

A Synthesis: Exploring the Interconnection between Disability and Covid-19

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Abstract

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Background:

The global outbreak of Covid-19 has had far-reaching and devastating consequences, leading to widespread fatalities and the declaration of a pandemic as it rapidly spread across countries. In 2020 alone, there were over 23 million reported cases of Covid-19. Among those impacted, individuals with disabilities constitute a significant and vulnerable group, facing unique challenges in carrying out their daily tasks. The Sustainable Development Goals emphasize the importance of prioritizing the needs and rights of marginalized populations to ensure a life of dignity and safety for all. Unfortunately, people with disabilities are particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of public health crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The primary objective of this review study is to shed light on the various factors contributing to the heightened vulnerability of individuals with disabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methods:

To achieve this objective, a systematic search was conducted on Google Scholar using the keywords "COVID-19 AND DISABILITY" to identify relevant articles.

Conclusion:

The impact of Covid-19 on individuals with disabilities has been multifaceted, resulting from a combination of factors such as an increased risk of adverse health outcomes, limited access to essential medical care and rehabilitation services, and the profound social consequences of pandemic containment efforts. Through this review, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between people with disabilities and the Covid-19 pandemic. By highlighting the challenges, they face, we can foster a greater awareness of their needs and advocate for more inclusive and targeted interventions to ensure their well-being and safety during these challenging times.

Keywords: Disability, Covid-29, Impairment, People living with disability

INTRODUCTION

Persons with disabilities form a diverse and heterogeneous group characterized by differences in identity, gender, age, and underlying health conditions. As a consequence, their healthcare needs vary significantly. For instance, early identification and support are crucial for children with conditions like cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy to optimize their growth and functioning. Likewise, individuals with severe vision or hearing impairments require accessible public health information to interact effectively with medical providers [2, 3]. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected people across all social classes, including those with disabilities, who encompass a wide range of impairments, from physical and motor function challenges to cognitive and sensory limitations, spanning all age groups from infants to the elderly. However, it is vital to view individuals with disabilities not as a homogeneous "category" within a tragedy or pandemic but as unique individuals with specific needs. Their vulnerabilities during the pandemic stem from the complexities of their conditions, and addressing their health-related requirements is equally essential as attending to the general population's needs [1, 2].

People with disabilities face particular challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic, encompassing increased risks of contracting the virus, developing severe symptoms, or experiencing worsened health outcomes, regardless of whether they are infected with Covid-19. Therefore, it becomes imperative to ensure that individuals with disabilities have equitable access to healthcare facilities and public health information at all times, especially during this pandemic. Permanently unwell individuals may face heightened risks due to difficulties in maintaining social distancing, the need for additional physical support, and the limited accessibility of public health information, particularly in formats that cater to their unique needs [3].

Unfortunately, people with disabilities often encounter environmental barriers that hinder their ability to protect themselves adequately from Covid-19 infection. This includes a lack of timely and accessible public health information, as many nations and public health organizations fail to provide guidelines in formats suitable for individuals with disabilities, such as plain language, Easy read

formats, electronic screen readers, captioning, and sign language. Additionally, current public health campaigns may not effectively reach certain vulnerable subgroups, such as institutionalized individuals, those with mental health or substance use disorders, or people experiencing homelessness or with limited personal resources.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the varied and specific needs of individuals with disabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic. This review aims to shed light on the reasons behind the increased vulnerability of this population and to emphasize the importance of providing accessible and inclusive healthcare and public health information. By recognizing the unique risks, they face and implementing tailored interventions, we can strive to safeguard the health and well-being of people with disabilities amidst the ongoing global health crisis.

This synthesis aims to explore the intricate relationship between disability and the Covid-19 pandemic, delving into the multifaceted ways in which individuals with disabilities are affected. By comprehending the underlying factors that contribute to their increased risk and susceptibility to the virus, we can better tailor interventions and support systems to ensure their safety, well-being, and inclusion throughout this unprecedented global health crisis. Through a comprehensive examination of relevant research and data, this synthesis seeks to shed light on the diverse challenges faced by individuals with disabilities during the pandemic. By harnessing this understanding, we can pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable response to the Covid-19 pandemic, fostering a society that upholds the rights and needs of every individual, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

In the following sections, we will explore the various dimensions of the link between disability and Covid-19, highlighting the crucial areas that demand attention and action. Through this synthesis, we hope to contribute to the advancement of evidence-based strategies and policies that protect and empower individuals with disabilities amidst this global health crisis. By recognizing their unique experiences and requirements, we can work towards building a more resilient and compassionate society that leaves no one behind in the face of adversity.

