Telecommunications

Improving access to telecommunications in rural Australia is a commonly discussed topic and a focus of government policy. In general, rural and regionals areas have poorer access to telecommunications when compared to urban areas. This 'digital divide' is an issue commonly raised as of concern for the economic development of rural areas (Curtin 2001). It is also a health issue: increasingly, many are promoting the idea of addressing a lack of available specialist health services in rural areas by providing e-health services, in which consultations occur via video link or other methods which require good telecommunications infrastructure. Amongst the many barriers to the successful implementation of e-health initiatives in rural Australia is a lack of access to adequate high speed and reliable telecommunications (see for example Jang-Jaccard et al. 2014). More broadly, having adequate access to reliable, high speed and widespread mobile phone and internet coverage is critical to the future of many rural and regional businesses, from retail shops to farmers and manufacturing industries. Good telecommunications access can support the development not only of traditional businesses, but of e-commerce businesses located in rural and regional areas (e.g. Pao et al. 2011).

What did we measure?

Survey participants were asked to rate their access to the following types of telecommunications in their local community, on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 7 (very good):

- High speed internet
- Mobile phone coverage

The average of a person's responses to these two items, which were highly correlated, was used to construct the 'access to telecommunications' measure.

Overall access to telecommunications

Only 37% of rural and regional Australians felt they had good access to high speed internet, while 48% felt they had poor access (Figure 3.5q). When asked about mobile phone coverage, 52% felt they had good coverage, while 31% felt it was poor.

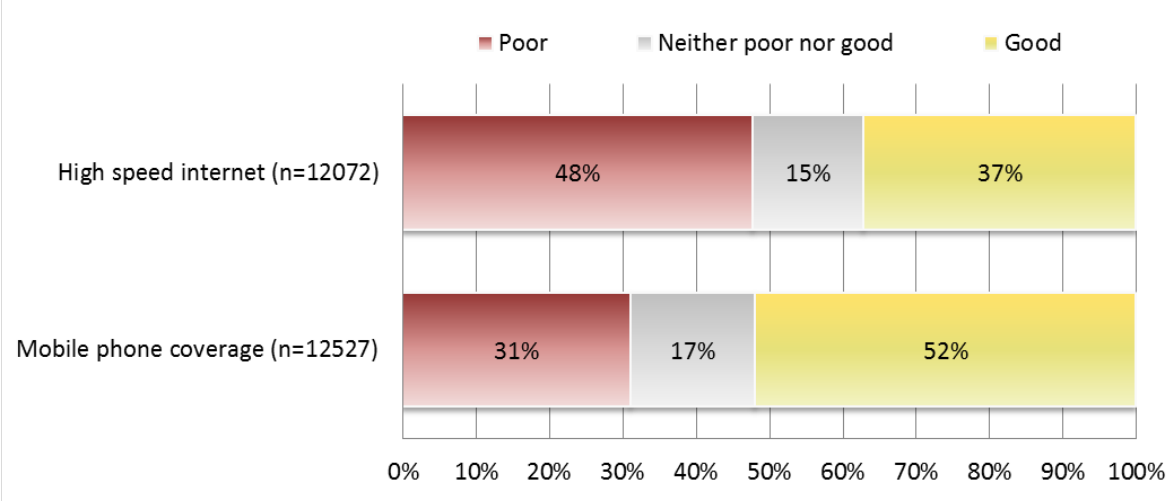


Figure 3.5q Access to telecommunication, 2015, rural and regional Australia

Access to telecommunications in different places

People living in Tasmania were much more likely to rate their access to telecommunications as good when compared to those in other states, although even in Tasmania many residents rated their access as poor (Figure 3.5r). People living in New South Wales and in Queensland reported poorer access than those living in other states. These results are very similar to 2014 findings from the survey.

When examined for different regions (Figure 3.5s), access to telecommunication services was rated poorer than the national average in the following regions:

- NSW: Orana & Far West; Southern Inland & rural ACT; Northern Inland
- Qld: Fitzroy & Central West; Northern Queensland
- SA: Limestone Coast
- WA: Wheatbelt & Mid West Gascoyne; Goldfields Esperance

