

Article

# Protected characteristics by disability status, England and Wales: Census 2021

The protected characteristics of disabled and non-disabled people in England and Wales, using Census 2021 data.



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# 1 . Main points

- The highest age-standardised rates of disability occurred for people who identified with the ethnic groups "White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller" (33.2% in England and 39.1% in Wales) and "Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean" (22.4% in England and 26.7% in Wales).
- People who described their religion as "Other religion" had the highest proportion of disabled people (30.2% in England and 40.9% in Wales) and the highest percentage of disabled people who were limited a lot compared with other religious groups.
- For ages 65 years and over, the highest prevalence of being disabled and limited a lot was for those who identified as "Muslim", where one in three females and one in five males were disabled and limited a lot, in England.
- The percentage of disabled people who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or another minority sexual orientation (6.4% in England and 6.1% in Wales) was greater than that of non-disabled people (2.6% in England and 2.5% in Wales).
- The difference in sexual orientation between disabled and non-disabled people was primarily driven by the higher proportion of young disabled females reporting being LGB+ (7.4% in England and 7.2% in Wales).
- A third of disabled adults were married in 2021 (34.2% in England and 34.1% in Wales) compared with just under half of non-disabled people (47.1% in England and 45.1% in Wales); the percentage of disabled people who had never married, separated, been widowed or divorced was higher compared with non-disabled people.

## 2 . Using the data

In line with the [Equality Act \(2010\)](#), people who assessed their day-to-day activities as limited by long-term physical or mental health conditions or illnesses were considered disabled. Those who stated that they had a condition that did not limit their day-to-day activities or had no condition were considered non-disabled.

On Census Day (21 March 2021), people were asked "Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more?". If they answered "yes", a further question "Do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry out day-to-day activities?" was asked. The response options were:

- "yes, a lot"; referred to here as "limited a lot"
- "yes, a little"; referred to here as "limited a little"
- "not at all"

We have previously explored [disability trends by age and sex](#) in the England and Wales population and reported that:

- disability increased substantially with age and the highest rates occurred for people aged 65 years and over
- the increase in disability with older ages was associated with an increase among disabled people who were limited a lot
- over age 16 years, females were more likely than males to be disabled

In this article, we have explored how these observed trends in disability are found for other protected characteristics, including ethnic group, religion, sexual orientation and legal partnership status.

Percentages in this article have been age-standardised because of the close relationship between disability and age. Age-standardised percentages (ASPs) account for differences in age structures in the population and are more appropriate than crude percentages when drawing comparisons between differently sized population groups, such as different ethnic groups or religions. Standardised data are not comparable with other published data, which use crude percentages. For further information on age standardisation, [see the Glossary](#).

Please note that Census 2021 was carried out during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and this may have influenced how people perceived their conditions or illnesses. Cultural differences may also affect how people report their health conditions, which may influence some of the differences reported in this article.

### 3 . Ethnic group

The ethnic group question had two stages. First, the respondent identified through one of the following five high-level ethnic groups:

- Asian, Asian British, Asian Welsh
- Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African
- Mixed or Multiple
- White
- Other ethnic group

Second, the respondent identified with 1 of the 19 available response options, which included categories with write-in response options. Here we compare the prevalence of disability within each ethnic group for 19 categories of ethnicity. Proportions differ from [previous Census 2021 publications](#) because of the use of [age-standardisation](#).

In England, [17.7% of the whole population were disabled, while 21.1% were disabled in Wales](#). Prevalence of disability varied between ethnic groups; in England the highest percentages occurred for people who identified with the following ethnic groups:

- "White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller" (33.2%)
- "Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean" (22.4%)
- "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Bangladeshi" (20.7%)

In Wales, the highest percentages occurred for people who identified with the following ethnic groups:

- "White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller" (39.1%)
- "Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean" (26.7%)
- "Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups: Other Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups" (25.3%)

These groups also had some of the highest percentages of being disabled and limited a lot. In contrast, those who identified as "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Chinese" had the lowest percentage of disability (8.6% in England and 9.3% in Wales). This group had the smallest percentage of people who were disabled and limited a lot (2.9% in England and 3.2% in Wales).

### **Figure 1: People who identified as “White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller” had the highest percentage of disability of all ethnic groups and across every age-group**

Age-specific percentages of disability by ethnic group in England and Wales, 2021

**Notes:**

1. This figure is ordered with the highest to lowest disability prevalence for 65 and over within each of the five high-level ethnic groups. The order varies for England and Wales.

