



## Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on People with Disabilities

### Research Findings

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all projects funded by the Administration for Community Living's National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) experienced substantial delays and required pivoting in some way during the pandemic. Grantees used this opportunity to collect data on the experiences of people with disabilities. This document summarizes some of their findings.

**People with disabilities were disproportionately affected by the hardships of COVID-19, and some groups of people with disabilities have been particularly hard hit.**

- The disadvantages that people with disabilities experience in health care and community living place them at greater risk for poor COVID-19 outcomes. There is a need to ensure accurate data collection to better understand such disparities and improve prevention and treatment of, and preparedness for current and future infectious disease pandemics among people with disabilities. [This work, published in \*The American Journal of Bioethics\*](#), was supported by several federal funding sources including two NIDILRR grants as part of the ADA National Network.
- Adults with physical disabilities from marginalized communities, such as disabled older adults, non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic disabled people, and disabled residents of homeless shelters, were overrepresented among U.S. COVID-19 patients requiring hospitalization. [Listen to the webinar highlighting key findings](#) from University of Michigan's Investigating Disability factors and promoting Environmental Access for healthy Living, a NIDILRR Rehabilitation Research and Training Center.
- People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) experienced unique and disproportionate impacts from COVID-19; [in this video](#), researchers share some of the data, and people with I/DD share personal and professional experiences. Webinar recorded by the Community Living Policy Center at Brandeis University, a NIDILRR Rehabilitation Research and Training Center.
- Among people with existing mental health disorders, more than one-third screened positive for generalized anxiety disorder and over one-fourth screened positive for major depressive disorder. Notably, a majority of this population reported pandemic-related changes in eating and sleeping patterns and exposure to COVID-19 infection. This [work published in \*Translational Behavioral Medicine\*](#) was supported by two NIDILRR Rehabilitation Research and Training Centers at the University of Illinois-Chicago.
- Practical strategies were developed by the Southeast ADA Center, a member of the ADA National Network funded by NIDILRR and a project of the Burton Blatt Institute (BBI) at Syracuse University, to take care of mental health in times of crisis in a three-part series: [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#).
- During the pandemic, people with burn injury experienced reduced access to inpatient and outpatient medical and therapeutic care, loss of peer support (leading to increased social isolation), and triggers for PTSD. [This work published in \*Burns\*](#) was supported by a NIDILRR-funded Burn Injury Model Systems grant awarded to the Boston-Harvard Burn Injury Model System.

## Impacts on community engagement and participation

- Restrictions necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19 may be especially burdensome to vulnerable populations, including individuals with spinal cord injuries (SCI). The majority of study participants with SCI (80%) reported difficulty engaging in regular activities, and approximately 40% of the sample reported: difficulty in accessing healthcare information and services, difficulty acquiring PPE, difficulty acquiring medication refills, and difficulty acquiring food/groceries. [This work published in the Archives of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation](#) was partially supported by a NIDILRR-funded Spinal Cord Injury Model Systems grant awarded to the South Florida Spinal Cord Injury Model System.
- A study of individuals with mobility impairments found that access to family and friends was the most negatively affected topic related to participation, followed by access to food and groceries, transportation, employment, living independently, caring for others, and participating in the community in general. [This work published in the Disability & Health Journal](#) was supported by the Center on Promoting Interventions for Community Living, a NIDILRR Rehabilitation Research and Training Center.
- In a study of adults with autism spectrum disorder, community mobility and participation decreased in both essential and non-essential activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the number of trips leaving the house for participants decreased substantially. [This work published in the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders](#) was supported by a Field Initiated Project NIDILRR grant awarded to Temple University.
- While common for many disability populations, peer support specialists are an integral part of many support programs for individuals with serious mental illness. Peer support specialists reported the individuals with serious mental illness they were supporting had increased concerns related to isolation, substance abuse, housing instability, and food insecurity since the pandemic. [This work published in Psychiatric Services](#) was supported in part by an Advanced Rehabilitation Research and Training (ARRT) NIDILRR grant awarded to Boston University.

## Impact on rural communities

The University of Montana Rural Institute's Research & Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities, a NIDILRR Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, published several pieces that illustrated the unique issues in rural communities:

- Rural residents reported higher rates of COVID-19 health risk factors but less adherence to public health recommendations. This included vaccine hesitancy. More specifically, rural residents with disabilities reported more concerns about vaccines side effects, how quickly they were developed, and newness. This work was published in the [Disability & Health Journal](#).
- Rural residents with disabilities and specifically, people with hearing and communication disabilities were less likely to trust information sources about COVID-19 than other sociodemographic groups. These same individuals were also less likely to adhere to CDC recommended practices for preventing the spread of COVID-19. This work was published in the [Disability & Health Journal](#).
- [This research brief](#) describes the disproportionate impact on rural residents – who are more likely to live in congregate settings -- when COVID-19 cases and deaths rose in nursing homes across the country at the same time that vaccination rates amongst staff and residents plateaued.

