

Untapped Potential: The Employment Reality for People with Intellectual Disability

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Cover:
Love Flowers
Katrina Hewett
IHC Art Awards 2025

Above:
Skytech Megacorp Cat
Bastian Messenger
IHC Art Awards 2025

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Sunset
Ronald Geary
IHC Art Awards 2025

Disclaimer

Access to the data used in this study was provided by Stats NZ under conditions designed to give effect to the security and confidentiality provisions of the Data and Statistics Act 2022. The results presented in this study are the work of the author, not Stats NZ or individual data suppliers.

These results are not official statistics. They have been created for research purposes from the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) which is carefully managed by Stats NZ. For more information about the IDI, please visit <https://www.stats.govt.nz/integrated-data/>.

The results are based in part on tax data supplied by Inland Revenue to Stats NZ under the Tax Administration Act 1994 for statistical purposes. Any discussion of data limitations or weaknesses is in the context of using the IDI for statistical purposes, and is not related to the data's ability to support Inland Revenue's core operational requirements.

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All the art in this report was created by intellectually disabled artists. The art was selected by the authors from over 500 entries into the IHC Art Awards in 2025. The authors were inspired by the complexity and diversity of the art created by the talented artists and thought it was critical to show what intellectually disabled people are capable of when they are well supported and included. The authors are very grateful to the artists for their contribution to the report.

Executive summary

This report examines the employment situation of people with intellectual disabilities in Aotearoa, combining large-scale quantitative analysis with qualitative insights. It explores the prevalence and quality of paid work, the barriers and enablers shaping employment outcomes, and the value of work for individuals and communities. The study is framed within the rights-based approach of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which affirms the right to work on an equal basis with others.

Approach

The research draws on linked administrative and survey data from Stats NZ's Integrated Data Infrastructure and the Household Labour Force Survey, complemented by in-depth interviews with people with intellectual disabilities and their families. This mixed-methods approach provides both a population-level perspective and rich personal narratives, enabling a nuanced understanding of employment patterns and lived experiences.

Employment Patterns

Labour market participation for people with intellectual disabilities remains markedly lower than for the general population. Those who do work are often in roles characterised by insecurity, low pay, and limited progression. Employment is concentrated in a narrow range of industries and occupations. These patterns reflect systemic barriers rather than individual limitations.

Economic vulnerability is a recurring theme. People with intellectual disabilities are disproportionately affected by economic downturns and experience slower recovery following shocks. Employment instability compounds these challenges, with higher rates of job exits and shorter tenure, perhaps linked to greater levels of casualised employment, compared to other workers.

Barriers and Enablers

Barriers to employment are multifaceted. They include inadequate transition pathways from education to work, insufficient workplace support, lack of reasonable accommodations, and persistent discrimination. These barriers often intersect with systemic issues such as fragmented services and low expectations, creating a cycle of exclusion.

Conversely, success stories highlight the importance of inclusive employers, tailored supervision, flexible conditions, and strong social/familial support networks. Facilitated access to job opportunities and values-driven organisational cultures emerge as critical enablers. Simple adjustments, such as clear instructions, predictable routines, supportive colleagues and appropriate and strengths-based oversight, can make the difference between success and failure.

The Value of Work

Qualitative insights underscore the profound value of work for people with intellectual disabilities. Employment provides structure, social connection, and greater financial independence. It fosters

identity, belonging, and pride, and contributes to wellbeing and self-determination. Participants described work as a source of confidence and recognition, whereas exclusion was associated with isolation, diminished self-worth, and declining health. Work was seen not only as a means of earning but as a pathway to inclusion and experience of community, an ordinary life outcome that remains elusive for many.

Health and Wellbeing

Employment is strongly associated with better health outcomes. People with intellectual disabilities who are in paid work show higher levels of wellbeing and lower rates of avoidable hospitalisations compared to those not in work. While poor health can be a barrier to employment, the evidence suggests that work itself supports physical and mental health, reinforcing its role as a determinant of wellbeing.

Implications

The evidence points to an urgent need for coordinated action. Strengthening pathways to employment, embedding reasonable accommodations, addressing discrimination, and ensuring targeted support during economic shocks are essential steps toward equity. Paid work is more than income, it is a foundation for dignity, identity, and participation. Realising the promise of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires sustained commitment to inclusive employment practices across government, employers, and communities.



1 Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), of which New Zealand is a signatory, establishes clear rights for disabled people, including those with intellectual disabilities. Article 27 of the UNCRPD recognises the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities, from recruitment and hiring to career advancement and working conditions.¹

Key obligations for signatory countries include:

- Prohibiting disability-based discrimination in all forms of employment.
- Ensuring equal pay and safe, harassment-free workplaces.
- Supporting access to vocational training, job placement, and career development.
- Promoting employment in both public and private sectors, including through incentives and affirmative action.
- Providing reasonable accommodation in the workplace.
- Encouraging entrepreneurship and self-employment.
- Protecting labour rights, including union participation.
- Safeguarding against forced labour and servitude, ensuring freedom and dignity at work.

In Aotearoa, the Enabling Good Lives (EGL) approach², developed by the disability community and supported by government through a national roll-out, includes the principle of Ordinary Life Outcomes:

“Disabled people are supported to live an everyday life in everyday places; and are regarded as citizens with opportunities for learning, employment, having a home and family, and social participation - like others at similar stages of life.”

Despite New Zealand’s being a signatory of the UNCRPD and the national roll out of the EGL approach, labour market statistics continue to show lower levels of labour-force participation for disabled people. Stats NZ reported that in the June 2023 quarter the labour force participation rate for disabled people aged 15–64 years was 44.1 percent compared with 84.7 percent for non-disabled people of the same age group³.

¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>

² Enabling Good Lives - <https://www.enablinggoodlives.co.nz/about-egl/>

³ Labour market statistics (disability): June 2023 quarter - <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/labour-market-statistics-disability-june-2023-quarter/>

When focusing on intellectual disability, repeatedly, international and national research shows that wellbeing outcomes are generally worse for people with intellectual disabilities compared to the broader disabled community.

In December 2023, IHC published *From Data to Dignity: Health and Wellbeing Indicators for New Zealanders with Intellectual Disability* (Beltran-Castillon & McLeod, 2023), a comprehensive report on the wellbeing of intellectually disabled people in New Zealand. Using Inland Revenue data in the IDI, the research showed that participation in paid employment for people 18 years or older is significantly lower for people with intellectual disabilities compared to people without intellectual disability.

A subsequent IHC report, *The Cost of Exclusion* (McLeod, Stone, & Beltran-Castillon, 2025) using data from Stats NZ's Household Economic Survey, confirmed that adults with intellectual disability were much less likely than other adult New Zealanders to be working. These differences in access to paid employment between people with and without intellectual disability result in wide differences in income, despite high access to income support payments by people with intellectual disabilities. People with intellectual disabilities have a lower average annual personal income than people without intellectual disability across all age groups over the age of 24. The age-standardised income for people with intellectual disabilities was estimated at \$32,500, compared to \$51,700 for non-intellectually disabled people. In New Zealand around one in five people with intellectual disabilities are living in hardship through to age 64. This is around double the rate of hardship for people without intellectual disability up to age 39 and almost triple the rate at ages 40 to 64, as hardship rates drop throughout the life course for people without intellectual disability.

The workplace is considered one of the key settings in which to promote wellbeing (OECD, 2011). International research consistently shows a large negative effect of unemployment on subjective wellbeing (Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008). Empirical research confirms this finding in the New Zealand context, where using data from the General Social Survey, unemployment has been found to negatively affect wellbeing (Brown, Woolf, & Smith, 2012). Furthermore, the negative effect of unemployment on subjective wellbeing is pervasive even long after the period of unemployment has ended (Clark, Georgellis, Lucas, & Diener, 2004).

In this context of New Zealand and international research, we identified a need to extend the current evidence on employment and disability with analysis focused on the intellectually disabled community of Aotearoa. The data available in the IDI provided an opportunity to fulfil this need.

1.1.1 Existing data sources

We identified several data sources with the potential to answer questions about the labour-force participation of the intellectually disabled community in New Zealand. These sources provide the context for defining the research scope.

Administrative data from Inland Revenue within the IDI contains tax-related information about individuals. It includes details about a person's employment situation, such as earnings, whether they receive wages or salary income, job tenure, changes in employment status, the industry they work in, the size of their employer, and whether they receive a benefit. For individuals who are not currently working, the IDI still records their employment history and benefit receipt. This data

provides valuable opportunities to understand paid work for the intellectually disabled community in greater detail.

Because the IDI holds Inland Revenue data dating back to 2006, it is possible to conduct trend analyses and examine how changes in the economic climate affect paid work opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. It also allows comparisons with the non-intellectually disabled population to see whether these effects differ.

The Stats NZ Household Labour Force Survey (HLFS) surveys around 15,000 households every three months and produces New Zealand's official employment measures, as well as indicators of labour force underutilisation. One-eighth of the household panel is rotated out each quarter, meaning the entire panel is replaced every two years. The HLFS includes approximately 250 working-age people with intellectual disabilities each year. By combining data across several years, there is likely to be a sufficient sample to undertake meaningful statistical analyses.

The HLFS collects information on whether people are in the labour force, whether they are seeking work, whether they want to change their current situation, and why. For employed individuals, the survey records the type of employment, the number of hours worked, and the number of jobs held. This data offers an opportunity to explore the motivations and barriers to employment for people with intellectual disabilities.

1.1.2 Aim of this report

This report adds to the existing body of evidence on the value, enablers, and barriers of paid work for people with intellectual disabilities. It presents further insights into the employment situation of people with intellectual disabilities in Aotearoa.

The information presented supports advocacy and policy development with up-to-date evidence. While previous IHC reports offered high-level indicators that collectively painted a broad picture of the lives of people with intellectual disabilities in New Zealand, this report explores employment in greater depth. It provides evidence that can be used to enhance work opportunities and improve work conditions for people with intellectual disabilities.

Identity-first language or person-first language

In this report, we use both identity-first language (“intellectually disabled people”) and person-first language (“people with intellectual disabilities”) interchangeably. This decision was made following discussion with IHC and reflects the diversity of preferences within the intellectually disabled community in New Zealand and internationally. People First New Zealand, the national Disabled People’s Organisation (DPO) representing people with intellectual disabilities under the UNCRPD, uses person-first language itself, consistent with the position taken by the global People First movement since its first conference in Oregon in 1974 (Wehmeyer, Bersani, & Gagne, 2000). However, research and community perspectives show that language preferences vary, with some people favouring identity-first language as an expression of disability identity, and others preferring person-first language. Factors influencing this choice include the strength of disability identity (Gernsbacher, 2017) and the social context of intellectual disability, which historically has been among the most stigmatised disabilities (Tringo, 1970) (Thomas, 2000). By using both forms, we acknowledge and respect this range of preferences, while maintaining consistency in describing other groups - for example, using terms such as “other adult New Zealanders” or “other children” when making comparisons. We are explicit about these choices so that readers understand our approach and the reasoning behind the words we use.

2 Research design and methodology

This study examines the employment situation of people with intellectual disabilities in Aotearoa, drawing on data from Stats NZ's Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI). This is complemented by the voices of a few individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families, gathered through in-depth interviews.

2.1 Research scope

The study uses administrative data from Inland Revenue, Census data and data from Stats NZ's Household Labour Force Survey in the IDI. The qualitative component involved undertaking seven in-depth interviews with intellectually disabled working-age people. In most cases, another family member or caregiver was also interviewed to provide additional information and perspectives.

This research aims to answer the following questions:

- What is the employment profile of intellectually disabled people (e.g. how many hours they work, what type of jobs they have, whether they work for large or small employers, whether urban or rural people with ID were likely to be employed, how often they change jobs)?
- Who is more likely to be in paid work among intellectually disabled people? What are their characteristics? What are the barriers and enablers for paid work?
- How stable is paid work for people with intellectual disabilities? What are the impacts of economic downturns on the employment of people with intellectual disabilities? What is the evidence of precarious employment within the intellectually disabled population?
- What is the perceived value of paid work for people with intellectual disabilities? What evidence is there regarding labour force underutilisation in the intellectually disabled population, and how to interpret it?
- Do intellectually disabled people in paid work have better health and wellbeing outcomes compared with those not in paid work? How do health and wellbeing, and work interact for the intellectually disabled population?

2.2 Population definitions

The population of focus for this study is the working-aged (18 to 64) intellectually disabled population in Aotearoa.

The analysis in the IDI has used three different study populations to answer the research questions. All these study population are representative of the New Zealand population:

- **The 2024 Administrative Population Census (APC) working-age population available in the IDI**
The APC contains census-type information derived from different government agencies to represent the New Zealand population. Inland revenue data in the IDI was added to understand the employment situation of this population. Ministry of Health data in the IDI will also be linked to this population to understand the relationship between employment and health outcomes.

- **Respondents of the New Zealand Household Labour Force Survey (HLFS) for June 2016 to 2024**

The HLFS is carried out by Stats NZ to produce New Zealand’s official measure of employment. It also collects supporting information to explain the state of the labour market (e.g. hours of work, status in employment, duration of unemployment).

- **The working-age APC population from 2006 to 2024**

This extended dataset was linked to Inland Revenue data for those years to understand the impacts of economic downturns on the employment of people with intellectual disabilities.

2.2.1 Identifying intellectual disability in the populations

There is no single record in the IDI that tells us who has an intellectual disability, so we used many different data sources, in the same way as for the *From Data to Dignity* research. This is done using data sourced from public and private hospital discharges, outpatient and emergency department collections, secondary mental health services, Disability Support Services, interRAI assessments for those in aged residential care, Ministry of Social Development income support data, the Ministry of Education Ongoing Resourcing Scheme, and Oranga Tamariki Gateway assessments. A person was counted as having an intellectual disability if a diagnosis was recorded by a health professional in any of these sources.⁴

2.2.2 Population limitations

The method of identifying people in the IDI works best for identifying people with more serious needs, who are more likely to have contact with health, education, or support services. People with mild intellectual disabilities who are in good health may be undercounted because they don’t always show up in these records.

The Household Labour Force Survey (HLFS) targets New Zealand-resident, private households living in permanent dwellings. This excludes “special dwellings” such as hotels, boarding houses and institutions. Group homes (community-based supported living) are treated as non-private dwellings, so they are explicitly excluded from surveying and therefore not included in the HLFS-based study population. We estimate that around 1 in 5 people with intellectual disabilities aged 18 to 64 are likely to be excluded in this basis. This only affects the HLFS-based study population not the APC-based study population.

2.3 Research approach

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of large-scale survey and administrative data with qualitative interviews. Together, these methods provide both a

⁴ The detailed criteria used to identify intellectual disability can be found in *From Data to Dignity: Health and Wellbeing Indicators for New Zealanders with Intellectual Disability*. <https://www.kotatainsight.co.nz/our-work>

population-level view and personal insights into the employment experiences of people with intellectual disabilities.

2.3.1 The quantitative analysis

We used descriptive statistics to compare the employment situation of people with and without intellectual disabilities. The analysis draws on the 2024 APC population linked to Inland Revenue data and pooled HLFS data from 2016–2024.

To ensure fair comparisons, the intellectually disabled population was matched to a similar group of non-disabled individuals using propensity score matching. This reduces the likelihood that differences in outcomes are due to demographic differences such as age, gender, or ethnicity. As a result, observed differences can be more confidently attributed to intellectual disability. However, because the matched group is not representative of the entire non-disabled population, these estimates cannot be generalised to all New Zealanders without intellectual disabilities.

We used regression modelling to identify factors associated with being in paid work. Logistic regression was used to model current employment status (yes/no) for people with intellectual disabilities as a function of personal and environmental characteristics.

To assess the impact of economic downturns, we analysed employment trends from 2007 to 2024 using a model with interaction terms to test for differences in outcomes by intellectual disability status. This allows us to estimate whether events such as the Global Financial Crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionate effect on employment for people with intellectual disabilities compared to those without intellectual disability.

We used aged-standardised rates (ASRs) to compare the health outcomes of people with and without employment. ASRs are used to compare groups fairly by removing the effects of age. For this report, ASRs are based on New Zealand’s estimated population on 30 June 2023, broken into five-year age bands.

2.3.2 The qualitative study

We used a case study approach to enable both within-case and cross-case analysis. This method offers two key strengths:

- Preserving the integrity of each person’s or family’s lived experience, allowing their circumstances to be understood in context.
- Facilitating comparisons that highlight common experiences and significant differences, including how participants interpret their situations.

This approach is essential for answering those research questions that require qualitative insights.

Project Kaupapa

This project was guided by key principles:

- **Inclusion** – The project was developed with IHC’s guidance, ensuring strong input from people with intellectual disabilities from the start. It was reviewed by technical experts, subject experts, and members of the intellectually disabled community. The analytical team are also carers within the disabled community.
- **Benefit** – The project aims to help track and improve outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities. Every indicator was chosen with the benefit to this community in mind.
- **Minimising burden** – No new data was collected, so the project placed no extra burden on the intellectually disabled community.
- **Privacy and confidentiality** – The project used IDI data under Stats NZ’s ‘Five Safes’ framework:
 - *Safe people* – Only trained, approved researchers can access data.
 - *Safe projects* – Projects must be in the public interest.
 - *Safe settings* – Data is stored and accessed securely.
 - *Safe data* – All identifying details are removed.
 - *Safe outputs* – Results are checked to ensure no one can be identified.
- **Accessibility** – The report will be published alongside a non-technical summary and an easy-read version to make findings accessible. Code and datasets are available in the IDI for approved researchers.
- **Recognition of tangata whenua** – Previous research showed Māori have higher rates of intellectual disability, so this study includes Māori-specific indicators when data allows. IHC’s Māori Director of Advocacy guided the project.
- **Efficiency and value** – The team worked collaboratively, using existing tools and knowledge to save time and resources. The work is designed to be easily updated in future, with code and documentation shared for reuse.

