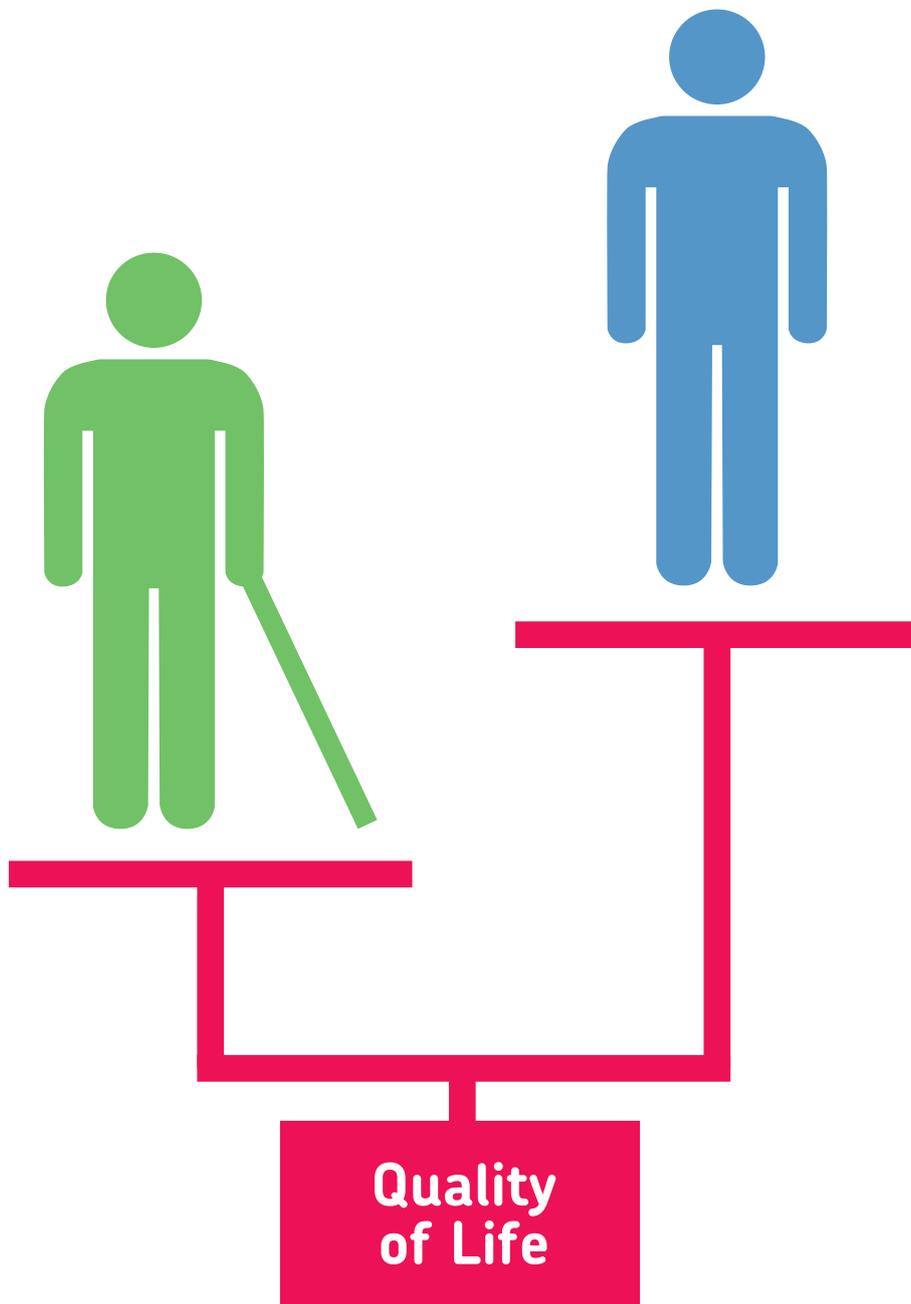




Understanding
Society

Living with sight loss

Using Understanding Society to explore the circumstances of those with visual impairment



Almost two million people in the UK are living with sight loss. That's approximately one person in 30. It is predicted that by 2020 the number of people with sight loss will rise to over 2.25 million.

As we grow old, we are more likely to experience eye sight problems. In the UK, the ageing population is increasing and it's predicted that by 2050, the number of people with sight loss in the UK will double to nearly four million.

Almost half of blind and partially sighted people say they feel 'moderately' or 'completely' cut off from people and things around them. Older people with sight loss are almost three times more likely to experience depression than people with good vision, whilst only one-third of registered blind and partially sighted people of working age are in employment.

This situation is likely to affect many more of us in the future. With this in mind the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) commissioned new research from NatCen in order to get the widest possible view of what life is like for people with sight loss.

Key findings

People with sight loss are more likely than those without sight loss to have difficulty finding work and to have been disproportionately affected by the recession. They are more likely to find it harder to afford basic necessities and to find it hard to access the amenities and services they need outside of home. They are also much more likely to have been victims of discrimination or hate crime.

Additional findings reveal that compared to people without any impairment, those with sight loss:

- were twice as likely as to be unemployed and looking for work
- aged 16-44 were twice as likely to live in a household with an income of less than £300 a week
- aged 45-64 were nearly three times as likely to live in a household with an income of less than £300 a week
- aged 65 or more were more likely to live in a household with an income of less than £300 a week

- were six times more likely to face restrictions with access outside of the home
- were three times more likely to have difficulty accessing health care services. Other services also posed a problem.