Unraveling Complex Challenges for Individuals with Disabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed a multitude of challenges worldwide, and among the most vulnerable groups affected are individuals with disabilities. The intensity of the virus has been exacerbated for those with pre-existing medical conditions, particularly related to the immune system, heart, diabetes, pulmonary, or immune system function, making them more susceptible to severe health issues and even fatalities [9]. Access to timely and appropriate healthcare has been severely hindered for persons with disabilities, aggravating their vulnerability [12]. Furthermore, the pandemic has disrupted essential services they rely on, leaving them at a significant disadvantage [10].

This paper aims to shed light on the intricate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals with disabilities. By exploring critical areas such as healthcare access, employment and social security, education, and assistance programs, we can better comprehend the challenges they face and devise tailored solutions to support their well-being and inclusion during this crisis.

People with disabilities often grapple with underlying health conditions, making them more susceptible to severe COVID-19 outcomes. Additionally, the pandemic has created barriers to accessing timely medical care, posing significant challenges for this population [9]. Disruptions to healthcare services have further exacerbated their vulnerability, leaving them without the necessary support and resources [12].

The socio-economic impact of the pandemic has disproportionately affected individuals with disabilities. Many have lost their jobs and face difficulties in re-entering the workforce after recovery [10]. The crisis has also intensified exclusion from education for students with disabilities, exacerbating gaps in accessibility and support [13].

Access to support services is vital for individuals with disabilities to lead safe, healthy, and independent lives. Unfortunately, measures to control the COVID-19 outbreak have severely disrupted essential support networks, including unique assistance, sign language interpretation, tactile resources, and

psychosocial support [10]. The economic repercussions of the pandemic may further curtail these critical services in the post-pandemic period.

Understanding the intricate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals with disabilities is crucial in formulating targeted interventions and support systems. As we unravel the complex challenges they face in healthcare, employment, education, and assistance programs, we can work towards building a more inclusive and resilient society. By fostering an environment that caters to the unique needs of individuals with disabilities, we can ensure their safety, well-being, and equal participation in all aspects of life amidst this global health crisis.

Impact of Violence on Individuals with Disabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about various adverse consequences, and one concerning aspect is the increased incidence of violence against individuals with disabilities. Early reports, such as those in the Impact Policy Brief, have highlighted a troubling surge in local violence, particularly targeting women and girls with disabilities. Families and adults with disabilities also bear a disproportionate burden, facing significantly higher risks of violence compared to their peers without disabilities. Moreover, the pandemic has exacerbated stigma and prejudice against people with disabilities, further exacerbating their vulnerability in the community [13]. Additionally, the heightened susceptibility of individuals with impairments to COVID-19 adds to the complexity of the challenges they face.

The pandemic has brought with it a surge in local violence, and persons with disabilities have found themselves at the receiving end of such acts. Women and girls with disabilities, in particular, have been subjected to blockades and violence at alarming rates. This alarming trend requires urgent attention and intervention to safeguard the rights and well-being of this vulnerable group. Families and adults living with disabilities face a heightened threat of violence during the pandemic. The stressors of the crisis, coupled

with pre-existing societal biases, have contributed to an atmosphere where violence is more prevalent against individuals with disabilities [14]. This has created an urgent need to address the root causes of such violence and ensure a safer environment for this population. COVID-19 has brought to the surface deeper societal issues, including stigma and prejudice against people with disabilities. The pandemic has intensified negative attitudes and misconceptions, making it even more challenging for individuals with disabilities to navigate the community. Eradicating such discrimination is paramount to fostering a society that upholds the rights and dignity of all its members [15].

One of the additional challenges faced by individuals with disabilities is their heightened susceptibility to COVID-19. Pre-existing health conditions, compromised immune systems, and limited access to healthcare facilities make them more susceptible to severe outcomes from the virus. This further accentuates the need for tailored support and protective measures for this vulnerable population [16].

