

DISABILITY DATA BRIEFING

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The Institute is an independent health and welfare statistics and information agency established under Commonwealth legislation. The Institute is working to improve the collection and analysis of national data in the disability field. These briefings provide data and share information about national data developments with people in the field.

Communication restrictions—the experience of people with a disability in the community

Introduction

Communication is a basic human activity and need, and a key element in social participation. Communication is one of the three 'core activities' in the ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers – the other two being self-care and mobility. The need for assistance with any one of these three areas defines the ABS notion of 'severe or profound core activity restriction'. The number of people with communication restrictions identified in the 1998 survey (166,900) was relatively small compared to the number of those with self-care (724,600) and mobility (516,400) restrictions (AIHW 2000: 107).

Nevertheless, it is of great interest to describe more fully the outcomes for this smaller but important group, especially in view of the finding that, among people receiving disability support services, effective spoken communication is closely related to the need for other supports, such as assistance with self-care (AIHW 1999).

This data briefing explores the relationship between communication restrictions and other outcomes for people with a disability. It is useful to keep in mind the definitions and methods of the ABS survey when considering data from it (Box 1).

Box 1: 'Communication' in the ABS population survey

Communication activities in the ABS survey included understanding or being understood by family and friends and/or strangers.

Communication restrictions were rated as:

- *profound, if the person was unable to communicate or always needed help with communication;*
- *severe, if the person sometimes needed help, had difficulty understanding or being understood by family and friends, or could communicate more easily using sign language or other non-spoken forms of communication;*
- *moderate, if the person needed no help but had difficulty communicating;*
- *mild, if the person needed no help, had no difficulty, but used 'aids and equipment'.*

Survey results were based on personal interviews where possible. Proxy interviews were conducted for people aged under 15 years and for those aged 15–17 years whose parents did not permit them to be personally interviewed.

Questions about assistance with communication were asked only in respect of people aged 18 years or more with a disability where the interview was by proxy, and persons aged 5–17 years with a disability and interviewed by proxy, where the person was reported as being slow at learning/understanding, having a mental illness, or a hearing loss, or loss of speech, or a nervous/emotional condition, or head injury, or brain damage.

Source: ABS 1999.

In 1998, of the 3,426,000 people with a disability living in households, 961,600 or 28% had a severe or profound core activity restriction (Table 1). Of these, 18% had a severe or profound communication restriction, 12% had a mild or moderate restriction, and

70% had no communication restriction. The following analyses focus on people with severe or profound core activity restrictions, and explore the differences within this group, between those with and without communication restrictions.

Table 1: Level of communication restriction among people with a disability living in households, 1998

Level of communication restriction	Core activity restriction ^(a)				Total with a disability	
	Severe or profound		Not severe or profound		No. ('000)	Per cent
	No. ('000)	Per cent	No. ('000)	Per cent		
Profound	58.3	6.1	0.0	0.0	58.3	1.7
Severe	118.6	12.3	0.0	0.0	118.6	3.5
Moderate	28.9	3.0	55.2	2.2	84.1	2.5
Mild	83.6	8.7	266.0	10.8	349.5	10.2
<i>Total with communication restriction</i>	<i>289.4</i>	<i>30.1</i>	<i>321.2</i>	<i>13.0</i>	<i>610.6</i>	<i>17.8</i>
No restriction	672.2	69.9	2,143.2	87.0	2,815.4	82.2
Total	961.6	100.0	2,464.4	100.0	3,426.0	100.0

(a) Refers to a person's overall severity level of core activity restriction, which is determined by their highest level of restriction in self-care, mobility and communication activities.

Source: AIHW analysis of ABS 1998 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers confidentialised unit record file.

Sex differences

Of people aged under 65 years with a severe or profound core activity restriction, 69% of those with communication restrictions were male; 55% of those with no communication restrictions were female (Table 2). Among those aged 65 years or more, 70% of those with no communication restrictions were female, although the proportions of males and females were similar for those with communication restrictions.

Communication and assistance received

Among people with severe or profound core activity restrictions aged under 65 years, those with communication restrictions had a very different profile of assistance

received compared with those with no communication restrictions (Table 2). Between 2% and 3% of both groups relied solely on formal assistance. However, people with communication restrictions were much less likely to be receiving informal assistance only (29%, compared with 61% of others with severe or profound core activity restrictions), and much more likely to be receiving a combination of both informal and formal assistance (65%, compared with 33%). These differences were much less striking for people aged 65 years and over.

