



Demographic differences in employment for people with disabilities in the UK

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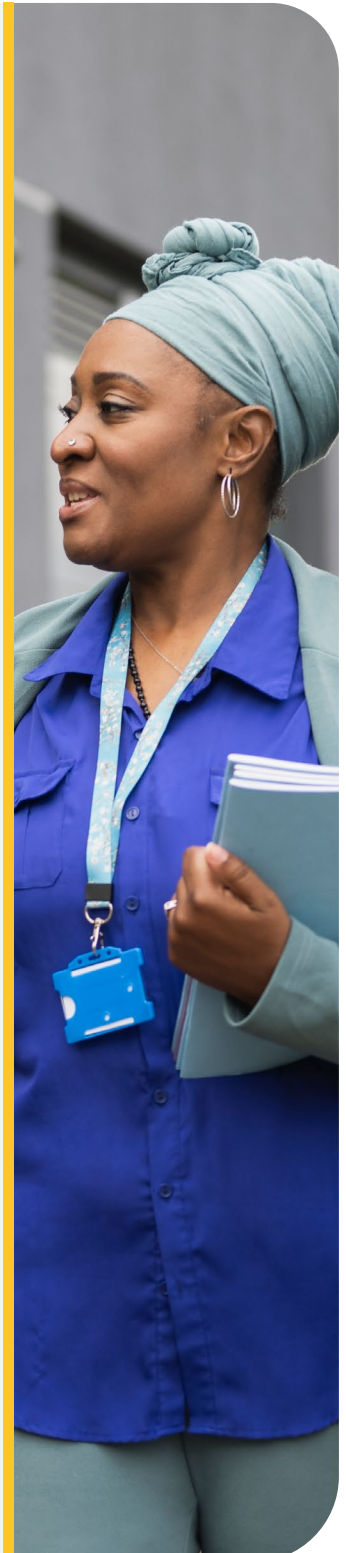
Background

The employment outcomes of specific demographic groups, such as young people, those from minority ethnic backgrounds, and women, have been the subject of much research in recent years. 2020 findings from the Carnegie UK Trust explored an important race equality dimension to labour market participation and experiences, and concluded that minority ethnic groups were more likely than others to be unemployed or in precarious work (Carnegie UK Trust, 2020). Recent research from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) also concluded that young people, despite being more academically qualified than ever, often experience difficult transitions from education into the workplace (CIPD, 2024).

Despite these well-researched and established links between the demographics of age and race and employment outcomes, there has been little research exploring the intersection of these factors with disability. While broader employment statistics provide an overview of the employment rates of people with disabilities in the UK, this study seeks to explore specifically employment outcomes for disabled people through the lenses of age, education, ethnicity, and gender. These demographic factors shape employment opportunities and barriers in distinct ways, influencing pay gaps, occupational distributions, industry representation, and overall job stability for disabled workers.

Understanding the intersection of disability with other demographic factors is particularly critical in identifying employment patterns, and the interventions that can be made to support improvements. Differences in industry representation, accessibility of career progression, and the types of roles available to disabled individuals are all shaped by the wider socio-economic landscape. Disparities in employment outcomes are not solely the result of individual characteristics; they are also driven by systemic challenges, including employer biases (IZA Institute of Labour Economics, 2024), educational inequalities (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO), 2023), and sector-specific barriers that limit the career trajectories of disabled workers. Understanding the demographic factors of age, education, ethnicity, and gender is essential for developing targeted employment policies that address the unique challenges faced by different groups within the disabled population.

