

1. A CHANGING POPULATION

In 1987, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education began the first effort in this country to document the experiences and outcomes of youth with disabilities. It launched the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS), which generated nationally representative information about secondary school-age youth who were receiving special education services in 1985. NLTS information met the information needs of a variety of audiences, and was particularly helpful in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1992 and 1997.

Since NLTS was conducted, much has changed in American society, and the impacts of those changes are evident in many aspects of our national life. For those in the disability policy arena, the breadth of such changes raises important questions. To what extent and in what ways have the changes in our world resulted in changes in the demographics and experiences of youth with disabilities? Have some youth with disabilities benefited or been hampered more than others by particular changes? Have improvements taken place in important outcomes for youth with disabilities, such as finishing high school, enrolling in postsecondary education or training, and finding employment?

To assess the current status of youth with disabilities and how they differ from their predecessors, OSEP has commissioned the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2). It addresses many of the same issues as NLTS, but extends its scope in important ways. Comparisons of findings for youth who were included in NLTS with those in NLTS2 illuminate the extent to and ways in which special education and the youth it serves have changed in the years between the studies. Those comparisons are the focus of this report, whose purpose is descriptive. Findings presented here were generated by comparing information from the first wave of interviews with parents of NLTS2 students (cohort 1), conducted in the spring and summer of 2001, with data from similar interviews of parents conducted in 1987 (cohort 2) for the age groups of students included in Wave 1 of both studies: 15-, 16-, and 17-year-olds.¹

Although the changes in the population of youth with disabilities can be described using information from NLTS and NLTS2, this report does not attempt to identify the combination of factors that explain the changes in the population. The tremendous range and scope of changes that mark the last decade of the 20th century and the beginning years of the 21st make attributing differences between youth with disabilities in 1987 and 2001 to specific social changes impossible. Yet, an awareness of those social changes is an important lens to use in viewing a variety of changes in the population of youth with disabilities:

- **Population.** We are a more racially and ethnically diverse nation than ever before, with more of us having a language other than English as our primary language.
- **Families.** Families also are increasingly diverse, with the traditional family of two married biological parents and their children being only one of the many combinations of

¹ The samples were weighted to have the same distribution of these three age groups: 26% are 15, 35% are 16, and 38% are 17.

adults and children who now make up family units. Increasingly, if there are two adults in a family, both work outside the home.

- **Economics.** The 1990s saw unparalleled economic growth and prosperity as we embraced the “information age.” In the new millennium, the economic boom came to an end with the “dotcom bust” and a general economic downturn that included declines in stock values and a depressed job market.
- **Technology.** The accelerated, dynamic state of technology innovation is changing the nature of communication, work, education, and leisure. The Internet has increased tremendously our access to information and our ability to communicate worldwide.
- **Risk.** School shootings, teen gang violence, and other tragedies involving adolescents have increased the awareness of our society that the teenage years are not simply “troubled” for some youth, but can be truly perilous for them and for those around them. Such events have served as “wake-up calls” to alert us to the need to know much more about the behaviors of adolescents and influences on those behaviors.

These changes have far-reaching impacts on all of us. Other changes particularly affect students, including, for example, the growing emphasis on the use by school systems of “high stakes” testing through which they are held accountable for the academic performance of their students, and the growing number of “school choice” options available to parents in determining the nature of their children’s education. Still other changes have particular impacts on students with disabilities and their families, including:

- **Education legislation.** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was revised significantly in the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA ’97). These amendments demonstrated legislative commitment to access for all students to the general education curriculum, high academic performance standards, and accountability for results for students with disabilities. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 emphasizes the need for accountability, flexibility, parent involvement, and evidence-based instruction in the education of all children, including students with disabilities in public schools.
- **Changing disability categories and prevalence.** Changes to IDEA in the 1990s altered the federal special education disability categories. The deafness and hard of hearing categories were combined into a single hearing impairment category, and categories were added for traumatic brain injury and autism. These additions were in recognition of the unique educational challenges those disabilities pose and, in the case of autism, the dramatic increase in its prevalence. Even within existing categories, the prevalence in special education of students with some kinds of disabilities has changed markedly, including a large increase in children and youth being diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (who, if eligible for special education, are classified primarily within the other health impairment category) and a decline in the categorization of students as having mental retardation for eligibility purposes under IDEA.
- **Parent involvement.** What started in the mid-1970s as a somewhat revolutionary idea—parents being partners with schools in the education of their children—is now an established part of the educational process for students with disabilities. Parent information and training programs encourage parent participation and give parents tools

