

Statistical bulletin

Disability and education, UK: 2019

Annual data on the highest level of qualification attained by disabled and non-disabled people aged 21 to 64 years. Analysis by age, sex, impairment type, impairment severity and country.

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1 . Other pages in this release

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has explored outcomes for disabled people across a number of areas of life, through a series of bulletins - other pages in this release include:

- [Improving disability data in the UK](#)
- [Disability and employment](#)
- [Disability and housing](#)
- [Disability, well-being and loneliness](#)
- [Disability and crime](#)
- [Disability and social participation](#)

Aims of this work

This work aims to present comparable information that uses the government Statistics Services' (GSS) harmonised definition of disability, and as far as possible presents UK analysis, alongside intersections with other protected characteristics.

Definition of disability

For the purposes of this analysis, a person is considered to have a disability if they have a self-reported long-standing illness, condition or impairment which causes difficulty with day-to-day activities. This definition is consistent with the [Equality Act 2010](#) and the [Government Statistical Service harmonised definition](#). For further information on disability and impairment definitions see the [glossary](#).

Article scope

Data on the educational outcomes of disabled people are limited. Education outcomes data tend to report on special education needs or additional learning needs, which do not cover the same population as disabled children. The Annual Population Survey (APS) offers an opportunity to explore education outcomes for disabled adults. Here we explored the highest level of qualification for disabled people aged 21 to 64 years.

2 . Main points

- The disparity between disabled and non-disabled people achieving no qualifications has decreased by 4.3 percentage points between 2013 and 2019, driven by an increase in disabled people gaining qualifications.
- 21.8% of disabled people had a degree in 2019 compared with 38.0% of non-disabled people; this gap has remained consistent over the period 2013 to 2019.
- Disabled people aged 60 to 64 years were almost two and a half times more likely to have no qualifications than non-disabled people, 24.1% compared with 10.4%, respectively.
- Disabled men were three times less likely to attain qualifications than non-disabled men, 18.1% compared with 6.3%, respectively.
- Individuals with severe or specific learning difficulties were the disabled group least likely to have a degree (7.0%), a difference of 14.8 percentage points in comparison with the disabled population on average.
- Disabled people who were “limited a lot” were more likely to have no qualifications than non-disabled people (10.7% compared with 6%); however, disabled people who were “limited a little” were slightly less likely than non-disabled people to have no qualifications (5.4%).

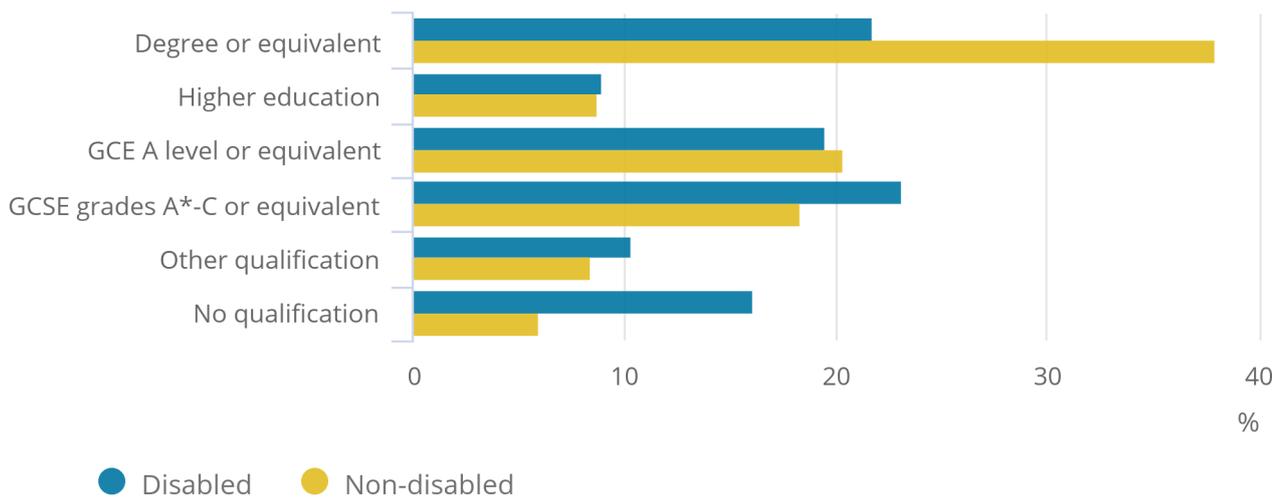
3 . Highest qualification by disability status

