

User's guide to disability estimates and definitions

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This guide outlines the Department for Work and Pensions' position in the area of disability estimates in response to findings from a *review of disability estimates and definitions* (Bajekal et al, DWP In-house report 128, 2003). The review explored, for a group of key surveys, the definitions of disability used; their methodological validity; and the reasons for differences between the estimates produced by them. This guide aims to help users of estimates understand what causes differences between estimates and what criteria they can use to judge which estimate best meets their needs.

Key points

- There is no single or 'gold standard' measure or estimate of disability.
- DWP's core estimates of the prevalence of disability are as follows. (See box 1 for explanation of the various definitions of disability):
 - **There are about 10 million adults** in Britain covered by the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) from the Family Resources Survey 2002/3.¹
 - **There are about 6.9 million people of working age** with a long-term disability from the Labour Force Survey spring 2003.² Long-Term disability is the measure used for the DWP's Public Service Agreement on employment and disability and consists of people who have a disability that affects the amount or type of work they could do (work

limiting disability) and people with a disability likely to be covered by the DDA.

- DWP is working with the Department for Education and Skills to produce a meaningful and reliable estimate of the number of disabled children. Later editions of this guide will include this when it becomes available.

If you need an estimate for another definition of disability and/or group (or *population*) see the table on page 4.

- Previously, the estimate of the **adult disabled population** from the Disability Survey 1996/7 which produced a figure of 8.6 million or 20 per cent (Grundy et al 1999) was widely used. DWP recommends this estimate is no longer used as it is based on an outdated definition of disability and data from 1996/97 it is therefore out of step with moves towards a model of disability that reflects the definition in the DDA and thus has more relevance to today's Britain. Instead. Estimates of the population covered by the DDA have more relevance to today's Britain.
- The scope of the provisions of the DDA could change over time. For example, the draft Disability Discrimination Bill includes proposals to extend its protection to more people with HIV, cancer and multi-sclerosis. Similarly, the way in which the population covered by the DDA is measured could also change over time. To ensure up to date estimates are available, the estimate will be updated annually.

¹ All adults (excluding 'dependent children' aged 16 years and under or aged 16 – 18 years who are single, in full time non-advanced education and living at home).

² All men aged 16 to 64 years and all women aged 16 – 59 years.

Why is there more than one estimate of the prevalence of disability?

Different estimates of the disabled population are needed for different definitions of disability (**What** is being measured) and populations (**Who** is being measured). When selecting an estimate, users must consider the **purpose** of the information they require and **who** they want to include. They should also identify any technical limitations of the data. See table 1 on page 4 to select the appropriate estimate.

Why disability is difficult to measure?

Disability is a complex phenomenon to measure for a number of reasons. People's understanding of definitions of disability and the concept of disability itself vary: It is possible for one person to define themselves as disabled when another person with an identical condition would not. One reason for this can be a perception that 'disabled' is a stigmatising label.

Some surveys are less accessible for people with certain types of disability – for example a self completion questionnaire may be less accessible to someone with a visual impairment. As a result some surveys may underestimate the populations of certain impairment groups.

Certain types of disability are fluctuating, with levels of severity that vary over time. Respondents might classify themselves as non-disabled at the time of the interview if they are not experiencing a severe phase of their disability.

How far do survey estimates vary?

Although there are a variety of estimates available, for people of **working age**, estimates produced using the different definitions vary in a way that is expected; Broader definitions should (and do) produce larger estimates because they include more people.

There is also, however, variation between surveys using the same definition (caused by differences in **How** disability is measured).

Estimates of long-term disability have remained fairly stable over time but are sensitive to societal influences on self-reporting behaviour, for example how acceptable being disabled is believed to be.

Why is there variation in estimates?

Variation in estimates of disability may be caused by a number of factors. These include variation in:

What is being measured. Different *definitions* of disability are used for different purposes. See box 1 for explanation of these definitions

Who is being measured. For example, estimates might be for all those of working age or all adults in Great Britain.

