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Disability discrimination in hiring: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Despite well-documented disability differentials in employment rates globally, there is only limited research using experimental methods to study discrimination in recruitment, which may constitute a key pathway through which the disability employment gap is sustained. In this systematic review, we review 69 existing experimental research studies on disability discrimination in hiring, published between June 1972 and January 2025, and outline key areas for future research in the field. Our review underlines significant differences in callback rates as well as variability in effect sizes across applicant and occupational characteristics. We also find that certain chronic health conditions and impairments have received more empirical attention than others. Exploring discrimination levels across a wider range of chronic conditions and impairments is necessary to move beyond monolithic understandings of disability as a binary ascriptive status and to discern different causal mechanisms associated with adverse employment outcomes among different subgroups. We argue that intersectional, theoretically grounded, and cross-national experimental approaches are needed to better understand and address disability discrimination in hiring.

1. Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of the international disability rights movement alongside an increased recognition of structural barriers faced by disabled people across the world (Sabatello & Schulze, 2014). These developments eventually culminated into the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CDRP) in 2008, which has been celebrated for setting out a new disability rights discourse to enable disabled people's equal participation in society (Harpur, 2012). However, disabled people continue to experience socioeconomic and health disparities across the world (World Health Organisation, 2011). Despite national legislations and policies (e.g., the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the US, the Equality Act 2020 in the UK, the 2006 General Equal Treatment Act in Germany) to ensure open, inclusive and accessible labour markets and workplaces, there is a well-documented disability gap in employment rates across developed and developing countries alike (Baumberg et al., 2015; M. K. Jones, 2008; Lee, 1996; Mizunoya & Mitra, 2013; D. L. Stone & Williams, 1997; Van der Zwan & De Beer, 2021). Disabled people are also less likely to experience upward occupational and income mobility and more likely to experience downward mobility compared to their non-disabled counterparts (Chatzitheochari et al., 2022; Gugushvili

et al., 2024). Labour market integration of disabled people is crucial for achievement of goals such as social approval, stimulation, and comfort related to economic resources (Hadjar & Kotitschke, 2021), and empirical research has confirmed its importance for health, wellbeing, and social inclusion of this group (Foubert et al., 2017; Roulstone & Barnes, 2005; Saunders & Nedelec, 2014). It is therefore particularly important to better understand the reasons behind the abovementioned inequalities.

Existing research suggests that disability differentials in educational attainment and productivity differences only partly explain the abovementioned disparities (Bryce et al., 2023; M. K. Jones, 2006; Kidd et al., 2000; Mizunoya & Mitra, 2013), shifting our attention to the attitudinal and structural barriers affecting the employment situation of disabled people. A key consideration is discrimination in the labour market, which arises when a disabled individual is treated differently to an otherwise similar non-disabled individual by virtue of their disability, despite the fact that disability has no direct effect on productivity (Heckman, 1998). Taking into account that all labour market rewards are conditional on employers' decisions on who can (and who cannot) enter an organisation (Bills et al., 2017), we contend that understanding disability discrimination during the hiring process, a process that involves evaluation of different job candidates and is likely to be affected

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by negative stereotypes and prejudice about disability (Shore et al., 2009; Storm et al., 2023; Vedeler, 2014), is of utmost importance in the study of disability inequality.

While discrimination has been conceptualised as pivotal for influencing life-course trajectories and reinforcing socioeconomic disadvantage of socially vulnerable groups (Link & Phelan, 2001), it has not been systematically explored in empirical literature focusing on employment outcomes of disabled people. To some extent, this omission may be attributed to the manifest difficulties of capturing experiences of discrimination in conventional social surveys (Van Brakel, 2006). Similarly, responses to attitudinal survey items are prone to social desirability bias (Krumpal, 2013) and may not be used as proxies for disability discrimination by employers (on ethnic discrimination, see Janus, 2010). Experimental methods, employed in a survey or field setting, constitute an alternative tool for the measurement of employers' discriminatory behaviour during hiring processes that moves away from some of the limitations of measures provided by observational research (Beyer & Liebe, 2015; Shamshiri-Petersen & Krogh, 2020). By systematically varying applicant characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and disability, and randomly assigning them to fictional candidates, these experimental methods allow researchers to disentangle the effects of disability characteristics from effects of other (confounding) characteristics. If designed accordingly, they can also uncover intersectional effects, for example by separating the combined effects of gender and disability or ethnicity and disability. In a survey context, experimental studies typically focus on hypothetical hiring decisions and ask respondents (e.g., employers/HR managers or university students) to evaluate multiple resumes or shorter descriptions of fictional applicants, known as vignettes (Shamshiri-Petersen & Krogh, 2020). In a field setting, audit studies have emerged as a valuable method for measuring discrimination in the context of hiring practices (Baert, 2018; Lippens et al., 2023). This approach targets employers and elicits interviewing and hiring decisions. Audit studies involve creating fictional job applications which are identical in all aspects except one or multiple manipulated characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, and/or disability status. Audit studies can be conducted either in person (in-person audits), where research confederates apply for jobs face-to-face, or through written applications (correspondence audits) (Gaddis, 2018). In both approaches, the applications are submitted to the same or to different employers, and positive call-backs (e.g., invitations for an interview, requests for further information) of the different applicants are compared within a single employer (within-subject design) or across different employers (between-subject design). As the employers are typically not aware that they are being observed, the potential influence of social desirability bias on their responses and behaviour is minimised. Compared to decomposition methods, which rely on observational data to infer discrimination from unexplained differences in employment outcomes, experimental approaches such as audit studies provide more direct evidence of causal mechanisms by controlling for all other applicant attributes. Experimental methods, therefore, offer a key advantage in directly capturing discriminatory behaviour rather than inferred or self-reported bias. Although there is a very large and growing body of experimental research on recruitment processes and ascriptive characteristics such as gender, race, and ethnicity (Riach & Rich, 2002; Zschirnt & Ruedin, 2016), there are fewer studies focusing on disability (Triana et al., 2021). To our knowledge, there is no comprehensive review on experimental research on disability discrimination in hiring (for a comprehensive meta-analysis of all correspondence studies, see Lippens et al., 2023). We therefore conducted such a review to shed light on the current state of knowledge and outline key substantive areas for future experimental research in the field.

Our paper is centred around a set of interrelated substantive topics on disability research (D. L. Stone & Colella, 1996). First, we document the types of chronic health conditions and impairments covered in existing research. Disability is a highly heterogeneous category (Altman, 2014), encompassing a diverse set of physical, mental, and emotional chronic health conditions and impairments, characterised by different functional limitations and participation restrictions and subject to varying levels of stigma (for example, see Campbell, 2009; Westbrook et al., 1993). Employers' attitudes and hiring behaviour may be influenced by the situational visibility of different chronic conditions and impairments and their perceived distance from normative ideals about skills in work settings (Neumark, 2018). Associated with the notion of disruptiveness and fear of costs that may arise from reasonable accommodations, productivity loss and absenteeism (Vornholt et al., 2018), level of support needs and severity may also impact employers' evaluations (Burke et al., 2013; Heera & Devi, 2016). Exploring discrimination levels across different chronic conditions and impairments is necessary to discern different causal mechanisms associated with adverse employment outcomes among these groups (Chatzitheochari et al., 2022).

Second, we examine the influence of different occupational and workplace characteristics. We examine variation by job sector, which may be linked to well-documented effects of educational qualifications on labour market experiences of disabled people and employer notions surrounding the "ideal worker" in different occupational fields (Baldwin & Johnson, 2006; Bryce et al., 2023; Kidd et al., 2000). The distinction between public and private sectors is also of interest given persisting differences in policies that improve employability of disabled people (e. g., affirmative action initiatives, disability inclusion schemes), as evidenced by previous research in different country settings (Barnay et al., 2015; Bruyere, 2000). Other institutional characteristics such as size of the organisation (Bacon & Hoque, 2022; Fraser et al., 2010), presence of specialist HR managers (Goss et al., 2000), and corporate social responsibility practices (Kwan, 2020) have also been identified as potential enablers to employment of disabled people, reducing the risk of discrimination in recruitment.

