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Labour market trajectories of disabled people – generating insights for more effective interventions

In this Insight, the first of two on disabled people's labour market trajectories, for which we partnered with Workbridge, we investigate approaches to describing and understanding the common patterns in the labour market experiences of disabled people, drawing on previous research. This is a first step towards understanding what interventions might be effective in improving the long-term employment outcomes of disabled New Zealanders.

Key points

- Disabled people's labour market experiences represent a significant economic opportunity.
- Trajectory studies of non-disabled populations are common and have provided deep insights into labour market challenges and solutions.
- A small number of recent trajectory studies on disabled people exist, but none have been undertaken for New Zealand.
- Studies show that while disabled people experience significant labour market disadvantage as a group, there are significant differences within the disabled population.
- Published studies' designs and results reflect different countries' institutional arrangements as well as the available data, limiting the applicability of insights to the New Zealand context.
- The IDI presents an opportunity for a New Zealand trajectory study to identify key at-risk groups, improve understanding of underlying causal factors, and inform the design of effective interventions to support disabled people's labour market participation and outcomes.

Disabled New Zealanders represent a significant economic opportunity

New Zealand is experiencing low economic growth as well as a demographic shift towards a high age dependency ratio. While various solutions are proposed, from infrastructure investment to immigration, one possible solution is to increase labour force participation and employment. This could have two positive economic effects:

- increasing the level of output per person (GDP per capita)
- reducing the need for tax-funded welfare benefits.

At the individual level, increased employment opportunities and the social connections they provide are key to better life outcomes: work provides self-esteem, social contact, as well as increased income.

Disabled people represent an important group to consider in this context because they are more likely to be unemployed or not in full-time employment compared to those without disabilities, and many disabled people want to participate more fully in employment.

Poorer labour market outcomes for disabled people don't just reduce the total level of output and increase the need for long-term

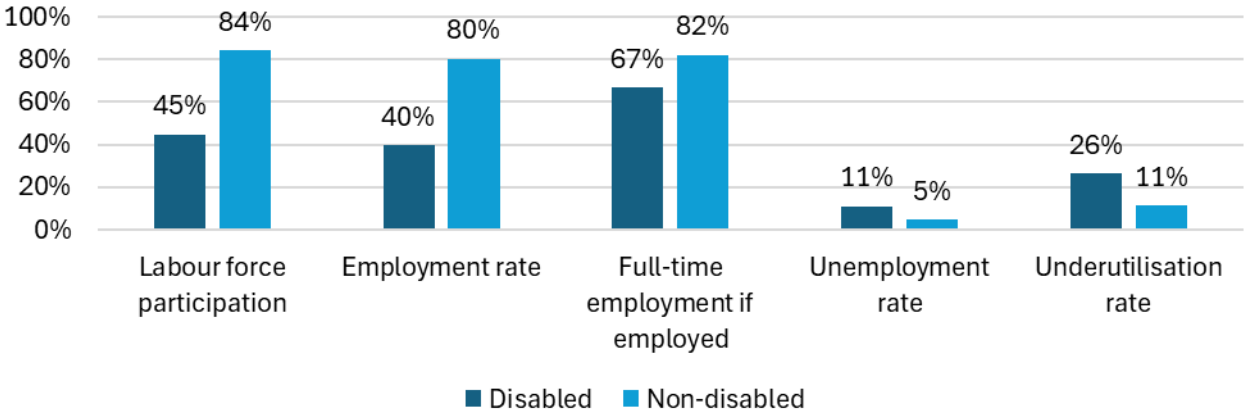
welfare support; they also result in reduced wellbeing for disabled people through both financial and non-financial effects.

Descriptive data provides a basic view of the problem

According to the Household Labour Force Survey, disabled people aged 15 to 64 years have significantly lower labour force participation and employment rates, but only a slightly lower probability of being in full-time employment once they are employed.

This data suggests that participation and gaining employment represent key challenges for disabled New Zealanders.

Figure 1 Labour market outcomes for disabled and non-disabled New Zealanders[1]



Source: New Zealand Labour Force Survey 2024

The solution is less obvious

While the data shows the scale of the issue and demonstrates how effective solutions could provide significant value, there are three important gaps:

- While data on labour market outcomes paints a consistent picture of disadvantage for disabled people, it also conceals considerable variation due to the heterogeneity of disability, which is less well understood with regards to labour market outcomes.
- Data on disabled people's employment is a snapshot – a point in time – which says nothing about the problem dynamics: Does the subset of employed disabled people remain constant over time, or do different disabled people move in and out of this group at different times?
- Data on disabled people's employment does not provide reasons why some disabled people may be employed and others unemployed: How much is explained by different types and severity of disability, for example, and what other factors interact with disability to improve or worsen the odds of good employment outcomes?

A "wicked problem" or just a research gap?

The economic benefits of improving labour market outcomes for disabled people are significant, including reduced welfare dependency, increased economic output, and the many indirect benefits of increased

[1] The labour force participation rate is calculated as the number of people participating in the labour force divided by the total number of people. The employment rate is calculated as the number of people employed divided by the total number of people participating in the labour force. The unemployment rate is calculated as the number of people participating in the labour force but not employed divided by the total number of people participating in the labour force.

income for individuals and families (some of which translate into further cost reductions in publicly funded services like health care).

