

Environmental Impact on People with Spinal Cord Injury

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Introduction. Due to improvements in technology, the population of individuals with spinal cord injury (SCI) that re-enter the community has increased greatly. The focus of research within health care has traditionally been on individual aspects, such as how the impairment affects the lives of individuals with SCI. Only a handful of studies have explored the extent to which environmental factors enable or restrict the participation of individuals with SCI in everyday life.

Objective. The purpose of this sequential mixed methods study was to identify and describe the perceptions of environmental barriers impacting the social participation of Icelandic individuals with SCI.

Method. In the quantitative part the degree to which environmental barriers impact the participation of individuals with SCI were assessed and the aspects of participation most affected were identified, by use of the Craig Hospital Inventory of Environmental Factors (CHIEF) instrument. Alternatively, a focusgroup interview provided qualitative information to assist in explaining and interpreting the quantitative findings. The 24 participants in the quantitative part were members of the Icelandic Spinal Cord Injury Association, ages 18 years and older. Six participants were chosen for a group discussion in the qualitative part

Results. The most common barriers identified were within the physical environment, i.e., natural environmental elements as well as the design and layout of buildings and places. Other main barriers involved programs, services and governmental factors. These included lack of transportation availability; lack of assistance, personal equipment and adapted devices; and barriers reflecting the education and employment programs and policies. Significant difference was found within the total score of the participants depending on their age, residence and gender where participants in the age group 48 - 57 years old and living in the capital area reported less hindrances in their environment than others. Moreover, men reported more policy barriers than women.

Conclusion. The participants reported barriers in several areas that kept them from doing what they needed and wanted to do.

Contribution to the practice of occupational therapy. Reduction of environmental barriers can lead to increased social participation and quality of life for people with SCI.