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Disability in Australia: changes over time in inclusion and participation in education

While people with disability participate actively in all aspects of Australian life, they can face additional challenges doing so.

This fact sheet uses data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC) to look at selected changes between 2003 and 2015 for people with disability in one life area—inclusion and participation in education for those living in the community (that is, in households) (see Box 1 and 'Where can I find out more?').

Fast facts

- In 2015, 81% of children and young people with disability attended school, similar to 2003.
- Between 2003 and 2015, there was a shift towards attending special schools and away from attending special classes in mainstream schools.
- People with disability continue to have lower levels of educational attainment than those without disability.

Box 1: The ABS SDAC

In the SDAC, a person is considered to have disability if they have at least one of a list of limitations, restrictions or impairments, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least 6 months and restricts everyday activities. The severity of disability is further defined according to the degree of assistance or supervision required in core activities—self-care, mobility, and communication—and grouped for mild, moderate, severe, and profound limitation. People with disability can also be identified as having a schooling or employment restriction. More information on the survey is available on the ABS website at: www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4430.0.

School attendance

In 2015, 81% of children and young people aged 5–20 with disability, and 84% of those with severe or profound limitation (a subset of disability—see Box 1), attended school or an educational institution (Table A1). This was similar to 2003 (80% and 89%, respectively). This group is referred to in this fact sheet as students with disability.

For the 1 in 5 who did not attend school or an educational institution, the most common main reason given was having finished school—72% of people aged 5–20 with disability, and 55% of those with severe or profound limitation, had finished school (down from 82% and 63%, respectively, in 2003). This was followed by having a condition that prevented their school attendance—17% of people aged 5–20 with disability, and 28% of those with severe or profound limitation, reported that their condition was the main reason they did not attend school (compared with 10% and 28%, respectively, in 2003).

The number of children and young people attending school has increased

Between 2003 and 2015, there was a small increase in the number of students with disability attending school (up by 4% from an estimated 323,000 to around 336,000), and a greater increase in those with severe or profound limitation (up by 11% from 148,000 to 165,000) (Table A1).

The increase in the number of students with disability is likely to create future demand for services and assistance, as these young people manage the transition from school to adult life. This includes post-school education, entry into employment, and other social and economic activities.

There has been a shift towards attending special schools and away from attending special classes in mainstream schools

Students with disability commonly either attend special schools (schools that enrol only students with special needs), special classes within a mainstream school (classes that operate in mainstream schools to specifically support students with special needs) or mainstream classes within a mainstream school (where students with disability might receive additional assistance).

In 2015, the majority (86%) of students with disability who attended a special school had severe or profound limitation, similar to that reported in 2003 (88%) (Table A1). Students with disability who attended special classes in a mainstream school were less likely to have severe or profound limitation—58% of students with disability who attended special classes in a mainstream school in 2015 had severe or profound limitation, an increase from 49% in 2003.

Between 2003 and 2015, there was a shift towards students with disability attending special schools and away from attending special classes in mainstream schools. This might reflect a mix of positive and negative experiences at the student level (see Box 2). Over that period:

- the likelihood of students with disability attending a special school increased:
 - 15% of students with disability, and 26% of students with severe or profound limitation, attended a special school in 2015, an increase from 11% and 22%, respectively, in 2003
 - the number attending a special school increased by 35% for students with disability, and by 31% for students with severe or profound limitation
- the likelihood of students with disability attending a special class in a mainstream school decreased:
 - 19% of students with disability, and 22% of students with severe or profound limitation, attended a special class in a mainstream school in 2015, a decrease from 25% and 27%, respectively, in 2003
 - the number attending a special class in a mainstream school decreased by 22% for all students with disability, and by 8% for students with severe or profound limitation.

Box 2: Interpreting changes in school attendance

Changing patterns in the type of school people with disability attend could reflect a mix of positive and negative experiences at the student level.

For example, attendance at a special school might provide the most appropriate support for some students, but these arrangements might also be the result of increased segregation.

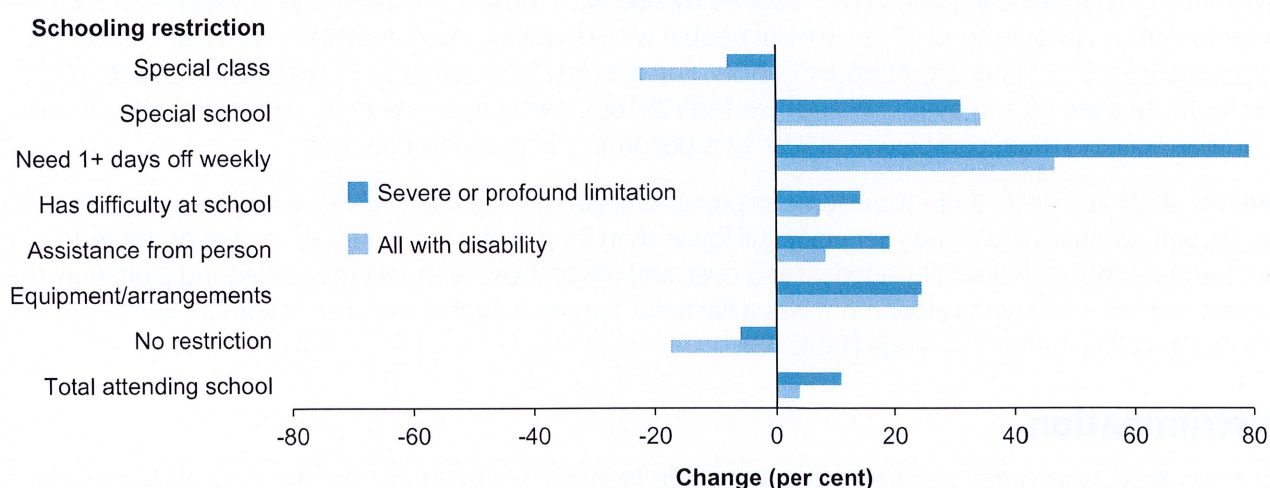
Likewise, attendance at mainstream schools could indicate that the education system has become better at integrating students with disability, fostering inclusion and providing additional, tailored supports. Or it might be that the availability of resources is directing the placement of students into mainstream schools even if an appropriate level of support is not provided.

