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NATIONAL LONGITUDINAL TRANSITION STUDY **2**

YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES: A CHANGING POPULATION

A Report of Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study
(NLTS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES: A CHANGING POPULATION A REPORT OF FINDINGS FROM THE NATIONAL LONGITUDINAL TRANSITION STUDY (NLTS) AND NATIONAL LONGITUDINAL TRANSITION STUDY-2 (NLTS2)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 at the time. 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). NLTS2 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 ways in which special education and the youth it serves have changed in the years between the studies. This report documents the extent and direction of differences between the population of 15- to 17-year-old youth with disabilities in 1987 and those in 2001 (referred to as cohorts 1 and 2) using data reported in interviews with parents about the following topics:

- Characteristics of students, including aspects of students' disability profiles and 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).

Findings are presented for youth in the nine disability categories that were in use in both 1987 and 2001 and for youth with disabilities who differed in their gender, the income of their households, and their racial/ethnic background.

Methods

The findings presented in this report come from telephone interviews with parents of students included in NLTS and NLTS2. Parents who could not be reached by telephone were mailed a questionnaire with a subset of the items included in the telephone interview. Total response rates of 66% and 82% were achieved for NLTS and NLTS2, respectively.

NLTS and NLTS2 have many design features that facilitate valid comparisons between them. However, important differences between them have required analytic adjustments for comparisons to be valid. To make the age distribution of students in the two samples equivalent, only the subset of youth of similar ages, 15 through 17, were selected from each sample for

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comparative analyses. The membership of particular disability categories in use at the two times also have required analytic adjustments to improve comparability.

The statistics presented in the report are weighted estimates for the population of youth with disabilities nationally. They generalize to that population as a group, as well as to each disability category.

Changes in Characteristics of Students

The composition of 15- through 17-year-old youth with disabilities has changed markedly in some ways since 1987.

- **Types of disability.** The NLTS/NLTS2 age group had significantly fewer youth classified with mental retardation as their primary disability in 2001 than in 1987. At the same time, 15- to 17-year-olds had grown significantly in the proportion classified as having other health impairments. Some of the growth in the other health impairment category resulted from large increases in the numbers of youth diagnosed with autism or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.
- **Gender.** Boys comprised about two-thirds of youth with disabilities in both studies. However, there were shifts in specific disability categories. The change in the mix of disabilities within the other health impairment category was accompanied by significant increases in the proportion of boys in that category.
- **Race/ethnicity.** The racial/ethnic makeup of youth with disabilities has become more like that of the general population of youth. Youth of color accounted for similar proportions of those with disabilities and those in the general population in 2001, whereas they had been overrepresented by about 4 percentage points in 1987. This shift resulted from African Americans being a smaller proportion of youth with disabilities in 2001 than in 1987 although they remained somewhat overrepresented among youth with disabilities. The sizable increase in the proportion of youth who were Hispanic was similar among youth with disabilities and youth in the general population, as were their proportions of the populations of youth with disabilities and those in the general population. Changes in the racial/ethnic distribution were particularly evident for youth in the other health impairment category, which included markedly more white youth in 2001 than previously.
- **Language diversity.** The languages used by youth with disabilities became increasingly diverse over time, with a significant increase in the percentage of youth who did not speak primarily English at home. In 2001 more than half of Hispanic youth with disabilities spoke primarily a language other than English at home.
- **Age for grade level.** The proportion of youth who were at the typical age for their grade level increased from one-third of youth to more than one-half between 1987 and 2001. This could bode well for youth in their efforts to finish high school; being older than the typical age for a grade level has been shown to be a powerful predictor of youth with disabilities dropping out of school.

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- **Age at identification of and first service for a disability.** Youth were both identified and first served at significantly earlier ages in 2001 than in 1987, with declines in these ages averaging 8 and 13 months, respectively. Declines of at least a full year in age at first service for a disability were evident for almost all categories of youth, which narrowed the gap between identification and service for most of them.
- **Daily living skills.** Despite earlier identification and service, small, but significant declines were reported by parents in the daily living skills of youth.