Figure 1: The disparity for highest level of qualification is largest for those obtaining a degree

Proportion of disabled and non-disabled people aged 21 to 64 years, by highest level of qualification, UK, 2019

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Proportion of disabled and non-disabled people aged 21 to 64 years, by highest level of qualification, UK, 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey

The greatest differences between disabled and non-disabled people's educational outcomes were in those attaining degree-level qualifications (a difference of 16.2 percentage points), those who achieved no qualifications (a difference of 10.1 percentage points) and those achieving GCSEs (a difference of 4.8 percentage points). The remainder of this article focuses on the largest disparities of those achieving degrees or no qualifications.

Disabled people were less likely to have a degree-level qualification, with 21.8% of disabled people having any degree compared with 38.0% of non-disabled people in 2019. Although a higher proportion of both disabled and non-disabled people had a degree in 2019 compared with 2013, the disparity between disabled and non-disabled people remained consistent over this period.

The proportion of disabled people who had no qualifications was more than two and a half times the proportion of non-disabled people, at 16.1% compared with 6.0% in 2019. Between 2013 and 2019, the disparity between disabled and non-disabled people obtaining no qualifications decreased by 4.3 percentage points, driven by a reduction in the proportion of disabled people with no qualification.

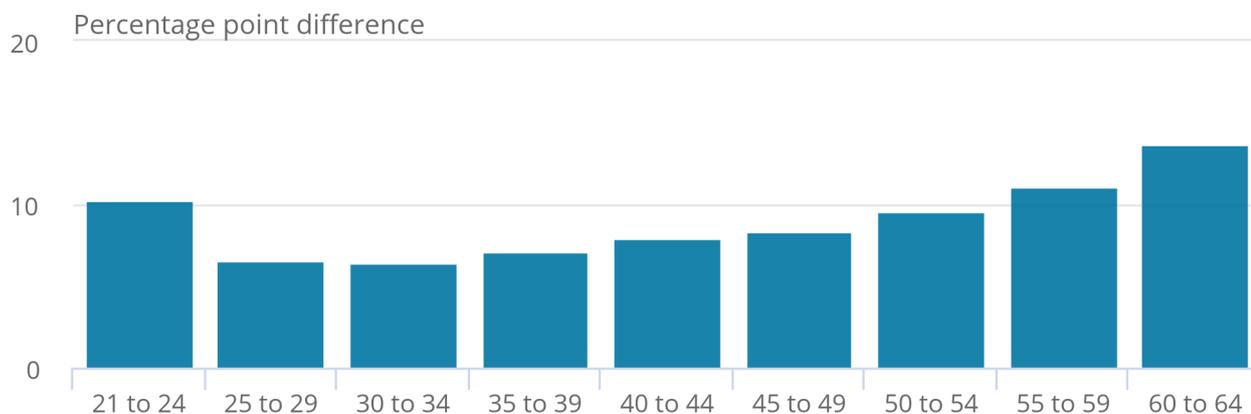
4 . Age and sex

Figure 2: The greatest disparity between disabled and non-disabled people having no qualifications is for the oldest age group

Percentage point difference between disabled and non-disabled people with no qualifications, UK, 2019

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Percentage point difference between disabled and non-disabled people with no qualifications, UK, 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey

The largest disparity between disabled and non-disabled people achieving no qualifications was for the 60 to 64 years age group. Disabled people in this age group were almost two and a half times more likely to have no qualifications than non-disabled people, with 24.1% and 10.4% having qualifications respectively.

The gap between disabled and non-disabled people with no qualifications narrowed from the oldest to younger age groups (excluding the youngest age group). This may reflect changes to education since the 1970s, which have led to it becoming more common for all people to access education and achieve qualifications.

For degree qualifications, there was no consistent trend across age groups. The 40 to 44 years age group had the largest gap between disabled and non-disabled people, with a difference of 17.7 percentage points. This was relatively consistent for the age groups between 25 to 39 years at 16.4 to 16.9 percentage points.

