

COVID-19's Impact on People with Disabilities in Canada

Fact Sheet No. 1:

Sharing the Experiences of Diverse People with Disabilities

The COVID-19 pandemic and related policy measures had many negative impacts on diverse people with disabilities in Canada. While these impacts were often profound for those in the disability community, they remained largely invisible to others.

In Fall 2020, researchers at the Live Work Well Research Centre and the DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) Canada set out to share the experiences of people with disabilities during the pandemic. We conducted our research using an approach called "intersectional disability and gender analysis" (iDGA). We examined how policies during the emergency affected diverse people with disabilities, their support providers, and disability organizations. This fact sheet series and the final report share what we learned. Read the final report and fact sheet series on liveworkwell.ca.

What is an intersectional disability and gender analysis (iDGA) framework?

The iDGA framework is a way of gathering and understanding policy and research data that considers experiences based in disability, types of impairments, race, gender, sexuality, and income among others. The framework uses a series of questions to explore research data from a variety of viewpoints, including everyday experiences and diverse ways of knowing. By asking different questions and taking this approach to research, we can better understand the full impact of policies and generate new insights.



From bad to worse: What the data show about the impact of COVID-19 on people with disabilities

Not only did people with disabilities face a higher risk of getting sick with COVID-19, but they also had more difficulty meeting their day-to-day needs, like food, health care, and support services. Problems that existed before the pandemic only got worse during the emergency.

Before the pandemic

Since the start of the pandemic

EDUCATION

Before the pandemic

Canadians with disabilities have lower rates of education compared to those without disabilities. For example, the percentage of Canadians with disabilities not completing high school or post-secondary education is double the rate of other Canadians. Barriers to education are greater for those with severe disabilities and for Indigenous people living in First Nations communities.



During the pandemic

Survey results reported in Oct. 2020 found that 37% of respondents reported receiving no support for their children's online education needs during the pandemic, which limited the ability of their child to participate in classroom activities. The impacts of the pandemic on access to education were greater for those living in rural areas and for people with developmental disabilities.

EMPLOYMENT

Before the pandemic

Prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, employment rates for Canadians with disabilities were significantly lower than those without disabilities (59% compared to 80%). This gap is wider for women and for people with more severe disabilities.



During the pandemic

Statistics Canada data* collected during the pandemic found that one-third (36%) of people with disabilities who had jobs before the pandemic had experienced a temporary or permanent job loss or reduced hours. Young people, women, and those with lower levels of education were more severely affected.

INCOME

Before the pandemic

Pre-pandemic data show that people with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty and homelessness than those without disabilities. Lack of housing is a particular challenge for women with disabilities, especially those living with low income.



During the pandemic

According to a 2020 Statistics Canada survey*, 31% of participants aged 15 to 64 with long-term conditions or disabilities reported their overall household income had decreased. These impacts were more severe among people with disabilities who are also Indigenous, women, racialized, LGBTQ2, or living in households with children.

SOCIAL

Before the pandemic

A 2019 study found that people with physical disabilities were twice as likely to be socially excluded than people without disabilities, with 38% reporting high levels of loneliness and isolation. Approximately 25% of women with disabilities live alone, making isolation a particular concern.



During the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened social exclusion and isolation for people with disabilities, as many regular social programs and services have been cancelled. People with disabilities living in congregate living settings were particularly affected by "no-visitor" policies.

*Data from the Statistics Canada crowdsourced survey "Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians Living with Long-term Conditions and Disabilities." From June 23 to July 6, 2020, approximately 13,000 Canadians with long-term conditions or disabilities participated in this survey. The survey was not conducted according to probabilistic sampling.

“There’s help for everyone except us. People with disabilities matter too! Food is so expensive now that I have to choose to pay rent or buy food. Government should help us that have disabilities that can’t afford to live.”

– *Independent Living Canada Survey Respondent*

How did COVID-19 policies affect diverse people with disabilities?

- Social distancing measures prevented people living in congregate settings from visiting loved ones.
- Increased isolation increased the risk of violence and abuse, especially for women with disabilities, Indigenous women with disabilities, people with intellectual disabilities, and those in congregate living settings.
- Disruptions in public transportation increased isolation for those living alone and made it difficult for many to access essential supplies.
- Mask requirements increased barriers to communications for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing.
- Online communications and information-sharing left out people with disabilities who do not have or cannot afford computer or internet access.
- COVID-19 triage policies raised concerns about whether people with disabilities would be treated fairly or treated at all in emergency situations.

“I really have felt afraid and I’m sure will continue to feel afraid throughout the remainder of this thing that my life won’t be valued by health care practitioners or government officials, anybody in general, enough for me to continue to survive if I do get COVID.”

