Title: Initial and Lasting Effects of COVID-19 on Disability among the Aged

Abstract

COVID-19 has swept over the world and is currently spreading rapidly and widely in the United States. Evidence suggests the aged are the most vulnerable and experiencing the highest rates of mortality from COVID-19. The pandemic's growing demand on the nation's healthcare system means that the elderly with chronic conditions may not receive timely care. For instance, hospitals have canceled or postponed all non-emergency surgeries, such as knee replacement and back surgeries, which will affect the aged disproportionately.

Prior research documents long-lasting physical and mental health effects of earlier COVID-19 type pandemics. A 15-year follow-up study on the lung and bone conditions of SARS patients found a sharp recovery in the first two years, and then a much slower recovery in the following 13 years (Zhang et al, 2020). Another study found persistent psychiatric morbidities and chronic fatigue among SARS survivors at the 4-year follow-up (Lam et al, 2009). The severity of COVID-19 has far surpassed the severity of SARS, both in terms of number of infections and mortality. Like SARS, COVID-19 may also have long-term physical and mental health effects that may increase short-term or even long-term disability among the aged and may in turn have implications on disability payments.

The direct impact of COVID-19 on short- and long-term disability combined with the potential indirect effects from the ensuing economic collapse and forgone or mistimed healthcare noted above, suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic may have significant consequences for current and future disability payments. We propose to assess the impact of COVID-19 on prevalence of disability among the aged (55 and above). We will focus on the short-term as well as the longer-term impacts. We will use the monthly Current Population Survey that has a six-question module capturing disability in hearing, vision, memory, mobility, personal care, and physical limitations. Further, the core monthly survey also includes a question on whether disability is the cause of not being in the labor force. We will use the data on COVID-19 cases by month-state to study its impact on various measures of disability. We propose to use the monthly CPS data for January-December 2019 and January-December 2020 to assess the short-term (immediate) impact of the pandemic on disability. Each monthly sample has roughly 35,000 observations of respondents 55 or above (overall 840,000 observations for the 24 month period), yielding a sufficiently large sample to conduct the current study. We will compare rates of disability by age (or age groups) and month in 2019 to rates of disability by age (or age groups) and month in 2020 and relate that difference to the number (or proportion) of cases in each state-month cell.

This initial assessment of the effects of COVID-19 will be the foundation for an assessment of longer-term consequences of COVID on disability.

References:

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