The difference in degree qualification attainment narrowed for older age groups, with the smallest difference between disabled and non-disabled people for the age group 55 to 59 years (a 10.1 percentage point difference). This was largely driven by a decrease in degree attainment for non-disabled people in older age categories.

Disabled men were three times less likely to attain qualifications than non-disabled men, (18.1% compared with 6.3% respectively). This disparity was smaller but consistent for women, with 14.6% of disabled women attaining no qualifications in comparison with 5.6% of non-disabled women.

For both sexes, there was a 16.5 percentage point difference in degree attainment for non-disabled people compared with disabled.

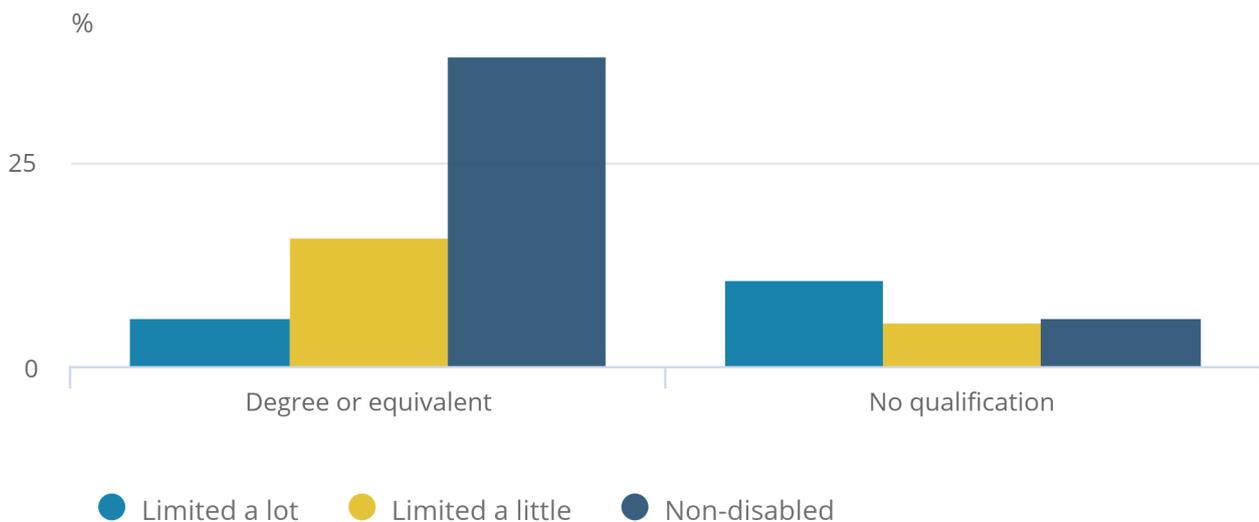
5 . Severity of impairment

Figure 3: Disabled people are less likely to have a degree and more likely to have no qualifications if they are more severely affected by their impairment

Proportion of disabled people by severity and highest qualification, UK, 2019

Figure 3: Disabled people are less likely to have a degree and more likely to have no qualifications if they are more severely affected by their impairment

Proportion of disabled people by severity and highest qualification, UK, 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey

Disabled people who self-report that their ability to carry out day-to-day activities is “limited a lot” in comparison with “limited a little” have poorer educational outcomes. In 2019, 15.9% of disabled people who were “limited a little” had a degree compared with 38.0% of non-disabled people, a difference of 22.1 percentage points. The gap was larger for more severely disabled people (those “limited a lot”) when compared with non-disabled people (32.1 percentage points).

Those “limited a little” were more likely to attain qualifications than non-disabled people; 5.4% of disabled people “limited a little” had no qualifications in comparison with 6.0% of non-disabled people. In comparison, disabled people who were “limited a lot” were almost twice as likely to have no qualifications than non-disabled people (10.7% compared with 6.0%).

