

# Attitudes and disability:

The experiences of disabled people in 2022

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**SCOPE**



Equality for disabled people

# Introduction

Scope has a proud history of challenging negative and outdated attitudes towards disability and disabled people. Over the years, our research has found that there remains a stubborn lack of understanding of disability, and negative attitudes towards disabled people are still far too common. From outright discrimination to more nuanced and subtle exclusion, disabled people experienced negative attitudes in many parts of their lives.

## And little has changed.

Our latest research, the largest of its kind ever conducted, has found negative attitudes towards disability and disabled people are still commonplace on our streets, in our workplaces and on public transport.

From the judgement of others about what disabled people are capable of, the constant questioning and having to justify yourself, to confrontation, discrimination and physical abuse. Disabled people still face huge barriers to full inclusion and equality in society.

Our latest research has found **3 in 4 disabled people have experienced negative attitudes and behaviour from others** in the last five years. For disabled women these experiences are more frequent. And for younger disabled people, these experiences are more common.

The impact of these negative attitudes and behaviour can be huge. Isolation, loneliness and feeling of being forgotten are frequently reported by disabled people as a direct result of experience negative attitudes from others. And for some, the experience of negative attitudes has led to leaving work, to stopping socialising and avoiding things they once liked to do.

## The time to change this is now.

We believe society is stronger when everyone feels included, free from discrimination, negative attitudes, and behaviours of others. And where disabled people can enjoy equality and fairness. Achieving this requires institutions, individuals and disability organisations to think differently. Government, employers, the media, our benefits system and general public all need to play a role.

Over the next five years Scope will be working tirelessly to make this the case.

# About this research

Attitude change is consistently raised as a top priority for disabled people and their families, and we believe that negative attitudes, behaviours and stereotypes are a root cause of the inequality disabled people face day to day.

Whilst there has been previous work exploring the prevalence and impact of negative attitudes on disabled people, there have been limited large-scale surveys conducted in the UK from a disabled person's point of view.

Scope sought to understand the experiences disabled people have of attitudes and the types of behaviour they experience from others in everyday life. We also wanted to explore the impact attitudes have on disabled people and whether such attitudes lead to disabled people reducing or stopping certain social, educational and vocational activities.

With Opinium Research, Scope conducted an online survey with 4,015 disabled adults in England and Wales between 12 May and 16 June 2022. 100 disabled people were also contacted to complete the survey via telephone, to include those with limited access to the internet or who were less digitally confident. Data was weighted to be nationally representative of the disabled adult population in England and Wales.

In addition, Scope conducted in-depth focus groups with 24 disabled people, including one session specifically dedicated for disabled younger adults.

This research has followed a co-production approach. A co-researcher supported the development, design and delivery of this research programme. And Scope co-produced the questions and categories used in the online survey.

# Overall experiences

We wanted to explore disabled people's experiences of attitudes over the past 12 months and over the past five years. We looked back this far to understand people's experiences before restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic were in place.

**A third of disabled people (36%) stated that they have often experienced negative attitudes and behaviours in the 12 months. This increases to 1 in every 2 disabled people (50%) under the age of 55.**

This age divide was significant throughout. A large difference was frequently observed between the young and old, with younger disabled people often reporting more negative experiences and greater impact on their lives.

**44% of disabled people said they feel less equal to others** because of the attitudes and behaviours they experience.

**In the last 12 months alone, over a quarter of disabled people (26%) stated that they often experienced discrimination.**

Worryingly, when reviewing attitudes disabled people commonly report experiencing, **3 out of 4 disabled people (72%) indicated that they had experienced many of these negative attitudes or behaviours in the last five years.**

"Being called names by strangers as I walk down the street is very demoralising"

"I think the pandemic brought to light the huge divide that we have and the huge lack of care for disabled people that exists within society"

# Types of attitudes and behaviours

The attitudes and behaviours disabled people and their families experienced range from everyday rudeness and ignorance, to assumptions, judgements and unfounded criticism or accusations of faking.

