged 0–64 years with disability increased by 90%, or 1.2 million people.

Some of the increase in the number of people with disability can be attributed to population growth, particularly the growth in the proportion of the population aged 65 years or over. The way data was collected also contributed to a large increase in the prevalence of disability. Improved diagnosis and heightened awareness of certain disabling conditions have increased the reported rates of disability among children. However, there have been no significant changes in the underlying age-specific rate of severe or profound core activity limitation since 1981.



Notes

1. Children aged 0–4 years were not included in prevalence estimates of severe or profound core activity limitations in 1981, 1988 and 1993.
2. Projections are based on age- and sex-specific rates from the 2003 SDAC, applied to ABS projected population (series 8).

Source: Table A4.2.

Figure 4.2: Trends and projections in the number of people with disability, 1981–2030

Questions for discussion

1. Give examples of a person with each of the two measures of disability and explain why the growth in disability reported in the raw figures needs careful interpretation.

2. (a) According to the ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, how many people in Australia in 2003 had disability?

   (b) How many of these had severe or profound core activity limitation?

3. (a) What is the general relationship between disability rates and age?

   (b) Explain in your own words why this relationship exists.

4. Why is disability relatively high among school-aged children and lower in adolescence and early adulthood? Give three reasons.