The escalating violence against individuals with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic demands immediate attention and concerted efforts to address this distressing issue. Mitigating the impact of violence requires a multi-faceted approach, encompassing awareness-raising, education, policy changes, and support for affected individuals and families. Additionally, addressing the root causes of stigma and prejudice is essential in fostering a more inclusive and compassionate society. By recognizing the unique challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and offering targeted interventions, we can work towards building a safer and more equitable world for all, regardless of their abilities or disabilities [17].

Vulnerabilities and Equitable Healthcare for People with Mental Disabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching impacts on individuals worldwide, and among the most vulnerable are people with mental disabilities (MDs). As we continue to learn about COVID-19 and its potential severity, it is evident that people with disabilities face

unique challenges in coping with the physical, emotional, and social aspects of the pandemic. The pandemic has magnified pre-existing humanitarian crises faced by this population, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and equitable healthcare system. To ensure the health and well-being of people with disabilities, healthcare services are adapting and embracing digital advancements to provide virtual or remote assistance, ensuring everyone is included in the response.

People with mental disabilities have experienced disproportionate impacts during the pandemic. The lack of comprehensive understanding of COVID-19 has left this population facing increased risks and uncertainties. As many individuals with mental disabilities live in rural areas and have limited access to resources, their knowledge of COVID-19 and preventive measures may be limited [4]. Accessible information and tailored resources are crucial to empowering this group with the knowledge they need to protect themselves effectively.

Among people with disabilities, visually impaired individuals face unique challenges in dealing with COVID-19. Their reliance on others for basic daily tasks, such as crossing the street or handling personal protective equipment, can expose them to potential risks in pandemic situations [4]. Limited access to information in formats suitable for the visually impaired further compounds their vulnerabilities, making it crucial to create information and resources tailored to their needs.

The pandemic has provided an opportunity to build a more equitable healthcare system that caters to the needs of everyone, including individuals with mental disabilities. Embracing digital advancements and offering virtual or remote healthcare services can bridge the gap in access and ensure no one is left behind [4]. Additionally, increasing efforts to create and disseminate accessible information will empower visually impaired individuals with the knowledge needed to protect themselves.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities faced by people with mental disabilities and visually impaired individuals. As we navigate this global crisis, it is imperative to prioritize the needs of these populations by offering accessible information, equitable healthcare services, and tailored

resources. By fostering a more inclusive and supportive healthcare system, we can ensure the well-being and safety of all individuals, regardless of their abilities. This collective effort will lead us towards a more resilient and compassionate society, where everyone can thrive during and beyond the challenges posed by COVID-19 [18, 19].

Addressing Challenges and Ensuring Inclusive Responses for People with Disabilities during the COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the lives of people worldwide. Amidst the broader pandemic-related problems, individuals with disabilities have faced additional challenges, including limited social mobility, restricted access to healthcare, and an increased risk of developing depression. Even before the pandemic, people with disabilities already encountered difficulties such as limited community mobility, inadequate healthcare access, heightened feelings of hopelessness and loneliness, and reduced quality of life. The gaps in the healthcare system have also negatively impacted this vulnerable group. The pandemic has further exacerbated their struggles, with higher susceptibility to COVID-19 and challenges in adhering to social distancing measures [5]. Addressing the needs of people with disabilities in emergency responses is vital to ensure their well-being and inclusion.

People with disabilities face unique challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic due to their specific requirements for accessible transportation, regular medical visits, and close collaboration with caregivers or medical professionals to manage daily life. The use of face masks can hinder communication for those with limited communication options, posing additional difficulties for individuals with disabilities [5]. Children with special needs have also been overlooked in pandemic responses, as the focus primarily centered on older individuals' vulnerability to the illness. However, prioritizing the evaluation and support of children with disabilities is essential for their well-being [6, 8].

The pandemic and the measures taken to control its spread have had significant negative effects on people with disabilities. Limited access to healthcare, disruptions in

therapeutic services, and social isolation have all impacted this population. The reliance on virtual platforms for medical consultations and therapy has not always been feasible for individuals with disabilities, underscoring the importance of tailored approaches to address their specific needs [6, 8].

