



Disability and Work

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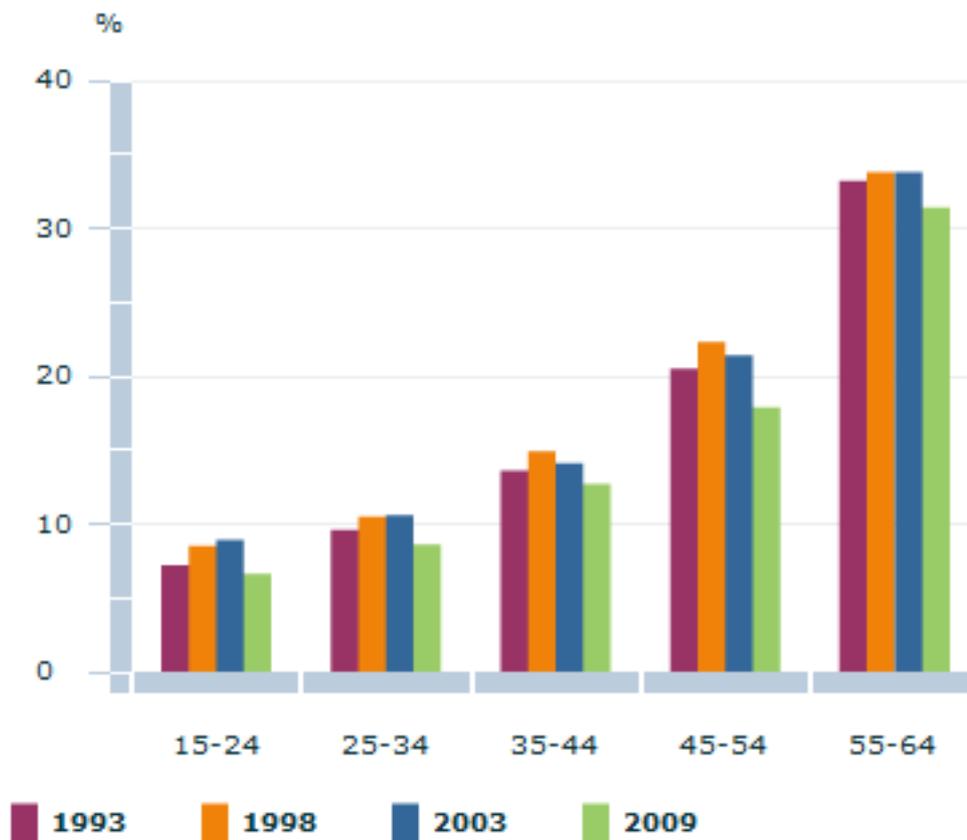
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DISABILITY RATE BY AGE(a) - 1993 - 2009



Source(s): [ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, 1993, 1998, 2003, 2009](#)

Related terms

Work, labour issues, Disability discrimination, Physical and mental health, Workplace equality, Labour force participation, Unemployment rate, Living with disability, Disability rate, Disability employment, core activity limitation, disability type

INTRODUCTION

Many people with disability engage in work and make a valuable contribution to society. Employment can provide financial independence, a better standard of living and improved physical and mental health.([Endnote 1](#)) Entering employment can provide individuals with increased confidence, expanding their social network and social skills as well as opportunities to develop a career by gaining new work skills and knowledge.

Recent decades have seen major developments towards achieving workplace equality for all Australians, including those with disability. The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) ([Endnote 2](#)) aims to protect people from discrimination because of their disability. Following a Productivity Commission Review ([Endnote 3](#)) in 2004, the DDA was changed to further protect the equality of opportunity for people with disability. In addition to legislative protection, since 2009 employment support has been provided through the National Disability Agreement (NDA).([Endnote 4](#))

Although there have been improvements in anti-discrimination legislation, people with disability are still less likely to be working than other Australians. The labour force participation rate for those aged 15-64 years with disability in 2009 was 54%, much lower than that for those without disability (83%). One of the priority outcomes of the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020 is to ‘increase access to employment opportunities as a key to improving economic security and personal wellbeing for people with disability...’.([Endnote 5](#))