3 The study population

This section presents the quantitative study populations, giving an understanding of their size, characteristics and the comparability of the matched sample. It also introduces the qualitative study sample.

3.1 Linked survey and administrative data

Table 1 presents the sizes of the two study populations used to compare employment profiles: the 2024 APC working-age population and pooled HLFS data from 2016–2024. Both datasets are sufficiently large for robust comparisons, highlighting the value of pooling survey data from several years when researching small populations. However, while the pooled HLFS sample supports comparisons between people with and without intellectual disabilities, it is not large enough for detailed subpopulation analyses. In total, only 348 employed people with intellectual disabilities were surveyed in the nine years analysed.

Table 1 - Number of people in the study populations by employment status

		APC 2024	HLFS 2016-2024
Total sample	Employed	2,416,947	159,588
	Not employed	762,237	61,224
People with intellectual disabilities	Employed	5,346	348
	Not employed	21,891	1,158
People without intellectual disability	Employed	2,209,050	148,737
	Not employed	670,497	55,476
Matched population without intellectual disability	Employed	202,551	10,503
	Not employed	69,849	4,590

Table 2 compares the demographic characteristics of people with intellectual disabilities in the study populations to a matched group without intellectual disabilities.⁵ The distributions across age, gender, and ethnicity, the variables used for matching, are very similar, validating the matching methodology.

⁵ Matching was done with optimal fixed ratio matching using PROC PSMATCH in SAS Enterprise Guide.

For the matched group, we selected 10 individuals without intellectual disabilities for each respondent with an intellectual disability, increasing the total sample size and improving the reliability of estimates.

Table 2 - Demographic characteristics of the intellectually disabled study population and their matched comparison

		HLFS 2006-2024			APC 2024		
	ID	Matched Non-ID	Total Non-ID		ID	Matched Non-ID	Total Non-ID
Age group	18-19	9%	8%	4%	6%	6%	4%
	20-24	17%	17%	10%	15%	15%	10%
	25-29	15%	14%	11%	13%	13%	11%
	30-34	12%	12%	11%	12%	12%	13%
	35-39	9%	9%	11%	10%	10%	12%
	40-44	8%	8%	10%	9%	9%	11%
	45-49	10%	10%	11%	8%	8%	10%
	50-54	8%	9%	11%	10%	10%	10%
	55-59	7%	7%	11%	9%	9%	10%
	60-64	6%	6%	10%	8%	8%	10%
Gender	Male	60%	60%	48%	60%	60%	50%
	Female	40%	40%	52%	40%	40%	50%
Ethnicity	Māori	27%	27%	14%	28%	28%	16%
	Pacific	10%	10%	8%	10%	10%	9%
	Asian	5%	4%	17%	5%	5%	21%
	European	67%	67%	66%	69%	69%	61%
	Other	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%	2%
Total		1,509	15,093	219,294	27,243	272,400	3,151,944

Table 3 shows the size of the APC working-age population from 2016 to 2024. This population was used for the analysis of the effect of economic downturns on employment.

Table 3 - APC population by year, intellectual disability and employment status

Year	Intellectual disability		Non-intellectual disability	
	Employed	Not employed	Employed	Not employed
2016	4,764	20,688	2,120,412	729,081
2017	4,962	20,706	2,178,231	721,047
2018	5,133	20,790	2,225,346	718,164
2019	5,181	20,985	2,266,632	719,703
2020	4,917	21,531	2,299,317	746,970
2021	5,226	21,516	2,345,616	702,051
2022	5,739	21,222	2,362,440	672,972
2023	5,709	21,354	2,394,603	709,491
2024	5,346	21,891	2,411,601	740,346

3.2 The qualitative sample

Participants for the in-depth interviews were recruited through IHC networks. A summary of each research participant is outlined below, and their employment status and living situation are compiled in Table 4. We have used pseudonyms throughout this report to protect the participants’ privacy.

Table 4 – Employment status and living situation of study participants

Participant (*)	Living situation	Employment status	Paid hours worked	Volunteering
Lindell (20s)	Living with family	Casual part-time	30hrs	
Emma (40s)	Living with family	Permanent part-time	28hrs	
Mica (30s)	Flatting (**)	Permanent part-time	5hrs	Regularly
Robert (50s)	Flatting (**)	Self-employed	Varies	Regularly
Grace (20s)	Living with family	Unemployed		Regularly
Chris (50s)	Group home	Unemployed		Historically
Ajay (60s)	Group home	Unemployed		Historically

(*) All participants are referred with pseudonyms to protect their privacy

(**) Flatting – Independently sharing rental accommodation

Although one of the participants had experience of working in a sheltered workshop, we were unable to secure an interview of a person currently working in one or working in an organisation with Minimum Wage Exemption.

Sheltered workshops were created by the 1960 Disabled Persons Employment Promotion Act and were exempt from standard wages and employment conditions. This policy, developed without input from disabled people, was later viewed as discriminatory. Continued advocacy resulted in the Act’s repeal in 2007, though Minimum Wage Exemptions remain common⁶.

The rest of this section introduces the interview participants.

3.2.1 Emma

Emma is a woman in her 30s with Down syndrome who leads a full and structured life, shaped by work, creative pursuits, and close family and social connections. She lives in an intergenerational family setting that provides both stability and future security, with her parents in one house and her sister’s family next door. For most of her adult life, Emma has worked four days a week in a school

⁶ A brief history of disability in Aotearoa New Zealand - <https://www.whaikaha.govt.nz/resources/guidance-and-advice/about-disability/brief-history-of-disability#scroll-to-7>

library, a role that combines teaching assistant and library duties. This long-term work gives her deep satisfaction and a sense of belonging and routine. Her Fridays and Saturdays are dedicated to theatre and dance, which have been central to her identity and personal growth since childhood, while Sundays are reserved for family and rest. Emma has a vibrant social life, with strong ties to colleagues, friends from dance and theatre, and personal assistants, carefully chosen to foster independence and companionship. Emma is supported by her parents and extended family, who provided transport, planning, and long-term financial arrangements. She takes pride in her creative work, her contribution to the school, and her family's achievements. Emma's life reflects a balance of independence, support, and meaningful social participation.

3.2.2 Mica

Mica is a sociable woman in her 30s who lives independently in her own accessible flat in a large city, supported by social housing and a coordinated network of family, professionals, and community connections. She works part-time in a communications role for a non-governmental organisation. This position suits her people-focused nature and provides her with a sense of purpose, stability, and pride. Her prior work experience has included childcare, customer service, cleaning, and reception roles, as well as volunteering and training placements that helped build her confidence and workplace skills.

While Mica experiences intellectual and physical challenges, including Bell's palsy and other health conditions, she manages these with intermittent support that enables her to maintain independence and remain engaged with her job and community. Financial stability comes from her income combined with Individualised Funding overseen by her mother. She would like to work more to improve financial security and deepen her sense of social participation. Surrounded by strong family support, particularly from her mother, and by friendships nurtured through her spiritual community and social activities, Mica leads a well-rounded life that encompasses work, family, faith, and sport.

3.2.3 Robert

Robert is a single man in his mid-50s with Down syndrome, living independently in stable rental accommodation in a large city. After losing his parents in a tragic accident as a teenager, he was cared for by his older sisters, who remain significant supports in his life despite now living at a distance.

Robert has worked continuously since leaving school, with a long career in part-time and permanent roles, including church cleaning, supermarket work, waste collection, and driving, often in supportive environments that accommodated his needs. More recently, he established his own small garden maintenance business, building on training from an IHC Landskills programme. This form of employment gives him a sense of pride and independence, despite challenges with recurring back pain.

Robert supplements his income with a Supported Living Payment. He receives twice-weekly visits from Tom, a trusted support worker and friend who helps with daily tasks and administration, enabling Robert to maintain his general independence. Financial pressures from rising costs remain a concern, sometimes limiting his ability to travel for family events, but he has not experienced material hardship. Robert's life is enriched by his volunteer work, involvement in the local IHC branch and

church, enjoyment of sports and movies, and a strong sense of community connection. Looking ahead, he aspires to expand his business, strengthen family ties, and continue making a social contribution.

3.2.4 Grace

Grace is a woman in her early 20s living with her parents and three younger siblings in a safe and supportive home, where her needs are met without financial hardship. Diagnosed with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and a traumatic brain injury in early childhood, she faces lifelong challenges with cognition, social understanding, and safety awareness. She is in a period of growth, increasing independence, and optimism.

Grace attends a vocational support programme twice a week, where fitness, life skills training, and peer friendships have given her confidence and a sense of belonging after years of isolation. Additionally, she volunteers one day a week in a charity shop, where structured tasks and positive social interactions provide fulfilment and a sense of achievement. Grace has also shown aptitude during work placements.

Grace's family, especially her mother and youngest sister, play a central role in supporting her progress. Neighbours engaged through Individualised Funding, and her church community extend her network of care and inclusion. Though her trusting nature makes her vulnerable, Grace aspires to secure permanent paid work and independent living, building on the foundations of stability, advocacy, and community connections that currently sustain her.

3.2.5 Chris

Chris is a man in his mid-50s with an intellectual disability and epilepsy who lives in a group home in a large city. Supported by long-standing family advocacy and professional carers, he thrives on routine, structure, and opportunities for meaningful participation in work and community life. From primary school age, Chris benefited from integrated special education, therapies, and consistent family involvement, which fostered his communication, motor skills, and social confidence. His employment history has included a series of part-time and intermittent roles such as retail stock arranging, community centre assistance, and small-scale production tasks, all of which required the support of job coaches or support workers to enable success.

While these experiences gave him a sense of pride and social engagement, long gaps between roles have left him frustrated and wanting more consistent, structured employment. Currently, Chris relies on Individualised Funding, supplemented by his parents, to cover his housing and basic needs. Although he has not experienced material hardship, he aspires to stable paid work – ideally in a setting like a chocolate factory – that would provide him with routine, purpose, and recognition. He experiences some fulfilment through outings with his housemates, creative hobbies, music, and weekly family visits, which maintain his sense of belonging.

3.2.6 Ajay

Ajay is a man in his late 60s of Indian descent who lives with cerebral palsy, an intellectual disability, and the lasting effects of a brain injury sustained early in life. He lives in a group home with four housemates, where familiar caregivers and long-term routines provide stability and comfort.

Ajay grew up in a close-knit family, with his mother as his primary caregiver until her death, after which his brother Karun and sister-in-law Dakshata assumed responsibility for his care, maintaining his inclusion in family life. He attended specialist education followed by attending an IHC-run day workshop before transitioning into sheltered workshop employment, where he performed a variety of structured tasks for two decades. The workshop provided a profound sense of purpose and community.

Since the closure of the workshops in the mid-2000s, Ajay has not had paid work. In the years since, he has participated in day programmes and enjoyed creative and recreational activities, such as art and bowling, supported by his family and caregivers. His income is derived from Individualised Funding and a family trust, which covers his living costs and allows for discretionary activities, such as annual holidays. While Ajay's health and mobility needs are well managed and he remains strongly connected to family and cultural life, he expresses frustration at the lack of meaningful daily activities. He misses the sense of structure, accomplishment and community he once gained from the sheltered work environment.

3.2.7 Lindell

Lindell is a woman in her mid-20s living with her parents and a sister in a major city, where she balances a casual part-time job with pet-sitting while living with ADHD, autism, and dyspraxia. Despite completing tertiary studies, she has found it difficult to secure stable or suitable employment. Her current role in food preparation provides experience and responsibility, but does not accommodate her sensory needs or aspirations associated with art and animal care.

Lindell grew up in a household marked by hardship, neglect, and strained family relationships, which contributed to periods of depression and anxiety during her schooling and early adulthood. A delayed diagnosis of her conditions in her early 20s gave her clarity. It enabled her to seek helpful coping strategies and medication, but systemic supports and job-seeker services have been poorly tailored to her needs. She continues to face financial stress and dependence on her family despite efforts to gain independence. Her long-term online relationship remains the strongest source of both emotional and practical support.

Presentation of results

- Most of the quantitative results in this report may come from one of two study populations, the APC 2024 and HLFS 2016-2024, both of which represent the New Zealand population.
- When results are available for both study populations, they will be presented together. This approach supports the validation of findings and highlights areas where results may raise further questions.
- The qualitative results provide insights into areas where quantitative data is unavailable, and they illustrate the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in relation to the patterns shown by the numbers.

Jack and Jill

Gabrielle Ashdown

IHC Art Awards 2025



4 Employment aspiration and the value of work

Earning an income through work supports wellbeing by increasing financial security and enabling access to life's necessities and comforts. It also benefits those who use the services produced through paid work, thereby enhancing collective wellbeing. Beyond economic value, paid work can foster a sense of meaning, purpose, and social connection.

These dynamics also apply to people with intellectual disabilities. International research has shown that employment can make a substantial contribution to their sense of belonging and overall quality of life (Voermans, Taminiau, Giesbers, & Embregts, 2021). A recent Australian study found that people with intellectual disabilities have a strong desire to work and contribute meaningfully to society. Through work, they seek social connection, a sense of purpose and recognition, and fair pay (Wiesel, Nelson, Grimshaw, & Imogen, 2025).

The in-depth interviews conducted in this study provide further evidence that people with intellectual disabilities find genuine value in paid work. They seek the same benefits that most people associate with employment, including:

- Feeling “normal” – doing what everyone else does,
- The desire to contribute as a community member,
- Being part of a team and interacting with others,
- Learning new skills and taking on more responsibility,
- Satisfaction in success,
- Recognition for their contributions and achievements,
- The ability to “pay their way” and feel independent, and
- Reducing boredom and isolation associated with not working.

4.1 Normalisation and everyday citizenship

All participants expressed a desire to work, regardless of age, life stage, abilities, or social circumstances. This reflects the reality that employment is a pervasive social norm — one that is equally felt by people with intellectual disabilities, even when societal expectations of them are relatively low.

Employment is a key aspect of the *Enabling Good Lives* approach, as highlighted in the “Ordinary Life Outcomes” principle⁷:

⁷ Enabling Good Lives. (n.d.). Principles. Enabling Good Lives. Retrieved August 25, 2025, from <https://www.enablinggoodlives.co.nz/about-egl/egl-approach/principles/>

“Disabled people are supported to live an everyday life in everyday places; and are regarded as citizens with opportunities for learning, employment, having a home and family, and social participation - like others at similar stages of life.”

4.1.1 Lindell, Mica, Grace and Robert

The experiences and expectations of Lindell, Mica, Grace, and Robert exemplify the normative drive to work.

Lindell volunteered in a service role for two years before making a successful case to be paid for this work. Her perspective is humble and appreciative; although her job is far from ideal, she views it as an achievement. She compares her experience with the limitations and exclusions faced by others with similar conditions:

I understand that being able to do the job I do is actually a success for people with autism, dyspraxia and stuff. Some people can't even, or have trouble, pouring their own water.

Lindell

Mica's response to being asked what she liked most about working was simple and conveyed the everyday significance of work in her life.

Getting there and doing my job.

Mica talking about the significance of work in her life

As a young woman, Grace assumed she would get a job once she finished her life skills course. She held this belief even though her mother viewed Grace's employment prospects as very low based on the results of Grace's neuropsychological assessment.

Robert has held various jobs over the years, but has always been employed. For him, being a worker is an unquestioned reality, something that simply *is*.

4.1.2 Emma and Ajay

Emma's and Ajay's situations offer further nuance, revealing the profound importance of experiencing and maintaining motivation behind their desire to work.

Emma's multiple roles at school provide her with routine and structure, which underpin her happiness and wellbeing. Her father emphasised the importance of this:

[work] gives her a daily structure that she builds from.

Emma's father

This structure includes:

- Dressing appropriately for the job,
- Being aware of opportunities at the school,
- Participating in various activities, and
- Engaging with staff, families, and students.

Emma finds summer holidays challenging due to the absence of the routine that work normally provides.

Ajay's caregiver offered a powerful reflection on the role of work in maintaining dignity, identity, and social connection in the context of Ajay being out of work since the mid-2000s:

Every day or every second day, he talks about work in some way or another, whether it's the [IHC] workshop or doing this or that or having meaningful activities with his mates. [It's] the socialising, which he likes the most, because he's a natural socialiser and life of the party...so it's very important for him. He's a very proud person, too, and I think [his] identity as a worker is so important. And he's constantly disappointed with that.

Ajay's caregiver

4.2 Contribution

For several participants, making a social contribution was an obvious point of pride, even though it was not directly explicitly expressed in those terms. Mica's voluntary and paid work, for example, focused on altruistic environmental and social support goals.

Emma's work centred on assisting students and teaching staff, and she also enthusiastically participated in disability awareness campaigns in her own time. These were organised by her father and other disability activists and included her cohort of friends with intellectual disability.

4.3 Belonging and socialisation

Work plays a vital role in fostering a sense of belonging and providing meaningful social engagement for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The following excerpts from in-depth interviews illustrate how participants experience these benefits:

- **Mica** shared that “hanging out with my co-workers” is a major reason she enjoys her job, adding that “the co-workers are so lovely.” When asked, “So the social thing is important, isn't it?”, Mica's caregiver affirmed, “It's very important!”
- For **Emma**, one of the most appealing aspects of going to work is being among friends — her colleagues. She also enjoys frequent social interaction with students. Being part of the school community has become intrinsic to her identity and wellbeing.
- **Robert** also highlighted the social dimension of his job: “With [my maintenance job], I love meeting people too!”

