

# The geographic distribution of Indigenous disability

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PAPER PREPARED FOR THE  
FIRST PEOPLES DISABILITY  
NETWORK AUSTRALIA

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## 1 Introduction and overview of the National Disability Insurance Scheme

The rate of disability in the Indigenous population is substantially higher than for the Australian population as a whole. Despite the relatively high rates of disability experienced by the Indigenous population, there is surprisingly little research which provides basic descriptive information on where those Indigenous Australians with a disability live and what their demographic characteristics are.

This paper attempts to fill this knowledge gap by providing an overview of the geographic distribution of disability in the Indigenous population. It has been written for the First Peoples Disability Network of Australia in order to support their aim to work towards better outcomes for Indigenous Australians with a disability.

In the next section of the paper, we provide an overview of the data used in the analysis, as well as a picture of the distribution of the Indigenous population. The section that follows gives a comparison of rates of self-reported disability across the Indigenous lifecourse, with data also presented for the non-Indigenous population. The fourth section of the paper gives a summary of the rates of reported disability across 38 Indigenous Regions. This section is accompanied by two spreadsheets which give the estimated number of Indigenous Australians with a disability for these regions (Attachment 1) as well as for 411 Indigenous Areas (Attachment 2). These attachments give separate estimates for males and females, as well as for three population age groups: 0–14 years, 15–64 years, and 65 years and over.

The Productivity Commission proposal is for a system comprising three tiers of beneficiaries:

- The first tier of beneficiaries covers all Australians, including those without a disability or who are not carers. That is, all Australians are supposed to benefit from the NDIS because, in the event of themselves or someone they care for acquiring a significant or permanent disability, they will be able to obtain assistance under the NDIS.
- The second tier of beneficiaries are all those with a disability or who are carers, but who do not receive financial support under the NDIS. This second tier of recipients would receive information and referral services, and general information regarding the most effective care and support services for their particular needs.

- The third tier of beneficiaries consists of people with significant care and support needs due to a permanent disability and who would receive financial support from the NDIS. Permanent disabilities include episodic and chronic disabilities. Also covered would be those with significant and enduring psychiatric disability.

It is estimated that Tier 2 comprises approximately four million Australians and, in addition, 800,000 carers (Productivity Commission 2011: 15).<sup>1</sup> The two main groups within Tier 3 are the roughly 330,000 individuals with ‘significantly reduced functioning in self-care, communication, mobility or self-management’ who ‘require significant ongoing support’ and 80,000 people who fall within an ‘early intervention group’ (Productivity Commission 2011: 14). The former comprises, whereas the latter totals 80,000 people, for whom ‘intervention would be safe, significantly improve outcomes and would be cost-effective’. The Productivity Commission also states that ‘eligibility would be determined by functional limitations, not conditions’.

The Productivity Commission proposed two broad approaches to how the package of support is to be provided. The first is self-directed funding, where individuals or their carers ‘cash out their individualised package of supports and manage their own budget’ (Productivity Commission 2011: 346). The second is through choice of provider, where individuals are given an individualised package of support items, rather than a budget, with the ability to choose the service provider from whom the items will be sourced.

People living in highly urbanised and more socioeconomically advantaged areas are likely to have a broad range of services available to them, and will therefore benefit from the self-directed funding model. The Productivity Commission report notes that for many of those who live in large regional towns with practical, everyday needs, there will be a reasonable level of services available. However, for those in remote areas and smaller towns, as well as those with complex needs—two groups into which Indigenous Australians disproportionately fall—appropriate services will be much harder to come by.

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1. Productivity Commission 2011. *Disability Care and Support*, Report No. 54, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

## 2 Data and geography

Results presented in this paper are based on analysis of the 2011 Censuses of Population and Housing. In 2011, the estimated resident population (ERP) of Indigenous Australians was around 670,000. To undertake analysis at the regional and local level, this paper uses the Australian Indigenous Geographic Classification (AIGC).

