Disability among Canada's Aboriginal Peoples in 1991

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Abstract

In 1991, disability rates among adults were high for Aboriginal people, compared with the total Canadian population: 31% versus 13%. For all ages and levels of education, Aboriginal disability rates were much higher than those of Canadians overall. While most younger Aboriginal persons with a disability were only slightly disabled and did not need help with their daily activities, at age 55 and over, more than half of Aboriginal persons with a disability were either moderately or severely disabled and required such help. Nonetheless, most of the Aboriginal population with disabilities who needed help received it, so only a small proportion of them had unmet needs for assistance. The need for assistance, however, increased with the severity of disability. Recent improvements in survivorship mean that more Aboriginal people will live to older ages, at which disability rates are higher. This has implications for their need for health and social services, and the associated costs.

Statistics Canada's 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS) was used to examine the prevalence and severity of disability and the degree of dependence in the Aboriginal population. Where possible, these results are compared with data for the total Canadian household population from the 1991 Health and Activity Limitation Survey (HALS).

Keywords: *disabled, activities of daily living, limitation of activity, Indians (North American), Aboriginal health*

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Introduction

Progress has been made during the past three decades in many aspects of Aboriginal health. For example, as a result of improved living conditions and better access to health care, death rates have declined. But despite these recent improvements, Aboriginal Canadians face a disproportionate number of serious health problems.[1-5] Specifically, they are far more likely than Canadians overall to have a disability. (Disability refers to self-perceived limitations in sensory, mobility, agility, or other physical and psychological abilities, which had lasted or were expected to last six months or more.) The age-standardized disability rate among the adult Aboriginal population in 1991 was more than double the national rate: 31% versus 13%.

Not only do disability rates differ, but so do the dimensions of the problem. Aboriginal people with disabilities generally encounter difficulties that non-Aboriginals with disabilities do not. The Special Committee on the Disabled and the Handicapped stated in 1981 that "while all disabled Canadians have obstacles to overcome, Native Canadians who are disabled often have more. If they live in the north or on reserves, they are isolated from services for the handicapped that are usually located in cities. And if they go to the cities to take advantage of these services, they must abandon a familiar lifestyle and community. As well, they often have to cope with the obstacles of prejudice."[6]

Data on the prevalence and severity of disability among Aboriginal people are important for the development of health policies and programs.[7] Until recently, such information did not exist. The Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS), conducted by Statistics Canada in 1991, was the first national survey focusing on the social, economic, and health conditions of the Aboriginal peoples (see *Methods*).

Methods

Data source

The data in this article are from the 1991 Census and two post-censal Statistics Canada surveys: the Aboriginal Peoples Survey (APS) and the 1991 Health and Activity Limitation Survey (HALS). (The first HALS had been conducted in 1986.) The APS selected a sample of people who indicated on the 1991 Census that they had Aboriginal ancestry. These individuals were asked if they identified with their Aboriginal origins, and/or were registered under the Indian Act.[8,9] A person who reported, for example, Inuit origin on the census, but did not self-identify as Inuit on the APS, would not have been included as part of the APS population.

The APS collected data on lifestyle and living conditions (including health) from about 65,500 people aged 15 and over with Aboriginal identity living on reserves, in native settlements, or off-reserve. Personal interviews were conducted in the fall of 1991 and in early 1992. The response rate was 78%. For operational reasons, residents of institutions (nursing homes; residences for senior citizens; hospitals—general, maternity, etc.; chronic care hospitals; psychiatric institutions; treatment centres and institutions for the physically handicapped) were excluded from the survey.

The purpose of the HALS was to determine the prevalence, nature, and severity of disabilities in Canada and the barriers that individuals with activity limitations encounter in their daily activities.[10] The HALS had two components: a household survey and an institutions survey. To identify the target population for the household component, two census questions (on activity limitation and long-term disability) were used. The response rate for the household component, which included children, was 87%. The HALS data in this article are based on the approximately 91,400 interviews with adults in the household population, which took place in the fall of 1991.

Because any comparison of crude disability rates between the Aboriginal and total Canadian populations will be influenced by their different age structures, rates were age-standardized. The total APS estimated population aged 15 and over was used as the standard population.