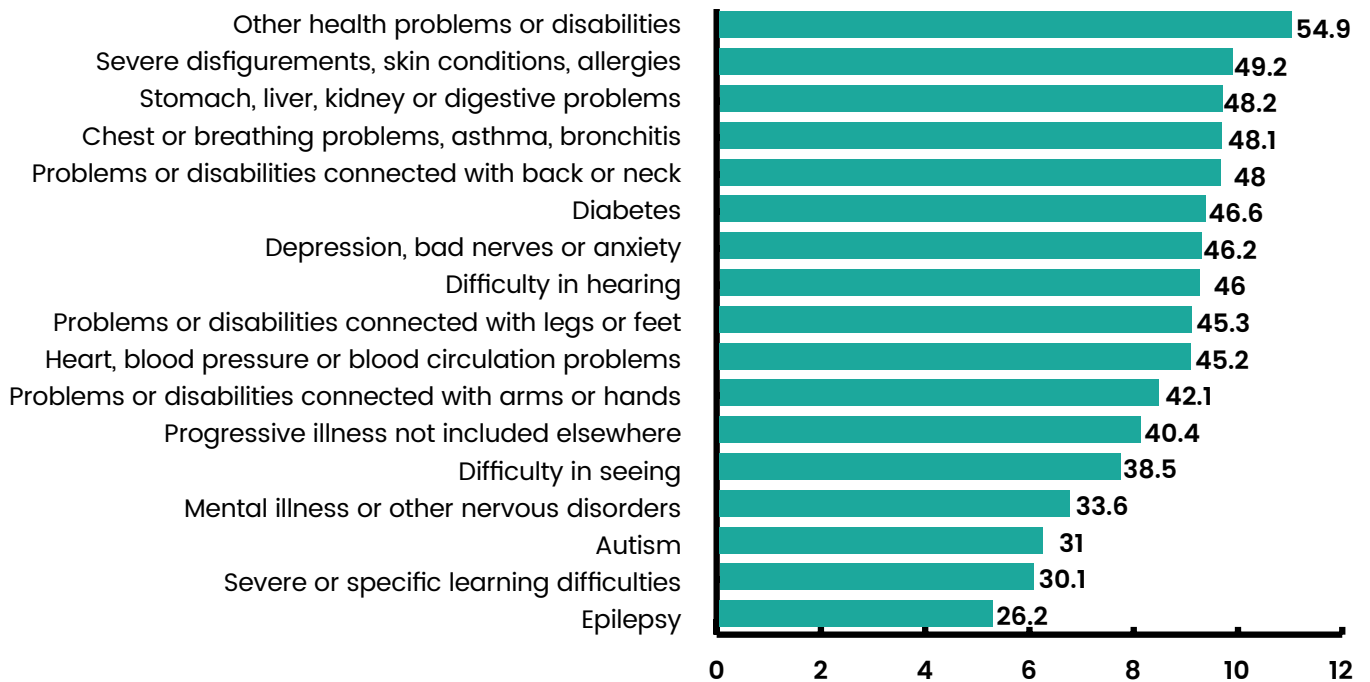
This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of these disparities in employment outcomes, highlighting key employment trends and their implications for disability employment policy. By synthesising quantitative data with critical reflection on broader labour market dynamics, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the systemic and structural factors that underpin employment inequalities for disabled individuals in the UK.





Health conditions and employment rates

Employment rates for people with disabilities varies by condition. Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) data reveals that 50.5% of those with musculoskeletal conditions were in employment in 2023–24, compared to 45.1% of individuals with mental health conditions (DWP, 2024). It is important to note that whilst individuals with severe or specific learning difficulties are included in the data, data on people with wider special educational needs is absent, indicating an area where more research is needed. The chart below outlines the percentage of people in employment by health condition.





Our approach

This analysis draws upon multiple open-source datasets, primarily using data from the 2023–24 period. The DWP's *Employment of Disabled People 2024* serves as the principal source of data, offering employment rates and self-reported wellbeing scores for disabled and non-disabled people in the UK. For the purposes of this analysis, wellbeing data has been gathered from self-reported survey data, and a single composite wellbeing metric has been developed by combining individual scores for metrics including satisfaction, happiness, a sense of worth, and anxiety. All wellbeing and employment rate data presented in this working paper is taken from the 2023–24 period, which was the latest available data at the time of publication.

Pay gap data has been sourced from the *Raw Disability Pay Gaps, UK* dataset, published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) via the Annual Population Survey. Pay gap data has been drawn from the years 2021 to 2023, to increase the sample size of the relevant data, during which period the UK experienced high inflation. Additional data from the Annual Population Survey has been utilised to analyse employment distribution across different industries and occupations at the local authority level.

The methodology adopted for this research ensures that data is examined in a way that identifies disparities across demographic groups. We carried out a comparative analysis to highlight differences in employment rates, pay gaps, and industry representation across key demographic variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, and education. To ensure robustness, our findings have been assessed in relation to broader labour market trends and economic conditions.

