

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

Workers with Disabilities Were Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic, but Stayed Engaged in the Labor Force

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

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 has had a profound impact on the labor force and the economy in general. This is true for people with and without disabilities. However, prior research suggests that the pandemic-induced disruption to the economy and labor force may have a greater and longer-lasting impact on workers with disabilities than it would on their counterparts without disabilities. This prior research is based on labor statistics from the Great Recession of 2007-2009, where workers with disabilities were disproportionately impacted. The impact of the Great Recession on workers with disabilities has caused similar concern about the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on that same group. In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers looked at monthly trends in employment status for workers with disabilities and workers without disabilities from February 2020 to January 2021. The researchers sought to gain insight on how workers with disabilities fared with employment during the height of the pandemic.

Researchers at the [Rehabilitation Research and Training Center \(RRTC\) on Employment Policy and Measurement](#) looked at employment data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), which is collected for the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) by the US Census Bureau and provides the official rate of monthly unemployment in the US. Of the approximately 60,000 households surveyed, the researchers' sample included only individuals 16-64 years of age that were not living in group quarters such as a group home or institutional setting. The researchers grouped individuals based on their employment status and whether they had a disability or not. A person was considered to have a disability if they reported difficulties with at least one issue in six areas: mobility, self-care, hearing, vision, cognition, and independent living. Employment status was broken into three categories: employed, unemployed, and not in the labor force. To be considered employed, the individual had to report being paid for work during the second week of the month they responded to the survey. To be considered unemployed, the individual must have been on either temporary layoff (i.e. terminated but expected to be called back) or actively searching for employment within the previous four weeks. An individual was considered not in the labor force if they were neither employed nor unemployed. The researchers compared the estimated percentages of individuals with disabilities and without disabilities in each of these employment categories each month from February 2020-January 2021.

The first few months of the pandemic saw the most significant losses for individuals with and without disabilities. Specifically, the researchers found that:

- Between February and April of 2020, individuals with and without disabilities had nearly identical relative reduction in the percentage of people employed (15.5% vs. 15.1%, respectively).
- During this period, the percentage of people unemployed rose from 3% to 6.5% for individuals with disabilities and 2.9% to 10.5% for individuals without disabilities.
- Between February and April 2020, the percentage of individuals with disabilities considered not in the labor force held steady around 66% while the percentage of individuals without disabilities increased from 22.3% to 26.3%.
- Between February and April of 2020, unemployed individuals with and without disabilities had similar increases in temporary layoffs. The percentage of individuals with disabilities who were temporarily laid off jumped from 9.1% to 72.9%. The percentage of individuals without disabilities jumped from 17.1% to 79%. Both groups also saw similar decreases in the percentage of people actively searching for employment: 91% to 27% and 83% to 21% respectively.

In the months following April 2020, the percentage of individuals with and without disabilities who were unemployed decreased, while the percentage of unemployed individuals looking for work increased. However, by January 2021 neither had returned to February 2020 levels. For example, 31.1% of individuals with disabilities were employed in February 2020, but only 28.9% were employed in January 2021.

The authors noted that, from February to April 2020, the pandemic-related disruption of the economy appeared to have a substantial impact on the employment status of people with and without disabilities alike. However, there was an increase in percentage of people without disabilities who were not in the labor force, while there was no such increase in people disabilities. According to the authors, prior research has shown that people with disabilities may be more likely to work primarily from home and to do any work at home versus at an office. The authors suggested that the tendency to work from home may have helped workers with disabilities to stay engaged in the labor force in a way that workers without disabilities did not.

The authors also noted that the unemployment rates may have even been underestimated due to the structure of the survey questions. In the CPS form, if a person was employed but absent from work during that week, they must give a reason such as vacation, illness, training, childcare problems, or “other reasons.” In April 2020, the number of respondents reporting other reasons jumped significantly. Workers who were classified as employed but absent for “other reasons” in the early days of the pandemic may actually have been temporarily laid off, as shown by the later increase in percentage of unemployed people who were temporarily laid off. The authors suggested that additional industry and occupation-specific research may be needed to gain a deeper understanding COVID-19’s impact on the employment status of people with and

without disabilities. The authors also recommended that post-COVID-19 employment status may benefit from continued observation over the next several months to years, as it may provide valuable insight into the potential need for various policies and programs to help maintain stable employment for workers with disabilities.

[To Learn More](#)

[National Trends in Disability Employment \(nTIDE\)](#) is a monthly series launched by the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) on Employment Policy and Measurement and the RRTC on Disability Statistics and Demographics to monitor the state of employment of people with disabilities in the US. The series includes brief reports and Lunch & Learn webinars.

The RRTC on Disability Statistics and Demographics publishes the [Annual Compendium of Disability Statistics](#) both as a print compendium and as an interactive tool to explore multiple Federal data sources.

[To Learn More about this Study](#)

Houtenville, A.J., Paul, S., Brucker, D.L. (2021) [Changes in the employment status of people with and without disabilities in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* (2021). This article is available from the NARIC collection.

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