4.4 Learning and personal development

For many participants, the workplace serves as a pivotal site for learning and personal growth. Through everyday tasks, social interactions, and new responsibilities, individuals with intellectual disabilities develop skills that extend far beyond the job itself.

4.4.1 Mica

Mica initially found it difficult to leave phone messages for people she didn't know. A supportive co-worker helped her build professional routines and confidence:

You wrote a script together to start with, just to practice getting into the rhythm of making those calls, and so [you] knew what you were saying when you called.

Mica's caregiver

Further support from a workmate significantly boosted Mica's development. Her mother described a noticeable shift in confidence as a part of a cascade effect from having a job that brought "One good thing upon another":

It really extended Mica... they wrote little scripts to help her or little things to offer to people to explain [what was being asked]. But the confidence after that was a noticeable shift... We went to [a big sports event] and Mica... totally went up to [the mascot] and said, 'Can we have a photo?' She'd never do that... I really think those things coincided — she got a job and she was doing these new things.

Mica's mother

4.4.2 Lindell

Lindell's boss asked her to train new workers — a responsibility that challenged her communication skills, especially when engaging with colleagues who spoke English as a second language. She learned to rely on non-verbal cues and became more confident in her interactions. Lindell reflected that she had become comfortable talking to others; she used to be very shy. The increased responsibility and her developing capability to train others pleasantly surprised Lindell, as she recognised the personal growth.

4.5 Self-efficacy and self-determination

This theme aligns closely with the *Enabling Good Lives* principles of **Self-determination** and **Mana Enhancing**:

"Disabled people are in control of their lives.

Disabled people are supported to live an everyday life in everyday places; and are regarded as citizens with opportunities for learning, employment, having a home and family, and social participation - like others at similar stages of life.⁸"

⁸ Enabling Good Lives. (n.d.). Principles. Enabling Good Lives. Retrieved August 25, 2025, from <https://www.enablinggoodlives.co.nz/about-egl/egl-approach/principles/>

Participants' reflections reveal how work enables autonomy, pride, and financial agency — all of which contribute to a stronger sense of self.

4.5.1 Building confidence and capability

When asked what mattered most in his working life, Robert replied, “The different skills you can do.” This response highlights the significance of self-efficacy, the belief in one’s ability to succeed.

Emily expressed a similar sentiment, “[I] just like being able to do it and learn how to do it.” She confirmed that learning and “doing something well” were key motivators.

4.5.2 Being in control

Robert, the only self-employed participant, enjoyed the greatest control over his work life. He was able to organise various jobs as he saw fit, choosing work he liked and scheduling it to suit his lifestyle — a quintessential example of self-determination.

[Interviewer: And do you like being your own boss?]

Yeah ... Like, I can do any time I want. Not really any time [because] I got a diary. Looking at diary, that day busy, that day okay, that one ... I can fit that one in.

Robert

Robert’s current level of autonomy stands in stark contrast to the tightly prescribed and repetitive roles he held over the past 35 years.

4.5.3 Working connotes success

Lindell equates employment with success — not just as a norm, but as a meaningful achievement. For her, work is part of life’s full expression: *if you can, then you must*. This reflects both internal self-recognition and a desire for external affirmation.

Mica also expressed pride and a sense of achievement in having a job. When asked how she felt about her current job, Mica simply replied: “I’m very happy.”

Emma’s longevity in her role may be the ultimate expression of success at work. She had become part of a workplace and community that she loved. Similarly, Ajay’s fondness for his time in the sheltered workshop, and his deep sense of loss after leaving suggest that work had been an essential source of identity and belonging.

4.5.4 Earning and saving

Having a steady income allowed Lindell to substantially improve her quality of life, despite her job being casual and paying below minimum wage. Over the past year, she was able to afford:

- **Basic necessities**

Previously, Lindell would starve herself to save money. Only recently has she felt able to buy food regularly and eat more normally.

- **Health care**
She received dental treatment and addressed mobility issues. Lindell negotiated with her dentist to pay in \$500 increments and purchased custom insoles to alleviate foot pain and improve muscle strength.
- **Professional development**
She completed certificate courses in an area of interest, potentially opening new job opportunities.
- **Student loan repayments**
Lindell made significant progress on a long-standing debt that had caused her anxiety since 2015.

For Mica, earning her own money enabled her to save toward personal goals. She set up multiple savings accounts for travel, events, special purchases, and an emergency fund.

Even Grace and Chris, who were not currently working, responded enthusiastically to the idea of earning a living and having financial independence through employment.

4.6 Recognition

Gaining recognition and feeling valued often accompany experiences of self-efficacy and self-determination. These affirmations reinforce a sense of worth and belonging, as illustrated by participants and their families in the following comments.

[Mica is] *quite proud when you tell people that you've got a job and people are interested.*

Mica's mother

Similarly, Emma described how others' reactions to her job made her feel "special." When asked if this made her proud, she responded enthusiastically: "Yeah, yeah."

Emma's long-standing role at her school is considered extraordinary. Her father noted that her work identity is celebrated by colleagues, and she is affectionately known by a nickname that reflects her outgoing personality. This social recognition affirms Emma's place in the workplace and community.

4.6.1 Recognition through responsibility

Being entrusted with greater responsibility at work conveys deep recognition, far beyond casual encouragement or praise. This was evident in the experiences of some of the employed participants:

- **Lindell**, after years in the same role, was asked to train new employees. This came as a surprise, given her previous self-perception: "I didn't think I was very good at the job." The new responsibility not only acknowledged Lindell's capability but also boosted her confidence and encouraged personal growth, despite her habitual self-doubt.
- **Emma's** experience further exemplifies this. When the school lacked a dedicated librarian, she stepped in to maintain the library for several months. This demonstrated that Emma was trusted with significant responsibilities and viewed as a capable, integral member of the school community — not someone to be marginalised due to changing circumstances.

5 The prevalence of paid work

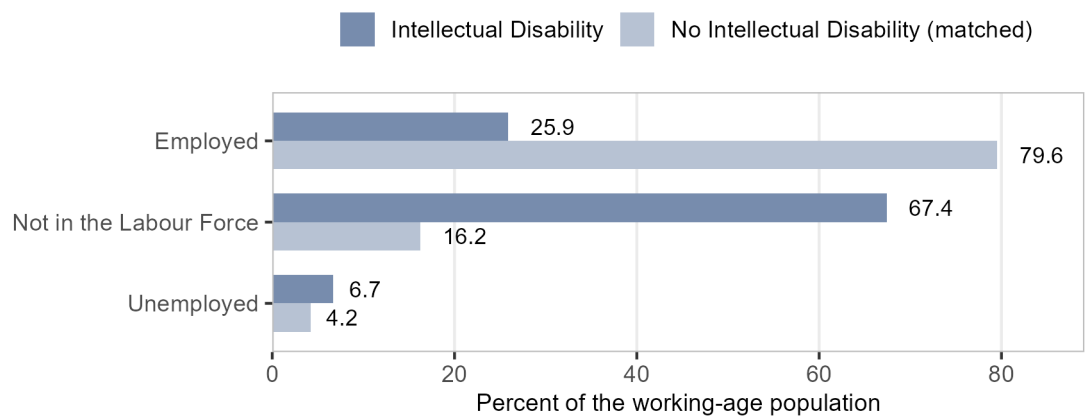
The previous section highlights the deeply personal and transformative value of work for individuals with intellectual disability, including the fulfilment of aspirations, and as a source of pride, autonomy, and recognition. In this section we situate these experiences within the broader social and economic context. Quantitative data reveals a stark disparity between the desire for meaningful employment and the actual prevalence of paid work among people with intellectual disabilities. The following section presents national statistics on work participation for the intellectually disabled community in Aotearoa.

The Household Labour Force Survey (HLFS) shows that a quarter of working-age people with intellectual disabilities are in paid employment. This highlights the active role people with intellectual disabilities play in the workforce, reinforcing the importance of inclusive employment opportunities. However, this is a long way off from reflecting an inclusive society as the employment rate of people with intellectual disabilities is much lower than that of the non-intellectually disabled population (25.9 percent compared to 79.6 percent).

Figure 1 shows the proportion of people by their labour force status (employed, un-employed and not in the labour force), for working-age people with and without intellectual disability. People with intellectual disabilities are much more likely than people without intellectual disabilities to be ‘not in the labour force’, 67.4 percent compared with 16.2 percent respectively.⁹ People classified in this category encompass a wide range of conditions, including those who have retired early, students not engaged in the labour market, parents engaged in full-time care of their children, and individuals who are permanently unable to work due to illness or disability. In the case of the intellectually disabled population, other factors such as inadequate vocational preparation, lack of workplace accommodations, transportation challenges, and persistent stigma may contribute to low confidence and discourage job-seeking.

⁹ People are considered to be unemployed if they are without a paid job, but are available for work, and have looked for a job in the past four weeks, while people who are not in the labour force report that they are not available for work or are not seeking work.

Figure 1 - Labour Force Status



Data source: HLFS 2016 to 2024
Note: People in the undetermined category were excluded and implicitly redistributed proportionally across other categories

In the next sections, we look in more detail firstly at people with intellectual disabilities in paid work and what facilitates their employment, and then at people with intellectual disabilities not in paid work and the barriers they face.

6 Intellectually disabled people in paid work

This section looks at people in paid work, and we compare the work situation of those with intellectual disability with those without.

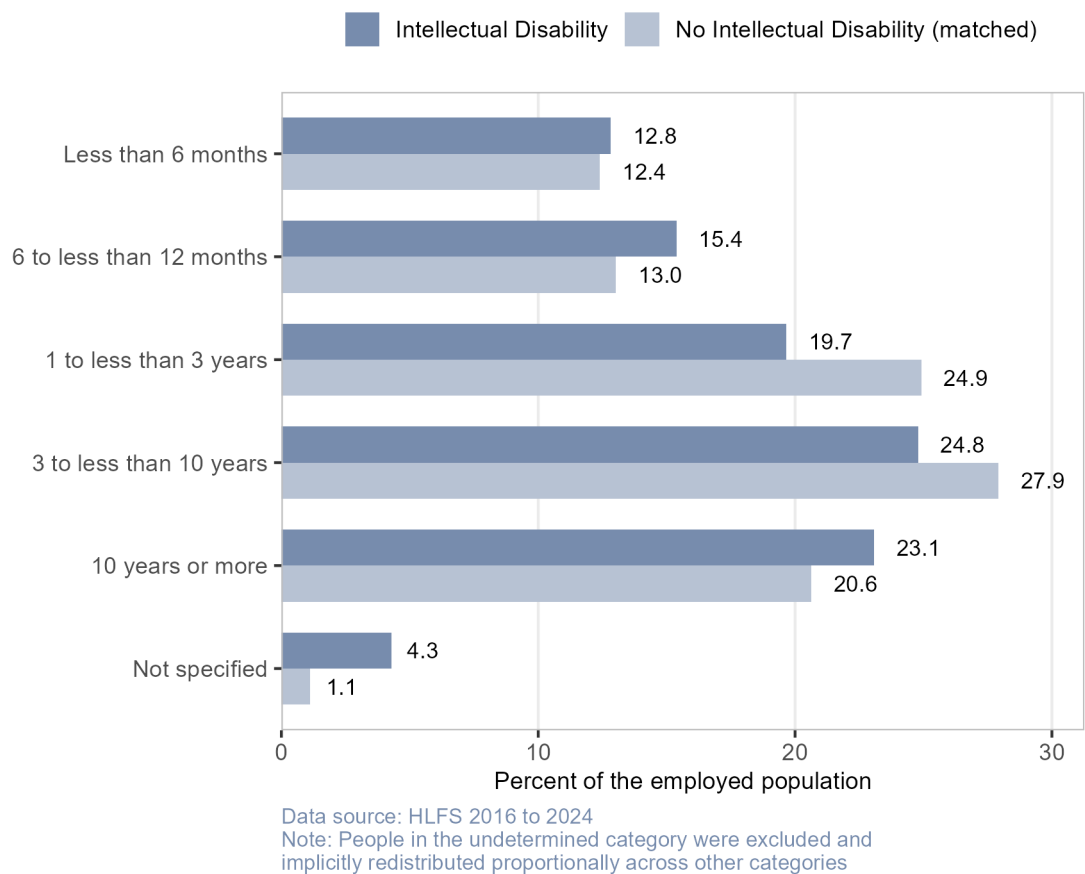
Most working adults in New Zealand hold only one job, and this is even more common among workers with intellectual disability. While 4.3 percent of workers with intellectual disability have more than one job, the figure is 6.8 percent for those without intellectual disability. The rest of this section refers to either the respondent's only job or the job they consider their main job.

6.1 Job stability: tenure and type of employment agreement

Data from the HLFS shows that 10 percent of people with intellectual disabilities in employment have casual or temporary jobs, compared with less than 1 percent of people without intellectual disability. In addition, 12.6 percent of people with intellectual disabilities are engaged in paid work without a formal employment agreement, compared to 4.8 percent of those without. These figures suggest that people with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be employed under less secure or informal arrangements, which may affect job stability and long-term employment outcomes.

Figure 2 shows the length of time people had been in their current job. It shows the percentage of people in different job tenure bands for people with and without intellectual disability. The data indicates that the largest proportion of both groups have been in their current job for between 3 and 10 years, making this is the most common tenure band overall. However, people with intellectual disabilities are slightly more likely than those without intellectual disability to have either very short tenure (less than one year) or very long tenure (10+ years). The presence of both short and long tenure may reflect a split between those in supported, stable roles and those in more precarious or transitional employment.

Figure 2 - Current job tenure of working-age people with and without intellectual disability



6.2 Job status

Part-time employment¹⁰ is significantly more common among people with intellectual disabilities, with 47.9 percent of those in employment working part-time compared to 16.2 percent of working people without intellectual disability.

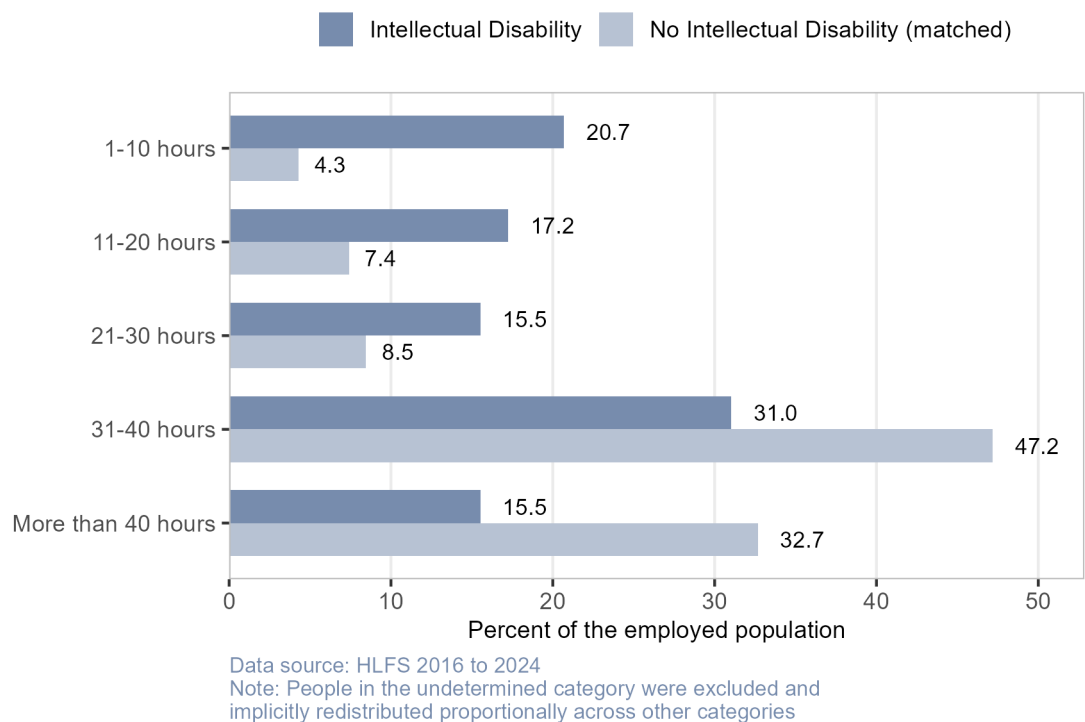
The distribution of usual weekly hours worked (shown in Figure 1) differs markedly between the two groups. While people without intellectual disability tend to be clustered around full-time hours (more than 30 hours per week), people with intellectual disabilities are more evenly spread across the range of weekly hours.

This flatter distribution may reflect greater variability in work arrangements, which could be shaped by the diverse needs of people with intellectual disabilities, as well as limited access to full-time

¹⁰ We follow Stats NZ definition of part-time employment as working less than 30 hours a week, differentiating it from full-time (30+ hours) for labour force statistics, based on International Labour Organization (ILO) standards.

employment. It highlights the importance of flexible and inclusive job opportunities that accommodate different capacities and preferences.

