

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

By Mary Wagner

NLTS2 represents youth with disabilities nationally who were ages 13 through 16, in secondary school, and receiving special education services in grade 7 or above in the 2000-01 school year. By mid-2003, 28% of these youth no longer were in secondary school, according to parents. Understanding the characteristics of out-of-school youth with disabilities is an important context for interpreting their experiences in their early years after high school. This chapter provides that context by describing out-of-school youth with disabilities in terms of their:

- School-leaving status and timing
- Disability and functioning
- Demographic characteristics.

Important relationships among some of these factors also are identified.¹

School-Leaving Status

Of the 28% of youth with disabilities who were reported no longer to be in secondary school or receiving secondary school instruction at the Wave 2 interview, about equal portions left school some time during the 2001-02 and 2002-03 school years (45% and 44%, respectively). Thus, 90% of youth with disabilities represented in this report have been out of school from as little as a few days (e.g., a 2002-03 graduate interviewed in June 2003) to as much as 2 years (e.g., an October 2001 dropout interviewed in October 2003). The 10% of school leavers with disabilities who left school in the 2000-01 school year also have been out of school about 2 years. Therefore, the remainder of this report will refer to youth with disabilities who have been out of secondary school up to 2 years, even though 2001 graduates interviewed later in 2003 and dropouts who left school earlier in 2001 have been out of school somewhat longer.

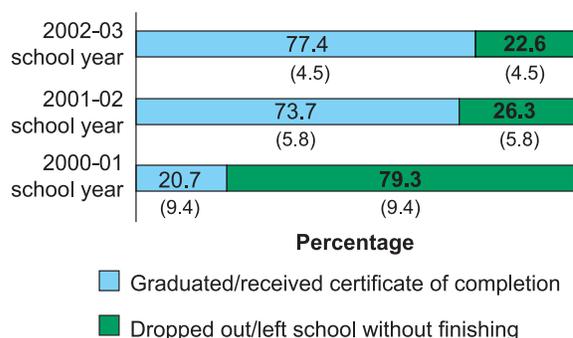
According to parents, 72% of out-of-school school youth with disabilities finished high school by receiving either a regular diploma (68% of out-of-school youth and 94% of school completers) or a certificate of completion or similar document (4% of out-of-school youth, 6% of completers). About one-fourth of school leavers (26%) reportedly dropped out of secondary school without completing, and 1% were reported to have left school in other ways (e.g., permanent expulsion).²

The year in which youth with disabilities left secondary school is related to the way in which they left school (Exhibit 2-1). Few youth who left school in the 2000-01 school year were old enough to graduate; thus, more than three-fourths (79%) left without finishing and have been out of school somewhat more than 2 years. In contrast, dropouts are only about one-fourth of youth who left school in other years, when larger percentages of youth were old enough to graduate. Graduates are about equal proportions of school leavers in the 2001-02 and 2002-03 school years (74% and 77%, respectively; $p < .001$ compared with the 2000-01 school year).

¹ The characteristics of out-of-school youth with disabilities represented in NLTS2 are not compared here with characteristics of youth represented in the original NLTS because age differences in the two samples make straightforward comparisons misleading. A subsequent report will present findings of analyses that include the adjustments necessary for accurate comparisons between NLTS and NLTS2.

² These youth will be referred to as dropouts.

Exhibit 2-1
MODE OF SCHOOL LEAVING OF YOUTH WITH
DISABILITIES, BY YEAR OF SCHOOL LEAVING



Source: NLTS2 Wave 2 parent/youth interviews.
 Standard errors are in parentheses.

Given that graduates typically complete school in May or June, at the time of the Wave 2 interviews in summer and fall 2003, the large majority of graduates had been out of school from a few weeks to a little more than a year. Thus, on average, dropouts have been out of school somewhat longer than school completers; this difference may have implications for outcomes discussed in this report (e.g., being out of school longer may contribute to some dropouts' having a longer employment history than other youth).

