

Mental health-related disability rises among employed Canadians during pandemic, 2021

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New combined data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Canadian Income Survey shed new light on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the prevalence of disability in the workplace. Among those who were employed during the first four months of 2021, more than one in five (21.5%) had a physical, mental health, cognitive or other disability. This was an increase of 2.7 percentage points compared with 2019 (18.8%), continuing a long-term upward trend associated with population aging and other factors.

Among the employed, the proportion with a mental health-related disability increased 2.3 percentage points from 2019 (6.4%) to 2021 (8.7%). Given the change in labour market conditions from 2019 to 2021, particularly large scale employment losses related to the pandemic, this increase was likely due mostly to an increase in the prevalence of mental health-related disability among those who were already employed, rather than an increase in employment among those with a disability.

The increased prevalence of mental health-related disability among the employed is consistent with other studies which have examined the employment, schooling, family and leisure challenges faced by Canadians during the pandemic. The 2020 Canadian Community Health Survey, for example, indicated that the proportion of Canadians reporting [positive self-perceived mental health](#) declined slightly throughout the pandemic. Similarly, according to the [Canadian Social Survey: COVID-19 and well-being](#), conducted in 2021, many Canadians reported higher stress levels than prior to the pandemic.

Among those employed in 2021, young women have the highest prevalence of mental health-related disability

The proportion of employed women aged 16 to 24 years with mental health-related disability was 17.2% in 2021. This was an increase of 7.6 percentage points from 2019, the largest increase of all major demographic groups. Among employed young men in the same age group, just under 1 in 10 (8.9%) had a mental health-related disability in 2021, little changed from 2019. During the first four months of 2021, 44.2% of youth worked in retail trade or accommodation and food services, where a relatively large proportion of jobs involve physical proximity to others and where employment security has been affected by the tightening and easing of public health restrictions throughout the pandemic. Official disability rates from [Canadian Survey on Disability](#) (CSD) indicate that the most prevalent disability type among younger Canadian adults (aged 15 to 24 years) in 2017 was mental health-related.

For those in the core working ages (25 to 54 years), employed women had a higher prevalence of mental health-related disability in 2021 (13.0%; +4.7 percentage points from 2019) than their male counterparts (6.5%; +1.6 percentage points from 2019).

The prevalence of mental health-related disability among employed people aged 55 years and older was virtually unchanged from 2019 to 2021, but was lower than the prevalence seen among core-aged workers. Among employed women aged 55 years and older, 4.5% had a mental health-related disability in 2021, and among men in this age group, the prevalence was 3.3%.

Disability itself is often dynamic, as people can experience disability in an episodic or progressive manner, along with entering or exiting disability. Previous studies on the [dynamics of disability](#) have indicated that episodic disability is more common among women, particularly young women.

Looking ahead: Labour market data on persons with disabilities

Since January 2022, disability-related information are collected every month through supplements to the Labour Force Survey and will be released on an annual basis. These new LFS data will complement other sources, particularly the 2022 CSD, to help build a deeper understanding of the labour market experiences of people with disabilities.

Note to readers

Labour Force Survey data with disability related indicators are now available for each year from 2014 to 2021, with the exception of 2020. The data and analysis above reflect information collected during the first four months of each year.

These data stem from the Disability Screening Questions (DSQ) included in the Canadian Income Survey (CIS) supplement to the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The DSQ is based on the social model of disability. This model defines disability as the relationship between body function and structure, daily activities, and social participation, while recognizing the role of environmental factors. In keeping with this model, the DSQ identifies persons with disabilities as those who not only have a difficulty or impairment due to a long-term condition or health problem but also experience a limitation in their daily activities. The definition of disability refers to difficulties or limitations that have lasted for or are expected to last for six months or more. The two groups of person with disabilities discussed in this article are defined as follows:

Persons with mental health-related disabilities: those who are sometimes, often or always limited in their daily activities by an emotional, psychological or mental health condition (e.g., anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, substance abuse, anorexia, etc.). It is important to note that the majority of those identified as having a mental health-related disability were also identified as having at least one other type of disability. Therefore, the data are based on the impact that all disability types these individuals with a mental health-related disability may have had.

Persons with disabilities not related to mental health: those who do not have a mental health-related disability, but who are sometimes, often or always limited in their daily activities by one or more of the following types of difficulties: seeing, hearing, mobility, flexibility, dexterity, pain-related, learning, developmental, memory, or unknown.

For more information on the DSQ, see [A New Measure of Disability: The Disability Screening Questions \(DSQ\)](#).

Employed persons: includes those who, during the reference week, did any work for pay or profit or had a job and were absent from work.

The CIS, like any other general population survey, should not be used (either directly or indirectly via the LFS) to calculate the official rate of disability. The post-censal CSD is the official source for this information.

Table 1
Proportion of mental health-related disability among employed Canadians, by demographic group

	2019	2021	2019 to 2021
	%		percentage point change
16 years and older			
Both sexes	6.4	8.7	2.3 ¹
Men	5.3	6.0	0.7 ¹
Women	7.5	11.7	4.2 ¹
16 to 24 years old			
Both sexes	9.6	12.8	3.2 ¹
Men	9.6	8.9	-0.7
Women	9.6	17.2	7.6 ¹
25 to 54 years old			
Both sexes	6.5	9.6	3.1 ¹
Men	4.9	6.5	1.6 ¹
Women	8.3	13.0	4.7 ¹
55 years and older			
Both sexes	3.9	3.9	0.0
Men	4.1	3.3	-0.8
Female	3.7	4.5	0.8

1. Change from 2019 to 2021 is statistically significant at a 68% confidence level.

Source(s): Canadian Income Survey (5200) and Labour Force Survey (3701).

Table 2
Labour market characteristics, by disability status

	2019	2021	2019 to 2021
	%		percentage point change
Unemployment rate			
Persons with a mental health-related disability	10.8	12.9	2.1 ¹
Persons with disabilities not related to mental health	8.9	11.5	2.6 ¹
Persons without a disability	5.2	7.7	2.5 ¹
Employment rate			
Persons with a mental health-related disability	46.7	52.9	6.2 ¹
Persons with disabilities not related to mental health	42.6	40.1	-2.5 ¹
Persons without a disability	67.9	65.1	-2.8 ¹
Participation rate			
Persons with a mental health-related disability	52.3	60.8	8.5 ¹
Persons with disabilities not related to mental health	46.7	45.3	-1.4
Persons without a disability	71.7	70.5	-1.2 ¹

1. Change from 2019 to 2021 is statistically significant at a 68% confidence level.

Source(s): Canadian Income Survey (5200) and Labour Force Survey (3701).

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey numbers 3701 and 5200.

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