



CRE-DH

Centre of Research
Excellence in
Disability and Health

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ATTITUDES MATTER

Findings from a national survey
of community attitudes toward
people with disability in Australia

in partnership with





Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank the many representatives from across the Australian disability advocacy sector who provided input into the survey design. We would particularly like to acknowledge and extend our thanks to AMAZE for sharing their experiences on their survey 'Australia's Attitudes and Behaviours towards Autism'^[1]. We also thank the Life in Australia members for sharing their thoughts with us.

Suggested citation

Bollier AM, Sutherland G, Krnjacki L, Kasidis V, Katsikis G, Ozge J & Kavanagh AM. (2021). *Attitudes Matter: Findings from a national survey of community attitudes toward people with disability in Australia*. Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health, The University of Melbourne. doi: 10.26188/15176013

Published August 2021

ISBN 978 0 7340 5602 3

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The project was funded by the Hallmark Disability Initiative at the University of Melbourne, the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, the Centre of Research Excellence in Disability and Health (CRE-DH), and the Disability and Health Unit, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health at The University of Melbourne.

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Executive Summary

Why Attitudes Matter

Attitudes can have a significant impact on the lives of people with disability. Attitudes are related to disability-based discrimination and social exclusion, which in turn impact the health and wellbeing of people with disability. Disability advocates in Australia have pushed for action to improve community attitudes for years, with the aim of achieving a more equitable and inclusive society for people with disability.

The survey

This study is the first national survey on attitudes toward people with disability in Australia. Over 2,000 people from across Australia participated in the Community Attitudes Survey in 2018. The survey asked respondents about their individual or personally held attitudes, as well as society or community perceptions about people with disability.

Summary of findings

Negative and positive attitudes

Most respondents reported positive attitudes toward people with disability. Only a minority reported overtly

negative attitudes. For example, 86% agreed that adults with disability should get to have a say about who they live with (positive), while 20% agreed that employers should be allowed to refuse to hire people with disability (negative).

Mistreatment and social exclusion

Many respondents were aware of the harmful and exclusionary ways that people in the community treat people with disability. For example, 42% agreed that people with disability are ignored, 63% agreed that people tend to become impatient with people with disability, and fewer than half (42%) thought workplaces were accepting of people with disability.

Seeing people with disability as exploitable

Sixty-three percent of respondents agreed that people with disability are easier to exploit than people without disability. This view may reflect deeply ingrained stereotypes about vulnerability, incapacity and/or weakness. While it may sound protective, stereotypical perceptions of people with disability as exploitable could be used to limit opportunities for choice and self-determination.

Uncertainty around people with disability

Seventy-eight percent of respondents agreed that people without disability are unsure how to act toward people with disability. While some actions toward people with disability are overtly discriminatory, other types of harm—such as asking inappropriate questions or ‘helping’ without being asked—may stem from a lack of understanding, which in turn leads to discomfort or uncertainty in interactions with people with disability. Regardless of a person’s intentions, acting based on uncertainty can have adverse impacts for people with disability.

Neutral responses

Across the survey it was common for respondents to choose the neutral response option—that is, selecting ‘neither agree nor disagree’ in response to statements about attitudes. For example, 34% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement ‘people with disability should not raise children.’

Neutral attitudes are important to understand in greater depth. While we do not know why some people responding to this survey chose neutral responses, it is possible that those who give neutral responses hold negative attitudes but were reluctant to report their true opinion because they do not believe it is socially acceptable (in research, this is referred to as ‘social desirability bias’). At a population level, understanding shared characteristics of

those who hold neutral attitudes may help identify this group for the purpose of targeted action to shift their attitudes in a positive direction.

Recommendations

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) declares full and active participation in society as a fundamental right of people with disability^[3]. With negative attitudes and consequent discriminatory behaviors known to be a key limiting factor to full participation, the results of this survey indicate that Australia still has a long way to go in meeting its obligations. Investing in strategies to improve community attitudes towards people with disability is also critical for realising the aspirations of the new National Disability Strategy.

