

Disability and unemployment: COVID-19 heightens existing inequalities, says expert

April 8 2020, by Carla Demarco



David Pettinicchio. Credit: Ian Patterson

As reality sets in about the extensive fallout during the current coronavirus pandemic, Assistant Professor David Pettinicchio cannot

help but notice that people with disabilities, a part of the population already marginalized and often most affected by various crises, are noticeably absent from mainstream conversations.

A professor with UTM's Department of Sociology since 2014, Pettinicchio looks at how people with disabilities, who already struggle with precarious employment, low earnings, minimal benefits, and insufficient economic security, become even more vulnerable at times like this.

"I think what's important to keep in mind is that what COVID-19 is really highlighting is how precarious and insecure a lot of people are just generally, and how it's going to have serious implications down the road," says Pettinicchio.

Pettinicchio's work has demonstrated that people with disabilities have difficulty finding work, and when they do it is often in low paying, non-unionized jobs, particularly in the [service sector](#), such as [food preparation](#), or they are burdened by longer hours in warehouse or grocery store positions. He says any jobs they could previously obtain or the flexibility they once had to accommodate their disability are now heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and this will have a long-term impact on household finances.

Pettinicchio draws a comparison between the new education-delivery scenario with that of the employment sector.

"When you consider our work in [higher education](#): COVID-19 was a huge shock, and as educators, we are scrambling to figure out ways to deal with it, and it's challenged how we implement accommodations for students with disabilities," says Pettinicchio.

"One of the things that should not be lost in the conversation is that this

new delivery of virtual instruction has issues with accessibility, and that not everyone is going to be able to access courses online."

Pettinicchio says accommodations are often made, when possible, to allow people to work remotely, which he maintains is a fundamental right, and employers who aren't making work accessible in order to perform the job from a distance are in violation of the law.

Pettinicchio finds the COVID-19 pandemic might bring new inequalities to light and heighten existing inequalities. He advises policymakers consider these issues given the potential duration of the current crisis and the long-lasting impacts.

"For policies and all these disaster-responses measures to work, we cannot move forward and leave already marginalized groups out of recovery efforts," says Pettinicchio.

"It can be as simple as recognizing that people with [disabilities](#) are a vulnerable group, and that special efforts are required when it comes to making information and programs accessible, and that providing accommodations are necessary to mitigate any inequalities that happen."

Provided by University of Toronto Mississauga

Citation: Disability and unemployment: COVID-19 heightens existing inequalities, says expert (2020, April 8) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-04-disability-unemployment-covid-heightens-inequalities.html>

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