

# **Qualitative Study on visual impairment – results from Norway**

## Background from the Grant Application

### *Description (what, how and where):*

- Disaster preparedness
- Disaster situations
- Coping with post-traumatic reactions
- Experiences on the basis of being blind

### *Research aims*

The overarching aim is to achieve knowledge that can be helpful in developing measures that can help people with visual impairments during and after disasters. We want to collect examples of how blind and visually impaired people experience safety and risk, disaster situations and how they cope with post-traumatic stress after accidents, violence, and disasters.

The project will expand the established knowledge of a vulnerable population. Such knowledge will be beneficial to national, regional and local authorities in planning and organizing emergency, for response personnel, for disability organizations and may lead to better care for disabled people during and after serious incidents.

### *Methods*

We want to conduct a qualitative study among blind and visually impaired. This will be achieved through personal interviews with 8 - 10 persons. We have initiated contact with the Norwegian Association of the Blinds by General Secretary Gunnar Haugsveen, who have confirmed that the association will be able to assist in recruiting persons to interview. We will include blind and visually impaired people with experience of potentially traumatic events. The selection will be done with variation in relation to age (down to 18 years), gender and types of trauma.

We are planning to spend 2 - 4 hours per individual for the completion of the interviews. Conversations will be recorded on tape. As researchers we have access to large databases on populations of disaster exposed, some of them representative for

the general population. They may serve as a comparison basis for the strategic sample of visually impaired.

*Expected results:*

1. Blind and visually impaired may experience a high risk for being victims of accidents, crimes, and violence.
2. Blind and visually impaired may need extensive and tailored information about security and evacuation procedures.
3. Blind and visually impaired may perceive a strong need for safety precautions such as alarms and early warning systems for detecting impending dangers.
4. Blind and visually impaired may feel more helpless, powerless, and dependent on others during and after a potential threatening event
5. Dependence and inability to help others may reinforce feeling of failure, guilt and sense of being a burden.
6. People with inborn blindness are likely to have other re-experiences of traumatic events than visual, such as acoustic, olfactory, and bodily.
7. Another profile of posttraumatic stress symptoms could have implications for early intervention and treatment of after effects such as PTSD and other anxiety disorders, depression and somatoform disorders.

*Constraints*

In-depth interviews with a small number of subjects call for caution when it comes to generalization of the findings. Also, differences in type and severity of trauma may lead to slightly different reactions. This must be taken into account when comparing findings to what is usual in trauma populations.

**Status and preliminary results from the qualitative study on visual impairment**

Persons are recruited mainly through the Norwegian Association of the Blinds. The data collection has started and so far one focus group and one interview are completed. One more focus group and 9 more individual interviews are scheduled.

*Demographic data about the group*

N=16. 5 men, 11 women. Age range from 20 to 75. Majority between 40 and 60 years of age

*Preliminary patterns – descriptives*

Two types of events is singled out:

- Accidents as a consequence of being blind or visually impaired
- The experience of being blind or visually impaired when a disaster or an accident happen

Accidents as a consequence of being blind or visually impaired

Is especially attached to mobility and lack of universal design. In outdoor spaces, in the street, and when something unexpected comes across (like street art, telephone boxes at the wall or blurry pavements)

A recurrent theme is the desire to be self-reliant, fear of making a fool out of themselves and lose face. Several mentioned that they do not ask for help. Several mentioning that they do not use a stick because they do not want to be seen as blind.

How to avoid accidents?

Societies contribution: Universal design with clean lines and flow Avoid obstacles and do not use glass walls.

What can I do self? What works?

Take precautions, be prepared, and ask for help.

Preparation and practice gives control; control over own life situation and increased self-efficacy. Many blind people get scared after accidents. They stop doing things, withdraws and isolate themselves.

Basic education of blind children worse today. More emphasis on theoretical training. Less weight on training, self-help and independence. Empowerment and control.

The experience of being blind or visually impaired when a disaster or an accident happen

One respondent had experienced several car accidents and a near-by airplane accident. Avoided similar situations afterwards. Describes a strong urge for control; “I would like to drive myself, I get exhausted of being in other peoples custody”

The feeling of not knowing what is happening is especially tied to being blind: During the accident; “I didn’t know what happened. Could not see anything. Just heard all the screaming. If I could see, I would have understand that everything would turn out in a good way. Everything gets more frightening because of this».

Other recurring themes are the fact that the blind person always is the last one to be evacuated. When the universal design is good, one can evacuate without support.

#### Summary of recurring themes:

The importance of being self-reliant

Self-efficacy

Fear of lose face

Shame

Do not ask for help

Do not want special treatment – wants adequate arrangements to be able to manage self

Has no other reactions than other people after experiencing a traumatic event, but has less access to treatment services with competence of being blind or visually impaired

Preparedness – training - control

Self-reliance gives control