Figure 3 - Usual hours worked per week

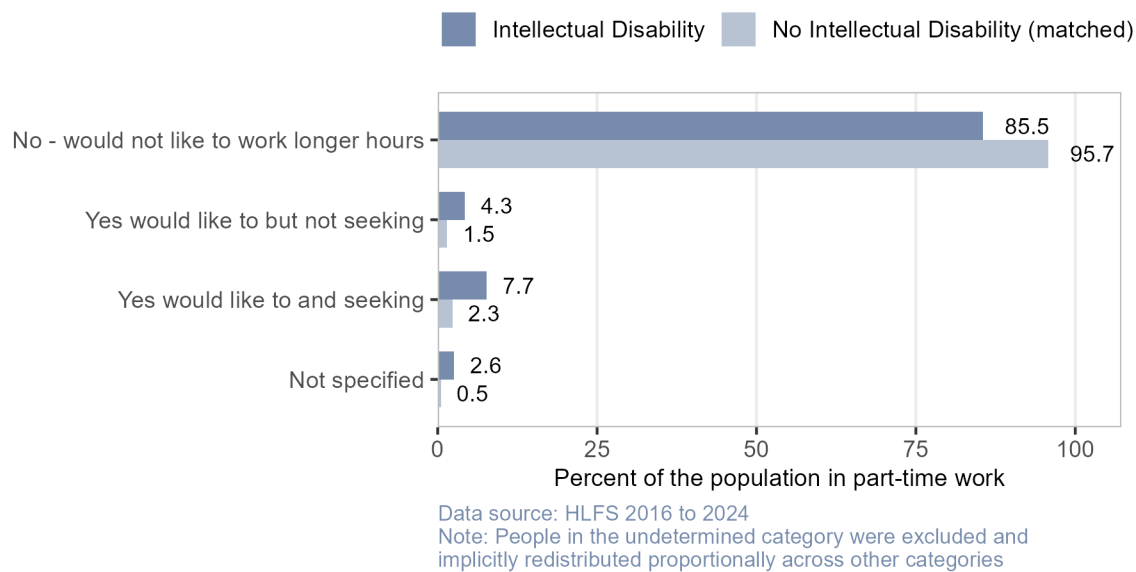


When asked about the possibility of working more hours, 24.0 percent of people with intellectual disabilities said they could and would prefer to work more hours compared with 12.0 percent of people without intellectual disability.

Analysing the answers to this question for those in part-time employment identifies the rates of underemployment. The rate of underemployment for people with intellectual disabilities is 12.0 percent compared with 3.8 percent for people without intellectual disability. Among those identified as underemployed, a similar proportion of people with intellectual disabilities are actively seeking additional work, 64.3 percent, compared to 61.4 percent of their non-intellectually disabled peers.

Figure 4 shows the proportion of people in part-time employment, broken down by whether they would prefer to work more hours and whether they are actively seeking additional work. Among those working part-time, people with intellectual disabilities are three times more likely to be looking for additional work, 7.7 percent compared to 2.3 percent for people without intellectual disability.

Figure 4 - Under-employment – Preference to work more hours and seeking further employment



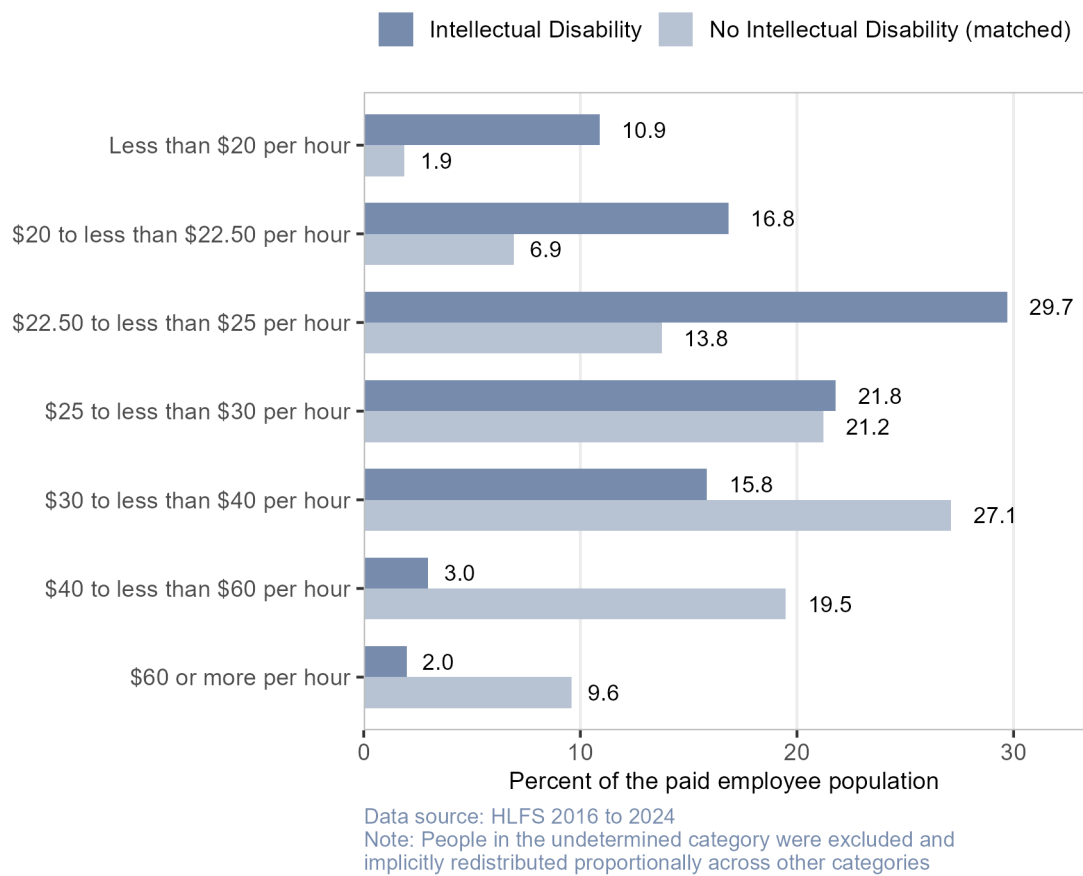
6.3 Earnings

People with intellectual disabilities are much more likely to work for lower hourly earnings compared with people without intellectual disability. More than half (57.4 percent) of paid employees¹¹ with intellectually disabilities earn less than \$25 per hour in 2024 dollars, compared to less than a quarter (22.6 percent) of the non-intellectually disabled counterparts. In addition, almost 20 percent (19.8 percent) of intellectual disabled paid employees reported earning a wage below the minimum wage rate at that time, compared to 4.5 percent of paid employees without intellectual disability.

Figure 5 shows the distribution of the paid employee population across hourly earnings bands for people with and without intellectual disability. It highlights the over-representation of people with intellectual disabilities in the lower earnings bands and their under-representation in the higher earnings bands.

¹¹ The paid employee population consists of individuals in the working-age population who work for one hour or more per week for pay or profit within an employer-employee relationship, it excludes self-employed.

Figure 5 - Real hourly earnings, adjusted to 2024 dollars (excludes self-employed)



6.4 Occupation

The HLFS collects data on occupation of those in paid work using the Australia and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupation (ANZSCO), allowing us to compare the occupation of working people with and without intellectual disability. Table 5 shows the definitions of the Major grouping that we used for this analysis.

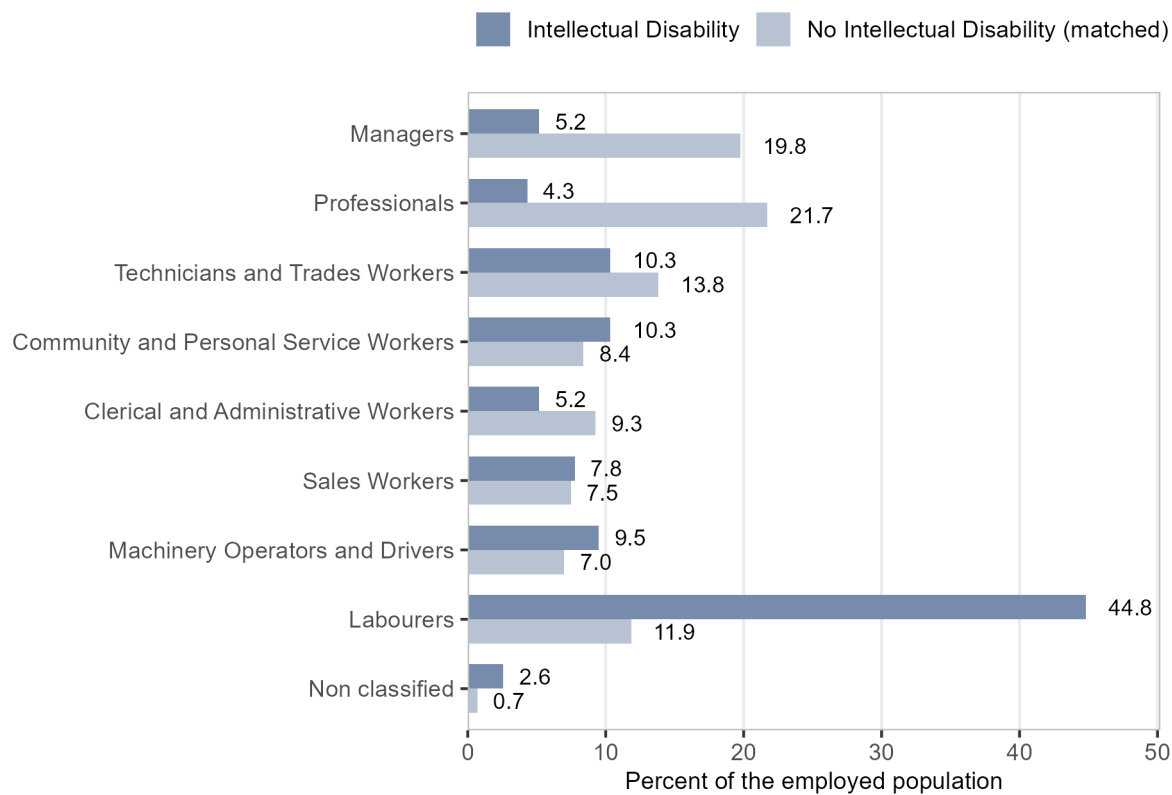
Table 5 - Descriptions of major ANZSCO groupings occupation groupings

Managers	Plan, organise, direct, control and coordinate operations of governments, enterprises and other organisations and organisational units within them. Managers have a high level of responsibility, accountability and knowledge within the organisational hierarchy and will typically have responsibility for and make decisions about the overall strategic and operational direction of the business, budgets, and selection, appointment and dismissal of staff.
Professionals	Perform analytical, conceptual and creative tasks through the application of theoretical knowledge and experience in the fields of the arts, media, business, design, engineering, the physical, social and life sciences, transport, education, health, ICT and the law

Technicians and Trades workers	Perform a variety of skilled tasks, applying broad or in-depth technical, trade or industry specific knowledge, often in support of scientific, engineering, building and manufacturing activities.
Community and Personal Service Workers	Provide services and support directly to the community in areas of aged care, disability support, social welfare, community development, education assistance, early childhood education and care, health assistance, defence, policing and emergency services, security, hospitality, travel and tourism, fitness, sport and personal services.
Clerical and Administrative Workers	Provide support to Managers, Professionals and organisations by organising, storing, manipulating and retrieving information.
Sales Workers	Sell goods, services and property, and provide sales support in areas such as operating cash registers and displaying and demonstrating goods.
Machinery Operators and Drivers	Operate machines, plant, vehicles and other equipment to perform a range of agricultural, manufacturing and construction functions, handle and move materials, and transport passengers and freight.
Labourers	Perform a variety of routine and repetitive physical tasks using hand and power tools and machines, either as an individual or as part of a team assisting more skilled workers such as Trades Workers, and Machinery Operators and Drivers.

Figure 6 shows the distribution of people working across different occupational groups, comparing those with and without intellectual disability. People with intellectual disabilities are significantly more likely to work as Labourers compared to those without intellectual disability. As explained in Table 5, Labourers include occupations where “workers perform a variety of routine and repetitive physical tasks using hand and power tools and machines, either as individuals or as part of a team assisting more skilled workers such as Trades Workers and Machinery Operators and Drivers.” Other occupations where people with intellectual disabilities are over-represented, though to a lesser extent, include Machinery Operators and Drivers, Sales Workers, and Community and Personal Service Workers. On the other hand, they are much less likely to be employed as Professionals or Managers.

Figure 6 – Occupation



Data source: HLFS 2016 to 2024
Note: People in the undetermined category were excluded and implicitly redistributed proportionally across other categories

6.5 Industry

Although the HLFS does not collect sufficient information to categorise the industry that people with intellectual disabilities work in at any level of detail, this information can be analysed using administrative data from the Inland Revenue available in the IDI. Figure 7 shows the distribution of working people in Aotearoa with and without intellectual disability by the industry type they work in.¹² The four industries that employs the highest percentages of people with intellectual disabilities are:

- Administrative and Support Services,
- Retail Trade,
- Health Care and Social Assistance, and
- Manufacturing.

When compared with the distribution of working non-intellectual disabled population, workers with intellectual disability are more likely to be employed in:

¹² Industry is classified using the Australia New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC).

- Administrative and Support Services,
- Retail Trade,
- Accommodation and Food Services,
- Health Care and Social Assistance,
- Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing, and
- Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services.

Darryl
Darryl Smith
IHC Art Awards 2025



Figure 7 – Industry type (ANZSIC division)

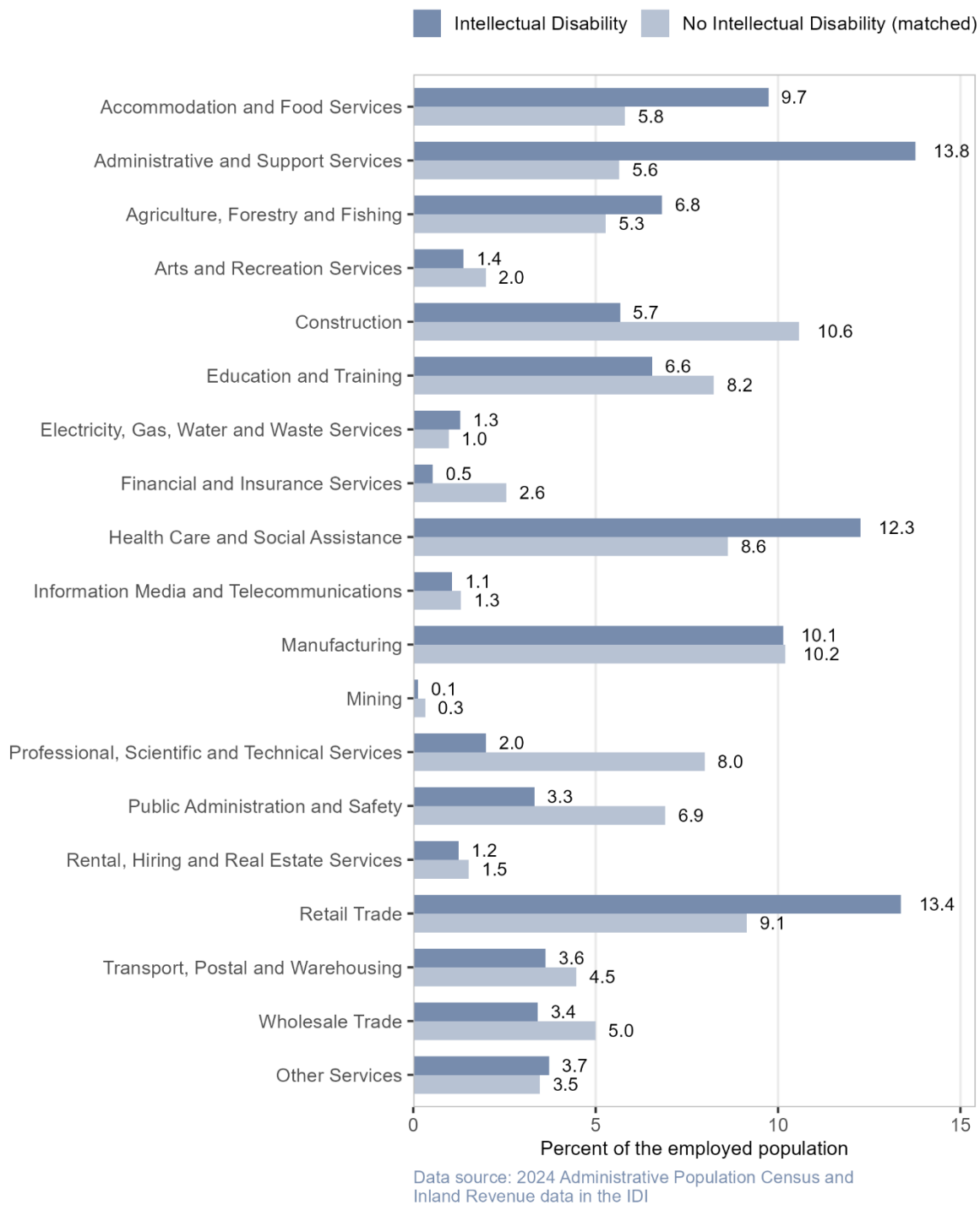
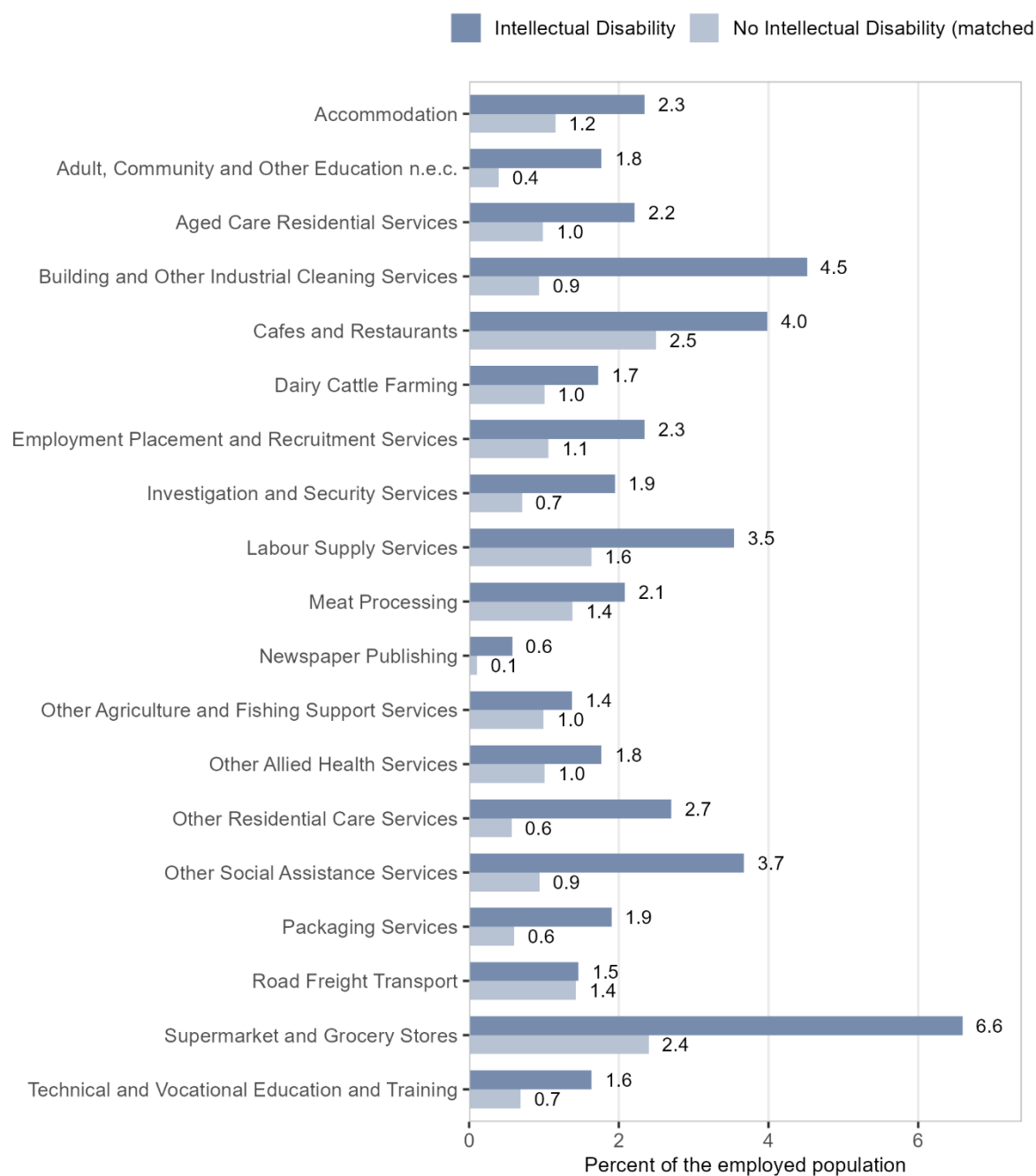


