



Briefing Note: Defining Disability in Government Surveys

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The definition of disability in law

The basic wording of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and Equality Act (2010) is very similar:

a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on his ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities (DDA 1995).

a physical or mental impairment and the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities (Equality Act 2010).

The definition of disability in government surveys

The definition of disability used in government surveys changed from 2010 onwards as a result of 'harmonisation' across surveys. The purpose was to promote compatibility and to reduce confusion where different surveys produce different statistics.

We start by looking at the disability questions in different surveys prior to harmonisation and follow up with the Labour Force Survey question after harmonisation (implemented in April 2013).

(i) Pre-harmonisation disability questions

In the Labour Force Survey (LFS) 1998-2012, disability is measured by positive responses to two self-assessed questions. The language of the questions comes from the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1996.

1. *Do you have any health problems or disabilities that you expect will last for more than a year? Yes/No*

If Yes:

2. *Do these health problems or disabilities, when taken singly or together, substantially limit your ability to carry out normal day to day activities? Yes/No*

Yes is required to both questions for a person to be classified as disabled. The non-disabled either answer No (Q1) or, Yes (Q1) and No (Q2).

Guidance for interviewers and respondents as to classification on question 2 is provided. This guidance is a summary of the list of capacities specified in the DDA (Sections D15 to D27, see Appendix 1). The criteria capture functional limitation.

Question wording is different in the Health Survey for England (HSE) and the General Household Survey (GHS) (discontinued). Neither of these surveys provide guidance notes for responding to the disability questions. Yes is required to both questions for a person to be classified as disabled.

THE HSE AND GHS DISABILITY QUESTIONS

1. *Do you have any long-standing illness, disability or infirmity? By long-standing I mean anything that has troubled you over a period of time, or that is likely to affect you over a period of time?*

If Yes:

2. *Does this illness or disability/do any of these illnesses or disabilities limit your activities in anyway?*

The Workplace Employment Relations Survey combines both into a single question where disability is typically defined as the aggregation of ‘Yes, limited a little’, ‘Yes, limited a lot’.

THE WORKPLACE EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS SURVEY DISABILITY QUESTION

Are your day-to-day activities limited because of a health problem or disability which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months?’. ‘Yes, limited a little’, ‘Yes, limited a lot’, ‘No’.

Each question is seeking to capture the same concept: an activity-limiting impairment. Responses are shown to be very sensitive to question, context and data collection methods and this creates differences in disability prevalence rates and employment gaps across surveys and can lead to debate about the size of each. Given sensitivity to question wording, inter-survey differences in rates and gaps are to be expected and can sometimes be explained by context, questions and survey method. These differences provided the motivation towards harmonising disability questions across government surveys.

(ii) Post-harmonisation questions in the LFS

The main disability questions in the LFS were re-worded in 2013 and is now more similar to that in the HSE.

THE 2013 LFS DISABILITY QUESTION

1. *Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expecting to last 12 months or more?*

If Yes:

2. *Does your condition or illness reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities?*

Yes, a little; Yes, a lot; and Not at all.

Disability is defined as Yes (Q1), followed by Yes, a little or Yes, a lot (Q2). The new LFS disability definition is broader. Although designed to better capture disability as defined in the Equality Act, there is no reference to 'substantial limitation' or to 'normal day-to-day activity' and no reference to 'disability'. It is less precise and more subjective because the guidance notes available in the pre-2013 LFS to assist respondents and interviewers make the disability classification in question 2 was removed.

Points to note for data collectors

These questions are designed to align to legislation and so capture employees who would qualify for support under the Equality Act.

The harmonised question is based on a social (as opposed to medical/functional) definition of disability reflected the purpose of the legislation. This means that the questions are broad and subjective. Responses may change over time as social understanding changes.

Consistency with definitions in nationally representative surveys: This allows the organisation to benchmark with nationally representative statistics both at the aggregate level and for sub-groups.

Continuity over time: changing definitions of disability has an adverse impact on building a body of quantitative research around disability trends. A change in question without any means to adjust for its effects (such as asking the old and new questions in the same survey for a while) precludes effective long-term evaluation of policy and practice interventions implemented before the change.

Further information from:

Who counts as disabled?

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/96511/1/CLOSING%20DISABILITY%20GAPS%20AT%20WORK%20Ralph%20Fevre%20et%20al.pdf>

Appendix 1: LFS Guidance Notes for DDA definition of disability (prior to 2013)

Mobility – for example, unable to travel short journeys as a passenger in a car, unable to walk other than at a slow pace or with jerky movements, difficulty in negotiating stairs, unable to use one or more forms of public transport, unable to go out of doors unaccompanied.