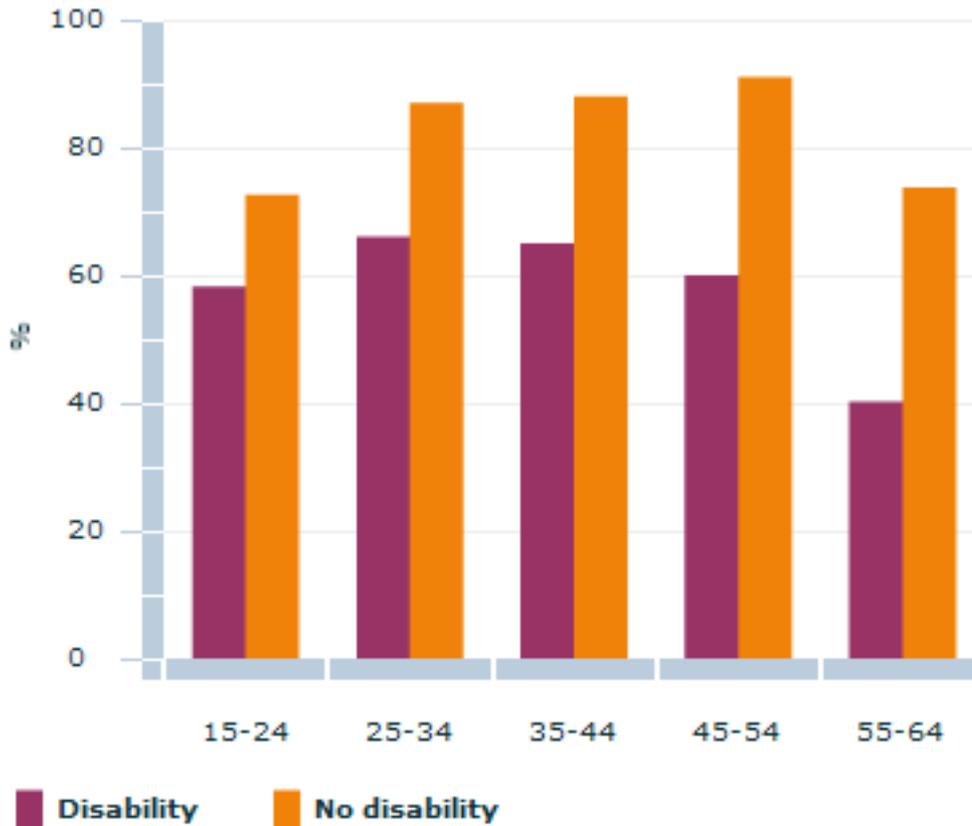
This article investigates the labour force characteristics of Australians aged 15-64 years with disability.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

In 2009, there were 2.2 million Australians aged 15-64 years with disability, up from 1.7 million in 1993. The disability rate for Australians aged 15-64 years, those of ‘prime working age’, rose from 15% in 1993 to a peak of 17% in 2003, then returned to 15% in 2009. In 2009, just over half (51%) of people with disability were women.

The likelihood of living with disability increases with age. In 2009, the disability rate among 15-24 year olds was 6.6% and the rate was higher for successively older age groups, with 18% of 45-54 year olds, and 31% of 55-64 year olds living with disability in 2009.

LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION BY DISABILITY STATUS AND AGE(a) - 2009



Footnote(s): (a) People aged 15-64 years and living in households.

Source(s): [ABS 2009 Survey Disability, Ageing and Carers](#)

LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION

Labour force participation provides an indication of both the desire for and availability of paid work, and the ability to obtain and perform such work. Between 1993 and 2009, the labour force participation rate for working-age people (15-64 years) with disability was relatively stable. In 1993, the rate was 55%, and this was broadly similar in 2009 at 54%. Conversely, over the same period, the participation rate for working-age people with no disability increased from 77% in 1993 to 83% in 2009.

Over the sixteen years from 1993 to 2009, the unemployment rate for 15-64 year olds with disability decreased from 17.8% to 7.8%, in line with the similar decline in unemployment for those with no disability (from 12.0% in 1993 to 5.1% in 2009). However, the unemployment rate for people with disability continued to be significantly higher than for those without disability in 2009.