We uncovered a widespread lack of understanding about disability, accusations of faking their condition and, being patronised. Sadly, for some disabled people, negative attitudes escalated into verbal and physical abuse.

## Types of attitudes and behaviours experienced by disabled people:<sup>1</sup>

Attitudes and Behaviours	Experienced by
Assumptions and judgements about my disability or what I can do	33%
Rushing me or being impatient	29%
Dismissing my condition, disabled people, or need for adjustments	27%
Accusing me of faking or being lazy	25%
Forgetting, ignoring, or excluding me	23%
Patronising me	24%
Staring or giving me looks	19%
Thinking I am a scrounger and should not be claiming benefits	16%
Being uncomfortable around me due to awkwardness	14%
Avoiding me completely	12%
Being fearful or suspicious of me	7%
Touch or moving my equipment/support aids without permission	5%

<sup>1</sup>Question: Have you experienced any of the following [attitudes or behaviours] from people over the last 5 years? Think about this in relation to you as a disabled person, or towards your health conditions or impairments. Base: All disabled adults (n=4015).

**“I parked in the disabled spot. I have a blue badge myself. Please don’t think I don’t, I do. They were like, ‘Hold on a minute, you’re not disabled.’ I said, ‘I am, that’s my name written on the badge.’ They were, like, ‘No, you’re not allowed, you don’t look it.’ You’re sitting there thinking, do I really need to look disabled? What does looking disabled mean to you?”**

Very worryingly, there were a number of reports of more extreme experiences, indicating that the most despicable and harmful attitudes and behaviour are still occurring to some disabled people and their families on a regular basis.

**1 in 10 disabled people (10%) have experienced verbal abuse** towards them, this rises to **1 in 5 disabled people aged 18-34 (22%)**. Of those who have experienced verbal abuse, over a third (35%) have experienced this quite or very often.

**1 in 25 disabled people (4%) have experienced physical abuse**, with a third of these people experiencing this often or very often (32%).

**At the “beginning of the first lockdown I was spat at, pushed and abused. I was being blamed because of (quote) “spastic people” [who] needed to be protected, therefore a lockdown on everyone. I also stopped wearing the sunflower lanyard as that was just like antagonising the situation.”**



**#@?!**

# Who attitudes come from

Disabled people told us that these attitudes come from a range of people in their lives and wider society.

When focusing on people or areas of life relevant to each disabled person's life<sup>2</sup>, the general public (42%) were most frequently identified as a common source of negative attitudes and behaviours.<sup>3</sup> This was followed closely by passengers on public transport (39%). Alarming though, disabled people also reported frequent incidences from people closer to home.

Family (29%), partners and romantic relationships (27%), as well as friends (25%), were all reported by disabled people as sources of negative attitudes and behaviours.

Wherever disabled people attended work or education, visited leisure facilities or shops, poor attitudes were reported throughout disabled peoples' lives and wider society.

2 out of 5 disabled people (42%) who have been in work, education or training in the last five years have experienced negative attitudes from management. Over half of disabled people (52%) who have accessed the benefits system reported negative attitudes from benefits assessors in the last five years.

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<sup>2</sup> The percentages are presented as a proportion of disabled people who indicated the individuals or areas of life they were asked about were applicable to them.

<sup>3</sup> The disabled person is considered as having experienced a negative attitude if they selected that it happens to them 'sometimes', 'frequently' or 'all the time' within their survey response.

When accessing the following, proportion of disabled people who reported negative attitudes:<sup>4</sup>

Employment, Education or Training	Experienced by
Management	42%
Work colleagues	41%
Recruitment agency staff	40%
Other students	37%
Careers advisors	36%
Teachers, lecturers, or other training staff	35%

Support services	Experienced by
Benefit assessors	52%
Job Centre staff	46%
Social workers	36%
Administrative health staff (for example, receptionists)	33%
Carers and personal assistants	29%
GP medical staff (such as GPs, nurses)	29%
Specialist healthcare staff (for example, doctors, consultants, nurses and other hospital staff)	25%
Police and emergency services	25%

<sup>4</sup> Question: Thinking about the last 5 years, how often, if at all, have you experienced negative attitudes from the following [people/staff/services]? We're interested in negative attitudes towards you as a disabled person or towards your conditions or impairments. (Percentages based on those disabled people who said the following individuals or areas were applicable to them).



