

Pandemic disproportionately affects those with disabilities and chronic health conditions, study reveals

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David Pettinicchio knows that the COVID-19 pandemic is taking its toll on the mental and financial health of many Canadians. But when, three months into the pandemic last year, the federal government had yet to announce financial support for one of the groups hardest hit by the public health crisis, the UTM sociology professor started to think that people with disabilities and chronic health conditions were being left out of the picture—and paying an even bigger price for it than others.

So, he and University of Alberta sociologist Michelle Maroto set out to prove it.

Last June, they launched a national online survey of 1,027 Canadians with [disabilities](#) and chronic [health](#) conditions to find out how COVID-19 was impacting their employment, financial security and [mental health](#). Fifty respondents also participated in in-depth, one-on-one follow-up interviews.

Their findings were recently published in the *Disability and Health Journal* and in a series of opinion editorials in the *Toronto Star*.

"What we found was very troubling," Pettinicchio says. "We saw that the [pandemic](#) was having a disproportionate impact on a group that was already socially, politically and culturally marginalized and experiencing a constellation of issues."

Almost half of the respondents said that COVID was affecting their ability to pay down debt, make rent and utility payments and purchase groceries. Although nearly half of those surveyed held a full- or part-time job, more than 40 percent worried that they might lose it within the next month.

"This is a group already earning less and more likely to be in retail and service jobs impacted by the pandemic," Pettinicchio explains. What's more, many people with disabilities and [chronic health conditions](#) are unemployed, under-employed or unable to work, which meant that they were ineligible for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB).

While the [federal government](#) did offer a one-time \$600 emergency benefit for Canadians with disabilities, that money wasn't available until the fall—after the survey.

Pettinicchio and Maroto also observed a direct link between financial uncertainty and mental health, with more than one-third of the survey participants reporting increased levels of anxiety and stress. Mental distress was most pronounced among those with severe disabilities and health issues and those who reported that COVID-19 negatively affected their finances.

The hit to the pocketbook was further compounded by feelings of isolation. Pettinicchio explains: "Care workers weren't visiting, they couldn't see their doctor face to face, many were cut off from their community services and they were isolated from family."

On top of that, many respondents worried about getting COVID-19 while working in jobs that put them at greater risk.

"The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities," Pettinicchio concludes. The researchers fear that if nothing is done, those already disadvantaged will continue to be left behind. "All of this won't get resolved once the pandemic is under control. It will pose long-term problems."

In an opinion piece published in the Toronto Star in March, he called on the Canadian government to do more "to ensure that government policy responses to the pandemic are inclusive of the voices of individuals most negatively impacted by this health crisis."

Pettinicchio also hopes his research—and the follow-up study he and Maroto are planning for this summer—will give Canadians pause when they wax nostalgic about the pre-pandemic world.

"That world was never fair or equal for all. Why shouldn't we use this shock to our system as a way of thinking about doing something about economic, social and health inequalities? Why not make this an opportunity to take meaningful action?" he asks.

More information: David Pettinicchio et al. Findings from an online survey on the mental health effects of COVID-19 on Canadians with disabilities and chronic health conditions, *Disability and Health Journal* (2021). DOI: [10.1016/j.dhjo.2021.101085](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2021.101085)

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