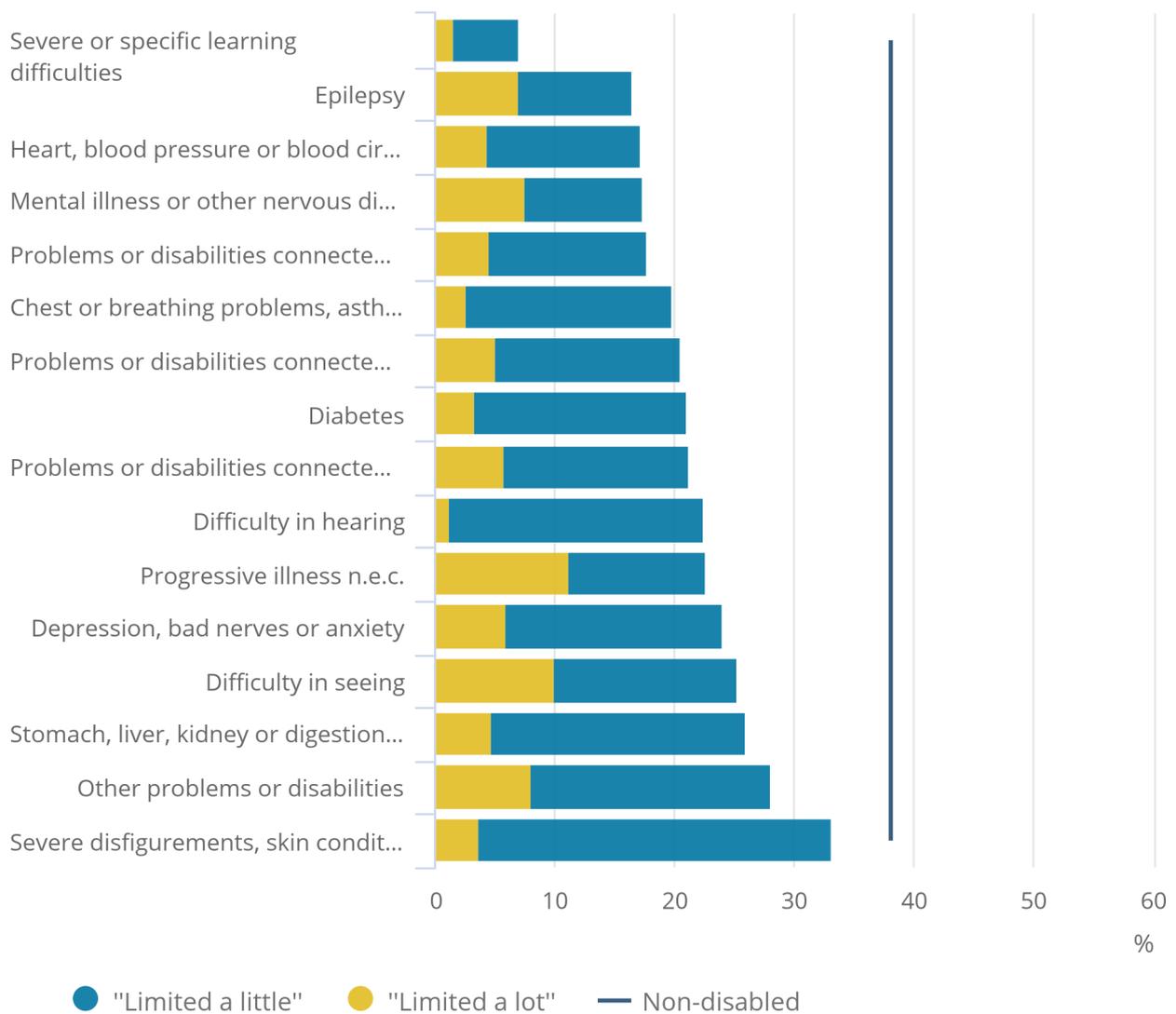
6 . Impairment type and severity

Figure 4: Disabled people with skin conditions or allergies had the highest percentage of degree qualifications (33.1%)

Proportion of disabled people with a degree by impairment and severity, UK, 2019

Figure 4: Disabled people with skin conditions or allergies had the highest percentage of degree qualifications (33.1%)

Proportion of disabled people with a degree by impairment and severity, UK, 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey

The proportion of disabled people who had a degree varied by impairment type. Those with a severe disfigurement, skin condition or allergy were most likely of all impairment groups to obtain a degree (33.1%). However, only a small proportion of the sample of disabled people had this impairment (0.9%).

