

Article

Improving disability data in the UK: 2019

An introductory article looking at global drivers for improving how we look at disability, including a summary of new analysis on disabled people's lives, and proposals for addressing the gaps in evidence.

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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:

- [Disability and education](#)
- [Disability and employment](#)
- [Disability and housing](#)
- [Disability and crime](#)
- [Disability, well-being and loneliness](#)
- [Disability and social participation](#)

2 . Introduction

We have launched a new series of reports exploring the situation of disabled people in the UK. In this article, we summarise new analysis on disabled people's lives, review the global drivers for improving how we look at disability, and set out proposals for addressing the gaps in evidence.

Our new reports show the contribution that disabled people make to society, as well as the inequalities that can be faced across several areas of life. While we know that the age distribution of disability is skewed towards older ages from previous reports, including the [Family Resources Survey](#), there are clear differences in outcomes for disabled people by age.

Each of the pages in the release draws information from household surveys, and disaggregates information about disabled people by protected characteristics, such as age and sex, as well as specific aspects of disability such as main impairment type and severity.

The need to improve disability data is driven by advances in promoting equality for disabled people, such as the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), [Sustainable Development Goals](#) and the [Equality Act 2010](#) (or the [Disability Discrimination Act, 1995](#) in Northern Ireland).

We set out a new research programme that will conduct longitudinal analysis to understand the impact of disability over the lifecourse, improve knowledge of issues such as causes behind negative outcomes, and use data from the 2021 Census and new administrative data linkages to facilitate innovative analyses.

Definition of disability

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

All pages in the release use this definition, but disability definitions used in data from other sources can vary.

3 . Main points

- Between 2013 and 2019, the disability employment gap has reduced, with the latest data showing roughly half of disabled people were in employment (53.2%) compared with just over four out of five non-disabled people (81.8%).
- 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.
- Young disabled people in 2019 (ages 16 to 24 years) were less likely to live with their parents (67.6%) than young non-disabled people (73.1%), but this pattern reverses for ages 25 to 54 years.
- In the year ending March 2019, disabled women were more than twice as likely to have experienced domestic abuse (17.3%) than non-disabled women (7.0%).
- The proportion of disabled people (13.3%) who report feeling lonely “often or always” is almost four times that of non-disabled people (3.4%), with the greatest disparity for young adults, aged 16 to 24 years old.
- Disabled people were as likely to have been involved in a group, club or organisation (67.9%) as non-disabled people (71.9%) in the year ending March 2018.

4 . Statistician’s comment

“Today the ONS has drawn together a range of data showing disabled people’s experience of different aspects of life in the UK. This work shows the contribution that disabled people make to the economy and society and the barriers they face, for example in accessing equal employment and pay, protection from crime and experiencing positive well-being.”

5 . Overview of the Office for National Statistics’ (ONS’s) new disability data

Education

Currently, little is known about the educational experiences and outcomes for disabled children across the UK. Data in this area are lacking, but the [Annual Population Survey](#) (APS) offers an opportunity to explore educational attainment for disabled adults using timely annual data.

[Disability and education](#) compares the qualifications achieved by disabled and non-disabled people, finding significant disparities in those attaining degrees, GCSEs or no qualifications.

The bulletin explores the influence of age, sex, country, severity of disability and impairment type on the largest disparities of those attaining degrees and no qualifications. Of all types of main impairment, those with learning difficulties fare worst in terms of education and employment outcomes.

Employment

Employment outcomes for disabled people have gained greater attention in official statistics than other aspects of life. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) routinely reports on the [labour market status](#) of disabled people, although not in relation to other protected characteristics, such as age, and influencing factors, like impairment type. Using APS data, we investigated these intersections in greater depth, alongside types of employment and working patterns.

In [Disability and employment](#) we found that while the employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people reduced to 28.6 percentage points between 2013 and 2019, the disparity is greatest for disabled people with learning difficulties and mental illness.

Working patterns also differ, with more disabled people working part-time and more disabled men in self-employment. While the employment gap is larger for men, women are more likely to experience a pay gap.

Previously, a lack of a suitable weighting methodology has prevented detailed analysis of the pay gap between disabled and non-disabled people. Using APS data, we have addressed this in a new report on [Disability pay gaps](#) in the UK. This bulletin shows that median pay is consistently lower for disabled than non-disabled people, with a wider gap for men than women, and the largest gap for those with a mental illness. Older disabled adults experience an increasing employment gap with increasing age.

Housing

Access to good quality housing is considered an important issue for disabled people. However, robust surveys, such as the [English Housing Survey](#), are limited to one country. UK-level data in this area are lacking, but the APS offers an opportunity to explore person-level housing tenure of disabled people across the UK.