## Telehealth

- The disability community is using telehealth in rural areas. Individuals with disabilities and service providers tended to have positive opinions about telehealth services and called for the need to increase knowledge and confidence in its use. [This research report](#) was developed by the Rocky Mountain ADA Center, a member of the ADA National Network funded by NIDILRR.
- Individuals with chronic illness and disability experience mental health disorders at higher rates than individuals without disabilities, and this disparity was magnified during the pandemic, intensifying the need for accessible telemental health services (mental health services provided via phone or internet). This research report highlights key findings, including comorbid mental health concerns among individuals with other disabilities and accessibility concerns of telemental health services. [This research report](#) was developed by the Rocky Mountain ADA Center, a member of the ADA National Network funded by NIDILRR.
- There are specific considerations for providers who are serving transition age youth and young adults with disabilities using telehealth services. [This factsheet](#) describes how providers can protect their emotional safety, privacy, and welfare while they are participating in virtual mental health care for transition age youth and young adults. This work was supported by the [Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures](#) at Portland State University of Montana, which is co-funded by NIDILRR and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
- One study highlighted emerging vulnerabilities in Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protections, including accessibility of telehealth and telework. Jurisdictional uncertainty leaves open questions for how patients and workers can navigate and best advocate for their rights. Policymakers should consider these issues—as well as the diverse array of remedial choices for the accessibility of telehealth and telework—as they tackle these problems in consultation with the deaf, hard-of-hearing, and DeafBlind communities. [This work was published by the University of Colorado Law School: Colorado Law Scholarly Commons by the RERC on Technology for People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing](#), a NIDILRR Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center (RERC) operated by to Gallaudet University.

## Students with disabilities and education services

- COVID-19 implications created disruptions in school for students with disabilities (including those with mental health conditions) and providers of supported education services (primary, secondary, and [college students](#)). These students and providers continue to need help as there are unique considerations for in-person and hybrid learning formats. To address this need, a [curated collection of resources](#) to help youth and young adults, administrators, and counselors was developed by The Learning and Working During the Transition to Adulthood Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, a NIDILRR Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

## Employment and return-to-work accommodations

- People with disabilities, particularly those in rural areas, were especially vulnerable to the COVID-19 recession because they are less likely to have an emergency savings fund, have access to paid leave, or be able to work from home. This [research brief](#) was published by the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities: Employment Collection and developed by the Research & Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities, a NIDILRR Rehabilitation Research and Training Center at to the University of Montana.

- There is a possibility of a significant increase in workplace accommodations requests under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) due to post-COVID syndrome, a collection of lingering symptoms such as fatigue and brain fog, which may prompt employees who had the virus to request accommodations. [This resource](#) was developed by the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Employment for People with Physical Disabilities, a NIDILRR RRTC operated by the Shirley Ryan AbilityLab.
- Deaf, hard of hearing, and DeafBlind people working remotely during the COVID-19 crisis encountered significant barriers to communication. [Guidance on making remote workplaces accessible](#) was developed by the Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center (RERC) on Technology for People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing and the RERC on Improving the Accessibility, Usability, and Performance of Technology for Individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, two NIDILRR Rehabilitation Engineering Research Centers at Gallaudet University.
- Resources about [accommodations available for people with disabilities](#) and best practices for [return to work in the pandemic](#) were developed by two ADA Regional Centers (Great Lakes ADA Center and MidAtlantic ADA Center), members of the ADA National Network funded by NIDILRR.
- [A brief about maintaining productivity and connectedness while working from home](#), along with its [American Sign Language \(ASL\) translation](#), were developed by The Learning and Working During the Transition to Adulthood Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, a NIDILRR Rehabilitation Research and Training Center awarded to the University of Massachusetts Amherst.
- Additional COVID-19 specific resources designed to help people with disabilities are available from the [Administration for Community Living](#)
- Information about [rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\) and how they apply to the coronavirus](#) (COVID-19) pandemic is available from the NIDILRR-funded ADA National Network.

## Research gaps and opportunities

NIDILRR continues to support research on the impact of COVID-19 on the disability community; currently there are 11 NIDILRR-funded projects. The documented experiences of people with disabilities and the disproportionate impact COVID-19 has had on them highlight the urgent need for further research. ACL and NIDILRR encourage grantees and the broader disability research community to:

- Further explore COVID-19 disparities and improve prevention and treatment of —and preparedness for — infectious disease pandemics among people with disabilities.
- Critically examine the impact of COVID-19 mitigation strategies (i.e., unemployment and loss of health insurance, food insecurity, housing instability, and preventive health care services) on people with disabilities.
- Develop an evidence base for the effectiveness and reach of telehealth or remote interventions for people with disabilities.
- Monitor long-term effects of COVID-19 in disability populations.
- Develop an evidence base for the impact of COVID-19 in long-term care facilities including nursing homes, assisted living and other congregate settings.
- Assess impacts of existing interventions and pivots due to COVID-19.