Given these potential benefits, one might assume that the lack of focus on solutions is due to policymakers putting this issue in the 'too hard' basket. Policymakers may see poor labour market outcomes for disabled people as a "wicked problem" – defined by Koi Tu as problems with many interconnected causes that can't be resolved by one action or within a single government term (Sridar, Low and Gluckman 2025).

But this perception may be due to a lack of evidence. As the Koi Tu report states, best practice requires "*an understanding of the contributing factors that need to be addressed and the consequences of doing so*".

The problem is likely amenable to policy solutions

According to the OECD, education plays a critical role in improving labour market outcomes for disabled people. The OECD's Sickness, Disability and Work series (2010) finds that higher educational attainment significantly increases employment rates for disabled people.

Intuitively, this makes sense because education improves non-disabled workers' employment, and also because many disabled people are likely to face more significant employment barriers to physical work than they might to desk-based work, which is a more likely type of employment at higher levels of educational achievement.

Other studies have highlighted that the institutional context of employment transitions plays an important role in the types and probabilities of transitions (e.g. from school to employment). For example:

- Ikutegbe et al. (2023) identified that job matching and job crafting were effective strategies that led to successful employment outcomes for disabled people in New South Wales, and that employer attitudes, which are amenable to change, are critical.
- A systematic review (Sanz-Martinez and Camacho, 2025) found that inclusive higher education, information and support for employment, internship and job placement programmes, and ICT and language training all influenced employment outcomes for disabled people.

A complex problem with complex data

If institutional factors were the only causal drivers, solutions would be fairly simple to design. However, in addition to institutional factors, individual factors such as disability type and timing of onset are likely to play important roles, highlighting that the evidence base to inform policy may itself need to be complex.

Disability is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of functional challenges, from physical to intellectual, sensory, and social. Additionally, people with the same disability may experience varying degrees of impairment.

Disability itself can follow different trajectories, including:

- Early onset, including from birth, and a stable level of impairment (e.g. Down Syndrome).
- Early onset, including from birth, with worsening impairment (such as congenital muscular dystrophy)
- Later onset with a stable level of impairment (e.g. disability resulting from an accident)
- Later onset with worsening impairment (e.g. disability resulting from a progressive health condition, like multiple sclerosis).

Understanding disability itself from data can be challenging

While disability can present in many forms and affect people in different ways, data describing disability is generally blunt. The data presented in Figure 1, for example, are based on the Washington Group Short Set (WGSS) – a set of survey questions used to generate data to make high-level comparisons between the disabled population and the non-disabled population, rather than to understand variation within the disabled population.

The WGSS identifies disability as having a lot of difficulty, or being unable to perform, at least one of six specific activities: seeing (even with their glasses), hearing (even with their hearing aid), walking or climbing stairs, remembering or concentrating, self-care, and communicating. The WGSS does not assess the cause of disability or the age of onset. The WGSS also has well-recognised limitations in its ability to capture mental health impairments, neurodevelopmental conditions, vision and hearing impairments, and even mobility impairments in some cases (Goddard and Hall 2025).

In New Zealand, the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) provides opportunities to explore disability beyond the WGSS data collected in surveys: Needs assessments carried out to identify disabled people's support needs, for example, provide more specific data, including diagnoses, although administrative data can be patchy.

But beyond definition issues, detailed longitudinal data requires structure to produce useful insights. This is where methods developed and tested in previously published literature can help.

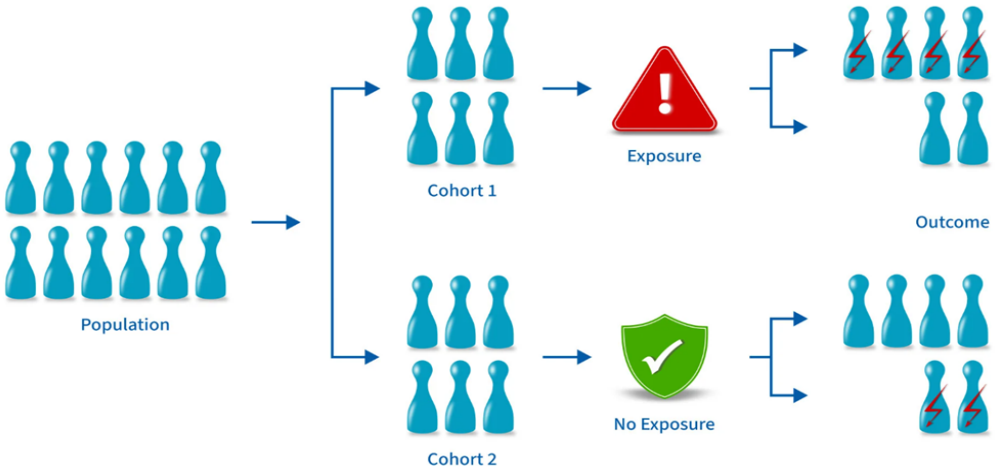
Different types of studies have attempted to shed light on labour market experiences and outcomes generally

There are at least three important types of empirical studies that use longitudinal data to describe and explain employment experiences:

- Studies that focus on labour market outcomes at a single point in time.
- Studies that focus on transitions between labour market states.
- Studies that focus on describing and understanding common labour market trajectories.