Transport and Services	Experienced by
Call centre staff	29%
Retail staff (for example in shops and supermarkets)	28%
Airport staff	26%
Leisure staff (for example at sports club, theme parks)	26%
Hospitality staff (for example in restaurants/bars/pubs/hotels)	25%
Bus staff	25%
Rail/train staff	25%
Taxi drivers	24%
Delivery drivers	21%



# The impact on disabled people

Whatever the extremity of the negative attitudes and behaviours, and whoever they experience them from, these experiences have a profound impact on disabled people's lives.

9 out of 10 disabled people (87%) who experienced negative attitudes and behaviours indicated that these attitudes had a personal impact on them. This rises to 96% of 18-34 year old disabled people. Disabled women were more likely to report that these attitudes had a negative personal impact.

The impact affects disabled people's confidence and their feeling of self-worth. For some disabled people the impact of negative attitudes and behaviours has led to isolation and to them feeling forgotten. For others, attitudes are so ingrained that they said they now just put up with it.

"Sometimes people make jokes, and they don't even know what's up, and sometimes those jokes can be about something that actually is what's directly affecting you... I can't challenge them [like other people] and I just find I go within myself, lose more confidence, and back off from people. And then it's difficult then to turn it all around, and start again, and trust people."

The top reported personal impacts on disabled people who have experienced negative attitudes and behaviours<sup>5</sup>

Impact of negative attitudes and behaviours	Experienced by
It reduced my confidence and self-belief	41%
A negative effect on my emotional well-being	41%
It made me lonely/isolated	35%
I felt disrespected	34%
I am used to it, so I just put up with it	28%
It made me feel like I needed to hide that I am a disabled person, or hide my condition(s) or impairment(s)	24%
It made me feel forgotten	22%

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<sup>5</sup> Question: You said you received negative attitudes or behaviours from other people towards you as a disabled person, or towards your conditions or impairments. As a result of this, have you experienced any of the following in the last five years? (n=3,238 disabled adults who have experienced negative attitudes and behaviours).

# The impact on day-to-day life

Experiences of negative attitudes and behaviour have a significant impact on disabled people's ability to live their daily lives.<sup>6</sup>

This impact is felt across many aspects of life, from day-to-day things like going to the shops, to socialise, through to travelling on public transport and looking for employment or education and training.

"My husband's negative comments have the greatest impact, as most days he is the only person I see - he doesn't always understand how hearing loss impacts on my ability to socialise - it makes me feel very low."

"People laughing at me, taking the mick out of me in the pub. Teasing me and making me feel worthless and alone. I didn't socialise for a while due to how it made me feel."

## Going out to socialise

**1 in 5 disabled people (23%) avoided going out socialising following negative attitudes and behaviour.**

**Younger disabled people (35%) were twice as likely to avoid going out to socialise, compared to those disabled people over 55 (15%).**

Disabled people said it was the attitudes of the general public (such as strangers in public places), family and friends who had the biggest impact on them deciding to avoid socialising or socialise less.

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<sup>6</sup> Disabled people who have experienced negative attitudes and behaviours were asked what impact that has had on various activities. The percentages presented as a proportion of those people who indicated the activities were applicable to them.

“Pressure being put on me by work colleagues to socialise after work, when my health condition means that I tire easily. Made to feel guilty and that I’m not a team player. [My colleagues are] failing to accept the limitations caused by my health condition, making me feel that my colleagues think I’m exaggerating my symptoms.”

## Employment

Attitudes and behaviour significantly impacted those disabled people looking for new employment or promotions.

