

# **Disability and Social Inequality**

**JULY 2021**



## Introduction

Disability, both physical and mental, has led to extreme social inequality in the UK. Though the disabled make up a small percentage of the population (8% of children, 19% of working-age adults and 44% of pension-age adults) they are significantly disadvantaged in terms of employment, income, housing and more [1]. This has been worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic - with limited access to treatment, increased fear and anxiety and difficulty accessing online services.

This short report looks at the latest available national research and data from the issues which clients bring to us.

## Employment

One of the most prominent issues facing disabled people in the UK is employment. Although the disability employment gap has decreased in recent years, there is still a disproportionate number of disabled people out of work. The latest figures show that 53.2% of disabled people are in employment compared to 81.8% of non-disabled [2]. Those with severe or specific learning difficulties were found to be the least likely to be employed, with only 17.6% in employment in 2019 [2].

The disparity does not begin at employment level, however, as those with disabilities are twice as likely to have no formal qualifications due to lack of support in education [3]. Only 21.8% of disabled people had a degree in 2019 compared to 38% of non-disabled. This affects the long term wellbeing of disabled individuals, as many of those who cannot find employment want to work but are unable to, either due to their disability, lack of qualifications or the stigma surrounding disability in general. One in three of those living with a disability feel that there is prejudice against the disabled in the UK, in comparison to one in five of those without a disability [1]. A large proportion of the population also considers disabled people to be less productive which significantly damages their employment prospects [3].

## Living Costs

In addition to lower income and employment issues, the existing inequality is worsened by the fact that living costs are considerably higher for the disabled. Research carried out in 2019 shows that disabled people acquire extra costs of £585 on average every month as a direct result of their disability [1]. One in five of these people are required to cover extra costs amounting to over £1,000 - this increases to 24% with families who have children with a disability [1]. The costs relate to travel expenses, medication, carers and specialised equipment.

Statistics also show that the proportion of working age disabled people in poverty is higher than that of working age adults with no disability - 26% compared to 20% [1]. This can be attributed to difficulties in employment and also the increased costs of living with a disability - on average, disabled people are required to spend 25% more to cover living costs [3].

There is support available to help those with disabilities who struggle financially including: Personal Independence Payment; Disability Living Allowance; Attendance Allowance; Employment and Support Allowance; Statutory Sick Pay.

## Wellbeing

As well as financial difficulties, disabled people in the UK face many issues in terms of well-being, social participation and loneliness. According to the Annual Population Survey and Community Life Survey, overall happiness and life satisfaction ratings were lower for those with a disability compared to those without. Average anxiety ratings were found to be much higher for disabled people with a rating of 4.27 out of 10 in comparison to 2.66 out of 10 for non-disabled. The surveys also found that 13.3% of disabled people reported feeling lonely 'often or always' which is considerably higher than the 3.4% of non disabled people [2].

This disparity can be attributed to lack of support, financial difficulty, lack of opportunity and prejudice. Scope discovered in 2018 that, in addition to insulting and abusive behaviour aimed at the disabled, disabled people also frequently encountered smaller acts of aggression such as being referred to in the third person or having doors swung back on them [4]. As well as these smaller acts of prejudice, disabled people are the victims of more serious acts in comparison to non-disabled people. From March 2018 to March 2019, 14.1% of disabled adults experienced domestic abuse in comparison to 5.4% of non-disabled adults. Disabled women were also over twice as likely to have experienced domestic abuse.

## Impact of Coronavirus

These social inequalities have been significantly exasperated due to the pandemic. In September 2020, 83% of disabled people reported that they were 'very worried' or 'somewhat worried' about the effect of the pandemic on their life in comparison to 71% of non-disabled people. An anxiety rating of 6 out of 10 or higher was also more common among disabled people and more reported feeling lonely, spending too much time alone, feeling like a burden and having no one to talk to.

While the pandemic has had negative effects in relation to mental health across all demographics, with 56% of the population feeling stressed and anxious and 63% feeling worried about the future, the percentage of people experiencing these negative feelings was consistently higher among the disabled. Significantly, among those who reported that the pandemic had affected their wellbeing, almost half of disabled people indicated that it has directly made their mental health worse. The negative effects of the pandemic on disabled people can be linked to worries about health, access to medication or healthcare not associated with Coronavirus, access to necessities such as food and other essential items and also loneliness as a result of shielding, isolation and lockdowns.

*"Millions spent months shielding, having to battle for basic support like healthcare, supermarket deliveries, financial support and social care."*

James Taylor, Executive Director at Scope

### Impact of Covid on disabled people

**2,604** said mental health had got worse

**2,427** disability had deteriorated

**683** had seen all of their appointments cancelled/unable to attend

**241** had not left house at all

BBC research: 3,351 disabled people questioned

## Disability and Social Inequality in East Herts

Over 14.3% of the population of Hertfordshire has a disability or long term health condition and 17% of adults have a mental health issue [5]. Despite Hertfordshire County Council's commitment to equality and diversity, from 2019 to 2020 5.5% of hate crimes were directed towards the disabled [5]. Additionally, though the number of unemployed and physically disabled or permanently sick people in East Herts makes up only 2% of the population, this group constituted 10% of Citizens Advice East Herts clients from 2019 to 2020 [6]. 24% of these individuals experience a physical impediment while 25% experience disability relating to mental health [7]. The issues that disabled clients contact us on include debt, employment, housing and relationships, which are in line with national statistics regarding problems faced by the disabled. However, the most common issues are benefits, with about 27% of concerns for these clients relating to benefits and tax credits and about 21% relating to universal credit.

The Coronavirus pandemic has also had an impact at a local level in the number of disabled people seeking support. The number of disabled clients helped has fallen in the last 12 months, though we must be mindful of the fact that the recording of special category data (SCD) issues such as disability have fallen significantly since moving to remote working. It can be assumed that the move away from face to face advice may have made it harder for some disabled people to access support. This is largely due to digital capability, with 81% of adults over 75 using a mobile phone, 69% of whom have a long standing illness or disability nationwide, in comparison to 96% of all adults. Digital advice can be especially difficult for those with certain disabilities such as people who are deaf and need adjustments in order to access support [8].

## Conclusion

It is clear that considerable social inequality exists, both at a national and local level, and despite financial support and allowances, the disabled community is still disadvantaged economically and thus more likely to have financial issues, often impacting on mental health. Our new service model means that we can support disabled clients more at their point of need, offering advice via phone, video, online and face to face (including home visits). We provide a textphone service for people who can't hear or speak on the phone and can arrange a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter. Through our Research and Campaigns work, both locally and nationally, we will seek to highlight areas of need and champion equality.

## References

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