Figure 8 presents results by a more detailed industry classification and focuses on those industries that disproportionately employ people with intellectual disabilities. The data shows that the industry group comprising Supermarkets and Grocery Stores is the most likely to employ people with intellectual disabilities, making up 6.6 percent of the employment of people with intellectual disabilities, compared to 2.4 percent for non-intellectually disabled people. Other industries in which people with intellectual disabilities commonly work are Building and Other Industrial Cleaning Services, and Cafes and Restaurants.

Figure 8 - Detailed industry type (only selected industries with greatest intellectually disabled representation)



Data source: 2024 Administrative Population Census and Inland Revenue data in the IDI
Note: Other industries are excluded. Excluded categories represent 51.9% of ID employment and 79.5 percent of non-ID employment.

7 Enablers of employment

Paid work for people with intellectual disabilities is enabled by a society in which whānau, employers, and support services work together to support individuals throughout the employment pathway. The in-depth interviews identified four significant enablers of employment:

- Facilitated access to job opportunities, or effective pathways to employment
- Conducive work environment
- Supporting and responsive working conditions
- Values-driven employers who operate a positive discrimination or targeted employment regime

Taken together, these elements are active ingredients for the EGL “Person-centred” principle¹³, with respect to employment:

“Disabled people have supports that are tailored to their individual needs and goals, and that take a whole life approach rather than being split across programmes.”

7.1 Facilitated access and transition to employment

Ajay, the oldest of the interview participants, had a notably positive experience transitioning from school to work in the late 1970s, facilitated entirely by IHC. His brother explained that Ajay attended special education from a young age and later an IHC-run day base “five days a week” that was “like a school.” From there, Ajay moved into an IHC sheltered workshop, which he enjoyed. Transport was provided by IHC and supplemented by his brother, making the process seamless. As previously mentioned, at the time sheltered workshops operated under exemption from standard wages and employment conditions. They were increasingly seen as inconsistent with human rights law and the principles of the UNCRPD and in 2007 the repeal of Disabled Persons Employment Promotion Act signalled the closure of sheltered workshops as they were.

Most other participants described far more fragmented and uncertain pathways to employment.

The support of a highly skilled champion was crucial for Mica finding employment. Insights from conversations with Mica, her mother, and caregiver highlight key attributes of an effective employment facilitator within organisations such as IHC:

- Attends events where prospective job seekers with intellectual disabilities are present
- Actively seeks and engages work-ready candidates
- Follows up promptly after initial contact

¹³ Enabling Good Lives. (n.d.). Principles. Enabling Good Lives. Retrieved August 25, 2025, from <https://www.enablinggoodlives.co.nz/about-egl/egl-approach/principles/>

- Leverages professional networks to identify suitable roles
- Matches candidates to specific job opportunities
- Provides support and guidance in preparing for interviews

Mica experienced a considered and effective transition into her current permanent role. Her caregiver provided supplementary support to help Mica adjust to the role until it became evident that her colleagues and the organisation's systems and culture were sufficient.

I was initially coming in as [on the job] support because that's when my hours with Mica were. But after being there for probably only about two or three weeks, we decided I wasn't really necessary because you're doing really well, and there was really good support in the office.

Mica's caregiver

7.2 Value-driven employers

Mica was employed by an organisation that has long-term staff with disabilities, signalling an intentionally inclusive workplace. Similarly, Ajay benefited from targeted employment programmes run by IHC decades earlier.

7.3 Conducive work environment

People with intellectual disabilities in the workplace benefit from the same things as the general population: a job that match one's skills, flexible conditions, sufficient and appropriate supervision and responsive culture.

7.3.1 Suitable work

Three of the four employed participants held jobs that involved manageable and satisfying duties and tasks, allowing them to make the most of their abilities and providing a sense of accomplishment. Three of the four employed participants also had jobs that matched their abilities and interests, providing a sense of accomplishment.

Emma, for example, held two roles: teaching assistant, which entailed supporting teachers with organisation and daily tasks, and library assistant, which involved maintaining the library's operations. She found great satisfaction in helping students return their books and assisting with a programme that teaches children how to grow and cook their own food. These practical tasks and responsibilities, and the social nature of these activities, really suited her. When directly asked about her work, Emma emphatically stated:

I really like my job.

Emma

Robert is doing his dream job; one he's wanted to do since he was a teenager after participating in an IHC-run school programme.

The nature of Mica's job is also a perfect fit for her dispositions, as it's very social and communication-centred.

Task selection was also a crucial consideration for Ajay during his time at the IHC sheltered workshop, to ensure that the work was suitable and satisfying for him.

7.3.2 Sufficient and appropriate supervision

Most participants relied on tailored supervision to maintain employment. It is important that this supervision was sensitive to the workers' disposition and needs, including ensuring a good match between their abilities and preferences and allocated job tasks and work duration. Another supervision consideration is flexibility – being able and willing to intensify or relax guidance and encouragement depending on the intellectually disabled worker's response to a given task or situation.

During periods when Chris had part-time work, it was imperative that a dedicated person be available to help him stay on task and to moderate potentially fractious interactions with others. This extended to selecting and changing activities or work areas to maximise engagement and satisfaction and minimise frustration and dysregulation.

Supervision also has a key role in keeping people safe, as Chris's situation indicates. In another example, Grace's mother reluctantly terminated a work placement because she felt Grace was left unsupervised in a situation where she was vulnerable to ill-intentioned advances of strangers.

7.3.3 Responsive work culture

Reasonable accommodation is a key concept in the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It is the practice of making changes that support disabled people to live their lives on an equitable basis with others. Work accommodations create equitable opportunities, reduce barriers and allow individuals to perform their jobs on an equal basis with others. In accordance with the convention, discrimination based on disability includes the denial of reasonable accommodations. The receipt of workplace accommodations is shown to play a significant role in the employment of people with disabilities (Anand & Sevak, 2017).

Some of the participants described instances where work accommodations facilitated their participation in paid work.

Emma's father noted that alongside well-matched tasks, the school provided her with clear and easy-to-follow instructions and consistent routines.

She is very assisted with detail, which means, of course, that many of the library duties are absolutely right up her alley. And the requirements in terms of the technical competence, she easily meets those. The computer system [at] the school is set up so kids can actually issue books out as well.

Emma's father

One of Robert's employers made various accommodations to enable Robert to do a range of tasks, including working as a checkout operator.

Told [the supermarket manager] that [if] I go to checkout, help me with money side of things. "Okay. We get someone to help you with that". [They put a] sign in the front of the checkout, "keep patient for the guy learning how to operate, got little special need to." [sic]

Robert

We have one participant example that highlights the potential benefits of assistive technologies. Emma used a computer from a young age, which would have positioned her well for her later work life.

The software on [the laptop we bought her] was something called Write Out Loud. And there was a small inkjet printer, and she would do the schoolwork on the laptop...So where there were errors in terms of her spelling or grammar, it would prompt her, but the teacher aide would work with that. But that meant that her competency wasn't reduced because she couldn't write quickly with a pencil or a pen and paper. So that was a really good use of assistive technology.

Emma's father

Mica's team recognised that she needed support with tasks, noting that if she's doing the same task repeatedly, she might get distracted. They determined she would consequently benefit from the following accommodations:

- Taking breaks
- Having variety in tasks
- Gaining additional support

7.3.4 Supportive work culture

Beyond formal supervision and work accommodations, participants recalled informal supports that enabled them to navigate their work obligations, underscoring the value of an inclusive workplace culture.

Mica's experience of effective workplace support involved a workmate:

- Writing scripts to help her interact with people
- Accompanying Mica and providing encouragement when she asked for donations in community settings
- Offering guidance on how to explain things to people.

Emma enjoyed good relationships with colleagues, who she described as calm, good listeners, and supportive. Knowing Emma well, they provide ample encouragement and are on hand to knowledgeably and sensitively mediate when issues arise. For example, Emma can be disconcerted or become agitated by changes in routine or when confronted with a challenging social exchange with students.



Beautiful Bird at the Window

Theresa Hemming

IHC Art Awards 2025

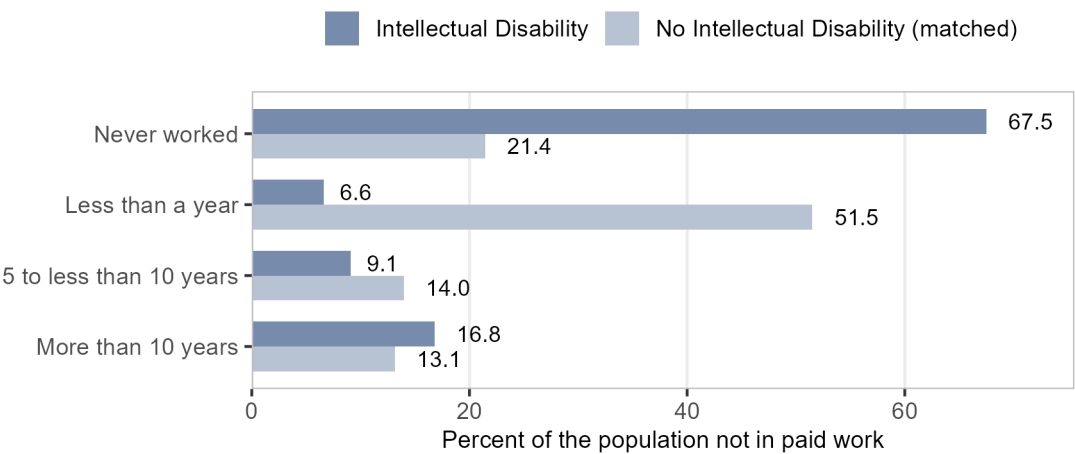
8 About those who do not work

This section looks at the 76.9 percent of people with intellectual disabilities who are not in paid work at presents findings on their situation, reasons and motivations.

8.1 Duration without paid employment

Figure 9 presents the time individuals currently not in employment have been without paid work. Among the intellectually disabled population not in employment, 67.4 percent have never done paid work. This is significantly higher than the 21.4 percent observed in the matched population without intellectual disability.

Figure 9 - Time out of paid work

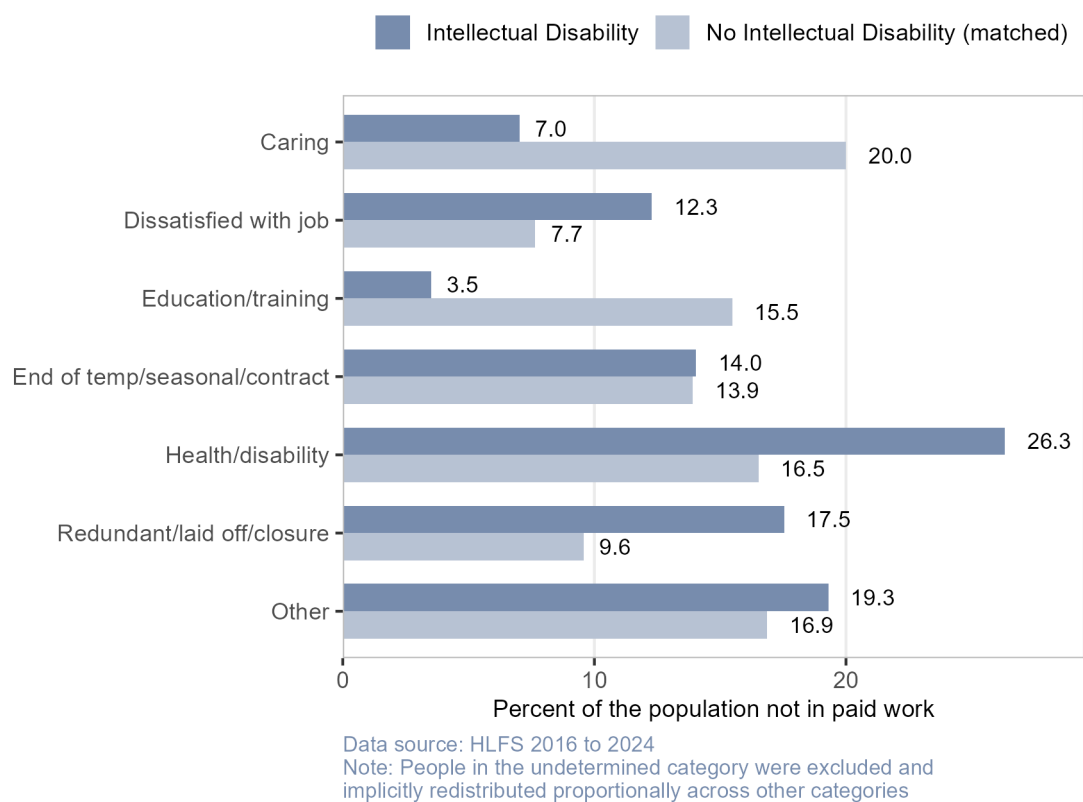


Data source: HLFS 2016 to 2024
Note: People in the undetermined category were excluded and implicitly redistributed proportionally across other categories

8.2 Reason for leaving

For those who had previously been in paid employment, there are a variety of reason for leaving their paid job (see Figure 10). People with intellectual disabilities are almost twice as likely to leave their job because of redundancy, lay-off or closure than the matched non-intellectually disabled population. Compared with the matched population they are also much more likely to leave their job because of health or disability, or because they are dissatisfied with the job.

Figure 10 - Reason for leaving paid work



8.3 Employment intentions

The survey results show that 18.7 percent of intellectually disabled individuals who are not currently working said that they could start work if a job were available. This compares with 33.6 percent of the matched population without intellectual disability. A similar proportion, 18.9 percent, intend to look for work within the next two years, but only 11.8 percent have done so in the past four weeks. These figures are considerably lower than those for the matched non-intellectually disabled population, where 61.2 percent intend to seek work within the next two years and 25.1 percent have done so in the past four weeks.