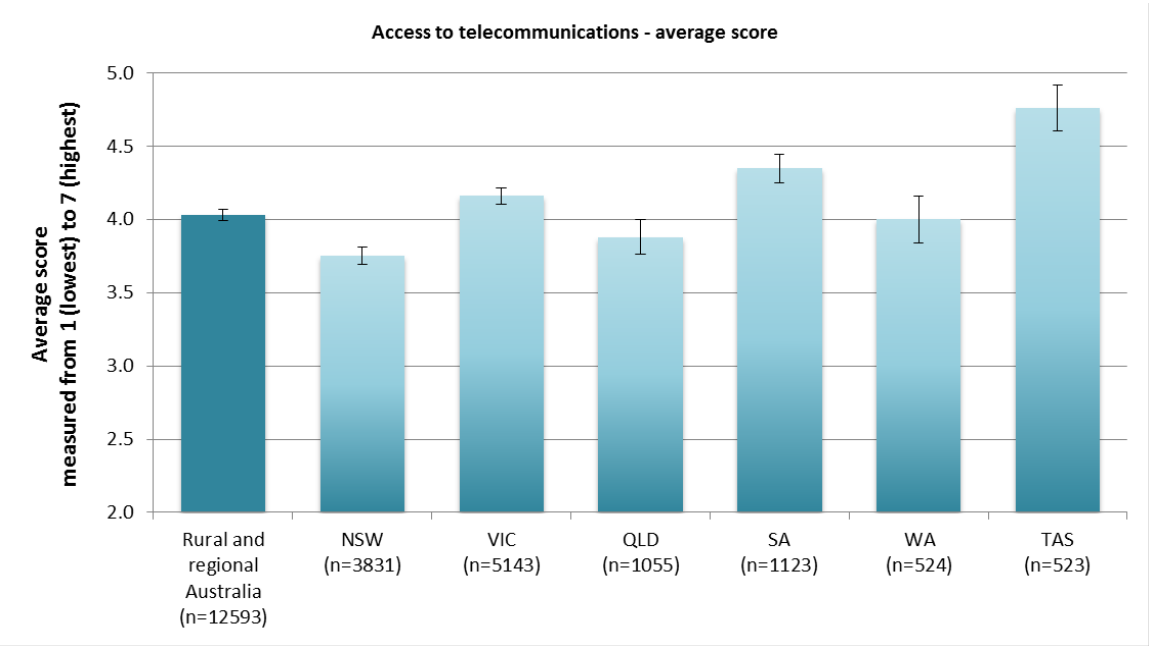
Access to telecommunication services was rated slightly better than the national average in the following regions, many of which were located close to large urban areas. It is important to note that even in these regions, a high proportion of residents felt their access was relatively poor:

- NSW: Central West
- Vic: rural areas of Southern Melbourne and Melbourne East; Grampians; Loddon Mallee; Barwon South West
- SA: Barossa & Adelaide Metropolitan; Adelaide Hills, Fleurieu & Kangaroo Island
- WA: Great Southern & South West

When compared over time (the telecommunications measure was included in both the 2014 and 2015 Regional Wellbeing Survey), in most regions access remained relatively stable (see Figure 3.5t). In some regions poorer access was reported in 2015 compared to 2014: Far South Coast (NSW), Gippsland (Vic), Melbourne East (Vic), Northern Inland (NSW), Orana & Far West (NSW), and Southern Inland & rural ACT (NSW/ACT). Ratings of access to telecommunications improved significantly between 2014 and 2015 in only one region: Tasmania.

Access to telecommunications for different people

People aged under 30 reported slightly better access to telecommunications than those in other age groups: this may reflect that younger people were more likely to be living in regional cities and larger towns than older people, and these locations tend to have better internet and mobile phone service coverage compared to smaller towns and villages. The poorest access was reported by dryland farmers, the large majority of whom reported poor or very poor internet and mobile phone access. Irrigators also reported poorer access on average compared to non-farmers (Figure 3.5u). These findings are likely to reflect both the level of access these groups have to telecommunications – farmers predominantly live on rural properties, on which telecommunications access is poorer than access in nearby towns – as well as expectations of different groups about what constitutes 'good' access.