Our bulletin on [Disability and housing](#) reveals that disabled people are less likely to own their own home and more likely to rent social housing than non-disabled people. Young disabled people (ages 16 to 24 years) are less likely to live with their parents than non-disabled people, but this pattern reverses for older age groups.

Crime

Evidence from the [Crime Survey for England and Wales](#), showed that disabled adults were more likely to have experienced crime in the last year. In [Disability and crime](#), we explore these disparities in greater detail, particularly for domestic abuse and sexual assault, showing that disabled adults were more likely to experience these crimes, with the disparity greatest for disabled women.

Well-being and loneliness

The ONS routinely reports on personal well-being, but does not routinely disaggregate this information by disability. Using the APS (covering the UK) and [Community Life Survey](#) (CLS, which covers England only), we explored outcomes of well-being and loneliness for disabled people in [Disability, well-being and loneliness](#).

Average life satisfaction, worthwhile and happiness ratings were all lower for disabled people than non-disabled, while anxiety and loneliness ratings were higher. Outcomes varied by characteristics such as impairment type, severity, age and sex.

Social participation

With disabled people at greater risk of loneliness, we have also explored [Disability and social participation](#). Data on these concepts are unavailable for the UK, but using the CLS, we explored differences in participation for civic engagement, volunteering and group participation.

Disabled people were more likely to be involved in civic participation than non-disabled people and equally likely to volunteer formally or informally, but less likely to be involved in certain groups. These outcomes were explored by age, sex and severity.

6 . Improving disability data

Global drivers for change

Recognition of the inequalities experienced by disabled people and the need for good quality data to measure these has gained momentum on the global stage. The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (UNCRPD) was adopted in 2006, moving from “viewing disabled people as ‘objects’ of charity, medical treatment and social protection towards viewing persons with disabilities as ‘subjects’ with rights who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives”.

The UK ratified the [UNCRPD](#) in 2009, agreeing to eliminate disability discrimination, enable disabled people to live independently in the community, ensure an inclusive education system and protect disabled people from harm.

In 2015, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and “leave no-one behind” agenda were launched. The SDGs are a universal “call to action to [end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030](#)”. They are a set of ambitious goals and supporting targets, agreed at the [United Nations’ Sustainable Development World Summit](#).

The “leave no-one behind” agenda aims to ensure that the SDGs are translated into effective action for specific populations, particularly vulnerable groups such as disabled people.

In 2010, the [Equality Act](#) came into force in Great Britain and with it, an increasing demand for robust data to monitor equalities for all nine of the protected characteristics (disability, age, sex, gender reassignment, race, religion, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnerships and pregnancy and maternity). The comparable [Disability Discrimination Act, 1995](#) remains in place in Northern Ireland.

Together, these developments have led to a drive for improved data disaggregated by disability to monitor progress:

- The [UNCRPD](#) requires that states set up independent monitoring mechanisms to monitor implementation of the Convention.
- The SDGs have provided an impetus for disaggregation of a wide range of statistics by disability, requiring that the 244 SDG indicators “should be disaggregated, where relevant, by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographic location, or other characteristics, in accordance with the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics” ([Report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators](#)).
- The [Public Sector Equality Duty](#) (PSED) requires public authorities to have due regard for the need to achieve the objective set out in the [Equality Act 2010](#), including providing information to demonstrate compliance with the PSED.

The need for better data

Progress has been made towards monitoring outcomes for disabled people, but more needs to be done to improve the data, its consistency and availability.

The Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) as a national human rights institution has an obligation to monitor progress against implementation of the [UNCRPD](#). Their reports assessing disabled people in Great Britain are submitted for the UN's review roughly every five years. They also produce three-yearly reports on equality and human rights progress in England, Scotland and Wales, ([Is Britain Fairer?](#)) and have reviewed evidence of the experiences of disabled people across various domains of life in their publication '[Being disabled in Britain: a journey less equal](#)'. These reports provide comprehensive reviews of available data, but are limited in part by the quality of information provided by official statistics.

The UN last examined how well the UK is implementing the UNCRPD and published its [recommendations](#) in August 2017. It highlighted shortcomings in data including, a lack of measures for women and girls with disabilities, disabled people from black and minority ethnic groups, and inclusive education and hate crime experiences. The limited collection and analysis of survey and census data by disability was also noted.

In line with the SDGs, the UN also recommended significantly increasing the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by disability and other protected characteristics. Currently, we are in the process of reporting on all SDG indicators and 75% of the 244 goals have been disaggregated by disability in the UK. These are available on the [SDG data website](#).

