Employment-related COVID-19 exposure risk among disabled people in the UK

Andrew Bryce, University of Sheffield
a.m.bryce@sheffield.ac.uk

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Coauthors:
Mark Bryan, University of Sheffield
Jennifer Roberts, University of Sheffield
Summary

• Workplaces are fertile territory for the transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus which causes COVID-19
• In the UK, disabled people were significantly less likely to work from home and more likely to be working outside the home during the pandemic
• Disabled people were also more highly concentrated in occupations with high risk of exposure to COVID-19
• Adds to evidence that disabled people experienced a particularly raw deal during the pandemic and helps to explain why three in five people who died from COVID-19 were disabled
Same storm, different boat!

- Disabled people accounted for 60% of COVID-19 deaths in the UK
- Even taking account of age and underlying health conditions (clinical vulnerability), disabled people had higher rates of death so were clearly more exposed to the virus
Data

• We use the ‘covid’ waves in Understanding Society: The UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) – monthly / bi-monthly surveys throughout the pandemic
• Data on whether they were employed, number of hours worked in the week and whether they often or always worked at home
• We match in data from the latest wave of the regular UKHLS survey to identify disabled people (long-standing physical or mental impairment, illness or disability and has substantial difficulties with one or more specified functions)
• For employed people, we also identify their occupation in 2019 – for each occupation we apply a ‘risk indication factor’ based on job quality measures from O*NET (see Kikuchi and Khurana, 2020)
High risk occupations

Physical proximity to others  Exposure to disease
Disabled people less likely to work from home …

Percentage of workers always or often working at home
…and more likely to work in high risk occupations

Average Risk Indication Factor of people working outside the home
What have we learnt?

• The UK government wants to get 1 million more disabled people into work by 2027. That’s great, but …

• COVID-19 is still with us and probability of further pandemics is high, so how can we enable disabled people to participate in the labour market safely?

• Recommendations of the Work and Pensions Committee:
  • Statutory right to request remote or flexible working from the start of employment
  • Support and encourage employers to adopt job carving practices when employing disabled people
  • Reform Statutory Sick Pay so it is available to the lowest paid and those in precarious forms of work
Thank you

a.m.bryce@sheffield.ac.uk
@brycemeister

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