How did COVID-19 lockdown impact employment of individuals with visual disabilities?

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New data show that while individuals with visual disabilities were slow to recover employment because of the effects of the COVID-2019

lockdown, they have made headway, depending on their level of disability, almost meeting their pre-pandemic levels. Possible reasons for their slower recovery include major safety concerns due to the shortage of personal protective equipment, less access to vaccines, and their vulnerability to severe consequences of COVID, according to experts speaking during a recent nTIDE Deeper Dive Lunch & Learn Webinar.

Using data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) for persons ages 16-64, the average monthly employment-to-population ratio for April 2022 to March 2023 was 59.8% for individuals who reported vision disabilities only, (people who reported being "blind or having serious difficulty seeing" and no other disability) compared to 40.3% for people who reported vision disability (plus at least one other disability). For individuals who reported vision disability with activity limitations (e.g., difficulty with self-care, leaving the house by themselves) the employment-to-population ratio was 14.1%.

"These data show a really slow recovery overall: it took this disability segment until the third year post-lockdown to return to their pre-pandemic employment levels," said nTIDE expert Andrew Houtenville, Ph.D., professor of economics at the University of Hampshire (UNH) and research director of the UNH Institute on Disability.

The monthly employment-to-population ratio, a key indicator, reflects the number of people in a population who are working, relative to the total number of people in that population. A 12-month average of this indicator is used to boost statistical precision. The 12-month period of April in one year to March in the next year is used to help examine employment trends before and after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown recession.

"In the Current Population Survey, 'vision disability' can be

characterized in numerous ways that make a difference in subsequent employment estimates. For instance, reporting vision difficulty and activity limitation likely indicates a more severe disability, and folks experiencing more severe vision disability are much less likely to be employed," Dr. Houtenville explained. "In the coming months, the nTIDE Deeper Dive will be looking more closely at how people experience disability using data from the six questions in the BLS survey, which asks about hearing difficulty, vision difficulty, cognitive difficulty, ambulatory difficulty, self-care difficulty, and independent living difficulty."

Impacts on employment recovery

The reliance on tactile input and the fear of COVID complications post-lockdown may have impacted the employment recovery time for people with blindness and visual impairment. "The COVID-2019 pandemic probably negatively influenced individuals with vision disabilities who use tactile cues to navigate," said Elaine E. Katz, MS, CCC-SLP, senior vice president of Grants and Communications, Kessler Foundation.

"Personal safety issues were a huge concern. Many visually impaired individuals hesitated to go out alone due to concerns about coming into contact with surfaces contaminated by germs or encountering people without masks. People who worked in offices ended up staying home and telecommuting," Katz said.

Note on data collection and language: When presenting information about disabilities, nTIDE employs the terminology found in the survey that serves as the basis for BLS data, known as the Current Population Survey (CPS).

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