The study acknowledges that while large-scale datasets provide valuable quantitative insights, they do not always capture the full complexity of lived experiences. Therefore, this research calls for future work that incorporates qualitative perspectives, such as interviews and case studies, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by disabled workers.

Key findings

A demographic analysis of disabled employment in the UK reveals distinct trends and inequalities that shape the labour market experiences of disabled individuals. While broad employment patterns provide a useful overview, the intersection of disability with age, education, ethnicity, and gender creates nuanced challenges that demand targeted interventions. These findings highlight not only disparities in employment rates and pay but also deeper structural issues related to accessibility, workplace culture, and long-term career sustainability.

Age and employment outcomes

Employment rates for disabled individuals follow a trajectory similar to that of non-disabled individuals, increasing with age before peaking in mid-life and declining in later years. However, key differences emerge when comparing employment rates across age groups.

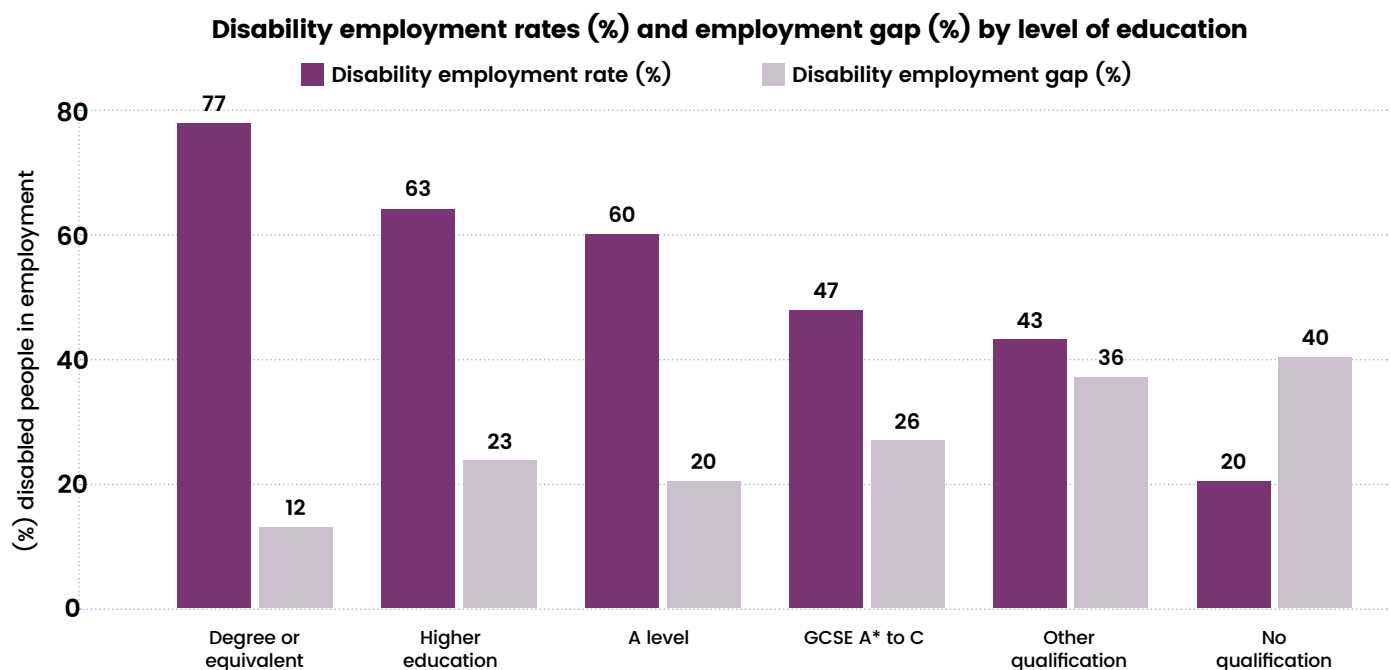
Employment rates for disabled individuals peak at around 64% in the 25–34 and 35–49 age bands. Beyond the age of 50, employment declines significantly, with only 49% of disabled people remaining in employment, compared to 81% of non-disabled people in the same age bracket. This drop-off suggests that health conditions associated with ageing exacerbate employment barriers, leading to an earlier withdrawal from the labour market for disabled individuals.