Studies that focus on labour market outcomes at a point in time identify groups of individuals based on some criteria (e.g. age, onset of disability, leaving school, etc.) and outcomes of interest at a different point in time (e.g. employment status 5 years later). These studies typically seek to understand the influence of a key characteristic or "exposure event" on outcomes (E.g. To what extent does delayed transition to employment affect later incomes in a cohort of graduates with equivalent qualifications 10 years post-graduation?).

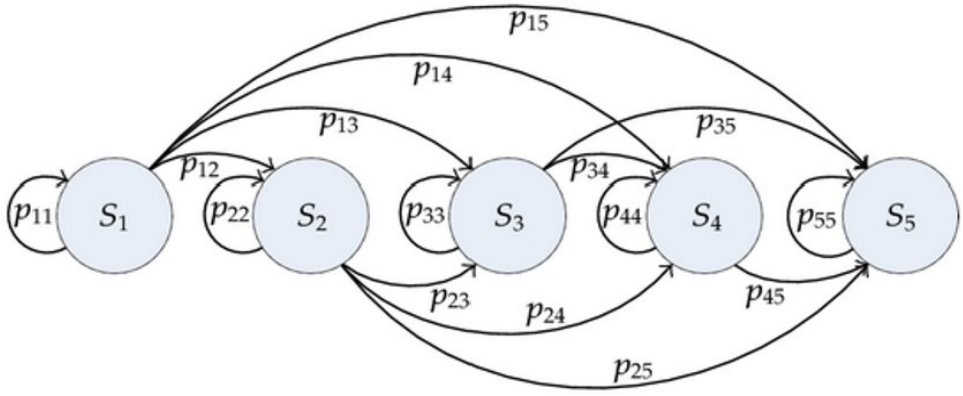
Figure 2 Understanding labour market outcomes at a point in time



Source: Simkus (2023)

Some studies focus on the probability of transitioning between labour market states, such as moving from unemployed to employed. These studies usually focus on comparing groups or time periods to identify differences in the probabilities of transitions occurring. For example, did the change in eligibility for the JobSeeker benefit increase the probability of young people transitioning directly from education to employment? And did it reduce the probability of them later transitioning from employment to unemployment?

Figure 3 Understanding probabilities of transitions from one labour market state to another

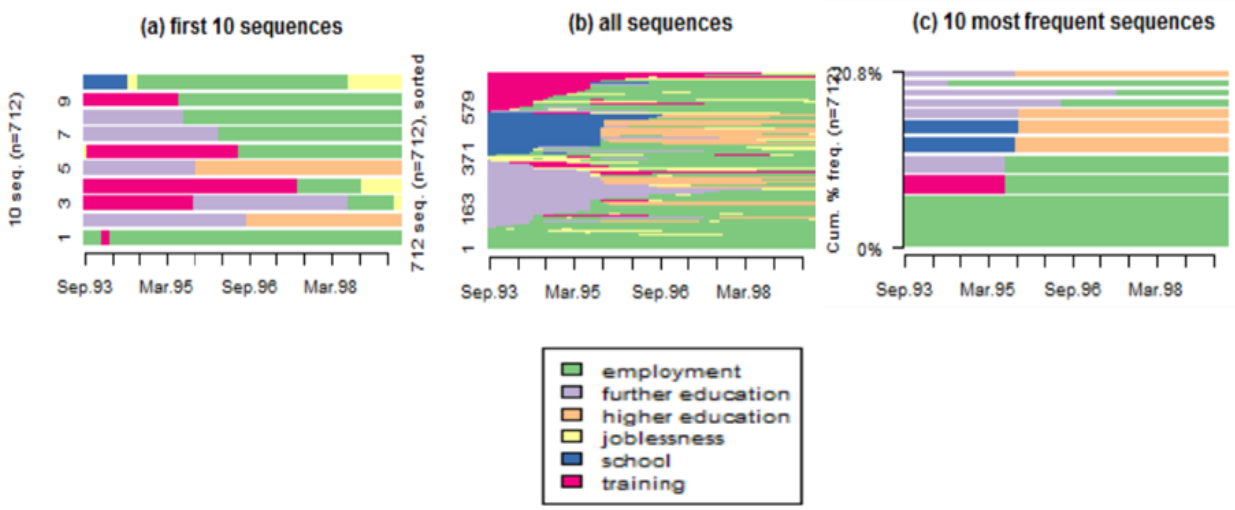


Source: Ni (2012)

Finally, trajectory studies focus on describing patterns across predefined labour market states and transitions between them over a period of time. They use statistical/econometric techniques, such as sequence and cluster analysis, which have been described as enabling the research to focus on "life as an unfolding process" in contrast to limiting researchers' attention to a specific outcome variable (Aisenbrey & Fasang, 2017, p. 1452). Another advantage of these studies is the simplified understanding of highly detailed longitudinal data they provide.

