



The Impact of Norwegian Labor Market Policy on Disability Employment¹

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ABSTRACT

Despite generous welfare systems and relatively high employment rates, sizable employment gaps persist in the Nordic countries between people with disabilities and the general population. Evaluations of previous policies can be important tools for designing and implementing more effective ones. This study contributes to this objective by analyzing the impact of a Norwegian policy, the 'joint inclusion effort', on the labor market participation of people with disabilities. Using registry data from 2015 to 2021 and a difference-in-differences design, the study estimates the effect of this policy on the probability of employment for people with disabilities. The findings suggest a small positive effect of the policy on overall labor market participation. The results prompt a discussion on the implications for active labor market policy and directions for future research.

KEYWORDS

active labor market policy / difference-in-differences / disability / employment outcomes / labor market participation / people with disabilities

Introduction

The persistent employment gap between people with disabilities (PwD) and the general population is a pressing issue that requires attention (Van der Zwan & De Beer 2021). Addressing this gap is crucial not only at an individual level but also from organizational and societal perspectives. Improving employment opportunities for PwD can foster social integration, alleviate labor shortages, and reduce benefits dependency. Despite the recognition of these potential benefits, the disability employment gap persists, necessitating targeted and effective policy interventions that address the barriers to employment faced by PwD.

Nordic countries, characterized by universal social protection, high employment rates, and a commitment to social equality (Halvorsen et al. 2016), have implemented various policy measures that can address the disability employment gap. These measures include policies that directly target disability employment and indirect strategies through active labor market policies (ALMPs). ALMPs aim to lower unemployment by improving individual employability or incentivizing employers to hire (Frøyland et al. 2019). The Nordic countries have some of the highest expenditure rates on ALMPs in Europe (Bakker & Van Vliet 2021), which might lead one to anticipate high employment rates for PwD in these countries. However, a study examining the disability employment gap in European Union (EU) countries found the opposite: Nordic countries have large employment gaps between PwD and the general population (Van der Zwan & De

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Beer 2021). Moreover, the study found no compelling evidence that ALMPs improved employment outcomes for PwD. Such policies have also been criticized for targeting unemployed persons closer to the labor market, while the most disadvantaged jobseekers, like PwD, remain excluded (Frøyland et al. 2019). To design and implement more effective labor market policies that can help close the disability employment gap, it is necessary to determine the overall effect of previous policies on the labor market participation of PwD. This study aims to contribute to the literature by evaluating the effect of part of a Norwegian labor market policy on disability employment.

In 2018, the Norwegian government implemented the joint inclusion effort (*inkluderingdsdugnaden*), a policy aimed at engaging employers to hire PwD (Østerud 2020; Østerud & Vedeler 2022). The policy consisted of both regulatory and motivational elements. The regulatory aspect introduced a soft quota for state employers, stipulating that 5% of new recruits should either have a disability or have experienced at least a two-year gap from the labor market. The intention was to position state employers as role models in the labor market integration of PwD (Ministry of Local Government and Modernization 2018). However, there were no sanctions for non-compliance. The motivational component of the joint inclusion effort was presented as a national campaign targeting both public and private employers (Østerud et al. 2023). The campaign encouraged employers to acknowledge the importance of labor market inclusion for PwD and other vulnerable groups, advocating a ‘joint effort’ between the government and employers to increase labor market participation.

In a study on the early implementation of the joint inclusion effort with state employers, Østerud (2020) finds that only 3.1% fulfilled the employment quota for PwD. An evaluation of quota fulfillment in 2021 demonstrates that the majority of state employers did not reach the 5% goal (The Norwegian Agency for Public and Financial Management 2021). Moreover, Østerud and Vedeler (2022) contend that state employers remained passive despite viewing the quota positively. The joint inclusion effort (both soft quota and motivational campaign) was terminated in 2022 when the intended results had not been reached (Østerud et al. 2023). If the joint inclusion effort had been effective in increasing the labor market participation of PwD, one would have observed a higher average level of quota fulfillment. Thus, these studies indicate that the joint inclusion effort has not increased the labor market participation of PwD.

However, previous research has focused solely on quota fulfillment and has not evaluated the joint inclusion effort in terms of policy effectiveness across employment sectors. Knowledge of how social policy affects labor market outcomes for PwD is crucial for the further design and implementation of evidence-based policies that contribute to the overall labor market participation for this group. Evaluating the effectiveness of policies like the joint inclusion effort on employment for PwD can contribute to this knowledge; if deemed effective, the policy can be implemented in other countries. As such, this study aims to contribute to the literature on social policy by answering the following research question: Has the joint inclusion effort affected the labor market participation of PwD?

The study aims to answer the research question by employing a difference-in-differences (DiD) analysis design. DiD is a quasi-experimental method that can estimate the causal effect of the joint inclusion effort on the labor market participation of PwD (Wing et al. 2018). To conduct a DiD analysis, a control group (never received treatment) and a treatment group (received treatment) are required (Gertler et al. 2016).

The ‘treatment’ in this study is the ‘joint inclusion effort’, so the control group consists of people without disabilities and the treatment group consists of PwD. This DiD approach compares changes in the labor market participation of PwD before and after the implementation of the joint inclusion effort to changes in the same outcomes for people without disabilities. The analysis can help determine whether the part of the joint inclusion effort targeting PwD has improved their employment outcomes and whether ALMP that combines regulatory and motivational elements can be effective.