Disability Characteristics

Youth in some disability categories are much more likely than others to be out of secondary school (Exhibit 2-2). Fewer than 20% of youth with speech or orthopedic impairments, mental retardation, autism, or multiple disabilities are out of school. In contrast, 31% or more of youth with learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, or traumatic brain injuries are no longer in secondary school ($p < .001$ comparing youth with emotional disturbances and those with speech impairments). A lower rate of school leaving among youth with speech impairments may be due in part to the fact that they are younger, on average, than other groups of youth (Marder, Levine, & Wagner, 2003). However, youth with mental retardation or multiple disabilities in the NLTS2 age range may have lower rates of school leaving because they are more likely than youth in other categories to continue to receive special education services in high school until age 21 (Wagner, 1991b). These differential rates of school leaving across disability categories produce an out-of-school population that is dominated by youth with learning disabilities (67%) and emotional disturbances (14%); therefore, the experiences of out-of-school youth as a group reflect heavily the behaviors of youth in these two categories.

How long youth have been out of school and the ways in which they leave school also vary across disability categories. For example, not only are larger proportions of youth with emotional disturbances than youth in other categories out of secondary school, more of them have been out of school longer and left school without finishing. One in five youth with emotional disturbances were reported to have left secondary school in the 2000-01 school year, a significantly higher rate of early school leaving than youth in most other categories. Further, a smaller percentage of out-of-school youth with emotional disturbances are school completers (56%) than youth in every other category ($p < .05$ compared with youth with learning disabilities). In contrast, youth with mental retardation, orthopedic impairments, autism, or traumatic brain injuries have larger proportions (60% to 68%) who left school in the 2002-03 school year, and youth with visual impairments are the most likely to have left school in the 2001-02 school year (60%; $p < .05$ comparing youth with mental retardation and visual impairments).

Exhibit 2-2
SCHOOL-LEAVING STATUS, TIMING, AND METHOD, BY DISABILITY CATEGORY

	Learning Disability	Speech/ Language Impairment	Mental Retardation	Emotional Disturbance	Hearing Impairment	Visual Impairment	Orthopedic Impairment	Other Health Impairment	Autism	Traumatic Brain Injury	Multiple Disabilities
Percentage no longer in secondary school	30.8 (2.7)	16.3 (2.2)	18.8 (2.3)	36.0 (2.9)	25.5 (2.9)	29.7 (3.7)	17.2 (2.4)	26.4 (2.4)	14.1 (2.1)	31.7 (5.1)	14.4 (2.2)
Percentage leaving secondary school in:											
2002-03	46.6 (5.7)	40.3 (7.6)	62.3 (7.5)	44.2 (5.5)	46.1 (6.9)	37.6 (9.2)	60.1 (8.0)	49.2 (5.6)	61.5 (9.5)	67.7 (10.3)	56.2 (9.4)
2001-02	44.4 (5.6)	49.8 (7.7)	32.7 (7.3)	36.2 (5.4)	51.9 (6.9)	60.4 (9.3)	37.1 (7.9)	43.8 (5.6)	32.8 (9.1)	28.8 (19.9)	29.1 (8.6)
2000-01	9.0 (3.3)	9.9 (4.6)	5.0 (3.4)	19.6 (4.4)	2.0 (2.0)	2.1 (2.7)	2.9 (2.7)	7.0 (2.9)	5.8 (2.9)	4.0 (4.0)	9.3 (6.0)
Percentage completing high school	74.8 (4.9)	79.1 (6.3)	72.2 (7.0)	56.1 (5.4)	90.3 (4.1)	95.1 (4.1)	87.9 (5.4)	77.1 (4.7)	86.1 (6.8)	78.5 (8.8)	64.9 (9.5)
Percentage of school completers whose parents reported they received a regular diploma	96.8 (2.3)	94.1 (4.3)	83.6 (7.1)	85.8 (5.2)	97.3 (2.4)	99.2 (1.8)	93.7 (4.3)	92.2 (3.5)	93.9 (5.2)	94.1 (6.0)	90.8 (7.7)