**Download the data**

[.xlsx](#)

Consistent with the whole population, disability prevalence in each ethnic group increased with age and was lowest for younger people. Between the ages of 16 and 49 years, the rate of disability for people who identified with the following ethnic groups was notably higher when compared with the whole population:

- "White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller" (26.9% in England and 32.4% in Wales)
- "Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean" (17.7% in England and 23.1% in Wales)

The largest variations in disability by ethnic group occurred for people aged 65 years and over, where [disability was more prevalent overall](#). In England, at 65 years and over, people who identified with the following ethnic groups had some of the highest percentages of disability when compared with the whole population:

- "White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller" (52.3%)
- "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Bangladeshi" (49.9%)
- "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Pakistani" (44.3%)

While a similar trend between males and females was observed in Wales, the differences were not [statistically significant](#) because of the smaller population sizes.

### **Figure 2: Females who identified as “White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller” had the highest percentages of being disabled and limited a lot when compared with females across all other ethnic groups**

Age-standardised percentages of disability status by ethnic group for males and females in England and Wales, 2021

**Notes:**

1. This figure is ordered with the highest to lowest prevalence of disability for females within each of the five high-level ethnic groups. The order varies for England and Wales.

## Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

Females had higher rates of disability than males and this remained true for all ethnic groups. However, within some ethnic groups, females in England had notably higher proportions of disabled people than males:

- "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Pakistani" (5.1 percentage points higher)
- "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Bangladeshi" (4.2 percentage points higher)
- "Other ethnic group: Arab" (3.9 percentage points higher)
- "Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups: Other Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups" (3.1 percentage points higher)

While a similar trend between males and females was observed in Wales, the differences were not statistically significant because of the smaller population sizes.

For the following ethnic groups, over half of females aged 65 years and over were disabled. The percentages of being disabled and limited a lot for these females aged 65 years and over were amongst the highest across all ethnic groups:

- "White: Gypsy or Irish Traveller" (36.0% in England and 41.7% in Wales)
- "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Pakistani" (34.6% in England and 38.1% in Wales)
- "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh: Bangladeshi" (34.7% in England and 36.4% in Wales)

## 4 . Religion

Religion refers to a person's religious affiliation and was a voluntary question in the census. [The question asked respondents about the religion with which they connect or identify](#), rather than their beliefs or active religious practice.

This section explores prevalence of disability within each religious group. Proportions differ from [previous Census 2021 publications](#) because of the use of [age-standardisation](#).

### **Figure 3: People who identified their religion as “Other” had the highest proportion of disabled people across most age bands**

**Age-specific percentages of disability by religion in England and Wales, 2021**

#### **Notes:**

1. This figure is ordered with the highest to lowest disability prevalence for 65 and over for each religion. The order varies for England and Wales.
2. Under 16s are not presented because of small numbers.

## Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

In England and Wales, the highest prevalence of disability was for those who reported "Other religion" (30.2% in England and 40.9% in Wales) and this was the case across age bands under 16, 16 to 49 and 50 to 64 years. In England, from age 65 years and over, the highest percentage of disability occurred with those who identified as "Muslim" (43.7%). The lowest percentages of disability were among those who identified as "Hindu" or "Sikh".

People who reported "Other religion" also had the highest percentage of being disabled and limited a lot compared with other religious groups (13.3% in England and 20.0% in Wales). From 65 years and over, where [disability prevalence was increased](#), over a quarter of people who identified as "Muslim" were disabled and limited a lot (27.4% in England and 28.0% in Wales). The percentage of disabled people aged 65 years and over who identified as "Muslim" and were limited a lot was notably higher compared with limited a little.

In the whole population, disability was more prevalent among females than males. This remained true across all religious groups in England apart from those who identified as "Buddhist". In Wales, trends were comparable, although differences were not [statistically significant](#) because of the smaller population sizes.

The differences in the percentage of disabled females and disabled males were highest for those aged 65 years and over where disability prevalence was increased. In both England and Wales, these differences were greatest for the following religious groups: "Muslim", "Sikh", "Hindu" and "Other religion".

### **Figure 4: Females who identified as "Other religion" or "Muslim" had the highest percentages of disability compared with females who identified with other religious groups**

Age-standardised percentages of disability status by religion for males and females in England and Wales, 2021

#### Notes:

1. This figure is ordered with the highest to lowest female disability prevalence for each religion and "not answered" presented last. The order varies for England and Wales.

## Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

The percentage of disabled females who identified as "Other religion" or "Muslim" and were limited a lot was notably higher when compared with disabled males who identified as "Other religion" or "Muslim" and were limited a lot. For those aged 65 years and over, one in three females who identified as "Muslim" (32.8% in England, 36.0% in Wales) and one in five males (21.6% in England, 21.0% in Wales) reported being disabled and limited a lot.