Changes in Characteristics of Students' Households

Demographic characteristics. Several changes since 1987 in the households of youth with disabilities could have positive repercussions for youth:

- In 2001, youth with disabilities were more likely to be living in households with at least one biological parent present than in 1987, and the heads of their households were much less likely to be high school dropouts or unemployed.
- Consistent with higher educational and employment levels among heads of households in 2001, youth with disabilities were less likely to be living in poverty in 2001 than in 1987. Yet, despite having made some strides in closing the income gap with the general population, youth with disabilities still were more likely than other youth to live in households with the risk factors of low income, unemployment, and heads of households who were poorly educated.

Other changes were less positive:

- In 2001, almost 6% of youth with disabilities lived with a family member other than a parent—a rate twice that in 1987—and youth were significantly more likely to be living in households with an adult with a disability than previously.
- Even with declines in the percentage of heads of households who were high school dropouts, youth with mental retardation or emotional disturbances continued to be more likely than other youth with disabilities to live in poverty, with unemployed heads of households, and in households that participated in benefit programs.

Changes in some factors were most beneficial to categories of youth who were more disadvantaged:

- Improvements in the education or employment status of heads of households were most apparent for the families of low- and middle-income families, which narrowed significantly the gap between middle- and higher-income youth.
- Similarly, African American and Hispanic youth benefited most from improvements in head of household education and employment.

Parents' expectations. Parents of youth with disabilities had similar expectations for youth in 1987 and 2001 in some respects, but not in others:

- Youth with disabilities were about equally likely in 1987 and 2001 to be expected by parents “definitely” to graduate from high school with a regular diploma (about half of

youth) and “definitely” to graduate from a 4-year college (fewer than 10% of youth). However, expectations for 4-year-college graduation increased significantly for youth with speech or hearing impairments.

- Two-year colleges were considered a much more likely option in 2001 than in 1987 for youth in all disability categories, for both boys and girls, for white and African American youth, and for those at all income levels.
- Employment expectations also rose for most categories of youth, and larger increases for girls than boys closed the gap in employment expectations that had existed in 1987.
- Although for all groups, expectations of independent living were lower than those of paid employment, sizable increases were noted for youth with mental retardation, hearing and other health impairments, or multiple disabilities.

Services Received

Youth with disabilities were substantially more likely to be receiving support services in 2001 than in 1987, with the difference being accounted for entirely by increases in services provided from or through their schools:

- **Receiving any services.** By 2001, half of 15- to 17-year-old students with disabilities were receiving related or support services from or through their schools, compared with less than one-third of students in 1987.
- **Types of services.** Significant increases were noted for many kinds of services, with there being particularly large increases of 9 and 10 percentage points in receipt of speech/language therapy and vocational and mental health services. Only life skills training and help from a tutor, reader, or interpreter were not received from their schools by significantly more youth in 2001 than in 1987.
- **Disability category differences.** The increases in receipt of any support services from schools occurred for youth in all disability categories, with the largest increase occurring for youth with emotional disturbances, primarily because of their 20 percentage point increase in receipt of mental health services. Students with learning disabilities experienced increases in fewer kinds of services than other youth, increasing significantly over the time span only in receipt of speech/language therapy and mental health services. All other categories of youth experienced increases in at least four kinds of services, and youth with mental retardation, visual impairments, or multiple disabilities had increases in seven of the eight kinds of services assessed.
- **Demographic differences.** Boys and girls both experienced significant increases in receiving services from their schools. All income groups also experienced significant increases in receiving any services and the receipt of transportation help. Youth from lower income households had increases in a wider range of services than youth from higher income households. White and African American youth had a similar pattern of change in services, with significant increases in speech/language therapy, vocational and mental health services, and transportation. Hispanic youth shared gains in vocational

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services, but were the only ones to experience increases in help from a tutor, reader, or interpreter and in physical therapy.

Student Outcomes

Examining changes in a range of outcomes for youth with disabilities from 1987 to 2001 does not yield a consistent or unequivocal “good news” or “bad news” story. The mix of changes shows progress on some dimensions and for some groups, but little change or even change in an undesirable direction on some measures.