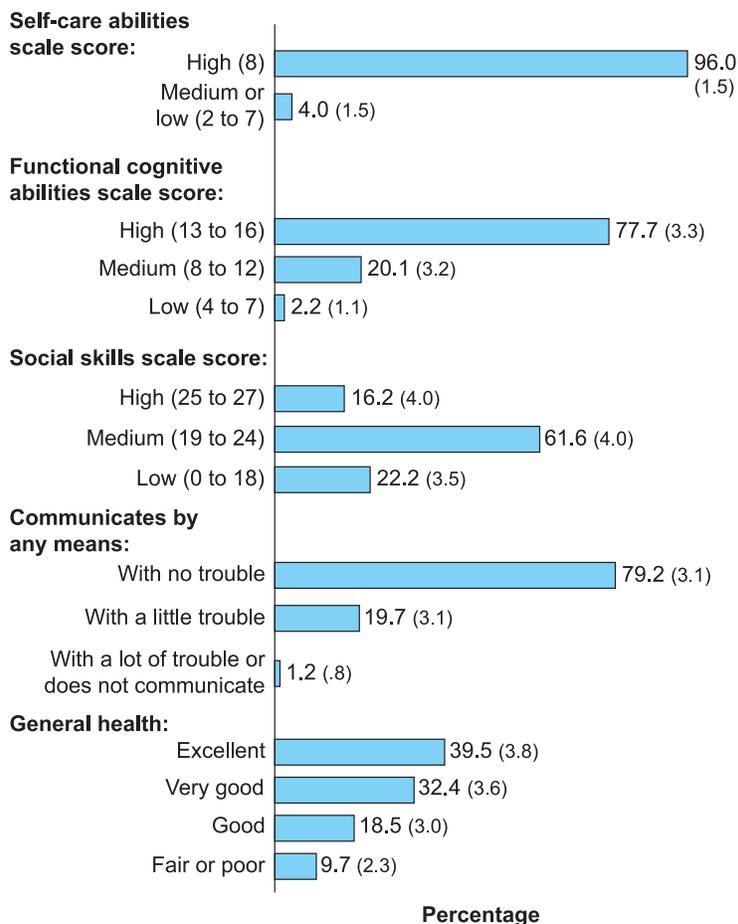
Source: NLTS2 Wave 2 parent/youth interviews.
Standard errors are in parentheses.

School completion rates are quite high among youth with hearing or visual impairments (90% and 95%, respectively), as well as among those with orthopedic impairments (88%) or autism (86%). More than 90% of school completers in all categories except mental retardation and emotional disturbance were reported by parents to have received a regular high school diploma (91% of youth with multiple disabilities to 99% of those with visual impairments); 84% of youth with mental retardation and 86% of those with emotional disturbances were reported to have graduated with a regular diploma.

Although disability category is a key characteristic to consider when reviewing information about out-of-school youth with disabilities, it is the actual functional skills of youth that can have important implications for their experiences after high school. Five dimensions of functioning are addressed here, using parents' reports: self-care skills (how well youth dress and feed themselves independently), functional cognitive skills (how well youth perform common tasks that require literacy and numeracy, such as counting change and reading common signs), social skills (how often youth exhibit behaviors indicative of self-control, assertiveness, and cooperation), communication skills (how well youth communicate with others by any means), and general health (ranging from excellent to poor).³ Higher functioning in these areas would be expected to promote more positive experiences in the early postschool years.

³ Skills scales are described in greater detail in Appendix B.

**Exhibit 2-3
FUNCTIONAL ABILITIES OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL
YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES**



Source: NLTS2 Wave 2 parent/youth interviews.
Standard errors are in parentheses.

The large majority of out-of-school youth with disabilities (96%) have no trouble with self-care tasks, and 78% are rated as having high functional cognitive skills (Exhibit 2-3). Nonetheless, 4% of youth with disabilities are challenged to perform the self-care tasks that are fundamental to independence. In addition, 20% have some trouble with functional cognitive tasks that require literacy or numeracy, and 2% do such tasks poorly, according to parents. Social skills are more problematic. Only 16% of youth with disabilities were reported by parents to have high social skills, and more than one in five (22%) have low social skills. Further, although 79% were reported to be able to communicate with no trouble, 20% have some trouble and 1% have major communication barriers. In addition, whereas the majority of youth with disabilities have excellent or very good health (40% and 32%, respectively), 10% have health that is described as fair or poor.