Nearly half (46%) of working-age people with disability were not in the labour force in 2009, and more than half of these (59%) were permanently unable to work. Of those people with disability who were not in the labour force, one fifth (20% or 194,000) had no employment restriction, meaning that it was not their disability which prevented them from working. Difficulties such as access to childcare (22%), were reported as limiting these people's ability to participate in the labour force despite having no employment restrictions. For people without disability who were not in the labour force, other difficulties were reported such as a lack of vacancies or suitable hours (both 11%).

DISABILITY STATUS (A) BY LABOUR FORCE STATUS - 2009

Male

Females

Total

Labour force status	With disability(b)		With disability(b)		With No disability	
	No disability	No disability	No disability	No disability	No disability	No disability
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Employed full time	42.5	70.5	19.9	38.2	31.0	54.5
Employed part time	12.3	13.9	25.5	34.5	19.1	24.1
Total employed	54.8	84.4	45.5	72.7	50.0	78.6
Unemployed	4.9	4.5	3.6	4.0	4.2	4.2
Not in the labour force	40.2	11.1	51.0	23.4	45.7	17.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total ('000)	1,059.4	6,323.0	1,111.9	6,224.9	2,171.3	12,547.9
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Participation rate	59.8	88.9	49.0	76.6	54.3	82.8
Unemployment rate	8.2	5.0	7.3	5.2	7.8	5.1

(a) People aged 15-64 years and living in households.

(b) Includes those who may not have a specific limitation or restriction.

Source: ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, 2009

Age and sex

Labour force participation rates for people with disability varied with age, a similar pattern to people without disability. The difference in labour force participation between people with and without disability increased with age.

The peak of participation for people with disability was in the 25-34 years age group while for those without disability, participation peaked at 45-54 years. People aged 55-64 years with disability had the lowest participation rate (40%) of all the age groups. Of people of this age, with disability and not in the labour force, nearly one third (30%) reported long-term illness or injury as a reason for not wanting to work, much higher than people of the same age without disability (2%). For people aged 55-64 years with disability, their low participation rate may partly reflect the desire for retirement or difficulties experienced by mature-age job seekers, which can discourage some from looking for work. ([Endnote 9](#))

There were differences in labour force participation between working-age men and women among those with disability, with women (49%) less likely to participate than men (60%). This was also true for people without disability (77% and 89% respectively), partly reflecting women's roles in family responsibilities. ([Endnote 10](#))

Disability type

Of the five main disability groups, the most common in 2009 was physical disability, which affected nearly three quarters (71%) of working-age people with disability. This was much higher than the proportion with sensory and speech disability (21%) or psychological disability (17%). People can be affected by more than one type of disability and therefore be classified into one or more disability groups.

The type of disability that an individual has can affect their likelihood of participating in the labour market. People with sensory or speech impairment had the best labour market outcomes with a participation rate of 54% and an unemployment rate of 7.0%, while people whose disability was psychological had the lowest participation rate (29%), and the highest unemployment rate (19%). People with sensory or speech impairment may be able to benefit from assistive technologies but this is not the case for people with psychological disability such as mental illness. People with mental illness may experience disruption to their work attendance and career due to the episodic nature of their disability. ([Endnote 11](#))

SELECTED LABOUR FORCE CHARACTERISTICS BY DISABILITY GROUP (A) - 2009

Disability group	People '000	Labour force participation rate %	Unemployment rate %
Sensory and speech	457.9	53.7	7.0
Intellectual	244.8	40.9	16.3
Physical	1,546.0	49.7	7.5
Psychological	369.6	29.2	18.9
Head injury, stroke or brain damage	155.6	35.6	15.3
All with a disability(b)	2,171.3	54.3	7.8
No disability	12,547.9	82.8	5.1
All people	14,719.2	78.6	5.4

(a) People aged 15-64 years and living in households.

(b) Includes other disability type(s) and those who may not have a specific limitation or restriction.

