

7 Disability

Disability affects an individual's participation in society, and thus is an important aspect of health and wellbeing. The measurement of disability has undergone changes recently to take into account the level and type of activity restrictions that are experienced by an individual, a concept formerly known as 'handicap'.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the prevalence of disability among young people, and then discusses the levels and types of activity restriction, and the main conditions causing their disabilities. The source of the data is the 1998 ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers. The size of the sample restricts analysis to 5-year age groups, and thus this chapter is limited to examining the age groups 15–19 years and 20–24 years. Information on services for people with a disability is reported in Chapter 24.

Prevalence of disability

The ABS survey defined a person with a disability as someone who had one or more limitations, restrictions or impairments, that had lasted or was likely to last for 6 months or more. The list of limitations, restrictions or impairments, included loss of sight (not corrected by glasses); loss of hearing; loss of speech; chronic pain restricting everyday activities; blackouts or fits; learning difficulties; incomplete use of arms, fingers, feet, or legs; a nervous or emotional condition restricting everyday activities; restriction in physical activities or work; disfigurement or deformity; needing help due to mental illness; brain damage restricting everyday activities; any other long-term condition restricting everyday activities (ABS 1999:4).

Table 7.1: Prevalence of disability by sex and age group, 1998 (per cent)

Age (years)	Males	Females	Persons
0–9	8.1	5.2	6.7
10–14	12.6	6.0	9.4
15–19	9.2	7.0	8.1
20–24	9.8	8.5	9.2
25–29	10.4	9.1	9.7
30–49	15.6	14.9	15.2
50–69	34.4	31.9	33.2
70+	59.5	59.9	59.7
All ages	19.6	19.1	19.3

Source: AIHW, from ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, 1998.

- The 1998 survey found that 8% of the population aged 15–19 years and 9% of those aged 20–24 years had a disability (Table 7.1). The total number of persons in these age groups with a disability was 230,900 (ABS 1999:14).
- Because disability increases with age, these rates were among the lowest of all age groups. The rate for 10–14 year old males was 13%, for those aged 70 years and over the figure was 60%, and for those aged 50–69 it was 33%. Just under 20% of the whole population had a disability.
- The rates for males were slightly higher than for females in the age groups 15–19 and 20–24 years, as was the case for most other age groups.

Activity restriction

The ABS survey attempted to measure the extent of disability, particularly if the disability restricted a person's 'core activities' and/or schooling or employment opportunities. 'Core activities' were defined as *self care* (bathing, dressing, eating, using toilet), *mobility* (moving around at home and away from home, getting into or out of bed or chair, using public transport), and *communication* (understanding and being understood by others) (ABS 1999:4). Most people reporting a disability were restricted in these specific activities (core or schooling/employment): 87% of all people with a disability, and 80% of those aged 15–24 years. The prevalence of disability with activity restriction is shown in Table 7.2. Since this group is a subset of all people with a disability, the patterns in Table 7.2 are similar to those in Table 7.1.

Table 7.2: Prevalence of specific restrictions (core activities and/or schooling/employment), by sex and age group, 1998 (per cent)

Age (years)	Males	Females	Persons
0–9	7.1	4.2	5.7
10–14	10.8	5.1	8.0
15–19	7.7	5.4	6.6
20–24	7.9	6.4	7.2
25–29	8.8	7.9	8.3
30–49	13.1	13.1	13.1
50–69	29.7	27.9	28.8
70+	53.3	56.6	55.2
Total	16.9	16.9	16.9

Source: AIHW, from ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, 1998.

- About 7% of the youth population (183,900 persons aged 15–24 years) reported having a disability which led to a restriction in their core activities or in schooling or employment. The figure for the total population was 17%.
- Males in the youth population were more likely to have such restrictions than were females, about 8% compared with 6%.

Disability

The measurement of schooling or employment restrictions is limited to the population aged 5–64 years, those usually at school or in the labour force, and the prevalence data for this type of restriction are shown in Table 7.3. Again, these data are a subset of those in Tables 7.1 and 7.2, and thus the patterns will be similar.

Table 7.3: Prevalence of schooling/employment restrictions, by sex and age group, 1998 (per cent)

Age (years)	Males	Females	Persons
5–9	8.6	5.5	7.1
10–14	9.5	4.4	7.0
15–19	6.3	4.4	5.3
20–24	6.4	5.1	5.8
25–29	7.5	6.1	6.8
30–49	11.2	11.0	11.1
50–64	23.8	20.1	22.0
5–64	11.9	10.1	11.0

Source: AIHW, from ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, 1998.

- Overall, 11% of the population aged 5–64 years, and nearly 6% of the youth (148,400 persons aged 15–24 years), reported such a restriction.
- As with Tables 7.1 and 7.2, the prevalence of schooling/employment restrictions is slightly higher among males than females.