Understanding how basic abilities vary across disability categories helps to illuminate the differences in postschool experiences among youth. Notably, each disability category contains youth who demonstrate the full range of ability on each functional dimension (Exhibit 2-4). Further, for some categories of youth, high functioning on some dimensions is accompanied by much lower functioning on others. For example, almost all out-of-school youth with learning disabilities, speech or hearing impairments, or emotional disturbances dress and feed themselves with no trouble at all. The functional cognitive skills of these categories of youth also are rated highly (80% to 84% receive that rating, respectively). Youth with learning disabilities or emotional disturbances also are rated highly in their communication skills (83% and 80%, respectively, communicate with no trouble). However, communication presents challenges to those with speech or hearing impairments (39% and 59% of youth in these two categories,

Exhibit 2-4
FUNCTIONAL SKILLS OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH, BY DISABILITY CATEGORY

	Learning Disability	Speech/ Language Impairment	Mental Retardation	Emotional Disturbance	Hearing Impairment	Visual Impairment	Orthopedic Impairment	Other Health Impairment	Autism	Traumatic Brain Injury	Multiple Disabilities
Percentage rated by parents “high” on:											
Self-care skills	98.5 (1.3)	96.1 (3.0)	84.2 (5.7)	97.7 (1.6)	99.3 (1.2)	90.6 (5.6)	67.8 (7.1)	89.4 (3.4)	66.0 (9.1)	73.5 (9.2)	56.3 (9.5)
Functional cognitive skills	80.4 (4.5)	84.5 (5.7)	42.3 (7.8)	83.6 (4.2)	84.1 (5.2)	63.9 (9.3)	82.8 (6.3)	84.8 (4.0)	72.2 (8.8)	74.5 (9.3)	44.5 (9.6)
Percentage with social skills rated^a:											
High	19.1 (4.7)	14.1 (5.8)	7.3 (4.3)	5.4 (2.6)	32.6 (7.0)	36.5 (9.5)	24.3 (7.2)	16.2 (4.2)	3.1 (3.8)	9.9 (6.6)	17.7 (8.5)
Low	17.4 (4.5)	16.5 (6.2)	26.0 (7.2)	45.8 (5.8)	9.7 (4.4)	10.6 (6.1)	17.1 (6.3)	22.5 (4.8)	28.1 (9.8)	30.0 (10.1)	25.9 (9.8)
Percentage communicating with no trouble											
	83.3 (4.1)	61.3 (7.5)	55.2 (7.7)	80.4 (4.3)	41.1 (6.8)	92.7 (4.9)	77.2 (6.8)	81.8 (4.2)	65.4 (9.2)	62.1 (10.2)	54.5 (9.6)
Percentage with health reported to be^b:											
Excellent	41.2 (5.5)	50.7 (7.7)	30.4 (7.1)	36.0 (5.2)	40.8 (6.8)	50.7 (9.4)	28.1 (7.3)	40.5 (5.4)	47.0 (9.6)	21.1 (8.5)	27.3 (8.4)
Fair or poor	8.1 (3.0)	6.6 (3.8)	12.1 (5.0)	13.5 (3.7)	10.4 (4.2)	7.1 (4.9)	19.3 (6.4)	13.6 (3.8)	5.9 (4.5)	32.0 (9.7)	18.5 (7.4)

Source: NLTS2 Wave 2 parent/youth interviews.

^a The category “medium” is omitted from the exhibit.

^b The categories “very good” and “good” are omitted from the exhibit.

Standard errors are in parentheses.