PwD and the right to work

PwD can be defined as people who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments, which, in interaction with barriers, can hinder their equal participation in society compared with other groups (United Nations 2006). One of the primary barriers PwD face is discrimination and exclusion in the labor market and workplace, which can hinder opportunities to access and retain employment (Vornholt et al. 2018). To address this barrier, the United Nations (UN) introduced the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), affirming the rights of PwD. Central to this convention is Article 27, which recognizes ‘the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others’, including the right to earning a living wage in a chosen or accepted job in a labor market that is inclusive and accessible (United Nations 2006). The CRPD has been ratified by most countries worldwide, including all Nordic countries and the EU, reflecting its broad international acceptance. The CRPD obliges member states to actively promote and protect employment opportunities for PwD. This commitment can include implementing policies that either directly or indirectly address the barriers faced by PwD. Directly targeted policies can include anti-discrimination legislation designed to eliminate hiring and workplace discrimination and employment quotas for PwD. Indirect policies, on the other hand, are typically broader in scope, focusing on promoting labor market participation for all unemployed persons. These may involve incentivizing job seekers to secure employment, offering wage subsidies to employers to encourage hiring, or a combination of the two (Frøyland et al. 2019).

Anti-discrimination legislation and quotas

Anti-discrimination legislation and employment quotas represent regulatory policies that require the compliance of organizations and employers. Many countries have enacted laws prohibiting discrimination in employment processes based on individual characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age, nationality, illness, or disability. These anti-discrimination laws can also establish individual rights to reasonable accommodations in interview processes, physical work environments, and job tasks (Frøyland et al. 2019). In 2008, the Norwegian government introduced its first anti-discrimination law for PwD, prohibiting discrimination in hiring processes. The other Nordic countries have implemented similar policies, with Sweden serving as the first to adopt such legislation in 1999 (Hvinden 2004). The primary challenge with these laws and conventions lies in enforcement. They are rarely actively upheld by the state or government, making it difficult to address cases of discrimination or barriers to employment faced by PwD.

A recent systematic review concludes that anti-discrimination legislation has had no measurable impact on disability employment rates (Derbyshire et al. 2024).

Other governments have implemented direct regulatory measures in the form of employment quotas for PwD. Many quota systems, some of which predate the CRPD, require organizations above a specific size to employ a designated percentage of PwD annually, with non-compliance resulting in fines or taxes (Greve 2009). However, the evidence on the effectiveness of quotas to improve employment outcomes for PwD is mixed. For instance, the UK abolished its PwD quota system in 1995, replacing it with anti-discrimination legislation (Sargeant et al. 2018). The quota system was discontinued due to employer resistance, ineffective enforcement mechanisms, and perceptions that the costs of hiring and accommodating PwD outweighed the penalties for non-compliance (Fuchs 2014). Despite these challenges, quota compliance in countries that have such systems ranges from 30% to 70% (Fuchs 2014). At the same time, Fuchs (2014) concludes that quotas typically result in negligible net employment gains and are often justifiable primarily on grounds of equity. Similarly, the International Labour Organization (ILO 2019) reports that countries with mandatory quotas have achieved only modest improvements in PwD employment rates, with many employers opting to pay levies or fines rather than meet hiring targets. A systematic review finds inconsistent evidence of quota schemes, arguing that quota success likely varies according to the levels of financial disincentives and exemptions from the policy (Derbyshire et al. 2024).

Before the implementation of the joint inclusion effort, none of the Nordic countries had adopted quota schemes. However, as a part of this initiative, state companies in Norway were obligated to meet employment quotas for PwD, representing a significant policy shift. Previously, Norwegian labor market policies relied on voluntary employer commitments to PwD inclusion, reflecting the government's reluctance to impose mandatory obligations (Aksnes 2019). The joint inclusion effort represented a departure from this voluntary approach, highlighting a newfound willingness by the government to mandate employer participation through regulatory measures, even though non-compliance with the quota remained unsanctioned.

Active labor market policy

In terms of more general policies, after the activation turn in the 1990s, many countries implemented policies to incentivize unemployed persons to seek employment. Activation policies consist of two main types: enabling and demanding policies (Frøyland et al. 2019; Raffass 2017). The first type is aimed at improving individual employability—for example, through on-the-job training or vocational training—without any sanctions. The second type is aimed at reducing time in unemployment—for example, through extensive job search requirements, mandatory skills building, and unpaid work—for which non-compliance is often sanctioned (Frøyland et al. 2019; Raffass 2017). As it became clear that activation policies aimed at unemployed individuals were insufficient to increase overall labor market participation (referred to as supply-side policies), the policy focus shifted to incentivizing employers to hire unemployed persons (demand-side policies). Many employer-focused policies aim to encourage hiring by offering financial incentives, such as free recruitment services provided by employment agencies or wage subsidies (Bredgaard et al. 2023). The subsidies are intended to offset the potential loss

in employee productivity, making it more financially viable for employers to hire individuals from the unemployed pool (Frøyland et al. 2019).