There is some overlap between the populations of disabled people with core activity restrictions and those with schooling and/or employment restrictions. (Many, but not all, of those with schooling and/or employment restrictions also have core activity restrictions; and many, but not all, of those with a core activity restriction have a schooling/employment restriction.) Those with a core activity restriction (self care, mobility, communication) were assessed in the ABS survey for the severity of the restriction. Table 7.4 reports the prevalence of ‘profound’ or ‘severe’ core activity restrictions. A person with a profound restriction is unable to perform a core activity, or always needs assistance for that activity, and a person with a severe restriction sometimes needs assistance to perform the activity.

Table 7.4: Prevalence of profound/severe core activity restrictions, by sex and age group, 1998 (per cent)

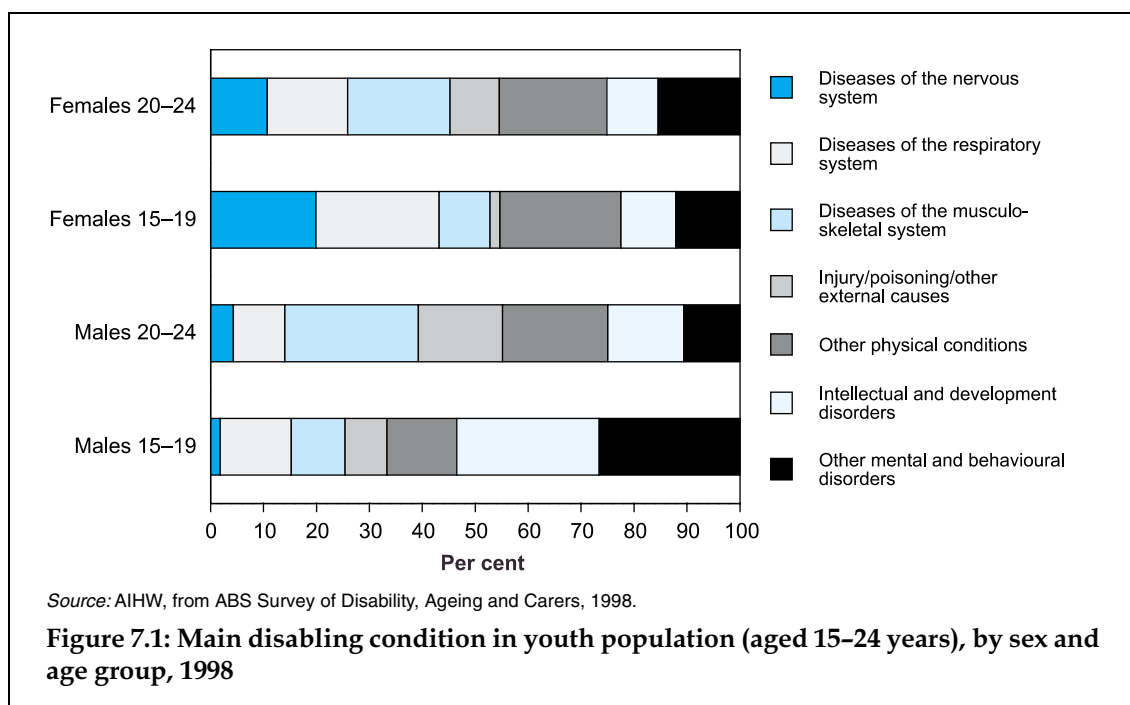
Age (years)	Males	Females	Persons
0–9	4.8	2.6	3.7
10–14	4.9	2.3	3.6
15–19	2.6	2.0	2.3
20–24	1.6	1.4	1.5
25–29	2.0	2.2	2.1
30–49	3.5	4.3	3.9
50–69	7.5	8.1	7.8
70+	20.6	30.9	26.6
Total	5.4	6.7	6.1

Source: AIHW, from ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, 1998.

- About 2% of males and 1% of females in the youth population (51,400 persons aged 15–24 years) reported having a profound or severe core activity restriction.

Main disabling conditions

Disability usually arises from a disease, disorder or injury (ABS 1999:7). For the youth population, the main disabling conditions can be divided into physical conditions (diseases of the nervous, respiratory, or musculoskeletal systems, or external causes such as injury or poisoning) and mental/behavioural disorders, including intellectual and developmental disorders. Figure 7.2 shows the main disabling condition reported by people with a disability, many of whom may have had more than one of these conditions.



- Over half of the disabling conditions of males aged 15-19 years with a disability were 'mental and behavioural disorders'. Half of these were 'intellectual and developmental disorders'.
- 'Mental and behavioural disorders' as the main disabling condition was much less among males aged 20-24 and among females in both age groups, being around 25%.
- 'Diseases of the musculoskeletal system' were a major disabling condition among males and females aged 20-24 years, and 'diseases of the respiratory system' were substantial for those aged 15-19 years .
- Diseases or injuries affecting the sensory system, such as those which cause loss of sight or hearing, were infrequently stated as the main disabling condition, and thus are included with 'other physical conditions' in Figure 7.1. For males aged 15-24 years with a disability, 2% gave eye conditions and 4% ear conditions as the main disabling condition for females aged 15-24 with a disability, the figures were 3% each for eye and ear conditions.

Reference

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1999. Disability, ageing and carers: summary of findings 1998. Australia. Cat. No. 4430.0. Canberra: ABS.