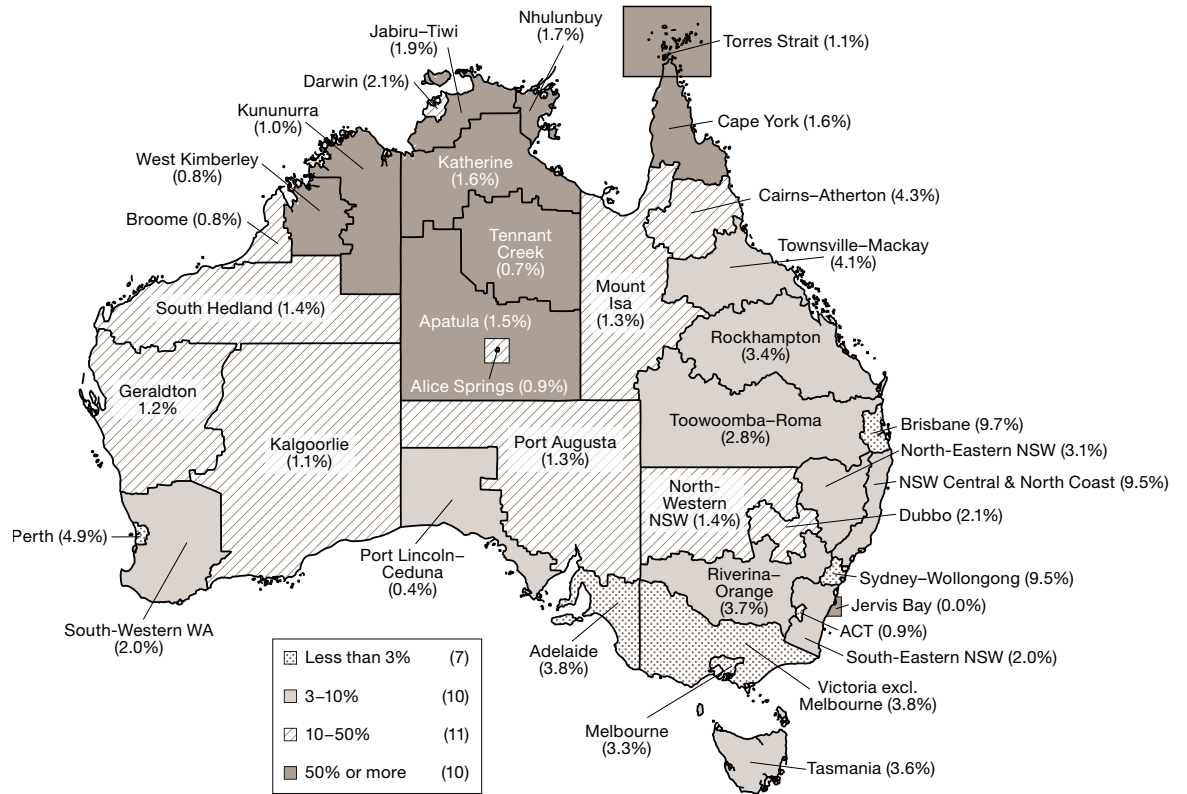
The AIGC is a four-level structure that builds up from the Statistical Area Level 1, which is common to both the AIGC and the Australian Statistical Geography Standard. The next level above the Statistical Area Level 1 in the AIGC is Indigenous Locations, of which there were 1,116. The next level above Indigenous Locations are Indigenous Areas, of which there were 429. This number lowers to 411 substantive areas after excluding administrative codes representing those in a particular State or Territory who did not give any additional detail on their place of usual residence, or who were migratory on the night of the census.

We use Indigenous Areas to obtain estimates of the number of people in a small area who have a disability. This is because they are quite consistent in terms of the size of the Indigenous population in each area. This is in comparison to other geographical classifications more commonly used for the total Australian population like Statistical Area Level 2, Statistical Local Areas (from previous censuses) and urban centres. All of these latter classifications suffer from having a number of locations with very small Indigenous populations and are thereby open to issues to do with confidentialisation.

The most aggregated level of geography in the AIGC is Indigenous Regions. There were 57 of these in the 2011 version of the AIGC. After excluding administrative regions and the Christmas–Cocos (Keeling) Island region (which has very few Indigenous Australians), this leaves 38 Indigenous Regions used in the analysis for this paper.

