



# Socio-demographic characteristics of people seeking advice with claiming Universal Credit: A longitudinal analysis of UK Citizens Advice data, 2017-2021

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## About the research

### Background:

In 2013, the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) started to roll out Universal Credit (UC), a new form of social security which is replacing the old benefits system and tax credits (also known as legacy benefits). The rollout is due to be finished by 2024. Citizens Advice (CA) is an independent charity that provides free advisory services including offering advice for people making an application for UC. With the rollout of UC, there are more UC claimants seeking advice from CA each year. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that UC may be contributing to poor health and rising health inequalities. There is a need to understand who is seeking advice with claiming UC to ensure that these services help those in need and potentially contribute to reducing the negative health impacts of UC.

We identify which groups of people are seeking advice when making a claim for UC and how this has changed with the rollout of UC.

### Methods:

We used annual data collected by CA on all people seeking advice between 1st April 2017 to 31st March 2021. This gives us data on 1,003,411 people. We have information on their gender, age, ethnicity, disability, household type, housing tenure, employment, and marital status. This data is publicly available at the CA Tableau (<https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/citizensadvice#!/>).

We summarised the socio-demographic characteristics of people seeking help with claiming UC and used a population-weighted t-test (a statistical test) to estimate the changes in socio-demographic over time.

To help ground the results in practice, we discussed our findings with seven CA employees (from Northumberland, Gateshead, Newcastle, and Sunderland branches) and three UC claimants who had lived experience of seeking advice (two of the UC claimants were from the North East of England and one was from the West Midlands).

## Policy implications

- Reductions in funding, restrictions in how advice can be provided (e.g. move to online/telephone only support) and the yearly renewal of funding for Help to Claim may impact on the ability to support everyone requiring help with applying for UC. This may be an increasingly important issue as the migration of legacy benefits continues. A reduction in support may negatively impact on health and lead to increasing health inequalities.
- To reduce the likelihood that applying for UC will negatively impact on health, the claim process could be simplified by:
  - 1) Reducing the time between acknowledging issues and faults with the UC application process and making changes to these processes
  - 2) Reducing call wait times (potentially have a named DWP contact for CA advisors to enable them to help more people by reducing wait times on the telephone).
  - 3) Automating and simplifying the claim process for those migrating to UC from legacy benefits.





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## Key findings

- When comparing 2017/18 to 2018/19, there was a significantly higher proportion of people with limiting long term conditions seeking advice with claiming UC than those without. However, as the rollout continued, between 2018/29 and 2019/20 and between 2019/20 and 2020/21 there were significantly higher proportions of those without a limiting long term condition seeking advice than with.
- Between 2019/20 to 2020/21, there were a higher proportion of people who owned or had a mortgage on their property and a higher proportion of people living in private rental sector seeking advice compared with those who lived in council housing.
- From 2018, there was a higher proportion of those who were self-employed compared to those who were unemployed seeking advice with claiming UC.
- As the rollout of UC continues, the proportion of people who are married compared to those who are single seeking advice increased.

## Further information

This work forms part of the NIHR funded project: [Evaluation of the health impacts of Universal Credit: a mixed methods study](#).

Protocol for the NIHR work has been published as [Craig, P., et al. \(2022\). Evaluation of the mental health impacts of Universal Credit: protocol for a mixed methods study. BMJ open, 12\(4\), e061340.](#)

A paper about our public involvement and engagement activities has been published as [Cheetham, M., et al. \(2022\). Exploring the mental health effects of Universal Credit: a journey of co-production. Perspectives in public health, 142\(4\), 209-212.](#)

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