Communication and schooling

Of people aged 5-20 years with severe or profound core activity restrictions and living in

households, most had a communication restriction – 93,700 or 62% (Table 3). Those with communication restrictions were much more likely than others to be

attending a special school (20%, compared with 6%) and much less likely to be attending school in an ordinary class (43%, compared with 59%).

Table 2: People with a severe or profound restriction living in households: sex and type of assistance received by presence of a communication restriction, 1998

	Under 65 years		65+ years	
	Communication restriction	No communication restriction	Communication restriction	No communication restriction
Sex	<i>% of total</i>			
Males	69.4	45.5	48.1	29.8
Females	30.6	54.5	51.9	70.2
Assistance received				
No assistance received	*1.4	3.8	**0.9	*1.5
Informal only	28.7	60.9	31.3	35.1
Formal only	*2.6	*2.4	*2.9	*3.8
Both informal and formal	65.4	32.9	63.9	59.5
Not applicable	*1.9	**0.0	*1.0	**0.0
Total number ('000)	178.9	457.1	110.5	215.1

(a) Estimates marked with * have an associated relative standard error (RSE) of between 25% and 50%. Estimates marked with ** have an associated RSE of 50% or more. These estimates should be interpreted accordingly.

Source: AIHW analysis of ABS 1998 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers confidentialised unit record file.

Table 3: People aged 5–20 years with a severe or profound restriction living in households: type of school attending by presence of a communication restriction, 1998

Type of school/class	Communication restriction		No communication restriction	
	Number ('000)	Per cent	Number ('000)	Per cent
Ordinary school class	40.1	42.8	33.6	58.7
Ordinary school (special class)	25.3	27.0	*6.8	11.9
Special school	18.5	19.7	*3.2	*5.6
Not applicable	9.8	10.5	13.6	23.8
Total	93.7	100.0	57.2	100.0

(a) Estimates marked with * have an associated relative standard error (RSE) of between 25% and 50%. These estimates should be interpreted accordingly.

Source: AIHW analysis of ABS 1998 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers confidentialised unit record file.

Communication and employment

In 1998 there were 79,200 – or 16% of the 492,300 people aged 15–64 years with severe or profound core activity restrictions, living in households – who had a communication restriction (Table 4). The presence of communication restrictions correlated with poorer employment outcomes and more employment restrictions compared with outcomes for others with severe or profound restrictions not including communication. People with communication restrictions were:

- more likely not to be in the labour force – 76% were not, compared with 63% of those without a communication restriction;
- less likely to be employed – 21% compared with 33%;
- more likely to need employer-provided equipment or special arrangements (20%), ongoing supervision or assistance (21%) or a support person (53%); these figures compare with 13%, 8% and 47%, respectively, for people with severe or profound core activity restrictions but no communication restriction;
- more likely to need ‘other employment arrangements’ such as retraining and other forms of assistance;
- more likely to have severe or profound employment restrictions – 74% (compared with 55% of people with severe or profound core activity restrictions but no communication restriction).

An interesting feature of communication restrictions emerges when Tables 3 and 4 are compared. There were more people with severe or profound core activity restrictions and communication restrictions in the relatively narrow age range 5–20 years (93,700) than there were among those aged 15–64 years (79,200). This appears to reflect a compounding of two effects: that relatively more people in younger age groups in 1998 reported severe or profound restrictions – particularly in comparison to previous ABS surveys (Figure 1), and that it is more likely that people in these age groups reported communication restrictions – 62% (93,700 of 150,900, Table 3) compared with 16% (79,200 of 492,300, Table 4). There is a range of possible factors here, the most obvious being that, in the earlier years of life, schools and parents are aware of learning and communication difficulties, and may be actively addressing them. At older ages these problems may have been ameliorated through earlier interventions, or people may find activities and environments where these restrictions have less effect on their lives and are hence less likely to be reported in the survey. This statistical pattern aligns with the finding that having difficulty with ‘learning and understanding things’ was more common among young males in both the 1993 and 1998 surveys (Figure 2), and intellectual disability estimates are higher in the younger age ranges (AIHW: Wen 1997).

