

COVID-19 and Employment Losses for Workers with Disabilities: An Intersectional Approach

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This paper studies the disparate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers with an array of physical and mental disabilities, using comparisons to otherwise-similar workers without disabilities, and within disability categories. We pay particular attention to an intersectional analysis of individuals with multiple identities, especially disability, race/ethnicity, and gender.

The study uses the Current Population Survey (CPS), the definitive labor force survey for the U.S. The CPS provides data on various demographic characteristics as well as measures of disability based on a six-question set that identifies hearing, vision, cognitive, and mobility impairments, and difficulty with self-care or going outside alone. These data are first used to construct descriptive statistics on employment rates and number of jobs by disability status. Next, we run regressions to predict the percent change in the likelihood of employment by disability status, controlling for demographic characteristics, occupation, and industry. Finally, we use a decomposition approach to examine the extent to which the difference in employment rates between those with and without a disability is explained by differences in other observed characteristics, or remains unexplained.

Results from the descriptive analysis point to a stronger pandemic-related drop in the number of jobs for workers with disabilities compared to their non-disabled counterparts (see the figure below). The number of jobs has also been slower to bounce back for individuals with disabilities in the latter part of 2020. The largest employment declines, and the slowest recoveries, were experienced by workers with disabilities who are women, Black, or middle-aged.

Regression results controlling for other factors like age and education indicate that White and Black women with disabilities experienced relatively greater employment losses during the pandemic compared to White men without disabilities. Finally, the decomposition procedure reveals that the disability employment gap increased during the pandemic and that a substantial portion of the increased gap is accounted for by how the pandemic differentially affected occupations and industries. People with disabilities were disproportionately likely to be in the hardest-hit occupations and industries, such as cleaning services and food preparation. There was also an increase in the portion of the disability employment gap that is not explained by other personal characteristics, occupation, or industry, which could partly reflect growing discrimination by employers against people with disabilities during the pandemic.

The results are very consistent with a number of prior studies showing that workers with disabilities tend to be “last hired, first fired.” These findings should help to inform the direction of employment policies during and after COVID-19 by showing how employment outcomes have changed for people across the spectrum of disabilities and for individuals from underserved/minority backgrounds in the context of the pandemic. Our results also have

important implications for employer policies to provide telecommuting accommodations rather than trying to pigeonhole individuals with disabilities into a traditional workspace. Home-based work has particular value for some people with disabilities not only in enabling employment, but also in helping ensure that their pay levels and raises are determined more by actual job performance and qualifications, rather than by stereotypes and workplace cultural dynamics that have been shown to disadvantage workers with disabilities.

Overall, our findings highlight the challenges faced by workers with disabilities, employers, and policy-makers, and set an important context for the studies on disability employment that we will be conducting in the Disability Inclusive Employment Policy Center, funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research over the next five years. One of our projects will be on trends and opportunities in home-based work for people both with and without disabilities, which has obviously become much more common during the pandemic and may reshape many workplaces going forward. Our other projects will also examine policies that seek to reduce the precariousness of employment and income for workers with disabilities, including projects on the effects of paid leave policies, contingent work, unemployment insurance, and minimum and subminimum wages on the employment and earnings of workers with disabilities.