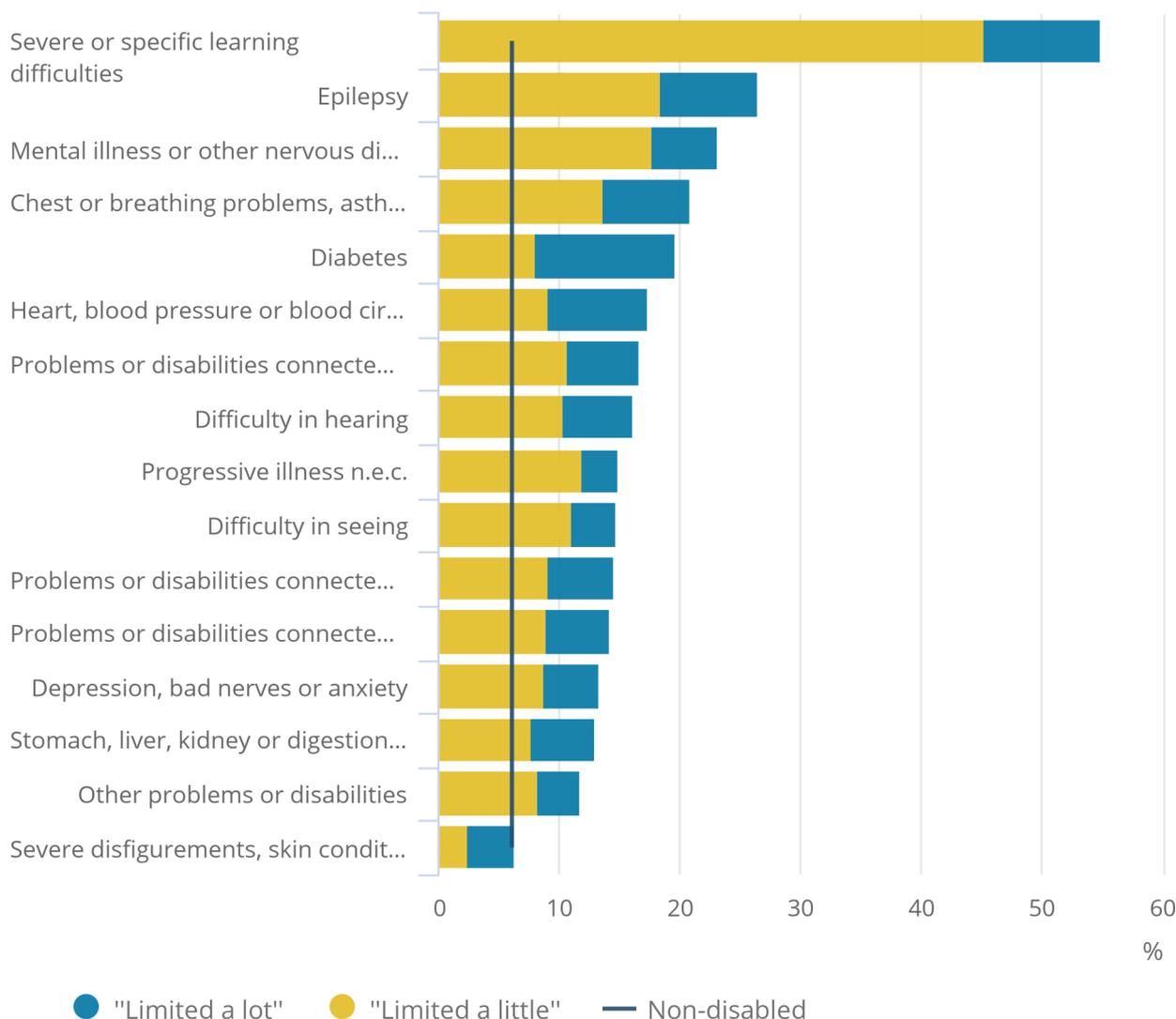
Individuals with severe or specific learning difficulties were the least likely to have a degree (7.0%), a disparity of 14.8 percentage points in comparison with the disabled population on average. This group also had one of the smallest "limited a lot" proportions (1.6%). This is as a result of those "limited a lot" being more likely to obtain no qualifications, rather than degrees.

