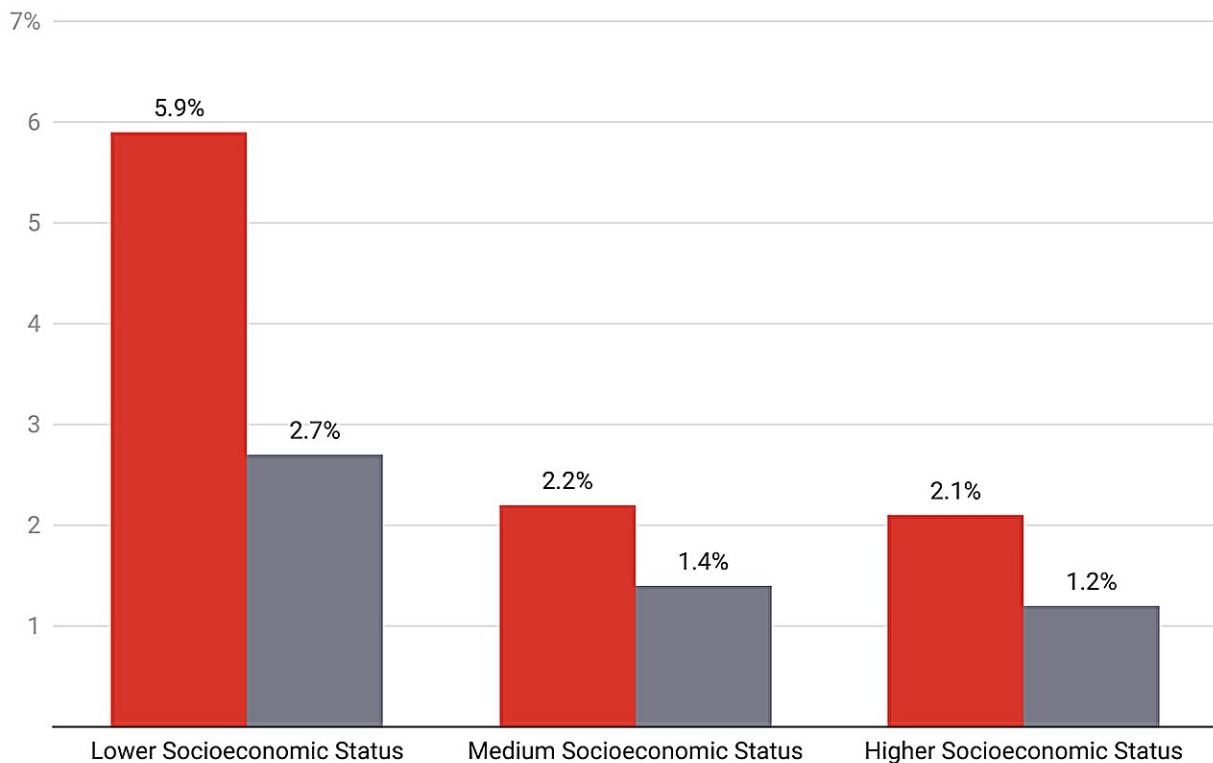


Hearing loss is twice as common in Australia's lowest income groups, research shows

March 5 2024, by Mohammad Nure Alam, Kompal Sinha and Piers Dawes

Prevalence of hearing loss by socioeconomic status

Men Women



Based on author computations of HILDA survey

Chart: The Conversation · Created with Datawrapper

Credit: The Conversation

Around [1 in 6 Australians](#) has some form of hearing loss, ranging from mild to complete hearing loss. That figure is expected to grow to [1 in 4](#) by 2050, due in a large part to the country's aging population.

Hearing loss affects communication and [social engagement](#) and limits educational and employment opportunities. Effective treatment for hearing loss is available in the form of communication training (for example, lipreading and auditory training), hearing aids and other devices.

But the [uptake of treatment](#) is low. In Australia, [publicly subsidized hearing care](#) is available predominantly only to children, [young people](#) and retirement-age people on a pension. Adults of working age are mostly [not eligible](#) for hearing [health care](#) under the government's [Hearing Services Program](#).

Our recent study published in the journal [Ear and Hearing](#) showed, for the first time, that working-age Australians from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are at much greater risk of hearing loss than those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

We believe the lack of socially subsidized hearing care for adults of working age results in poor detection and care for hearing loss among people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This in turn exacerbates social inequalities.

Population data shows hearing inequality

We analyzed a large data set called the Household, Income and Labor Dynamics in Australia ([HILDA](#)) survey that collects information on various aspects of people's lives, including health and hearing loss.

Using a HILDA sub-sample of 10,719 working-age Australians, we evaluated whether self-reported hearing loss was more common among people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than for those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds between 2008 and 2018.

Relying on self-reported hearing data instead of information from hearing tests is one limitation of our paper. However, self-reported hearing tends to underestimate actual rates of hearing impairment, so the hearing loss rates we reported are likely an underestimate.

We also wanted to find out whether people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to develop hearing loss in the long run.

We found people in the lowest income groups were more than twice as likely to have hearing loss than those in the highest income groups. Further, hearing loss was 1.5 times as common among people living in the most deprived neighborhoods than in the most affluent areas.

For people reporting no hearing loss at the beginning of the study, after 11 years of follow up, those from a more deprived socioeconomic background were much more likely to develop hearing loss. For example, a lack of post [secondary education](#) was associated with a more than 1.5 times increased risk of developing hearing loss compared to those who achieved a bachelor's degree or above.

Overall, men were [more likely](#) to have hearing loss than women. As seen in the figure below, this gap is largest for people of low socioeconomic status.

Why are disadvantaged groups more likely to experience hearing loss?

There are several possible reasons hearing loss is more common among people from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Noise exposure is one of the [biggest risks](#) for hearing loss and people from low socioeconomic backgrounds may be more likely to be exposed to [damaging levels of noise](#) in jobs in mining, construction, manufacturing, and agriculture.

Lifestyle factors which may be more prevalent in lower socioeconomic communities such as smoking, unhealthy diet, and a lack of regular exercise [are also related](#) to the risk of hearing loss.

Finally, people with lower incomes may face challenges in accessing timely hearing care, alongside competing health needs, which could lead to missed identification of treatable ear disease.

Why does this disparity in hearing loss matter?

We like to think of Australia as an egalitarian society—the land of the fair go. But nearly half of people in Australia with hearing loss [are of working age](#) and mostly ineligible for publicly funded hearing services.

Hearing aids with a private hearing care provider cost from around A\$1,000 up to more than \$4,000 [for higher-end devices](#). Most people need two hearing aids.

Lack of access to affordable hearing care for working-age adults on low incomes comes with an economic as well as a social cost.

Previous economic analysis estimated hearing loss was responsible for financial costs of around [\\$20 billion in 2019–20](#) in Australia. The largest component of these costs was productivity losses (unemployment, under-employment and Jobseeker social security payment costs) among working-age adults.

Providing affordable hearing care for all Australians

Lack of affordable hearing care for working-age adults from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may significantly exacerbate the impact of [hearing loss](#) among deprived communities and worsen social inequalities.

Recently, the federal government has been considering extending publicly subsidized hearing services to [lower income working age Australians](#). We believe reforming the current government Hearing Services Program and expanding eligibility to this group could not only promote a more inclusive, fairer and healthier society but may also yield overall cost savings by reducing lost productivity.

All Australians should have access to affordable hearing care to have sufficient functional hearing to achieve their potential in life. That's the land of the fair go.

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