Third, we focus on the intersections of disability with other ascriptive characteristics, which has been recently identified as a key priority for the field of disability studies (Bixby, 2024; Shifrer & Frederick, 2019). There is emerging evidence on the intersections of disability status with gender, race, and social class in different life domains including employment (Bixby, 2024; Brown & Moloney, 2019; Chatzitheochari et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2020; Maroto & Pettinicchio, 2014; L. R. Shaw et al., 2012). Such research highlights the need to move beyond monolithic understandings of disability as "master status" that dominates other characteristics and emphasises the importance of better understanding how overlapping stigmatised identities may influence employment opportunities. We therefore explore the extent to which experimental designs have incorporated intersectional approaches, and insights that have emerged from such investigations.

Fourth, we explore the extent to which existing research has engaged with theories such as statistical discrimination (Arrow, 1972; Phelps, 1972), taste-based discrimination (Becker, 1971) or status beliefs (reward expectations theory; Berger et al., 1985, 2014) in order to explain the reasons why discrimination in recruitment occurs (Quillian & Midtbøen, 2021). This is essential for reducing the disadvantage faced by disabled people in the labour market, as interventions are likely to fail when they are based on wrong assumptions regarding the origins of discrimination. For example, statistical discrimination suggests that providing more information about job candidates' ability and performance should reduce discrimination. However, this approach will be ineffective if discrimination is instead driven by a pure taste for discrimination or by status beliefs (Auspurg et al., 2017). Another theoretical mechanism in hiring decision making is social capital, which has been shown to be highly relevant for employer decisions and labour market outcomes (Bills et al., 2017). We contend that it is important to explore whether existing research has engaged with formal theory-testing, since it is constitutes a necessary step for the articulation of mechanism-based explanations of and subsequent reduction of disability-related occupational disadvantage.

2. Materials and methods

This section outlines our data collection and synthesis strategies. Our systematic review aims at comprehensively assessing existing research on how various chronic health conditions and impairments are treated in hiring processes. We therefore seek to document different experimental study designs, patterns of discrimination faced by individuals with different types of chronic conditions and impairments as well as the influence of different attributes such as situational visibility and severity of impairment/condition. It follows that a meta-analysis is not an appropriate strategy for the purposes of our review as it would reduce the analysis to a simpler "disabled vs. non-disabled" (or "physically disabled vs. mentally disabled vs. non-disabled") comparison (recently offered by Lippens et al., 2023).

2.1. Protocol and search strategy

We conducted a systematic literature review following the guidelines in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement (Page et al., 2021). We employed a hybrid search strategy to identify existing research on discrimination of disabled job applicants: We conducted a comprehensive search of Web of Science, Scopus, and PubMed on 15 January 2025. We used the terms "discrimination", "disability", "hiring", and "experiment" and variants thereof to search in titles, abstract, and keywords.¹ Next, we employed "reference harvesting", using reference lists of identified articles to locate additional relevant articles, and compared our results to previous review studies that covered discrimination in hiring to add any studies we had missed. We gathered studies from previous reviews on hiring discrimination by Lippens et al. (2023; included 12 studies² on disability and hiring discrimination), Baert (2018; 8 studies), Rich (2014; 1 study), Neumark (2018; 3 studies), Averett (2012; 1 study), Lindsay et al. (2022; did not contain any experimental hiring studies), Ren et al. (2008; 23 studies³), Riach and Rich (2002; 3 studies), Riach and Rich (2004; 1 study), Burke et al. (2013; 21 studies), Ju et al. (2013; 15 studies) and Arvey (1979; 4 studies) and checked them against our inclusion criteria.⁴ In the last step, we used Google Scholar to supplement with additional sources not indexed in the three databases and not cited in any of the reviewed studies (on 16 January 2025). We first screened titles and abstracts of all identified articles and then reviewed full-text articles that met our inclusion criteria.

2.2. Inclusion criteria

We included studies that met the following criteria: 1) addressed discrimination against disabled people in hiring practices, 2) used an experimental design where a decision regarding hiring or interviewing was made, employing a non-disabled control applicant or a control applicant with a different impairment/condition,⁵ 3) published in English, and 4) published until January 15, 2025. We considered peerreviewed journal articles, working papers published on publicly accessible repositories, book chapters, reports, and conference proceedings. Given our explicit focus on experimental studies that allow the assessment of a disability penalty, our review does not include studies that focus only on *when* or *how* to acknowledge a disability in the hiring process, except when these include a non-disabled control group.⁶

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Healthy (ICF) conceptualises disability as a dynamic interaction between heath conditions, environmental factors and personal factors (World Health Organization, 2001), moving away from the medical model that viewed disability as an individual characteristic located within the human body and/or mind, to a biopsychosocial model that takes into account the social aspects of disability. Still, the definition of disability remains elusive, with the term used to describe all components of the disablement process including chronic health conditions and/or active and residual impairments resulting from disease or injury; functional limitations and difficulties arising from these, and subsequent participation restriction when the environment is not supportive (Altman, 2014). A global definition of disability is impossible; disability is socially and historically contingent, given cross-national and temporal variations in medical knowledge and treatment, environmental factors, as well as administrative national definitions that determine who is classified as disabled (Albrecht et al., 2003). For this reason, we refrained from employing a strict demarcation of disability status, utilising the term "disability" and its variants as key search terms.⁷ It follows that we did not include the names of specific chronic health conditions and illnesses (e.g., cancer, diabetes) as search terms; studies on specific illnesses that did not use the term "illness", "handicap", "impairment" or "disability" will not have been captured by our review.

Our final set of reviewed studies focus on a set of physical, mental, and emotional impairments and conditions that have limiting long-term effects on daily activities of individuals across different countries.

¹ The exact search string were as follows: Scopus: (TITLE-ABS-KEY(discriminat* OR stigma) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(disab* OR handicap* OR illness OR impairment) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(hiring OR labor OR labour OR employ* OR recruit* OR workplace OR job) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(experiment* OR factorial OR correspondence OR resume OR CV OR audit)); Web of Science: (TS=(discriminat* OR stigma) AND TS= (disab* OR handicap* OR illness OR impairment) AND TS= (hiring OR labor OR labour OR employ* OR recruit* OR workplace OR job) AND TS= (experiment* OR factorial OR correspondence OR resume OR CV OR audit)); PubMed: (discriminat*[tiab] OR stigma[tiab] OR bias[tiab] OR prejudice[tiab]) AND (disab*[tiab] OR handicap*[tiab] OR illness[tiab] OR limitation[tiab] OR capability[tiab]) AND (hiring[tiab] OR employment[tiab] OR recruitment[tiab] OR workplace[tiab] OR job[tiab]) AND (experiment*[tiab] OR factorial[tiab] OR "correspondence study"[tiab] OR resume[tiab] OR CV[tiab] OR audit[tiab]). Search terms used within GoogleScholar: "hiring discrimination disability", "employment discrimination disability", "hiring discrimination handicap", "employment discrimination handicap", "correspondence experiment disability", "correspondence experiment impairment", "correspondence experiment handicap", "experiment employment disability", "experiment hiring disability".

² Lippens' et al. (2023) mentioned 13 studies on disability and hiring discrimination, but only 12 were referenced.

 $^{^3\,}$ Ren et al. (2008) included PhD theses. Given our inclusion criteria, we only considered the published articles included in this review.