In the Nordic countries, a combination of supply-side and demand-side approaches has been implemented to address unemployment and enhance labor market participation. On the supply side, extensive measures such as qualification programs, vocational training, and work training initiatives have been implemented to improve individual employability (Bonoli 2009; Hyggen & Vedeler 2021; Strandh & Nordlund 2008). Two meta-analyses conducted on the effectiveness of supply-side policies demonstrate that labor market training programs positively impacted the labor market prospects of the unemployed (Card et al. 2018; Hardoy et al. 2017). On the demand side, Nordic governments have introduced employer-oriented policies such as wage subsidies to incentivize the hiring of unemployed individuals. Studies on Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish subsidy schemes reveal the mixed results of wage subsidies on job-finding rates, where the success of such schemes likely relies on the size and duration of the subsidies (Clayton et al. 2012; Hardoy et al. 2017; Sjögren & Vikström 2015). Together, these ALMPs reflect the Nordic commitment to inclusive labor markets, though their overall effectiveness remains modest and context-dependent. Despite the potential of these ALMPs to improve labor market outcomes for PwD, Van der Zwan and De Beer (2021) conclude that there is little evidence to suggest a positive impact on employment.

Employer participation

Employer participation in ALMPs has been recognized as essential to increasing the labor market participation of PwD and other vulnerable groups (Bredgaard & Salado-Rasmussen 2021; Ingold & Stuart 2015). Previous research has examined employer attitudes toward PwD and hiring behavior (Bredgaard & Salado-Rasmussen 2021; Nagtegaal et al. 2023; Van der Aa & Van Berkel 2014). In one study, Bredgaard and Salado-Rasmussen (2021) identify a discrepancy between employer attitudes toward PwD and hiring. They contend that while the majority of employers held positive views of hiring PwD, only a minority actively hired from this group. Similarly, a systematic review of the facilitators and barriers relevant to hiring PwD shows that the most common barriers were a lack of knowledge of disabilities and the belief that PwD were costly and unproductive workers (Nagtegaal et al. 2023). The most common facilitators were a desire to help others, expecting a competitive advantage, and working at a large organization. Bridging the gap between employer attitudes and hiring behavior, as well as addressing employer-perceived barriers, will likely be necessary to increase the labor market participation of PwD.

A study on employer participation in the Netherlands identifies four primary motivations for engaging in ALMPs (Van der Aa & Van Berkel 2014). The first type of employer is motivated by recruitment opportunities, using public channels to hire new workers. The second type participates due to economic incentives, such as reduced wage costs. The third type is driven by corporate social responsibility (CSR), which is defined as voluntary corporate commitments to integrate social and environmental concerns into their operations (Wickert & Risi 2019). These CSR-motivated employers hired disadvantaged individuals to fulfill social responsibility goals. The fourth type had a combination of motivations, including recruitment opportunities, economic incentives,

and CSR. Further research highlights the importance of recruitment opportunities and corporate CSR as key drivers of employer participation in ALMPs (Butler & Payne 2023; Orton et al. 2019; Simms 2017). These findings suggest that aligning employer motivations—such as recruitment opportunities, economic incentives, and CSR—with targeted policy initiatives could bridge the gap between attitudes and hiring behavior, ultimately improving the labor market participation of PwD.

Research indicates that employer participation in the Nordic region has predominantly been driven by voluntary agreements with governments or self-initiated efforts rather than regulatory measures like fines or taxes (Hvinden 2004). These initiatives can be a part of CSR programs led by foundations and trade organizations, with the goal of improving the recruitment of PwD and other vulnerable groups. In Norway, two notable examples are ‘Ringer i Vannet’ and ‘Helt Med’, designed to systematically enhance recruitment and retention for jobseekers with support needs and intellectual disabilities, respectively (Aksnes 2019; The Coordinating Council for People with Intellectual Disabilities; SRO 2016). ‘Ringer i Vannet’ involved a partnership between vocational rehabilitation services and the largest employers’ association, aiming to increase the recruitment of individuals from rehabilitation programs into roles within the association’s member organizations (Aksnes 2019). Meanwhile, ‘Helt Med’, initiated by a foundation supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities, focused on forging collaboration agreements with employer organizations throughout Norway to facilitate recruitment (SRO 2016). Both initiatives emphasized creating suitable employer–employee matches and offering ongoing support to both parties throughout the recruitment process.

The most comprehensive example of voluntary participation in Norway, however, is the inclusive work-life agreement (IA Agreement), a collaboration of the state, trade unions, and employer organizations. This agreement aimed to increase labor market participation, reduce sick leave, and improve job retention for PwD (Hyggen & Vedeler 2021; Mandal & Ose 2015; Østerud 2020). However, the agreement had a minimal impact on PwD employment rates, leading to the deletion of this specific sub-goal during the agreement’s renegotiation in 2018 (NAV 2017). Subsequently, the joint inclusion effort became Norway’s sole public policy explicitly targeting the increased labor market participation of PwD. While the initiative introduced a quota obligation for state employers, its motivational aspect still relied heavily on voluntary employer participation. The policy’s name emphasized its overarching goal: to inspire both public and private employers to make a collective effort to hire PwD. The motivational campaign sought to highlight PwD as a valuable labor resource, but its emphasis on the societal costs of disability may have inadvertently undermined the intended message (Østerud et al. 2023).

Summary and empirical expectations

The review of the literature on policies designed to directly or indirectly improve the labor market participation of PwD reveals mixed evidence of their effectiveness. There is no data to support the effectiveness of anti-discrimination legislation, and prior research indicates that quota policies with economic sanctions have had only modest positive effects on PwD employment. While labor market training programs show encouraging outcomes, evidence of the effectiveness of wage subsidies remains inconsistent.