Source: ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers 2009

Disability severity

The severity of disability is an indication of a person's limitations in the core activities of communication, mobility and self-care. Of people aged 15-64 years with disability, almost one quarter (23%) had profound or severe disability, while nearly half (47%) had moderate or mild disability. About one third (30%) of people with disability did not have a core activity limitation, yet they may have had a school or work restriction.

As with disability type, the severity of a person's disability is reflected in their ability to participate in the labour force. Generally, labour force participation decreases as the severity of disability increases. In 2009, those aged 15-64 years with moderate or mild disability had a participation rate of 53%, while

those with profound or severe disability had a labour force participation rate of 31%. This pattern was evident across all types of disability. For example, the participation rate of those with moderate or mild physical restriction was 51%, while those with profound or severe physical restriction had a participation rate of 28%.

To see a pattern in unemployment rates, severity and type of disability need to be looked at together. For example, the unemployment rate for people with intellectual disability was high in comparison with other disability groups, regardless of severity. Those with moderate or mild intellectual disability (20%) had a higher unemployment rate than those with moderate or mild physical disability (8.8%). This may partly reflect the unique barriers that people with intellectual disability face in accessing education and work.

Employment restrictions

Some people with disability experience employment restrictions such as being restricted in the type of job they can do or the number of hours they can work, or needing special assistance in the workplace. People with disability who had an employment restriction were far less likely to be participating in the labour force (46%) than those without an employment restriction (71%).

Of the 69% of people with disability who had an employment restriction, two of the most common restrictions were the type of job or the number of hours they could work (51% and 31% respectively). People with profound or severe disability were the most likely to have some kind of employment restriction (92%).

EMPLOYMENT

In Australia in 2009, over one million working-age people with disability (50%) were in paid employment, comprising 10% of the total Australian workforce. Men with disability (55%) were more likely to be employed than women with disability (45%).

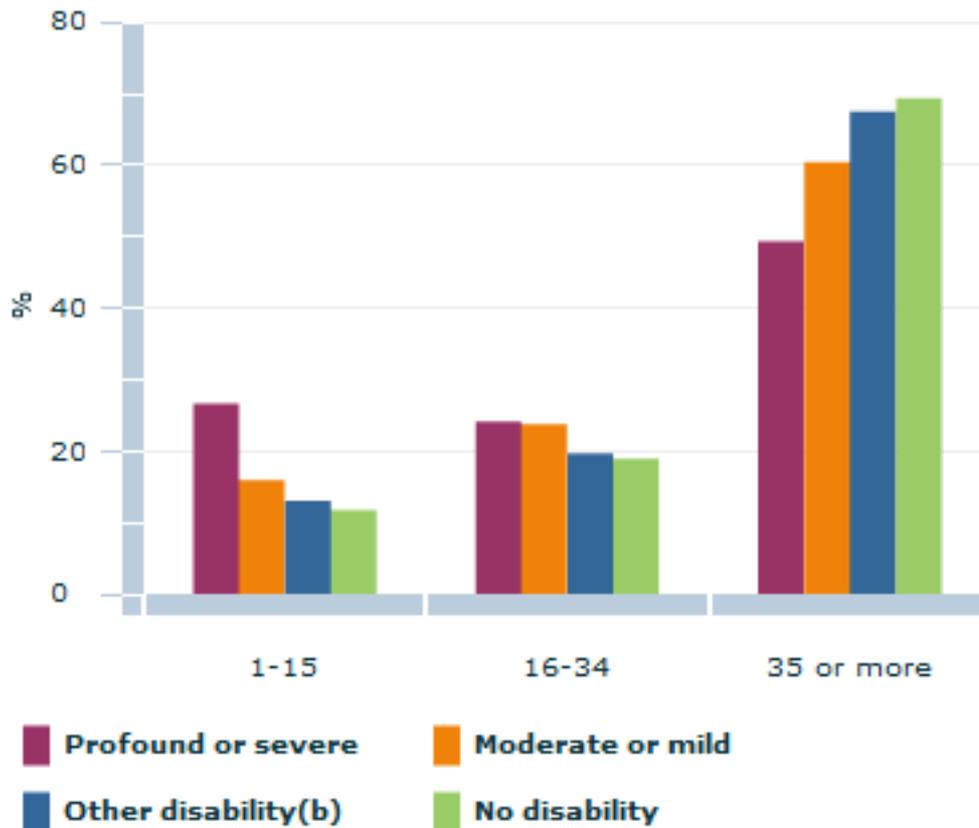
Hours worked

Generally, people with disability who were employed were more likely than people without disability to work part time (38% and 31% respectively). The number of hours usually worked by people with disability was associated with the severity and type of disability they had.