⁴ An additional review by Adamovic (2020) included 14 studies, but these were not referenced.

⁵ Note that although the study of Deuchert and Kauer (2017) did not include non-disabled control applicants, it is included in our systematic review. This study used applications from real disabled applicants and varied disclosure of financial subsidy as a signal of disability.

⁶ We therefore did not include studies like Hebl and Skorinko (2005) and Lyons et al. (2017), as these studies did not allow comparison of different impairments or comparison of a disabled applicant with a non-disabled control applicant.

Our search string identified one study focusing on discrimination of obese individuals during the hiring process. However, further investigation revealed that the majority of studies that focus on this topic were missed by our search string, as they did not frame obesity as a health/disability issue but rather as an attractiveness and personality issue (for example, see Goulão et al., 2024; Rooth, 2009). While we recognise that there may be some commonalities between weight-based and disability-based discrimination (particularly for some visible chronic conditions and impairments) during the hiring process, we decided to omit obesity from our systematic review, considering that it is not a protected characteristic in most national contexts and that it is only considered a disability under specific circumstances in some countries (Flint et al., 2016). In addition to this, we note that persisting causal beliefs about controllability of obesity and stereotyping of obese individuals as lazy and unintelligent (Link & Phelan, 2001; Puhl & Heuer, 2010) also suggest that weight-based discrimination may be generally triggered by different underlying beliefs than disability-based discrimination.

2.3. Data extraction

Once studies were identified, we extracted all relevant information. The data extraction phase involved a collaborative effort with the contribution of all authors. One author acted as the primary data extractor, responsible for conducting the initial extraction of data from selected studies. To enhance the reliability and validity of the data extraction process, the two other co-authors independently cross-checked the extracted data for accuracy and completeness. Discrepancies and uncertainties were resolved through discussions among the research team.

The data extraction process was guided by a predefined and revised data extraction form developed and refined based on research objectives and key variables of interest. In line with our research aims, the following substantive items were recorded for each study: type of condition/impairment studied, country and/or institutional policy context (if mentioned), stated theoretical explanation, and type of job/industry. We also extracted information on the date of data collection, sample size and description, disclosure and description of disability, severity of disability and its potential impact on work performance, experimental design, details on the hypothetical candidates (qualification level, gender, age), control group(s), measurement of hiring outcome, and reporting of heterogenous effects. We summarised key findings of each study, focusing on outcome measures (i.e., call-back rates, interview invitations, and/or hiring recommendations). In cases where only raw numbers were reported, we calculated call-back rates to improve comparability across studies. We report significant, heterogeneous effects as mean differences (if available). Although bias at the study level or across studies was not assessed, publication status and publication outlet are provided as further quality indicators.

2.4. Type of experimental design

We differentiate between audit studies (including in-person and correspondence audits) and other experimental designs. Audit studies target employers and elicit interviewing and hiring decisions (Quillian & Midtbøen, 2021; Verhaeghe, 2022). Other experimental studies ask about *hypothetical* hiring decisions and employ designs in which participants are aware that they are part of a research study. In these studies, respondents are presented with fictional application materials or shorter vignettes that describe fictional applicants. They are then asked to imagine that they are responsible for hiring and to make hiring decisions.



Fig. 1. PRISMA flow diagram summarising the systematic review procedure.

2.5. Study selection

Fig. 1 summarises the selection process in a PRISMA flow diagram. From the electronic databases queried, 1429 articles were identified, of which 1079 titles and abstracts were screened after deduplication.

A large part of the retrieved studies (n = 893) was excluded during title screening as they did not focus on hiring discrimination but rather provided assessment of scales or similar; these studies were retrieved through the search string as such scales "discriminated" between different outcomes. Further, many excluded studies focused on evaluation of programs supporting disabled people's integration into the labour market. After initial screening of abstracts and titles, 68 articles were assessed as potentially eligible and were screened as full texts. In accordance with our exclusion criteria, 27 of these articles were removed.

23 studies were additionally identified through reference list and five studies not yet included through other channels were identified through Google Scholar. The final review includes 69 studies that focused on hiring outcomes of disabled people (Table A1; online appendix). This includes audit studies (n = 33; these include 5 follow-up studies which use additional data from outside the audit without collecting new data on employer decisions), and other experimental designs including laboratory experiments, (non-audit) field experiments, and survey experiments (n = 36).

3. Results

3.1. Overview of reviewed studies

69 studies were reviewed as part of this systematic literature review. Fig. 2 depicts the number of studies per year. The first study on disability discrimination in hiring was published in 1972, while the first audit study was conducted in 1973. In this first study, E. A. Shaw (1972) presented 132 college students with descriptive resumes and accompanying photographs of three hypothetical college graduates and randomised college students into an experimental and a control group. While the control group was presented with three male college graduates, including a married one, the experimental group was presented with one female college graduate, one divorced male graduate who was also facing financial problems, and a male graduate who was described as having "4-F, a withered arm, weak vision requiring glasses". Participants were asked to give the hypothetical job applicants a hire rating ranging from "would refer for hire even though no position is immediately available" to "would not refer for hire under any circumstances." Comparing answers of treatment and control group respondents, E. A. Shaw (1972) did not find a significant influence of the applicant's physical condition on the hire rating. The first audit study was conducted by Farina and Felner (1973). In this study, a confederate, a male





of college age, visited 61 manufacturing establishments in the state of Connecticut (found through a pamphlet), to obtain 32 interviews. At 16 randomly selected establishments, the confederate presented himself as a job applicant who had been traveling for the preceding nine months, while at the others he stated that he had been in a mental hospital for the same period. The applicant received a total of six job offers: Four were offered to the applicant who had been travelling and two to the one who had been mentally ill. While this was suggestive, the numbers in this early study were too small for this difference to be statistically significant.

There has been relatively stable and rather modest research interest surrounding disability discrimination over time, remarkably peaking in 2024, with a noticeable increase of audit studies from 2015 onwards. This is likely due to the increase of online job advertisements and the ease of submitting job applications, which have rendered correspondence audits more feasible for researchers.

A recent development is the emergence of follow-up studies of audit experiments (Bjørnshagen, 2022; Krogh, 2024; Østerud, 2022a, 2022b, 2023) that address shortcomings of traditional correspondence experiments, particularly the limited insights into the underlying reasons for and mechanisms behind discrimination (Gaddis, 2018). Most often, these follow-up studies consist of interviews, conducted with a subset of targeted employers (see Krogh, 2024; Østerud, 2022a, 2022b, 2023).

3.2. Study locations

Table 1 shows the country of origin of reviewed studies which collect original data on hiring decisions (this table excludes the five follow-up studies of Bjørnshagen 2022, Krogh 2024 and Østerud 2022a, 2022b, 2023). The majority of research is from the Global North, namely from Europe and the US. Approximately 84 % (30/36) of non-audit experimental studies come from the US. In contrast, audit studies tend to have a larger geographical scope: 29 % (8/28) were conducted in the US and 71 % (20/28) in European countries, with five studies from the UK (Antinyan et al., 2024; Fry, 1986; Graham et al., 1990; MacRae & Laverty, 2006; A. Stone & Wright, 2013), three from Belgium (Baert, 2016; Baert et al., 2016; Capéau et al., 2012), three from France (Chareyron et al., 2024; L'Horty et al., 2022; Ravaud et al., 1992), two from Norway (Bjørnshagen, 2021; Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov, 2021) and two from Sweden (Ahmed et al., 2024; Bjørnshagen et al., 2025). There is only one audit study on disability that was not conducted in the US or in Europe (Pearson et al., 2003; Hong Kong). Notably, all follow-ups to audit studies stem from Scandinavia, four from Norway (Bjørnshagen, 2022; Østerud, 2022a, 2022b, 2023) and one from Denmark (Krogh, 2024).