8.4 Reasons for not working or looking for work

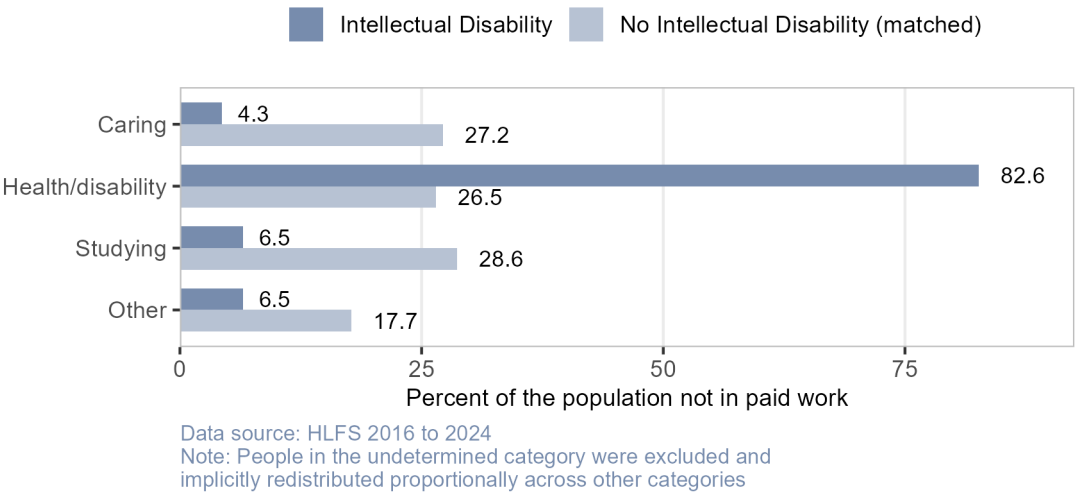
When asked why they are not available to work, the majority of people with intellectual disabilities, 82.6 percent, give health or disability as the reason (see Figure 11). However, confirming previous research, a 2025 literature review (Meares, 2024) highlights that employment for disabled people is often limited not by ability, but by:

- technology, systems and processes,
- employer and co-worker attitudes,
- lack of enabling supports, and
- challenging industry-specific norms.

This suggests that people with intellectual disabilities may have internalised these external barriers as inherent limitations of their disability. Another possibility is that another household member may have completed the survey on behalf of the person with an intellectual disability and provided assumed responses¹⁴.

The data also shows that only 6.5 percent of working-age intellectually disabled are not working because of they are studying, compared to 28.6 percent of the matched population without intellectual disability. This highlights a diminished opportunity for education and training among people with intellectual disabilities.

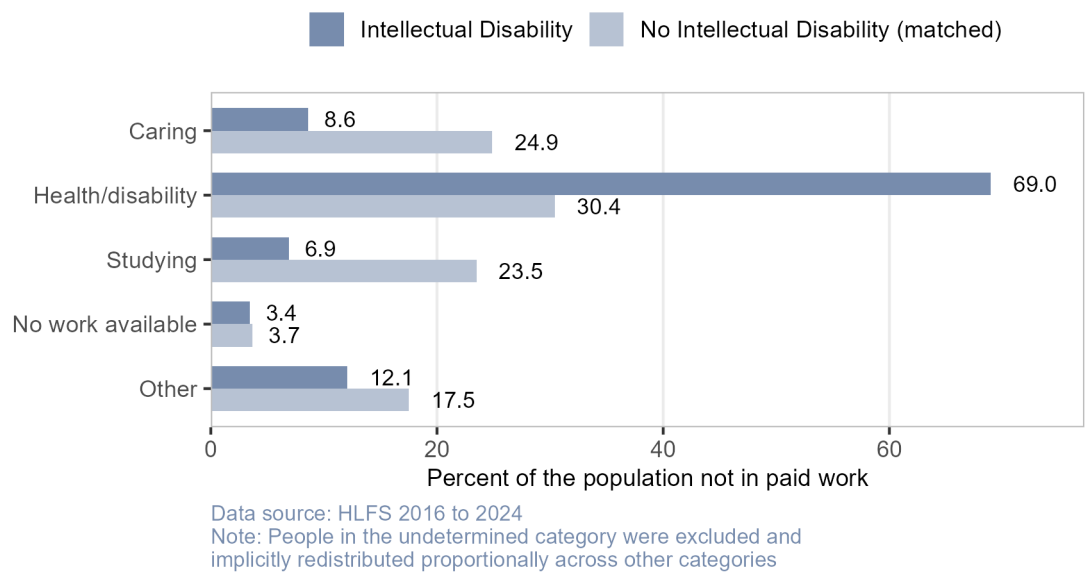
Figure 11 - Reason for not being available to work



Among those not in paid employment and not seeking employment, the main reason people with intellectual disabilities give for not currently looking for a job is again health or disability (Figure 12). This is the case for 69.0 percent of the intellectually disabled population, compared to just 30.4 percent of the matched non-intellectually disabled population. This large disparity provides further evidence of internalised limitations associated with disability, commonly referred to as internalised ableism, which is widely documented in disability studies (Campbell, 2009).

¹⁴ “The HLFS/Income allows interviewers to take responses from proxies if a respondent is unavailable or unable to answer the questions themselves.” - <https://www.stats.govt.nz/methods/household-labour-force-survey-sources-and-methods/>

Figure 12 - Reason for not looking for work

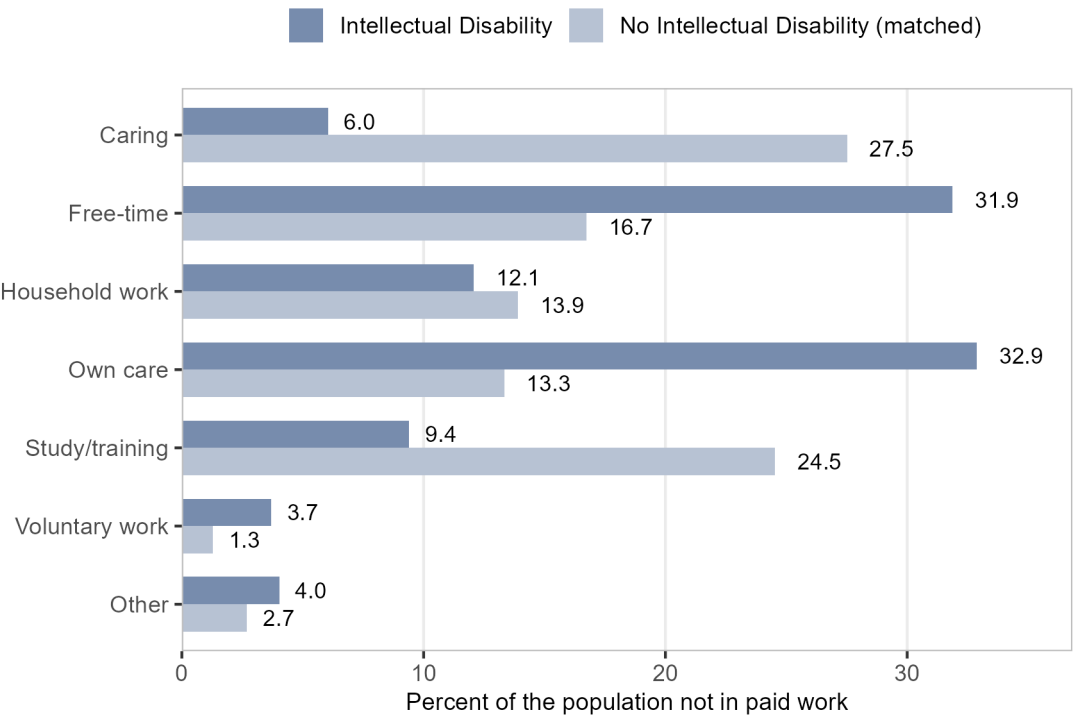


8.5 Main activity for those not in the labour force

Figure 13 reports on the main weekly activity of people not in the labour force. Among people with intellectual disabilities who are not in the labour force, around one-third report ‘own care’ as their main weekly activity, and another third report ‘free time’. Compared to the matched population of people without intellectual disability not in the labour force, they are more than two and a half times more likely to report ‘own care’, and almost twice as likely to report ‘free time’.

This pattern suggests that people with intellectual disabilities may be engaging in daily activities that reflect limited access to structured opportunities, such as education, employment, or community programs.

Figure 13 - Main activity of those not in the labour force



Data source: HLFS 2016 to 2024
Note: People in the undetermined category were excluded and implicitly redistributed proportionally across other categories



Bloom
Shafiq Sos
IHC Art Awards 2025

9 Barriers to employment

This section presents findings from in-depth interviews on barriers to paid work for people with intellectual disabilities. Participants identified multiple, often interrelated factors contributing to low or declining employment prospects, including:

- Inadequate preparation and transition to work
- Unsuitable or aversive work environments
- Insufficient workplace support
- Systemic discrimination

9.1 Inadequate employment preparation and transition to work

Most participants reported that schooling and employment programs failed to prepare them for paid work. Three recurrent themes emerged:

- lack of awareness and recognition of individual needs,
- limited effectiveness of employment support services, and
- unsupportive systems.

Collectively, these factors contribute to what can be described as an ‘unresponsive employment system’.

9.1.1 Lack of awareness and recognition of individual needs

Lindell’s experience illustrates how the lack of awareness that comes with delayed diagnosis can begin at home and persist through education and employment services:

...they didn't know I was autistic. I didn't know I was autistic! [At school], if they'd known I was autistic, perhaps I could have got more help...

Lindell

This lack of recognition continued in interactions with employment services. Lindell faced significant pressure from Work and Income, who often told her she was “not working hard enough” despite her efforts. Her partner noted:

None of Work and Income’s resources were really tailored to her being disabled and undiagnosed.

Lindell’s partner

9.1.2 Limited effectiveness of employment support services

Despite having a well-intentioned case manager, Lindell found Work and Income's support ineffective and highlighted the absence of networking opportunities and practical guidance. Ultimately, she secured part-time work through a personal connection rather than formal support.

I went through their job-seeking thing that was supposed to help you, and even for artsy people. I went there for a little bit, and I never got a job out of that.

Lindell

Mica also had a similar experience with an employment agency she was with for "probably four or five years", according to her mother "Not much had come out of that".

9.2 Unsuitable or aversive environments

Participants emphasised the importance of job-person fit and elaborated on the challenge of finding suitable work.

It was quite hard to come by anything that had the right number of hours, was sort of the right distance away, had some support in the workplace for people with disabilities.

Mica's mother

Lindell reported that her current role is stressful due to noise and poor alignment with her skills but "it was just the only job I could get".

9.3 Insufficient workplace support

Workplaces frequently lacked the adaptive structures and resources, and initial support often diminished over time, making job retention difficult.

For example, Mica's first job began with good support but later shifted to a much more hands-off approach, making it untenable.

It was very much left to Mica to do it. You might have been better with someone alongside ...and so [job] just sort of dissolved a bit at the end.

Mica's mother

Chris's frustration led to behavioural outbursts that required intensive oversight, reducing his employability, a circular problem. The closure of sheltered workshops and employment programmes in the early 2000s had a profound effect on older participants. Ajay has not been employed since.

The workshop closed down for good...can't find any more. Everybody came home [i.e., became unemployed].

Ajay

Sometimes the lack of structure to provide support acts as a deterrent when looking for jobs:

She needs supervision, and that's the problem when we try and get jobs.

Grace's mother

Grace has an excellent memory and has succeeded in and enjoyed highly procedural work. Arguably, she would have gained more regular employment if the work settings had offered closer supervision.

Work placements can become unattainable if the supports are not maintained. For example, Mica's first job ended when support diminished:

As the support fell away, so did Mica's ability to keep on task.

Mica's mother

9.3.1 Supporting capability challenges

Participants described difficulties with literacy, memory, and applying learning in real-world contexts. For example, Grace's mother explained that despite excelling in a first aid course, Grace could not recognise an emergency situation requiring immediate intervention. Ajay, while diligent and multilingual, cannot read or communicate easily with unfamiliar people. Emotional regulation challenges, such as Chris's frustration-driven outbursts, further reduced employability.

Although these challenges can be managed, systemic barriers and insufficient workplace support severely limit employment options.

9.3.2 Supporting changing needs

Employment sustainability is influenced by multiple factors, including age, health, type of disability, job requirements, self-confidence, and available support. People with intellectual disabilities often experience age-related health issues earlier than the general population, which further affects work capacity.

Emma's father noted her diminishing adaptability due to dementia, stressing the need for consistent support across home and workplace settings. This raises larger questions about the need and provision of individualised or tailored care, which extends to workplace support for those with intellectual disability.

9.4 Systemic discrimination

Three forms of systemic discrimination were identified: unaware, deliberate, and global.

- **Unaware**

Lindell's experience reflects the unaware form, where hidden disabilities lead to misinterpretation as laziness.

- **Deliberate**

Emma experienced deliberate systemic discrimination when applying for library work after

completing her polytechnic course. Despite successfully completing a work placement, she was told by a council library manager that there was “no place for disabled staff.” At the time, the New Zealand Disability Strategy had not been launched, and even after its release, it lacked mandatory employment targets, leaving Emma and others with intellectual disabilities facing significant barriers.

- **Global**

This form affects people who are least aligned with social norms, as the following examples show. Chris struggles with emotional regulation, and can appear belligerent and unmanageable, requiring close and understanding supervision. Ajay cannot read and has trouble making himself understood by unfamiliar people, despite being multilingual and having a good memory. Grace who is considered vulnerable to mistreatment without trusted supervision due to her ungaurded and suggestable nature.



10 Impacts of insufficient employment

In previous section we reported on the value of work, recalling what the interviewed participants told us about their perceived benefits of paid work. In this section we report on the impacts that insufficient employment can have on people with intellectual disabilities.

10.1 Under-stimulation and uncertainty

Loss of employment often led to reduced social contact and a lack of meaningful activity. Ajay's brother explained:

He probably misses more of the social contact... He likes making cups of tea and loading the dishwasher with other people. It just gives them a sense of belonging.

Ajay's brother

Ajay also expressed frustration with daily uncertainty and the absence of structured tasks:

...the workshop closed down, everybody stay home now... I don't know what we gonna do... I've not got the new task yet... I had to find another job for me.

Ajay

10.2 Financial Insecurity and dependency

Before recently achieving a modicum of financial stability, Lindell faced severe hardship and continued to worry about the future:

Financial stability, how on earth would I get that?... just trying to move house, balance finances and food... How would I get a new job?

Lindell

Low wages and limited opportunities left many participants reliant on family support, creating stress for both parties. Lindell felt unable to move out, while Grace's mother described conflicting emotions, wanting independence for her daughter while fearing for her safety.

I so want her to go on the bus to work... I think it would be the making of her. If she could get away from us [and live] independently, her confidence...

Grace's mother

Grace's family worked with a NASC worker to transition her from volunteering to paid work, but progress was slow.

We needed to give them this whole year to get to know Grace... The big picture is to transition out of volunteering to a part-time job.

Grace's mother

Despite these efforts, Grace's mother acknowledged the likelihood of long-term care:

She's going to need to go on to respite care full-time when I'm older... Or if anything happens to me or my husband.

Grace's mother

These challenges were compounded by other family pressures and health concerns, leading to feelings of despair:

We'll have to work till we're 70 to look after our children.

Grace's mother

10.3 Marginalisation and Diminished Self-Worth

Lack of employment was closely linked to feelings of low self-worth. Lindell described the demoralising experience of repeated job rejections.

You just put yourself through the application process, ... just to get rejected all the time.

Lindell

Emma's father highlighted research showing that unemployment and ageing can erode self-belief, an issue beyond the scope of this study but critical for future exploration.

10.4 Declining Wellbeing

Prolonged inactivity also affected physical health. Ajay's sister-in-law noted:

We just worry about [Ajay] keeping healthy... Otherwise, if you sit down and do nothing...

Ajay's sister-in-law

11 Health outcomes and employment

The data available in the IDI provided an opportunity to analyse the relationship between employment and health outcomes for the intellectually disabled population. Figure 14 compares health outcomes for the working-age intellectually disabled population with and without employment.

Age-adjusted rates show that working-age people with intellectual disabilities who are employed generally have better health outcomes than those who are not employed. This is partly explained by the fact that poor physical or mental health can be a barrier to paid work. However, research also indicates that employment can support better health outcomes (Waddell & Burton, 2006).

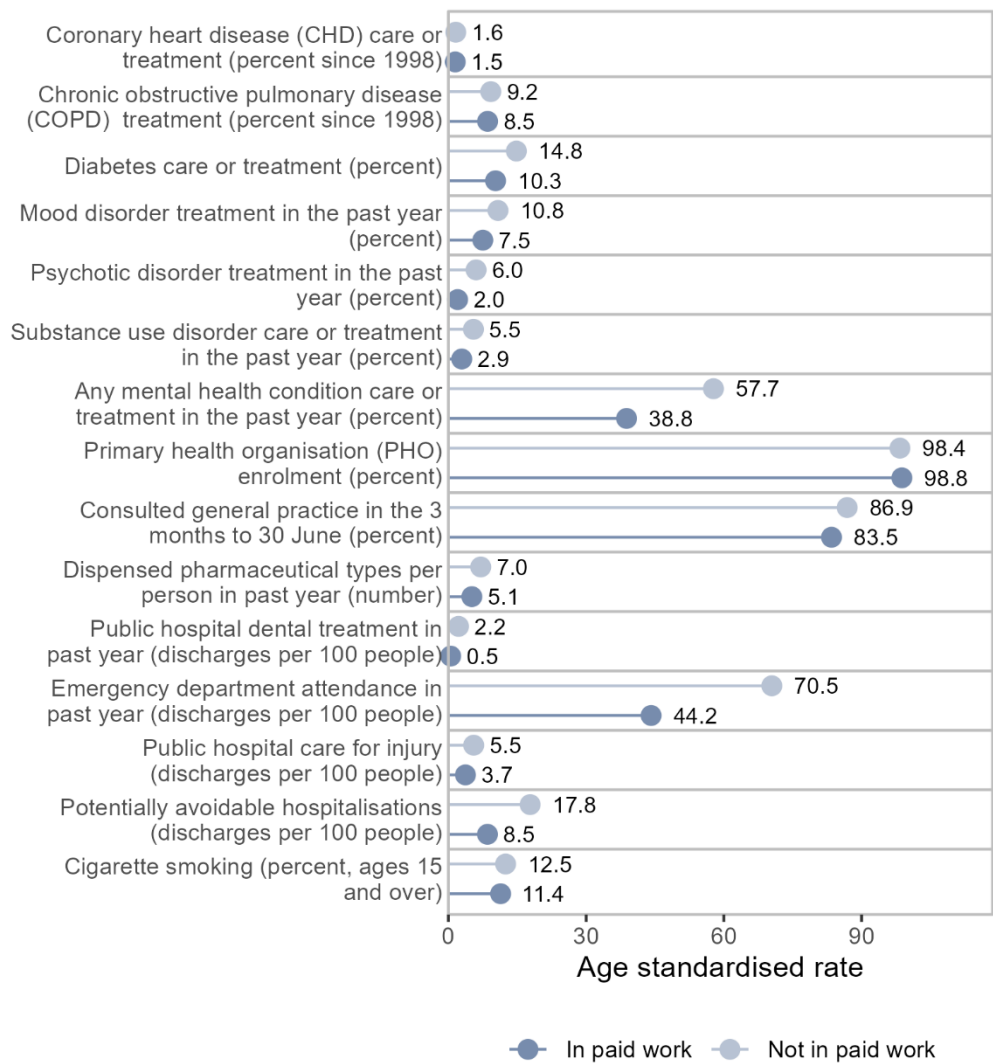
Among the working-age intellectually disabled population, indicators of primary health service use are slightly higher for those not in employment. People not in paid work are about 1.5 times more likely to have visited an emergency department in the past year, been hospitalised for injury, lodged an ACC claim, or experienced a potentially avoidable hospitalisation compared to those in employment.

