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Vision loss and labour force outcomes: Research summary 10 April 2018

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# Introduction

This summary presents the key findings of the analysis of labour force outcomes among individuals with vision loss in two national surveys. These analyses were conducted for Vision Australia to present trends and snapshots of employment outcomes and related factors among individuals with vision loss in Australia. Detailed results from the analysis of each survey can be found in the separate reports from the Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC) and Household Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia survey (HILDA).

We used 13 waves of the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey [HILDA] and 3 years of the Survey of Disability, Ageing, and Carers [SDAC]. The longitudinal nature of HILDA allowed for the analysis of trends over time, and provided useful comparisons in labour force outcomes between individuals with vision loss and individuals without any impairment. The cross-sectional analysis of the 2009, 2012, and 2015 SDAC allowed us to examine differences within the population of individuals with vision loss.

Individuals who had sight problems which were not corrected by glasses or lenses, including total loss of sight, were considered to have vision loss. Individuals with vision loss may also have other types of impairments.

Labour force status is defined as employed, unemployed, and not in the labour force. Individuals who work full or part time are employed. People who are not working but are actively seeking work are unemployed. People who are employed or unemployed are considered to be participating in the labour market. Individuals who are neither employed nor unemployed are not in the labour force [NILF]. NILF individuals are not participating in the labour market.

## Labour Force Participation

Analysis from both SDAC and HILDA reflected that individuals with vision loss have lower levels of labour force participation. As shown in Figure 1, an estimated 40-50% of working age (15-64 years) individuals with vision loss are employed, compared to approximately 75% of people without any impairment. While the unemployment rate is similar for both populations (nearly 5%), individuals with vision loss are substantially more likely to be NILF (50-60%).

Figure 1: Labour force outcomes, SDAC

Characteristics of Those Not in the Labour Force

Using data from SDAC, we investigated the group of individuals with vision loss who are not in the labour force to find out how this group differs from individuals with vision loss who are participating in the labour market.

We found that the majority of individuals with vision loss have other, additional impairments, regardless of age group. This indicates a high degree of comorbidity within the population of people with vision loss. These impairments cover a range of broad types, with physical restrictions reported most commonly.

There was a linear relationship between the number of impairments an individual reported in addition to vision loss and the presence of employment restrictions, as shown in Figure 2. Among individuals with only vision loss, 40% reported having some kind of employment restriction. This proportion increased to 90% for individuals with two or more impairments in addition to vision loss. These restrictions were most commonly related to the job itself, such as restrictions in the type of job, changing jobs, or getting a preferred job. Following this, individuals with vision loss reported restrictions pertaining to their hours of work, such as a need for time off or reduced/flexible hours.

Figure 2: Number of impairments among individuals with vision loss, SDAC

A substantial proportion of individuals with vision loss who were NILF reported they were permanently unable to work. Being permanently unable to work was also associated with increasing numbers of impairments: 45% of individuals with vision loss only who were NILF reported they were unable to work, compared to 85% for those with vision loss and at least two other impairments.

Evidence from HILDA suggests that, among individuals with vision loss who are NILF, only a small proportion want to work. However, the data lacks enough detail to be able to explore why NILF individuals feel they don’t want to work, or the reasons they are unable to work.

Job Characteristics of the Employed

Despite the lower proportion of people with vision loss who are employed as compared to individuals without any impairment, we found relatively few differences between the two groups experiences of the labour market. As compared to individuals without any impairment, individuals with vision loss were slightly more likely to be in lower skill jobs and less likely to be in professional roles.

Objective status inconsistency (i.e. whether people are overqualified for their job) and subjective status inconsistency (i.e. whether people feel they use their skills at work) were similar for individuals with vision loss and individuals without any impairment. Both groups had similar proportions of individuals in employee and employer roles, and approximately 90% of individuals in both populations had only one job. A similar proportion of individuals with vision loss were employed in the private sector when compared with individuals without any impairment.

However, as show in Figure 3, individuals with vision loss were more likely to report working part time than individuals without any impairment. They were also more likely to report that they were underemployed, that is, not working as many hours as they would like.

Hours Usually Worked Per Week for people with vision loss and people without vision loss. Data is shown for the years between 2003 and 2015. For people with vision loss, part time work trends from 4.1 to 4.4. Full time work trends from 2.9 to 3.2 and >40 hours trends from 2.9 to 2.5. 
For people without any impairment, part time work trends from 3.1 to 3.2. Full time work trends from 3.2 to 3.8 and >40 hours trends from 3.7 to 3.1.
Transcribers Note: the above values are approximates.


Figure 3: Hours usually worked per week, HILDA

## Recommendations

There is a paucity of information about why individuals with vision loss are NILF. The large number of NILF individuals may be a reflection of personal choice, their own health, experiences of discrimination, or feelings of discouragement with an unwelcoming labour market. Further research in this area could elucidate the reasons for not participating in the labour market and inform interventions for helping individuals with vision loss gain meaningful employment.

Additionally, individuals with vision loss presented a high degree of comorbidity. This comorbidity was associated with decreased participation in the labour market. Increasing understanding of how comorbidity impacts people with vision loss can make employment interventions more accessible to people with vision loss as well as other impairments.

## Strengths and Limitations

Both the SDAC and HILDA are large, nationally representative surveys with rich data on a number of health and labour force outcomes. The use of HILDA data allowed us to look for trends over time, although we did not notice substantial changes. SDAC provided detailed data on comorbidity.

However, only a small number of individuals reported vision loss. As such, we were unable to restrict the sample to individuals with vision loss only, and we were unable to analyse the data for patterns by sex, small age categories, or different additional impairment types. This small sample size also limited the depth of our analysis and has led to greater uncertainty surrounding the estimates of outcomes.

Despite these limitations, we believe this analysis indicates important areas for future research and intervention among individuals with vision loss in Australia.