



Disability in South Africa

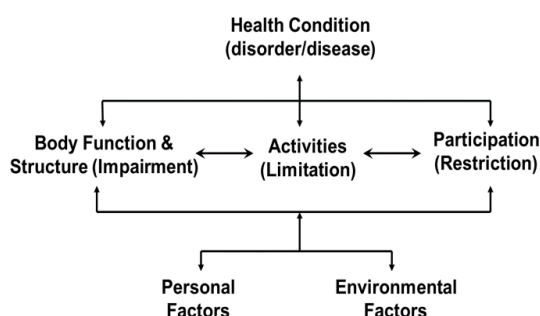
The Importance of Disability

Disability is both a multidimensional concept and experience. Disability can affect anyone at any time – from birth through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Worldwide, many people with disabilities do not have equal access to education, employment, and health care. In addition, those with disability may experience barriers to participating in civic and social life activities.

Defining Disability

No single definition of disability exists. Definitions vary depending on the purpose for measurement. Moreover, the nature and severity of disabilities can vary greatly depending on cultural contexts¹. Yet, data on the size and characteristics of the population with disability, which also allow for cross-cultural comparisons, require standardization in both the conceptualization and the measurement of disability.

The ICF Model of Disability



The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), developed by the World Health Organization², provides the necessary and consistent definition of disability. According to the ICF model, disability arises from the interaction between an individual and

that individual's contextual (personal and environmental) circumstances. Thus, the degree to which participation in life activities is restricted depends on the interaction between the individual's functioning (ability to perform basic functional activities) and the environment.

The Washington Group

The Washington Group on Disability Statistics (WG), a city group established under the United Nations Statistical Commission, was formed to address the need for population-based measures of disability by promoting and coordinating international co-operation in the area of health statistics, focusing on disability data collection tools suitable for censuses and national surveys.

The WG has developed, tested and adopted the Short Set on Functioning (WG-SS) to collect such data. The questions use the ICF as a conceptual framework. The WG-SS is comprised of 6 questions measuring difficulty functioning in basic actions, with response categories that capture the full spectrum of difficulty functioning, from mild to severe. Disability is defined as having “a lot of difficulty” or “cannot do at all” to at least one WG-SS question.

The WG Short Set on Functioning

1. Do you have difficulty seeing, even if wearing glasses?
2. Do you have difficulty hearing, even if using a hearing aid?
3. Do you have difficulty walking or climbing steps?
4. Do you have difficulty remembering or concentrating?
5. Do you have difficulty with self-care, such as washing all over or dressing?
6. Using your usual language, do you have difficulty communicating, for example understanding or being understood?

Response categories: No difficulty / Some difficulty / A lot of difficulty / Cannot do at all

South Africa Data on Disability and Methods

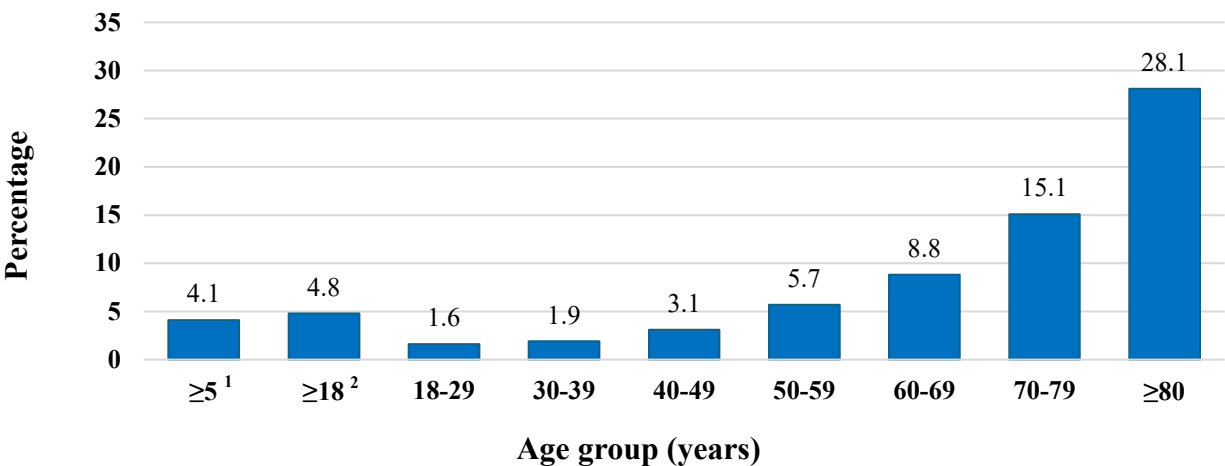
The Population and Housing Censuses provide detailed information on population composition, characteristics, and spatial distribution to the lowest geographical area. The Census 2022 was conducted on the night of 2nd February 2022. For more information about the Census 2022 visit: <https://census.statssa.gov.za/#/>.