The process and results are often presented in a chronogram (or state proportion plot), as shown in Figure 4, below).

Figure 4 Clustering individual trajectories to understand lifecourse patterns



Source: Institute of Demography and Socioeconomics

Trajectory studies also often include analysis of factors associated with identified trajectories (e.g. what are the key early career patterns of young adults, and what role does education play in determining the trajectories of young adults' careers?).

A key feature of the techniques used in trajectory studies is the clustering of individuals into distinct subgroups, so that individuals within a given subgroup share greater similarities than individuals from separate subgroups. Employment trajectories of disabled people are complex, and characterised by significant labour market disadvantages and varied patterns of entry and exit, making the simplification offered by trajectories studies appealing from a policy perspective.

Trajectory studies are commonly used to describe labour market experiences

Trajectory studies of non-disabled populations are common.

For example, Balogh et al. (2025) used this approach to show five distinct trajectory clusters for women and men, highlighting the

need for separate analysis of population sub-groups in order to identify best-fit trajectories.

Ek et al. (2021) analysed the role of early life factors, identifying five later life trajectories, including stable employed and self-employed trajectories as well as a "floundering" trajectory which described long-term experiences for 12 percent of men and 22 percent of women.

Bouziri et al. (2025) analysed the association between employment trajectories and health status, providing deeper insights for retirement policies.

We identified a small number of recent trajectory studies on disabled people

To better understand how employment trajectories might be usefully defined for disabled people, we searched for recent studies published in peer-reviewed journals and in grey literature that describe distinct employment trajectories for disabled people.

While relatively small in number, such studies have been conducted across multiple countries with varying designs, employing longitudinal cohort data from administrative registers and large-scale panel surveys. The studies demonstrate the use of techniques similar to those used to analyse employment trajectories in the non-disabled population.

Disabled people have both disability and labour market trajectories

Our literature search revealed two types of trajectory studies among disabled people where the outcomes of interest related to employment. These are shaped around the two key trajectories that shape the lifecourse of disabled individuals:

- the disability trajectory – the pattern of disability onset, severity, and recovery over time – with individuals having trajectories such as permanent low severity, permanent high severity, fluctuating, worsening, and recovering
- the labour force trajectory – the pattern of labour force participation and employment over time – which may be influenced by both the disability type, severity, and trajectory, as well as other individual factors and institutional factors.

Recognising the relationship between disability and labour market outcomes, studies either:

- use disability trajectories to predict labour market outcomes at a point in time, or
- describe labour market trajectories and then seek to explain them using data about the individual's disability type and severity.

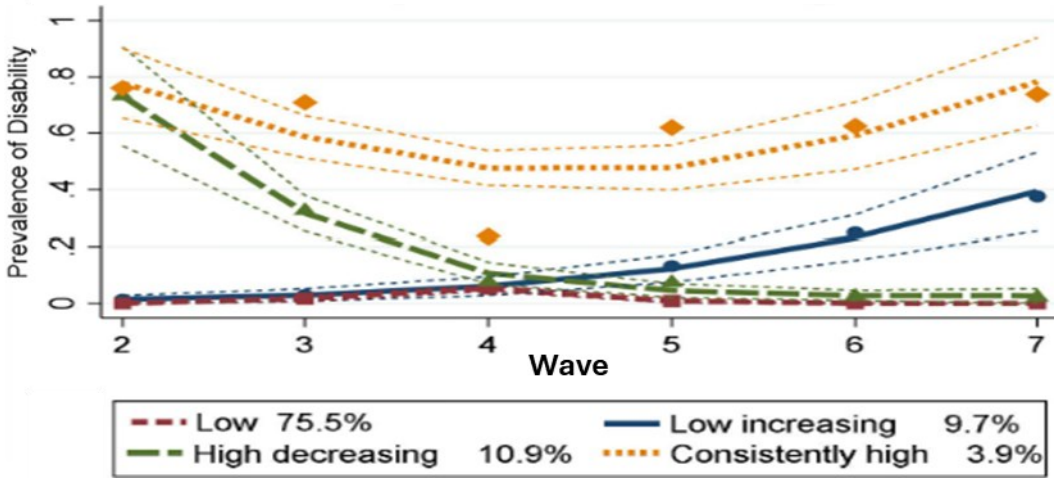
For example, Shields et al. (2022) analysed the predictive power of pre-labour market disability trajectories for early labour market outcomes among Australian children. Using the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, the study identified four main trajectories defined in terms of disability prevalence:

- low (75.5 percent of the cohort)
- low increasing (9.7 percent of the cohort)
- high decreasing (10.9 percent of the cohort)
- consistently high (3.9 percent of the cohort).

(see Figure 5 below)

These pre-labour force disability trajectories were shown to be predictive of early labour market outcomes: Prolonged and increasing experiences of disability among Australian children were found to be differentially associated with future labour force outcomes, suggesting additional support is needed for children who experience longer-term or increasing disability.