We recommend, therefore, an ambitious agenda for all levels of government to invest in co-designed interventions that are targeted to those sectors and life domains that are identified by people with disability as impacting on participation and inclusion (e.g. work, education, community). Consideration should be given to multi-level interventions (structural, organisational and individual) and should draw on currently available evidence regarding the effectiveness of interventions and rigorously evaluated so they can be monitored and improved upon.

People with disability report experiencing discrimination and prejudice in their day-to-day life which excludes them from many domains of life including work, school, accessing services and the community.

Results

In this section we highlight key findings. Results are organised into four sections:

A. Common beliefs

B. Attitudes about personal lives

C. Behaviours toward people with disability

D. Inclusion of people with disability

A table of complete survey results and question sources is included in the Appendix.

A guide to interpreting results

This survey captured community attitudes through different lenses. Sometimes we asked respondents about their own attitudes. Other times, we asked them about their perceptions of broader community attitudes or behaviours.

Survey statements designed to capture personally held attitudes are indicated with a thought bubble and binoculars for community perceptions, for example:



“People with disability are a burden on society.”

This statement reflects respondents’ own attitudes.



“People are unsure how to act toward people with disability.”

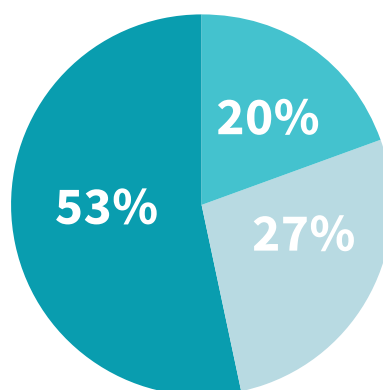
This statement reflects a perception of other people.

A. Common beliefs

Low expectations

20%

agreed that people should not expect too much from people with disability



Disagreed Agreed Neither

Perceived exploitability

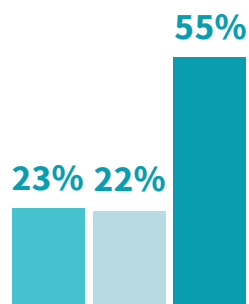
63%

agreed that people with disability are easier to take advantage of, exploit or treat badly

Future prospects

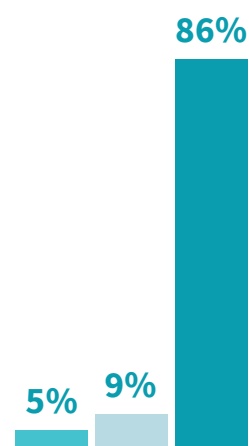
23%

agreed that people with disability have less to look forward to than others



5%

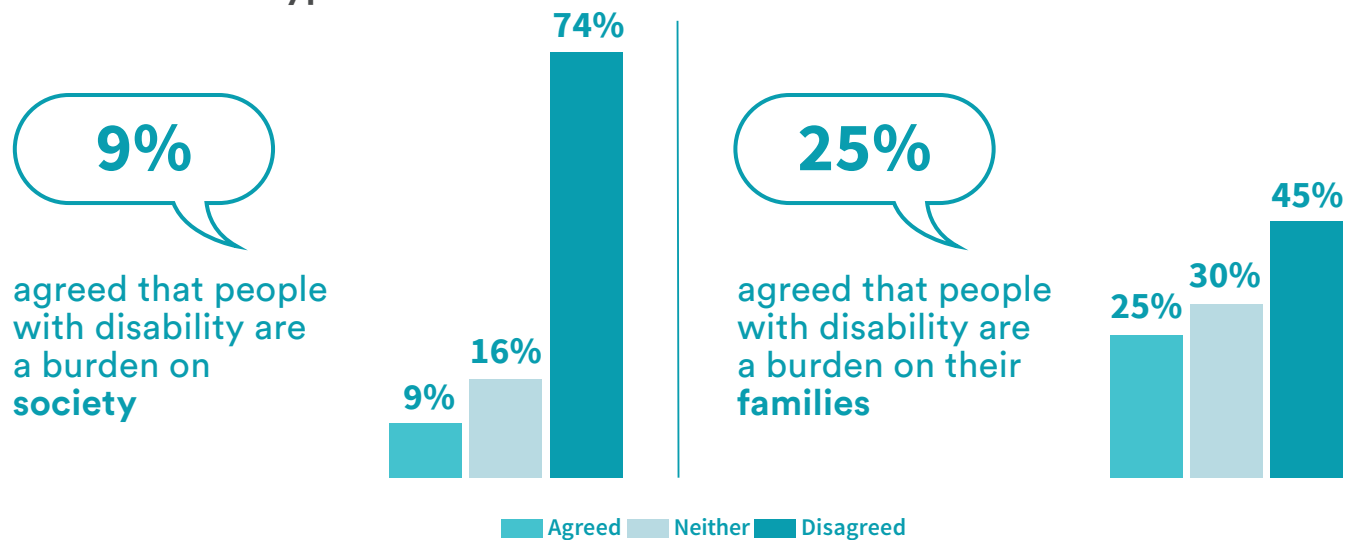
agreed that people with disability should not be optimistic about their future



