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# Easterseals Study on the Impact of COVID-19 on People with Disabilities

*Executive Summary & Key Findings*

May 2021

It comes as no surprise that 2020 will undoubtedly go down as one of the worst years in history. The COVID-19 pandemic, social unrest, overdue reckoning for racial justice and equality, deep political divides, and a lengthy list of other domestic and global misfortunes made the year exceptionally difficult for virtually every American and people around the world. But, for children and adults with disabilities, there is no doubt; they have been disproportionately impacted by the crisis.

Before COVID-19, people with disabilities were already at a disadvantage. Historically under-reported and overlooked, they have faced discrimination in employment, with many employers not understanding their talent and potential; in healthcare, with limited access to quality healthcare and often at the hands of doctors who lack training on their unique needs; and in society, with heavy stigmas being placed on their worth.

**As communities begin to reopen and people generally start to recover from the crisis, for some 61 million people with disabilities, the barriers to recovery are much more complex. If not properly addressed, the challenges they face post-pandemic could have devastating short- and long-term consequences on their quality of life and wellbeing – and a negative impact on society at large.**

Easterseals, a leading nonprofit provider of outcomes-based services and powerful advocacy for people with disabilities, their families, and their communities, commissioned Accenture, a global professional services company, to conduct a comprehensive national study to better understand COVID-19’s impact on the disability community. The Study identifies the crisis’ immediate and long-term consequences on people with disabilities to inform the organization’s strategy in responding to the needs of the 1.5 million people and families it serves annually – and the one in four Americans living with disability today.

The Study’s research includes in-depth interviews with a cross section of nearly 1,000 individuals within the Easterseals Network including volunteer and staff leadership from its 67 Affiliates nationwide as well as individuals with disabilities throughout the lifespan

### Causes of Stress During COVID-19



(including people of color with disabilities), their parents, and their caregivers. Secondary data which evaluates how COVID-19 has exacerbated challenges for people with disabilities is also included in the Study.

Made possible through support from a transformational gift to Easterseals by philanthropist MacKenzie Scott in late 2020, the Study confirms Ms. Scott's belief that certain marginalized communities, including people with disabilities, would bear the brunt of the pandemic and would disproportionately experience negative effects across all aspects of their lives but particularly around healthcare equity, education, employment, and financial stability.

Easterseals will use the findings as a dynamic roadmap forward, launching a comprehensive, nationwide strategic effort to modify, expand, and amplify its services to meet the very pressing and evolving needs of people with disabilities. The Study provides Easterseals with quantitative and qualitative research to have informed conversations with national, state and local government officials, as well as corporate leaders and individual donors, to advance the nonprofit's commitment to positively change the future landscape for people with disabilities.

While many of the Study findings are not surprising, they reinforce the urgency required to effectively respond to the critical needs of people with disabilities now, and in the future. Addressing these critical advancements and investments in Easterseals' service delivery and programmatic expansion is essential to millions of people with disabilities to ensure their wellbeing, their recovery from the pandemic, and, ultimately, their ability to thrive as valuable members of their communities.

Key Study findings are highlighted below, as are solutions to be advanced by Easterseals in its commitment to provide greater access, inclusion, and equity in healthcare, employment, and education – as well as remedies to close the digital divide and opportunities to ensure financial stability – for children and adults with disabilities, including veterans and seniors, as well as their families and caregivers, as it has done throughout its 102-year history.

The entire Study can be viewed [here](#).

“ Before COVID-19, people with disabilities were already at a disadvantage. While it is no surprise, 2020 was a difficult year for virtually every American. But for the 61 million people living with disabilities in our country, there is no doubt that they have been hit disproportionately hard by the crisis.

