

Disabled young people have less upward social mobility than their peers —and class background makes this worse

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We know very little about the inequalities experienced by disabled people in the UK today. My research finds that disabled young people lag behind in employment compared to young people who are not disabled. Not only that, but it's also likely that disabled young people will

end up in jobs with worse pay and conditions than their parents: they have downward social mobility.

Intergenerational social mobility compares the social position of an individual with that of their parents. It tells us who gets ahead and who is held back. As such, it is widely regarded as a measure of societal "fairness" and "openness."

Together with colleagues, I conducted [research](#) to look at the role disability plays in social mobility. We analysed data from a nationally representative [longitudinal study](#)—research which collects information from the same people at multiple points of time. This research covered 16,000 students from English schools who were born in 1989 and 1990.

Looking at this data allowed us to document social mobility patterns by disability status. We looked at the social class of [young people](#)'s parents when the young people were 14. We then compared this to the young people's own social class at age 25.

Stark inequality

Our study found that disabled young people are more likely to be unemployed at age 25: 35% of 25-year-old disabled people in the study were unemployed, compared to 18% of people who were not disabled.

They are less likely to experience upward mobility—that is, to end up in jobs with better pay and conditions than their parents. In fact, it is most likely for disabled young people to be downwardly mobile, with jobs with worse pay and conditions than their parents.

But our analysis also reveals another important inequality that has gone unnoticed in earlier studies. Disabled young people from a low social class background fare much worse in the labour market. Of the disabled

young people who were unemployed at age 25, a disproportionate number came from a low social class background. A far smaller proportion of disabled young people from intermediate and high social class backgrounds were unemployed at this age.

To better understand the patterns highlighted in our study, we launched another piece of research, a [qualitative longitudinal study](#). This is research that regularly collects in-depth information through interviews. We worked with disabled young people from the age of 16 onwards. This allowed us to start tracing the [social processes](#) that lead to social disadvantage, with a particular focus on differences by social class.

The impact of social class

[Our research showed](#) the discrimination by class that disabled young people face in mainstream school settings in England. Drawing on interviews with 35 young people, we found that most of the young people in our study found it difficult to receive appropriate support when they were at school.

But it was mostly young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds that experienced increasing barriers to learning over time, with consequences for their educational progress and [overall schooling experience](#).

Young disabled people from upper and middle-class families benefited from parental resources and strategies to overcome ableist barriers in the educational system. This included, for instance, entry to a school with exemplary special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision, the option to homeschool and the ability to pay for additional private tuition. Parents from more well-off families may be able to use legal means to [challenge schools](#) over discriminatory practices.

In contrast, those from working-class backgrounds had limited means to challenge school authorities to secure young people's right to support at school.

People who experience structural discrimination and stigmatisation are likely to lag behind in education and [employment](#). We think that class differences in the school experiences of disabled young people may partly explain class differences between disabled and non-disabled people in the workplace later in life.

Social mobility inequalities may also be related to discrimination in hiring practices, lack of reasonable adjustments in the workplace, and limitations that are specific to the young person's disability. However, we focused on the [school](#) experiences of disabled young people. This is because education has a [very strong influence](#) on socioeconomic trajectories and [social mobility](#).

Our research shows the powerful influence that [social class](#) has on the life chances of young people—and disabled young people in particular.

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