Agreed Neither Disagreed

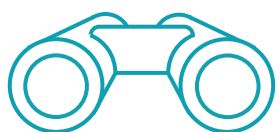
“We’re portrayed as victims or charity cases or we’re portrayed as heroes or inspirational. And those two extremes really reinforce the current negative and limiting attitudes towards people with disabilities.”

‘Burden’ stereotypes



“My partner’s non-disabled and people always think that she must be a fabulous, wonderful person—and she is—but she must be a fabulous, wonderful person for being with me, and she must do the majority of the domestic tasks and I must be some burden. And one day she’ll wake up and realise that I’m a wheelchair user and leave. I’ve had people say that to me. She hasn’t ‘realised’ yet. So somewhere down the track she’s going to wake up and go, “Oh, she doesn’t stand up. Okay, I’ve got to get out of here.”

The ‘hero’ narrative



63%
agreed that people are inspired by people with disability

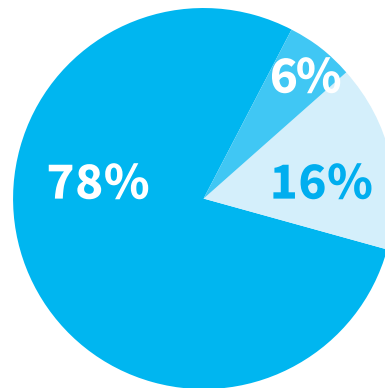
“The idea that we push our impairments down or away and try and overcome them, so almost like a Paralympian sporting stereotype, ... People think that we’re trying to inspire them, but we’re also trying to minimise whatever ways we might look or be.”

B. Attitudes about personal lives

Talking about sex

6%

agreed that sex should not be discussed with people with disability

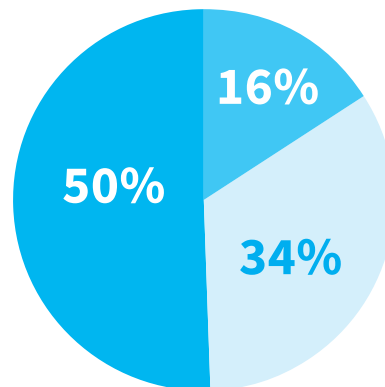


Disagreed Agreed
Neither

The right to raise children

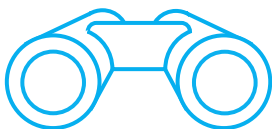
16%

agreed with the statement, 'People believe that people with disability should not raise children'



