How many people with intellectual disability are employed in the UK?

Rachel Forrester-Jones
Nick Gore
Tizard Centre, University of Kent

Kathy Melling
Employability Development Manager, Kent County Council

Introduction
Increasing employment opportunities for people with learning disabilities has recently become a priority for service provision in England following the publication of Valuing People Now (DH 2007, 2009a) and Valuing Employment Now (DH 2009b, 2009c). These developments may be regarded as the culmination of 35 years of previous policies which alluded to the importance of employment for the quality of life of people with learning disabilities, rather than stating how it should be achieved.

It is generally recognised that very few people with learning disability are currently employed. For example, Valuing People (DH, 2001) and the Commission for Social Care Inspection (reported in DWP, 2006a) both estimate that fewer than 10% of those known to local authorities are employed. Precise figures and characteristics of employees with learning disability are harder to find. As a consequence, it is often difficult for service developers, clinicians and researchers to ascertain whether or not real advances have been made in this area. The aim of this paper is to outline some of the reasons for this shortfall, with the objective of promoting improved data quality and accessibility in the future.

The diversity of potential sources: where to look?
At present, data relating to employment could be derived from a number of sources, among them the Department of Work and Pensions, Job Centre Plus, Labour Force Surveys, National Indicator Data, PSA-16 data, and Economic and Social Data Service. Difficulties are encountered, however, when trying to co-ordinate and synthesise this information. Notably, data relating to people with learning disability is rarely a focus of recording in these sources, or presented in a way that can be readily accessed by practitioners. For example, in order to use data from the Office of National Statistics, a specific request must be made for the creation of customised tables at a minimum charge of £135.00 (see lfs.dataservice@ons.gov.uk). This makes searches both time-consuming and costly for clinicians and service providers.

The diversity of disability recorded: what is meant by learning disability?
In each data set a variety of terms may be used in relation to learning disability, the generic term ‘disability’ often being favoured. For instance, the Health and Disability Survey (HDS) includes...
people with learning disability in a category that also encompasses people who have physical, sensory and health conditions in the absence of intellectual impairment. While it is occasionally possible to locate information relating more directly to people with learning disability (for instance, DWP (Berthoud, 2006), PSA-16 data), more detailed information regarding the level of disability (mild, moderate, severe, profound) and any additional developmental conditions or behavioural needs tends not to be available.

There is also considerable variation in how people with learning disability have (or have not) been identified (for example via contact with social services or special education) and questions emerge on how representative of the learning-disabled population individual data samples are. For instance, Dempsey and Ford (2008) demonstrate how, although the largest group of people with learning disability consists of individuals with mild to moderate disabilities (approximately 1.2 million people, of whom 700,000 are of working age [DH, 2001]), many of them are not known to local authorities and so often fail to be represented in data-collecting exercises. In addition, around 210,000 people with learning disability have a severe or profound disability (DH, 2001) but are often considered ‘incapable’ of work and therefore not included in databases (Dempsey & Ford, 2008).

The diversity of employment variables: what kind of work?
Calculating the number of people with learning disability in employment is further complicated by differences in how ‘work’ has been conceptualised and/or evidenced. Apart from mainstream full-time or part-time paid positions, cited examples may include supported employment, work experience placements, social enterprises, voluntary work and employment training in day centres/colleges. To some extent this reflects the fact that supported employment agencies may be organised via local authority, voluntary or community organisations, each with its own remit and service philosophy. For instance, in 2002 969 employment projects existed for people with learning disability, with variable degrees of direct support provided for people to gain mainstream work (DWP, 2006 in Dempsey & Ford, 2008). Such agencies are not evenly distributed across the country, success often being based on regional general employment experience as well as funding (Forrester-Jones et al, 2004). Unless supported by Jobcentre Plus, these services are also exempt from formal inspection by the Adult Learning Inspectorate (DWP, 2006b), so it is rarely possible to compare like for like in how ‘real work’ has been interpreted.

Finally, a number of employment variables that have particular significance when considering supported employment (identifying work preferences, development of prerequisite skills, accessing work placements, nature and extent of co-working, etc) are not recorded at all in large-scale sources.

Conclusion and future directions
The drive to increase employment for people with learning disability is supported by a solid evidence base demonstrating the social and economic benefits of work (Beyer et al, 2004; Forrester-Jones et al, 2004; Powell & Flynn, 2005; Fripp, 2005; O’Bryan & Beyer, 2005; Abbott & McConkey, 2006; Forrester-Jones & Broadhurst, 2007). However there is a paucity of data on the overall number of people with learning disability who currently work in the UK, beyond the received wisdom of ‘fewer than 10%’ (DH, 2001). This lack of readily accessible, reliable and representative data presents a major barrier to monitoring the effectiveness and efficiency of employment services in terms of outcomes for people with learning disability.

References
How many people with intellectual disability are employed in the UK?


