

Research In Focus: A Weekly Digest of New Research from the NIDILRR Community

Both Employers and Workers with Disabilities Are Feeling the Effects of COVID-19 on Employment and Earnings

A study funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR).

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact millions of people worldwide. Over 77 million cases and over 900,000 deaths have been confirmed in the US alone. In addition to the public health impact, the COVID-19 pandemic has also had a significant economic impact. By May of 2020, unemployment in the US had reached its highest level in over 70 years, affecting people in all demographics. While the full picture remains incomplete, preliminary findings appear to show that people with disabilities (PWD) have been significantly impacted by the pandemic, with the unemployment rate nearly doubling between the beginning and end of 2020. During that time, not only were PWD more likely to be unemployed, but they were also more likely to experience more part-time or temporary employment arrangements. Early studies showed that PWD were more likely to experience reductions in work hours and subsequent financial troubles than people without disabilities. Even with this preliminary data, the extent to which employment of PWD was affected by COVID-19 is still mostly unknown.

In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers examined the effects of COVID-19 on the employment of PWD and on employers. The researchers also sought to understand the subsequent employment and financial challenges experienced by PWD during the pandemic.

Researchers from the [Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employment of People with Physical Disabilities](#) surveyed 733 PWD and 67 individuals representing employers, such as hiring managers. The PWD were all 18 years or older and reported a physical or neurologic disability that affected their ability to work. The employer representatives were also 18 years or older and had direct involvement in hiring, accommodating, or managing employees. The PWD answered questions about their demographic characteristics, and whether they experienced employment changes since the pandemic. If they were employed, they answered questions about their employment status, how the outbreak affected them, their finances, and their ability to work. If they were not employed, they answered questions about the reason for unemployment and whether they accessed any pay or unemployment benefits. The employer representatives answered questions about the size of their company, their industry, and whether the pandemic affected their business, how it was affected, and reasons for closing or changing business practices.

Overall, the 733 PWD in this study were similar to the general population of PWD regarding age, gender, race, and ethnicity. The researchers found that 182 respondents, or about 25%, reported changes in their employment during the pandemic. Of those who reported changes to their employment, just over half were working at the

time the survey was done, while just under half reported they were not working at the time of the survey.

Of the 182 respondents who experienced employment changes:

- 42% reported decreases in pay or serious financial difficulty, 41% reported working remotely more than usual, and 40% reported being furloughed or working reduced hours, or going on medical leave.
- 23% reported having a harder time completing their work and 22% had increased workload during the pandemic.
- 16% reported commuting or transportation challenges.
- 12% reported having to work with people who might be infected by COVID and spending time disinfecting at home.
- 10% reported lack of access to workplace accommodations or equipment and challenges in communicating in the workplace.
- 7% were caring for others who had COVID while 5% reported difficulties with childcare.

For the respondents who were working at the time of the survey:

- 45% were at the same job, while the rest either found new employment or 20% became self-employed. A few reported implementing a new business model.
- 93% reported that COVID-19 affected their work in some way, with the majority of those reporting that their jobs were moderately or largely affected.

For those respondents who were not working during the pandemic:

- 34% described their employment status as having lost their jobs, 17% being on leave, and 10% voluntarily leaving their jobs or being temporarily laid off. A few reported they closed their business temporarily. 9% reported that they stopped their job search because they found few employers were hiring.
- 47% reported pandemic-related reductions in business and 31% reported being sick or disabled. 23% reported that they were unable to find a job or did not want to work at that time. 8% reported they were caring for someone, or they retired.
- 54% had filed for unemployment benefits but less than 20% received pay or benefits for the time they weren't working

The 67 employer representatives came from a diverse group of industries, including healthcare, social services, education, arts, entertainment, and recreation. Most were representing medium or large companies with more than 50 employees, and most were in the Midwest. Nearly all of the employer representatives reported that their businesses were affected by COVID-19. The most common effects they reported were changing to

virtual/remote work, changing how they conducted business, furloughing or laying off workers, and temporary business closures. Of those who had to change how they conducted business or had to temporarily close, most cited concerns about spreading COVID-19 as a reason. They also cited government policies requiring them to close and having difficulties providing services as additional reasons. A few respondents also reported supply-chain difficulties, high operating costs, difficulty finding marketing or delivery channels, and difficulty finding enough employees.

The authors noted that even though PWD are at higher risk of infection from COVID, there were no disability-specific policy changes made by the federal government. While programs that were enacted offered financial assistance regardless of disability status, they suggested that there may be a need to enact policy that addresses the unique needs of this population including access to employment, healthcare services, transportation, and communication technology. The authors also noted that employers and PWD may benefit from working together to create reasonable work accommodations that allow PWD to continue to work while remaining safe from COVID-19.

The authors indicated that this study offers preliminary insight into the disparities faced by PWD during the pandemic. This insight may offer an opportunity for employers and policymakers to help address these disparities faced by PWD. Future research may be beneficial for investigating the long-term effects of the pandemic on PWD and its effects on their employment, as well as exploring potential differences in COVID-19's effects on a broader range of industries around the rest of the country.

[To Learn More](#)

More research is emerging about how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the disability and rehabilitation community. We've covered a few recent studies in this series:

- [**Rehabilitation Physicians and Counselors Share Their Experience of Working with COVID-19 Long-Haulers and the Challenges These Individuals May Face Returning to Work**](#)
- [**The COVID-19 Pandemic Has Taken a Toll on Latinx Families with Children with IDD, but There Are Some Positives as Well**](#)
- [**Adults with Mental and Behavioral Health Disorders Describe COVID-19's Impact and Resilience-Building Strategies Through Social Support, Emotion Management, and Self-Care**](#)

NARIC maintains a special collection of publications from the NIDILRR community focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic. This collection includes journal articles, factsheets, multimedia items, and much more. [Browse the COVID-19 Special Collection](#).

To Learn More About this Study

Wong, J., Ezeife, N., Kudla, A., Crown, D., Trierweiler, R., Capraro, P., Tomazin, S., Su, H., Pham, T., & Heinemann, A.W. (2022) [Employment consequences of COVID-19 for people with disabilities and employers](#). Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation, 2022.

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