The 2011 Indigenous Regions are shown in Figure 1. The shading for the regions indicates the percentage of the population in the region who were estimated to be Indigenous, ranging from less than the national average (3.0%) in the dotted areas to more than half of the population (the darkest shading). The numbers after the Indigenous Region name refer to the percentage of the total Indigenous ERP who identified that region as their place of usual residence on the night of the census.

**Figure 1. Proportion of population that is Indigenous (shading) by Indigenous Region and proportion of total Indigenous population in each region (text), 2011**



Source: Customised calculations using the 2011 Census.

There are two key points that emerge from Figure 1. First, it is in more remote regions that the share of the population who identify as being Indigenous is highest. There are 10 regions where more than half of the population counted in the 2011 Census identified as being Indigenous, with the Torres Strait (84.8%), Apatula (80.5%) and Jabiru-Tiwi (79.3%) all having more than three out of every four usual residents being Indigenous.

While it is remote regions in north, central and western parts of the country that have the highest percentage of the population being Indigenous, the regions with the greatest absolute number of Indigenous Australians are in the south and east of the country. The Brisbane, New South Wales Central and North Coast, and Sydney-Wollongong regions all have an Indigenous population estimate of 60,000 people or higher, whereas most of the remote regions have populations of around 10,000 Indigenous Australians or fewer. While a higher proportion of the Indigenous population lives in remote areas than the non-Indigenous population, the majority of the Indigenous population lives in urban areas.

In the census, people with a disability are identified through the following four questions:

20. Does the person ever need someone to help with, or be with them for, self care activities?
21. Does the person ever need someone to help with, or be with them for, body movement activities?
22. Does the person ever need someone to help with, or be with them for, communication activities?
23. What are the reasons for the need for assistance or supervision shown in questions 20, 21 and 22?

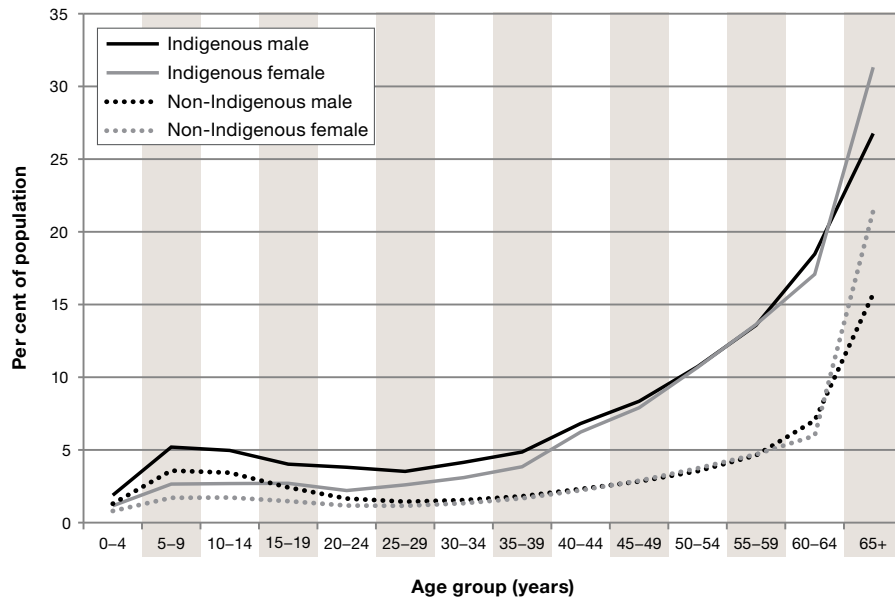
From these questions, core activity need for assistance is calculated and '[p]eople with a profound or severe disability are defined as those people needing help or assistance in one or more of the three core activity areas of self-care, mobility and communication, because of a disability, long-term health condition (lasting six months or more) or old age'.