Moreover, there is little evidence to suggest that these policies, which often target the unemployed in general, have positive impacts on PwD in particular. The relative ineffectiveness of these policies is reflected in persistent disability employment gaps, which range from 10 to 42 percentage points across European countries (Van der Zwan & De Beer 2021). In 2023, the disability employment gaps in the Nordic countries ranged from the highest gap of 28.7% in Norway to the lowest gap of 19.4% in Finland (Eurostat 2025). To advance the realization of the right to work for PwD as stipulated in the CRPD, more targeted policies will likely be necessary. These policies should directly address the specific challenges PwD face in securing and sustaining employment in Norway, across the Nordic countries, and throughout the EU.

Drawing on the literature review, a small positive effect of the joint inclusion effort can be expected. The quota component of the joint inclusion effort neither imposes sanctions for non-compliance nor offers economic incentives for employing PwD. Consequently, this policy will likely have a smaller effect on labor market participation compared to quota schemes with economic (dis)incentives. This expectation is further supported when considering previous studies on the joint inclusion effort that documented low quota fulfillment by state employers and that the motivational campaign emphasized the societal cost of PwD. However, given the strong tradition of voluntary participation and the growing emphasis on CSR initiatives in Norway, the motivational campaign associated with the joint inclusion effort can have a positive impact on the employment of PwD.

Methods

Data

I used Norwegian population registry data from 2015 to 2021 compiled in Statistics Norway's statistical interface, Microdata.no. Microdata takes several steps to uphold data confidentiality and individual anonymity, and individual data points cannot be accessed (Microdata 2023). The dataset used for analysis was compiled from multiple registries on linked employer-employee (LEE) records, disability benefit records, demographic records, and educational records, consisting of yearly cross-sectional data points. Employment records were only available from 2015 onwards, which is why the lower sample limit was set to 2015. An evaluation of employment registry data at the micro level shows that they systematically overestimate employment rates, but that the agreement between survey data and registry data on employment rates is high (Villund 2010).

Sample of PwD – treatment group

This study uses administrative registry data, which does not include variables for the self-identification of PwD. To identify the sample of PwD, an administrative definition of disability was applied, with the receipt of specific benefits serving as proxy variables. PwD were defined as people receiving basic or assistance allowance benefits, work assessment allowance (WAA) benefits, or disability benefits in 2015. Basic benefits are

meant to cover necessary additional expenses incurred due to permanent injuries, illness, or disabilities (NAV 2023b). Assistance allowance benefits are meant for people who require long-term private care and supervision due to illness, injury, or congenital disability (NAV 2023a). Both types of benefits are supposed to cover permanent expenses with a duration of at least two to three years.

WAA benefits are temporary and cater to individuals with reduced work capacity due to a long-term illness or injury. To be eligible for WAA, work capacity must be reduced by at least 50% due to ill health or injury or at least 30% due to work-related sickness or injury (NAV 2023c). Moreover, work capacity must be impaired for all jobs the individual is qualified for and must be improvable through treatment, workplace accommodations, or counseling from NAV (NAV 2023c). WAA benefits can be received for up to three years, with the exact duration depending on individual treatment and rehabilitation needs (NAV 2023c).

Disability pensions are permanent benefits provided to individuals with permanently reduced work capacity. To be eligible for disability pensions, work capacity must be permanently reduced by at least 50% or at least 30% for a work-related illness or injury (NAV 2024a). Applicants must also demonstrate that treatment or vocational rehabilitation has been attempted to improve work ability or earning capacity without success. For this study, individuals with a 100% reduction in work capacity who were under 18 or over 72 years of age, had active student records, or received retirement pensions were excluded from the sample. After applying these criteria, the final sample of PwD consisted of $n = 1,296,183$ observations.

Statistics on the most common diagnosis for all basic and assistance allowance benefit recipients are unavailable. However, diagnoses were recorded for new recipients from 2015 onwards, and the most common diagnoses for these two benefits were mental and behavioral disorders (NAV 2019a, 2019b). For WAA benefits and disability pensions, the most common diagnoses for the recipients were also mental health and behavioral disorders (NAV 2020, 2024b). This finding indicates that the proxy variables capture at least a part of the target group and that there is inter-benefit homogeneity in terms of individual diagnoses. At the same time, the proxy variable will likely capture some individuals who receive such benefits but are not classified officially as having a disability. For instance, the second most common diagnosis among new recipients of basic benefits was diseases of the digestive system, primarily celiac disease (NAV 2019a). Although celiac disease is a permanent condition, it does not typically qualify as a disability. Consequently, the inclusion of people without disabilities in the sample introduces a limitation to the validity of the proxy measure. This limitation renders the measure more conservative, as it underestimates the full scope of effects on PwD by including individuals who are not disabled.

Sample of people without disabilities – control group

The sample of people without disabilities was identified by age, education records, and pensioner records. Individuals below 18 years of age and above 72 years of age were excluded. Individuals who were recorded as active students and individuals who received retirement pensions were excluded from the sample. This decision was made to ensure a comparable sample of working-age individuals for whom employment would

be the expected main activity, resulting in a sample of $n = 13,120,647$ observations on people without disabilities and a total sample of $N = 14,416,830$.