The total population of South Africa is 62 million, with 23 390 456 persons aged 18 and above. To ascertain the level of difficulty experienced, the Washington Group Short Set on Functioning was asked to persons aged 5 years and older. Disability statistics are presented using level of difficulty in the six functional domains individually (seeing, hearing, communication, walking, cognition and self-care). This report uses Census 2022 data. The WG-SS questions have been included in the Census since 2011. The estimates reported here are age-adjusted using the 2020 world population³ to facilitate cross-country comparisons.

Prevalence of Disability

- The age-adjusted percentage of persons with disabilities aged 18 and above is 4.8%.
- The age-adjusted percentage of persons aged 5 and older with disabilities is 4.1%.
- Generally, the results show that prevalence of disability increases with age.

Figure 1. Prevalence of disability: age-adjusted and age-specific percentage of the population 18 years and over and by age group, South Africa, 2022



¹Total for 5 years and over is age-adjusted using the 2020 world population (available at: [World Population Prospects - Population Division - United Nations](#)) using the following age groups: 5-17, 18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70-79, and ≥80 years.

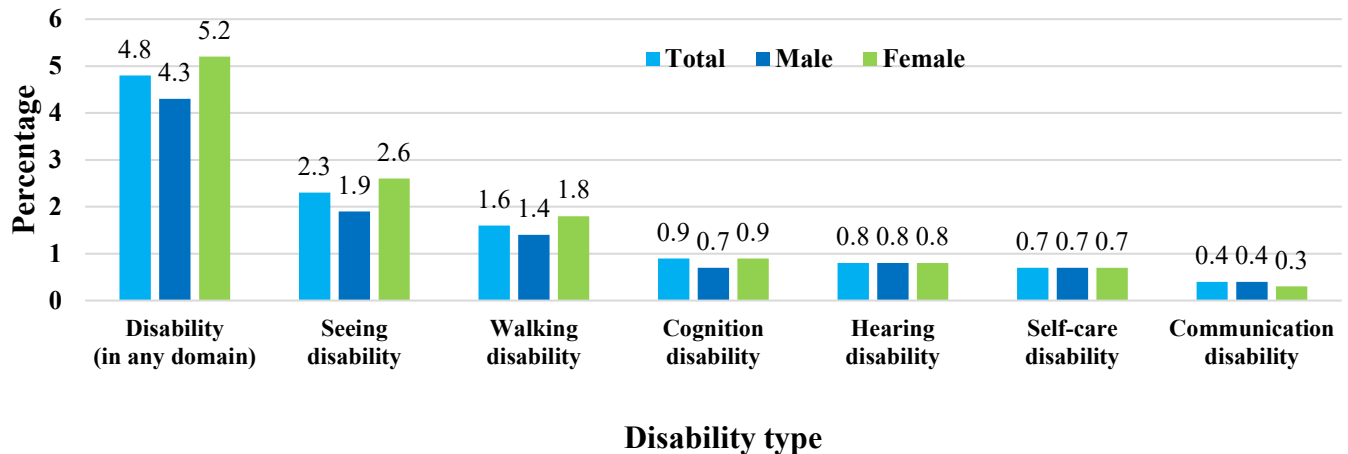
²Total for 18 years and over is age-adjusted using the 2020 world population (available at: [World Population Prospects - Population Division - United Nations](#)) using the following age groups: 18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70-79, and ≥80 years.

Disability is defined using the WG Short Set on Functioning, which asks about difficulty in seeing, hearing, walking or climbing steps, communicating, remembering or concentrating, and self-care, such as washing all over or dressing. Respondents who indicated “a lot of difficulty” or “cannot do at all” to at least one of the six functioning domains were classified as with disabilities.

Estimates are based on the Census 2022, South Africa.
Data Source: Census 2022, Statistics South Africa.

- Females are more likely to experience disability (in any domain), with the largest percentage-point difference observed in seeing (2.6% for females and 1.9% for males) and walking disability (1.8% for females versus 1.4% for males).
- The most common type of disability reported is seeing, followed by walking, and the least common is communication disability.

Figure 2. Prevalence of disability in any domain and disability in each domain: age-adjusted percentage of the population 18 years and over, by sex, South Africa, 2022



Age-adjusted percentages are based on the 2020 world population (available at: [World Population Prospects - Population Division - United Nations](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/)) using the following age groups: 18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–69, 70–79, and ≥80 years.