Interestingly, disabled individuals who remain in employment beyond the age of 50 report higher wellbeing levels than younger disabled workers, despite the overall employment rate decline. This may suggest that employers who successfully accommodate older disabled workers provide better job security, accessibility, and support structures, leading to a more positive employment experience. Conversely, the largest gap in wellbeing between disabled and non-disabled workers is observed among the youngest working population (aged 16 to 17), indicating that younger disabled workers may face additional challenges related to workplace inclusion, training opportunities, and early-career development. A lack of adequate entry-level support and accommodations for young disabled workers may contribute to this disparity.

Education and employment prospects

A strong correlation exists between educational attainment and employment rates among disabled workers. Disabled individuals with a degree-level qualification have an employment rate of 77%, which is significantly higher than those with only A levels (60%) or GCSEs (47%). The employment gap between disabled and non-disabled individuals narrows at higher levels of education, standing at just 12% for those with degrees. This suggests that higher education acts as a levelling force, providing greater access to skilled, higher-paying jobs that may offer better accommodations and workplace flexibility for disabled individuals.



However, the sharp contrast in employment outcomes for disabled individuals with no formal qualifications, where only 20% are employed compared to 60% of non-disabled individuals, underscores the importance of early intervention in education. The barriers preventing disabled individuals from accessing higher education – including financial constraints, a lack of accessible learning environments, and inadequate support services – have long-term ramifications for employment opportunities. Policy interventions that increase accessibility in both further and higher education, as well as vocational training, could help bridge this employment gap. Additionally, employers must recognise the value of experience-based qualifications, and support alternative career pathways that do not rely solely on formal education.



Industry and occupational trends by age

Employment patterns among disabled workers shift significantly by age, reflecting changes in industry demand, career progression opportunities, and the physical demands of certain jobs. Younger disabled workers (aged 16 to 34) are more likely to be employed in industry sectors such as accommodation and food services (8.2%), and arts and recreation (8.9%). These sectors typically offer more entry-level positions but may also present challenges in job security, career advancement, and workplace accommodations.

By contrast, older disabled workers (35 to 64) are more likely to work in education, construction, and manufacturing, with 25.9% employed in these industries compared to just 18.1% of younger disabled workers. This shift could imply that disabled workers who remain employed into mid-life may be more likely to secure roles in sectors that offer stability and professional development opportunities. However, the concentration of disabled workers in physically demanding industries, such as construction and manufacturing, raises concerns about workplace accessibility and the availability of reasonable adjustments for those with mobility or long-term health conditions.

Similarly, occupation types change as disabled workers age. Among younger disabled individuals (16 to 24), the largest employment category is elementary occupations (consisting of simple and routine tasks), accounting for 26% of employment in this age group. This percentage declines significantly with age, falling to just 10% in the 25 to 34 age group. In contrast, employment in professional and technical occupations increases with age, from 13.1% among younger disabled workers to over 26% in the 25 to 49 age group. This shift may suggest that career progression is possible for disabled individuals, but it also highlights limited early-career opportunities. The transition from lower-skilled jobs to professional roles requires sustained support, mentorship, and access to training – factors that remain unevenly distributed across industries. Alternatively, this difference in occupational employment could imply generational shifts in work preferences and attitudes. Further research is required to better understand the nature of these shifts in occupation with age, and draw conclusions.