– *Research participant*

For many with disabilities, household income further declined while costs increased for food, transportation, and health supplies. People with disabilities who live with children were even more affected by these changes. The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) of \$2,000 per month— is nearly double the amount of most forms of income assistance for people with disabilities.



“There’s still a lot of work to do in general with accessibility and getting the support that we need. So, during this whole thing of just being worse is, it’s kind of sad that we’re kind of thinking of the people with disabilities last. And that’s how I’ve kind of felt that we’ve been. We’re very much an afterthought. No one thought about us when it first started.”

– *Research participant*

Why did COVID-19 policies have negative effects on people with disabilities?

- Insufficient data were available to show the needs of diverse people with disabilities.
- Many policies responding to COVID were not created with people with disabilities in mind or made it difficult for people with disabilities to qualify.
- Federal and provincial benefits were not well-coordinated or consistent.
- Many communications were inaccessible, such as public signage and wayfinding that excluded people who are blind, or online information that was inaccessible to people without internet access.

About this series

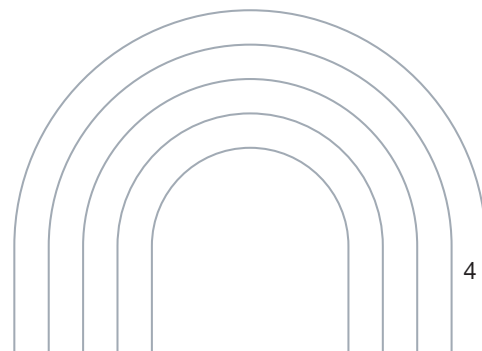
This fact sheet is part of a series highlighting research conducted in Fall 2020 by the Live Work Well Research Centre in partnership with the DisAbled Women’s Network of Canada. Read the final report and fact sheet series on liveworkwell.ca.

As part of this research we:

- Gathered data from five provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Québec, and New Brunswick) and from international websites;
- Analyzed statistical data, research articles, policies, and media coverage;
- Conducted interviews and focus groups with 24 disability leader key informants, 30 people with disabilities, and three federal, provincial, and regional health key informants; and
- Identified themes from the data by applying our intersectional disability and gender analysis framework (iDGA).

The COVID-19’s Impact on People with Disabilities in Canada fact sheet series includes:

1. Sharing the Experiences of Diverse People with Disabilities
2. Accessing Essentials During the Pandemic
3. Involving People with Disabilities in Decision-Making
4. Barriers to Health Care and Services
5. Housing and Congregate Living
6. Learning from International Examples



Acknowledgements

We recognize our presence and work on the territories of the Attawandaron, Mississaugas, Algonquin Anishnaabeg, Kanien'kehà:ka, and Mi'kmaq Peoples. We wish to thank the participants and key informants who gave generously of their knowledge and time. We also thank Employment and Social Development Canada for their support of this work.

Sources used

Angus Reid Institute. "A Portrait of Social Isolation and Loneliness in Canada Today." June 17, 2019. <http://angusreid.org/social-isolation-loneliness-canada/>

De Camargo, Olaf Kraus, Farah Ahmad, Kinga Pozniak, and Matt Freeman. COVID-19 Survey at a Glance. CanChild Survey. 2020. https://canchild.ca/system/tenon/assets/attachments/000/003/346/original/COVID-19_Survey_V3.pdf

Hoye, Bryce. "'What about Us?' People with Disabilities and Their Advocates Wonder When Services Will Restart." *CBC News*, May 5, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitobans-disability-dayprogram-covid19-reopen-1.5553072>

Independent Living Canada. "Independent Living Canada Survey finds Canadians with Disabilities have major concerns about COVID-19." 2020. <https://www.ilc-vac.ca/uploads/1/3/1/4/131438945/english-press-release-covid-19-may-12-2020.pdf>

Morris, Stuart P., Gail Fawcett, Laurent Brisebois, and Jeffrey Hughes. "A Demographic, Employment and Income Profile of Canadians with Disabilities Aged 15 Years and over, 2017." Canadian Survey on Disability. *Statistics Canada*, 2018. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/89-654-X2018002>

People First of Canada. "Living with care, support and an intellectual disability during COVID-19." April 15, 2020. <https://peoplefirstofcanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/EditorialApril152020MarkhamResponse.pdf>

Statistics Canada. "Impacts of COVID-19 on Persons with Disabilities." *The Daily*, August 27, 2020. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/200827/dq200827c-eng.pdf?st=avvw6y9j>

© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada 2021