

Workers with Disabilities May Remain Unemployed Long after the COVID-19 Pandemic

Jennifer D. Brooks

While the re-opening of the U.S. economy promises a return to work for some, this may not be the case for many displaced workers with disabilities. Workers with disabilities are often the first fired and last hired.¹ The COVID-19 labor market is no exception to this rule. Recently released data suggest that employment rates between March and April 2020 decreased 18% for the general population, but 24% for workers with disabilities.² While the “new normal” of virtual work has created more inclusive and flexible online work environments,³ people with disabilities are losing, instead of gaining, traction in the labor market. But, why?

The answer may lay in what workers with disabilities do for a living. People with disabilities, especially people of color and women with disabilities, are often pigeonholed into low status, low-wage, part-time, in-person, non-unionized jobs, which offer very little (if any) job security.^{4,5} Industries which have traditionally employed many workers with disabilities, such as food services, leisure and hospitality, construction, and manufacturing, experienced substantial job losses at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ While these types of positions are beginning to reemerge, they will likely be filled by those without disabilities, due to both individual and structural factors.⁷

Why Workers with Disabilities May Not Reenter the Labor Market

There are several reasons why people with disabilities may not return to work. First, unemployed workers with disabilities may be overlooked for jobs due to employer preferences for non-disabled employees. As unemployment reaches historic levels, the supply of people who are available to work has increased. At the same time, social distancing measures limit the number of employees an employer can hire/re-hire. This increase in the supply of workers and low demand for employees will result in a selective hiring process. If given a choice between a potential employee with a disability or one without, employers may choose the latter due to the negative stereotypes and attitudes surrounding disabled workers.

Second, some individuals with disabilities will not return to work due to COVID-19 health-related concerns. Indeed, recent research indicates that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are more likely to both contract and experience the most severe symptoms of COVID-19.⁸ Thus, for many people with disabilities, especially those with underlying health conditions, returning to work may be a matter of life and death.

Third, due to the pandemic, some displaced workers with disabilities have lost the supports and services that allowed them to participate in various aspects of pre-COVID-19 life, including work. These individuals, who once relied on supports to live independently in the community (e.g., personal attendant care (PCA) services), may now be sheltering-in-place with family, partners, and friends for the foreseeable future. Although jobs might become available to these individuals, they will not have the appropriate supports to access these jobs.

Finally, while people with disabilities are often seen as care receivers, many are also caregivers.¹⁰ Many people with disabilities, especially women with disabilities, have more caregiving responsibilities due to stay-at-home orders. Additional tasks, such as homeschooling, cooking, cleaning, 24/7 childcare, and caring for those who are not typically a part of the household, may make returning to work impossible for these individuals.

While most of the reasons mentioned above can also be applied to displaced workers without disabilities, these effects will be magnified for those with disabilities who face multiple other barriers to labor market participation.¹⁰

Long-Term Consequences for People with Disabilities

These COVID-19 unemployment effects will have lasting consequences for people with disabilities long after the pandemic is over. Whereas most displaced workers without disabilities will be able to re-enter the labor market relatively quickly, this will not be the case for many people with disabilities. Unable to find a job, these workers may become discouraged and will be forced to apply for disability-related government assistance, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Medicare, and Medicaid. The income and asset limits for these programs, however, make it nearly impossible for people with disabilities to get off and return to work, trapping them in a lifetime of poverty and economic disadvantage. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic will leave a legacy of increased economic and labor market inequality among those with disabilities.

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About the Author

Jennifer (Jen) Brooks is a doctoral candidate in the Sociology department and a Research Affiliate in the Policy, Place, and Population Health Lab in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University (jdbro100@syr.edu).

The mission of the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion at Syracuse University is to improve population health through applied research and evaluation, education, engaged service, and advocating for evidence-based policy and practice change.