Table 4: People aged 15-64 years with a severe or profound restriction living in households: labour force status and employment restrictions, by presence of a communication restriction, 1998^(a)

	Communication restriction	No communication restriction
Labour force status	<i>% of total</i>	
Employed	20.8	32.8
Unemployed	*3.7	*3.8
Total in the labour force	24.5	36.6
Not in the labour force	75.5	63.4
Employment restrictions		
Restricted in type of job	44.0	42.3
Difficulty in changing job or getting a better job	37.4	34.5
Need for time off work	*7.3	15.2
Need for employer provided equipment and/or special arrangements	20.4	12.8
Need for ongoing supervision or assistance	20.6	*7.7
Need for support person	53.4	46.8
Other employer arrangements		
A disability support person or someone at work to assist/train on the job	14.5	3.3
Special equipment	9.7	4.6
Training or retraining	*7.5	**1.0
Different duties	*4.8	*4.6
Severity of employment restriction		
Profound	51.4	43.8
Severe	22.5	10.8
Moderate	23.4	36.8
Mild to no employment restriction	**2.6	*8.6
Total number ('000)^(b)	79.2	413.1

(a) Estimates marked with * have an associated relative standard error (RSE) of between 25% and 50%. Estimates marked with ** have an associated RSE of 50% or more. These estimates should be interpreted accordingly.

(b) The total may be not equal to the sum of the components as the questions on employment restrictions and arrangements were asked separately in the survey.

Source: AIHW analysis of ABS 1998 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers confidentialised unit record file.

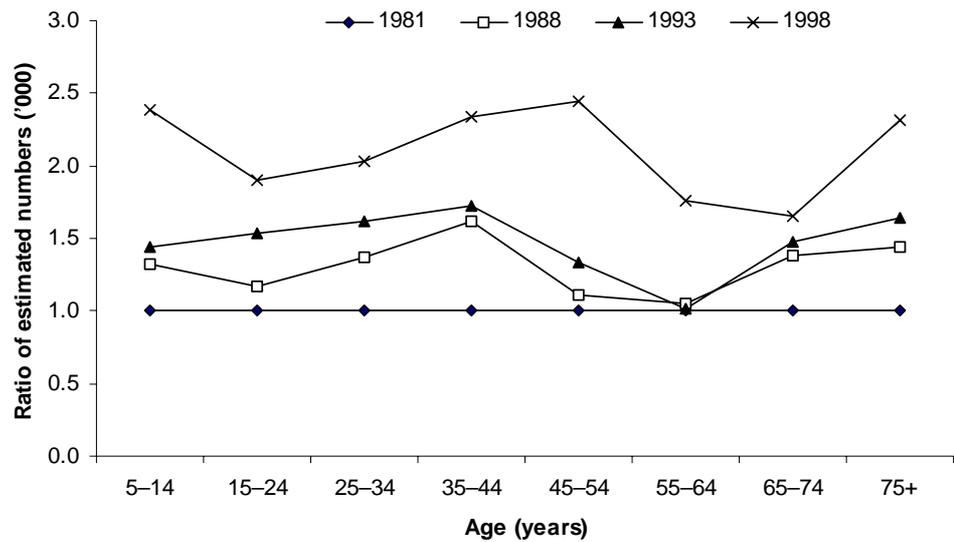


Figure 1: Ratio of the estimated numbers of severe or profound restrictions by age: 1988, 1993 and 1998 to baseline year 1981.

Source: AIHW analysis of unpublished data tables from the ABS 1981, 1988, 1993 and 1998 disability surveys.

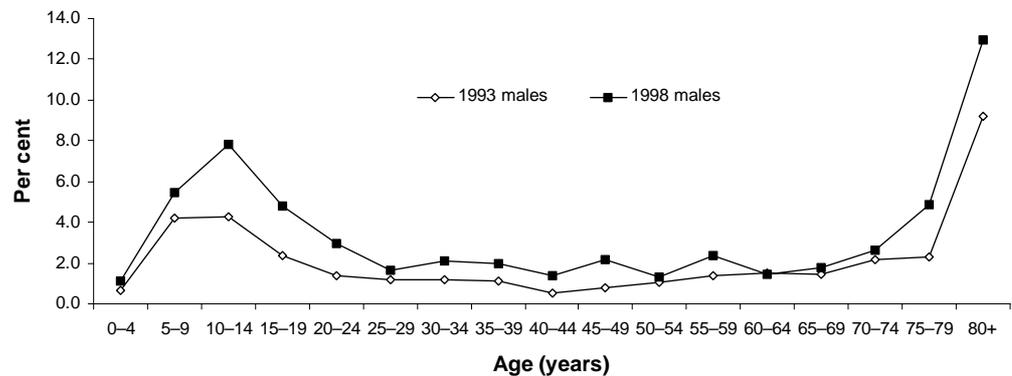


Figure 2: Percentage of males reporting slowness (1993) or difficulty (1998) with learning or understanding things, by age, 1993 and 1998

Source: AIHW analysis of ABS 1993 and 1998 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers confidentialised unit record file.