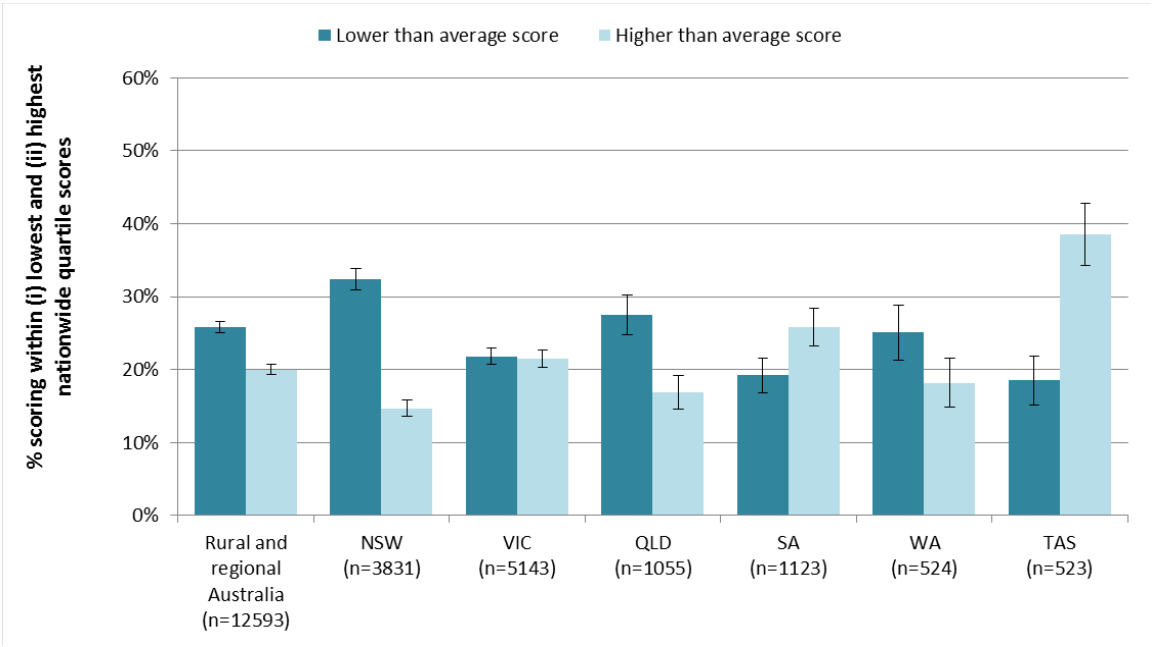


Figure 3.5r Access to telecommunications, 2015, by state

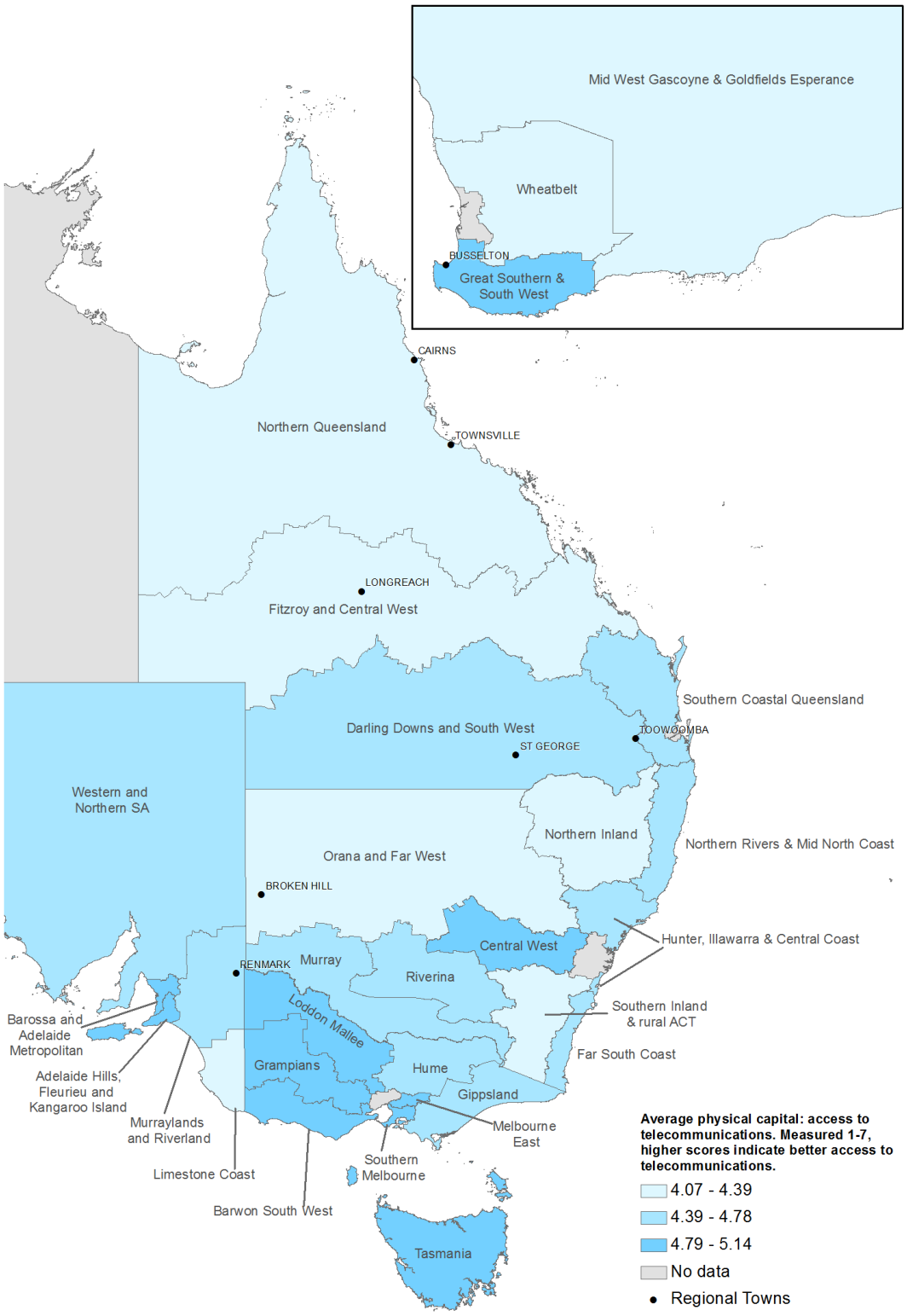


Figure 3.5s Access to telecommunications, 2015, by region

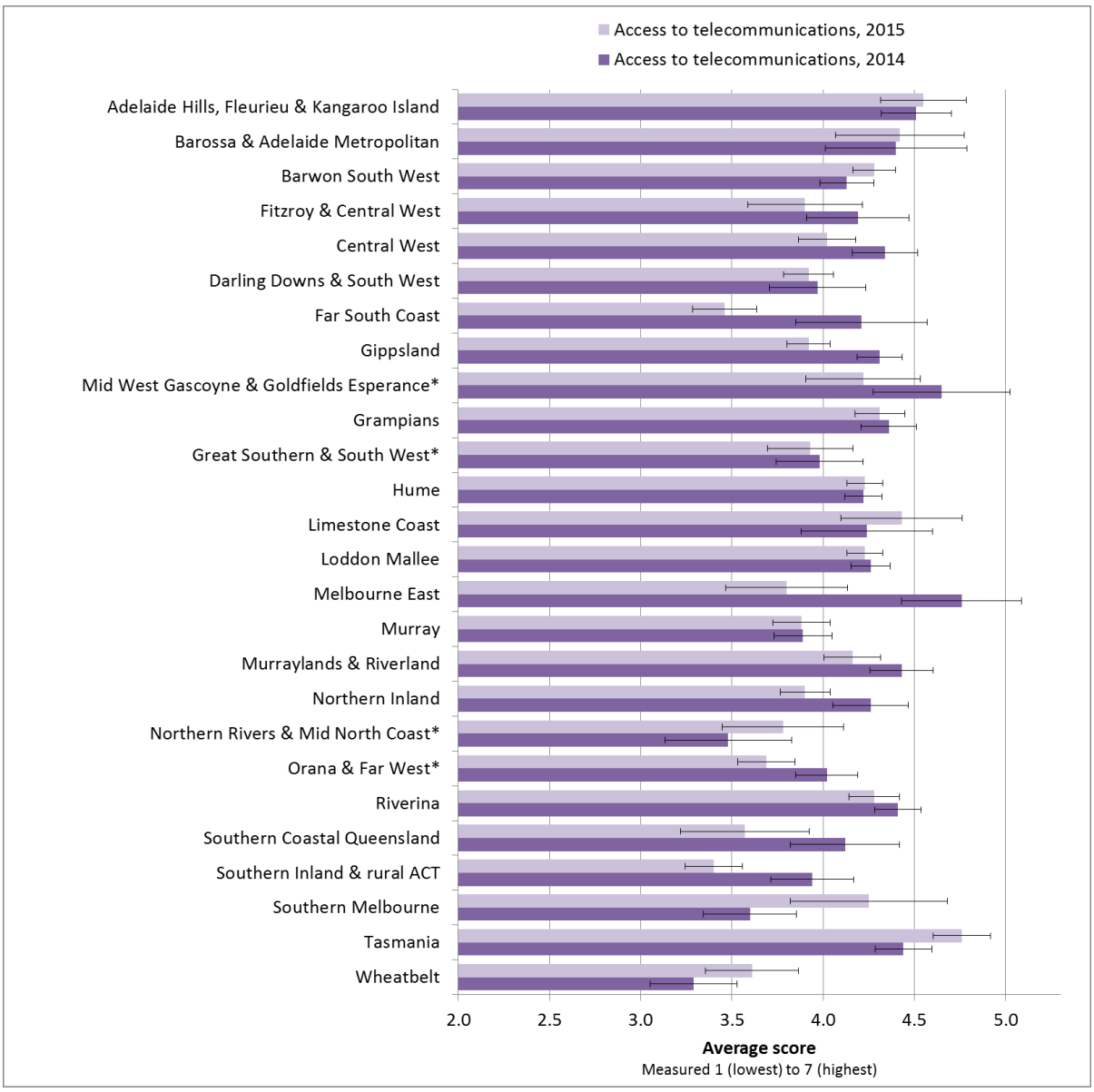


Figure 3.5t Comparison of access to telecommunications, 2014 and 2015, by region[28]

[28] A star (*) next to the name of a region indicates that the boundaries of this region differed in 2014 and 2015, and the region is reported using the 2015 region name. See the footnote to Figure 2.1h for further details of how to interpret this figure.