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Country of o	rigin of reviewed	studies which	ch collect or	iginal hiring	data.

Country	Audit studies (excluding follow- ups)	Other experimental designs	Total (excluding follow-ups)
USA	8	30	38
UK	5	1	6
Belgium	3	1	4
Norway	2	1	3
France	3		3
Canada	1		1
Switzerland	1		1
Hong Kong	1		1
Greece	1		1
Denmark	1	1	2
Sweden	2	1	3
Ireland		1	1
Total	28	36	64

Note: This table excludes the five follow-ups to audit studies that do not collect original data on hiring decisions (Bjørnshagen, 2022; Krogh, 2024; Østerud, 2022a, 2022b, 2023).

3.3. Sample size and characteristics

For audit studies, vacancy sample size ranges between 31 and 6016, with a mean of 944 (sd = 2276) and a median of 575. For studies with other designs (n = 41, Bishop et al., 2007; Nittrouer et al., 2024; Reilly et al., 2006 include multiple studies) including laboratory and non-audit field experiments, sample size ranges between 26 and 2000, with a mean of 412 (sd = 558) and median of 180.

In audit studies, employers received between one and five applications, while in other experimental designs participants rated between one and nine applications. In studies employing other experimental designs, employers/HR managers (n = 17), students (n = 17), general professionals (n = 2) and/or respondents drawn from online panel providers like Amazon MTurk or Prolific (n = 7) were asked to make hypothetical hiring decisions (some studies include multiple samples).

3.4. Types of disabling chronic conditions and impairments, disclosure, severity and impact on work performance

Table 2 shows the varying chronic health conditions and impairments covered in reviewed studies (excluding the follow-up studies), using terminology employed by the author(s) of each study. We acknowledge that certain terms are now defunct and that there is some overlap between certain categories, partly due to differences in terminology across countries. Non-audit studies cover a wider variety of impairments and conditions than audit studies. The majority of studies (50 % of audit studies (n = 14/28) and 53 % of non-audit studies (n = 19/36)) focus on wheelchair users, a category that usually includes individuals with a wide range of impairments who use the assistive device for mobility purposes. A third (n = 11/33) of these studies does not provide further details regarding the reasons for wheelchair use, while the remaining two thirds (n = 22/33) attribute it to a specific health condition (e.g., cerebral palsy, paraplegia etc.) in the study design. Unspecified mental illness and depression follow as the next most popular conditions covered in audit (both n = 3/28; 11 %) and non-audit studies (both n = 6/36; 17 %), as well as sensory impairments (blindness and deafness), also covered both in audit (n = 3/28, 11 % for hearing impairments and n = 4/28, 14 % for visual impairments) and non-audit studies (n = 2/36, 6 % for hearing impairments and n = 4/36, 12 % for visual impairments).

Aside wheelchair use, other studies also focus on other visible consequences of impairments and chronic conditions: facial disfigurement (Stevenage & McKay, 1999; A. Stone & Wright, 2013), use of crutches (Christman & Slaten, 1991; Pearson et al., 2003), amputation (Bordieri & Drehmer, 1988; Rose & Brief, 1979) and congenital cleft lips and palate (Scheuerle et al., 1982). It is noteworthy that several highly prevalent invisible conditions (e.g., Asperger's/autism, multiple sclerosis, HIV, cancer) have been studied only few times each in audit studies (see Table 2).

The vast majority of audit studies (n = 24/28 of) disclose disability in CVs and cover letters (or in "application blanks") of the fictional candidates through direct mention to the condition (e.g., "I should explain that I am a person with cerebral palsy and am registered disabled.", Fry, 1986), mention of volunteer work or volunteer group memberships (e.g., "...providing time/energy to those similar to myself", Ameri et al., 2018), mention of having worked in a state-owned company known for employing people with disabilities (Ahmed et al., 2024), or to justify a spell of unemployment in work history (e.g., "... hospitalised for five months due to depression", Berven & Driscoll, 1981). One study discloses disability by mentioning eligibility for wage subsidy, in line with the Swiss disability insurance act (Deuchert & Kauer, 2017). Baert (2016) also mentions subsidy entitlement alongside disability disclosure.

Four audit studies, including the three first-recorded ones, were inperson studies, thus making use of face-to-face employment situations (Brand & Claiborn, 1976; Farina & Felner, 1973; Johnson & Heal, 1976). Such in-person audits have by now become a rare occurrence, with the exception of a recent study by Bendick (2018), as they have some important limitations. Particularly, it is more difficult to create controlled environments where the characteristics of the applicants (such as appearance, behaviour, and verbal communication) are kept consistent across multiple visits to employers compared to creating standardised, written application documents in correspondence audits. Correspondence audits are also easier to implement at scale. Moreover, in today's economy, in-person job applications have become less common due to the increasing reliance on online job applications, making correspondence audits more relevant and aligned with current recruitment practices. One recent correspondence study by Bellemare et al. (2023) presents a hybrid solution, using video CVs that offer visual stimuli similar to face-to-face interactions while still adhering to the advantages of correspondence audits.

Non-audit studies use more varied methods to describe disability. The majority uses CVs, cover letters, application blanks or candidate information sheets to mention disability within fictional application dossiers (n = 15), several other studies (n = 11) present interview material (in form of videotapes or interview snippets), describe the applicant and their disability in a textual vignette (n = 7), or present medical summaries (n = 2). Stevenage and McKay (1999) disclose the facial disfigurement of their applicants through photos and both Bell and Klein (2001) and Nittrouer et al. (2024) disclose disability in fictional recommendation letters.

Three audit and two non-audit studies specify the severity of the condition explicitly. Audit studies signal severity through the disability disclosure statement in the cover letter ("severe depression", Baert et al., 2016; "severe visual impairment" Chareyron et al., 2024; "severely deaf" L'Horty et al., 2022) while non-audit studies have varied the type of disability (using different types of cancer with varying survival rates, Bordieri et al., 1990; varying the extent of brain damage, Gouvier et al., 1991).

Many studies (n = 16) disclose disability in way to signal that there is no or only very little disability impact on work performance (e.g. by mentioning in the cover letter "[...] however, as I think my education and work history show, my disability has not restricted my working life", Graham et al., 1990; or by citing positive medical reports, see Rose & Brief, 1979), and several other studies (n = 12) mention the need for reasonable adjustments in the workplace to achieve a level of work performance comparable to a non-disabled candidate. Only one study by Sterkens et al. (2024) focused on a disability (Parkinson's disease) which is likely to affect work performance in the long term as stated in the original paper.⁸

3.5. Effects of disabling chronic conditions and impairments on hiring

All audit studies report significant differences in call-back rates between wheelchair and non-wheelchair users (Ameri et al., 2018; Antinyan et al., 2024; Bellemare et al., 2023; Bendick, Jr, 2018; Bjørnshagen et al., 2025; Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov, 2021; Fry, 1986; Glazko et al., 2024; Graham et al., 1990; Johnson & Heal, 1976; Krogh & Bredgaard, 2022; MacRae & Laverty, 2006; Ravaud et al., 1992; A. Stone & Wright, 2013).

There is substantial variation in effect sizes of these studies, with the majority reporting large effects where non-disabled candidates are at least 1.5 times more likely to be contacted (n = 9), a minority reporting smaller effects (n = 4), and one study not providing adequate detail (n = 1). For example, focusing on the effects of wheelchair use (cerebral palsy) on hiring for secretarial positions in the United Kingdom, Graham et al. (1990) find a call-back rate of 45 % for non-disabled applicants and

⁸ While there are studies which focus on effects of disability disclosure, these do not form part of this systematic reviews as they do not allow the calculation of a disability penalty.

