

Health limitations and finding work in the UK

Research by the Institute for Employment Studies has found that the UK underperforms in employment outcomes for people with long-term ill health compared to other European countries



The report, which uses Understanding Society data, says workers with health limitations often face employment challenges, but that these “appear especially pronounced in the UK”. The UK performs badly across age groups, but “there are especially concerning signs for younger UK adults”.

The findings

In most European countries, the rate of employment of people with health limitations fell between 2018 and 2022. In the UK, the data show that the ‘employment gap’ between those with and without health limitations is the highest among the 15 countries studied.

The increase in worklessness among young adults with health limitations in the UK was particularly pronounced. People aged 16–24 with health limitations were more than twice as likely to be out of work in 2022 as they had been before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Also, older people’s chances of working when they have health limitations have shown positive signs elsewhere, but not in the UK. The UK is only slightly below average on this, but as the report says: “it appears to be headed in the wrong direction”.

One cause for concern is that the UK is one of the countries where employment for people with health limitations has fallen most sharply – but before the pandemic this had been improving.

Using the data

The report was written for the Commission for Healthier Working Lives, which brings together employers, workers, and experts to find ways to improve working-age health, and make sure people with health conditions can work.

The research used Understanding Society and EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) to compare results across the ‘EU15’ (members of the European Union from 1995–2004 – i.e. before the EU’s expansion in May 2004). The analysis looked at data from 2018 and 2022 to consider changes before and after the pandemic. It compared those who reported having limited or severely limited health (including disabilities), with those who did not.

“A joined-up, system-wide approach to supporting those with ill health or disabilities to work is likely to be key”

EU-SILC data gave the researchers consistent measures of employment and health across Europe, as well as allowing them to consider other demographic factors which might affect employment. The results showed the extent to which living in each country influenced the chance of people with health limitations being in work, while accounting for other factors.



Analysing the findings

There were wide variations in the reported prevalence of health limitations in different European countries. These reflected differences in reporting or definitions to some extent, but there would also have been variations in underlying health conditions. Rates were comparatively low in Sweden, Greece, Denmark, and Finland – but notably higher in Portugal, Luxembourg, and Spain.

In the UK, 21% of 16–64-year-olds reported health limitations, which was above the EU15 average – but the level was very similar in 2022 to the figure for 2018.

Employment rates for people with health limitations appeared to fall in many European countries between 2018 and 2022. Only Denmark and Luxembourg showed a higher rate of employment. The UK was one of the countries where the employment rate for people with health limitations deteriorated the most, despite a strong improvement trend before the pandemic.

Employment gap

The UK has usually been a country with relatively high employment rates, and the research found that for people with no health limitations this was still true. The UK had the fifth highest rate, behind Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands.

However, the gap between employment rates for people with and without health limitations in the UK was one of the biggest. Of the 15 countries studied, only Ireland and Belgium had a larger gap. The smallest were seen in Luxembourg, Denmark, Spain, Italy, and Portugal.

The research also looked at the relationship between the prevalence of health limitations and employment outcomes. The UK's share of 16–64-year-olds with health limitations is comparatively high, and it also has a substantial health employment gap. Other countries, such as Luxembourg,

Spain, and Portugal, also have high shares of people with health limitations but have narrower employment gaps. Germany, Greece and Sweden appear to have some of the lowest shares of people reporting health limitations but have employment gaps similar to those seen in countries with higher shares of people with health limitations.

Are there other factors?

The data also allowed the research to compare people's other characteristics, and the socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors of countries, in order to see the difference ill health or disability make.

In this analysis, the UK did worse than many other European countries – although Belgium and Ireland performed worse overall. Having a health limitation made young people 6% more likely to be out of work in 2018, but in 2022 they were 13% more likely to be out of work. The UK performed better for older workers, though.



What could help the UK to improve?

The report also reviewed work and health policies from across the world to ask how the UK could promote healthy work, help people with ill health and disabilities get work, and help them stay in work. Measures include limits on working hours, agreements between workers and employers on conditions, incentives for hiring disabled people and promoting workplace health, and occupational health provision to make it easier for people with health limitations to work.

The report says a “joined-up, system-wide approach” would be the most effective: “This could be a case of effectively linking preventive and rehabilitative measures, or more generally, ensuring that one policy does not undermine another, or ... coordinated policies that tackle different areas through different means.”

Nick Litsardopoulos, Jonny Gifford, Meghna Sharma, Astrid Allen, Zofia Bajorek and Tony Wilson, *Work and health: international comparisons with the UK*, a report for the Commission for Healthier Working Lives, Institute for Employment Studies, 2025



Read the report

<https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/work-and-health-international-comparisons-uk>