Disability is defined using the WG Short Set on Functioning, which asks about difficulty in seeing, hearing, walking or climbing steps, communicating, remembering or concentrating, and self-care, such as washing all over or dressing. Respondents who indicated “a lot of difficulty” or “cannot do at all” to at least one of the six functioning domains were classified as having disability (in any domain). Disability in each domain is defined by a response of “a lot of difficulty” or “cannot do at all” in that domain.

Estimates are based on the Census 2022, South Africa.
Data Source: Census 2022, Statistics South Africa.

Outcomes Disaggregated by Disability

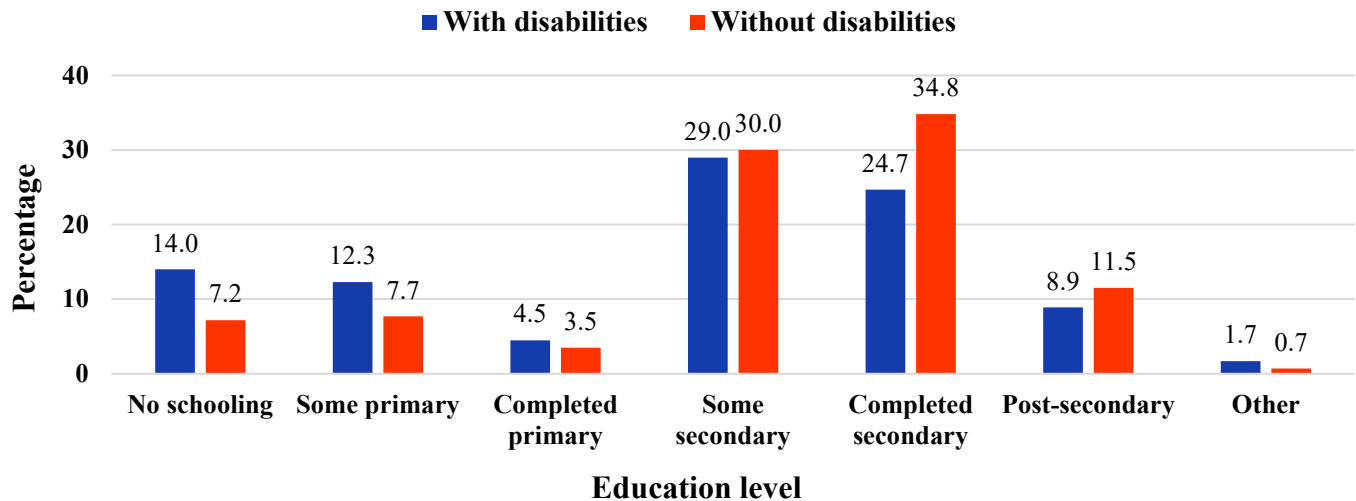
Disaggregating data by disability status allows for the comparison of outcomes for people with and without disabilities and is a necessary first step towards addressing disparities. Outcome indicators, such as educational attainment, any of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals⁴, or specific programmatic objectives, can be monitored over time to determine if gaps exist between those with and without disabilities and whether those gaps are increasing or decreasing across time. In this section, data on educational attainment are disaggregated by disability status.

Educational Attainment

- Adults 18 years and over without disabilities were less likely to have no schooling than adults with disabilities (7.2% vs 14.0%).
- Adults aged 18 years and over without disabilities were more likely to have completed secondary level education compared with those with disabilities (34.8% vs 24.7%).

- Similarly, persons aged 18 years and above without disabilities were more likely to have post-secondary level education (11.5%) than adults with disabilities (8.9%).

Figure 3. Education level by disability status: age-adjusted percentage of the population 18 years and over, South Africa, 2022



Age-adjusted percentages are based on the 2020 world population (available at: [World Population Prospects - Population Division - United Nations](https://population.un.org/wpp/)) using the following age groups: 18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–69, 70–79, and ≥80 years.

Disability is defined using the WG Short Set on Functioning, which asks about difficulty in seeing, hearing, walking or climbing steps, communicating, remembering or concentrating, and self-care, such as washing all over or dressing. Respondents who indicated “a lot of difficulty” or “cannot do at all” to at least one of the six functioning domains were classified as with disabilities. Education level is based on the highest level of education attained. Respondents who reported “do not know” for the education variable were included in analysis but estimates for this group are not shown in the figure.

Estimates are based on the Census 2022, South Africa.
Data Source: Census 2022, Statistics South Africa.

References

1. Altman, B. (2001). “Definitions of Disability and their Operationalization, and Measurement in Survey Data: An Update.” In Barnartt, S. and Altman, B. (Eds.) *Exploring Theories and Expanding Methodologies: Where We Are and Where We Need To Go* (Research in Social Science and Disability, Vol. 2, pp. 77-100). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
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4. United Nations General Assembly. (2015). *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/57b6e3e44.html>.