Manual dexterity – for example, loss of functioning in one or both hands, inability to use a knife and fork at the same time, or difficulty in pressing buttons on a keyboard

Physical co-ordination – for example, the inability to feed or dress oneself; or to pour liquid from one vessel to another except with unusual slowness or concentration.

Problems with bowel/bladder control – for example, frequent or regular loss of control of the bladder or bowel. Occasional bedwetting is not considered a disability.

Ability to lift, carry or otherwise move everyday objects (for example, books, kettles, light furniture) – for example, inability to pick up a weight with one hand but not the other, or to carry a tray steadily.

Speech – for example, unable to communicate (clearly) orally with others, taking significantly longer to say things. A minor stutter, difficulty in speaking in front of an audience, or inability to speak a foreign language would not be considered impairments.

Hearing – for example, not being able to hear without the use of a hearing aid, the inability to understand speech under normal conditions or over the telephone.

Eyesight – for example, while wearing spectacles or contact lenses – being unable to pass the standard driving eyesight test, total inability to distinguish colours (excluding ordinary red/green colour blindness), or inability to read newsprint.

Memory or ability to concentrate, learn or understand – for example, intermittent loss of consciousness or confused behaviour, inability to remember names of family or friends, unable to write a cheque without assistance, or an inability to follow a recipe

Perception of risk of physical danger – for example, reckless behaviour putting oneself or others at risk, mobility to cross the road safely. This excludes (significant) fear of heights or underestimating risk of dangerous hobbies.

Examples of impairment type in the LFS

Do you have...

Code all that apply

1 problems or disabilities (including arthritis or rheumatism) connected with your arms or hands?

2 ...legs or feet? 3

...back or neck?

4 difficulty in seeing (while wearing spectacles or contact lenses)?

5 difficulty in hearing?

6 a speech impediment?

7 severe disfigurements, skin conditions, allergies?

8 chest or breathing problems, asthma, bronchitis?

9 heart, blood pressure or blood circulation problems?

10 stomach, liver, kidney or digestive problems?

11 Diabetes?

12 depression, bad nerves or anxiety?

13 Epilepsy?

14 severe or specific learning difficulties?

15 mental illness or suffer from phobias, panics or other nervous disorders?

16 progressive illness not included elsewhere (eg cancer not included elsewhere, multiple sclerosis, symptomatic HIV, Parkinson's disease, Muscular Dystrophy)?

17 other health problems or disabilities?

Which of these is your main health problem/disability?

1 problems or disabilities (including arthritis or rheumatism) connected with your arms or hands?

2 ...legs or feet? 3

...back or neck?

4 difficulty in seeing (while wearing spectacles or contact lenses)?

5 difficulty in hearing?

6 a speech impediment?

- 7 severe disfigurements, skin conditions, allergies?
- 8 chest or breathing problems, asthma, bronchitis?
- 9 heart, blood pressure or blood circulation problems?
- 10 stomach, liver, kidney or digestive problems?
- 11 diabetes?
- 12 depression, bad nerves or anxiety?
- 13 epilepsy?
- 14 severe or specific learning difficulties?
- 15 mental illness or suffer from phobias, panics or other nervous disorders?
- 16 progressive illness not included elsewhere (eg cancer not included elsewhere, multiple sclerosis, symptomatic HIV, Parkinson's disease, Muscular Dystrophy)?
- 17 other health problems or disabilities?

Washington Group Short set of questions (identifies limitations rather than conditions)

<http://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/washington-group-question-sets/short-set-of-disability-questions/>

The next questions ask about difficulties you may have doing certain activities because of a HEALTH PROBLEM.

1. Do you have difficulty seeing, even if wearing glasses?
 - a. No - no difficulty
 - b. Yes – some difficulty
 - c. Yes – a lot of difficulty
 - d. Cannot do at all

2. Do you have difficulty hearing, even if using a hearing aid?
 - a. No- no difficulty
 - b. Yes – some difficulty
 - c. Yes – a lot of difficulty
 - d. Cannot do at all

3. Do you have difficulty walking or climbing steps?
 - a. No- no difficulty
 - b. b. Yes – some difficulty
 - c. c. Yes – a lot of difficulty
 - d. d. Cannot do at all

4. Do you have difficulty remembering or concentrating?
 - a. No – no difficulty
 - b. Yes – some difficulty
 - c. Yes – a lot of difficulty
 - d. Cannot do at all

5. Do you have difficulty (with self-care such as) washing all over or dressing?
 - a. No – no difficulty
 - b. Yes – some difficulty
 - c. Yes – a lot of difficulty
 - d. Cannot do at all

6. Using your usual (customary) language, do you have difficulty communicating, for example understanding or being understood?
 - a. No – no difficulty
 - b. Yes – some difficulty
 - c. Yes – a lot of difficulty
 - d. Cannot do at all