

Wheelchair users face severe job market discrimination, says new Quebec study

Laval University study measured level of discrimination wheelchair users face while job hunting

By Elysha Enos, [CBC News](#) Posted: Jun 18, 2017 5:57 PM ET Last Updated: Jun 18, 2017 6:09 PM ET

A person in a wheelchair is 54 per cent less likely to be called in for a job interview than someone without a disability, according to a new study targeting Montreal and Quebec City employers.

That percentage means the bias against people living with a disability is worse than other forms of discrimination on the job market, as observed in similar studies.

"It's definitely worse than discrimination based on ethnic background, which is already very strong," said Charles Bellemare, the head of the team that conducted the study.

Last year, the economics department at Laval University started measuring the prejudice people in wheelchairs face while job hunting.

The team sent out 1476 fictional resumes to real job postings in Quebec's two largest cities.

The jobs were all ones which could be done by someone in a wheelchair — secretary, receptionist, programmer and accounting clerk.

Some resumé's were sent out stating in their cover letter that the person used a wheelchair, others didn't. That was the only difference between them.

- [Government looking for ways to improve job prospects for disabled Canadians, minister says](#)

Still, the disparity between the two groups when it came to who was offered an interview was massive.

Resumé's that didn't note a disability elicited a 31 per cent response rate from employers.

By comparison, only 14 per cent of those candidates which mentioned the use of a wheelchair were similarly contacted for an interview.

"We were extremely surprised, even a bit shocked," Bellemare said of the results.

Wheelchair users not surprised

Geneviève Imbeault, who uses a wheelchair and works at Quebec's education ministry, wasn't shocked by the results.

She lives with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and it affects her connective tissue and eyesight.

Job interviews in the private sector back when she showed signs of a disability, but still hadn't begun using a wheelchair, made employers' bias known.

"I had forearm crutches and I'd see this little recoiling movement, a reticence," she said of the interviewers.

- [Pregnancy discrimination persists in the workplace](#)

Government intervention not enough

About one hundred discrimination complaints are opened each year with the Quebec Human Rights Commission because of discrimination in the hiring process.

Among them, disabilities elicit the most complaints.

Quebec is taking steps to curb the problem by offering employers subsidies to cover certain costs associated with accommodating a person with disabilities in the workplace.

Almost 4,600 people benefited from the program in 2016-2017.

But Bellemare included this variable in his study and the impact was negligible—those candidates which specified having clearance for government special allowances to their employer didn't have many more interview offers.

This leads Bellemare to believe that the root of the problem is flat-out discrimination.

- [PEI lawsuit aims to force disability payments for mental illness](#)

"If we don't tackle the problems with perception, it is much more difficult to make sure that these government programs are effective," Bellemare said.

Isabelle Senneville, the head of La Croisée, an organization helping people with physical limitations integrate into the workforce, agrees that perception is the main barrier to employment.

"We distance ourselves from what we don't know. That's the way people are," Senneville said.

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