

Why people with disabilities are at greater risk of going hungry—especially during a pandemic

May 6 2021, by Melissa L. Caldwell



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The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed uncomfortable and distressing truths about American society: namely, the struggle many Americans

face just getting by.

Yet, while the [pervasive food insecurity](#) that has always existed in the U.S. became [more visible](#), how the problem disproportionately affects people with [disabilities](#) has received less attention.

As an [ethnographer of food, poverty and welfare](#), I study how people respond to economic scarcity through caregiving networks. Although caregiving networks like neighborhood mutual aid groups and pop-up [food banks](#) quickly emerged to support vulnerable groups during the pandemic, people with disabilities have continued to face additional challenges.

High risk of food insecurity

An estimated [25% of U.S. adults](#) have some form of physical or [intellectual disability](#). Functional disabilities—such as the inability to walk more than a quarter of a mile, climb stairs or lift objects weighing over 10 pounds—are among the [most common](#).

People with disabilities are more likely to experience other [chronic health conditions](#) such as [anxiety and depression](#), [arthritis and cardiovascular problems](#). They also have higher rates of [unemployment](#) and [economic instability](#). In 2019, the poverty rate for Americans with disabilities was [almost 27%](#)—more than double the rate of those without disabilities.

Collectively, these factors put them at greater risk for [food](#) insecurity, which the [USDA defines](#) as limited or uncertain access to adequate food.

Yet people with disabilities are [underrepresented in accounts of pandemic-related poverty](#) and food insecurity. Given their [reduced access](#) to food shopping, they are less likely to be included in research on

disruptions to the food system. This is [prompting demands](#) from health researchers and disability activists for greater attention and solutions.

Shopping with a disability

Even before the pandemic, limited physical access to food shopping and preparation for persons with disabilities led to [greater reliance on precooked and heavily processed foods](#).

In the early stages of the pandemic, many Americans endured long lines and stocked up on groceries to avoid repeat trips to the stores. But these inconveniences—as well as going from store to store in search of [scarce goods](#)—can be [physically and emotionally grueling](#) for people with limited mobility or stability, or who are easily exhausted. And although many supermarkets created [special shopping hours](#) for elderly and disabled customers, getting there at specific times required people to either be able to drive or navigate the scheduling uncertainties of public transportation.

Once inside stores, disabled persons are further disenfranchised by the physical limitations of shopping. Shopping for one to two weeks—as [public health officials had recommended](#)—is especially difficult while using a wheelchair or motorized scooter that holds only a small basket of goods. The same is true for pushing a cart or carrying a basket while using a walker or cane.

Customers who are able to drive themselves to shop may also find themselves unable to get their items from the store into their vehicles. Stores that once offered assistance stopped these services in order to protect their employees.

[Food donation and delivery programs](#) attempted to meet some of these needs by providing meals and groceries for several days or even weeks at

time. Despite these efforts, demand outstripped the availability of both [food supplies and volunteers](#).

For some individuals with disabilities, going to a food bank or community service center was also an [important social encounter](#)—an opportunity to visit friends, access news and interact with social workers. Once those [programs were shuttered](#) or [made contactless](#), many people were further isolated in their homes. Studies have shown that social isolation among people with disabilities reduces not only access to food but also the [motivation to prepare and eat food](#).

While [new digital technologies](#) have allowed customers to outsource their food shopping to gig workers, they require basic infrastructure, equipment and knowledge that may be [unaffordable to low-income people with disabilities](#). Moreover, reliance on others to choose one's food can cause people to feel a [loss of control and autonomy](#) over their food choices.

In many ways, the stories that have been most visible around [food insecurity](#) have been those of the people who were in fact able to stand in lines, stock up on groceries and even barter with neighbors for supplies. During a pandemic that has made life much more difficult for billions of people around the world, I believe the experiences of disabled persons have become further marginalized and less visible.

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