Dependent variables

The first dependent variable, labor market participation, was defined as having an active employment record as of December of each year. The variable is binary and defined as unemployed (0) and employed (1).

Treatment variable

The treatment variable was binary and indicated whether observations were in the pre-treatment period (2015–2017) or the post-treatment period (2018–2021). The sample consisted of $n = 6,219,345$ observations in the pre-treatment period and $n = 8,197,485$ in the post-treatment period. Because the samples in the analysis are based on the registry data, it is not possible to observe who received treatment. All observations on PwD in the treatment period (2018–2021) were defined as receiving treatment (1), like in intention-to-treat (ITT) analysis (Hollis & Campbell 1999). The effect of the joint inclusion effort will likely be underestimated because the treatment group is inflated.

Group variable

The group variable designates the two groups to be compared: PwD (1) and people without disabilities (0). The sample of PwD consisted of $n = 1,296,183$ observations, and the sample on people without disabilities consisted of $n = 13,120,647$ observations.

Independent variables

Individual characteristics. Sex (binary), age (continuous), higher education (binary), marital status (binary), and parental education (categorical, defined as highest parental education) were included. Individual characteristics were time invariant within individuals, within years. Centered age was included in the analysis to gain a meaningful intercept. Observations with missing information on individual characteristics were excluded.

Contextual variable. The local unemployment rate was defined as the mean yearly unemployment percentage in the county in which the individual resided (NAV 2019c). The variable was time-invariant within counties, within years.

Analytical strategy

To estimate the effect of policy interventions like the joint inclusion effort on the achievement of policy goals, experimental or quasi-experimental methods are required.

These methods aim to isolate the effect of the intervention on the treatment group by comparing it to a control group that did not receive treatment. In many quasi-experimental designs, it is crucial that the control group closely resembles the treatment group to isolate the effect of the intervention accurately. In this study, the treatment group consists of working-age PwD, while the control group is made up of working-age individuals without disabilities. These two groups are likely to differ in both observed and unobserved characteristics, such as work capacity. To address such potential differences between treatment and control groups, the DiD estimator was chosen. DiD accounts for both observed and unobserved time-invariant differences between the groups by comparing pre-intervention and post-intervention trends. Consequently, this method controls for characteristics that remain constant over time, such as reduced work capacity, which might otherwise have biased the results (Gertler et al. 2016). DiD ensures that the differences between groups that are relatively stable over time do not impact the estimated effect of the joint inclusion effort on the labor market participation of PwD.

DiD does not control for time-varying characteristics between the treatment and control groups and, therefore, implements a model assumption for unbiased results: the parallel trends assumption (Gertler et al. 2016). The parallel trends assumption posits that in the absence of the joint inclusion effort, the employment trend for PwD would have been equal to the trend for people without disabilities. If the parallel trends assumption is violated, the estimated treatment effect may be biased (Gertler et al. 2016). The assumption is untestable, as it is not possible to prove parallel trends in the absence of an implemented intervention. Consequently, the DiD estimator implements a strong assumption on the pre-treatment trends, which constitutes a limitation of using the DiD estimator. Because it is untestable, the best way to plausibly satisfy the assumption is through a graphical evaluation of pre-treatment trends, which was conducted for people with and without disabilities for mean labor market participation.

Additionally, placebo tests can be conducted with the goal of verifying that the treatment group, outcome, or control group is defined correctly (Gertler et al. 2016). If the placebo tests yield effects using a fake treatment group, fake outcome, or differences in effects between control groups, the parallel trends assumption is likely violated. As the analysis in this study was conducted on population-level data, it was not possible to conduct a placebo test with a fake treatment group or a fake control group, but a placebo test with a fake outcome was conducted. Despite the measures taken to satisfy the parallel trends assumption, the results should still be interpreted as causal under strong model assumptions. Both the graphical representation of the pre-treatment trends and placebo tests are presented in the results section.

To estimate the effect of the joint inclusion effort on labor market participation among PwD, a DiD ordinary least squares (OLS) linear probability model (LPM) was used. A potential limitation of using LPM is the prediction of values outside the range of the dependent variable. In this analysis, however, only 2.2% of the predicted values exceeded 1, representing a relatively small deviation. Additionally, the mean of the residuals is zero, which suggests that the model does not have systematic bias in its predictions. The model estimation yielded the average treatment effect on the treated (ATET), which is the impact of the joint inclusion effort on the labor market participation of PwD.

Results

Parallel trends assumption and placebo test

Figure 1 presents the graphical representation of the pre-treatment trend in mean employment rates by disability status. The figure shows that for PwD, the mean employment rate spanned 46–47% in the pre-treatment years. For people without disabilities (non-PwD), the employment rate was much higher, about 80–81%. The pre-treatment employment trends are almost parallel, satisfying the parallel trends assumption graphically.

