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Editorial

COVID-19 and people with disability: Social and economic impacts



Disability and Health Journal (DHJO) has been a platform for publications about the effects of the pandemic on people with disability for the past year and a half. As early as July 2020, the Journal published data-driven research studies outlining increased risks and disparities in outcomes for people with disability, although the majority of the early articles were commentaries with a “call to action.” Throughout 2021, however, the Journal has been publishing research articles that reinforce those early opinions and commentaries. Articles cover topics that define clinical issues and outcomes for people with disability related to the pandemic, report on the responses of the health care system and society, identify strategies for health promotion self-management by people with disability, explore mental health effects, and in general, reinforce the significant disparities people with disability have had to face, compared to those without disability, in the United States and globally.

This issue of DHJO moves the discussion into understanding how people with disabilities and their families are impacted in the larger social and economic spheres. As would be expected, the pandemic has had negative social and economic effects, disproportionately affecting people already at-risk. So it is no surprise that articles in this issue report that people with disability identify more uncertainties and lack of support for basic needs, compared to those without disability:

- US national surveys note household food insecurity has been magnified, affecting those already disadvantaged¹ and showing an increase in the number of households newly classified as such.² It has been established that there is a high prevalence of food insecurity among people with disability,^{3,4} although disability as a risk factor is not often identified in research about the food environment. Studies published in this issue compared people with to those without disability to confirm that people with disability reported a lower rate of food sufficiency during the pandemic.^{5,6} Additionally, while free food resources were highly utilized,⁵ people with disability experienced difficulties in accessing food or deliveries.⁶
- People with disability are also more highly impacted by economic downturns,⁷ with the pandemic responsible for unemployment and lockdowns. A Canadian study noted people with disability, both physical and mental health, reported greater health and financial concerns and limited organized support to manage the pandemic compared to those without disability.⁸

Further, those with disability reported increased levels of contract work, stress, and unmet accommodations in the workplace.

- High levels of emotional distress were noted by people with disability compared to those without, identifying depressive symptoms, mental distress, suicidal ideation, and increased substance use in mid-2020.⁹ Additional stressors included uncertainty of access to health care services, difficulties caring for personal or another's ongoing health conditions, emotional or physical abuse from others, and food insecurity.

Each of these topics is linked to the others, and demonstrates that people with disability are disproportionately affected by the social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. And although for people with disabilities and for those of us who work with and support people with disability and their families or who are engaged in research related to the health and well-being of people with disability are not surprised by these findings. Evidence shows that disability confers a higher risk for negative outcomes during the pandemic, but it also is clear that disability is associated with food insecurity, lack of inclusive employment opportunities, limited access to care, and inaccessible environments even in non-pandemic times. The articles in this issue highlight the disappointment in the lack of prior planning or organized responses during the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuing lack of prioritization of the social, economic, and health needs of people with disabilities. These research findings emphasize the need for continued study of the structural inequities faced by people with disabilities and the associated consequences during the pandemic with the hope of leading to a more inclusive, equitable, and accessible society.

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