In addition, the increased number of students attending school with additional supports—such as through part-time attendance—might be a positive change if this reflects the most appropriate support (rather than a lack of support), or if it enables attendance for someone who previously was not attending school at all.

Students with disability were more likely to need or use additional assistance with their schooling, especially through part-time arrangements

The availability of appropriate assistance or equipment at school can influence participation in education (see Box 2). The SDAC collects information on the assistance students need or use with their schooling, and students are able to report more than one type of assistance concurrently.

Not all students with disability report needing additional assistance with their schooling—in 2015, around 1 in 5 students with disability (19%), and 8% of students with severe or profound limitation, reported they needed no help or special equipment at school and experienced no difficulty (that is, they had ‘no restriction’) (Figure 1; Table A1).



Source: Table A1.

Figure 1: Changes in schooling restrictions for people aged 5–20 with disability living in households and attending school, by selected disability status and severity, 2003 to 2015

Compared with 2003, in 2015, students with disability were more likely to report that they received additional assistance, such as help provided by another person or through special equipment and other arrangements, or by attending part time (needing 1 or more days off each week) (see Box 2). In particular, the likelihood of students with disability needing to attend school part time increased, especially for students with severe or profound limitation. In 2015:

- 10% of students with disability, and 13% of students with severe or profound limitation, needed at least 1 day off each week, an increase from 7% and 8%, respectively, in 2003
- the number who needed part-time arrangements increased by 47% for students with disability, and by 79% for students with severe or profound limitation.

Many students had difficulties at school because of their disability

In 2015, around 2 in 3 students with disability (64%), and 3 in 4 students with severe or profound limitation (76%), had difficulties at school because of their condition. This was relatively unchanged from 2003 (62% and 73%, respectively) (Table A1).

The most common types of difficulties experienced at school for both groups were learning, fitting in socially, and communication difficulties (ABS 2016b).

Level of educational attainment

Access to education, as well as the level of education attained, can affect participation in other key life areas, including employment and the ability to achieve financial independence.

People with disability generally had lower levels of educational attainment

In 2015, around 1 in 3 people with disability aged 20 and over (32%), and 1 in 4 with severe or profound limitation (25%), had completed Year 12 or equivalent (Table A2). This was much lower than the 2 in 3 people without disability in this age range (62%). While this was an increase for both those with and without disability (from 24%, 19% and 49%, respectively, in 2003), the increase was not as pronounced for people with disability.

Whether a person had completed Year 12 varied by age, with those in the older age ranges less likely to have done so. Among people aged 20–24, 64% of people with disability had completed Year 12 or equivalent, compared with 81% of people without disability. For ages 50–54, these were 31% and 51%, respectively, and for those aged 85 and over, 15% and 16% (ABS 2016b). This reflects changing patterns of education in Australian society where completion of Year 12 is becoming increasingly common.

Between 2003 and 2015, there were some improvements in the highest level of educational attainment for people with disability, but it was generally still lower than for people without disability. For example, in 2015, for 15% of people with disability aged 20 and over, and 9% of those with severe or profound limitation, their highest level of educational attainment was a Bachelor degree or higher, compared with 31% of people without disability in that age range (Table A3).

Discrimination

People's participation and inclusion in education is influenced by discrimination. The 2015 SDAC introduced a new module to estimate the prevalence of discrimination experienced by people with disability, and to contextualise these experiences.

In 2015:

- 9% of people with disability aged 15 and over had experienced discrimination in the previous 12 months, of which 6% identified a teacher or a lecturer as the source of that discrimination
- 19% of people with disability aged 15 and over who were currently attending an educational institution for a non-school qualification had experienced discrimination in the previous 12 months, of which 24% identified a teacher or a lecturer as the source of that discrimination (ABS 2016a, 2016b).

Where can I find out more?

This fact sheet is accompanied by separately published tables, and is part of a series of releases on disability. These are available at: <www.aihw.gov.au/disability-publications>.

The SDAC is considered the best source for estimating the prevalence of disability in Australia, and is the source of the information included in this fact sheet. For more information on, and publications from, the survey, see: <www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4430.0>.

Monitoring disability prevalence provides information on various issues relevant to social and economic policies and service planning, but it is only part of the picture. Information from other sources is needed to complement such data, and to present a more complete picture of the experiences of, and outcomes for, people with disability as they take part in various aspects of life in Australia. Sources of additional information include, but are not limited to, administrative data on government services and payments, including those from mainstream services (that is, those that are not disability specific). For example, other sources of data on students with disability include the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability at: <www.education.gov.au/what-nationally-consistent-collection-data-school-students-disability>, the Disability Services National Minimum Data Set at: <www.aihw.gov.au/disability-publications>, and the National Disability Insurance Agency at: <www.ndis.gov.au>.


References

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