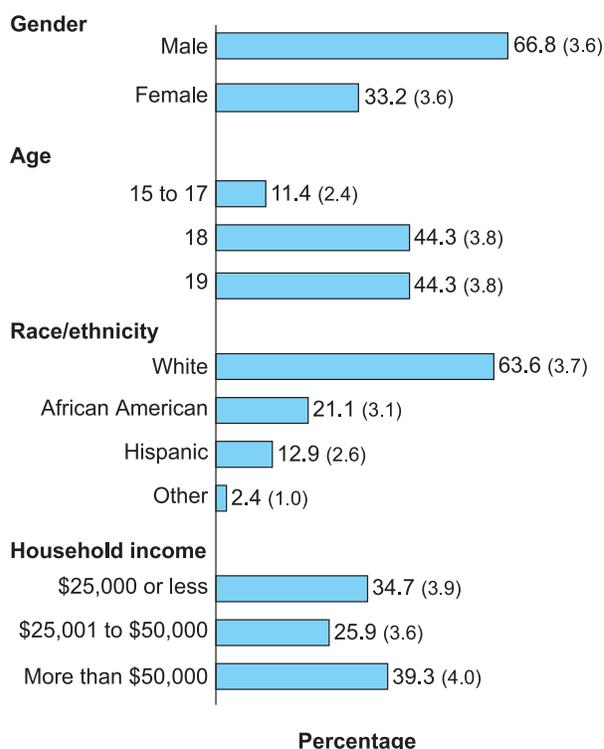
respectively, have at least some trouble communicating by any means). Youth with emotional disturbances are the most likely to be reported as having low social skills (46%, $p < .001$ compared with youth with learning disabilities).

In contrast to this uneven pattern of functioning across dimensions, youth with autism, traumatic brain injuries, or multiple disabilities tend to have a fairly consistent pattern of lower functioning across dimensions. They are among the lowest scorers on most measures, with the exception of social skills for youth with multiple disabilities and health for youth with autism.

Demographic Characteristics

Beyond the nature of their disability and its functional implications, several other characteristics of young people with disabilities can help shape their post-high-school experiences. Differences in age can be reflected in notable differences in both competence and independence as youth continue with the developmental tasks of adolescence. Gender is a defining human characteristic at any age that can influence the choices youth make in powerful ways. Race/ethnicity, too, can be associated with rich cultural traditions, patterns of

**Exhibit 2-5
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF
OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES**



Source: NLTS2 Wave 2 parent/youth interviews.
Standard errors are in parentheses.

Not surprisingly, older youth with disabilities are more likely than younger peers to be out of secondary school (Exhibit 2-6). Whereas only 6% of those younger than 18 are out of school, 46% of 18-year-olds and 69% of 19-year-olds are out of secondary school. As would be expected, most (61%) of those who were 18 years old at the time of the 2003 interviews—the most common age for graduating from high school—left school in the 2002-03 school year; a similar percentage (62%) of 19-year-olds left school the previous year (when they were 18). The majority of the youngest age group (74%) left school in the 2002-03 school year. The youngest out-of-school youth are much less likely to have completed high school (48%) than 18-year-olds (71%, $p < .05$) or 19-year-olds (80%, $p < .01$).

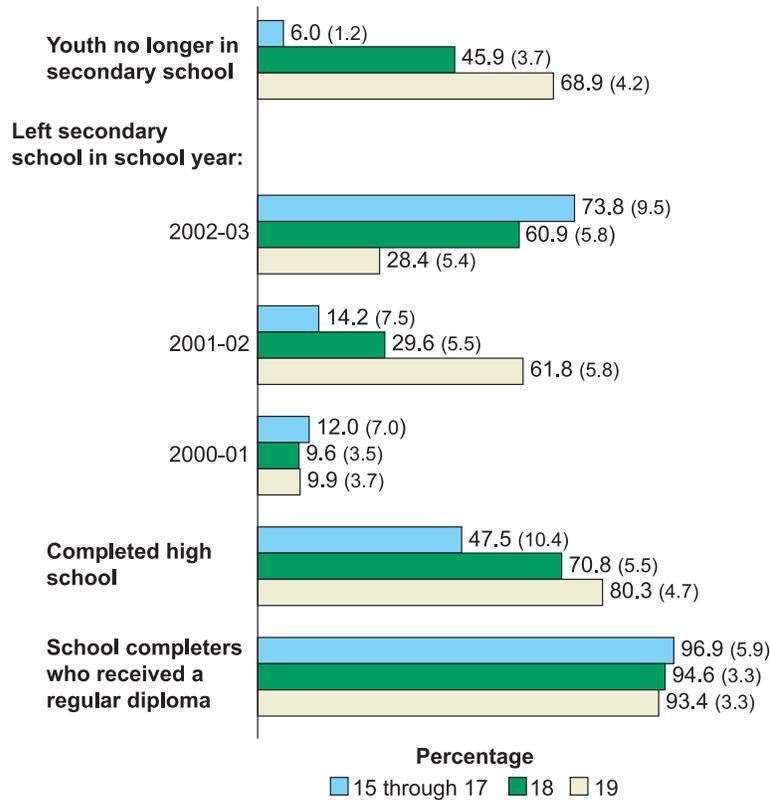
There are no differences between boys and girls with disabilities in their school-leaving status, timing, or method. Similarly, there are no differences between youth with disabilities who differ in the income of their households or in their racial/ethnic background in the likelihood that they are out of school, the timing of their school leaving, or whether they received a regular diploma if they completed high school.