Communication and social participation

On almost every measure of social participation collected in the 1998 survey, people living in the community with communication restrictions fared worse than did other people with severe or profound core activity restrictions (Table 5).

Among people aged under 65 years, with severe or profound core

activity restrictions, and with a communication restriction:

- some 77% had received visits from and 77% had made visits to family and friends in the previous three months, but they were less likely to have done so than other people with severe or profound core activity restrictions, 89% of whom had

- received visits at home from family and friends, and 84% of whom had visited family and friends;
- 61% had received phone calls from family and friends compared with 91% of other

- people with severe or profound core activity restrictions;
- 44% had been to a restaurant or club in the last three months compared with 55% of other people with severe or profound core activity restrictions.

Table 5: People with a severe or profound restriction living in households: social and community participation, use of computer at home, by age, by whether has a communication restriction, 1998

	Under 65 years		65+ years	
	With a restriction	No restriction	With a restriction	No restriction
At home in the last three months	<i>% of total</i>			
Visits from family or friends	77.4	89.4	91.0	88.3
Telephone calls with family or friends	60.5	91.1	84.5	90.0
Craftwork for/with other people	14.2	18.5	11.0	10.7
Church/special community activities	9.7	9.3	6.9	6.3
Voluntary work (including advocacy)	2.6	8.1	3.5	4.3
None of the above	5.8	3.1	5.2	5.5
Away from home in the last three months				
Visited family or friends	77.0	84.1	61.8	68.6
Went to a restaurant or club	44.2	54.6	40.2	44.2
Attended church activities	23.4	25.7	21.0	24.2
Voluntary work (including advocacy)	7.8	17.0	6.5	9.3
Organised performing arts group activities	6.3	6.4	2.4	1.5
Organised art/craft group activity	8.1	8.0	4.3	4.2
Other special interest group activities	20.9	17.2	15.2	13.7
None of the above	4.4	7.6	17.9	16.3
Does not leave home	2.1	1.2	5.5	5.6
Use of computer in the last three months				
Used	12.7	27.1	3.9	2.9
Did not use	87.3	72.9	96.1	97.1
Total ('000)	178.9	457.1	110.6	215.1

(a) Estimates marked with * have an associated relative standard error (RSE) of between 25% and 50%. Estimates marked with ** have an associated RSE of 50% or more. These estimates should be interpreted accordingly.

(b) Total may be not equal to the sum of the components as the questions on employment restrictions and arrangements were asked separately in the survey.

Source: AIHW analysis of ABS 1998 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers confidentialised unit record file

The pattern for people under 65 years was fairly similar for those aged 65 years and over with communication restrictions. Those aged 65 years and over were more likely to have received visits from family and friends in the previous

three months—91%, compared with 88% of those of the same age without severe or profound core activity restrictions, and 77% of those aged under 65 years with similar restrictions.

They were less likely than their younger counterparts to have gone out to visit family and friends (62%, compared with 77%) and more likely to have received phone calls from them (85%, compared with 61%).

Church and 'special community activities' and 'organised activities' (art/craft and performing arts) were the only areas where people with communication restrictions were as likely to be participating as others with severe or profound core activity restrictions.

References

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

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AIHW 2000. Disability and ageing: Australian population patterns and implications. AIHW cat. no. DIS 19. Canberra: AIHW.

AIHW: Wen X 1997. The definition and prevalence of intellectual disability in Australia. AIHW cat. no. DIS 2. Canberra: AIHW.

Communication restrictions as an indicator of need

Communication restrictions are correlated with important participation outcomes – schooling, employment and social activities. Because of the alignment of patterns of communication restrictions with patterns of intellectual disability, and their correlation with the need for assistance, it is possible that communication restrictions offer some explanatory power in their own right, as an indicator of need, and a potentially useful focus, for intervention and assistance.

Recent disability related publications

AIHW: Bricknell S 2003. Disability: the use of aids and the role of the environment. AIHW cat. no. DIS 32. Canberra: AIHW.

AIHW 2003. Disability support services 2002: National data on services provided under the Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement. AIHW cat. no. DIS 31. Canberra: AIHW.

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