

COVID-19 Pandemic Effects on the Composition of the Population with Disabilities

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Key Findings and Policy Implications

This paper analyzes changes in the composition and employment of people reporting that they have a disability during the COVID-19 pandemic. It uses 2018-2021 data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation and data from SSA's Disability Analysis File Public Use File. The study finds that:

- A larger share of the population reported that they suffer from a disability in surveys conducted after the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. In addition, among those reporting a disability, there was a sizable increase in the share reporting cognitive/mental health difficulties.
- Those reporting that they had a disability during 2020 were more likely to have stronger employment histories than observed in the years before COVID. The increase in disability reported in 2020 came disproportionately from those employed and working from home at least some days a week, with smaller increases among those working away from home, or not working at all.
- During the early stages of the pandemic, while the share of workers in telework-amenable occupations rose among workers not reporting disabilities, it declined among workers reporting a disability. This suggests that the structural changes in the labor market toward these types of occupations and remote work might not have been advantageous for promoting employment among people with disabilities.
- The mortality rate of SSDI recipients in 2020 and 2021 increased relative to the previous eight years. This increase in mortality explains a nontrivial portion of the reduction in active claims in 2020 and 2021.

The compositional changes identified in this study help to explain the increase in the employment rate of people with reported disabilities, not just from the reduced levels of the pandemic, but surpassing pre-pandemic employment rates of people with disabilities.

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