The disability pay gap across age groups

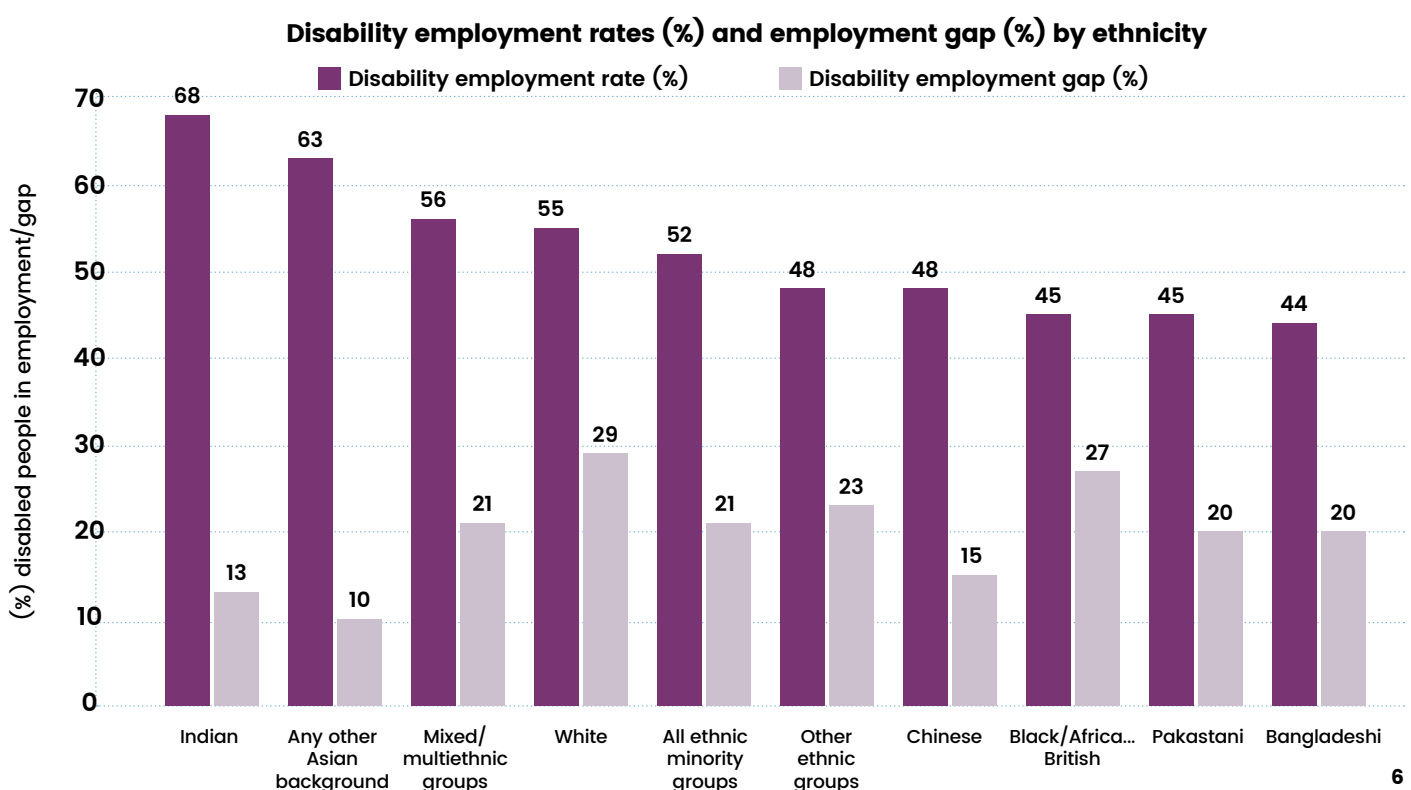
The disability pay gap widens with age before narrowing again in later years, reflecting a complex interaction between career progression, employer biases, and job security. Analysis of pay rates from 2021 to 2023 shows that the pay gap is minimal for younger workers (0.3% for ages 16 to 19) but steadily increases with age, peaking at 17.5% for those aged 45 to 49. This widening pay gap suggests that disabled workers face increasing wage disadvantages as they progress through their careers.

Several factors may contribute to this trend. Disabled individuals may experience slower career progression due to discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, reduced access to leadership roles, and an overrepresentation in lower-paying, part-time, or precarious employment. Indeed, research undertaken by EDT in a separate working paper ('Wellbeing and fair pay, or plentiful work? The dilemmas facing disabled people in the world of work'), highlighted this challenge specifically. Additionally, the impact of long-term health conditions may lead to more frequent employment breaks, career interruptions, or the need for more flexible working arrangements, all of which can limit earning potential. As workers reach their 50s and 60s, the pay gap decreases, falling to 7.8% for those aged 60 to 64. This may reflect the fact that those who remain employed later in life are more likely to be in stable, well-paying jobs, while those facing greater employment difficulties may have already exited the workforce.

The implications of these trends are significant. The increasing pay gap during peak working years means that disabled workers are accumulating lower lifetime earnings, reducing their financial security and retirement savings. Addressing this issue requires a multi-pronged approach, including pay transparency initiatives, employer accountability measures, and stronger enforcement of equal pay laws. Additionally, greater access to career development programmes and workplace accommodations can help prevent the career stagnation that contributes to widening wage disparities.