Figure 5: Disabled people with learning difficulties had the highest percentage of no qualifications

Proportion of disabled people with no qualifications by impairment and severity, UK, 2019

Figure 5: Disabled people with learning difficulties had the highest percentage of no qualifications

Proportion of disabled people with no qualifications by impairment and severity, UK, 2019



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey

The proportion of disabled people who had no qualifications also varied by impairment type. Generally, of those with no qualification, a larger proportion were “limited a lot” compared with “limited a little”, indicating that severity of impairment was more of a contributing factor to education attainment than impairment type.

Disabled people with severe or specific learning difficulties had the highest proportion with no qualifications, at 55.0%. Almost half (45.3%) of those with learning difficulties who are “limited a lot” had no qualifications, compared with the 9.7% who were “limited a little”.

7 . Country

Figure 6: The disparity between disabled and non-disabled people attaining a degree and those attaining no qualifications is greatest in Northern Ireland

Difference between the proportion of disabled and non-disabled people with a degree or no qualifications

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Difference between the proportion of disabled and non-disabled people with a degree or no qualifications



Source: Office for National Statistics – Annual Population Survey

Northern Ireland had the largest difference between disabled (13.1%) and non-disabled (32.2%) people achieving a degree. This country also had the largest difference between those disabled and non-disabled attaining no qualifications (19.5 percentage points).

For disabled people achieving a degree or equivalent, England (22.4%), Scotland (20.6%) and Wales (19.6) were broadly similar. The gap between disabled and non-disabled people ranged from 13.7 percentage points in Wales to 16.3 in England.

There was greater disparity among those gaining no qualifications between countries. England and Wales had the lowest proportions of disabled people obtaining no qualifications (15.0% and 17.0%, respectively) with Scotland significantly higher (21.4%) and Northern Ireland higher again (29.2%). These figures reflect the pattern between disabled and non-disabled people in each country attaining no qualifications.

8 . Disability and education data

[Disability and education](#)

Dataset | Released 2 December 2019

Highest level of qualification for people aged 21 to 64 years by age, sex, impairment type, impairment severity and country.

9 . Glossary

Disability

To define disability in this publication we refer to the [Government Statistical Service \(GSS\) harmonised “core” definition](#): this identifies “disabled” as a person who has a physical or mental health condition or illness that has lasted or is expected to last 12 months or more, that reduces their ability to carry-out day-to-day activities.

The GSS definition is designed to reflect the definitions that appear in legal terms in the [Disability Discrimination Act 1995 \(DDA\)](#) and the subsequent [Equality Act 2010](#).

The GSS harmonised questions are asked of the respondent in the survey, meaning that disability status is self-reported.

Severity

Disabled people whose ability to carry out day-to-day activities is self-reported as "limited a lot" or "limited a little" by their impairment. Respondents were asked: "Does your condition or illness reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities?" with the responses, "yes, a lot" and "yes, a little" being taken to indicate severity of disability.

Impairment

An impairment is defined as any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more. Respondents were presented with a list of impairments and then asked to select all and subsequently their “main health problem”. The commentary in this bulletin refers to the main health problem. Analysis is limited to those who are also defined as disabled and does not explore where disabled people experienced more than one impairment. For further details see [Volume 3: Details of Labour Force Survey variables](#).

The impairments or condition categories compared in this bulletin relate to the categories within the questions in the survey, the exception is speech impediment, which has been grouped with the “other” category because of low sample size.

Highest qualification

Highest qualification applies to all respondents aged 21 to 64 years with qualifications.

Statistical significance

Any changes or differences mentioned in this publication are “statistically significant”. The statistical significance of differences noted within the release are determined based on non-overlapping confidence intervals

10 . Measuring the data

The Annual Population Survey

Education estimates are based on data collected from the Annual Population Survey (APS).

The APS is an annual survey based on data collected in wave 1 and wave 5 on the Labour Force Survey (LFS), combined with an annual local area boost sample run in England, Wales, and Scotland.

The survey does not cover communal establishments, except for NHS staff accommodation. Those living in student halls of residence or boarding school are included as part of their family household. The APS dataset contains approximately 300,000 individuals.

The APS datasets are produced for four different overlapping 12-month periods: January to December, April to March, July to June and October to September. The analysis in this publication was conducted on the July 2018 to June 2019 period as it provides the most up-to-date information.

