

The demography of blindness and partial sight

There are nearly 30 million blind and partially sighted people in the 44 member countries of the European Blind Union. This figure is based on the premise that 1 in 30 people are blind or partially sighted, and takes into account the varying definitions of visual impairment.

Older people

Blindness and partial sight are closely associated with old age, and as people live longer the number of people with a visual impairment is set to increase. Nearly 90% of all blind and partially sighted people in Europe are over the age of 60, and two thirds are over the age of 65. Older people losing their sight may have additional health problems such as hearing loss or mobility problems. They find it more difficult to learn new ways to cope with daily tasks and are less likely to have the opportunity to go on rehabilitation programmes or register as disabled, because they feel it is 'just part of growing old.' Agencies providing services to older people may have low awareness of sight problems. Consequently older people may be less aware of the support services available to them, and are at increased risk of isolation.

Children and young people

It is vital for young blind and partially sighted people to have a good education to give them the skills needed to lead a full life. They and their parents should be involved in decision making both about their education and other important aspects of their lives, in the organisations representing them and in society generally as contributors, not merely recipients of welfare. Inclusive education helps to build an inclusive society as able bodied and disabled children grow up together and learn about differences. Children and young people with sight loss may also choose to be educated in a specialist setting.

Women

Blind and partially sighted women often face double discrimination, in terms of both gender and disability. Some blind and partially sighted women have a greater struggle to participate fully in social, economic and cultural life, and to have a family of their own. The EBU Women's Commission, now integrated into the Equality and Diversity Commission, has done important work to empower blind and partially sighted women to overcome the obstacles to full participation both within their organisations and in daily life. The Commission has, for example, run a pilot project, co-financed by the EU, to examine and raise awareness of the particular issues faced by blind and partially sighted women suffering from abuse and violence.

People with multiple disabilities

Many younger blind and partially sighted people have additional disabilities, due to congenital and neo-natal problems. Those with complex dependency needs are often 'the most excluded amongst the excluded'. They and their families are often denied the respect, support and solidarity needed from their communities to help them

overcome the challenges they face.

Parents and professionals working with multi-disabled blind and partially sighted people need the right training, support and services, such as specialist schools for the young, and supported employment opportunities for adults whose disabilities are such that mainstream employment is not a possibility. In multi-disabled people their blindness or partial sight may not be properly recognised or treated. For instance, amongst all people with severe learning disabilities it is estimated that at least 25-30% are also blind or partially sighted. Older people often have both sight and hearing loss, as well as mobility problems.

Partially sighted people

There are far greater numbers of people with partial sight than blindness. Many fall under the category of people losing sight as they grow older. The solutions and measures needed for people with partial sight are often quite different to those for blind people. Low vision aids, such as magnifying equipment and Closed Circuit Television are important and products and environments designed to meet the requirements of partially sighted people make a real difference.

Deafblind people

Deafblindness is a unique disability and deafblind people should not be considered as blind people with additional impairments. There is a specific organisation representing the needs of this group, the European Deafblind Union, with which EBU cooperates closely. The term deafblindness describes a condition that combines in varying degrees both hearing and sight loss. Two sensory impairments multiply and intensify the impact of each other creating a severe disability which is different and unique.

Ethnicity

Some ethnic groups are at a high risk of acquiring certain eye conditions. For example, people of Afro-Caribbean origin are particularly susceptible to glaucoma. This predisposition is not generally recognised and people from some ethnic communities who lose their sight often experience difficulty in accessing services that are sensitive to their needs and cultural identity.

Blindness and partial sight in the developing world

There are around 180 million blind and partially sighted people in the world. Forty five million of them are blind and 135 million have less severe sight loss. About 80% of blind and partially sighted people are living in developing countries where blindness is most often the result of infections caused by insufficient hygiene, environmental factors or malnutrition. Other conditions and diseases which lead to blindness include malnutrition, cataracts, diabetes, trachoma, river blindness and dry eye. Wars, internal conflicts and natural disasters cause blindness too.

It is estimated that in the year 2020 of the 54 million blind and partially sighted people

over the age of 60, 50 million (93%) will be in the developing world.