Figure 5 Disability trajectories used to predict labour market outcomes



Source: Shields et al. 2022

Similarly, Hellström et al. (2021) analysed trajectories of anxiety and depression among people on sick leave with mood or anxiety disorders and identified three key trajectories for each of anxiety and depression, describing how symptoms evolved over time. This study identified that depression trajectories were not predictive of return to work, while a significant difference in return to work was observed between mild-decreasing symptoms and moderate symptom trajectories for anxiety.

If the focus is labour market trajectories, what are the options?

Most of the studies identified in our literature search focused on labour market trajectories rather than on disability trajectories to predict early labour market outcomes.

Trajectories can be usefully compared between disabled and non-disabled groups. These comparisons show important disability disadvantages, such as disabled people being five times more likely to be in the early marginalisation group, and less likely to be in stable employment (Gottschalk Ballo et al. 2023).

But even within this group of studies, the definitions of disability and the ways disability is captured over time vary significantly.

Studies include various disability types and causes, including physical disabilities (with some specific health condition causes like multiple sclerosis, as well as injury causes like spinal cord injury), mental health conditions, sensory disabilities, intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder. This diversity allows for some examination of both condition-specific patterns and general employment trajectories across disability types. Disability severity is also often a feature of these studies and is classified in various ways, including functional status measures, degree of disability scales, and presence of co-occurring conditions.

The studies also demonstrate that grouping disabled people's labour market experiences by trajectories not only provides deep descriptive insights into the life-course effects of disability, but also supports further analysis of contributing factors – how various individual and institutional factors and life events shape trajectories and trigger the transitions that define them.

The key studies we identified are described in Table 2 below.

Table 1 Key studies describing disabled people's employment trajectories

Author(s), year	Country setting	Study population	Follow-up	Number of trajectories
Amin et al. 2024	Sweden	12,121 young adults with common mental disorders[2]	6 years (+ 3 years pre-diagnosis)	3
Blanck et al., 2025	31 European countries	13,634 young disabled adults	4 years	7
Gottschalk et al. 2023	Norway	3,243 young disabled adults	14 years	4
Madsen 2020	Norway	9,607 adults on long-term sickness benefit	10 years	9
Ferdiana 2014	Netherlands	225 adults with spinal cord injury	5 years	3
Bury 2024	Netherlands	2,449 autistic adults	8 years	4
Christiansen and Moan 2022	Norway	9,000 adults treated for alcohol use disorder	5 years	6
Helgesson et al. 2024	Sweden	11,304 adults with anxiety-, mood/affective-, or stress-related disorders	3 years	4
Helgesson et al. 2021	Sweden	6,287 young adults with ADHD[3]	5 years (+3 years pre-diagnosis)	6
Hellström et al. 2018	Denmark	283 adults with mood and anxiety disorders	2 years	4
Legha et al. 2025	UK	Adults with musculoskeletal disorders	1 year	5
Poutanen et al. 2024	Finland	643 adults with self-reported low work ability	Up to 16 years	4
Rysstad et al. 2023	Norway	549 adults on sick leave due to musculoskeletal disorders	1 year	6
Wittlund et al. 2022	Norway	2 cohorts of young disabled adults (19,300 and 15,964 individuals)	10 years per cohort	6
Zarghami et al. 2022	Australia	207 adults with multiple sclerosis	11 years	10

Source: NZIER

The studies reviewed consistently identified multiple distinct employment trajectory patterns among disabled people, revealing substantial heterogeneity in labour market experiences.

Long follow-up provides deep insights with options to compare populations or time periods

One of the most important studies, due to its 14-year follow-up period and large sample size (Gottschalk et al, 2023), described four key trajectories from seven defined labour market

[2] Including substance use disorders and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

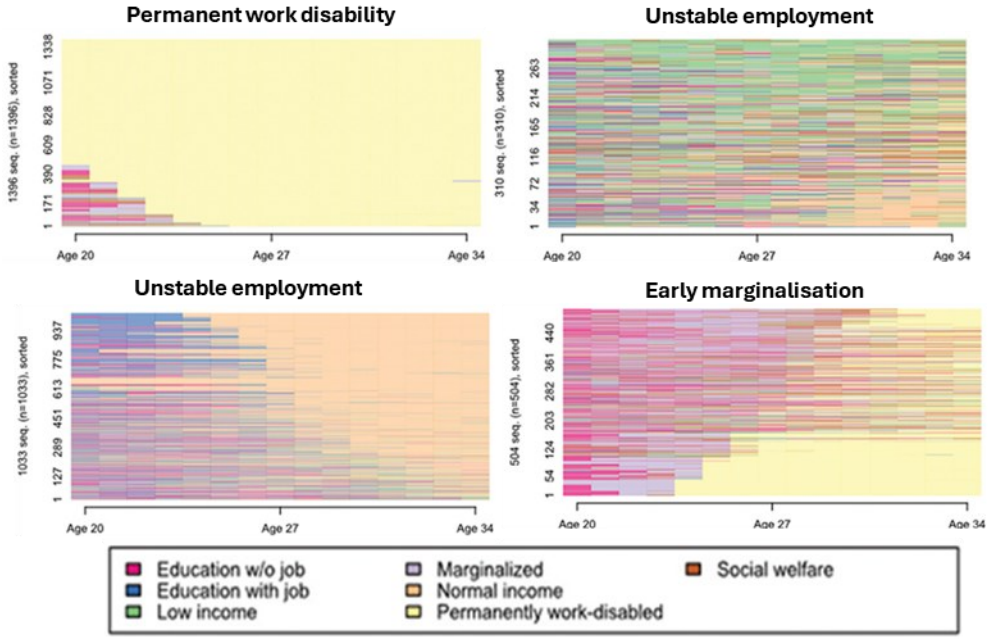
[3] Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

states: Work-disabled, normal income, education with part-time work, education without part-time work, low income, social welfare, and marginalisation (not in any of the six other states and income below a defined threshold).

