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## **The History of Work-Disability in the UK**

A major challenge for activation policies in the UK has been the existence of some 2,600,000 people on long-term sickness/disability benefits. The number of such claimants has trebled over the past thirty years. This increase is both counter-intuitive (since it has taken place at a time when most objective measures have shown health status to have improved) and seemingly unaffected by the rise in employment rates that occurred between c.1994 and 2008 (in contrast to other groups of claimants, notably lone parents and the unemployed). The causes of this increase are complex, ranging from deindustrialisation to the medicalisation of everyday life and a growth of mental behavioural disorders (which now comprise c.40 per cent of such claims). A particular problem is regional concentration. The problem of work-disability is often seen as originating in the 1970s, with the massive economic restructuring that took place from then on. What is less often realised is that work-disability has a very long history, and its incidence has frequently changed in response to labour market conditions. British friendly societies experienced rising sickness benefit claims among their older members at the end of the nineteenth century, as they encountered increasing job insecurity. Claims to such benefits fell in the tight labour market of the First World War, and then rose in the recession-hit 1920s and 1930s (when there was growing concern about older jobless men in the economically depressed areas who appeared to have given up looking for work). Work-disability diminished during the Second World War and the subsequent two decades of full employment. The incidence of work-disability has also shown a marked regional variation throughout history. This paper will draw some lessons from this historical evidence – particularly pertinent as the UK faces a very uncertain economic future which threatens to undermine current activation policies.