Many of these visual impairments could be easily prevented or cured by proper nutrition, vaccinations, environmental programmes and vision controls.

In the developing world a disabled person is often considered a shame to the family and his/her value as a human being is considered low. A blind or partially sighted daughter or wife is perceived as a particularly heavy burden on the family. The best way to help disabled people in the developing world is to rehabilitate them to become independent and to provide them with vocational training. In this way they will regain their human dignity.

EBU considers development cooperation as a two way process. It means interaction, giving and taking between partners, enrichment of knowledge and deepening of life. Sustainable support means basing operations primarily on the recipient country's own resources and know-how. These principles are applied in EBU's development funds to work with African and other developing countries. EBU has developed a [resources section](#) on its website giving information about technical devices to facilitate easy access for organisations in developing countries and their partners.

<http://www.euroblind.org/fichiersGB/visincen.html#blindness>

Working age blind and partially sighted people

According to EUROCHANCE Labor market report and other projects

(<http://eurochance.brailcom.org/download/labour-market-report.pdf>)

(<http://www.eyesproject.eu/overview.htm>) there are 7.4 million blind and partially sighted people in the European Union and many more in the whole of Europe. There is a lack of comparable data regarding the number of blind and visually impaired people and their degree of participation in the life of society. We are unable to offer precise figures concerning the actual numbers of working age blind, and partially sighted in particular, people. It is reported that there is a total of 433 750 blind and partially sighted people of working age.

Unemployed working age blind and partially sighted people

The available statistics nonetheless show that the proportion of disabled people in relation to the total population of the EU is around 13 %, 4 % of which are severely disabled, 9 % moderately disabled. A person without any disability in working age (16 to 64 years) in Europe has a probability of 66 % to find a job or to develop in business, while for a person with a moderate disability the probability becomes 44 % and for a person with a severe disability only 25 %. The exact number of visually impaired people of working age in Europe is unknown due a lack of recent accurate statistical studies on the topic.

General unemployment versus visually impaired peoples unemployment

<i>For example</i>	<i>% Unemployment (visually impaired)</i>	<i>% General unemployment</i>
Croatia	50	20
Cyprus	32	3,5
Denmark	69	5,2
Finland	56	11
Germany	72.8	8.9
Hungary	77	6

Norway	68	2.5-2.8
Poland	70	16
Spain	4.2	13.61
Sweden	5.5	3-4

Statistics about disability

<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sconcerns/disability/disab2.asp>

The Labour Market Situation of People with Disabilities in EU25

http://www.euro.centre.org/organisation_index.php

European Disability Forum

http://www.edf-feph.org/Page_Generale.asp?DocID=12534

Facts and figures about disability

- **Disabled people represent 50 million persons in the European Union (10% of the population)**, the equivalent to the population of Belgium, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary and the Netherlands together.
- **One in four Europeans has a family member with a disability.** Six Europeans out of ten know someone, in close or more distant circles, who has a disability.
- **People with reduced mobility represent more than 40% of the population.**
- Disabled people are **two to three times more unemployed** than non-disabled people.
- **Only 16 %** of those who face work restrictions are provided with **some assistance to work.**
- **Many disabled persons are 'discouraged workers'** and don't even attempt to enter the labour force. They are therefore classified as inactive.
- **The more severe the degree of disability, the lower the participation in the labour force.** Only 20% of people with severe disabilities, compared to 68% for those without disabilities.
- **Non-disabled people are more than twice as likely to have reached third level education than non-disabled people.**
- **38% of disabled people aged 16 - 34 across Europe have an earned income, compared to 64% of non-disabled people.** Disabled people's income is dramatically lower than the income of non-disabled people.
- **One out of two disabled persons has never participated in leisure or sport activities.**
- **One third of the disabled population has never travelled abroad or even participated in day-excursions due to inaccessible premises and services.**

- Disabled people suffer from isolation. Compared to non disabled people, **more than twice disabled people meet their friends and relatives less than one or two times per month.**

And what do Europeans think about disability?

- **88% of Europeans** consider that access to public transport for physically disabled people and blind people is difficult.
- **97% of Europeans think that something should be done to ensure better integration of people with disabilities into society.** 93% express their desire to dedicate more money to the removal of physical barriers that complicate the life of people with disabilities.

