

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

### Survey Offers Insight into Impact of COVID-19 on Community Living and Travel Behavior of People with Disabilities

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

The ability to participate in one's community is important for maximizing quality of life, health, well-being, and self-determination. Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted daily life. Research has shown that the COVID-19 response has led to increased isolation, psychological distress, and financial challenges. While this is true for all of society, people with disabilities are particularly at risk for being more negatively affected. Research suggests that the combination of preexisting social disadvantages and COVID-19 may exacerbate the vulnerability of this population and have a disproportionately negative impact on their participation in activities of daily community living (ADCL). Further, individuals with disabilities may be at greater risk for contracting COVID-19 due to underlying health/medical conditions, as well as greater exposure from interactions with direct support professionals and living in congregate care settings. Individuals with disabilities may also have experienced decreased access to needed community and healthcare services due to COVID restrictions. However, there's very little research evidence examining the extent to which ADCL have been impacted during the pandemic for people with disabilities.

A recent NIDILRR-funded study sought to address this research gap by examining travel and transportation use by people with and without disabilities before and during COVID. Specifically, the researchers wanted to know whether people with disabilities would have a larger decline in daily travel and a greater shift in the mode of transportation, and whether their activities were more negatively impacted by the pandemic, compared to people without disabilities.

Researchers on the project [A Socio-Ecologic Framework Supporting Individuals with Disabilities' Community Living and Participation](#) surveyed 393 people with and without disabilities across the US. Among the participants, 161 (41%) were people with disabilities, and 232 (59%) were people without disabilities. The participants with disabilities had at least one type of disability categorized as sensory, cognitive, mobility, and others. All participants completed a 60-question survey that included questions about their demographics and travel behavior. Demographics included questions about age, disability type, race, gender, employment/student status, and income. Travel behavior included questions regarding weekday trip frequency, modes of transportation frequency, and places visited pre-COVID (i.e., 2019) and during COVID (i.e., 2020 after initial outbreak).

When the researchers looked at results for travel and transportation among people with and without disabilities before and during COVID, they found the following:

- Participants with disabilities and participants without disabilities had a similar decline in travel frequency: Both groups took about one fewer trip per day during COVID compared to pre-COVID averages.
- Participants with disabilities generally had much larger declines in trips via ride share compared with participants without disabilities, as well as some declines in trips by automobile and walking. Declines were similar between the groups for trips via public transit.
- Participants with cognitive and sensory disabilities had a larger decline in trips via taxi (including ride-share services such as Uber & Lyft) compared with participants without disabilities.
- Participants with mobility and sensory disabilities had a larger decline in walking trips compared with participants without disabilities.
- Participants with disabilities had a decline in paratransit use during COVID compared to pre-COVID, especially those with cognitive disabilities.
- Participants with disabilities had a larger decline in trips to grocery stores and community service providers compared to participants without disabilities
- Participants with disabilities had a larger decline in travel to outdoor recreational facilities and healthcare providers compared to participants without disabilities.

Upon reflection on the study results, the authors noted that despite being at higher risk for contracting COVID-19 and for adverse outcomes from infection, people with disabilities were not more likely to reduce their use of public transportation, where infection risk was greater. At the same time, there was also a reduction in paratransit trips, where the risk of exposure could conceivably be lower. It is possible that paratransit availability may have been limited by the pandemic in some areas. The authors suggested that expansion of subsidized transportation such as paratransit may be helpful to reduce the risk of exposure for travelers with disabilities.

While the researchers observed a larger decline in trips to grocery stores and community service providers for people with disabilities, the impact of this decline was unclear since delivery and online options increased during the pandemic for those who could afford them. The larger decline in trips to outdoor recreational spaces for people with disabilities may be concerning, as research has shown that access to natural environmental spaces helps decrease stress and improve physical and mental health. They suggested that future research may be beneficial for a more detailed look at changes in travel behavior to destinations such as open spaces and their impact on health and well-being.

This study aimed to establish evidence of the impact of the pandemic on travel and activities of community living for people with and without disabilities. Further research is

needed to understand why these impacts happened. The authors also acknowledged that future studies may benefit from examining region-specific differences in external factors (e.g., regional travel restrictions). But they suggested that this study offers a promising first step in examining how future pandemics may impact the travel behavior of people with disabilities.

#### [To Learn More](#)

Previous issues of Research In Focus have examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on community participation of people with disabilities:

- [\*\*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\*\*](#)

#### [To Learn More About this Study](#)

Park, K., Chamberlain, B., Song, Z., Nasr-Isfahani, H., Sheen, J., Larsen, T., Novack, V., Licon, C., Christensen, K., (2021) [A Double Jeopardy: COVID-19 impacts on the travel behavior and community living of people with disabilities](#). *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 156, 24-35. This article is available from the NARIC collection under Accession Number J88265 and free in full text from the publisher.

---

Research In Focus is a publication of the National Rehabilitation Information Center (NARIC), a library and information center focusing on disability and rehabilitation research, with a special focus on the research funded by NIDILRR. NARIC provides information, referral, and document delivery on a wide range of disability and rehabilitation topics. To learn more about this study and the work of the greater NIDILRR grantee community, visit NARIC at [www.naric.com](http://www.naric.com) or call 800/346-2742 to speak to an information specialist.

NARIC operates under a contract from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services, contract # #140D0421C0021.