## 5 . Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation is an umbrella term covering sexual identity, attraction, and behaviour. For an individual respondent, these may not be the same. This was a voluntary question on Census 2021, asked of those age 16 years and over. Those who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or another minority sexual orientation are referred to collectively here as LGB+. This section focuses on the differences in sexual orientation between disabled and non-disabled groups.

### **Figure 5: A higher percentage of disabled people identified as LGB+ than non-disabled people**

Age-standardised percentages of sexual orientation by disability status in England and Wales, 2021

[Download the data](#)

[.xlsx](#)

A higher percentage of disabled people in England and Wales identified as LGB+ (6.4% in England and 6.1% in Wales) than non-disabled people (2.6% in England and 2.5% in Wales).

The percentage of disabled people who identified as bisexual (3.2% in England and 3.1% in Wales) or with another minority sexual orientation (0.9% in England and 0.8% in Wales) was around three times higher than for non-disabled people who identified as bisexual (1.0% in England and 0.9% in Wales) or with another minority sexual orientation (0.3% in England and 0.2% in Wales).

### **Figure 6: A higher percentage of disabled people identified as LGB+ than non-disabled; particularly for females aged 16 to 24 years**

**Age-specific percentages of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or another minority sexual orientation (LGB+) by disability status in England and Wales, 2021**

[Download the data](#)

[.xlsx](#)

The difference in sexual orientation between disabled and non-disabled people was largely driven by the higher proportion of young disabled people reporting being LGB+. Between ages 16 and 24 years, the percentage of disabled people who identified as LGB+ was three times higher (17.8% in England and 17.6% in Wales) than non-disabled people at this age (5.3% in England and 5.6% in Wales). As a result, the percentage of disabled people aged 16 to 24 years identifying as straight or heterosexual (71.0% in England and 72.0% in Wales) was substantially lower when compared with non-disabled people (85.2% in England and 85.9% in Wales) of this age group.

The difference in sexual orientation between disabled and non-disabled people was also particularly influenced by females. In England, 7.4% of disabled females identified as LGB+ compared with 2.6% of non-disabled females. In Wales, these figures were 7.2% and 2.7% respectively. For males, 5.1% of disabled males identified as LGB+, compared with 2.7% on non-disabled males in England and in Wales these figures were 4.6% and 2.4% respectively.

This was primarily driven by the substantial difference in disabled females who identified as LGB+ between 16 and 24 years compared with non-disabled females. In England, 24.0% of disabled females aged 16 to 24 years identified as LGB+, compared with 6.9% of those non-disabled. In Wales, these figures were 23.6% and 7.4% respectively.

There were no substantial differences in the level of limitation based on sexual orientation of disabled people. However, a higher percentage of non-disabled people, who indicated that they had a condition that did not limit their day-to-day activities, identified as LGB+ (5.2% in England and 5.1% in Wales) than people who reported having no long-term condition (2.4% in England and 2.3% in Wales).

## **6 . Marriage and civil partnership status**

Legal partnership status classifies a person according to their marital or registered civil partnership status on Census Day, (21 March 2021). This analysis compares differences in marital and civil partnership status between disabled and non-disabled people.

A third of disabled people were married in 2021 (34.2% in England and 34.1% in Wales) compared with just under half of non-disabled people (47.1% in England and 45.1% in Wales). A higher percentage of disabled people compared with non-disabled people were never married, separated, widowed or divorced.

Civil partnerships were introduced in the UK in 2005 and were extended to opposite-sex couples in 2019. Only 0.2% of the population in England and 0.2% in Wales were in a civil partnership and no notable differences were seen between disabled and non-disabled people.

## Figure 7: Across most age groups, a higher percentage of disabled people compared with non-disabled people had never married, separated, been widowed or divorced

Age-specific percentages of legal partnership status by disability in England and Wales, 2021

### Notes:

1. Civil partnerships account for 0.2% of the population in England and Wales and are not visible within this graph. In Wales, the proportion of those aged 85 years and over in a civil partnership has been suppressed because of small numbers.

### Download the data

[.xlsx](#)

Expected trends in marital and civil partnership statuses by age were seen, with fewer young disabled and non-disabled people being married and more older people being widowed. However, age-specific trends revealed differences in marital status between disabled and non-disabled people.

The difference between disabled and non-disabled people who reported being married was greatest for those aged between 50 and 64 years. In England, 45.8% of disabled people were married, compared with 63.0% of non-disabled people. In Wales, these figures were 47.3% and 63.5% respectively.

