

*Daniela DIMITROVA-RADOJICHIKJ*UDK: 616.98:578.834]-036.21-
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COVID-19: THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic from the beginning of 2020 to the end directly affected the health and general well-being of people with disabilities—the world’s largest minority, constituting approximately 15% of the world’s population. People with disabilities are more severely affected by the institutional barriers during the COVID-19 crisis. In Macedonia, there is no accurate data on the condition of people with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this study was to document the impact of COVID-19 on Macedonian persons with disabilities.

According to this study, the primary source of support for people with disabilities was their families (72.3%). Friends were less pointed as a source of support (19.6%). From a total of 112 people with disabilities, included in this research, 41.1% answered that they had reduced social interaction due to the pandemic. In general, most people with disabilities stated that they were concerned about the additional cost of food and medicine and that they feared a possible infection with COVID-19.

Keywords: PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES, COVID-19, PANDEMIC, SUPPORT

Introduction

The Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has seriously affected every aspect of people’s lives all over the world. This pandemic and its associated restrictions have posed challenges, especially to individuals with disabilities (Lund et al., 2020). Namely, the pandemic from the beginning of 2020 to the end directly affected the health and general well-being of people with disabilities—the world’s largest minority, constituting approximately 15% of the world’s population. People with disabilities are more severely affected by the institutional barriers during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, the UN Special Report (March, 2020) on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states: “People with disabilities feel they have been left behind. Containment measures, such as social distancing and self-isolation, may be impossible for those who rely on the support of others to eat, dress, and bathe.” Additionally, the UN statement (August, 2020) underlined that people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable in many areas as a result of the COVID-19 pan-

demic. For example, the right to health can be violated by several important factors: lack of knowledge of health workers on how to respond to the needs of people with disabilities during a pandemic; lack of protective resources; insufficient information on the pandemic and the measures taken in response; and resource-based decisions that exclude people with disabilities from appropriate treatment due to their disability or comorbidity (European Association of Service Providers for People with Disabilities, 2020; Paine, 2020). Also, in public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, clear information becomes more important than ever (Shakespeare, Ndagire, and Seketi, 2021). But, in most countries, messages have been confusing or complicated, which has been difficult for people with disabilities to understand.

The lockdown measures societies have taken during the COVID-19 pandemic have meant people with disabilities are worse off and more excluded (Kuper et al., 2020). Most people with disabilities need extra support to carry out their daily activities, so they cannot keep a physical distance. For example, people who are blind or visually impaired and who need to touch objects to obtain information about themselves will be at greater risk of contracting the virus. Also, they did not have easy and fast access to updated information about the virus and how to protect themselves, nor could they access information in accessible formats (e.g. Braille). In addition, many people with disabilities did not have access to the necessary ongoing medical and rehabilitation services. In many cases, people with severe disabilities rely solely on the support of family members. Furthermore, many of them lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19. As a result, some of them faced serious financial problems and did not have equal access to medical care. All of this affected their mental and physical health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before the COVID-19 health crisis, people with disabilities were at a higher risk of lower psychosocial well-being than people without disabilities (Holm et al., 2022). In Macedonia, there is no accurate data on the condition of people with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this study was to document the impact of COVID-19 on Macedonian persons with disabilities.

Methodology

The survey collected data on 112 people with disabilities. A two-part questionnaire was used to analyse the impact that COVID-19 and the response measures adopted by the Macedonian government had on the lives of people with disabilities during the pandemic: demographics (seven questions) and the impact of pandemics on people with disabilities. Disability (ten closed questions). A T-test and chi-square were used to analyse the relationship between the answers to certain questions.

Results

Table 1 describes the distribution of participants according to different socio-demographic variables. The structure of participants by age shows that most of them are in the middle (between 22 and 44 years old) and older groups (45 years old or older).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristic of people with disabilities

	N	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	58	51.8
Male	54	48.2
Total	112	100
<i>Age group</i>		
Up to 21 years old	25	22.3
Between 22 and 44 years old	42	37.5
45 years old or older	45	40.2
Total	112	100
<i>Type of disability</i>		
Visual impairment	43	38.4
Hearing impairment	29	25.9
Physical impairment	40	35.7
Total	112	100
<i>Place of living</i>		
City	74	66.1
Village	38	33.9
Total	112	100
<i>Type of living</i>		
Alone	11	9.8
With others	101	90.2
Total	112	100
<i>Level of education</i>		
Primary	31	27.7
High	62	55.3
Faculty	19	17
Total	112	100
<i>Occupation</i>		
Unemployed	50	44.6

Full time employee	32	28.6
Part-time employee	5	4.5
Retired	25	22.3
Total	112	100

More than half of people with disabilities (61%) said they had some knowledge about the coronavirus. Also, half of them (55.3%) said that they are very concerned about the long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

During the pandemic, most people with disabilities had the support of family and friends (table 2). But the average value of the responses on the Likert scale (1- never; 4-often) was higher for family support. Using the t-test, it was found that people with disabilities have significantly greater support from family than from friends ($t = 9,223$, $p < ,001$).

Table 2. Daily living in conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic

Question	M	SD
<i>Did your family help you during the pandemic?</i>	3.65	0.63
<i>Did your friends help you during the pandemic?</i>	2.69	0.89
<i>How often did you have contact with others during the pandemic?</i>	2.63	0.912

Statistically, the majority of participants (64.3%) faced financial problems due to the COVID-19 pandemic ($X^2 = 4.6667$; $p < ,005$). It should be noted that 55.3% of the participants cited the additional costs of food and medicine, as well as the lack of state aid (36.6%) as the main factors for their financial problems during the pandemic (Figure 1)..