Definitions

The APS and the HALS used the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of **disability**: "any restriction or lack (resulting from impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being."[11] Respondents to both surveys were asked comparable questions about self-perceived limitations (which had lasted or were expected to last for six months or more) in sensory, mobility, agility, or other physical and psychological abilities (see *Appendix*). A person who was limited in any of these activities for health-related reasons, even with a

The APS and Statistics Canada's Health and Activity Limitation Survey (HALS) provide comparable disability data for Aboriginal people and for Canadians in general.[13-15] This article, based on APS and 1991 HALS results, examines the severity of disability and the degree of dependence in the Aboriginal population aged 15 and over.

Disability more prevalent

Disability is much more prevalent among the Aboriginal peoples than among Canadians overall. In 1991, 117,100 or 31% of Aboriginal adults reported at least some disability, whereas the age-standardized rate for the total Canadian population was 13% (Table 1). At younger ages, the difference was even more pronounced. For 15- to 24-year-olds, the Aboriginal disability rate was more than three times the corresponding Canadian figure: 22% and 7%.

A variety of health problems among Aboriginal people have been attributed to poor housing and community conditions, such as crowding and the lack of safety facilities. (See **Tuberculosis** in this issue.) These conditions may partly explain their high disability rates.[16] As well, the high disability rates among Aboriginal youths are consistent with relatively higher rates of illness and death arising from accidents, violence, and suicide.[1,2] In fact, earlier data reveal that accidents were most often cited as the underlying cause of disability among Canadians of Aboriginal ancestry, followed by aging and congenital factors.[17] Inhalant abuse and fetal alcohol syndrome may also be factors in the comparatively high disability rates, although there is considerable uncertainty about the extent of the latter in Aboriginal communities.[2,5] Another emerging health concern among Aboriginal people is diabetes, but the degree to which their high disability rate was related to diabetic conditions could not be determined from APS data.[18]

Rates higher for Aboriginal women

The age-standardized disability rate for Aboriginal women was slightly higher than that for men: 33% versus 30%. This pattern prevailed regardless of age (Table 2). Among 15- to 24-year-olds, 23% of Aboriginal women and 20% of Aboriginal men reported some disability; at age 55 and over, the proportions were 68% and 64%.

By contrast, the age-standardized disability rates for all Canadian adults were almost the same for women and men: 13% and 12%. At ages 15 to 24, both figures were 7%. However, at age 55 and over, women's disability rate slightly exceeded men's: 37% and 35%.

Table 1

Disability rates, by Aboriginal group, Canada, 1991

	Total Canadian population	Total Aboriginal population	North American Indians					Métis	Inuit
			Place of residence			Official status under Indian Act			
			Total	On-reserve	Off-reserve	Registered	Non-registered		
Sample size †	91,360	65,450	52,940	37,610	15,330	46,980	5,970	8,850	6,080
Estimated population †	21,063,100	373,800	277,700	100,400	177,200	218,900	58,800	81,700	18,800
Persons with disabilities †	3,533,100	117,100	87,200	33,200	54,100	68,800	18,400	26,000	5,400
Disability rates					%				
All ages‡	12.6	31.4	31.3	31.7	31.0	31.2	31.9	32.0	29.9
15-24	7.0	21.7	21.7	21.7	21.7	20.7	25.5	21.9	21.0
25-34	8.5	23.6	23.7	23.3	23.9	24.0	22.7	23.1	23.2
35-54	13.7	35.5	35.4	35.5	35.3	35.2	36.1	37.2	33.3
55+	35.7	66.5	66.4	70.1	63.3	67.3	61.8	68.1	62.5

Source: *1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey and 1991 Health and Activity Limitation Survey*