Figure 1 Pre-treatment trends of mean employment rates by disability status

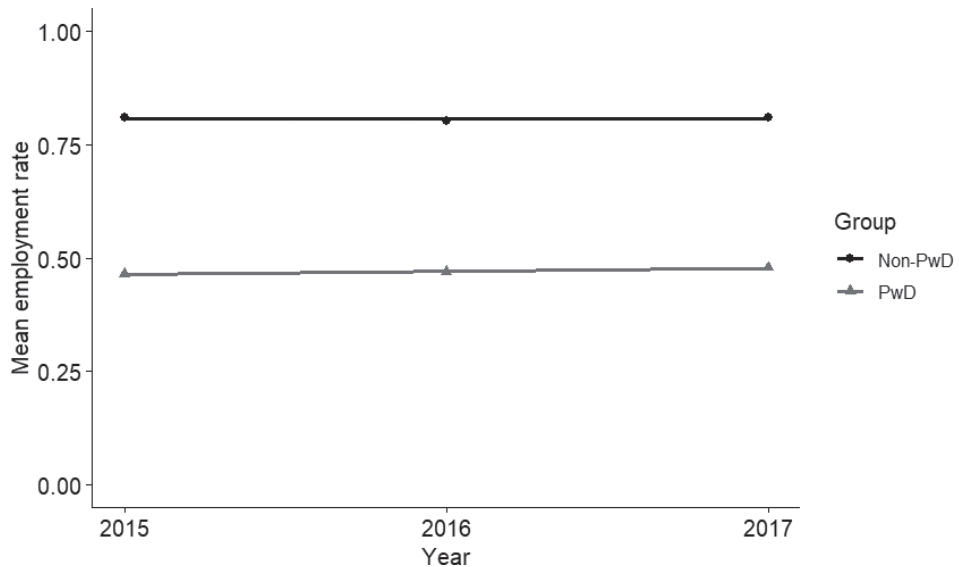


Table 1 presents the results of the placebo test with the number of children in the household as a fake outcome. Model 1 presents the results of the test on the full sample, in which the significant effect of the joint inclusion effort on the number of children in the household equals -.17. However, when estimated with a random sample of 10% of the population, the effect is no longer significant and was likely a result of the statistical power of the model. This result reinforces the validity of the control group and supports the parallel trends assumption.

Table 1 Results of DiD placebo test with the number of children as a fake outcome

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Disability, ref = non-PwD				
People with disabilities	-.112***	.001	-.111***	.004

(Continued)



Table 1 (Continued)

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Treatment, ref = control				
Treated	−.007***	.001	−.007***	.002
ATET	−.017***	.002	−.011	.006
Sex, ref = male				
Female	.035***	.001	.022***	.002
Parental education, ref = elementary school				
High school	.089***	.001	.093***	.002
Short university degree	.052***	.001	.059***	.002
Long university degree	.051***	.001	.046***	.004
Marital status, ref = unmarried				
Married	.600***	.001	.604***	.002
Education, ref = no university degree				
University degree	.078***	.001	.076***	.002
Age, centered	−.028***	.000	−.028***	.000
Local unemployment rate	−.031***	.000	−.033***	.001
Intercept	.686***	.001	.690***	.003
R ² , between	.182		.183	
R ² , total	.155		.155	
N	14 381 675		1 436 466	

ATET, average treatment effect on the treated. Model 1 = full population, model 2 = 10% of the population. *p < .05, **p<.01, ***p<.001. SE, standard error.

Labor market participation of PwD

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables, with descriptive statistics for people without disabilities (the control group) in the left panel and for PwD in the right panel (the treatment group). For people without disabilities, the typical individual is male, 46 years of age (SD = 13.61), and unmarried. He is employed, has parents with a high school education, and has not attended university. For the sample of PwD, there are five main differences. First, the majority of PwD are unemployed. Second, the majority of PwD are women. Third, PwD are less likely to have a university-level education, as there is a difference of 18 percentage points between people without disabilities and PwD in terms of possessing a university degree. Fourth, PwD are more likely to have parents with only an elementary school education; in this case, there is a difference of 14 percentage points between PwD and those without a disability. Lastly, PwD are less likely to be married, though there is only a four-percentage point difference between PwD and people without disabilities. Otherwise, the samples have only slight variations in distributions in age and parental education.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for dependent and independent variables

Individual characteristics	% Control	% Treatment
Employment		
Unemployed	18.64	53.29
Employed	81.36	46.71
Sex		
Male	53.92	40.03
Female	46.08	59.97
Parental education		
Elementary school	20.70	34.37
High school	52.31	49.61
Short university degree	19.39	12.12
Long university degree	7.60	3.9
Education		
No university degree	58.31	76.61
University degree	41.69	23.39
Marital status		
Unmarried	55.07	58.04
Married	44.93	41.96
Continuous variables	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Age	45.66 (13.61)	51.76 (14.85)
Local unemployment	3.07 (1.03)	3.01 (.98)
Observations	13,120,647	1,296,183

Descriptive statistics for key variables, including percentage distributions for categorical variables, means and standard deviations for continuous variables, and sample sizes for control and treatment groups. % control = percentage of non-PwD. % treatment = percentage of PwD. SD, standard deviation.

Table 3 presents the results of the DiD analysis concerning the effect of the joint inclusion effort on the labor market participation of PwD. From the results in model 1 on the full population, having a disability negatively predicts labor market participation, with PwD being 29.7% less likely to be employed compared to people without disabilities. Being in the treatment group positively predicts labor market participation, with individuals in the treatment group being 1.1% more likely to be employed compared to those in the control group. The interaction effect between these two variables, the ATET, positively and significantly predicts employment. This finding indicates that PwD are 2.8% more likely to be employed after the implementation of the joint inclusion effort compared to before its implementation. To evaluate whether the effect results from the statistical power of the model, the same model was estimated with a random sample of 10% of the population. In model two, the ATET remains significant but with a slight increase in effect size, in which PwD are 3.2% more likely to be employed after the implementation of the joint inclusion effort compared to prior to implementation.