### 3 Disability across the lifecourse

Figure 2 shows the disability rate by age for Indigenous and non-Indigenous males and females. There is a clear association between age and the likelihood of reporting having a disability. For both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population, the disability rate is low and relatively stable for age groups covering the range of 0–34 years. For the Indigenous population, the proportion with a disability starts to increase from the ages of 35–39, with more than a quarter of the Indigenous population 65 years and over age group having a disability. For the non-Indigenous population, while the rate of disability does start to increase from the mid-thirties, the substantial increase in the proportion of the population with a disability does not occur until the ages of 60–64.

The rate of disability is higher for Indigenous men and women for all age groups, with the biggest differences in the disability rate being for men and women aged 40–44 years or older.

**Figure 2. Percentage of Indigenous and non-Indigenous males and females who reported having a disability, 2011 Census**



Source: Customised calculations using the 2011 Census.

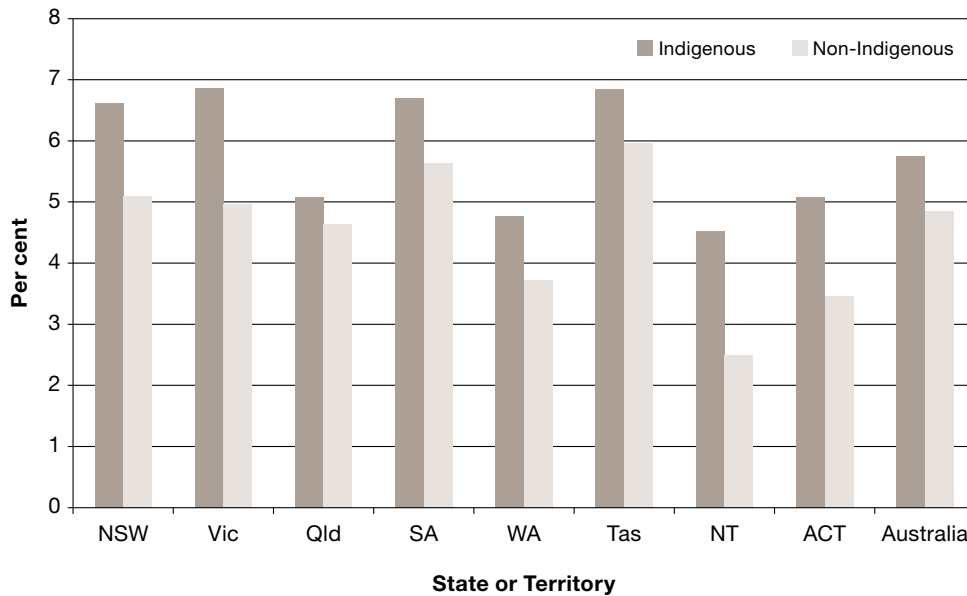
Whilst males are more likely to report a disability than females in the younger age groups, by the time both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations reach 55 years and beyond, females have a higher probability.

#### 4 Reported disability by geography

Figure 3 examines the variation in the prevalence of disability for Indigenous Australians by State or Territory. Across all the jurisdictions, the proportion of the Indigenous population who reported needing assistance with core activities was higher than the non-Indigenous population. The difference between the proportion of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations needing assistance is particularly large, however, in the Northern Territory, Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales.



**Figure 3. Distribution of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians by State/Territory and disability status, 2011 Census**



Source: Customised calculations using the 2011 Census.

Tables 1 and 2 summarise the distribution of Indigenous Australians with a disability across Indigenous Regions. Results are presented for three age groups: 0–14, 15–64, and 65+. The first three columns of results give the number of people in each Indigenous Region estimated to have a disability. These numbers are calculated based on the counts of the number of people in each region who have a need for assistance with core activities. However, the counts are adjusted upwards based on the relevant state- and age-specific undercount.<sup>2</sup> Results for Indigenous males are presented in Table 1, whereas results for Indigenous females are presented in Table 2. Results for the non-Indigenous population as well as a full set of results for Indigenous Areas are available in the attachment tables, as documented in the last section of this paper.

2. For example, there were 32,003 Indigenous males aged 0–14 counted in New South Wales in the 2011 Census. The preliminary population estimate for this age group is 38,561. Therefore, the counts of Indigenous males aged 0–14 years with and without a disability in the Indigenous Regions in NSW were all adjusted upwards by a factor of 1.205.