- Angela F. Williams,  
President and CEO of Easterseals

## KEY STUDY FINDINGS

### HEALTHCARE

- 25% of Study participants with disabilities reported decreased physical health during COVID-19, and 79% reported feeling isolated during COVID-19, with 31% feeling very isolated, leading to mental health challenges at levels of five times those experienced by people without disabilities.
- 42% of Survey respondents with disabilities did not use virtual healthcare services during the pandemic, and nearly half of those surveyed (46%) were no longer able to access services during COVID-19.
  - 69% of respondents with disabilities who used virtual services during the crisis want a return to in-person services, an interesting contrast to research among people without disabilities in the general population who pointed to a substantial increase in use and satisfaction with telehealth services during the pandemic.
- People with disabilities are misunderstood by healthcare workers, causing reduced quality of care.
  - 80% of U.S. medical students receive no clinical training treating people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, with 56% reporting that they are not competent to treat people with disabilities.
  - Subsequently, people with disabilities are three times more likely to be denied healthcare and four times more likely to be treated poorly while receiving care.
- A severe lack of direct service providers, compounded by COVID-19, has decreased access to care for people with disabilities.
  - 70% of administrators and staff delivering long-term services and supports currently report a lack of qualified job applicants.
  - By 2024, 1.1M additional direct service providers will be needed to provide these services to people with disabilities and seniors.
- Individual needs are often interconnected, yet they are treated in isolation in traditional healthcare services delivery streams.

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People with disabilities are four times more likely to be treated poorly while receiving care.<sup>17</sup>

**Easterseals solutions** include continued advocacy to assure public policies that ensure access to quality healthcare for people with disabilities; curriculum for healthcare professionals to train them in serving people with disabilities; collaboration with other disability services providers in the development of a training and certification program for direct service providers to assure them adequate wages and benefits; the design of human-centric experiences that seamlessly integrate support for social, mental, and physical health.

**EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC STABILITY**

- *More than one million people with disabilities lost employment during the first six months of the pandemic. The Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) reports that 1 in 5 workers with disabilities have been dismissed from employment, as compared to 1 in 7 in the general population, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.*

**Easterseals solutions** include helping job seekers with disabilities build skills to future-proof their careers, connect to employment opportunities, and adapt to the rapidly changing job market while also collaborating with employers to realize the benefits of hiring and retaining people with disabilities through its [All In](#) national employment initiative.

Unemployment Rates <sup>13</sup>		
	General Population	People with Disabilities
2019	3.5%	7.3%
2020	7.9%	12.6%
Change	↑ 4.4%	↑ 5.3%

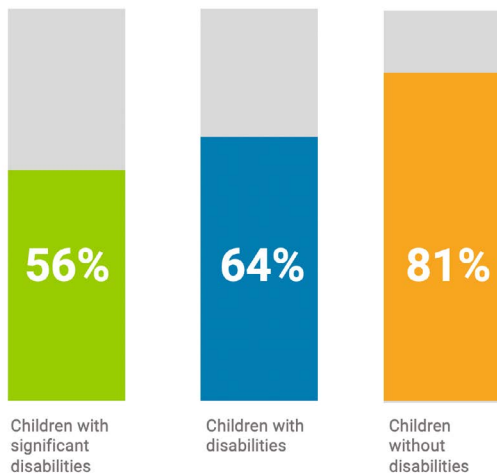
Rates-of-Employment <sup>13</sup>			
	General Population	People with Disabilities	Difference
2019	66.3%	19.3%	47%
2020	61.8%	17.9%	43.9%

## EDUCATION

- *Almost all children with significant disabilities (93%) have missed milestones due to the pandemic compared to around half (54%) of their non-disabled peers.*
- *The first five years of a child's life are the most critical time in their development; these crucial years set the trajectory of their entire lives. For a child with a developmental delay or disability, early diagnosis and early intervention are key. Countless young children's social, emotional, and mental wellbeing have been dramatically impacted by the pandemic, according to the CDC. Missed milestones and any trauma faced at this developmental stage may have long-term consequences across their lifespan.*