Table 2

Type of disabling chronic conditions and impairments covered in reviewed studies which collect original hiring data.

Impairment/Condition	Audit studies	Ref.	Other experimental designs	Ref.	Total
Wheelchair user (cerebral palsy, spinal cord injury, paraplegia)	14	(Ameri et al., 2018; Antinyan et al., 2024; Bellemare et al., 2023; Bendick, Jr, 2018; Bjørnshagen et al., 2025; Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov, 2021; Fry, 1986; Glazko et al., 2024; Graham et al., 1990; Johnson & Heal, 1976; Krogh & Bredgaard, 2022; MacRae & Laverty, 2006; Ravaud et al., 1992; A. Stone & Wright, 2013)	19	 (Ameri & Kurtzberg, 2025; Bell & Klein, 2001; Berre, 2024; Bishop et al., 2007; Bordieri & Drehmer, 1986, 1988; Christman & Slaten, 1991; Dispenza et al., 2018; Drehmer & Bordieri, 1985; Koser et al., 1999; Marchioro & Bartels, 1994; Miceli et al., 2001; Nordstrom et al., 1998; Shamshiri-Petersen & Krogh, 2020; Sprong et al., 2019; Stevenage & McKay, 1999; C. I. Stone & Sawatzki, 1980; Timmons et al., 2024; Wright & Cunningham, 2017) 	33
Visual impairment (weak vision) /blindness	4	(Baert, 2016; Chareyron et al., 2024; Glazko et al., 2024; MacRae & Laverty, 2006)	4	(Berre, 2024; Bishop et al., 2007; E. A. Shaw, 1972; Wang et al., 2010)	8
Unspecified mental illness	3	(Bjørnshagen, 2021; Farina & Felner, 1973; Hipes et al., 2016)	6	(Berre, 2024; Bordieri & Drehmer, 1988; Gouvier et al., 2003; Nittrouer et al., 2024; Premeaux, 2001; C. I. Stone & Sawatzki, 1980)	9
Depression	3	(Baert et al., 2016; Glazko et al., 2024; Pearson et al., 2003)	6	(Bell & Klein, 2001; Berven & Driscoll, 1981; Bishop et al., 2007; Koser et al., 1999; Nittrouer et al., 2024; Pailly et al. 2006)	9
Hearing impairment	3	(Baert, 2016; L'Horty et al., 2022; Pearson et al.,	2	(Berre, 2024; Bordieri & Drehmer, 1988)	5
Disability not further	3	(Ahmed et al., 2024; Deuchert & Kauer, 2017; Clarko et al., 2024)	2	(Berre, 2024; Gouvier et al., 1991)	5
Autism/Asperger's	3	(Ameri et al., 2018; Baert, 2016; Glazko et al., 2024)	1	(Andersson et al., 2015)	4
Cancer	1	(Namingit et al., 2021)	4	(Bishop et al., 2007; Bordieri et al., 1990; Bordieri & Drehmer, 1988; Beilly et al., 2006)	5
Bipolar disorder	1	(Brand & Claiborn, 1976)	4	(Ameri & Kurtzberg, 2025; Dai & Brady, 2019; Dispenza et al. 2018; Spirito Dalein & Bellini 2008)	5
Unspecified physical disability	1	(Capéau et al., 2012)	3	(Andersson et al., 2015; Nittrouer et al., 2024; Premeaux, 2001)	4
HIV	1	(Drydakis, 2010)	2	(Bishop et al., 2007; Miceli et al., 2001)	3
Facial disfigurement	1	(A. Stone & Wright, 2013)	1	(Stevenage & McKay, 1999)	2
Tuberculosis	1	(Brand & Claiborn, 1976)	-	()	1
Crutches	1	(Pearson et al., 2003)	1	(Christman & Slaten, 1991)	2
Learning, development and intellectual disabilities, mental retardation	-		5	(Andersson et al., 2015; Berre, 2024; Bishop et al., 2007; Bordieri & Drehmer, 1988; Gouvier et al., 2003)	5
Epilepsy			5	(Ameri & Kurtzberg, 2025; Bell & Klein, 2001; Bishop et al., 2007; Rose & Brief, 1979; Sung et al., 2017)	5
Brain/closed head injury			3	(Andersson et al., 2015; Dai & Brady, 2019; Gouvier et al., 2003)	3
Drug dependency and substance abuse			3	(Bordieri & Drehmer, 1986, 1988; Reilly et al., 2006)	3
Amputation			2	(Bordieri & Drehmer, 1988; Rose & Brief, 1979)	2
Diabetes			2	(Klesges et al., 1990; Spirito Dalgin & Bellini, 2008)	2
Schizophrenia			2	(Bishop et al., 2007; Drehmer & Bordieri, 1985)	2
Kidney disease			1	(Bordieri & Drehmer, 1988)	1
Pneumonia			1	(Bordieri et al., 1990)	1
Psychosis			1	(Andersson et al., 2015)	1
Multiple sclerosis			1	(Bishop et al., 2007)	1
Heart problems			1	(Bishop et al., 2007)	1
Congenital cleft lips and palate			1	(Scheuerle et al., 1982)	1
Withered arm			1	(E. A. Shaw, 1972)	1
Anxiety			1	(Timmons et al., 2024)	1
Parkinson's			1	(Sterkens et al., 2024)	1
ADHD			1	(Andersson et al., 2015)	1
Total	40		87		127

Note: This table excludes follow-ups to audit studies that do not collect original data on hiring decisions (Bjørnshagen, 2022; Krogh, 2024; Østerud, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). Studies which cover multiple chronic conditions and impairments are listed multiple times, thus leading to a greater total.

a rate of 29 % for wheelchair users, resulting in a difference of 16 percentage points. In other words, the study finds that non-disabled applicants were 1.5 times more likely to receive a positive response from employers than disabled applicants. More recent studies confirm that wheelchair users continue to experience substantial levels of discrimination in recruitment: Krogh and Bredgaard (2022) report a 55 % difference in call-back rate for non-disabled applicants and wheelchair users (spinal cord injury) for jobs in various sectors in Denmark, while Bendick (2018) also finds a 32 % difference in call-back rates and a 25 % difference in job offers for retail jobs in the United States.

Due to differences in research design (i.e., more varied control applicants) and outcome variables (i.e., rating scales with varying number of scale points), it is difficult to compare effect sizes for non-audit experimental studies. In general, results on wheelchair users and other visible impairments and conditions appear mixed: The majority of studies report non-significant differences between non-disabled candidates and those with visible impairments and conditions (n = 10). Four studies find higher ratings for visibly disabled candidates (Ameri &

N. Schwitter et al.

Kurtzberg, 2025; Christman & Slaten, 1991; Koser et al., 1999; Nordstrom et al., 1998), and only five studies show negative effects (Berre, 2024; Miceli et al., 2001; Shamshiri-Petersen & Krogh, 2020; Stevenage & McKay, 1999; Timmons et al., 2024).

Two audit studies find large descriptive gaps between non-disabled candidates and those who declared mental conditions, but these do not translate to statistically significant differences, which may be attributed to small sample sizes (Brand & Claiborn, 1976; Farina & Felner, 1973). Pearson et al. (2003) report very large negative effects for candidates that were formerly depressed (call-back of 36% for non-disabled candidates as opposed 13 % for formerly depressed candidates) and Glazko et al. (2024) find that generative artificial intelligence models used to screen applications prefer applicants without any mentions of depressions in 90 % of cases. Two studies find considerably smaller gaps of less than ten percentage points (Baert et al., 2016; Bjørnshagen, 2021). In contrast to studies focusing on visible impairments, non-audit studies on mental health and psychiatric conditions report predominantly negative ratings of candidates compared to those with no declared impairments and conditions (Bell & Klein, 2001; Berre, 2024; Berven & Driscoll, 1981; Drehmer & Bordieri, 1985; Nittrouer et al., 2024; Reilly et al., 2006; Spirito Dalgin & Bellini, 2008; C. I. Stone & Sawatzki, 1980). However, in a study focusing on sharing economy gigs, Dai and Brady (2019) find no difference between non-disabled candidates and those with stated bipolar disorder.

