

Data design choices shape (in)visibility and exclusion

The following case studies use specific examples to illustrate broader issues in disability research, showing how aggregation and definitional choices shape whose experiences are counted and whose are rendered invisible.

Why are aggregate disability identifiers sometimes insufficient?

Case study: Employment experiences of women with intellectual disability

In research involving disability populations, relying on a single aggregated disability identifier can limit understanding of how social phenomena are experienced across diverse disability experiences. For example, the employment experiences of women with intellectual disability may differ in meaningful ways from those of women with other disability experiences and warrant targeted exploration. How researchers define populations, conceptualise employment, and recruit participants directly shapes which experiences appear in data. For women with intellectual disability, employment pathways often differ from those assumed in standard labour force surveys. Women may seek work through supported employment providers, disability employment services, social enterprises, advocacy networks or service-mediated recruitment processes, rather than through primarily open-market advertising. Many work, or have worked, in segregated or quasi-segregated settings, or move between paid work, training, unpaid roles and income support in ways that do not align with conventional employment categories.

In national datasets, estimates for smaller population groups,

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including women with intellectual disability, are frequently flagged with relative standard error warnings. These flags usually reflect small sample sizes, rather than a lack of policy relevance. In practice, high relative standard errors reduce the likelihood that analysts disaggregate, report or prioritise findings relating to these groups.

This dynamic helps explain why booster samples and intentional sampling strategies matter. Without them, evidence about employment may suggest that policies are effective for disabled people overall, while obscuring whether women with intellectual disability are accessing safe, open and fairly paid work, or remain concentrated in segregated, low-paid or insecure settings. WWDA's submission into the 2025 Next Steps in Supported Employment enquiry highlighted this risk, and underscores the need for data approaches that make visible the experiences of those most affected by structural exclusion.

How can definitions of social phenomena determine whose experiences are (in)visible?

Case study: Understanding women with disabilities experiences of economic abuse

National measures support population-level monitoring and often overlook experiences specific to women, girls and gender-diverse people with disability. For example, national measures of economic abuse typically focus on abuse perpetrated by a cohabiting intimate partner since the age of 15. Using this definition, national data shows that around one in six women (16.3%) have experienced economic abuse.¹ The data also disaggregates by disability, indicating that economic abuse is almost twice as likely for women with disability (4.6%) compared to women without disability (2.4%).² While this disaggregation is important, the measure defines economic

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abuse only in relation to cohabiting intimate partner relationships. This framing does not capture the full range of settings in which women with disability experience violence and abuse. Evidence demonstrates that economic abuse also occurs when other family members, co-residents in group homes, or support workers exert control over resources in contexts shaped by unequal power and constrained choices.³ Current measures are therefore likely to understate both the prevalence and forms of economic abuse experienced by women with disability. This limits the capacity of policy responses to address these risks comprehensively.



1. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (22 Nov 2023) 'Partner violence'. ABS.

2. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (22 Nov 2023) 'Partner violence'. ABS.

3. Byrt, A., Cook, K. and Burgin, R. et al. (27 Jun 2025). Making financial abuse visible: Embedding women's and children's voices in policymaking and research' (Version 1), Swinburne University, DOI: 10.25916/sut.29396963.v1.