11 . Strengths and limitations

Causality

The analysis conducted is for the purpose of comparing the outcomes of disabled and non-disabled people. The analysis describes differences in these two populations, but does not explore the cause of this difference. Further analysis, which is outside the scope of this article, is required to make judgements on causality. Details of our future workplan are available in the [Improving Disability Data in the UK](#) article.

Coverage and population

Analysis using the Annual Population Survey (APS) has been restricted to people aged 21 to 64 years olds because the disability variable is not robust for those aged 64 years and over. Disability status is only collected for people aged 65 years or older at their first contact resulting in less data for this population. The weighting used does not account for the reduced sample size for this age group, making the data not fully representative of the population.

The analysis is restricted to those who are likely to have finished their education (aged 21 years and over) and also removes those currently enrolled in a course.

The survey’s sampling method excludes communal establishments. Therefore, the findings of this analysis are not representative of disabled people who reside in medical or residential care establishments.

The analysis is restricted to people aged 21 to 64 years as a result of the target sample population of the survey. Age was restricted to 20 years and over as [most people will not have been able to complete a degree level qualification before this age](#). Additionally, participants aged 21 years and over who were enrolled in education were excluded.

Data on the educational outcomes for disabled children is limited. Education outcomes data tends to report on Special Education Needs or Additional Learning Needs, which does not cover the same population as disabled children. In the absence of this data, we have utilised an existing source of information (APS data) to understand how attainment differs for disabled and non-disabled people. We are exploring how the existing evidence gap of educational experiences and outcomes for disabled people could be addressed.

Education as an outcome

This analysis accounts for all people aged 21 to 64 years who have a self-reported disability at the time the survey was conducted. However, prevalence of disability is highest among older people and survey respondents may or may not have had a disability during the time of their education. Factors such as age and disability onset may have a confounding influence on the data reported.

People with different disabilities have different potential to attain qualifications. This analysis accounts for the highest level of achievement, but is unable to reflect if a disabled person has met their potential.

Uncertainty and quality

The results in this bulletin are survey-based estimates, so they are subject to a level of uncertainty as they are based on a sample rather than the whole population. Confidence intervals are provided around every estimate and give an indication of the range in which the true population value is likely to fall. The estimates in this bulletin are supported with confidence intervals at the 95% level. This means that, if we repeated the sample, we would expect the true population value to fall within the lower and upper bounds of the interval 95% of the time (i.e. 19 times out of 20).

Impairments

Analysis by impairment is based on the “main impairment” as reported by the respondent. People often experience more than one impairment, but this analysis does not account for co-morbidities or the cumulative impact of living with more than one impairment simultaneously.

12 . Related links

[Graduates in the UK Labour market: 2017](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 24 November 2017

This overview looks at employment, skill level of jobs, industry, pay, unemployment and comparison of male and female graduates.

[Table 15 - UK domiciled student enrolments by disability and sex 2014/15 to 2017/18](#)

HESA data | Updated January 2019

[Statistics: special educational needs \(SEN\)](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 24 November 2017

Statistics on pupils with SEN, including information on educational attainment, destinations, absence, exclusions, and characteristics.

[Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\), UK: August 2019](#)

Statistical bulletin | Released 22 August 2019

Estimates of young people (aged 16 to 24 years) who are not in education, employment or training, by age and sex.

[Level 2 and 3 attainment by young people aged 19 in 2018](#)

DFE data | Released 4 April 2019

The attainment of young people aged 19 in the 2017 to 2018 academic year.

[Further education and skills data](#)

DFE data | Released 26 February 2014

Information on learners, learning programs and learner achievement.

[Widening participation in higher education: 2018](#)

DFE data | Released 22 November 2018

Information on learners, learning programs and learner achievement.

[Destinations of key stage 4 and key stage 5 students, England, 2016/17](#)

DFE data | Released 16 October 2018

Information on learners, learning programs and learner achievement.

[School and labour market outcomes by pupil characteristics](#)

DFE data | Released 31 July 2018

Information on learners, learning programs and learner achievement.

[Disability pay gaps in the UK: 2018](#)

Article | Released 2 December 2019

Earnings and employment for disabled and non-disabled people in the UK, raw disability pay gaps and factors that affect pay for disabled people.