A further recommendation was a need for a harmonised measure of disability. The question sets developed by the [UN Washington Group](#) are promoted for global use, particularly where robust measures of disability are not already in existence, but are [considered unsuitable in a UK context](#). The UK has made progress with implementing harmonised principles for the measurement of disability, including:

- the [harmonised principle for long lasting health conditions and illness](#), which focuses on physical or mental health conditions or impairments expected to last for 12 months or more
- the [principle on impairment](#), which focuses on the type of functional deficit(s) which may be associated with an impairment, health condition or illness, such as restricted mobility
- [the principle of activity restriction](#), which focuses on how health conditions and impairments affect people's daily lives

The ONS Centre for Equalities and Inclusion was established in 2017 to ensure that the right data are available to address the main social and policy questions about fairness and equity in society. Their recent [data audit](#) noted limitations in harmonisation and availability of statistics about disabled people. These primarily relate to a lack of consistent use of harmonised principles in data collection.

Previous Official Statistics have collated evidence on outcomes for disabled people. The [Fulfilling Potential](#) outcomes and indicators framework (2015) and the [Work Health and Disability Green Paper evidence pack](#) (2016) both compiled statistics on the lives of disabled people across a range of indicators. However, both sources of evidence are becoming more outdated, and where the data are usually still collected, figures are not always routinely updated or published in a single place.

A primary source of UK-level data on disability, impairment and benefit use is the [Family Resources Survey](#). This routine publication provides robust timely data on prevalence trends and benefit use across the UK, but does not cover wider aspects of disabled people's lives.

In contrast, the [Life Opportunities Survey](#) provided statistics on work, education, social participation, transport, and use of public services. It provided one of the few sources of longitudinal information on disabled people, but data collection ceased in 2014. More up-to-date data providing a longitudinal perspective specifically relating to disability and social barriers to participation are lacking.

As disability is a cross-cutting issue that affects all aspects of life, data about outcomes for disabled people is found on numerous government websites across the four nations of the UK. While Scotland publishes statistics on disability in the [National Performance Framework](#) and [Equality Evidence Finder](#), and Wales reports key summary data on disability in their [Well-being of Wales](#) report, comparable monitoring frameworks are not available across the nations of the UK. Data from each of the devolved nations is also often collected differently, potentially using different definitions of disability and different reporting methods.

Office for National Statistics' (ONS') research programme

While the new reports we have published add to the existing evidence base, they do not address all the limitations of current data. We are proposing an ongoing research programme that aims to improve the evidence base by:

- ensuring appropriate measurement and reporting of the concept of disability, improving comparability across official statistics
- disaggregating wider outcomes by disability and exploring intersections with other protected characteristics to support SDG and UNCRPD aspirations
- using longitudinal analysis to shine a light on the impact of disability over the lifecourse
- supporting a better understanding of the drivers behind the disparities experienced by disabled people
- maximising opportunities from new data sources and linkages

In the shorter term (especially leading up to the 2021 Census) we aim to:

- produce new analysis using existing data to further explore disparities in outcomes; opportunities not captured by the outcomes data reviewed above, include using the National Transport Survey to explore transport use by disabled people, using the GP Patient Survey to understand differences in access to services for disabled and non-disabled people, using the European Health Interview Survey to explore health outcomes for disabled people in greater depth and using existing data to explore associations between disability and poverty
- collect new data to measure social influences such as attitudes towards disabled people
- explore the reasons behind changes in the disability employment gap and influences on wider outcomes by using APS and LFS data
- explore the linkage of census records to Hospital Episode Statistics, Improving Access to Psychological Therapies and All Education Dataset for England; this will enable research into issues such as experiences of care, causes of mortality and education outcomes for disabled children
- use the longitudinal APS to understand flows into and out of disability and associated changes in outcomes and use sources such as the Millennium Cohort Survey to explore education outcomes for disabled children
- In the longer term (mainly after the 2021 Census) we aim to:
 - use the Communal Establishments Census to disaggregate outcomes for disabled people in communal establishments
 - provide statistics at local levels to inform service planning
 - disaggregate disability by factors such as deprivation and socio-economic groupings for the UK
 - conduct new administrative data linkage to compare 2021 and 2011 outcomes in aspects such as causes of mortality

We welcome comments from disabled people, advocacy groups and users as we develop this programme of research. Please get in touch with us at life.course@ons.gov.uk.

7 . Glossary

Disability

To define disability in this publication we refer to the [Government Statistical Service \(GSS\)](#) harmonised “core” definition: This identifies as disabled 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](#). While the Equality Act replaced the DDA in Great Britain, the DDA is still in place in Northern Ireland. Both pieces of legislation define disability in broadly the same way.

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

Impairment

An impairment is defined as any physical or mental health condition or illness lasting or expected to last 12 months or more. Respondents were then asked to select from a list of impairments or conditions and then asked to select their “main health problem”. The commentary in the new outcomes reports refers to the main health problem. Analysis is limited to the 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: Detail of LFS variables](#).