Sources: Eurobarometer survey 54.2 and Eurostat report: Disability and social participation in Europe, 2001 edition

http://www.edf-feph.org/Page_Generale.asp?DocID=12534

The incidence of disabilities (and limiting illness) that restricts a person's ability to function in everyday life, as recorded by government agencies in some countries:

- United Kingdom, 18% of the population (National Statistics, 2001).
- Australia, 17% of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003).
- United States, 19.3% of the population (US Census Bureau, 2000).
- Canada, 12.1% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2001).
- New Zealand, 20% of the population (Statistics New Zealand, 2001).
- European Union, across the 15 EU countries in 2001, 19.3% of the population was hampered by physical or mental health problem, illness or disability, with 9.3% severely hampered. (Eurostat, 2003)

<http://usability.com.au/resources/statistics.cfm>

Denmark

Blind and partially sighted persons between the age of 18 and 60 years

Statistics on employment year 2000 according to survey by labour market consultant

Status	Number	% of Total
Ordinary terms of employment	249	10,24
Flexjob, special terms (reduced work capacity)	27	1,09

Social pension + ordinary terms of employment	142	5,77
Social pension + sheltered employment	134	5,44
Social pension	1.553	63,10
Education	127	5,16
Other	66	2,68
Drop-out	163	6,62
Total	2.461	100,00

Finland

The Number of Visually Impaired People in Finland

In Finland there is an estimated 80 000 visually impaired people (1.55 % of the total population) of which 70 000 are elderly people and 10 000 of working age. About 1000 - 1500 are under 18 years old.

The Age of Becoming Visually Impaired

	All cases 31.12.1999	New cases 1999
Impaired since birth	9.6 %	3.9%
1 - 17 years	4.5%	1.1%
18 - 39 years	8.1%	2.8%
40 - 64 years	12.0%	7.1%
65 + years	44.8%	58.3%
Unknown	20.9%	26.7%

The employment situation

Main Activities">	15 - 24 years	25 - 44	45 - 64	15 - 64 years tot
Full-time empl.	7.0 %	25.8 %	14.5 %	17.8 %
Partially empl.	39.3 %	27.8 %	20.9 %	26.0 %
Unemployed	3.9 %	2.4 %	0.8 %	1.8 %
Student	20.2 %	2.9 %	0.3 %	3.9 %
Retired	26.6 %	38.6 %	62.0 %	48.4 %
Other/unknown	3.0 %	2.4 %	1.5 %	2.1 %

France

Professional integration of blind people in France

There are no figures or surveys about the number of blind people in France, let alone about their age distribution or whether or not they have a job. According to an estimate of January 2001, totally blind people may be about **60 000** (of which 15 000 have learned braille, 7 000 practising it on a regular basis).

There are **15 000 blind people of working age** (including 3 000 braille-readers), **barely more than 6 000 may have a real job.**

Employment of the visually impaired in Poland

To create and sustain jobs for the Polish visually impaired is the main challenge faced by the Polish Association of the Blind (PAB). The economic and social transition of the last 10 years towards free-market economy has led to high unemployment rates amongst the general population (13,5 per cent in 2001).

According to PAB, there are some 80 000 blind and partially sighted people in Poland.

In 1999 only 5 419 out of 40 457 visually impaired people of working age had a job - i.e. an unemployment rate of 86,6 per cent.

Employment situation of the blind and visually impaired in Spain

Some overall figures relating to the creation of employment for the blind and visually impaired are given below :

- The ONCE has 58,132 members, of which 5,105 (8.78 %) are under 18 years of age and 20,011 (34.42 %) are over 65.
- Of these 58,132 members, 33,016 (56.79 %) are of working age, compared to the figure of 65 % for the rest of the Spanish population.
- 56 % of the members of working age (18,118 people) are regarded as active population (working or looking for employment), which is very similar to the rest of the Spanish population (50.2 %).
- Of the affiliated active population, 93 % (17,009 people) is employed and the remaining 6 % (1,109 people) is unemployed. The Unemployment Rate amongst the ONCE's members is significantly lower than that of the Spanish population in general.