In planning future emergency responses, it is imperative to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities are adequately addressed. Growing awareness among experts in pediatric rehabilitation, healthcare administrators, program designers, and advocates is crucial for developing inclusive responses that cater to the diverse requirements of this population [6, 8]. An integrated and collaborative approach involving all stakeholders is essential in creating effective strategies that prioritize the well-being and inclusion of people with disabilities during emergencies [20]. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the unique challenges faced by people with disabilities. The existing difficulties they encounter have been further exacerbated by the pandemic, necessitating targeted measures to address their needs. Inclusive emergency responses that encompass accessible healthcare, virtual services, and social support are crucial for ensuring the well-being and quality of life for individuals with disabilities. Through collective efforts and growing awareness, we can build a more resilient and compassionate society where the needs of all members, including those with disabilities, are met with dignity and respect [21, 22, 23].

Call for Inclusive Responses for People with Disability

People with underlying health issues and impairments face a higher risk of severe COVID-19 symptoms or mortality. Studies have shown worse outcomes for individuals with diabetes mellitus, cerebrovascular illness, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and coronary artery disease. The virus's impact on the central and peripheral nervous systems can lead to immobilization syndrome or critical neuropathy myopathy, resulting in transient or ongoing disabilities [9]. Amidst the COVID-19 response, people with disabilities are frequently left behind, posing a significant risk given their substantial representation in the global

population, comprising one billion individuals, including one in four adults over the age of 60 [11]. Challenges in following public health measures, lack of accommodations, and the concentration of infections in institutional settings exacerbate the situation for this vulnerable group [6, 7, 12].

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored existing inequalities and heightened the marginalization of people with disabilities, who often face decreased access to healthcare, education, employment, and social engagement even in typical circumstances. In crisis-affected communities, they are more likely to live in poverty, face violence, carelessness, and mistreatment [11, 12]. With a significant percentage of people with disabilities being over 60, their age becomes a significant risk factor for COVID-19 mortality, further exacerbating their vulnerability [13]. It is imperative to ensure that individuals with disabilities are at the center of the COVID-19 response and participate in its formulation and implementation.

To promote inclusion and protect individuals with disabilities during the pandemic and recovery, a coordinated approach is crucial. COVID-19-related laws must prohibit discrimination based on disability, age, and gender differences. This will help address potential difficulties that may arise during response and recovery, ensuring that services are accessible to everyone [13-23]. Success in fostering an inclusive approach will result in better virus control, improved services for all, and a more resilient healthcare system capable of handling challenging circumstances.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront the unique vulnerabilities faced by people with disabilities. Addressing their specific needs and ensuring their inclusion in the response and recovery efforts is essential. By actively involving individuals with disabilities in decision-making processes and eliminating discriminatory practices, we can create a more equitable and compassionate society. As we move forward, it is imperative to prioritize the well-being and safety of all individuals, especially those with disabilities, in our collective efforts to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic [14, 15].

CONCLUSION

The commitment to "Don't leave anyone behind" underpins the UN's vision for sustainable development, particularly in upholding the human rights of individuals with disabilities. Even in times of crisis, the UN's disability inclusion strategy remains steadfast in its pursuit of revolutionary and lasting reforms to promote disability inclusion. While this review acknowledges that COVID-19 is a relatively new illness and our understanding is still evolving, it sheds light on the disproportionate impact of humanitarian non-crises on disabled individuals. The pandemic presents an unprecedented opportunity to transform the healthcare sector into one that fosters inclusivity, providing equal access to information, facilities, programs, services, and products for all.

COVID-19 has highlighted the urgency of ensuring that individuals with disabilities are not marginalized and left vulnerable. The pandemic-induced challenges have emphasized the need to create a more equitable healthcare system that caters to the unique needs of all individuals, including those with disabilities. Leveraging digital technology, healthcare services now offer digitally enhanced healthcare, providing virtual or remote services to promote the health and well-being of people with disabilities, ensuring that no one is excluded from quality care.

The disability inclusion strategy is a beacon of hope, guiding us towards a future where every person, regardless of ability, is an integral part of society. It reinforces the idea that pandemics can be transformative catalysts for change, leading us to a better and more compassionate world. By fostering an inclusive approach and embracing the principles of "Don't leave anyone behind," we can build a society that values the health and welfare of all its members, leaving no one to suffer the adverse consequences of crises such as COVID-19. As we continue to navigate through these challenging times, our commitment to inclusion and equitable healthcare must remain resolute, ensuring that the well-being and rights of individuals with disabilities are always safeguarded, no matter the circumstances.

DECLARATION

Competing interests There were no competing interests from all authors in this study.

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