The percentage of disabled people who were never married (43.3% in England and 43.0% in Wales) was higher than for non-disabled people (36.5% in England and 38.3% in Wales). This was driven by an increased percentage of disabled people aged 16 to 49 years who were never married, when compared with non-disabled people.

Disabled people were more likely to be divorced (11.5% in England and 12.0% in Wales) than non-disabled people (8.5% in England and 8.7% in Wales). The difference in the percentage of disabled people compared with non-disabled people who were divorced was greatest between ages 50 and 64 years. In England, 21.1% of disabled people were divorced compared with 15.3% of non-disabled people. In Wales, these figures were 22.6% and 16.1% respectively.

A higher percentage of disabled people than non-disabled people were widowed at all ages. Around [a quarter of the overall population aged 65 years and over were widowed](#). The difference in widower status between disabled and non-disabled people was greatest for ages 85 years and over, where widower status was at its highest. In England, 61.4% of disabled people were widowed compared with 55.5% of non-disabled people. In Wales, these figures were 63.1% and 56.7% respectively.

A higher percentage of disabled people who were limited a little in their day-to-day activities were married (37.3% in England and 36.9% in Wales) than disabled people who were limited a lot (29.7% in England and 30.8% in Wales). The percentage of disabled people who were limited a lot who were widowed, divorced, separated or never married was higher than for disabled people who were limited a little (See the [accompanying datasets](#)).

## 7 . Data

[Protected characteristics by disability status in England and Wales](#) Dataset | Released 17 May 2023

This dataset provides Census 2021 estimates that classify usual residents in England and Wales by disability and other protected characteristics. The estimates are as at Census Day, 21 March 2021. Age-standardisation is used to enable comparisons between different population groups.

## 8 . Glossary



## Age-standardised and age-specific percentages

Age-standardised percentages (ASPs) allow for a fairer comparison in health outcomes between populations living in different areas and over time, as they account for differences in the population size and age structure. Further information is available in this [blog about the benefits of using age-standardised measures for health](#).

To calculate ASPs, an age-specific percentage is first calculated for each age group:

$$M_k = (d_k \text{ divided by } p_k) \text{ multiplied by } 100$$

where:

$M_k$  = percentage of disabled people in age group  $k$   $d_k$  = the number of disabled people in age group  $k$   $p_k$  = Census 2021 population in age group  $k$   $k$  = age group

The age-standardised percentage of disabled people is that which would have occurred if the observed age-specific percentage of disability had applied in the European Standard Population (ESP). Because of small counts, we first implemented disclosure control and weighted to ESP population totals for the grouped age bands presented.

thus:

$$\text{Age-standardised percentage} = \left\{ \sum P_k m_k \right\} \text{ divided by } \sum P_k$$

where:

$P_k$  = ESP in age group  $k$   $m_k$  = observed disability percentage in age group  $k$  (the age specific percentage)  $k$  = age group

The 2013 European Standard Population is used to standardise percentages. This is a hypothetical population and assumes that the age structure is the same in both sexes, therefore allowing comparisons to be made between the sexes as well as between geographical areas and over time. The standard populations are listed in Annex F of the [Revision of the European Standard Population: Report of Eurostat's task force and Revised European Standard Population: 2013 ESP](#). Further details on [our use of the 2013 European Standard Population](#) are available.

## Census Day

In 2021, the census was conducted on 21 March. At this time, most of the coronavirus (COVID-19) lockdown restrictions were still in place in England and Wales. The pandemic may have impacted estimates of disability prevalence because of changes in people's perceptions and increased death rates during this period (see [updated estimates of Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) related deaths by disability status](#)).

## Disability status

In Census 2021, people who assessed their day-to-day activities as limited by long-term physical or mental health conditions or illnesses were considered disabled. This definition of a disabled person meets the Government Statistical Service harmonised standard for measuring disability and is in line with the [Equality Act \(2010\)](#). This requires that a person has a physical or mental impairment, and that the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out day-to-day activities. Therefore, those reporting conditions that limited their day-to-day activities a little or a lot were classified as disabled. People who had no long-term physical or mental health conditions, or who had conditions that did not limit their day-to-day activities were classified as non-disabled.

## Ethnic group

The ethnic group question included two stages. Firstly, a person identified their ethnic group through one of the following five high-level ethnic groups:

- "Asian, Asian British, Asian Welsh"
- "Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African"
- "Mixed or Multiple"
- "White"
- "Other ethnic group"

Secondly, a person identified their ethnic group through 1 of the 19 available response options, which include categories with write-in response options. The write-in functionality has enabled the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to produce a detailed ethnic group classification by providing insight for 287 ethnic groups. This article provides further information on how write-in responses have been included in the analysis of [detailed classification for the ethnic group](#).

