

COVID-19's Underreported Impact on People with Disabilities

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Although the pandemic isn't over, the third wave has been on the decline, and this gives us a chance to take a step back and examine what we haven't seen in the news and provincial data.

There has been very little media coverage on COVID-19's impact on people with disabilities, and the deaths of people with disabilities are often not acknowledged by major news outlets and the province's reports.* This is surprising since at least 1 in 5 people in Canada self-identify as having a disability, and the actual number is expected to be much higher.*

This article will relay the available information on the number of deaths of people with disabilities. Then, it will outline some factors for why this number hasn't been fully counted and reported on.

What we know

From the very beginning of the pandemic, it was clear that people with disabilities were at greater risk of getting infected with COVID-19, and many people died in care facilities such as group homes.* And yet, the provincial government didn't report this number like it did with Long-Term Care homes.*

Deaths in congregant care settings were not included in the daily Long-Term Care updates.* Macleans reports that "For most of the pandemic, all that has been disclosed publicly about outbreaks in congregant care/group home/congregant other settings is from Public Health Ontario's epidemiological summaries. Unlike the daily reporting from Long-Term Care, there was no public, regular disclosure of how many people living in these facilities had died, or outbreak and infection information per type of congregant care setting."*

At the end of May 2021, after NDP MPP Lisa Gretzky tabled a question on the subject, the deaths of 69 residents and six staff in Ontario congregant care settings from COVID-19 were made public for the first time.* After that, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH) confirmed one more resident death.*

These deaths are from three kinds of facilities: Homes for Special Care, residences for adults labelled with intellectual/developmental disability, and group homes and domiciliary hostels.* However, there are many other settings which we don't have data for, so it's likely that there are more deaths of people with disabilities that weren't indicated in this number.*

The province's other congregant residential care settings are: halfway houses, boarding houses, Children's Aid Societies' disability homes, forensic psychiatric homes, mental health group homes, addictions, treatment and sober homes, group homes for children, human trafficking survivor group homes, and gender-based violence transition residences.*

These diverse settings also belong to different government ministries*, which is why it's difficult to find the total number of deaths of people with disabilities caused by COVID-19.

The previously-mentioned deaths of 70 residents and six staff members come from facilities that are overseen by three separate ministries: the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC), the Ministry of Child, Community and Social Services (MCCSS), and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MMAH).*

Of the 10,000 adults with a developmental disability who lived in MCCSS facilities, 871 had COVID-19 and 34 died.* Among staff, there were 1,602 COVID-19 cases and 5 deaths.* Since there is a waitlist of about 20,000 people for MCCSS-funded facilities, many adults with disabilities live in facilities funded by the MMAH while they wait.*

The MMAH reported that from June 8, 2020 (which is when it started collecting the data) until June 10, 2021, there were 1,040 COVID-19 cases among 8,000 residents at 90 facilities. Among the staff, 239 people were infected, and 35 residents died.*

Why don't we see this in the news?

Government ministries haven't openly shared this information with the media

The MOHLTC hasn't published any media releases about Homes for Special Care (homes for adults with complex mental illnesses) and the pandemic.* Also, from May 2020 to present, the MCCSS issued just one media release about congregant care settings, even though it releases media releases weekly.* Megan Linton, a disability researcher and advocate, believes that the underrepresentation of this information in the media is also partly due to the media not asking enough questions about life in these facilities.*

The number of elderly people with disabilities in Long-Term Care homes is overlooked

Linton also believes that the media's early focus on Long-Term Care as a place for the elderly overshadowed the fact that many of the residents are also disabled.* The high number of cases in Long-Term Care settings didn't happen because of the residents' age alone, but also because of the intersection of age and disability.* Linton points out that politicians and journalists did not consider this intersectional approach of understanding disability when they discussed Long-Term Care.* Also, in her opinion, other congregant residential care settings for adults with disabilities were overlooked and should have been discussed, too.*

"I hope that [news about deaths within group homes] results in the same reckoning that has happened in Long-Term Care and the same anger towards the people who allowed this to happen," she said, "but there hasn't been that yet."* Linton says that she has been "shocked

and frustrated by the lack of coverage” about adults with disabilities since the start of the pandemic.*

Final Thoughts

Many of us share her frustration. One thing that we can do is read and share articles about people with disabilities. This could result in more news coverage since it would show media outlets that there is demand for articles on this topic.

If you know somebody who has a disability, you can support them by regularly checking in to offer emotional support and practical support, such as delivering groceries and essential items to where they live.* Lastly, according to Dr. Nicole Baumer at Harvard Medical school, getting vaccinated is one of the “best strategies available to decrease the spread of COVID-19 and help protect people who are at increased risk.”*

If you have a disability, North Yorkers is inviting you to share your experiences during the pandemic. We will share these responses anonymously unless people specifically say that they want their names to be included.

Our intention is to offer our online platform as a space for people with disabilities to see their experiences represented. Your story could make other people in similar situations feel less alone, which can provide comfort as the pandemic reaches the 1.5-year mark. If you are interested, please email sarah.nydp@gmail.com.

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If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at www.ontario.ca/coronavirus. Follow all directions from your medical provider or your local health unit at the following phone numbers:

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000

Toronto Public Health: 416-338-7600

Peel Public Health: 905-799-7700

Durham Region Health Department: 905-668-7711

York Region Public Health: 1-877-464-9675