

Exploring the social interactions of those with and without mental health-related disabilities

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In recognition of Mental Health Awareness Month in May, Statistics Canada is releasing a new fact sheet titled "[Social connections among persons with and without mental health-related disabilities, 2020](#)." Disability can affect interactions with others, impacting social connectedness. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting health and safety measures altered how Canadians interacted with their social networks. This shift led to increased feelings of isolation and mental health-related challenges, which aligns with the study titled, "[Self-perceived mental health and mental health care needs during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)," which describes an overall decrease in well-being for many Canadians, especially persons with mental health-related disabilities.

This fact sheet provides an opportunity to investigate the social connectedness of persons with and without mental health-related disabilities, what factors impact their social connectedness, as well as how social connectedness impacts health and well-being. Data for this analysis are from the 2020 General Social Survey (GSS). This analysis looked at close relationships from the 2020 GSS, defined as persons with whom respondents felt at ease speaking about what was on their minds or calling on for help, to explore social connectedness. Among persons with mental health-related disabilities, the use of technology increases social networks. Furthermore, participation in groups, organizations or associations results in increased social connectedness among persons with mental health-related disabilities. Additionally, persons with mental health-related disabilities who described themselves as socially connected were more likely to report positive self-related general health and mental health.

Persons with mental health-related disabilities use electronic communication when connecting with friends more than those without mental health-related disabilities

In the 2020 GSS, persons with mental health-related disabilities described who was part of their social network, how they interacted and how satisfied they were with the level of contact with their social network. Persons with mental health-related disabilities reported smaller social networks, which may have comprised close friends, relatives or local contacts, compared with persons without mental health-related disabilities. In addition, persons with mental health-related disabilities were more likely to connect with friends by text message (68.0%), or by email or online social networks (65.3%) than those without mental health-related disabilities (60.6% and 55.0%, respectively for networking via text message and by email or online means). Also, those with mental health-related disabilities who participated in a group, organization or association in the past 12 months were more socially connected (42.0%) than those who did not (25.6%).

Persons with mental health-related disabilities who are socially connected are more likely to report positive self-rated general health and mental health

Persons with mental health-related disabilities who indicated being socially connected have better overall well-being than those who are less connected. Just over three-fifths (61.6%) of persons with mental health-related disabilities who were socially connected reported positive self-rated mental health compared with those who were not socially connected (49.1%). Similarly, four-fifths (80.1%) of socially connected persons with mental health-related disabilities reported a positive self-rated general health compared with those who were not socially connected (66.6%).

Persons with more severe mental health-related disabilities were less likely to be socially connected than those with less severe mental health-related disabilities

According to the 2020 GSS, 34.6% of persons with mental health-related disabilities reported being socially connected with others compared with 42.2% of those without mental health-related disabilities. Social connectedness is defined as having 3 or more close friends, 3 or more close relatives, or 10 or more local contacts.



Further, disability, demographic and social factors impact the social connectedness of persons with mental health-related disabilities. In 2020, 23.0% of persons with more severe mental health-related disabilities reported being socially connected, compared with 37.6% of those with less severe mental health-related disabilities, which demonstrates the diversity of mental health-related disabilities and their impact on social connectedness. People with two or more disabilities, including mental health-related disabilities, were less likely (31.2%) to be socially connected compared with those with one disability related to mental health (40.7%).

Among persons with mental health-related disabilities, social connectedness was highest among youth aged 15 to 24 years (47.3%) when compared with all other age groups (25 to 34 years, 35.0%; 35 to 44 years, 30.6%; 45 to 64 years, 28.4%; 65 years and older, 21.1%). Furthermore, regardless of whether people had mental health-related disabilities, attachment to a place or people, such as living in the same community for at least five years or knowing most or many people in the community, improved social connectedness. Among persons with mental health-related disabilities, about two-fifths (38.3%) reported connectedness if they lived in the same community for five years or more. In comparison, nearly 3 in 10 persons with mental health-related disabilities reported social connectedness if they lived in the same community for less than five years. As well, if persons with mental health-related disabilities knew most or many people in the community, a higher proportion (40.1%) reported being socially connected than those who knew a few people or no one in the community (32.5%).

Note to readers

The 2020 General Social Survey (GSS) was collected from 2020 to 2021 during a period when COVID-19 public health measures were changing over time. The different restrictions occurring during this time could have affected data collection and results.

The 2020 GSS includes the disability screening questions (DSQ). For more information on the DSQ, see [A New Survey Measure of Disability: the Disability Screening Questions \(DSQ\)](#). The DSQ's mental health-related disabilities category includes persons who are limited in or experience a lot of difficulty with their daily activities because of an emotional, psychological or mental health condition, which can include anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, substance abuse, anorexia, as well as other conditions.

Persons without mental health-related disabilities in this analysis may include those with other types of disabilities and persons without disabilities.

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Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5024](#).

The fact sheet "[Social connections among persons with and without mental health-related disabilities, 2020](#)," which is part of the publication *Reports on Disability and Accessibility in Canada (89-654-X)*, is now available.

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; infostats@statcan.gc.ca) or Media Relations (statcan.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.statcan@statcan.gc.ca).