## Marital and civil partnership status

Classifies a person according to their legal marital or registered civil partnership status on Census Day, 21 March 2021. It is the same as the 2011 Census variable "Marital status" but has been updated for Census 2021 to reflect the [Marriage \(Same Sex Couples\) Act 2013](#) and [Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths \(Registration etc\) Act 2019](#). These made provision for the extension of marriage to same-sex couples and civil partnerships to couples who are not of the same sex. The data include responses from persons aged 16 years and over.

## Religion

The religion people connect or identify with (their religious affiliation), whether or not they practise or have belief in it.

This question was voluntary, and the variable includes people who answered the question, including "No religion", alongside those who chose not to answer this question.

This variable classifies responses into the eight tick-box response options. Write-in responses are classified by their "parent" religion affiliation, including "No religion", where applicable. Percentages have been calculated out of the overall population as opposed to out of the population who answered the religion question. This aids comparison across time and between areas, as the percentage of the population who answer the question varies.

For more information on the religion variable, please see [Religion variable: Census 2021](#).

## Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation is an umbrella term covering sexual identity, attraction and behaviour. For an individual respondent, these may not be the same. For example, someone in an opposite-sex relationship may also experience same-sex attraction, and the other way around. This means the statistics should be interpreted purely as showing how people responded to the question, rather than being about whom they are attracted to or their actual relationships.

We have not provided glossary entries for individual sexual orientation categories. This is because individual respondents may have differing perspectives on the exact meaning. LGB+ is an abbreviation used to refer to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and other minority sexual orientations (for example, asexual).

The data include responses from persons aged 16 years and over.

## Statistical significance

Any changes or differences mentioned in this publication are "statistically significant". The statistical significance of differences noted within the release are determined based on non-overlapping confidence intervals.

## Usual resident

For Census 2021, a usual resident of the UK is anyone who, on Census Day, was in the UK and had stayed or intended to stay in the UK for a period of 12 months or more or had a permanent UK address and was outside the UK and intended to be outside the UK for less than 12 months.

## 9 . Data sources and quality

The census provides the most detailed picture of the entire population, with the same core questions asked to everybody across England and Wales. Census results can be more reliable than survey results based on a sample of the population, because the whole population is included. The UK Statistics Authority has assigned [National Statistics](#) status to Census 2021 outputs, providing assurance that these statistics are of the highest quality and value to users.

Census 2021 achieved a very high response rate of 97%. We ensure the census results reflect the whole population by using statistical methods to estimate the number and characteristics of people who were not recorded on a census response. This means that the census statistics are estimates rather than simple counts of responses, so they have some statistical [uncertainty](#) associated with them. We take numerous steps to minimise possible sources of error.

Additionally, we apply [statistical disclosure control](#) to protect the confidentiality of census respondents. Differences in the methods used for statistical disclosure control may result in minor differences in data totals between census products. As we round all figures individually, table totals may not sum exactly. Age-standardised and age-specific percentages were calculated based on these rounded numbers.

Quality considerations, along with the strengths and limitations of Census 2021 more generally, can be found in our [Quality and Methodology Information \(QMI\) for Census 2021](#). Read more about the [Health, disability and unpaid care quality information for Census 2021](#).

Further information on our quality assurance processes is provided in our [Maximising the quality of Census 2021 population estimates report](#).

Further analysis on gender identity will be included in subsequent articles following additional work we are undertaking. For more information, read our [Gender identity in Census 2021 statement](#) and our [Sexual orientation and gender identity quality information for Census 2021 methodology](#).

## 10 . Related links

[Disability by age, sex and deprivation, England and Wales: Census 2021](#) Statistical bulletin and datasets | Released 8 February 2023 Insights into disability prevalence in England and Wales in 2021, broken down by age and sex, and deprivation.

[Disability, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Bulletin | Released 19 January 2023

Information on disability in England and Wales, Census 2021 data.

[Unpaid care and protected characteristics, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Article | Released 24 April 2023

The provision of unpaid care by protected characteristics across England and Wales, with comparisons with the 2011 Census.

[Quality and methodology information \(QMI\) for Census 2021](#)

Methodology | Released 26 January 2023

Details the strengths, limitations, uses, users and methods used for Census 2021, England and Wales.

## 11 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 17 May 2023, ONS website, article, [Protected characteristics by disability status, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)