The four key trajectories are described as:

- permanently work-disabled (permanent work incapacity benefit at a young age)
- stable employment (a period of education followed by long periods of normal income)
- unstable employment (frequent changes in states, shifting back and forth between low income, social welfare, and education without work)
- early marginalisation (predominantly not in education, work, or receiving social welfare at a young age, mixed with unstable periods of social welfare and a high degree of permanent work-disability towards the end of the observation period).

Figure 6 Four key trajectories from seven labour market states across 3,243 individual trajectories of disabled people over 15 years



Source: Gottschalk (2023)

This study also included non-disabled comparator individuals, with the same sequence and cluster analysis applied, to understand how the disabled and non-disabled populations cluster differently across the four trajectories. The key result showed that, compared with non-disabled people, disabled people's trajectories are significantly clustered in the permanently work-disabled and marginalised trajectories.

Another key study (Wittlund et al. 2022) analysed two distinct large cohorts, both consisting of 29 to 39-year-olds, and following one cohort from 1993 to 2003 and the other from 2004 to 2014. The age-band restriction

provided a homogenous population across the two cohorts with regards to life-phase stages, such as education, labour market experience, and family, while the two distinct time periods allowed for temporal influences on labour market trajectories, providing insight into the evolution of labour market challenges over time for disabled people.

The study found that in both cohorts, gender plays an important role in transitions from education, with young men being more likely to follow trajectories characterised by labour market exclusion. Differences between the two cohorts also emerged, including:

- a doubling in the probability of following 'precarious income trajectories'
- a decrease in the probability of following 'work and/or education trajectories'

Both of these were identified as consequences of the observed significant increase in the proportion of early school leavers, lending further support to earlier research demonstrating the importance of education in both disabled and non-disabled employment outcomes.

These insights were translated into policy opportunities and challenges:

- The authors point out that existing initiatives were primarily focused on preventing transitions from employment to disability pension/benefits, but the study revealed that most young disabled adults had weak labour market attachment, suggesting these initiatives would have little impact and would benefit from being reoriented to non-workplace interventions and transitions into work.
- The overall increase in the proportion of early school leavers, the near doubling in the share following "precarious income trajectories", as well as the concurrent decrease in the probability of following "work and education trajectories", were interpreted as indicating that the function of disability pension was changing, increasing supporting people with primarily social (rather than medical) needs.

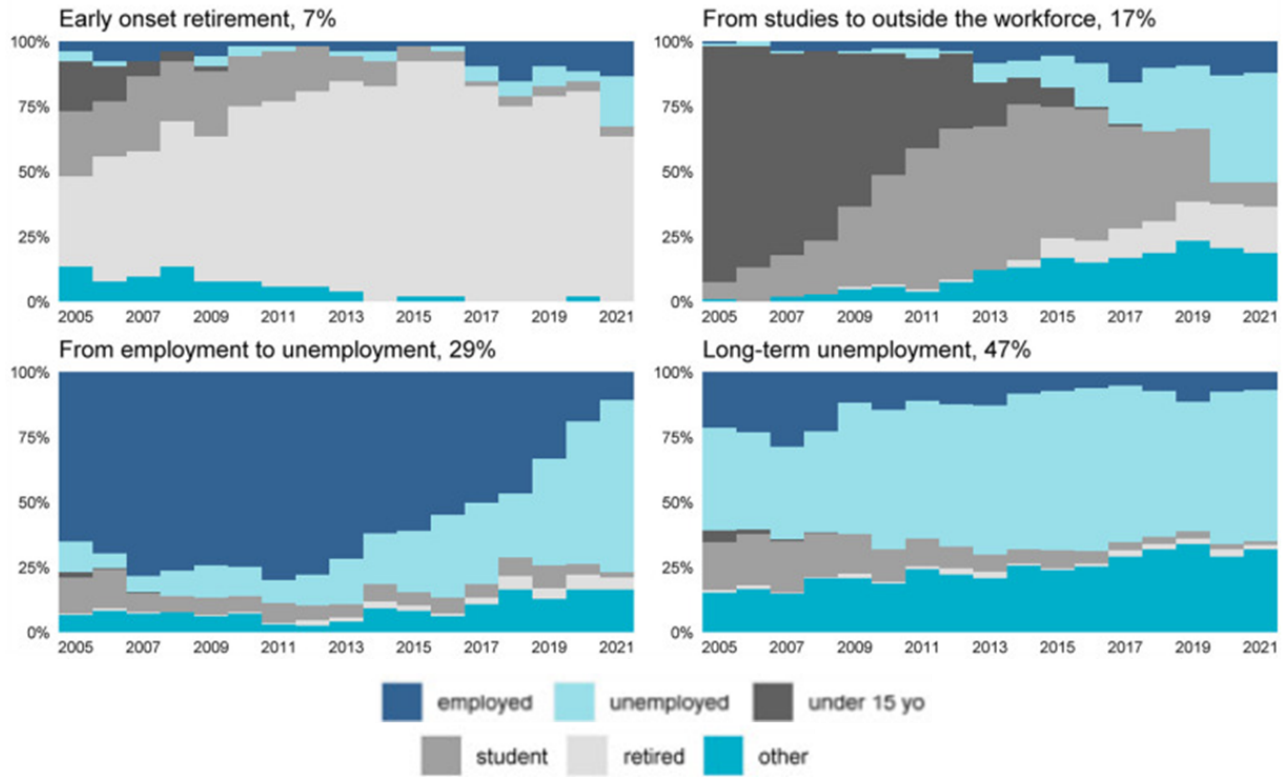
More detailed disability data supports deeper understanding of key differences within the disability population