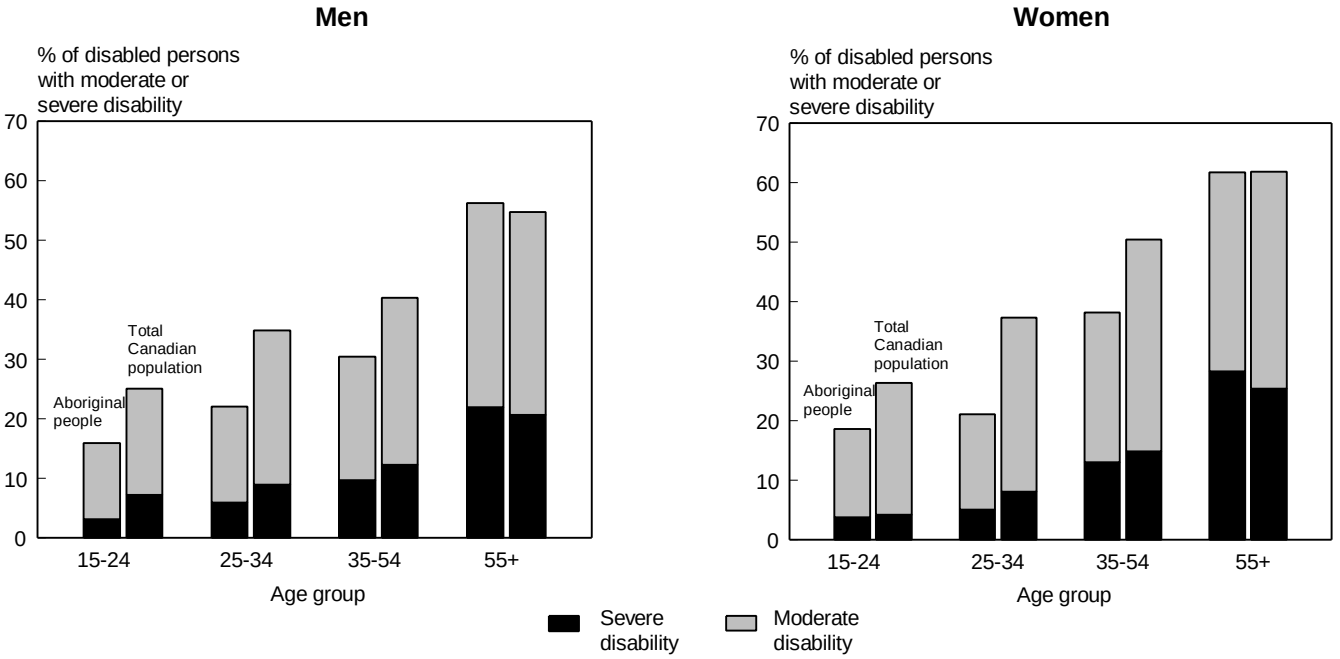
Note: *Household population aged 15 and over*

† *Because of rounding, row detail may not add to totals.*

‡ *Total disability rates are age-standardized to the total APS adult population.*

Chart 1

Disabled population with moderate or severe disabilities, by origin, age and sex, Canada, 1991



Source: *1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey and 1991 Health and Activity Limitation Survey*
Note: *Household population aged 15 and over*

Table 2

Disability rates, by severity of disability, origin and sex, Canada, 1991

	Any disability		Severity of disability: Slight		Moderate		Severe	
	Aboriginal population	Total Canadian population	Aboriginal population	Total Canadian population	Aboriginal population	Total Canadian population	Aboriginal population	Total Canadian population
	%							
Men 15+ †	**29.6**	**12.4**	**20.1**	**7.2**	**6.4**	**3.4**	**3.2**	**1.7**
15-24	20.1	6.8	16.9	5.1	2.6	1.2	0.7	0.5
25-34	22.1	8.2	17.2	5.3	3.6	2.1	1.3	0.7
35-54	33.6	13.6	23.4	8.1	7.0	3.8	3.3	1.7
55+	64.3	34.7	27.8	15.7	22.0	11.8	14.5	7.2
Women 15+ †	**32.8**	**12.8**	**21.1**	**6.7**	**7.5**	**4.2**	**4.3**	**1.9**
15-24	23.2	7.1	18.8	5.2	3.4	1.6	0.9	0.3
25-34	24.8	8.7	19.6	5.5	4.0	2.6	1.3	0.7
35-54	37.0	13.7	22.9	6.8	9.3	4.9	4.8	2.0
55+	68.5	36.6	26.2	13.9	22.9	13.3	19.4	9.3

Source: *1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey and 1991 Health and Activity Limitation Survey*
Note: *Household population aged 15 and over*
† *Total disability rates are age-standardized to the total APS population.*

Severity increases with age

Despite higher disability rates, young Aboriginal persons with disabilities were less likely than young people with disabilities overall to have severe or moderate disabilities (Chart 1). For example, at ages 15 to 24, 19% of Aboriginal women with a disability were severely or moderately disabled, compared with 26% of all women aged 15 to 24 with a disability. At older ages, this difference disappeared. By age 55 and over, about 62% of Aboriginal women with disabilities were moderately or severely disabled, virtually the same percentage as for all women aged 55 and over with a disability. This narrowing of the gap at older ages in the proportion of the two populations with moderate or severe disabilities also occurred among men.