In line with theories of stigmatisation (E. E. Jones, 1984; Link & Phelan, 2001), studies focusing on chronic conditions that are attributed to individual responsibility by the general public (HIV and drug addiction) find statistically significant differences between disabled and non-disabled individuals (Bordieri & Drehmer, 1986, 1988; Drydakis, 2010; Reilly et al., 2006). Drydakis (2010) reports a very pronounced treatment effect of 44 percentage points, when comparing male applicants with and without HIV infection applying for various high- and low-skilled jobs in Greece.

It is important to note that the reviewed studies differ in a range of factors other than just the impairments/conditions (e.g., occupational context, time of data collection, or country), making comparisons difficult. However, a total of 32 study designs includes comparisons of individuals with different impairments and conditions. Several of these comparisons involve mental/psychiatric conditions and physical impairments (including wheelchair use), with the vast majority of these studies reporting worse call-backs and candidate ratings for the former (Ameri & Kurtzberg, 2025; Andersson et al., 2015; Berre, 2024; Bishop et al., 2007; Bordieri & Drehmer, 1988; Drehmer & Bordieri, 1985; Gouvier et al., 1991, 2003; Koser et al., 1999; Nittrouer et al., 2024; Premeaux, 2001; Spirito Dalgin & Bellini, 2008; C. I. Stone & Sawatzki, 1980; Timmons et al., 2024). Blindness emerges as a particularly stigmatised status in four comparative studies (Baert, 2016; Berre, 2024; Bishop et al., 2007; MacRae & Laverty, 2006).

In the meta-analysis of correspondence studies by Lippens et al. (2023), the authors found relatively equal discrimination level of applicants with a physical or a mental disability (an around 40 % difference in positive call-backs compared to the control group). Notably, the authors mention the diversity in what is considered a physical and a mental disability which led to a very high statistical heterogeneity.

Studies that incorporate wage subsidies on the research design showed negative albeit small effects on call-back rates (Baert, 2016; Deuchert & Kauer, 2017), raising the possibility that employers interpret wage subsidies as proxies for severity of impairment/condition (L'Horty et al., 2022), previously shown to reduce probability of employment (Berthoud, 2003). In contrast, Berre (2024) finds positive albeit small effects of subsidies. Gouvier et al. (1991) find that disability severity (the extent of brain damage) increases the risk of discrimination in recruitment. However, Bordieri et al. (1990) finds that the severity of cancer did not systematically influence participants' evaluations of hypothetical applicants which were described to suffer from different types of cancers with varying 5-year survival rates. However, this might also be due to lack of knowledge about these survival rates. Besides Stevenage and McKay (1999), who look at overlaps of facial disfigurement and wheelchair usage, there are no studies focusing on overlapping chronic conditions and impairments, which may also be understood as an indicator of high support needs and functional limitations.

3.6. Occupational and workplace characteristics

The reviewed studies covered a wide range of sectors including manufacturing, retail, information technology, and administration. Generally, the studies focus on occupations where productivity is not strongly affected by the impairment/condition under study, especially given reasonable and rather minor work adjustments (such as an additional break, a standing desk, etc.); only Berre (2024) explicitly states that their research design did not match type of impairment with type of employer in order to compare several different impairments.

Approximately 14 % of audit studies (n = 4/28) varied the level of customer contact in their design (Baert et al., 2016; Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov, 2021; L'Horty et al., 2022; A. Stone & Wright, 2013), which relates to the concept of situational visibility of conditions and impairments and employer assumptions about customer discriminatory preferences. Stone and Wright (2013) find that call-back rates for candidates with facial disfigurement decrease for occupations with higher levels of customer contact, such as receptionists and salespeople, but there are no effects for wheelchair users who experience the same level of discrimination irrespective of customer contact. L'Horty et al. (2022) report similar differences for those with hearing impairment who experience twice the level of discrimination when applying for positions as caregiver assistants compared to administrative managers.⁹ Baert et al. (2016) and Bjørnshagen and Ugreninov (2021) do not find significant variation by levels of customer contact. Hipes et al. (2016) varies the extent of contact with other colleagues, reporting that effects of mental illness on call-back do not depend on mode of work. Five non-audit studies incorporate the extent of social/public contact in their research design, reporting no significant effects (Drehmer & Bordieri, 1985; Gouvier et al., 1991, 2003; Koser et al., 1999; Rose & Brief, 1979). Six audit studies (Baert, 2016; Baert et al., 2016; Bjørnshagen et al., 2025; Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov, 2021; Capéau et al., 2012; Drydakis, 2010) and five non-audit studies (Gouvier et al., 2003; Miceli et al., 2001; Rose & Brief, 1979; E. A. Shaw, 1972; Sterkens et al., 2024) employ designs that compare occupations requiring different skills and levels of formal education. In a study of wheelchair users in Norway, Bjørnshagen and Ugreninov (2021) examine a wide range of medium/high-skill and low skill occupations, from software developers and accountants to sales representatives and medical assistants, revealing occupational variation in call-back rates. In contrast, Drydakis' (2010) study of people with HIV infections showed that discrimination levels did not vary by occupation.

Only a few studies explore the role of workplace and/or employer characteristics; these are mostly audit studies and their follow-ups, which specifically target employers and workplaces that can then be compared. Two studies compare discrimination in private and public companies in Denmark and France respectively (Krogh & Bredgaard, 2022; L'Horty et al., 2022), reporting lack of significant differences. Five studies explore the relationship of disability discrimination in recruitment with company size (Ameri et al., 2018; Bjørnshagen, 2022; Chareyron et al., 2024; Graham et al., 1990; Ravaud et al., 1992), yielding mixed results. One study considers the influence of gender of the person responsible for hiring decision and finds no significant effect (Baert, 2016). Finally, a non-audit study explores the impact of a diversity

⁹ L'Horty et al. (2022) attribute differences in effect sizes for administrative manager and caregiver assistant positions to different levels of interaction with the public. However, hearing impairments may also affect the productivity within caregiving professions.

statement, finding that more heartfelt statements (compared to traditional/legal ones) improved ratings of candidates with disabilities and thus suggesting that the language used in these statements is an important signalling device (Ameri & Kurtzberg, 2025).

3.7. Intersectionality

Intersectional perspectives shift attention to the overlap of disability status with other ascriptive characteristics and social identities. Overall, only a few studies included in our review have adopted intersectional designs. Although gender is an important dimension of labour market discrimination, comparatively few studies explicitly address its interplay with disability status and report gender-specific rates of discrimination. In total, we found eight audit studies (Ahmed et al., 2024; Baert et al., 2016; Bjørnshagen et al., 2025; Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov, 2021; Drydakis, 2010; Krogh & Bredgaard, 2022; Namingit et al., 2021; A. Stone & Wright, 2013) and five non-audit studies (Bell & Klein, 2001; Berre, 2024; Dispenza et al., 2018; Sprong et al., 2019; Timmons et al., 2024) focusing on the relationship of gender and disability status. Only four studies report statistically significant interactions between the two ascriptive statuses (Ahmed et al., 2024; Baert et al., 2016; Bjørnshagen et al., 2025; Namingit et al., 2021). For example, focusing on individuals with a history of cancer in the US, Namingit et al. (2021) find a disproportionate effect of employment gap due to illness on women applicants' call-back rates. Bjørnshagen et al. (2025) offer the first comprehensive audit study of the complex interplay of gender and disability status, focusing on wheelchair users (congenital spinal cord injury). Results indicate no heterogeneity in levels of disability discrimination against men and women on average across occupations and by occupational gender segregation, but considerable variation in levels of discrimination among occupations that vary by gender. Timmons et al. (2024) conduct a vignette experiment with a representative sample of Irish adults to study several issues faced by disabled people within different contexts (including employment). Within the context of work and hiring, they did not find a significant disability-gender intersectionality effect.