Table 3 Results of the DiD analysis on the effect of the joint inclusion effort

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Disability, ref = non-PwD				
People with disabilities	-.297***	.001	-.297***	.002
Treatment, ref = control				
Treated	.011***	.000	.011***	.001
ATET	.028***	.001	.032***	.002
Sex, ref = male				
Female	.014***	.000	.016***	.001
Parental education, ref = elementary school				
High school	.051***	.000	.050***	.001
Short university degree	.023***	.000	.023***	.001
Long university degree	.005***	.000	.000	.001
Marital status, ref = unmarried				
Married	.062***	.000	.060***	.001
Education, ref = no university degree				
University degree	.089***	.000	.089***	.001
Age, centered	-.008***	.000	-.008***	.000
Local unemployment rate	-.007***	.000	-.007***	.000
Intercept	.722***	.001	.722***	.001
R ² , between	.213		.213	
R ² , total	.132		.132	
N	14 416 830		1 439 919	

Results of the DiD estimating the effect of the joint inclusion effort on the labor market participation of PwD. ATET, average treatment effect on the treated. Model 1 = full population, model 2 = 10% of the population. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. SE, standard error.

Discussion

This study contributes to the literature on social policies by assessing the impact of the joint inclusion effort on the labor market participation of PwD, finding a small positive effect on overall labor market participation. The small effect is not surprising given the unsanctioned nature of the quota and the policy’s reliance on the voluntary participation of private and municipal employers. These results align with prior research on quota systems for PwD, which similarly found only small net gains or mixed evidence for schemes with financial (dis)incentives (Derbyshire et al. 2024; Fuchs 2014; ILO 2019; Sargeant et al. 2018).

The positive effect of the joint inclusion effort suggests that a policy combining a soft quota with a motivational campaign can enhance labor market participation among PwD. Given previous research that highlights low quota compliance by state employers

(Østerud 2020; Østerud et al. 2023; Østerud & Vedeler 2022); however, it is plausible that part of the joint inclusion effort's positive effect stems from the national motivational campaign. This feature is notable because motivational campaigns are typically considered weak policy instruments for changing attitudes and behaviors, particularly absent economic incentives.

One potential explanation for the campaign's positive impact could lie in its alignment with CSR trends. As previous research has shown, CSR can be a powerful motivator for employer participation in ALMPs (Butler & Payne 2023; Orton et al. 2019; Simms 2017; Van der Aa & Van Berkel 2014). With CSR gaining importance and consumer expectations for employer engagement with local communities increasing, the campaign may have served as a catalyst for employers to adopt socially responsible hiring practices. Norway and other Nordic countries have a long-standing tradition of voluntary participation to promote the employment of people from marginalized groups like PwD (Hvinden 2004). This tradition is reflected in voluntary agreements with governments and initiatives led by employer associations and private foundations. Notable examples include 'Ringer i Vannet' and 'Helt Med', both of which focus on improving the recruitment and retention of individuals with support needs and intellectual disabilities through employer–employee matching and support services (Aksnes 2019; SRO 2016). From this perspective, the joint inclusion effort's motivational campaign may have presented an opportunity for Norwegian employers to implement CSR measures and participate voluntarily, aligning with their established practices of contributing to the community through inclusive hiring. The availability of wage subsidies and support through NAV may also have facilitated employer participation.

Nevertheless, the employment gap between PwD and people without disabilities persists (Van der Zwan & De Beer 2021). In Norway, the gap amounted to 28.7% in 2023 (Eurostat 2023). While it may be unrealistic to close this gap completely, improving the labor market participation of PwD who actively seek and desire employment is crucial to securing their right to work, as outlined in the CRPD. More effective policy interventions will be necessary to narrow the employment gap between PwD and the general population, as the 2.8% increase in employment probability achieved by the joint inclusion effort is insubstantial when compared to the employment gap of nearly 30%. As reviewed in the literature, other policy measures also fall short. Quota systems aimed at increasing employment opportunities for PwD reveal only weak positive outcomes (Derbyshire et al. 2024; Fuchs 2014; ILO 2019). There is little evidence to suggest that ALMPs, which often target the unemployed in general, have positive impacts specifically for PwD (Van der Zwan & De Beer 2021). Further, anti-discrimination legislation, while critical in principle, has not consistently demonstrated measurable impacts on increasing employment for PwD (Derbyshire et al. 2024). Given the evidence, future research and policy innovations must prioritize more targeted and effective approaches to address the disability employment gap, which can contribute to implementing the goals of the CRPD by securing equal opportunities to work for PwD. As countries with high social equality, the Nordics should strive to be at the forefront of executing the goals of the CRPD.

Achieving the CRPD's objectives necessitates not only policy reform but also societal transformation toward greater inclusion and accessibility. Research indicates the importance of involving employers as active partners in ALMPs. Studies reveal that employers are often treated as passive clients rather than collaborators (Butler &

Payne 2023; Ingold & Stuart 2015; Orton et al. 2019; Van der Aa & Van Berkel 2014). However, when public employment services actively engage employers as partners or co-designers of policies, their participation increases, resulting in more substantial and effective involvement in ALMPs. This shift—from viewing employers as passive participants to actively involving them as contributors—has the potential to complement more targeted policy initiatives. By fostering collaboration, policymakers can improve the design and implementation of employment programs, ultimately driving better outcomes for PwD. Improving labor market inclusion of PwD will require a dual approach: innovative, targeted policy measures combined with proactive employer engagement within the context of broader societal efforts to remove systemic barriers and promote inclusivity and accessibility.

