

# Immobilised: The Impact of Austerity and COVID-19 Policies on Disabled Experiences of Social Exclusion in Britain since 2010

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## Disability

A disability: a 'physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect on their ability to do normal day-to-day activities' (Equality Act 2010).

The Social Model:

'People are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference. Barriers can be physical, like buildings not having accessible toilets. Or they can be caused by people's attitudes to difference, like assuming disabled people can't do certain things' (Scope).

## Social Exclusion

For the purposes of this project, social exclusion is defined as:

The experience of a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, low incomes, poor housing, physical barriers to entering communities, stigmatisation, denial of dignity or withholding of the right to make choices, resulting from disability or another characteristic, which can be remedied by changes in society.

Austerity Policy:

- NHS spending growth slowed.
- Spending on social care cut.
- Replaced Disabled Living Allowance with Personal Independence Payments - tougher criteria.
- Tougher conditions for the Work Capability Assessment.
- Bedroom Tax.

COVID-19:

- Disproportionately high mortality rates for disabled people.
- Austerity strain on NHS linked to lack of emergency planning by inquiry report.
- Coronavirus Act suspended provisions of the Care Act 2014.
- Neglect of social vulnerability, labelled instead as clinical.

## Methodology

- Interviews: 17 semi-structured interviews with disabled respondents aged 19-65.
- Transcriptions: four key themes were identified inductively and then transcripts were coded.
- These four themes were then developed.

Refining my research question:

- Through qualitative research, this study seeks to understand how austerity and COVID-19 policies and rhetoric impact how disabled people in Britain feel they are perceived, supported, and accommodated within British society. Austerity and COVID are not understood as separate events but viewed as they occurred in reality – as intertwined sets of decisions, policies, and narratives.

## Findings

The four themes identified were that disabled people feel they are not:

- Cared for
- Believed
- Understood
- Accommodated

**I'm not cared for:**

- 'Diagnosis took seven years'.
- 'I was never seen by CAMHS, the wait was too long'.
- 'I'm one of the lucky ones, at least I got a wheelchair'.
- The NHS is sacrosanct. Social care isn't.
- A lack of funding means people sit alone all day in residential settings.
- Respondents paid for adaptations to their houses themselves.

**I'm not understood:**

- 'People stare but refuse to make eye contact'.
- Care worker was told the child she worked with should be 'locked away'.
- 'Too pretty', 'too young' to be a wheelchair user.
- People think disabled people are trying to cheat the system or view them as lazy.
- A 'forgotten section of society'.

**I'm not believed:**

- PIP was 'one of the worst experiences I've had since becoming paralysed'.
- 'The level of physical disability claimed did not match the evidence provided'.
- PIP was 'humiliating. Awful. Nasty.'
- 'Invasive' questions.
- Payments are 'incredibly minimal'.
- 'I was told I don't require help'.
- 'I fear PIP being cut'.

**I'm not accommodated:**

- Deaf student not provided with flashing fire alarm.
- 'People think I'm unfit to be a doctor'.
- 'Coworkers thought I was skiving'.
- 'I was fired two days after disclosing my disability'.
- 'I don't ever disclose my disability at interview'.
- 'I took a sick day. My manager rang and said he didn't believe me'.

Participant experiences

## Conclusion:

- Austerity and COVID-19 policies **exacerbated** and **normalised** social exclusion of disabled people.
- **Health and social care don't match demand** due to funding changes and cuts, and the lack of political concern for the social care sector. This leads to disabled people feeling they aren't cared for.
- The **benefits system invalidates** disabled experiences, politicians and media have used **rhetoric** which has led to the **stigmatisation** of disability. This leads to disabled people being doubted and misunderstood by professionals and the public.
- Disabled people experience **epistemic injustice**. Knowledge of disability is excluded from the common epistemic pool. This means disabled needs aren't known so aren't considered, so the barriers that they face remain in place. This enables austerity, and austerity exacerbates this.
- Disabled people are subjected to **eugenic logic**. Their lives are valued less than non-disabled lives, and this attitude contributes to neglect of disabled people's needs, including the **lack of accommodations** made for disabled people.
- **Compassion, investment, and disabled-led change** is required.