Despite the large literature on ethnic discrimination within the hiring process, there are no intersectional studies which explore the interplay of disability with ethnicity/race. Ameri et al. (2018) is the only study that uses black- and white-sounding names to describe applicants. The authors report that there are no significant interactions between the names and disability status (Ameri et al., 2018, p. 336). In contrast, Namingit et al. (2021) acknowledge intersectionality and use Caucasian-sounding names to avoid name-based employment discrimination (linked to race/ethnicity) from influencing results.

Exploring the combined effects of disability- and class-based stratification on hiring outcomes requires appropriate controls such as prestige of educational institution(s) attended by the applicants, extracurricular activities and hobbies, candidate names and place of residence (for example, see Besbris et al., 2018; Jackson, 2009). Our review did not find any studies that included such controls. Several studies solely manipulate educational attainment: For example, in a study based in Belgium, Baert (2016) reports smaller call-back differences between higher educated disabled and non-disabled applicants as opposed to moderately educated ones. Similarly, Ravaud et al. (1992) find a significant interaction effect for educational attainment and paraplegia, with paraplegic higher qualification holders having 2.2 times more chance of a positive response compared to those with lower educational attainment (1.1 times for non-disabled ones). These findings are line with other experimental research that highlights the importance of human capital in the hiring process (Bills et al., 2017). Some studies also provided insights of occupational-specific capital. For example, Wright and Cunningham (2017) focus on the occupation of fitness trainers and vary whether candidates have a moderate (bachelor's degree in general studies) or a high (Bachelor's degree in exercise science, certification from national strength and conditioning association) qualification. They

find no significant disability-degree interaction (and no significant main effect of disability on hiring recommendation). Sterkens et al. (2024) vary whether candidates are overskilled or not with different levels of educational qualifications and level of work experience and they find that, additionally to a significant main effect of disclosing Parkinson's disease, being overeducated or overskilled increases their disadvantage.

3.8. Engagement with theory

A range of theories is drawn upon to explain hiring discrimination in the reviewed studies. However, these are seldom discussed in detail. All studies assume that disabled people are discriminated against and will receive fewer call-backs; this is either reasoned in an (extended) introduction or in a theoretical section capitalising on existing theoretical accounts and empirical results. Only 20 % of all studies (n = 14/69)have a designated section on their theoretical framework (Bell & Klein, 2001; Berre, 2024; Bjørnshagen, 2021, 2022; Bjørnshagen et al., 2025; Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov, 2021; Chareyron et al., 2024; Hipes et al., 2016; Marchioro & Bartels, 1994; Namingit et al., 2021; Nittrouer et al., 2024; Østerud, 2023; Timmons et al., 2024; Wright & Cunningham, 2017). The majority of papers mention employer prejudice as a contributing factor in hiring practices. Approximately 68 % (n = 47/69) of studies employ the terms bias, stereotyping, stigma, attitudes and prejudice in a usually interchangeable manner in order to refer to the same underlying concept. Ten studies do not reference any theoretical explanation at all, while only a few refer to statistical/taste-based discrimination (n = 7), signalling (n = 4), and/or other theoretical explanations. In terms of audit studies, only one recent study has engaged more strongly with theoretical explanations: Antinyan et al. (2024) have included productivity signals (a positive reference from a previous employer and enhanced education and technical skills) in their fictional applications to reduce potential statistical discrimination. Their results show that these productivity signals do not reduce the disability gap in callback rates, as would have been expected from the theory of statistical discrimination, but widen the gap instead. Their results are thus suggestive of taste-based discrimination as a contributing factor. In contrast to audit studies, non-audit studies more frequently focus on the psychological mechanisms behind discrimination, i.e. cognitive and affective biases. Eight non-audit studies rely on semantic differentials to examine stereotypes associated with disability and to collect diverse trait ratings beyond hireability and qualification (Ameri & Kurtzberg, 2025; Bell & Klein, 2001; Berven & Driscoll, 1981; Christman & Slaten, 1991; Nordstrom et al., 1998; Scheuerle et al., 1982; Wang et al., 2010; Wright & Cunningham, 2017). In line with the findings on hireability in non-audit studies, they also generally find more positive ratings of disabled job candidates with a visible disability on a range of attributes (Bell & Klein, 2001; Christman & Slaten, 1991; Nordstrom et al., 1998), while those with mental conditions are rated lower across traits (Berven & Driscoll, 1981). Disentangling the personality traits of warmth and competence, Wright and Cunningham (2017) find that applicants who are wheelchair users were rated warmer than non-disabled peers, while competence ratings did not vary based on the disability status. These studies further our understanding of cognitive and affective biases underlying employer discrimination, complementing field experiments that focus on observed hiring outcomes.

4. Discussion and avenues for future research

This systematic review has offered a comprehensive overview of research on the impact of disability status on employer decision-making within hiring practices. While there is an emerging evidence base focusing on disability-related discrimination, the vast majority of research has focused on wheelchair users, followed by individuals who experience mental conditions, and those with sensory impairments. In contrast, there is very limited research on invisible chronic conditions and impairments such as autism, ADHD, multiple sclerosis, and cancer, despite evidence of stigma and discrimination in various settings (for example, see Fujisawa & Hagiwara, 2015; Lebowitz, 2016; Turnock et al., 2022; Vitturi et al., 2022). The predominant focus on wheelchair users may be partially attributed to the ease it provides in signalling identical productivity in certain occupations (e.g., administrative positions). At the same time, wheelchair users and those with mental conditions have been the main focus of long-standing stigma theories surrounding the role of visibility of conditions, social distance, and labelling (Goffman, 1986; Link & Phelan, 2001).

Audit studies suggest that wheelchair users consistently experience discrimination in recruitment on basis of their disability status. There are substantial variations in effect sizes, potentially linked to differences in country and occupational settings, which have not been systematically investigated in existing research (see also D. L. Stone & Colella, 1996). At the same time, we have found a mismatch between results of audit and non-audit studies with regards to this group, with the latter often reporting a lack of statistically significant differences between wheelchair users and non-disabled job candidates' ratings. This may be a result of experimenter demand effects (Zizzo, 2010) and social desirability bias (Krumpal, 2013), where participants' answers are influenced by inferences surrounding the purpose of the research. These results show that expressed attitudes and actual behaviour are not always closely connected (see also Shamshiri-Petersen & Krogh, 2020). It is noteworthy that the lack of significant effects was more common among non-audit studies focusing on wheelchair users and applicants with other visible disabilities as opposed to those with mental illness who frequently received more negative ratings than non-disabled candidates and/or other impairment/condition groups. Although direct comparisons are not possible due to differences between study designs, this evidence appears in line with existing evidence on varying levels of stigma and prejudice surrounding different conditions, which shows that mental conditions are the most stigmatised (Kowalski & Peipert, 2019; Werner, 2015; Westbrook et al., 1993).

Overall, only few studies systematically explore the influence of perceived severity of condition/impairment and level of support needs, two attributes that are important for processes of stigmatisation in any given setting (E. E. Jones, 1984). In contrast, situational visibility has attracted more attention, with several studies examining the impact of customer contact required in a job on discrimination; these have come to mixed conclusions. This aligns with the abovementioned empirical interest on wheelchair users and visibility of condition.

