

TUC – long-term sickness becomes top reason for women being out of the labour market

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New analysis shows number of women economically inactive as a result of ill- health has increased by more than 500,000 over last five years.

- TUC says “overstretched” public services and cuts to preventative health services are delaying access to treatment
- Women’s physical and mental health also being impacted by low-paid, insecure work, says TUC
- Government should “stop punishing people who are too ill to work” and deal with underlying causes, says union body

Long-term sickness has become the top reason for women being out of the labour market, according to new TUC analysis published today (Monday).

The analysis of official statistics shows that the number of women who are now economically inactive due to long-term sickness has increased by 503,000 (+48%) over the last five years to 1.54 million – the highest number since records began.

Economic inactivity due to long-term sickness has risen steeply for both men and women over the past five years. The rise has, however, been bigger for women than men across this period – with the number of men inactive due to long-term sickness rising by 37%.

This means that women account for six-tenths (59%) of the rise in economic inactivity due to long-term sickness over the past five years.

Huge rise in economic inactivity because of health conditions

Further TUC analysis on changes in economic inactivity between the end of 2018 and end of 2023 looked at the main health conditions of those who are economically inactive due to long-term sickness. It found that:

- The number of women economically inactive due to musculoskeletal issues (arms, hands, legs, feet, back and neck problems) increased by 126,000 (+47%)
- The number of women economically inactive due to conditions like cancer increased by 19,000 (+15%)
- The number of women economically inactive due to depression and anxiety and mental illness increased by 69,000 (+27%)
- The largest increase was in the “other” category, which saw a rise of 161,000 (+138%)

The TUC said the sharp rise in long-term sickness was due to a combination of factors. This includes long NHS waiting lists and cuts to preventative services.

Rising waiting lists

Despite some recent small falls, the NHS waiting list stands stubbornly high at 7.5 million.

TUC analysis also shows a rise in the waiting lists for community health services. Between October 2022 (when the current data began) and March 2024, the waiting list rose by 135,000 (15%) and now stands at 1.05 million. Across this 15-month period, there has been:

- a 15% increase in adults waiting for musculoskeletal care
- a 25% increase in adults waiting for physiotherapy

In addition, 2023 was the [worst year on record](#) for cancer wait times.

Cuts to preventative health services

The union body also highlighted the impact of cuts to local preventative services.

[Recent analysis](#) by the Health Foundation shows that local authority public health funding per person remains 27% lower in real terms in 2024/25 than in 2015/16.

This has resulted in key preventative health services being cut – particularly in more deprived areas – despite the growing evidence of the financial and social benefits of prevention.

As well as this, [health leaders](#) have warned that rising demand for mental health services isn't being met due to funding not keeping up with this demand, as well as staff shortages.

Low-paid, insecure work

Another key factor in the rise in long-term sickness among women is job quality, says the TUC.

Half a million more women than men are paid below the real living wage. And [TUC analysis](#) published last month shows that BME women are twice as likely to be on zero-hours contracts than white men.

Women are more likely to work in sectors including retail, hospitality and social care where insecure work and low pay are particularly prevalent.

Welfare reforms

Rishi Sunak announced last month that he was determined to crackdown on ill-health – but instead of improving access to treatment or boosting the quality of work he proposed sweeping reforms to benefits.

The TUC says that this is the wrong approach. Instead of stigmatising people who have become too ill to work ministers should invest in improving public services and crack down on insecure work.

TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak said:

“We need a proper plan for dealing with the sharp rise in long-term sickness – not cynical gimmicks.

“Instead of stigmatising people who are too ill to work, the government should be laser-focused on improving access to treatment and preventing people from becoming too sick to work in the first place.

“That means investing in local preventive services and bringing down our sky-high waiting lists.

“It means dealing with the chronic staffing shortages across the NHS and social care that are delaying patients from being seen when they need to.

“And it means improving the quality of work in this country – so that women are not disproportionately trapped in low-paid, insecure jobs.

“But instead the government is failing growing numbers of women who are unable to work because they can’t access the right treatment or support.”