However, differences are apparent between groups in the likelihood that out-of-school youth completed high school. The completion rate is higher among youth with disabilities from wealthier households (i.e., with incomes of more than \$50,000) than among low-income youth (82% vs. 64%, $p < .05$), an income-related difference that also is apparent in the general

relationships within families, and strong group identification that can be reflected in the paths youth take after high school. Finally, the economic resources available to youth can limit or expand their horizons as they look to the future.

The large majority of youth with disabilities who have been out of school up to 2 years are 18 or 19 years old (89%, Exhibit 2-5). Two-thirds of out-of-school youth with disabilities are male, as is true of youth with disabilities as a whole, regardless of whether they are in or out of secondary school. A similar percentage (64%) are white, about one-fifth (21%) are African-American, and 13% are Hispanic. Approximately one-third (35%) of out-of-school youth with disabilities are from households with annual incomes of \$25,000 or less, 26% are from households with incomes of \$25,001 to \$50,000, and 39% are from households with incomes of more than \$50,000.

**Exhibit 2-6
SCHOOL-LEAVING STATUS, TIMING, AND METHOD OF YOUTH
WITH DISABILITIES, BY AGE**



Source: NLTS2 Wave 2 parent/youth interviews.
Standard errors are in parentheses.

Summary

This chapter highlights several characteristics of the population of youth with disabilities who have been out of secondary school up to 2 years to provide background for interpreting the early postschool experiences reported in the following chapters. Although most out-of-school youth with disabilities completed high school, 28% left school without receiving a diploma. Dropout rates are particularly high for youth with emotional disturbances (44%). Most out-of-school youth with disabilities have been out of secondary school from a few months to somewhat more than 1 year, with dropouts being more likely than graduates to have been out of school up to 2 years.

The large majority of youth are classified as having learning disabilities or emotional disturbances, are male, and are 18 or 19 years old. Both across the group as a whole and within disability categories, youth demonstrate a wide range of functional abilities, differences that would be expected to influence their options for postsecondary education, employment, social activities, and independence after high school. Across categories, almost all youth with disabilities have no trouble with self-care tasks, and the majority were reported by parents to have high functional cognitive skills, communicate with no trouble, and have excellent or very

population (Kaufman et al., 2001). Although Hispanic youth with disabilities have a lower rate of school completion than white or African-American students (60% vs. 74% and 78%), the small number of Hispanic out-of-school youth with disabilities prevents this difference from attaining statistical significance. However, a similar difference between Hispanic and white youth is apparent in the general population, among whom the dropout rate for Hispanics is almost three times the rate for white students (Kaufman et al., 2001).

good health. However, some youth in every disability category have low ratings on these skills, including larger proportions of youth with autism, traumatic brain injuries, or multiple disabilities than youth in most other categories. Social skills are the most problematic for all categories of youth; about 6 in 10 youth with disabilities have moderate social skills scores, with about 1 in 6 having high skills and 1 in 5 having low social skills. Low social skills ratings are particularly prevalent for youth with emotional disturbances.

The relationships between variations in these characteristics of out-of-school youth with disabilities and their early postschool experiences are explored in the following chapters.