People with profound or severe disability who worked were more likely to work part-time hours than those with less severe disability. Nevertheless, almost half (49%) of those with profound or severe disability who were working, worked full time.

Among the five disability groups, psychological and intellectual disabilities have greater association with fewer working hours. More than a third (35%) of people with psychological disability who worked, usually worked no more than 15 hours, followed by people with intellectual disability (30%). In contrast, about two thirds of employed people with sensory or speech disability (66%) or physical disability (61%) worked full time.

HOURS USUALLY WORKED EACH WEEK(a) BY SEVERITY OF DISABILITY



Footnote(s): (a) People aged 15–64 years and living in households. (b) Includes those who may not have a specific limitation or restriction.

Source(s): [ABS 2009 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers](#)

Occupation and industry

Almost one fifth (19%) of working-age people with disability who were employed in 2009 worked as professionals, followed by clerical and administrative workers, and technicians and trade workers (both 15%). The distribution of people across different occupations is similar for people with and without disability. However, there was some variation of occupations according to the type of disability. For example, around one third (34%) of employed people with intellectual disability were working as labourers, such as cleaners, in 2009, while one-fifth (20%) of employed people with sensory or speech disability were in professional occupations, such as secondary school teachers.

Both people with and without disability had similar distributions across industry groups. Some industries had a higher than average (10%) disability prevalence rate, particularly Agriculture, forestry and fishing (15%) and Transport, postal and warehousing (12%). This may be partly reflective of the older age profile of people in these industries.

People with disability who were working were more likely to run their own business (13%), and/or work from home (9%), than employed people without disability (10% and 6% respectively). Such situations may enhance the flexibility of working arrangements, making it easier for people with disability to participate in the labour force.

Income sources

Among working-age people with disability who were employed, the most commonly reported main source of cash income was wages or salary (77%), much higher than the next most common income sources, government pensions or allowances, and business income (both 9%).

Of people with disability who were employed, over one fifth (22%) received some form of government pension or allowance. This was nearly double that of people without disability who were employed and in receipt of a government pension or allowance (12%). People with disability who were working part time were more likely to receive a government pension or allowance (41%) than those working full time (10%). The main disability income support, The Disability Support Pension, can provide income to supplement earnings from work (see Income support box).

Assistance needed

Employers and disability employment service providers may need to make special arrangements to ensure that employees with disability have a suitable environment in which to work. In 2009, 12% of employed people with disability required some type of special work arrangement such as being provided with special equipment or being allocated different duties.

The type of disability influenced whether assistance was needed in the workplace and the kind of assistance required. Employed people with psychological or intellectual disability were likely to require special working arrangements, with nearly one fifth (18% and 16% respectively) receiving assistance, such as a support person to assist or train them on the job. People with sensory or speech disability who were working were less likely to require special working arrangements, with one tenth (9%) receiving special working arrangements. For this disability group, assistance provided took the form of special equipment (48%).

The severity of disability also influenced whether a person required any special work arrangements, with 10% of employed people with moderate or mild disability needing special work arrangements compared with one fifth (20%) of those with profound or severe disability.

UNEMPLOYMENT

As well as being less likely to participate in the labour force, people with disability who do participate are more likely to be unemployed. The unemployment rate for 15-64 year olds with disability in 2009 was 7.8%, compared with 5.1% for people without disability. The unemployment rates of men and women with disability were not significantly different (7.3% and 8.2% respectively).

As with the labour force participation rate, the unemployment rate varied between disability groups. People with sensory or speech disability had the lowest unemployment rate (7.0%). Conversely, people living with psychological or intellectual disability had the highest unemployment rates (19% and 16% respectively).