People with intellectual disabilities in paid work are also less likely to smoke and less likely to have quit smoking in the past year than their peers who are not in paid work.



Elephants
Kerry Poff
IHC Art Awards 2025

Figure 14 - Age-standardised health measures for people with intellectual disabilities by employment status



Data source: 2023 Administrative Population Census, Health and Inland Revenue data in the IDI

12 Profile of those at work

Employment sustainability for people with intellectual disabilities depends on both individual factors, such as skills and experience, and broader influences like societal attitudes and welfare systems. It must therefore be understood at personal, environmental, and societal levels (Taubner, Tideman, & Staland-Nyman, 2023). This section reports on factors that increase the likelihood of employment in the New Zealand context, drawing on quantitative data and insights from in-depth interviews.

12.1 Demographic characteristics associated with employment

We used statistical modelling to identify characteristics associated with employment among the working-age intellectually disabled population. Our analysis considered multiple characteristics at once, including age, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, socio-economic deprivation (New Zealand Deprivation Index), and population density.

We used the APC study population because it provides a large dataset suitable for robust analysis. The HLFS population, although smaller, was used to validate the APC results.

Table 6 presents the results of the statistical model using the APC population. The significance level indicates which characteristics, and their respective values, are significantly associated with employment. The estimate shows the direction and magnitude of that association compared to other values within the same characteristic. The results of the model using the HLFS population are documented in Appendix 1.

The model concluded that, within the intellectual disabled working-age population, the demographic characteristics associated with a higher likelihood for employment are:

- Being male
- Being 25-34 years
- Being of European or 'Other' ethnicity group (where other means not being Māori, Pacific, Asian or of people of Middle Eastern, Latin American, or African descent)
- Living in a less deprived area according to the NZ Deprivation Index.

People with intellectual disabilities were also more likely to be employed in 2022 and 2023 than in other years. With the exception of the South Island outside Canterbury, which showed a slightly higher prevalence of intellectually disabled employment, we found no evidence that employment likelihood is linked to specific geographical areas in Aotearoa, or their rurality.

Table 6 - Regression analysis results: Modelling employment status for people with intellectual disabilities in the APC population between 2016 and 2024

Parameter	Estimate	Standard Error	Significance (*)
Intercept	-1.2547	0.0531	
<i>Year</i>			
2016	0	0	
2017	0.0401	0.011	**
2018	0.0715	0.0127	***
2019	0.0669	0.014	
2020	-0.0193	0.0147	
2021	0.0415	0.0155	*
2022	0.1445	0.0161	***
2023	0.1319	0.0163	***
2024	0.038	0.017	
<i>Age Group</i>			
18-19	-0.5537	0.0349	***
20-24	-0.0457	0.0279	
25-29	0.0722	0.0248	*
30-34	0.0601	0.0202	*
35-39	0	0	
40-44	-0.0701	0.0219	*
45-49	-0.22	0.0277	***
50-54	-0.3939	0.0305	***
55-59	-0.6073	0.0343	***
60-64	-0.9533	0.0424	***
<i>Ethnic group</i>			
European	0.2561	0.0418	***
Non-European	0	0	
Māori	-0.1764	0.0383	***
Non-Māori	0	0	
Pacific	-0.0937	0.0519	
Non-Pacific	0	0	
Asian	-0.1771	0.071	
Non-Asian	0	0	
MELAA	-0.2406	0.1465	
Non-MELAA	0	0	
Other	0.3186	0.1136	
Non-Other	0	0	
<i>Gender</i>			
Female	-0.4252	0.0258	
Male	0	0	
<i>NZ Deprivation Index Decile</i>			
1-5	0.0469	0.0178	*
6-8	0	0	
9&10	-0.0593	0.0167	**
Missing	-1.0186	0.5531	
<i>Region</i>			

Parameter	Estimate	Standard Error	Significance (*)
Auckland	0	0	
Wellington	-0.0276	0.0439	
Other North Island	-0.0083	0.0318	
Other South Island	0.1713	0.0439	***
Canterbury	0.0059	0.0425	
Missing	0.1815	0.6255	
<i>Urban/Rural</i>			
Main urban	0	0	
Secondary/Minor urban	0.0386	0.0219	
Rural	-0.0408	0.0275	
Missing	0	0	

(*) Significance level: *** Highly significant (0.1 percent level), ** Very Significant (1 percent level), * Significant (5 percent level)

These findings suggest that employment among the intellectually disabled working-age population is influenced primarily by demographic factors rather than geographic or socio-economic conditions. The higher likelihood of employment for males, individuals aged 25–34, and those identifying as European or ‘Other’ ethnicity indicates potential disparities that may warrant targeted support for other groups, such as women, younger or older individuals, and Māori, Pacific, and Asian communities.

12.2 Other factors associated with employment

The in-depth interviews reveal insights that extend beyond what the quantitative data show. They highlight two key factors that distinguish participants with paid employment from those with stronger job prospects: “work-ready” personal attributes and access to appropriate social support.

12.2.1 “Work ready” attributes

In this context, *work readiness* refers to personal attributes that employers generally value, across job types. The interviews revealed several qualities shared by participants who were in paid employment:

- Communication Skills**

Three of the four employed participants (Emma, Mica, and Robert) were confident and sociable communicators. The fourth participant, while more reserved, was highly articulate and held a tertiary qualification. All four enjoyed working in teams and demonstrated adequate written communication skills—a significant “hard skill”.
- Technology Use**

All four employed participants were competent with technology. They used cell phones, laptops, and tablets, and accessed the internet regularly. At least three were comfortable using video conferencing platforms such as Zoom.
- Independence and Initiative**

Three of the employed participants (Mica, Robert, and Lindell) were evident ‘self-starters’, willing to take on unfamiliar tasks and projects. All four were sufficiently organised to maintain work commitments reliably. Their performance led to increased responsibilities: one was offered

additional hours, and two others were entrusted with more complex tasks, signalling employer confidence.

Robert stands out for achieving his goal of self-employment, actively growing his client base through a social media campaign. Unlike most participants, he preferred working alone while enjoying natural interactions with clients. Lindell and Mica also demonstrated entrepreneurial initiative by starting income-generating ventures alongside their regular work or training.

- **Cognitive Understanding, Emotional Regulation and Applied Learning**

These participants understood and followed instructions, managed everyday social interactions appropriately, and applied learning effectively—often with the right support. This contrasted with three other participants whose challenges in these areas hindered their ability to secure sustained employment.

- **Mobility**

Mica and Robert were confident public transport users. Lindell, although previously independent, became reluctant after experiencing an assault at a bus stop, limiting her job options. Robert was the only participant with a driver's license and a car, while Emma relied on family or a personal assistant for transport.

These attributes point to areas where support can enhance employment outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities regardless of their support needs. Employers and service providers play a critical role in creating environments that foster these capabilities, while also accommodating diverse needs.

12.2.2 Effective social support

All employed participants had access to effective, and often substantial, social support. This support took different forms, but in every case, it played a critical role in enabling and sustaining employment:

- **Emma**

Emma's enduring and secure employment history is closely linked to extraordinary social support. One parent facilitated her initial access to paid work, and for nearly two decades after that, she had worked alongside her parents' colleagues and friends, people who became like whānau. Her family also provided daily transport, enabling consistent attendance. This level of support helped Emma maintain more paid hours per year than any other participant.

- **Mica**

Mica benefited from extensive support from her mother and a dedicated care team. They helped her prepare for employment through work-readiness courses and managed daily routines to accommodate job demands.

- **Robert**

Robert has lived independently for many years, supported by a long-term caregiver who visits weekly. This caregiver (and friend) offered trusted advice and encouragement, which appeared fundamental to Robert's confidence and wellbeing. Earlier family support also provided occasional employment opportunities, modelled business confidence, and acted as a financial safety net.

- **Ajay**

Ajay's brother played a pivotal role by teaching practical skills such as using public transport and

enrolling him in courses. Combined with substantial workplace support from IHC, this assistance contributed to Ajay's ability to work.

A Closer Look: Lindell's Experience

Lindell offered the most detailed account of the social support she received, and lacked, throughout her employment journey. Unlike others, she had no caring family or engaged friends. Instead, one person stood out: Ryder, her partner of 10 years. Lindell credits him as the reason she has a job: *"If it wasn't for Ryder, I probably would not have a job."* His support spanned multiple dimensions:

- **Financial guidance** – Ryder helped Lindell manage debt and to pre-emptively budget for periods of low income.
- **Emotional and practical support** – He validated her challenges, encouraged friendships, and reassured her of her worth.
- **Advocacy and navigation** – Ryder advocated with Work and Income and pushed for Lindell's formal diagnosis so that she could access appropriate support.
- **Professional development** – He encouraged Lindell to start pet-sitting, an activity she enjoys that supplements her income.
- **Holistic care** – Ryder prioritised Lindell's health, helping her access specialists and improve mental wellbeing before pursuing other goals.

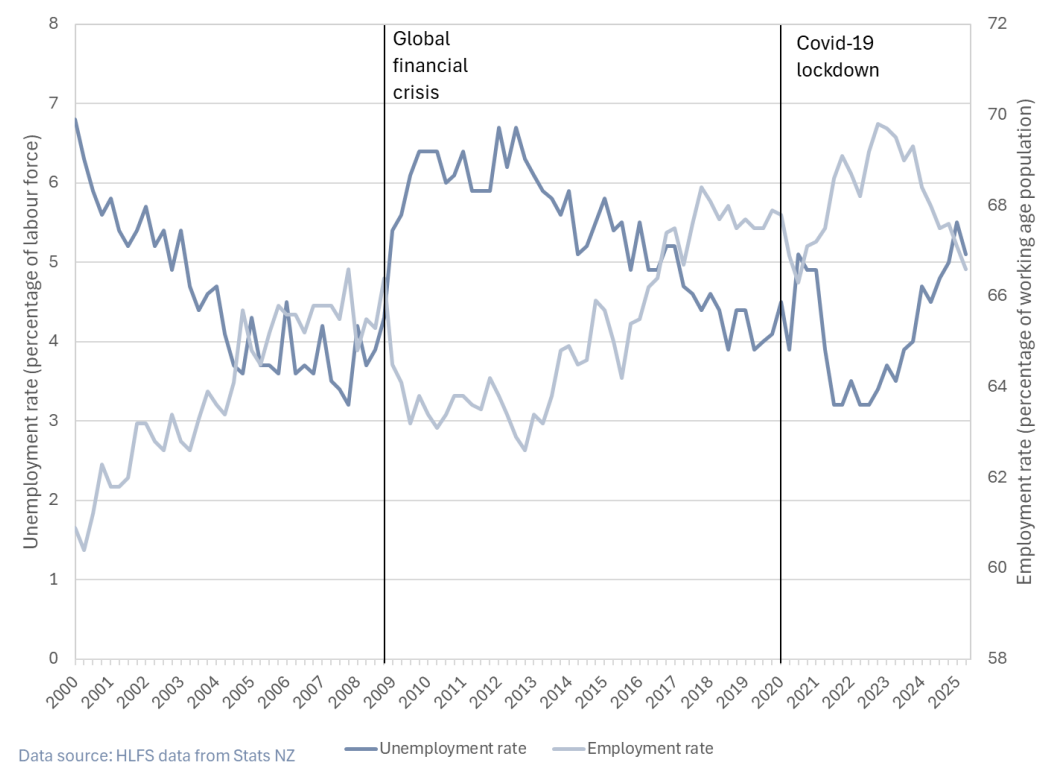
Social support is a critical enabler of employment for people with intellectual disabilities. It is important to note that as participants age and their needs evolve, ongoing, responsive, and potentially more intensive social and workplace support will be essential.

13 Employment and the economic cycle

International evidence suggests that people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by economic downturns (Kruse & Schur, 2003) (Burkhauser, Daly, & Houtenville, 2001). This section examines whether similar patterns are observed in New Zealand for people with intellectual disabilities, using employment data from 2007 to 2024 drawn from Inland Revenue wage and salary records.

The findings should be interpreted within the global financial context. Figure 15 provides an overview of unemployment and employment levels in New Zealand since 2000, illustrating the impact of major events such as the Global Financial Crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, we compare how these economic shocks have affected people with and without intellectual disability.

Figure 15 - Employment conditions in New Zealand over time



13.1 Months worked

This section presents data on the number of months per year that people receive wages or salary. Because people with intellectual disabilities have lower employment rates than the general population, it is expected that they work fewer months in paid employment each year.

Figure 16 shows the average number of months worked in a year per person from 2007 to 2024. Key findings include:

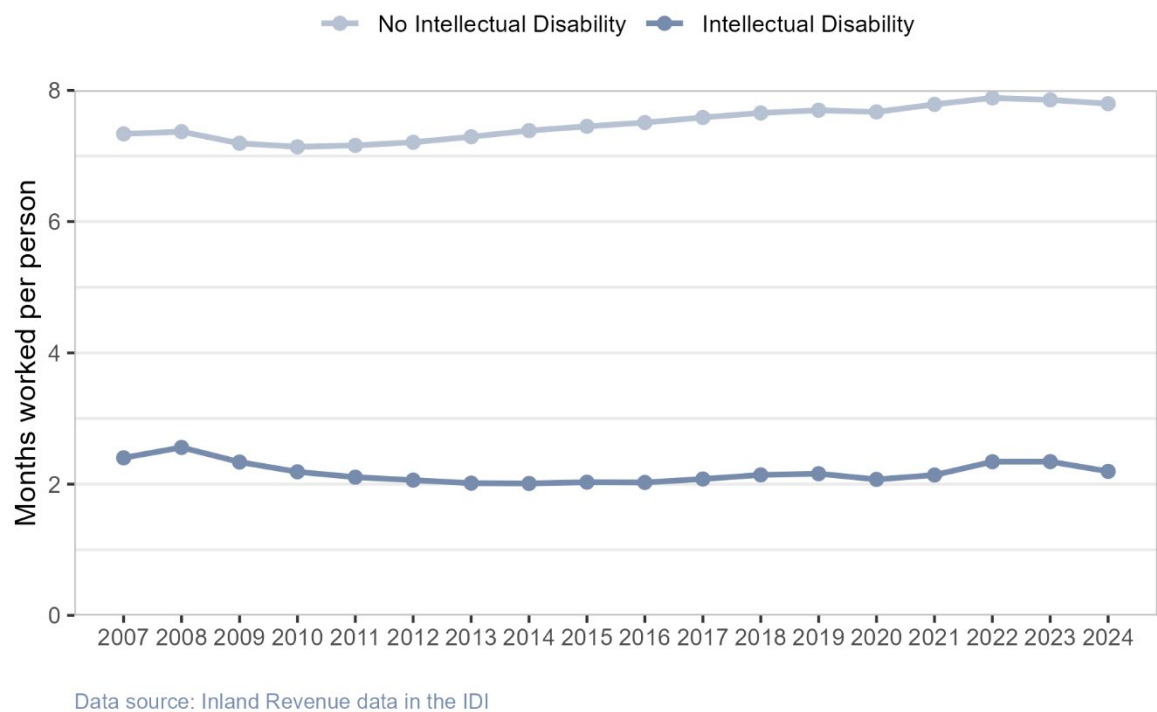
- **2024 snapshot**
People with intellectual disabilities worked for pay an average of 2.19 months, compared to 7.80

months for people without intellectual disability. This means that, on average, people with intellectual disabilities worked only 28% as long, about one quarter of the time, compared to those without intellectual disability. This gap has persisted since 2007.

- **Impact of the global financial crisis**
Both groups experienced declines in paid work after 2008. However, while employment for people without intellectual disability began to recover around 2010, recovery for people with intellectual disabilities was delayed by five years. During this period, both the absolute and relative disparities widened. This aligns with international evidence showing that economic downturns have longer-lasting effects on disabled populations.
- **COVID-19 pandemic effects**
In 2020, average months worked dropped for both groups. Recovery was relatively quick, and from 2021 onward, the upward trend was slightly more favourable for people with intellectual disabilities, leading to a modest narrowing of the gap through 2023.
- **Recent downturn**
Although the 2023 slowdown had limited impact on people with intellectual disabilities, by 2024 the gap reached its highest level since 2007, highlighting persistent structural barriers to employment.