**Table 1. Estimated number and percentage of Indigenous males who reported having a disability in the 2011 Census**

Indigenous Region	Estimated number			Estimated percentage of the population		
	0–14 years old	15–64 years old	65+ years old	0–14 years old	15–64 years old	65+ years old
Dubbo	111	255	43	4.4	7.4	20.5
North-Eastern NSW	134	373	86	3.6	6.7	23.8
North-Western NSW	42	121	47	3.0	4.7	25.7
NSW Central and North Coast	653	1,390	253	5.7	8.1	25.2
Riverina–Orange	235	479	102	5.4	7.4	26.2
South-Eastern NSW	118	292	63	5.1	8.3	26.6
Sydney–Wollongong	610	1,226	210	5.7	6.9	22.1
Melbourne	214	424	63	6.2	6.4	21.0
Victoria exc. Melbourne	227	613	85	5.0	9.4	21.6
Brisbane	565	1,167	184	4.9	6.4	27.1
Cairns–Atherton	105	399	89	2.1	5.3	26.6
Cape York	8	82	38	0.5	2.6	26.1
Mount Isa	8	86	45	0.5	3.4	28.4
Rockhampton	174	414	85	4.1	6.9	27.5
Toowoomba–Roma	152	369	52	4.1	7.8	20.5
Torres Strait	12	41	45	0.9	2.1	36.2
Townsville–Mackay	125	386	84	2.5	5.1	27.1
Adelaide	276	555	88	6.2	8.1	25.6
Port Augusta	33	142	71	2.5	5.8	43.9
Port Lincoln–Ceduna	4	42	11	0.9	5.6	37.0
Broome	22	57	11	2.6	3.7	20.0
Geraldton	17	91	41	1.4	4.7	32.5
Kalgoorlie	11	97	40	1.0	5.0	41.4
Kununurra	21	71	35	1.8	3.8	31.0
Perth	179	440	94	3.4	5.2	31.9
South Hedland	27	67	42	2.1	2.3	44.2
South-Western WA	69	200	45	2.9	5.8	27.6
West Kimberley	4	71	46	0.5	4.9	50.6
Tasmania	231	555	101	5.5	8.1	23.3
Alice Springs	34	100	32	3.8	6.7	32.5
Apatula	9	111	44	0.6	4.2	38.9
Darwin	80	205	33	3.6	5.2	25.5
Jabiru–Tiwi	23	155	41	1.0	3.9	29.2
Katherine	10	116	60	0.6	4.0	38.9
Nhulunbuy	18	169	31	1.0	4.9	25.0
Tennant Creek	0	33	31	0.0	2.8	40.6
ACT	45	109	10	4.6	5.5	20.5
Jervis Bay	0	9	0	0.0	10.4	0.0
All regions	4,608	11,512	2,481	4.0	6.3	26.9

Source: Customised calculations using the 2011 Census.