- **Academics.** The 1-year dropout rate for youth with disabilities was cut in half in the years between NLTS and NLTS2, with the rate in 2001 for youth with disabilities being significantly lower than the rate in the general population. However, only youth with mental retardation experienced a significant decline over time. Youth with emotional disturbances had the highest dropout rate in 1987, and had no decrease over time.
- **Extracurricular activity.** Overall participation in extracurricular activities did not increase between the two cohorts of youth with disabilities, but increases were evident for some kinds of activities. Most notable were increases in volunteer or community service activities, which more than doubled over time. However, rates of extracurricular activity for youth with disabilities remained below that of the general population.
- **Employment rates.** The 1-year paid employment rate increased, with significantly more youth holding paid jobs in the previous year in 2001 than 1987. This increase brought the overall 1-year employment rate for youth with disabilities (60%) in line with that of the general population of youth (63%). However, a decline in the rate of current employment suggests that youth also had more sporadic work experiences, rather than continuous employment.
- **Employment experiences.** Youth with disabilities experienced an increase in work-study jobs, a decline in the average number of hours worked per week, and significant improvements in pay. In 2001, two-thirds of youth with disabilities were earning more than the minimum wage, half again as many as had done so in 1987.
- **Independence.** Although there was little change in the level of responsibility for household chores between 1987 and 2001, more youth with disabilities had money about which to make decisions.
- **Social adjustment.** There is cause for concern in the increased rate at which youth with disabilities experienced the negative consequences of being suspended or expelled from school, fired from a job, or arrested. By 2001, one in five youth with disabilities had experienced one or more of these consequences of their behavior, up 6 percentage points from 1987.

Given the important differences within the population of youth with disabilities, these changes in outcomes did not affect all youth equally, and most groups of youth experienced changes that were inconsistent in direction. For example:

- **Youth with other health impairments.** This group had a sizable increase in their overall level of extracurricular group participation and volunteerism, increases in

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employment and pay, and increases in their responsibility for managing money of their own—all of which bode well for their future. Yet they were the only group that had a significant decrease in performing household responsibilities, and along with youth with emotional disturbances, had sizable increases in the rate at which they experienced negative consequences for their behavior.

- **Youth with mental retardation.** These youth had the only significant decrease in the dropout rate, and the largest rate of increase in holding a work-study job, yet they were the only disability category not to experience a significant increase in earning more than the minimum wage.
- **Youth with visual impairments.** This was the only group to experience a significant decline in their overall rate of participation in extracurricular activities and was among the few groups to show no increase in the work-study or 1-year or current paid employment rates. Yet youth with visual impairments who were working had large gains in earnings.
- **Gender differences.** Girls with disabilities experienced much larger increases in participation in some kinds of extracurricular activities than boys, particularly community groups and leadership or student government organizations. With greater change over time, the participation of girls in these activities in 2001 significantly exceeded that of boys. Because girls also had larger increases in employment than boys, the gap in employment rates between the genders that favored boys in 1987 had been closed for the most part by 2001. Girls also increased more than boys in the likelihood of having money of their own to spend. Yet, despite significant increases in the proportion of girls with disabilities who earned more than the minimum wage, boys still were more likely than girls to meet or exceed the minimum wage.
- **Household income differences.** Improvements in employment outcomes over time were least apparent for lower-income youth with disabilities. They experienced no significant gains in 1-year or work-study employment rates, nor did they share in the large gains in pay that were evident for other income groups. In addition, they had the largest decline in current employment rates. Upper income youth showed negative changes in other areas. Specifically, between 1987 and 2001, the percentage of upper income youth who had been suspended or expelled from school, fired from a job, or arrested increased from 11% to 20%.
- **Racial/ethnic differences.** Although all racial/ethnic groups experienced gains in 1-year employment rates, white youth had the only significant increase in pay and the only significant decline in the dropout rate. On the negative side, white youth accounted for virtually all of the gain in the percentage of youth that had experienced negative consequences for their behavior.

Summing Up

Summing up the changes identified in this report raises the question, “have they been for the better?” In many respects, the answer to that question is “yes,” but that answer applies to some youth more than to others. Findings also point to several challenges remaining for youth with

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disabilities, their families, and the schools that serve them. Future comparisons between NLTS and NLTS2 will focus more directly on the schools attended by youth with disabilities and their educational programs, examining such aspects of those programs as course-taking, placement in general education classes, and supports and accommodations. As NLTS2 youth age, comparisons also will be made between their early postschool experiences and those of youth with disabilities in NLTS.

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