These patterns underscore the vulnerability of people with intellectual disabilities to economic shocks and the need for targeted employment policies to support recovery and resilience.

Figure 16 - Number of months worked per person by intellectual disability status

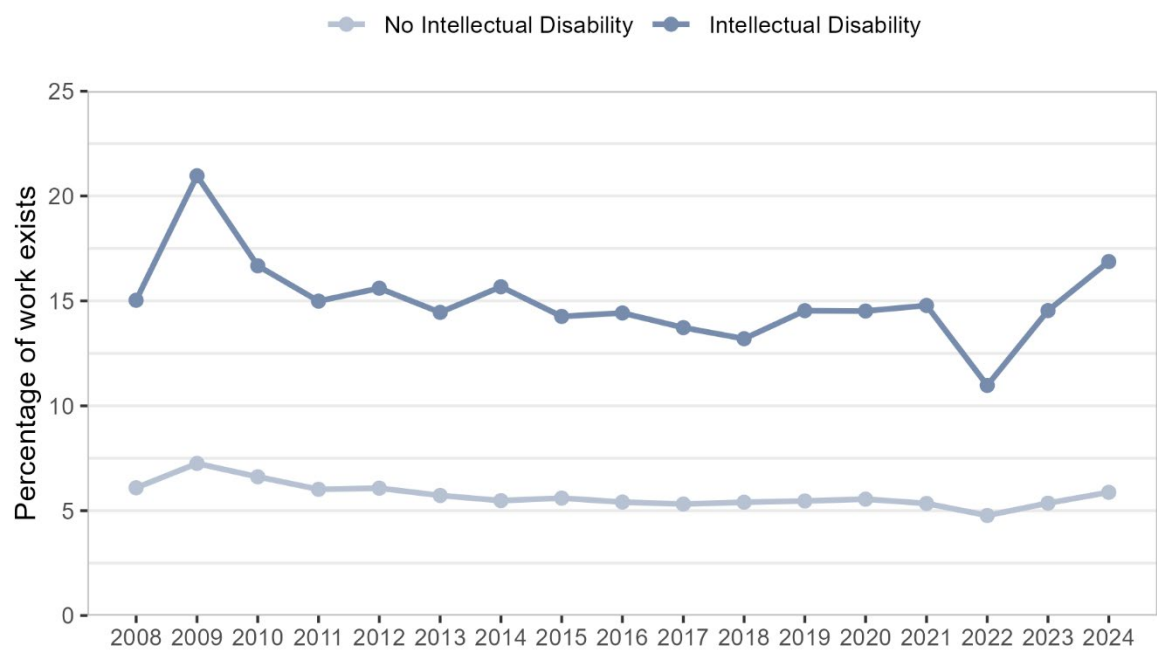


13.2 Work exits

This section reports on the number of people leaving paid work each year—a measure of both job stability and workforce participation. The indicator counts individuals who were employed in the previous year but are not in paid work in the current year, excluding those who reached retirement age (65).

Figure 17 shows the percentage of work exits from 2008 to 2024 for working-age people with and without intellectual disability.

Figure 17 - Percentage of work exits per year for the working-age population by intellectual disability status



Data source: Inland Revenue data in the IDI

Key insights include:

- **Job stability**
People with intellectual disabilities are consistently around 2.5 times more likely to leave paid work in a particular year than people without intellectual disability. This pattern has remained stable since 2008, highlighting persistent challenges in sustaining employment.
- **Impact of the global financial crises**
In 2009, job exits spiked for both groups following the global financial crisis. However, the relative increase was greater for people with intellectual disabilities, indicating heightened vulnerability during downturns.
- **The Covid-19 pandemic**
In 2022, during the second year of COVID-19 lockdowns, job exits decreased for both populations, with a sharper decline among people with intellectual disabilities. This temporarily

reduced the disparity between the groups and suggests that additional support measures during this period may have helped protect employment for people with intellectual disabilities.

- **Recent downturn**
Following the pandemic, job losses increased sharply for people with intellectual disabilities. By 2024, the relative difference in job exits between the two populations was as high as during the peak of the global financial crisis in 2009.

These trends indicate that people with intellectual disabilities face not only lower employment rates, but also greater instability once employed, particularly during periods of economic disruption. The improvement seen in 2022 provides an interesting example of how support mechanisms might influence employment outcomes during global events for the intellectually disabled community.

13.3 Putting it all together

To better understand the determinants of job loss, we estimated a multivariate regression model¹⁵ predicting the probability of leaving paid work in any given year for individuals who were employed in the previous year. The model used administrative data from 2007 to 2024 and included:

- intellectual disability status,
- personal characteristics (age, sex and ethnicity),
- job-related characteristics (length of previous job, income),
- indicators of global economic events, and
- the interaction between intellectual disability status and the global economic events.

This approach allows us to examine whether people with intellectual disabilities have a higher likelihood of job loss and whether they are disproportionately affected by economic shocks, while controlling for differences in personal and job-related factors.

The three global economic events included in the model are:

- Year to June 2009 - a period of increased job loss due to the Global Financial Crisis,
- Year to June 2022 - a period of decreased job loss due to the closed borders during the pandemic and,
- Year to June 2024 - the most recent period of increased job loss.

Table 4 presents the model results, showing which variables are significantly associated with job loss and the magnitude of these relationships.

¹⁵ We run a longitudinal random effects linear probability model with clustered standard errors to control for autocorrelation.

Table 7 - Job loss, intellectual disability and the effect of global events: Statistical model results

Parameter	Estimate	Standard Error	Significance (*)
(Intercept)	0.40379	0.00183	***
Intellectual disability indicator (ID)	0.05481	0.00098	***
<i>Global events</i>			
Year to June 2009 down-turn (dt1)	0.00766	0.00051	***
Year to June 2024 down-turn (dt2)	0.01053	0.00047	***
Year to June 2022 up-turn (ut)	-0.00043	0.00047	
<i>Age (modelled as quadratic)</i>			
age	0.00332	0.00008	***
age*age	-0.00003	0.00000	***
<i>Gender</i>			
Female	-0.00266	0.00032	***
<i>Ethnicity group</i>			
European	0.00195	0.00056	***
Māori	0.01158	0.00050	***
Pacific	0.00415	0.00071	***
Asian	-0.00159	0.00068	*
MELAA(**)	0.00041	0.00118	
<i>Months worked in the previous year (modelled as quadratic)</i>			
months worked	-0.04932	0.00024	***
months worked*months worked	0.00077	0.00002	***
<i>Income in the previous year (modelled as linear)</i>			
real income salary or wage	0.00000	0.00000	*
<i>Interaction between disability and global events</i>			
Intellectual disability - dt1	0.03369	0.00273	***
Intellectual disability - dt2	0.02678	0.00276	***
Intellectual disability - ut	-0.03085	0.00284	***

(*) Significance level (0.1 percent level): *** Highly significant (1 percent level), ** Very Significant, * Significant (5 percent level)

(**) MELAA includes Middle Eastern, Latin America and African Nations

Key insights from the model results include:

- **Personal and job characteristics**

Older age, Māori ethnicity, and shorter job tenure are associated with a higher likelihood of job loss.

- **Effect of intellectual disability**

Even after controlling for other factors, people with intellectual disabilities are about 5 percentage points more likely to lose their job in a particular year than those without intellectual disability.

- **Impact of economic shocks**

During periods of economic disruption, people with intellectual disabilities were an additional 3 percentage points more likely to lose their job compared to others.

- **Covid-19 period**

In 2021, when job exits declined overall, people with intellectual disabilities were 3 percentage

points less likely to lose their job than in other years, reducing the disparity between people with and without intellectual disability to around 2 percentage points, suggesting that support measures during this period may have helped protect employment.

These findings reinforce the patterns observed in the descriptive analysis: people with intellectual disabilities face greater employment instability, particularly during economic shocks. The improvement seen in 2022 offers insight into how targeted interventions can mitigate these effects.



Flowered Textures
Blaize Muller
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14 Discussion

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) affirms the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others (Article 27). This includes access to inclusive, accessible workplaces and protection against discrimination. Despite New Zealand's obligations under the UNCRPD and the principles of *Enabling Good Lives*, the findings of this study show that these rights remain largely unrealised for people with intellectual disabilities. Employment is not only a legal entitlement but a cornerstone of dignity, identity, and wellbeing. Yet, the evidence presented here highlights persistent structural inequities that undermine these rights.

14.1 Prevalence, conditions, and vulnerability

Labour market participation for people with intellectual disabilities is comparatively low. Only 25.9 percent of working-age individuals are in paid employment compared to 79.6 percent of those without intellectual disability. Among those employed, work is often precarious:

- 10 percent hold casual or temporary jobs compared to less than 1 percent for people without intellectual disability.
- 12.6 percent lack formal employment agreements (vs. 4.8 percent).
- Nearly 48 percent of those in employment work part-time (vs. 16%)

Earnings are also markedly lower: 57.4 percent earn under \$25 per hour in 2024 dollars, and almost 20 percent earn below the minimum wage. Occupational segregation persists, with over-representation in labouring, retail, and support roles, and near absence from professional or managerial positions.

Economic shocks amplify these disparities. During the Global Financial Crisis, recovery for people with intellectual disabilities lagged by five years compared to the general population. In 2024, they worked an average of 2.2 months per year, just 28 percent of the time worked by others, and were 2.5 times more likely to exit employment annually. These patterns underscore systemic vulnerability and the urgent need for targeted resilience measures.

14.2 Barriers and facilitators

Barriers to employment are multifaceted:

- Inadequate transition pathways from education to work.
- Unsuitable environments and lack of reasonable accommodations.
- Insufficient workplace support, often diminishing over time.
- Systemic discrimination, both overt and implicit.

Conversely, success stories point to critical enablers: inclusive employers, tailored supervision, flexible conditions, and strong social support networks. Facilitated access, through champions who actively connect candidates to roles, and values-driven organisations were decisive factors for participants who achieved sustainable employment.

14.3 The value of work for people with intellectual disabilities

Qualitative insights confirm that work matters profoundly. Participants described employment as a source of identity, belonging, and pride, offering structure, social connection, and financial independence. Work fosters self-efficacy and recognition, enabling individuals to “feel normal,” contribute to society, and pursue personal growth. Those in paid work reported greater confidence and wellbeing, while exclusion was linked to isolation, diminished self-worth, and declining health. These findings align with international evidence that employment is a determinant of health and quality of life.

14.4 Conclusion

This study provides a sobering reality check: despite strong rights frameworks, people with intellectual disabilities remain on the margins of Aotearoa’s labour market. Low employment prevalence, poor job quality, and heightened vulnerability during economic downturns reflect systemic barriers rather than individual limitations. Yet, the evidence also shows that inclusive practices make a significant difference. When employers, whānau, and support services collaborate, people with intellectual disabilities thrive and contribute meaningfully.

Achieving equity requires coordinated action: strengthening transition pathways, embedding reasonable accommodations, addressing discrimination, and ensuring targeted support during economic shocks. Paid work is more than income; it is a foundation for dignity, identity, and participation. Realising the promise of the UNCRPD demands urgent, sustained commitment to inclusive employment.

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Bikes
Lisa Graham
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Appendix 1 – Profile of those at work

Section 12 presented the results of the multivariate statistical models used to identify characteristics associated with employment among the working-age intellectually disabled population. This section presents the detailed results of the model using the HLFS study population. The HLFS population, although smaller, was used to validate the APC results presented in the main body of the report.

Table 8 - Regression analysis results: Modelling employment status for people with intellectual disabilities in the HLFS population between 2016 and 2024

Parameter	Estimate	Standard Error	Pr > Z	Significance (*)
Intercept	-1.1952	0.3994	0.0028	*
Year				
2016	-0.3965	0.2293	0.0837	
2017	-0.3585	0.2358	0.1284	
2018	-0.0907	0.2373	0.7023	
2019	-0.1611	0.2283	0.4805	
2020	-0.2283	0.2424	0.3463	
2021	-0.5044	0.2281	0.027	
2022	-0.3174	0.2244	0.1572	
2023	-0.1637	0.1673	0.3277	
2024	0	0	.	
Age group				
18-24	-0.4536	0.2363	0.0549	
25-34	-0.0426	0.2506	0.8649	
35-44	0	0	.	
45-54	-0.0611	0.2418	0.8005	
55-64	-0.5182	0.2876	0.0716	
Ethnic group				
European	0.8015	0.2546	0.0016	*
Non-European	0	0	.	
Māori	0.0439	0.2354	0.8521	
Non-Māori	0	0	.	
Pacific	0.1607	0.3046	0.5977	
Non-Pacific	0	0	.	
Asian	0.2267	0.4549	0.6182	
Non-Asian	0	0	.	
MELAA	0.3077	0.8459	0.716	
Non-MELAA	0	0	.	
Other	1.109	0.4789	0.0206	
Non-Other	0	0	.	
Gender				
Female	-0.4543	0.1538	0.0031	*
Male	0	0	.	
Region				
Auckland	0	0	.	

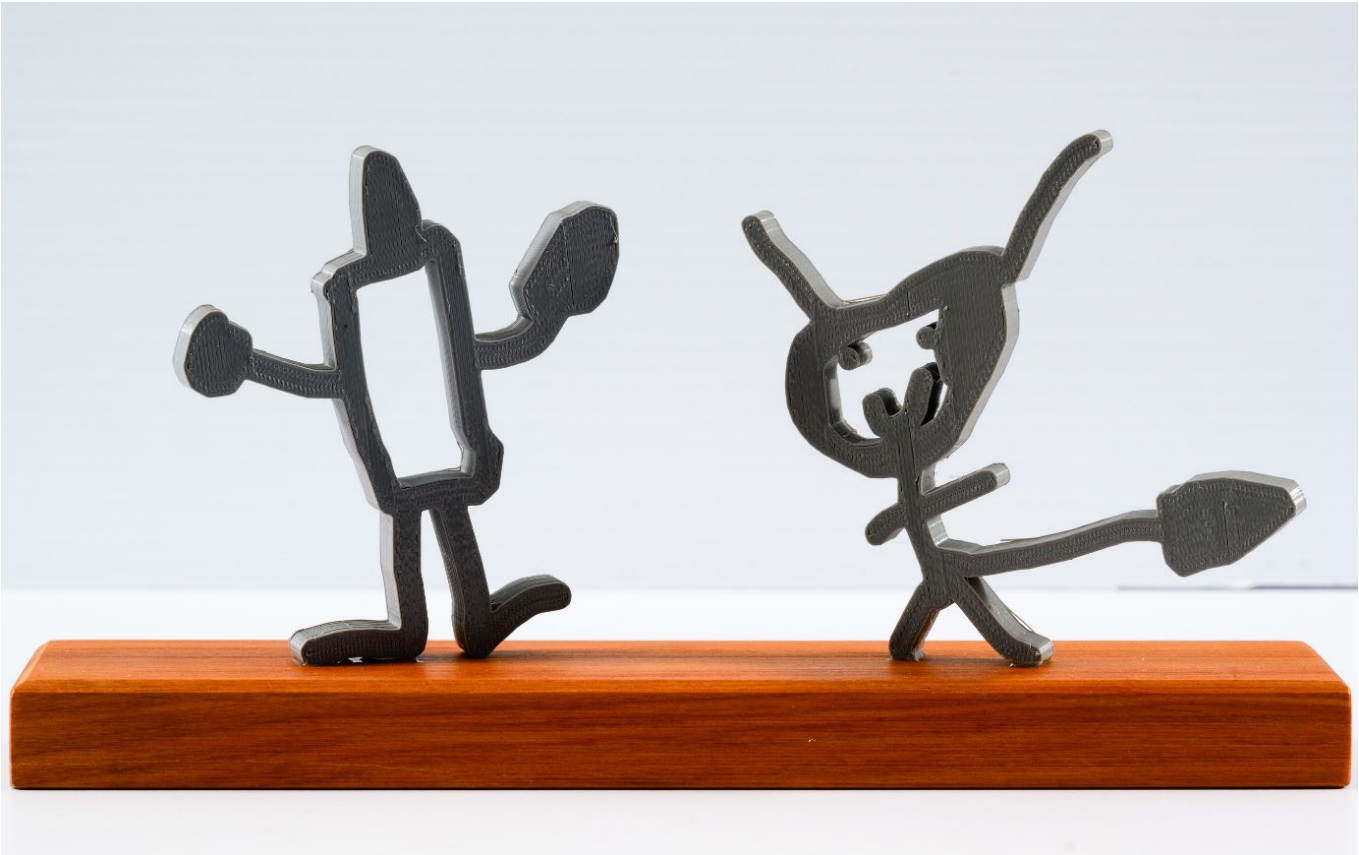
Parameter	Estimate	Standard Error	Pr > Z	Significance (*)
Wellington	0.1189	0.279	0.6701	
Other North Island	-0.0187	0.223	0.9333	
Canterbury	-0.0399	0.2713	0.8831	
Other South Island	0.3284	0.2663	0.2175	
<i>Urban/Rural</i>				
Main Urban	0	0	.	
Secondary/Minor Urban	0.1766	0.2217	0.4257	
Rural	0.0131	0.3035	0.9656	
<i>NZ Deprivation index</i>				
1-5	-0.2476	0.2204	0.2613	
6-8	0	0	.	
9&10	-0.2081	0.195	0.2859	
Missing	-0.1255	0.2368	0.5961	

(*) Significance level: *** Highly significant, ** Very Significant, * Significant

Square Man and Art Demon

Jaxon Bellve

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The Sunflower
Paul Raumaewa
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