There is a pressing need for research designs that explore discrimination of those with invisible conditions, given that high levels of unemployment among many of these chronic condition/impairment groups are not explained by differences in health status and ability to work (Chen et al., 2015; Vitturi et al., 2022). Similar to mental health conditions, invisible conditions may be signalled through a spell of unemployment in the CV and a corresponding explanatory sentence in a cover letter. Another way to render invisible conditions visible to a potential employer is through the request of reasonable adjustments for a potential interview (e.g., provision of interview questions in advance, request to use of assistive technology, provision of a quiet private space to wait on the day of the interview), which can be mentioned in open-ended questions in application forms or emails sent to prospective employers. However, there is evidence suggesting that there is a substantial proportion of people with invisible chronic conditions and impairments who avoid disclosure upon application to minimise the risk of employer discrimination (von Schrader et al., 2014) and that neurodivergent individuals (e.g., autism, ADHD, dyslexia) may engage in masking in the workplace, conforming to conventions of neurotypical behaviour to conceal perceived differences (Kidwell et al., 2023). This calls attention to other potential avenues through which employment disadvantage for these groups is sustained. However, we also contend that identifying more sophisticated ways of disclosure and signalling, and accordingly extending the focus of experimental studies to invisible conditions is necessary to understand differential locations of disadvantage and to delineate the mechanisms through which groups with different conditions and impairments end up occupationally disadvantaged (Chatzitheochari et al., 2022). For example, video CVs and video interview materials/snippets can be used to present candidates characterised by a "perceived typicality", who are tuned in stereotypical perceptions about their condition (Monk, 2022), may be particularly useful to understand discrimination faced by autistic applicants or those with ADHD even in cases of non-disclosure. A focus beyond callbacks (i.e., interview to job offer) may also be a fruitful avenue to fully understand discrimination faced by these impairment groups (Quillian et al., 2020) given that perceived differences may become more prominent in later stages of the hiring process.

Very few studies explore occupational variation and the role of workplace characteristics. Such research is essential to better understand workplace and demand-side factors that moderate employer hiring behaviour, including disability friendly policies and affirmative action initiatives in certain workplaces and sectors (Vornholt et al., 2018). While audit studies provide insights into actual employer behaviour, non-audit studies could help examine how workplace characteristics shape hiring decisions by systematically manipulating industry contexts, job requirements, and policy environments and/or by targeting HR professional from respective contexts. Expanding research in this direction could clarify which workplace factors mitigate or exacerbate disability discrimination in hiring.

Cross-national perspectives are also needed to understand the influence of labour market policies and disability protection laws on discrimination in hiring (Heymann et al., 2022). Comparative studies could examine whether discrimination differs in countries with quota-based hiring policies (e.g., Germany, France) versus those relying solely on anti-discrimination laws (e.g., US, UK). Understanding these policy effects could provide valuable insights into which legal and institutional approaches are most effective in mitigating inequalities in labour market entry for disabled individuals. Additionally, future research could compare discrimination in accessing different forms or levels of work by comparing applications for internships, apprenticeships, first jobs, job changes or returns to work after periods of unemployment. Existing research predominantly focuses on one level of work, most often changes of work by qualified candidates.

Further, there is a general lack of intersectional research considering how other intersecting inequalities shape disabled peoples' experiences in the labour market. Two recent studies sought to develop a comprehensive understanding of the intersection of gender and disability status (Bjørnshagen et al., 2025; Timmons et al., 2024). Similar research is needed for other ascriptive statuses of race/ethnicity and social class, given evidence of increased labour market disadvantage among disabled individuals from working class backgrounds and ethnic minorities (Fuentes et al., 2024; Pieper & Mohammadi, 2014). Future studies could systematically vary disability, race/ethnicity, and social class in correspondence tests or vignette experiments to assess whether employers penalise certain intersectional identities more than others. For example, a correspondence test could manipulate both disability type and racial/ethnic background to determine whether hiring biases differ based on visible versus non-visible disabilities across racial groups. Another approach could involve varying disability status alongside indicators of social class, such as prestige of educational institution attended or language style in a cover letter, to examine whether class-based signals mitigate or exacerbate disability discrimination. Additionally, survey experiments could investigate how employer perceptions of competence and workplace fit differ for candidates at these intersections.

Finally, we have shown that theory-driven work is rare in experimental research on disability-related discriminative behaviour. While previous studies often reference existing theoretical frameworks, there is a noticeable gap in rigorous theory-testing. A more theory-oriented approach would involve formulating and testing specific hypotheses derived from theoretical frameworks on discrimination. Adapted vignette and study designs can help to identify causal pathways, for example by varying the costs and information or by priming those making hiring decisions (Keuschnigg & Wolbring, 2016; Tilcsik, 2021). Thus, by experimentally varying the amount of information about applicants such studies could reveal, for example, whether statistical discrimination or status beliefs are more likely to be at work (Auspurg et al., 2017) and how this depends on the decision context; so far, this has only been conducted in one correspondence test (Antinyan et al., 2024). Research could also test the relevance of social capital for hiring (Bills et al., 2017) in the context of disability discrimination, for example the extent to which referrals mitigate disadvantages for disabled job candidates in specific occupations (this has also been discussed in the context of statistical discrimination, see Kaas & Manger, 2012). At the same time, non-audit studies can offer valuable insights into the cognitive and affective mechanisms underlying discrimination. While some reviewed studies have contrasted personality traits, the warmth-competence framework from the stereotype content model is only rarely used (Fiske et al., 2002). Given that stereotypes about warmth and competence shape judgments about employability, integrating this framework into future studies could provide a better understanding of how stereotype-driven perceptions translate into actual discriminatory behaviour. Studies with a clear focus on theory comparison are needed to find out which theoretical mechanisms are more likely than others. This is not only an important step in shedding light on the complex interplay of the various mechanisms implicated in discrimination experienced by disabled job candidates, but also provides insights into how discrimination can be mitigated. For example, providing more information would reduce discrimination if statistical discrimination is at play, but it would be ineffective if status beliefs are at work, which require attitude change that might be achieved by more role models, i.e. higher visibility of disabled people, in the labour market (Auspurg et al., 2017).

5. Limitations

While we aimed for a comprehensive review, our study has several limitations. We only reviewed texts available in English. This might have affected our results surrounding geographical scope as well as conditions and impairments covered in existing studies. Disability is contextually contingent: There are conditions that remain disabling in developing countries, which may be subject to labour market discrimination in these settings. Such conditions and contexts are not captured in our study.

We argue that experimental studies provide the most accurate assessment of direct discrimination in hiring, which may constitute a major pathway through which the disability employment gap is reproduced. We acknowledge that such disparities do not only depend on discrimination: job searching, individual responses to discrimination, lack of sufficient workplace accommodations, and other intersecting inequalities frequently experienced by disabled people are contributing factors that also merit research attention.

Experimental studies focus on proximate outcomes (i.e., call-backs) and may thus underestimate disability discrimination as they do not capture post-call back discrimination (Colella et al., 1997; Gunderson & Lee, 2016; G. E. Jones, 1997; Speach et al., 2023). Finally, it is important to note that the reviewed studies only seldom cover entry-level jobs where recruitment processes do not involve CVs and/or cover letters. Such occupations may be particularly relevant for individuals with certain impairments and conditions, that are associated with poor educational attainment in different country settings (Chatzitheochari & Platt, 2019; Emerson et al., 2020; Kaye, 2009; McCauley, 2020).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Stella Chatzitheochari: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data

curation, Conceptualization. **Ulf Liebe:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Nicole Schwitter:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.rssm.2025.101069.

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N. Schwitter et al.

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