

1 Introduction

The two consecutive biennial reports of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Australia's Welfare 1993* and *Australia's Welfare 1995*, provide an overview of population data on prevalence of disability in the Australian population. In addition, the AIHW conducted a study in 1995 (Madden et al. 1996) to inform the Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement (CSDA) Evaluation. The study examined available national data and made estimates of the demand (including unmet demand) for disability support services provided under the CSDA. These and other AIHW reports (Wen et al. 1995 and Madden et al. 1995) drew attention to the need for more work to be done on the dual issues of consistency of disability definitions and estimation of disability prevalence.

A number of other significant reports (Baume and Kay 1995, Yeatman 1996) have also highlighted the need to improve the consistency of disability definitions and the comparability of disability data collections. An Australian Disability Data Reference and Advisory Group (DDRAG) was established by the Institute in 1996 to examine these issues and provide a focus for work being done in this area.

Intellectual/learning disability is the most predominant primary disability type among the recipients of disability support services, accounting for about 70% of total clients (Black and Eckerman 1997). We need useable estimates of the prevalence of intellectual disability and a better understanding of the national picture of this population group in order to facilitate service planning and to inform the disability field and the community.

However, the existing estimates of intellectual disability show considerable variations, reflecting differences in operational definitions, measurements, survey methods, data sources and geographic locations. Most surveys and studies have been confined to State level.

This paper contains a critical review of existing definitions and estimates of prevalence from different data sources and studies, discusses the consequences of different purposes, operational definitions, measures and data collection methods, and presents estimates of the number of people with intellectual disability in Australia on the basis of the 1993 ABS disability survey. Estimates from this survey, which are based on self-reporting information, are compared with estimates from clinically oriented administration records.

The paper consists of four chapters, of which this brief introduction is the first. Chapter 2 provides an overview of existing definitions and classifications. Chapter 3 examines the existing published estimates of prevalence in Australia, refines the estimated number of people with intellectual disability, and analyses the pattern of intellectual disability in Australia, as revealed in the ABS disability surveys and other published studies. The discussion of prevalence is presented at both national and State levels, along with a comparison with international studies. Chapter 4 discusses issues relating to the definitions and estimates of prevalence of intellectual disability and presents some concluding remarks.