to enhance the effectiveness of their involvement at home and at school. Many parents have become much better educated in curricula, school policies, legal avenues, therapeutic interventions, and the education rights of their children, including secondary transition.

- **Advocacy.** Today, there are support groups, Web sites, conferences, and institutional advocacy for many disability groups. Active advocacy has expanded opportunities for people with disabilities and their families, both in the schools and in society at large.
- **Self-determination.** A notable change has taken place in recent years in the way young people with disabilities are viewed and treated by the adults in their lives. Increasingly and justifiably, youth with disabilities are viewed as capable of conceiving and shaping their own futures. The preferences and dreams of youth with disabilities are increasingly being expressed and taken into account in such areas as transition planning and service need determination.

These kinds of social, legislative, and education policy changes can be expected to affect the population of youth with disabilities in a variety of ways. Comparisons of NLTS with NLTS2 document changes on the following dimensions:

- Characteristics of students, including aspects of students' disability profiles and student demographic characteristics (Chapter 2).
- Characteristics of students' households, including household demographics and parents' expectations for their children's futures (Chapter 3).
- The services provided students by their schools (Chapter 4).
- Achievements of students in the academic and social domains and in moving toward independence (Chapter 5).

This report highlights variations in the extent and direction of change for the population of 15- through 17-year-old youth with disabilities as a whole and for key subgroups. Perhaps the most important subgroups are youth who differed with regard to the primary disability that made them eligible for special education services. To document the important ways in which the populations of youth with different disabilities experienced change over time, findings are presented for youth in the nine disability categories that were in use in both 1987 and 2001. Readers should note that youth are included in the disability categories assigned to them by the schools or school districts from which they were selected for the studies. Variations in eligibility determination processes among school districts and over time underscore the importance of interpreting findings as describing youth who were categorized as having a particular primary disability by their school or district; what students' actual disability diagnoses would be if they were subjected to uniform diagnostic processes are unknown. In addition to disability category differences, changes also are described for youth with disabilities who differed in their gender, the income of their households, and their racial/ethnic background.²

² The samples sizes are sufficient to report findings only for white, African American, and Hispanic youth. The intercorrelation between income and racial/ethnic background is acknowledged. This initial descriptive comparison of the NLTS/NLTS2 cohorts does not attempt the multivariate analyses needed to disentangle that interrelationship.

NLTS and NLTS2 have many design features that facilitate valid comparisons between them, and detailed studies of both school district and student nonresponse indicate that NLTS and NLTS2 accurately represent the populations of youth with disabilities at their respective points in time.³ However, important differences exist between them that have required analytic adjustments for comparisons to be valid. One important difference is the age ranges for youth included in the two studies. In its first wave of parent interviews, NLTS youth were 15 through 23 years old, whereas the first wave of NLTS2 interviews was about youth who were 13 through 17. Because age is a powerful determinant of experience, straightforward comparisons between the full sample of youth in NLTS and NLTS2 are not valid. To improve the comparability of the studies, the subset of youth of similar ages, 15 through 17, were selected from each sample. Differences in the membership of particular disability categories in use at the two points in time also have required analytic adjustments to improve comparability. In addition, readers should be aware that the statistics presented in this report are weighted estimates for the population of youth with disabilities nationally, and they generalize to that population. Appendix A provides additional information on methods used in the two studies, adjustments made to enhance their comparability, weighting of the samples, and interpretation of the population estimates that result.

³ Results of the nonresponse bias study for NLTS can be found in Javitz & Wagner, 1990. Results of the study of potential bias in NLTS2 will be available in spring 2003 at www.nlts2.org.