The labour market and the visually impaired in Sweden

During Spring 2000, SRF interviewed members about their terms of employment. 105 women and 93 men took part in the interview, making up a total sample of **198**.

- Half of the members interviewed are employed, with 21 % of them working part-time.
- 40 % of the remainder have taken early retirement ;
- 6 % are studying ;
- 3 % are in search of work.

The greatest disparity between genders is that more women than men work part-time.

A large number of people in the survey have an **additional disability** (23 %) which leads to difficulties. For these people the situation on the labour market is even more problematic. Only 18 % of this group are employed and about a third are on long-term sick leave. 80 % have been granted early retirement.

Training, rehabilitation and employment for visually impaired people in the UK

Background statistics

- There are about 90,000 blind and partially sighted people of working age in the UK of whom approximately 25 % are in employment.
- More than half of these people are over the age of 50.
- Employment levels peak between 25 and 35 years of age and decline rapidly after the age of 45.
- Younger people tend to be better qualified and there is a high correlation between qualification level and employment.
- The general shift in the national economy from manufacturing to knowledge based activity is reflected in the employment pattern of blind and partially sighted people.
- There are now fewer than 1000 blind and partially sighted people in sheltered workshops compared to over 10,000 just 15 years ago.
- On the other hand the employment rate of young people who have gained access to university has improved.
- Statistics for the income levels of visually impaired people not available but figures for disabled people as a whole indicate that disabled women earn 17% less than non-disabled women and disabled men earn 21% less than non-disabled men. It is probably fair to assume that a similar situation exists for blind and partially sighted workers.

Training and Education

Successive legislation has improved opportunities for disabled students. A survey by RNIB showed that visually impaired students were following a widening range of courses and that traditional areas such as law and physiotherapy are now minority subjects. The most popular areas of study are now based on information technology and business administration.

Participation rates in post-school education are still too low at little over half that for non-disabled students but results for those who do participate in higher education are, on average, better than those for non-disabled students.

Recent legislation (Learning and Skills Act, 2000) requires all colleges and universities to make reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of students with disabilities and is expected to further increase opportunities for blind and partially sighted students.

Support in Employment

RNIB's Adult Needs Survey indicated that early intervention is necessary if individuals are not to lose their jobs. Despite this, intervention when an individual loses his/her sight is uncertain and often late.

Disabled individuals who require support in employment, whether in relation to recruitment or job retention, can now expect employers to make reasonable adjustments. This is a requirement of the Disability Discrimination Act, 1996.

The government provides further support through the Employment Service which operates a national network of Disability Services Teams. These teams provide advice and expertise in supporting disabled people in employment and also run the Access to Work Scheme.

Access to Work provides subsidy to employers and employees to finance workplace alterations, travel to work, special equipment and personal support. This scheme has been especially useful for visually impaired people.

The Disability Services teams refer to specialist organisations when an appropriate area of expertise is missing from their own team. This has helped to develop working relationships with specialist disability organisations.

Visual impairment is the only disability for which there are arrangements for specialist residential rehabilitation. Clients are referred by the Employment Service to RNIB centres at Manor House or, in Scotland, to Alwyn House.

Current Developments

The government has introduced a number of initiatives aimed at moving disabled people from welfare into the labour market. RNIB has argued strongly for a benefits and support system that encourages visually impaired people to achieve an optimum level of engagement in the labour market.

It appears that the government are focusing on getting as many people into

employment as possible within a limited budget. The impact is likely to be that those nearest to the labour market and who need the least assistance attract resources. Those furthest from the labour market who need the most help are likely to be ignored. There is a deep concern that the limited resources for supported employment, which currently supports individuals who are least likely to be able to compete in an open labour market, will be diverted to support less disabled people.

Conclusion

There have been significant improvements in training and employment opportunities for visually impaired people over the past ten years. However, those benefits have been disproportionately to the benefit of younger well-qualified people and the situation for older poorly qualified visually impaired people has deteriorated.

RNIB, September 2000

<http://www.euroblind.org/fichiersGB/surveyymb.htm#denmark>