

Research Paper

# Intersections between disability, type of impairment, gender and socio-economic disadvantage in a nationally representative sample of 33,101 working-aged Australians

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## Abstract

**Background:** People with disabilities are socio-economically disadvantaged and have poorer health than people without disabilities; however, little is known about the way in which disadvantage is patterned by gender and type of impairment.

**Objectives:** 1. To describe whether socio-economic circumstances vary according to type of impairment (sensory and speech, intellectual, physical, psychological and acquired brain injury). 2. To compare levels of socio-economic disadvantage for women and men with the same impairment type.

**Methods:** We used a large population-based disability-focused survey of Australians, analyzing data from 33,101 participants aged 25–64. Indicators of socio-economic disadvantage included education, income, employment, housing vulnerability, and multiple disadvantage. Stratified by impairment type, we estimated: the population weighted prevalence of socio-economic disadvantage; the relative odds of disadvantage compared to people without disabilities; and the relative odds of disadvantage between women and men.

**Results:** With few exceptions, people with disabilities fared worse for every indicator compared to people without disability; those with intellectual and psychological impairments and acquired brain injuries were most disadvantaged. While overall women with disabilities were more disadvantaged than men, the magnitude of the relative differences was lower than the same comparisons between women and men without disabilities, and there were few differences between women and men with the same impairment types.

**Conclusions:** Crude comparisons between people with and without disabilities obscure how disadvantage is patterned according to impairment type and gender. The results emphasize the need to unpack how gender and disability intersect to shape socio-economic disadvantage. © 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Disability; Impairment; Disadvantage; Gender

In Australia and internationally people with disabilities are socio-economically disadvantaged compared to people without disabilities.<sup>1,2</sup> From a health perspective, this is

important as there is now a well-established evidence-base demonstrating a causal relationship between socio-economic circumstances and health, with health deteriorating

**Abbreviations:** ABS, Australian Bureau of Statistics; AIHW, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare; CURF, Confidentialised Unit Record Files; OECD, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development; SDAC, Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers; WHO, World Health Organization.

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with increasing disadvantage.<sup>3</sup> Thus the disadvantaged circumstances in which people with disabilities live are likely to have flow-on effects for their health. In Australia, and internationally, people with disabilities have poorer health than people without disabilities including a worse profile of risks factors and behaviors (e.g. obesity, participation in breast and cervical cancer screening) and health conditions (e.g. diabetes).<sup>4,5</sup> While few studies have assessed the relative contribution of disadvantage to the poorer health of people with disabilities, research among young Australians suggests that it is likely to be substantive.<sup>6</sup>

International agencies including the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Bank and the United Nations have identified the need to improve educational, economic, social, and health outcomes for people with disabilities through policy reform and service development.<sup>2,7</sup> Similar recommendations have been made in the Australian National Disability Strategy.<sup>8</sup> However, these international agencies and the Australian government recognize the limitations of current data for informing and monitoring interventions, as results are rarely disaggregated by demographic characteristics such as age, sex and ethnicity.<sup>2,8–10</sup>

This paper addresses some of these gaps. First, we describe socio-economic inequalities (e.g. education, employment) between people with and without disabilities according to the type of impairment (e.g. physical, intellectual), and second, to assess whether there are gender-based inequalities among people with disabilities, we compare the socio-economic circumstances of women and men with the same types of impairments.

## Disability and socio-economic disadvantage

Australians with disabilities have higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage than people with disabilities in economically similar countries. For example, adult Australians with a disability earn on average 68% of the income of those without disabilities – the lowest relative income of the 27 countries in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).<sup>1</sup>

### *Type of impairment and disadvantage*

Previous research has paid scant attention to the ways in which socio-economic disadvantage (measured by indicators such as education, income, labor force participation and housing) varies for people with different impairments. In relation to education, one Australian study reported variation in secondary school completion rates by the type of impairment, with students with mental illness having the lowest rates and students with sensory impairments having the highest rates (but five percent lower than for students with no impairment).<sup>11</sup>

No Australian research that we are aware of has examined whether income varies for people with different types of impairments.

An analysis of the 2003 Australian Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC) showed large discrepancies in labor force participation rates according to impairment type, with people with a mental illness reporting the lowest overall labor force participation rates<sup>12</sup> – a finding that is consistent with other countries.<sup>13–15</sup>

In terms of housing, people with disabilities are more likely to experience housing-related disadvantage, such as affordability problems<sup>16</sup> and housing insecurity,<sup>17</sup> and are over-represented within Australia's welfare housing sector.<sup>18</sup> People with psychological disabilities have the most housing problems, including prolonged periods of homelessness while those with sensory impairments have housing profiles similar to the general Australian population.<sup>17,19</sup>

There are many reasons why we might expect to observe differences in socio-economic circumstances for people with different types of impairments. Differences may arise because of limitations related to the impairment itself as well as environmental barriers. For example, lack of wheelchair access to office buildings precludes participation in the workforce for some people with physical impairments, and endemic discriminatory attitudes toward people with mental illness may make it difficult for people with psychological impairments to secure and retain jobs.<sup>20,21</sup> Employment opportunities by impairment type may occur due to changes in Australia's industrial base from a manufacturing-based economy to one focused on services. There may be differences in the amenability of manufacturing compared to service businesses in making work available for people with physical versus psychological or intellectual disabilities.

## Gender and disability

Although the overall prevalence of disabilities is similar for women and men in Australia (women 19%, men 18%),<sup>22</sup> disabilities are gendered in their acquisition and possibly their enactment.<sup>23</sup> For example, dominant norms of masculinity, such as risk-taking, place men at higher risk of accidents that may result in physical impairments. Men are more likely to be employed in manual jobs and so have higher risk of exposure to physical and chemical hazards.<sup>24</sup> Women have higher rates of depression and anxiety which has been attributed to a range of gender-related factors including experiences of gender-based discrimination and violence,<sup>25</sup> the increased likelihood that women's work is unstable and low paid,<sup>26</sup> poorer psychosocial working conditions (higher prevalence of job strain, sexual harassment, and low job control),<sup>27–29</sup> and the challenges of combining paid work and family roles.<sup>30–32</sup>

### *Gender, disability and socio-economic disadvantage*

Gender-based discrimination occurs across a number of levels – institutional, community, interpersonal relationships and family life, as well as intrapersonally.<sup>33</sup> In Australia,

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