Do household surveys give a coherent view of disability benefit targeting?

A multi-survey latent variable analysis for the older population in Great Britain

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Disability is high on the policy agenda in the UK and many other countries. Given the high and increasing cost of public support for disabled people, it is important to know how well targeted that support is on people in greatest need. Researchers generally address this question by analysing large-scale, nationally representative survey data, containing information at the individual level on the extent of disability, receipt of public support and other household circumstances.

A major concern about this kind of research is the difficulty of measuring disability. Survey interviewers ask questions which invite interviewees to report various kinds of health-related difficulties with everyday activities. Researchers then construct a summary measure of disability from those responses, for use in analysis. The quality of those disability measures naturally depends on the quality of the underlying survey questions. However, surveys vary in the number of disability questions they use and the wording of those questions. Surveys also differ in the way they select their samples and the way they handle cases where the subject is too unwell to answer personally. In practice, researchers often choose to use one survey rather than another quite arbitrarily and it is rare for them to investigate the robustness of their findings with respect to their choice of survey data.

In this study, we explore this issue, using data on older (65+) people from three leading UK surveys: the *Family Resources Survey* (FRS); the *British Household Panel Survey* (BHPS) and the *English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing* (ELSA). We ask whether the three surveys – which ask about disability in quite different ways – nevertheless give a similar statistical picture of the relationship between disability and receipt of the disability benefit called *Attendance Allowance* (AA).

Reassuringly, we find a quite coherent picture of the targeting of AA from the three surveys, particularly after harmonising their sample coverage. It is also important to use the same approach to statistical analysis, which treats disability as an underlying unobservable state indicated – but not directly measured – by responses to the survey questions on disability. The main unresolved cause for concern is in measurement of the cognitive dimension of disability, where the BHPS in particular appears to lack coverage.

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