Disagreed Agreed
Neither

Choice of housemates

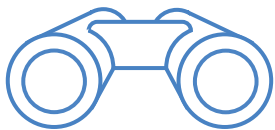


86%

agreed that adults with disability should have a say about who they live with

C. Behaviours toward people with disability

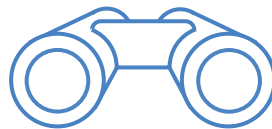
People are unsure how to act



78%

agreed that people are unsure how to act toward people with disability

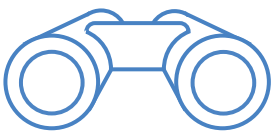
Impatience with people with disability



63%

agreed that people tend to become impatient with people with disability

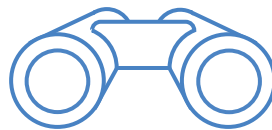
Making fun of disability



61%

agreed that people often make fun of disabilities

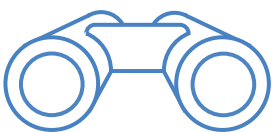
Ignoring people with disability



42%

agreed that people ignore people with disability

Mistreating people with disability



41%

agreed that people with disability are treated as if they have no feelings

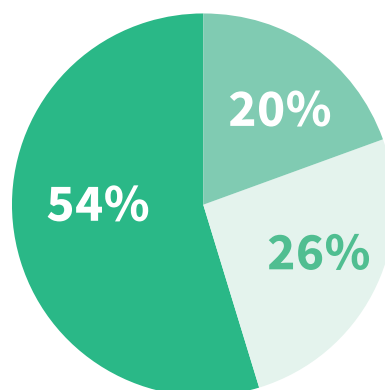
I've had instances where if people find out that I'm [disabled] halfway through speaking to them, they're like, "Okay, so, yeah, don't worry about it. It's okay, you don't have to do anything like that. You don't have to do what I'm asking you to do." They let you off the hook way too easily or they don't quite know what to do with themselves, so they try and back away. They don't mean offence. They just mean, 'I don't know how to handle this situation, so I'm going to try and not offend you by just walking away and not worrying about it.

D. Inclusion of people with disability

Employing people with disability

20%

agreed that employers should be allowed to refuse to hire people with disability



Disagreed Agreed
Neither

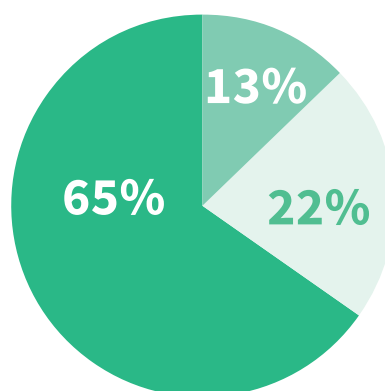
“What’s the reality? Is it that employers fear people with disability? Is it about absenteeism? Is it about the reaction that the rest of the office are going to have?”

“The people who are responsible for recruitment are usually the barrier for people with disability entering the workforce, and also when they’re in the workforce, other team members don’t always embrace them.”

Segregation in education

13%

agreed with the statement, ‘Children with disability should only be educated in special schools’



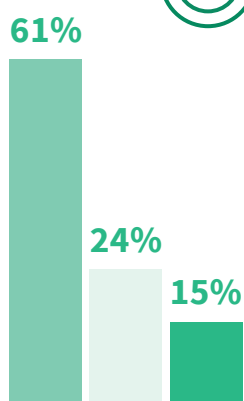
Disagreed Agreed
Neither

“So it’s not like coworkers have an attitude against me because I have a disability, but it’s because ‘your disability is your problem and you need to work around it. We’ll accept you [in the workplace] but it’s your problem.’”

School and workplaces

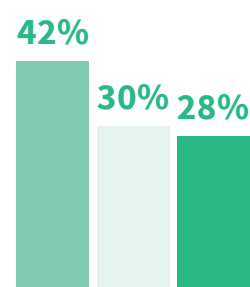
61%

agreed that schools are accepting of children with disability



42%

agreed that workplaces are accepting of people with disability

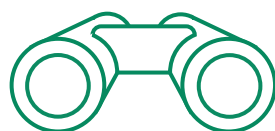


Agreed Neither Disagreed

Making friends

55%

agreed that people with disability find it harder than others to make new friends



Getting involved in society

55%

agreed that people with disability have problems getting involved in society

“And there’s this presumption that – the tragedy narrative – is something that everyone with an impairment has, and how you be a good member of the non-disabled public is you come up and say “hi” to that poor disabled person who must be sitting there feeling sad about themselves and how they must have no friends, and you’ve done a good thing by trying to elicit this story from this person.”



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