PEOPLE NOT IN THE LABOUR FORCE

In 2009, of people aged 15-64 years with disability, 46% were not in the labour force, which is significantly higher than people with no disability (17%). Of the nearly one million people with disability who were not in the labour force, more than half were women (57%). In comparison, over two thirds (67%) of people without disability who were not in the labour force were women. Nearly half (46%) of people with disability who were not in the labour force were aged 55-64 years, and of those of this age, 67% were permanently unable to work.

Having long-term illness or disability was reported by more than half (52%) of those not in the labour force as the main reason for not wanting, or not being able to work. Other main reasons for not being in the labour force were being satisfied with their current situation (no need to work for now) (18%), or being permanently retired (9%). Of people with disability who were not in the labour force, some found it difficult to find a job due to their illness or disability (41%) or because they lacked the necessary skills or experience (8%).

LOOKING AHEAD

The Australian Government, through the National Disability Agreement, provides support to people with disability who wish to enter employment ([Endnote 4](#)). Under the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020, federal, and state and territory governments are making a concerted effort to improve and increase employment services for people with disability. ([Endnote 5](#)) In addition, planned reforms to

the Australian welfare support system, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme, aim to create increased opportunities for people with disability to enter and maintain employment. ([Endnote 14](#)) Increases in labour force participation may improve both financial security and personal wellbeing for people with disability.

ADDITIONAL TOPICS

DISABILITY GROUPS

Disabilities can be broadly grouped depending on whether they relate to functioning of the mind or the senses, to anatomy or physiology. A person is classified to one or more of the following five disability groups:

- Sensory or speech (loss of sight, hearing or speech difficulties)
- Intellectual (difficulty with learning, or understanding things)
- Physical (breathing difficulties, blackouts, fits, chronic or recurrent pain, incomplete use of arms, finger, feet or legs, restriction in physical activities or in doing physical work, disfigurement)
- Psychological (nervous or emotional condition, mental illness)
- Head injury, stroke or brain damage (with long-term effects that restrict everyday activities)

SPOTLIGHT ON A DISABILITY - MENTAL ILLNESS

The ABS [National Health Survey 2007-08](#) (cat.no. 4364.0) tells us there were 1.8 million people of working-age living with mental illness in Australia. ([Endnote 6](#)) Mental illness is a clinically diagnosable disorder that significantly interferes with an individual's cognitive, emotional or social abilities. Mental disorders can include anxiety, affective or mood disorders, and substance abuse disorders. ([Endnote 7](#))

Having a mental illness does not always result in disability. Of the 1.8 million people with mental illness in Australia, less than half (43%) reported having a disability.

Having a mental health disability can significantly impact upon a person's ability to engage with the labour market. In 2007-08, the participation rate of people with disabling mental illness was 51%, much lower than the rate for people without disability (82%). This disparity may in part result from prejudice towards people with mental health conditions. ([Endnote 8](#)) Of people living with disabling mental illness who were employed in 2007-08, significantly more (49%) worked part time, compared with all people without disability (28%). ([Endnote 6](#))

Note: The 2007-08 National Health Survey measured disability differently to the Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, and as such the results from these surveys differ.

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

For young people, the time of transition from school to continued study or employment can be critical for their long-term economic future. For young people with disability, they must take account of their abilities and restrictions in their choice of study and work paths. Completing Year 12 can enhance study and work options. The 2009 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers indicated that of people aged 18-24 years with disability, nearly two fifths (38%) had completed Year 12 compared with almost half (49%) of those without disability.

While the majority of young Australians either work, study or do a combination of both, there are some young people who are not doing either. These people are described as not fully engaged and are at risk of unemployment or only securing low paid work. Being fully engaged describes people who are either studying full time; working full time; or studying part time and working part time.

In 2009, almost two-fifths (38%) of young people (15-24 years of age) with disability were fully engaged. This compares with over half (56%) of young people without disability who were fully

engaged. Young people with disability who were not fully engaged were either working part time (25%), studying part time (7%) or doing neither (68%).