Policy context

The UK Vision Strategy 2013-18 seeks a major transformation in the UK's eye health, eye care and sight loss services and calls for a determined and united cross-sector approach to make that change a reality.

The strategy sets out three priorities:

- Everyone in the UK looks after their eyes and their sight
- Everyone with an eye condition receives timely treatment and, if permanent sight loss occurs, early and appropriate services and support are available and accessible to all
- A society in which people with sight loss can fully participate

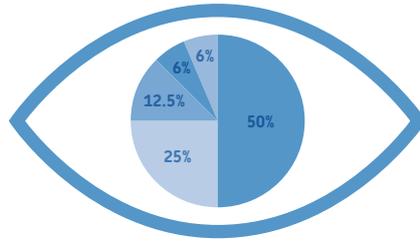
Adding his backing to the launch of the strategy, David Cameron has acknowledged that any loss or impairment of vision can reduce a person's quality of life substantially and demands for eye care services will increase as people live longer. Eye health, with a focus on ageing and sight loss, is also a UK-wide clinical priority for the Royal College of General Practitioners from April 2013 to March 2016.

The emphasis on quality of life is a key aspect of the UK Vision Strategy – and this includes, but is not limited to employment, use of public transport, education, leisure and using technology. Limited integrated research has been carried out into the subjective well-being of visually impaired people.

The RNIB has additional but related concerns that many visually impaired people will be hit hard by cuts to their housing benefits following the Government's welfare cutbacks and that as many as 17,000 registered blind people could

Using existing data like Understanding Society in secondary analysis is a very time efficient way for charities to get strong and robust research for relatively low cost rather than commissioning small scale surveys themselves.

Chris Lord, NatCen



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live in a household with an income of less than £300 a week



have problems with access outside of their home



have difficulty accessing health care services



be victims of discrimination or hate crime

be forced to move from their current housing as a result of the government's new 'bedroom tax'.

The research

Circumstances of People with Sight Loss is research by Sally McManus and Chris Lord at NatCen carried out on behalf of the Royal National Institute of Blind People.

The report presents indicators derived from two key large national survey datasets, Understanding Society and the Life Opportunities Survey (LOS). LOS is a Government-funded, large-scale longitudinal survey of disability in Britain, focusing on social barriers to participation.

Combining these datasets allowed the circumstances of people with visual impairment to be described and for comparisons with the rest of the population to be made.

Why Understanding Society?

Understanding Society interviews respondents about a wide variety of areas and examines people's longer-term occupational trajectories; their health and well-being, financial circumstances and personal relationships. The sample contained more than 1,300 visually impaired respondents.

This data was used in conjunction with LOS because it offers a wide range of modules covering the whole circumstance of people's lives and also permits a comparison between those suffering sight loss, and the general population. This is something that has not been done at this scale before.

The focus on well-being in Understanding Society was seen as a particular asset as LOS does not include validated measures of subjective well-being.

Policy implications

People with sight loss score lower than their sighted counterparts in almost every aspect of their lives. Of particular concern are their feelings about the future, with one third reporting they were not optimistic and 25% of people who said they were not satisfied with life overall.

There are fears that things may be getting worse rather than better for blind people. In response to the Government Spending Review for 2015 Steve Winyard, Head of Policy and Campaigns for the RNIB said that further cuts to local authorities' budgets "risk tipping blind and partially sighted people who are just about coping, into a spiral that could end in isolation, ill health and despondency".

Understanding Society allows us to look at people's journey of sight loss and what impact that journey of sight loss will have on their well-being.

John Slade, RNIB

This is clearly a challenge for an already over-burdened health and social care system which David Cameron has acknowledged can only be overcome by improving the coordination, integration and effectiveness of eye health and care services across the UK if it intends to meet the rising levels of sight loss in the UK.

The RNIB's new strategy aims to make everyday better for people living with sight loss. The secondary analysis of Understanding Society has helped reinforce some previous evidence that experiencing sight loss had a severe emotional impact on an individual. And because of its longitudinal nature RNIB will be using Understanding Society to track well-being over time, and monitor the success of their new strategy.

But this research also clearly points to a much bigger story about fairness and inclusivity, all of which are essential commitments if blind people are to get the support they need to play a full part in society.

Further information and outputs

The UK Vision Strategy 2013 to 2018:
www.vision2020uk.org.uk

Full RNIB report and a research briefing:
www.rnib.org.uk/knowledge-and-research-hub-research-reports/general-research

Find out more about the Life Opportunities Survey: www.gov.uk/government/collections/life-opportunities-survey

You can access this case study, including all web links, on our website at
www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/case-studies

If you would like a more detailed briefing on this research or to discuss how you can make use of Understanding Society in your research please email info@understandingsociety.ac.uk

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 Understanding Society – UK Household Longitudinal Study

This case study is part of a series aimed at potential users of Understanding Society data, including: policy makers, researchers and people in a position to influence social policy. If you are using data from Understanding Society and would like to profile your work, please email info@understandingsociety.ac.uk



Understanding Society has been commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The Scientific Research Team is led by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Essex.