Alternative explanations

During the second half of the post-treatment period, the COVID-19 pandemic spread, and social distancing and lockdowns were implemented to limit contagion. During COVID-19, unemployment rates increased drastically for the entire population (Christensen & Lægreid 2020). Periods of recession with high unemployment rates can disproportionately impact PwD due to the intensified competition for available jobs, as employers have access to a larger pool of candidates from which to recruit (Ingold & Stuart 2015; Kaye 2010).

During COVID-19, however, many employers facilitated working from home to continue business activities during lockdowns (Ingelsrud 2021). Working from home, either partly or fully, is an adjustment that can facilitate greater labor market participation among PwD (Holland 2021). Research on remote work for PwD prior to the pandemic highlighted several benefits, including increased opportunities for employment, greater control over work-life balance, improved coordination of work and family responsibilities, and less commuting (Holland 2021; Schur et al. 2020). If the overall rise in unemployment among PwD was offset by increased opportunities for remote work, resulting in a net increase in employment, this trend might partly explain the positive effect size observed in this study. However, COVID-19 restrictions also led to a rise in remote work opportunities for the general workforce, not only for PwD (Ingelsrud 2021). For this trend to fully account for the observed effects of the joint inclusion effort, the increase in employment among PwD due to remote work would have needed to exceed that of the general population. Therefore, it is unlikely that the effect observed in this analysis is the spurious positive effect of remote work on the labor market participation of PwD.

Limitations

While the joint inclusion effort targeted both individuals with disabilities and those who have been unemployed for over two years, this study has focused on the impact of the policy on labor market participation among PwD. This focus was chosen because PwD often face unique systemic, social, and workplace barriers that differ from those of the broader long-term unemployed population. Consequently, analyzing their experiences

separately can allow for targeted policy insights. However, it is important to note that the broader target population includes the long-term unemployed, who may experience different impacts. Future research should consider the policy's effectiveness across all target populations to provide a more comprehensive evaluation. It is unlikely, however, that the policy was more effective for long-term unemployed individuals compared to PwD, as the policy was collectively terminated for both target groups in 2022 (The Norwegian Agency for Public and Financial Management 2021; Østerud et al. 2023)

In this study, PwD are defined according to the UN's definition of disability (United Nations 2006). However, the PwD sample used in the DiD analysis was identified using a proxy measure based on an administrative definition. Specifically, PwD were defined as individuals who receive at least one of four types of social benefits. This approach limits the sample to those administratively recognized as PwD, potentially excluding those who self-identify as PwD from the treatment group. This factor constitutes a limitation of using administrative registry data, as opposed to combining national surveys with registry data, which would allow for self-identification. As a result, the effect of the joint inclusion effort on labor market participation may be underestimated, as some self-identified PwD may end up in the control group instead of the treatment group. Additionally, the results of the DiD analysis are only representative of those who are administratively recognized as PwD and not only of those who self-identify as PwD.

The DiD analysis was used to assess the impact of the joint inclusion effort on the labor market outcomes for PwD. Although DiD is suited for evaluating policy effects with observational data, it is not without limitations. A first limitation of DiD is that it attributes differences in trends between the treatment and comparison groups from the intervention's initiation. If other factors have an impact, the estimation results can be biased (Gertler et al. 2016). Various alternate estimators have been proposed to improve DiD and address potential bias in estimation (Baker et al. 2022; Callaway & Sant'Anna 2021; Roth et al. 2023), but these are not available in Microdata. Microdata does allow the inclusion of multiple pre-treatment and post-treatment periods, aiding analysis that accounts for lagged treatment effects. Additionally, the data used in this study are assessed at the population level and are of high quality, which can help minimize potential bias.

Another limitation of DiD is the untestable parallel trends assumption, which requires that the treatment and control groups follow the same trajectory in the absence of the intervention. To validate the parallel trends assumption and enhance the reliability of the results, visual evaluations of graphical evidence and placebo tests were conducted. The consistent alignment between the parallel trends, the outcomes of the placebo test, and the analysis results contribute to strengthening the conclusions of this study (Gertler et al. 2016). However, the results of this study should be interpreted as causal under strong model assumptions, both in terms of the validity of the parallel trends assumption and the DiD estimator's ability to isolate the effect of the joint inclusion effort on the labor market participation of PwD.

Conclusion

The joint inclusion effort has contributed to a small but significant increase in the labor market participation of PwD. The findings suggest that combining soft quota policies with motivational campaigns can positively influence the employment outcomes of PwD.

However, to address the persistent disability employment gaps observed in Norway and other Nordic countries, it is essential to develop more robust policies that actively engage employers in the labor market integration of PwD. Addressing the employment gap between PwD and the general population will likely require targeted interventions that directly address the barriers PwD face in acquiring employment. ALMPs that bridge the gap between employer attitudes and hiring behaviors—fostering motivation to recruit from this group—could enhance and sustain employer participation. Such efforts would likely not only improve labor market inclusion but also align with the goals of the CRPD to secure the right to work for PwD.

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