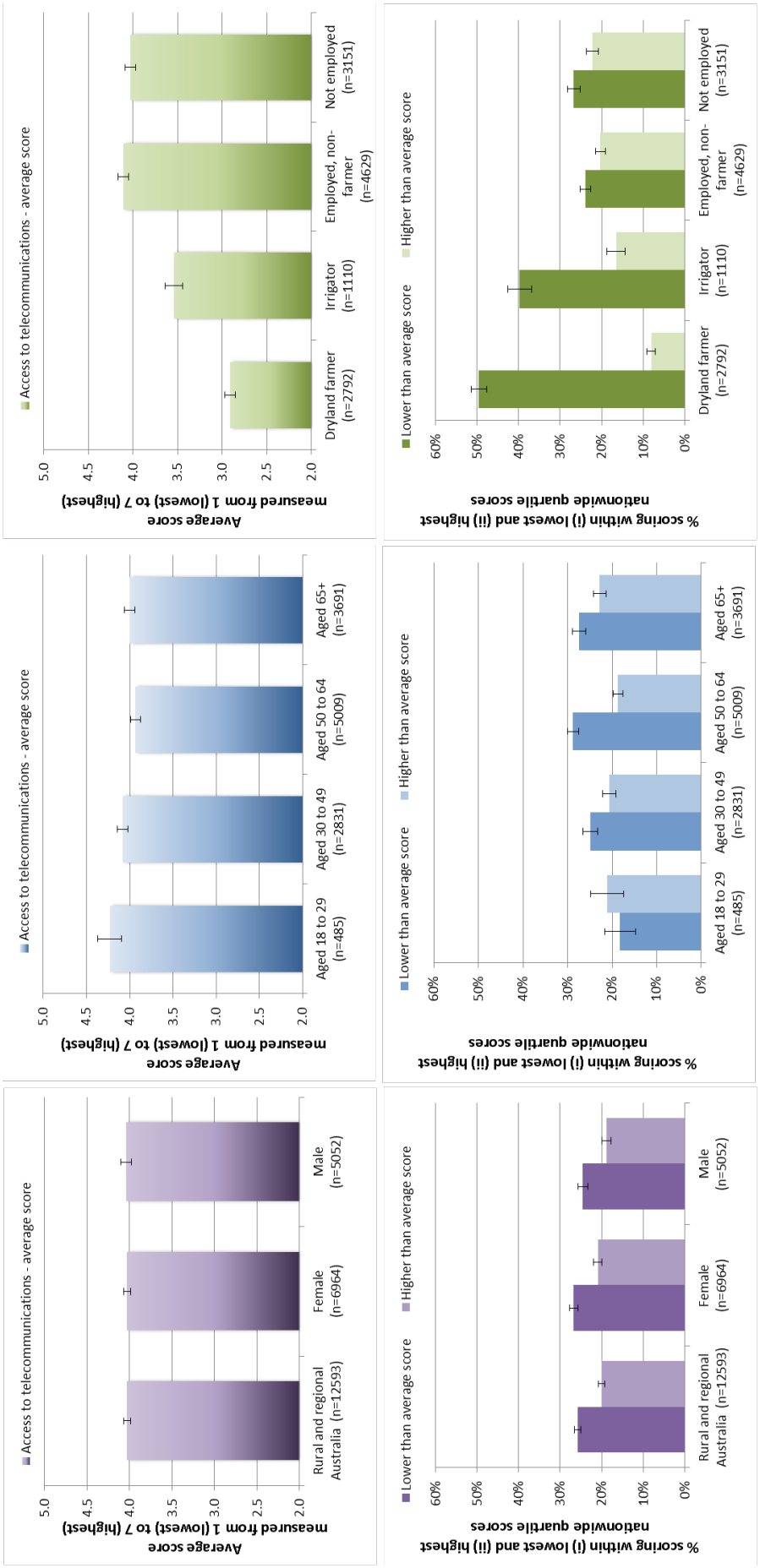


Figure 3.5u Access to telecommunications, 2015, by group