How disability is measured. The final estimate can be affected by differences in the way questions are worded (even for the same definition of disability), who commissioned the survey and how the result of the survey (in per cent) is turned into an estimate of the actual number of disabled people.

Which estimates should I use?

The following questions and the table below will help you select the most appropriate estimate to use:

- **Who** do you want to include? Table 1 divides available estimates into the two *sub-populations* – working age and total population and also includes the only currently available, recent estimate of the number of disabled children.
- **What** do you want to estimate? Box 1 identifies which **definition** of disability to adopt. For example do you want to estimate those covered by the Disability Discrimination Act or those with a disability that restrict the amount or type of work they can do.
- Do you want any **other** information about the disabled population? Some surveys include estimates of the disabled population broken down by other characteristics such as ethnicity, Government region or small areas as shown in Table 1.

The future of estimates

Estimates of disability are used for a variety of reasons, including policy evaluation and convincing others of the need to change their practices, both within and outside government. Reducing the influence of methodological differences between surveys will allow a clearer view of the changes in disability over time. The government is committed to improving the way we measure disability by:

- **developing standard questions for use across surveys** to allow greater harmonisation and more cross-survey analysis. These questions will be cognitively tested to allow analysts to understand how respondents interpret them;
- **commissioning a feasibility study for longitudinal analysis of health and disability**. This will consider whether we can validate a series of estimates from a single source and collect information about disability over time.

Box 1: definitions of disability

Disability Discrimination Act: A (or multiple) long-term health problem or disability that substantially limits a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

Work-Limiting Disability: A long-term health problem or disability that affects the *amount* or *type* of work a person can do.

Long Term Disabled: This is the definition of disability used for the DWP's Public Service Agreement on employment. It includes everyone with a **Work Limiting Disability** and/ or a **disability covered by the DDA**.

Limiting Long-Standing Illness: An illness, disability or infirmity that is longstanding (has troubled someone over a period of time or is likely to) and limits their activities in any way.

International Classification of Illnesses, Disabilities and Handicaps: A restriction or lack of ability to perform normal activities which has resulted from the impairment of a structure or function of the body or mind. This definition has now been replaced by the **International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health** which includes a set of environmental/ societal factors.

This User's Guide will be regularly updated with the latest estimates of the prevalence of disability. The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions and is available from Paul Noakes, Social Research Division, 4th Floor, The Adelphi, 1-11 John Adam Street, London, WC2N 6HT.

E-mail: Paul.Noakes@dwp.gsi.gov.uk
(In-house report 128: A review of disability estimates and definitions).

You can also download this guide, report and other research reports in the In-house series from www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/

Table 1: Choosing an appropriate estimate

Population	Definition	Main estimate to use	Other circumstances	Source(s)
All adults in GB	DDA	22% (9.8 million) from the FRS (2002/3)		LFS www.statistics.gov.uk FRS www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/frs
	LLSI	22% (9.8 million) from the FRS (2002/3)	For long term trends use the GHS (19% for 2001), for a breakdown by ethnicity, age or area use the Census	FRS www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/frs GHS www.statistics.gov.uk/lib2001/index Census: www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/
	ICIDH	20% (8.6 million) from the disability surveys 1996/7		Grundy et al 1999 'Disability in Great Britain' Research Report 94. Department of Social Security.
Working age	DDA	16% (5.7 million) from the LFS (spring 2003)	For a breakdown by ethnicity, age or Government region use LFS	LFS www.statistics.gov.uk
	Long-term disabled	19% (6.9 million) from the LFS (spring 2003)	For a breakdown by ethnicity, age or Government region use LFS	LFS www.statistics.gov.uk
	WLD	15% (5.4 million)LFS (spring 2003)	For a breakdown by ethnicity, age or Government region use LFS	LFS www.statistics.gov.uk
	LLSI	16% (5.4 million) from the FRS (2002/3)	For a breakdown by locality use the census 2001	FRS www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/frs Census: www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/