Poutanen et al. (2024) also had a long follow-up (16 years) although involved a smaller sample (643 adults) but was significant due to the rich disability data it used, drawing from participants responses to the Abilitator questionnaire which comprises 84 questions regarding: personal and demographic details (e.g. age, gender), wellbeing (e.g. general functioning, perceived work ability), inclusion (social functioning and social interaction), mind (mental functioning), everyday life (coping with everyday activities), skills (e.g. cognitive functioning, competence), body (physical functioning), background information (e.g. educational background) and work and the future aspirations/expectations (e.g. employment situation, desired changes).

This study also identified four distinct trajectories described as:

- early onset retirement
- from studies to outside the workforce
- from employment to unemployment
- long-term unemployment.

Figure 7 Four key trajectories from six labour market states across 643 individual trajectories of disabled people over 16 years



Source: Poutanen et al. 2024

This study found that young marginalised adults, whose trajectories fit the "from studies to outside the workforce" typology, comprised individuals whose exclusion from work was explained by a wide range of underlying challenges that are less clear than those of individuals following other trajectories, highlighting the need for comprehensive assessment and individualised support.

In contrast, the "from employment to unemployment" trajectories were more likely to be associated with individuals with musculoskeletal disorders and mental disorders. And low educational attainment was associated with "long-term unemployment" and "early onset retirement".

Other studies reveal the range of trajectories and their characterisations

Some trajectories include transitions between part-time and full-time work

Madsen et al. (2020) identified nine employment trajectories for people experiencing disability onset during employment. Six trajectories of return to work after disability onset were described, involving either stable full-time or stable part-time work, or stepped patterns up to or down from full-time work. Three described varying patterns of unemployment and dependence on long-term sickness benefits, as well as periods of rehabilitation and/or shifts to disability pension.

Blanck, Brzinsky-Fay and Powell (2025) use patterns of part-time and full-time work, as well as self-employment, education, care work, work disability, and NEET, to define the seven trajectories identified, with each

trajectory showing a distinct pattern in the share of these over time.

The trajectory cluster analysis revealed that early employment is a trajectory for around 14.6 percent of young disabled adults and that this typically consists of full-time employment, whereas young disabled adults whose trajectory was coined "Employment Bridge" (showing a gradual shift from school to work) had much higher rates of part-time employment.

Deteriorating trajectories may be important trajectories for some disabilities

Zarghami et al. (2022) describe similar trajectories of stable full- and part-time employment, and increasing part-time employment as other studies on disabled people's trajectories, but also describe a deteriorating trajectory where a person with increasing disability (in this study due to multiple sclerosis) progressively moves from full-time stable employment, through reduced hours and weaker labour market attachment before withdrawing from the labour force.

Blanck, Brzinsky-Fay, and Powell (2025) find no deteriorating trajectory per se, likely reflecting the choice of target population for the study (in this case, young adults transitioning from school to employment over 48 months).

Stable trajectories of either employment or unemployment are common

Multiple studies identified groups with consistently high or consistently low employment throughout follow-up periods.

Gottschalk Ballo and Alecu (2023) found that 31.6 percent of young disabled people followed a stable employment trajectory characterised by periods of education followed by long periods of normal employment income. Conversely, 1,406 individuals (43.3 percent) were classified as permanently work-disabled, having been granted permanent work incapacity benefits at a young age.

Similarly, among people with spinal cord injury in the Netherlands (Ferdiana et al. 2014), 21.6 percent maintained steady employment continuously from pre-injury through 5 years post-discharge, while 22.2 percent had no employment either before or after injury.

A study of nearly 2,500 autistic adults in the Netherlands (Bury et al. 2024) found that 32.7 percent maintained stable employment across 8 years, while 48.6 percent experienced stable unemployment.

Among patients treated for alcohol use disorder in Norway (Christiansen and Moan 2022), 23.3 percent maintained high labour force attachment throughout a 5-year follow-up period, while 15.8 percent remained on permanent disability pension throughout.