**As a result of the negative attitudes and behaviours they experienced, over a third (35%) said they now avoided looking for employment or promotions completely.**

Disabled people said it was the attitudes of interviewers, employment support staff and benefit assessors who had the biggest impact on them deciding to look less or stop looking for new employment or promotions.

## Education

**3 in 10 disabled people (30%) looking for education or training avoiding doing so because of the negative attitudes and behaviours they experienced.**

**Younger disabled people (36%) were more likely to avoid looking for education and training, compared to those disabled people over 55 (26%).**

Disabled people said it was the attitudes of the media (such as press, news, TV and film), their family or work colleagues who had the biggest impact on them deciding to look less or stop looking for new education or training.

## Public transport

**Nearly a quarter of disabled people (23%) who had used public transport avoided doing so following negative attitudes and behaviours they had experienced while travelling.**

## Health and social care

**1 in 8 disabled people (13%) who needed to access health and social care avoided doing so following negative attitudes and behaviours they had experienced in these settings.**

# Priorities for change

We asked disabled people to tell us the areas of life or groups of people where negative attitudes and behaviours need to be prioritised for change.

Unsurprisingly, **1 in 3 disabled people (31%)** who have experienced negative attitudes and behaviours told us **attitudes amongst the general public need to be prioritised**. A similar proportion (**30%**) said that **the benefit system needs to be prioritised for change**. Scope will be exploring the effect of demographics, condition types and protected characteristics on the priorities for attitude change, to reflect the different situations and varied lives disabled people lead.

## Disabled people's priorities for change:<sup>7</sup>

Changing negative attitudes and behaviours	Prioritised by
General Public	31%
Benefits system	30%
Healthcare	22%
Media (such as news, film or tv shows)	19%
The workplace	17%
Shops	15%

<sup>7</sup> Question: Which of the following areas or people, if any, do you think are a priority in terms of changing negative attitudes and behaviours towards you as a disabled person or towards your conditions or impairments? [select up to 3] (n=3,238 disabled adults who have experienced negative attitudes and behaviours).

# Conclusions and next steps

Negative attitudes towards disabled people are still far too common in Britain today. Occasional looks, stares and avoidance all add up. And at the extreme end, some disabled people report being seen as scroungers and of faking their condition, or are the subject of verbal and physical abuse.

The impact of these attitudes has led to lower levels of well-being and poorer self confidence. And it has left many disabled people feeling isolated and lonely, withdrawing from activities they once enjoyed.

It is clear that disabled people's priorities for change lie in improving attitudes amongst the general public, within our benefits system, in the workplace and on our high streets.

To shift these attitudes requires action on multiple fronts from a wide variety of organisations, institutions and individuals across society. Crucially, it requires these groups to work together, find common ground and collectively put an end to negative attitudes.

It will require Government to think differently about the way disabled people interact with the benefits system and other public services.

It requires individuals to understand the impact their words and actions can have on disabled people.

And it requires disability organisations and campaigners, to increase understanding of what it means to be disabled as employees, consumers and passengers create empathy and ultimately improve attitudes.

Scope exists to support and work with all of these groups to achieve real change for disabled people. We believe that an equal society is a better society. One where all disabled people can flourish.

We have undertaken this research to inform these groups and use the findings in their work and in future research. We will be making more data available from this research soon, exploring intersectionality and impacts in more detail when we release our full research report with Opinium Research.

Scope will also be releasing findings from commissioned work with the Behavioural Insights Team research consultancy in the framing of disability. These inform representation in the media, news reporting and disability campaigning by highlighting the most effective methods to build empathy and shift attitudes.

We're Scope, the disability equality charity. We won't stop until we achieve a society where all disabled people enjoy equality and fairness. We provide practical advice and emotional support to disabled people and their families whenever they need it most.

We use our collective power to change attitudes and end injustice. And we campaign relentlessly to create a fairer society.

**0808 800 3333**  
**[scope.org.uk](https://www.scope.org.uk)**

Call **0808 800 3333** to let us know if you'd like this information in a format that's accessible for you.

**SCOPE =** Equality for  
disabled people