INCOME SUPPORT

A key role of the Australian Government in supporting people with disability is the provision of income support. Around 819,000 people with disability* in Australia received the Disability Support Pension (DSP) in June 2011. (Endnote 12) Income and assets testing of the pension enable Disability Support Pension (DSP) recipients to earn an income while still receiving full-pension or part-pension. (Endnote 13)

The number of people receiving the DSP is growing despite relative stability in the disability rate. (Endnote 14) This growth is partly due to changes in the eligibility criteria such as the relaxation in the number of hours recipients are able to work while being able to continue receipt of the payment.

The Productivity Commission has completed an inquiry into disability care and support in Australia. The outcomes of this inquiry have led the Australian Government to develop reforms to the DSP and establish a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). (Endnote 15)

It is proposed that the NDIS will provide insurance cover for all Australians in the event of significant disability. This cover will provide long-term care and support. (Endnote 16) Suggested reforms to the DSP will allow recipients to work more hours than previously permitted. (Endnote 15)

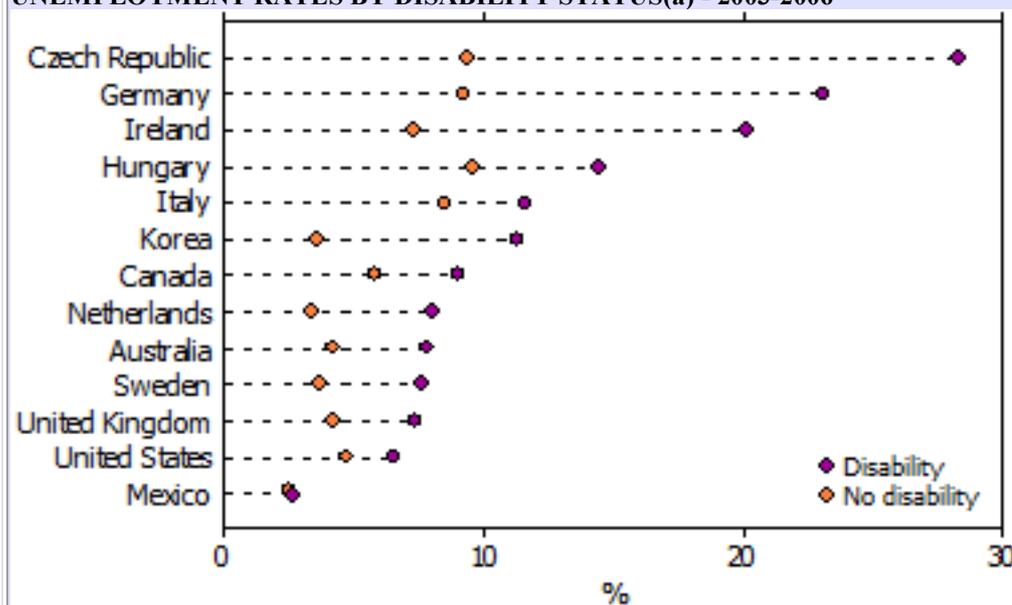
* Disability is defined as being unable to work for 2 years because of illness, injury or disability, or being permanently blind.



INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

In the mid-2000s, of selected OECD countries, the Czech Republic had the highest unemployment rate for people with disability whilst Mexico had the lowest. Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom all had relatively similar rates of unemployment for people with disability

UNEMPLOYMENT RATES BY DISABILITY STATUS(a) - 2003-2006



(a) People aged 15-64 years.

Source: OECD Sickness, Disability and Work (Keeping on Track in the Economic Downturn)

Background Paper, 2009. www.oecd.org. All data are for 2005 except Australia (2003), Mexico and United States (2004), and Canada and United Kingdom (2006). Note that the disability definitions vary across countries.

BARRIERS AND INCENTIVES TO WORK

In 2009 according to the Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, for people with disability aged 15-64 years seeking work, the most commonly reported main difficulty in finding work was their own ill health or disability (35%). This was followed by their lack of the necessary skills or education (13%).

Similarly, people with disability who were not in the labour force reported long-term illness or injury as the main reason for not wanting to work (52%) or not looking for work (35%).