Poutanen et al. (2024) found that 47 percent of people self-reporting low work ability were long-term unemployed.

Wittlund et al. (2023) also found that 26 percent were long-term unemployed in one cohort and in another cohort, 54 percent were regularly unemployed, leading to a long-term disability pension.

Unstable and fluctuating trajectories

A substantial proportion of individuals experienced unstable employment patterns characterised by frequent transitions between employment states.

Gottschalk Ballu and Alecu (2025) found that 10.3 percent followed an unstable employment trajectory with frequent changes between low income, social welfare, and education without work, while 477 individuals (14.7 percent) experienced early marginalisation with unstable periods of social welfare and high rates of work disability.

Among people with spinal cord injury, 56.3 percent had pre-injury employment and followed a low employment trajectory with slightly increasing probability of employment over 5 years.

For individuals with multiple sclerosis, part-time and full-time employment decreased

from 61.4 percent to 57.1 percent over 2.5 years, with 25.5 percent experiencing some change in employment status.

Research on mood and anxiety disorders (Hellström et al. 2018) identified four distinct return-to-work trajectories: 70 percent (196 of 283) had no return to work, 19 percent (56 of 283) experienced a 6-month delay before full return to work, 7 percent (19 of 283) rapidly returned but only worked half the time, and 4 percent (12 of 283) rapidly reached full employment but later experienced decreased work participation.

Amin et al. (2024) also identified "fluctuant" trajectories for young adults diagnosed with common mental disorders, including substance use disorder and ADHD, including a common trajectory, "fluctuant high", in which individuals followed a pattern characterised by an initial increase in work disability, followed by the diagnosis, and then gradual work disability due to effective management.

Poutanen et al. (2024) found that 29 percent of people with self-reported low work ability transitioned from employment to unemployment over 16 years of follow-up.

Legha et al. (2025) described trajectories in terms of absence from work for people with musculoskeletal and mental health conditions and found that trajectories involving longer periods of absence were less prevalent and tended to be more common among older people and those living in areas of greater socioeconomic deprivation.

Recovering trajectories

Some studies identified groups that improved their employment status over time. These included both temporary and permanent disabilities.

Rapid recovery and moderately paced recovery (characterised as rapidly and moderately decreasing use of sickness absence) in adults with musculoskeletal disorders accounted for 27 percent and 22 percent of the study population in a Norwegian study (Rysstad et al. 2022).

Among autistic adults, 7.5 percent (183 of 2,449) transitioned from early unemployment to increasing employment probability over 8 years (Bury 2024).

In the Norwegian alcohol use disorder cohort, 10.9 percent experienced increasing labour force attachment over the 5-year follow-up (Christiansen and Moan 2022).

Trajectories without employment

In some cases, transitioning from education to various states outside of employment and remaining out of employment was common. For example, Poutanen et al. (2024) found that 17 percent of people self-reporting low work ability transitioned through various states involving further studies, unemployment, early retirement, or other non-employment outcomes over 16 years. Individuals following this trajectory had the youngest average age in the sample and the lowest average income, as well as a high prevalence of mental disorders.

Early retirement trajectories

While early retirement may be common, particularly for people with late-onset disability and/or progressive disability, this was not a common trajectory or feature of a trajectory in the studies we identified. Most studies' follow-up periods or age ranges ended many years earlier than traditional retirement ages, likely because empirical challenges make it difficult to distinguish between involuntary and voluntary early retirement in study samples. However, Poutanen et al. (2024) identified early retirement as one of four main trajectories, with seven percent of the sample following this trajectory.

Making sense of the full evidence base is challenging

While individual studies provide interesting insights, it's challenging to consider the evidence base as a whole. One reason is that even basic definitions, e.g. "stable" employment, vary and that a systematic review confirms that this fundamental

concept is inconsistently defined (Taubner et al. 2021).

Differences between studies are largely driven by the data they use. The analytical techniques require that labour market states be defined before individual trajectories can be sequenced and clustered. These states are constrained by the available labour market data and determined by the researcher's interests. For example, some researchers may choose not to differentiate between part-time and full-time employment, and some data may not provide this granularity.

Any research into disabled people's trajectories in New Zealand will need to begin by identifying the "alphabet of states" which may be different for New Zealand.

Summing it up – What next?

Labour market trajectories for disabled people follow multiple distinct patterns likely determined by disability type, severity, onset timing, individual characteristics, and institutional contexts. Being able to describe the trajectories that disabled people in New Zealand commonly face can:

- improve understanding of causal factors
- identify key at-risk groups
- support policy design and assessment of fit-for-purpose.

Previous research has demonstrated significant differences in labour market trajectories across countries and highlighted the role of institutional factors in facilitating certain labour market transitions (Marczuk, 2024).

The importance of institutional factors suggests there is likely to be an important role for policy in altering labour market trajectories for disabled people. However, differences in institutional factors between countries mean the applicability of trajectories described by overseas studies to the New Zealand disabled population is unclear. This is a question that can be explored using New Zealand's IDI.

This will be the focus of the second Pubic Good Insight in this series.

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