Education a factor

For Aboriginal people and for the total Canadian adult population, higher levels of education were associated with lower rates of disability (Chart 2). But regardless of educational attainment, disability rates among Aboriginal people were almost double the corresponding figures for the population overall. For instance, among people with at least a university certificate, the rate of disability was almost three times higher in the Aboriginal group: 20% versus 7%. The main difference between these two rates was in the slightly or moderately disabled categories: 19% of Aboriginal people, compared with 6% of Canadians overall. Rates of severe disability were the same (1%).

There is a relationship between disability rates and educational attainment among Aboriginal people. But because the APS is a cross-sectional survey, it is not possible to ascertain the direction of causality. That is, APS data cannot determine if higher education results in lower disability rates, or if disability entails lower educational attainment, or both.

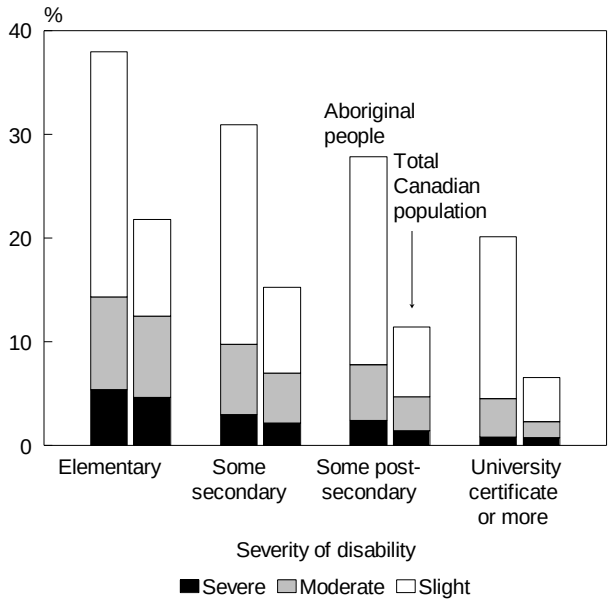
Nevertheless, education does lead to labour market opportunities, higher income, and thus, better living conditions.[19] People with a higher level of education are also more likely to know and understand the health risks associated with smoking, excessive drinking, and careless driving of automobiles and other vehicles. However, only 3% of the adult Aboriginal population had at least a university certificate, compared with 14% of the total adult population; 24% of Aboriginal people had less than Grade 9, compared with 14% of all adult Canadians.

Disability rates similar across Aboriginal groups

Regardless of their cultural origin, geographic location, or official status, Aboriginal people had remarkably similar disability rates (Table 1). The age-standardized rates for all groups were close to 31%. Disability rates at various ages were also similar for different groups. For example, among 15- to 24-year-olds, rates clustered around 22%, the only exception being non-registered North American Indians, whose disability rate was 26%. At age 55 and over, disability rates were higher, and the range between groups was somewhat wider.

Chart 2

Disability rates,† by educational attainment, severity of disability, and origin, Canada, 1991



Source: *1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey and 1991 Health and Activity Limitation Survey*
Note: *Household population aged 15 and over*
† *All disability rates are age-standardized to the total APS adult population.*

Although the major Aboriginal groups' disability rates tended to be similar, there was some variation in the type of disability. Mobility limitations were the most common type of disability in all groups except the Inuit. Among the Inuit with disabilities, hearing limitations were most prevalent.[15,20]

Help with daily activities

The majority—64%—of Aboriginal people with disabilities neither required nor received help with activities of daily living (Table 3). Around 5% did not receive help, although they needed it. The remainder were receiving help, but while 23% had their needs met, 8% still had some unmet needs.

Thus, a relatively small percentage of Aboriginal persons with disabilities (13%) had unmet needs for help with daily activities. This proportion tended to rise with age, from 6% among 15- to 24-year-olds with disabilities to 23% at age 55 and over.