Ethnicity and employment outcomes

Disability employment rates vary significantly by ethnicity, reflecting broader structural inequalities in both disability and labour market access. Individuals with disabilities in the UK of Indian extraction have the highest employment rate among ethnic groups, at 68%, with a relatively low disability employment gap of 13%. This suggests that cultural factors, educational attainment, and industry representation may contribute to stronger employment outcomes for this group. However, these trends are not equally observed across other Asian minority ethnic groups.





By contrast, disabled individuals of Chinese, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi backgrounds experience some of the lowest employment rates (between 44% and 48%), with higher disability employment gaps. These disparities may be driven by a combination of factors, including limited access to professional networks, greater representation in industries with fewer workplace accommodations, and systemic discrimination in hiring practices. Black disabled workers also experience substantial employment disadvantages, with an employment rate of just 45% and a high disability employment gap of 27%. Interestingly, while White disabled workers have higher employment rates, they also experience the largest disability employment gap (29%), highlighting the relative advantage that non-disabled White workers hold in the job market compared to their disabled counterparts.

These trends indicate that the intersection of ethnicity and disability is complex, shaping employment prospects in ways that require targeted policy interventions. Increasing employer awareness of intersectional inequalities and improving pathways into stable employment for disabled individuals from underrepresented ethnic backgrounds should be priorities for labour market policies. Further research is also required to better understand the sharp differences in employment rates and gaps across Asian ethnic groups.

Pay and wellbeing disparities by ethnicity

The disability pay gap is largest for White disabled workers (14.2%), followed by Asian or Asian British workers (11.1%). Black disabled workers experience the lowest pay gap (1.5%) compared to non-disabled Black workers. While this might suggest a more equitable pay structure within Black communities, it is important to consider that Black disabled workers also have among the lowest overall employment rates, which may mean that only those with higher qualifications and experience are securing jobs, reducing observed pay disparities. This finding may also in part be due to lower overall pay rates for Black non-disabled workers, which could minimise the pay gap.

Wellbeing scores also vary by ethnicity. Chinese disabled workers report the highest wellbeing among employed disabled individuals, with no significant difference in wellbeing scores between disabled and non-disabled Chinese workers. This trend differs from all other ethnic groups, where a wellbeing gap persists between employed disabled and non-disabled workers. The reasons behind these wellbeing disparities are not entirely clear, but they may be linked to differences in workplace culture, social support systems, and industry representation. Employers must acknowledge that wellbeing is not solely tied to income but also to workplace experiences, career stability, and job satisfaction. Addressing these disparities requires a focus on fostering inclusive workplace cultures that prioritise mental health and fair treatment across all demographic groups.





Gender and disability in the workplace

Employment rates for disabled men and women are similar, averaging around 55%. However, men experience a larger disability employment gap (30%) than women (24%), largely due to the higher baseline employment rate of non-disabled men compared to non-disabled women. This suggests that traditional male-dominated industries, such as construction and manufacturing, may be less accommodating for disabled workers, whereas sectors with higher female representation, such as healthcare and education, may provide better support structures.

Both disabled men and women report similar levels of wellbeing in employment, although disabled men in employment are more likely to score lower on self-reported wellbeing than disabled women, and women scored higher in relation to anxiety. Disabled men and women in employment score lower across all wellbeing and anxiety scores than their non-disabled counterparts, with the starkest differences noted in anxiety levels. Disabled women in employment scored 4.45 compared to non-disabled women in employment scoring 3.06, with the disabled and non-disabled men in employment scoring 3.86 and 2.70 for anxiety, respectively (on a 10-point scale where 10 is “completely anxious”).

The disability pay gap is larger for men (14.3%) than for women (9.6%); this difference may partly be explained by the significantly different industry and occupational work habits of men and women. More men are employed in process and plant operation roles and in skilled trades than women; skilled trades is an occupation with one of the highest pay gaps between disabled and non-disabled workers (7.6%). By contrast, disabled women are far more frequently employed in administrative and secretarial roles, as well as in caring and leisure service roles. The latter had the lowest disability pay gap of all occupation areas between 2021 and 2023, at 0.2%.