**Table 2. Estimated number and percentage of Indigenous females who reported having a disability in the 2011 Census**

Indigenous Region	Estimated number			Estimated percentage of the population		
	0–14 years old	15– 64 years old	65+ years old	0–14 years old	15– 64 years old	65+ years old
Dubbo	58	203	79	2.4	5.2	29.1
North-Eastern NSW	84	285	109	2.3	4.8	26.9
North-Western NSW	25	130	82	1.7	4.6	36.8
NSW Central and North Coast	351	1,300	354	3.2	7.0	30.2
Riverina–Orange	115	417	140	2.7	6.2	30.8
South-Eastern NSW	70	238	70	3.0	6.5	27.3
Sydney–Wollongong	273	1,243	338	2.8	6.4	27.9
Melbourne	94	463	102	2.8	7.0	24.7
Victoria exc. Melbourne	103	487	120	2.3	6.8	25.3
Brisbane	321	1,037	268	2.9	5.4	28.0
Cairns–Atherton	62	317	191	1.3	3.7	35.9
Cape York	4	69	65	0.2	2.2	30.9
Mount Isa	11	85	45	0.7	3.3	28.2
Rockhampton	110	366	84	2.6	5.8	23.7
Toowoomba–Roma	71	308	91	2.0	5.9	30.7
Torres Strait	6	40	71	0.5	1.9	39.8
Townsville–Mackay	74	346	122	1.6	4.4	29.0
Adelaide	119	527	113	2.8	7.0	22.4
Port Augusta	24	127	76	1.8	4.8	38.1
Port Lincoln–Ceduna	5	48	17	1.2	5.7	37.5
Broome	13	55	44	1.5	3.3	42.9
Geraldton	19	100	42	1.4	4.4	25.2
Kalgoorlie	13	109	73	1.1	4.8	54.2
Kununurra	6	84	75	0.5	4.0	54.1
Perth	86	503	126	1.6	5.2	30.7
South Hedland	4	88	84	0.3	3.3	56.1
South-Western WA	46	191	58	1.9	4.9	28.8
West Kimberley	5	64	52	0.6	4.0	49.5
Tasmania	110	463	110	2.8	6.4	23.8
Alice Springs	17	103	71	2.3	6.2	50.4
Apatula	0	118	113	0.0	4.2	47.7
Darwin	35	189	73	1.7	4.6	31.4
Jabiru–Tiwi	6	137	74	0.3	3.5	44.7
Katherine	10	121	75	0.6	4.0	48.2
Nhulunbuy	7	157	63	0.4	4.6	40.4
Tennant Creek	9	48	34	1.6	3.9	44.9
ACT	21	91	19	2.3	4.8	32.1
Jervis Bay	0	5	0	0.0	5.7	0.0
All regions	2,386	10,658	3,725	2.2	5.4	31.4

Source: Customised calculations using the 2011 Census.

## Attachment tables

The estimated number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians with and without a disability are presented in Table A1 (for 38 Indigenous Regions) and Table A2 (for 411 Indigenous Areas). The first two columns of each table give the name and code for the respective region or area, with the third column giving the state which that region or area falls into. The remainder of the columns give the disability estimates, as documented in the following table.

### Variable codes and names in attachment tables

Code	Variable details
ind_m_00to14_disab_erp	Indigenous males aged 0–14 with a disability
ind_m_00to14_nodis_erp	Indigenous males aged 0–14 without a disability
ind_m_15to64_disab_erp	Indigenous males aged 15–64 with a disability
ind_m_15to64_nodis_erp	Indigenous males aged 15–64 without a disability
ind_m_65plus_disab_erp	Indigenous males aged 65+ with a disability
ind_m_65plus_nodis_erp	Indigenous males aged 65+ without a disability
ind_f_00to14_disab_erp	Indigenous females aged 0–14 with a disability
ind_f_00to14_nodis_erp	Indigenous females aged 0–14 without a disability
ind_f_15to64_disab_erp	Indigenous females aged 15–64 with a disability
ind_f_15to64_nodis_erp	Indigenous females aged 15–64 without a disability
ind_f_65plus_disab_erp	Indigenous females aged 65+ with a disability
ind_f_65plus_nodis_erp	Indigenous females aged 65+ without a disability
non_m_00to14_disab_erp	Non-Indigenous males aged 0–14 with a disability
non_m_00to14_nodis_erp	Non-Indigenous males aged 0–14 without a disability
non_m_15to64_disab_erp	Non-Indigenous males aged 15–64 with a disability
non_m_15to64_nodis_erp	Non-Indigenous males aged 15–64 without a disability
non_m_65plus_disab_erp	Non-Indigenous males aged 65+ with a disability
non_m_65plus_nodis_erp	Non-Indigenous males aged 65+ without a disability
non_f_00to14_disab_erp	Non-Indigenous females aged 0–14 with a disability
non_f_00to14_nodis_erp	Non-Indigenous females aged 0–14 without a disability
non_f_15to64_disab_erp	Non-Indigenous females aged 15–64 with a disability
non_f_15to64_nodis_erp	Non-Indigenous females aged 15–64 without a disability
non_f_65plus_disab_erp	Non-Indigenous females aged 65+ with a disability
non_f_65plus_nodis_erp	Non-Indigenous females aged 65+ without a disability