Table 3

Degree of dependence, by age and severity of disability, Aboriginal population with disabilities, Canada 1991

	Total	Degree of dependence			
		Not receiving help (independent)		Receiving help (dependent)	
		Without unmet needs	With unmet needs	Without unmet needs	With some unmet needs
			%		
Total	**100**	**64**	**5**	**23**	**8**
Age					
15-24	100	84	2	10	4
25-34	100	76	3	16	5
35-54	100	63	5	24	8
55+	100	38	9	39	14
Severity of disability					
Slight	100	82	2	13	3
Moderate	100	39	9	39	13
Severe	100	11	15	51	23

Source: *1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey*
Note: *Household population aged 15 and over*

As might be expected, the need for help and the extent to which it was met depended on the severity of the disability. For instance, 82% of Aboriginal persons with a slight disability neither needed nor received help with activities of daily living. Only about 2% were not receiving help, although they needed it. The remaining 16% of people with slight disabilities were receiving help, but 3% reported that despite this assistance, they still had some needs that were not met. Consequently, 5% of Aboriginal people with slight disabilities had unmet needs for help.

The picture is much different among those with severe disabilities. Only 11% of them neither needed nor received help. Most (74%) were receiving help with their daily activities. Nonetheless, 23% reported that although they received help, some of their needs were not met. As well, 15% needed help, but did not receive it. Therefore, fully 38% of Aboriginal people with severe disabilities had unmet needs.

Summary

Despite progress during the past three decades in many aspects of Aboriginal health, disability rates among Aboriginal people in 1991 were more than double those of Canadians overall. As well, disability rates were similar regardless of the specific Aboriginal group with which they identified, where they lived (on- or off-reserve), or their official status (registered or not under the Indian Act).

Most of the younger Aboriginal population with a disability were only slightly disabled. Consequently, few of them required help in their daily living or had unmet needs for help. By contrast, at age 55 and over, about 60% of Aboriginal persons with a disability were either moderately or severely disabled and required help in their daily living. And although most of them received help, a substantial proportion still had unmet needs.

The Aboriginal population is relatively young. But projections indicate that the elderly component of the Aboriginal population is expected to increase in the next quarter century.[21] And it is at older ages that rates of severe disability are highest and the need for help is greatest. This changing age structure has implications for health and social services that Aboriginal people with disabilities will require and for the associated expenditures.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix

The comparable APS and HALS questions on self-perceived limitations are:

APS	HALS	Activity
C1	A1	Hearing one person
C2	A2	Hearing at least three people
C4	A4	Reading newsprint
C5	A5	Seeing a face
C7	A7	Speaking
C8	A8	Walking 400 metres
C9	A9	Climbing stairs
C10	A10	Carrying 10 pounds
C11	A11	Moving from room to room
C12	A12	Standing for 20 minutes
C13	A13	Bending
C14	A14	Dressing
C15	A15	Getting in/out of bed
C16	A16	Cutting toenails
C17	A17	Using fingers
C18	A18	Reaching in any direction
C19	A19	Cutting food
C20 (i-iv)	A20 (i-iv)	Physical limitations
C21	A21	Remembering
C22	A24a	Learning
C23 (i-iv)	A25 (i-iv)	Psychological limitations
C3a†	A3a†	Hearing on the telephone
C6a†	A6a†	Legally blind

† Not used as screening questions for disability, but used in assessing severity of disability.

Further information from Statistics Canada on Aboriginal people

Print :

Catalogue

94-325	Profile of Canada's Aboriginal Population
94-326	Canada's Aboriginal Population by Census Subdivisions and Census Metropolitan Areas
94-327	Age and Sex
89-533	Language, Tradition, Health, Lifestyle and Social Issues
89-534	Schooling, Work and Related Activities, Income, Expenses and Mobility
89-535	Disability and Housing
	User's Guide - 91 Aboriginal Data
	APS - 1991 General Information and Data Highlights
	Health Profile of Aboriginal Children (under 15 years of age), Canada, Provinces and Territories

Electronic:

Aboriginal Peoples Survey 1991 Microdata file

Aboriginal Community Profiles (statistical profiles containing socio-demographic and economic data for Aboriginal communities that participated in the 1991 APS)

For information on census products, contact Pierre Gauthier (613-951-2599). For information on the Aboriginal Peoples Survey, contact Heather Tait (613-951-2989).