Given that disabled men are more likely to work in higher-paying industries where progression is often competitive, it is possible that disabled men may be exposed to some occupation-specific barriers to advancement, to which disabled women are less exposed. Addressing these issues requires sector-specific policy responses, ensuring that all industries implement fair employment practices and provide equitable opportunities for career progression.





Implications for policy and practice

Targeted support for older disabled workers: Given the sharp employment decline after the age of 50, policies should focus on job retention strategies, flexible working arrangements, and health-related accommodations to support older disabled workers. Moreover, focus should be given to career development programmes and workplace accommodations that can help prevent career stagnation, which contributes to widening wage disparities.

Improving educational access and training: Expanding access to higher education and vocational training opportunities for disabled individuals would improve long-term employment outcomes.

Industry and occupational inclusion strategies: Employers should be encouraged to diversify recruitment efforts to ensure that younger disabled workers have access to professional and technical career paths.

Reducing the disability pay gap: Pay transparency policies and wage equity initiatives should be prioritised, to address the widening pay gap that disproportionately affects disabled workers as they age. Better employer accountability measures need to be instituted to ensure that equal pay laws are enforced.

Addressing ethnic disparities in disability employment: Targeted interventions for ethnic minority disabled populations should be developed to reduce structural inequalities in access to employment and career progression.

Enhancing workplace wellbeing: Employers should prioritise mental health support, workplace inclusivity, and reasonable adjustments, to improve wellbeing outcomes for disabled workers across all demographic groups.



Limitations and recommendations for future research

While this study provides a broad overview of demographic disparities in disabled employment, further research is needed to explore causality, employer perspectives, and long-term trends. Several questions emerge from this study, which could be more definitively explored in further research, for example through a longitudinal treatment of the data.

The first of these questions concerns the relationship between age and employment by occupation for disabled people. Younger disabled people are found to be employed more in temporary and elementary occupations. As disabled workers age, their occupational preferences shift, and they take on more employment in higher earning professional and technical roles. This study has not analysed this trend longitudinally to confirm whether this is a natural shift which takes place, as younger people take on more skills and education, or whether there are current obstacles in place which prevent young working disabled people from enhancing their early career development.

Our study has examined the relationship between ethnicity and a variety of employment outcomes, revealing findings which are worthy of further study. We have identified that further research is required to better understand the sharp differences in employment rates and gaps across Asian ethnic groups, as South Asian ethnic groups show very different disability employment outcomes. In general, employment rates for minority ethnic disabled populations tend to be lower, so it would be valuable to understand the reasons for this, and the targeted interventions which can be made. To this end, additional intersectional analysis incorporating socio-economic background, education history, and geographic differences could provide deeper insights into the structural barriers faced by different demographic groups.

Finally, the research would benefit from understanding the perspective of employers. We have not undertaken a qualitative assessment through surveys or interviews to understand employer-side dynamics. This is an important perspective if we are to develop a better understanding of the underlying relationships between disability and employment outcomes.



Conclusions

This research highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of demographic disparities in employment outcomes for people with disabilities in the UK. Age, education, ethnicity, and gender each play a significant role in shaping employment opportunities and challenges for disabled workers. However, these disparities are not simply the result of individual choices or abilities; they are deeply embedded in systemic structures that govern access to education, employment, and career progression.

The findings indicate that while educational attainment can serve as a key leveller for employment outcomes, access to higher education and vocational training remains uneven, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, while career progression is possible for many disabled individuals, barriers such as employer discrimination, lack of workplace accommodations, and industry-specific constraints hinder long-term career growth. The widening disability pay gap across age groups further underscores the compounding effects of these barriers over time.

Additionally, the intersectionality of disability with other demographic characteristics, such as ethnicity, presents unique challenges that cannot be addressed with a one-size-fits-all approach. Ethnic minority disabled individuals often face additional layers of disadvantage, requiring more tailored interventions that consider cultural, economic, and geographic factors.

Policymakers and employers must take a holistic approach to tackling these disparities, focusing not just on increasing employment rates but also on improving the quality of work, career progression, and economic security for disabled individuals. Interventions should be informed by both data-driven insights and the qualitative experiences of disabled workers to ensure that solutions address the root causes of inequality rather than just the symptoms. Addressing the disparities identified in this research will require innovative policy solutions, and a shift in employer attitudes towards disability inclusion.

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