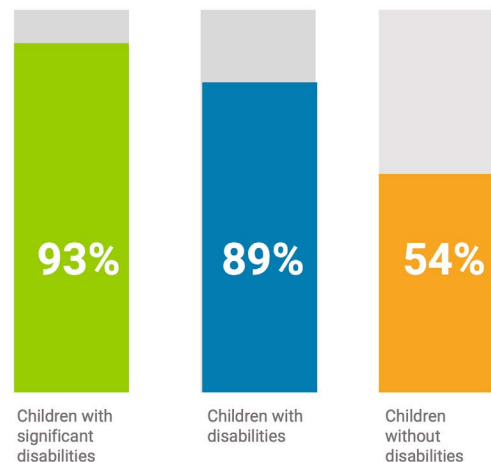
**Easterseals solutions** include public education on the importance of early identification and interventions for developmental delays through its [\*Make the First Five Count\*](#) initiative (including a free online screening tool for parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators) and continued advocacy at the federal, state, and local levels to ensure that students with disabilities of all ages receive proper support in school to mitigate education gaps so these students can achieve lifelong success.

Percent of children who are engaged in virtual learning during COVID-19



Source: Easterseals Community survey by Accenture

Percentage of children not achieving milestones during COVID-19

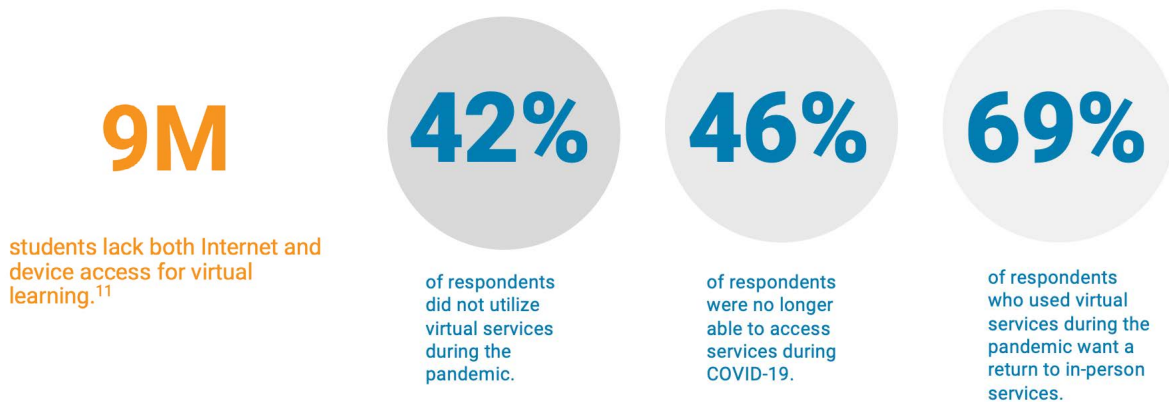


Source: Easterseals Community survey by Accenture

## THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

- *People with disabilities are acutely impacted by the digital divide and are much less likely to use the Internet, have home access to broadband, or to own a computer.*
- *People with disabilities are less comfortable than others in the use of certain technologies.*

**Easterseals solutions** include the strengthening of technology access and skills training for people with disabilities of all ages to ensure their success in a world where digital literacy is increasingly required to live, learn, and work – and fully participate and thrive in life.



## PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES OF COLOR

- *Hardships are compounded for people with disabilities of color in all areas highlighted throughout the Study and referenced above.*

**Easterseals solutions** include addressing the systemic inequities faced by people with disabilities of color to support their short- and long-term recovery from the effects of COVID-19.

### About Easterseals

Driven by its purpose to change the way the world defines and views disability, Easterseals makes profound, positive differences in the lives of people with disabilities every day through its life-changing services and powerful advocacy. For more than 100 years, Easterseals has been an indispensable resource for children and adults with disabilities, veterans, seniors, their families and their communities. Together, its national network of 67 affiliates serves 1.5 million people annually through high-quality community- and home-based services that include early intervention; autism services; workforce development programs; medical rehabilitation, including physical, occupational and speech therapies; behavioral health services; adult day programs; and much more. In schools, workplaces, and communities, Easterseals is fostering environments where everyone is included and valued – making a real and positive impact on us all. Join us in ensuring that everyone – regardless of age or ability – is 100% included and 100% empowered to reach their potential and participate in society. Learn more at [www.easterseals.com](http://www.easterseals.com).