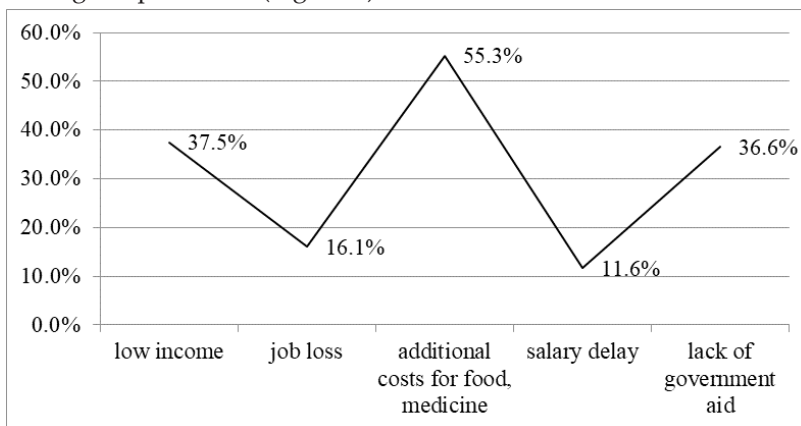


Figure 1. Financial problems

The biggest concerns of people with disabilities are the fear of COVID-19 infection (56.2%) and the inability to obtain the necessary assistance (46.4%). Additionally, 38.4% of participants reported fear of possible isolation due to the pandemic (Figure 2). On the other hand, they are the least worried about the inability to buy medicines and products (11.6%).

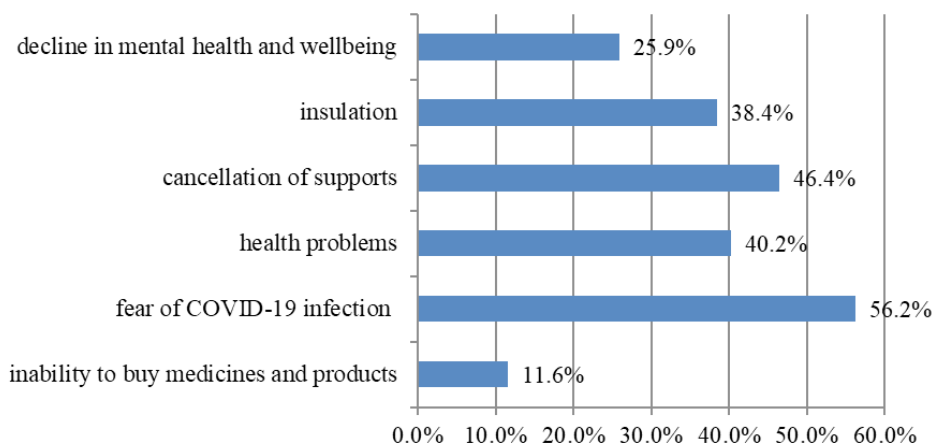


Figure 2. Worries during a pandemic

In general, according to the answers of people with disabilities, it can be concluded that their position during the pandemic would improve if they had better access to medical services (61.6%), but also with additional financial and logistical support (59.8%) (Figure 3).

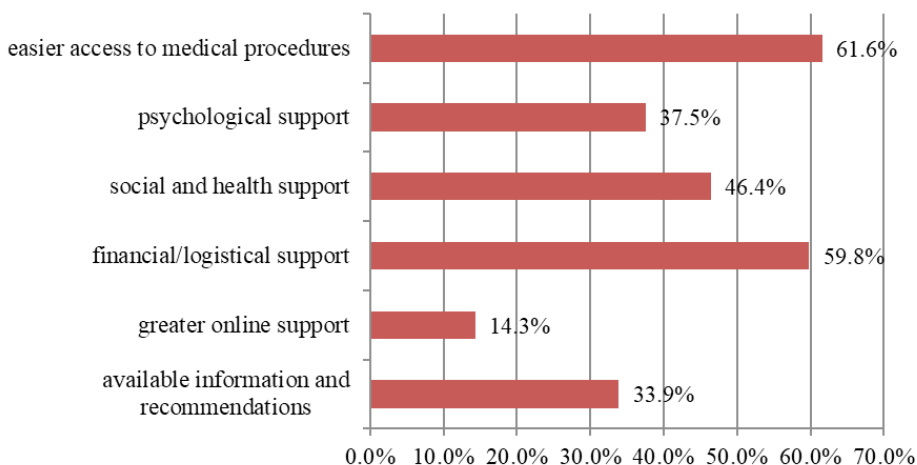


Figure 3. Pandemic recommendation

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic most affected mental health, psychological well-being, and social interactions (Steptoe and Gessa, 2021). Human contact was reduced, and people were forced to stay in their houses as one of the health measures in dealing with the coronavirus spread. Quarantines, if not carefully planned, can have negative socioeconomic consequences, particularly for the most socially vulnerable people, including some people with disabilities (Jesus et al., 2021).

In this study, the main source of support for people with disabilities was their families (72.3%). Friends were less pointed as a source of support (19.6%). Naves et al. (2021), also found that the main source of support for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities is their families (72.8%). Many authors report that one of the consequences of COVID-19 lockdown is reduced social interaction. From a total of 112 people with disabilities, included in this research, 41.1% answered that they had reduced social interaction due to the pandemic. Also, almost half of the participants (47.3%) reported that the pandemic had a negative effect on their mental health. In general, most people with disabilities stated that they were concerned about the additional cost of food and medicine and that they feared a possible infection with COVID-19. They also want better and easier access to medical services and greater financial and logistical support. Unfortunately, no special measures for access to hospital care for Macedonian people with disabilities were envisaged during the pandemic. In the future, it is necessary to provide more inclusive, accessible, sustainable, and agile systems that can respond to complex situations and reach those who need them most.

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