The 2008-09 ABS Survey of Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation indicated that, for people who assessed their health as poor, the most commonly reported incentives to enable work included being able to maintain welfare benefits (39%), less paperwork from government agencies (31%) and being able to sit down (26%). ([Endnote 17](#))

Under the National Disability Agreement (NDA) people with disability have access to increased and improved services to assist them into work. ([Endnote 4](#)) Two types of specialist agencies exist to support people with disability to find and maintain work:

- Australian Disability Enterprises (around 20,000 people with disability employed in Australian Disability Enterprises)
- The Disability Employment Services (employment assistance for job seekers with disability) ([Endnote 18](#))

The latest progress report of the NDA indicates that there was an 83% increase in the number of people using disability employment services from 64,800 in 2004-05 to 118,800 in 2009-10. ([Endnote 19](#))

AN EXAMPLE OF OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS

Jo* had a strong interest in getting work, but had been struggling with anxiety issues since recently finishing Year 12. Jo's feelings of anxiety meant she found it hard to talk to people; she was reluctant to leave home and worried about how she would manage job interviews and employment. After a referral to a disability employment services provider, CRS Australia, Jo received guidance on job options, interview techniques and disability counselling and support. Jo was interested in jobs in retail and when an option for a job at a supermarket came up, she was keen but anxious. The employment service helped Jo prepare for work at the supermarket, working with her psychologist. After an initial work experience placement, Jo was offered a paid position and has now worked there for six months.

'I feel good! It is a great environment to work in and I enjoy the social aspect. Work experience helped a lot', said Jo.

* Name changed for confidentiality.

Source: CRS Australia, 2012, www.crsaaustralia.gov.au

EXPLANATORY INFORMATION

DATA SOURCE AND DEFINITIONS

Most of the data in this article are from the ABS 2009 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC) (cat. no. 4430.0).

This article focuses on people aged 15-64 years living with disability and living in households.

Disability In this article a person has a disability if they have a limitation, restriction or impairment,

which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months and restricts everyday activities. Disability is defined based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF).

Core activity limitations There are four levels of core activity limitation based on whether a person needs help, has difficulty, or uses aids or equipment with any of the following core activities: communication, mobility and self-care. The levels of limitation used in this article are profound or severe, moderate or mild, and other disability (people with a disability other than a core activity limitation). A person's overall level of core activity limitation is determined by their highest level of limitation in these activities.

Employed A person is employed if they reported that they had worked, either full or part time (fewer than 35 hours per week), in a job, business or farm during the reference week (the full week prior to the date of interview); or that they had a job in the reference week, but were not at work.

Unemployed A person is unemployed if they were not employed during the reference week and:

- had actively looked for full-time or part-time work at any time in the four weeks up to the end of the reference week; and
- were available for work in the reference week.

Not in the labour force A person who was neither employed nor unemployed.

Participation rate The number of people employed or unemployed, which comprises the labour force, as a proportion of the total number of the population.

Unemployment rate The number of unemployed as a proportion of the total labour force.

END NOTES

1 Ross CE and Mirowsky J. 1995 Does Employment Affect Health? Journal of Health and Social Behaviour 36(3): 230-243.

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2 The [Disability Discrimination Act 1992](#) , viewed 31 October 2011

<www.comlaw.gov.au><http://www.comlaw.gov.au/>

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3 Productivity Commission 2004 [Review of the Disability Discrimination Act 2 1992](#) , viewed 31 October 2011 <www.pc.gov.au>

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4 Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2009 [The National Disability Agreement 2009](#), viewed 24 October 2011 <www.fahcsia.gov.au>

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5 Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2011 [The National Disability Strategy 2010-2020](#), viewed 24 October 2011 <www.fahcsia.gov.au>

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6 ABS 2007-08 National Health Survey, data available on request

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7 Australian Health Ministers 2009 [Fourth National Mental Health Plan](#), viewed 24 October 2011

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8 Thornicroft, G. 2009 Shunned: Discrimination against people with mental illness. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

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9 ABS 2010 Older people and the labour market, Australian Social Trends, cat. no. 4102.0

<www.abs.gov.au>

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10 ABS 2011 Fifty years of Labour Force: Now and then, Australian Social Trends, cat. no. 4102.0

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