

### 3. ENGAGEMENT IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION, WORK, OR PREPARATION FOR WORK

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Arguably, the main purpose of education for youth, both with and without disabilities, is to ensure that they are prepared to engage as adults within their communities. In the first few years after high school<sup>1</sup>—the period of time that is the focus of this report—young adults are just beginning the transition into adulthood and into ways of engaging in their communities that are typical of adulthood. A consensus has grown regarding the importance of having a broad notion of engagement and of successful transitions. For example, Halpern (1990) noted in his seminal review of follow-up and follow-along studies that “many people with disabilities value residential and personal/social adjustment more highly than vocational adjustment.” Jay (1991) echoed the importance of looking at a wide range of outcomes for students, expanding what it means to be successful to include unpaid employment, sheltered work, volunteerism, and training. Levine and Nourse (1998) also pointed to the importance of looking at the many outcomes and influences that make youth successful.

Until the mid-1990s, few studies of youth with disabilities in transition examined postschool outcomes other than paid employment. Although the range of postschool outcomes has expanded, employment continues to be central in recent studies (Haywood & Schmidt-Davis, 2000; Benz et al., 1997). Even among students with disabilities represented in NLTS2, employment is the most commonly cited transition goal of students with disabilities while in secondary school (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004), and paid employment is more common in the early post-high-school years than postsecondary education (see Chapters 4 and 5).

However, we must recognize the increasing importance of postsecondary education and job training in the lives of many young adults in the United States. Enrollment in 2- or 4-year degree-granting institutions increased steadily over the decade of the 1990s, from 13.8 million to 15.3 million (Gerald & Hussar, 2002). College enrollment includes close to half a million students with disabilities (Lewis, Farris, & Greene, 1999), and concerted efforts are under way to increase the access of students with disabilities to postsecondary education (Getzel, Stodden, & Briel, 2001; NCRVE, 1999; Stodden, 2001).

This chapter sets the stage for in-depth analyses of postsecondary education and employment in subsequent chapters by including those outcomes within a broader concept of community engagement after high school.<sup>2</sup> In this conceptualization, youth with disabilities are considered engaged if they are participating or have participated in one or more of the following activities since leaving secondary school:

- **Employment**—working for pay, other than work around the house, including supported or sheltered employment.

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<sup>1</sup> Youth with disabilities represented in this report have been out of secondary school from a few weeks to as much as 2 years.

<sup>2</sup> The engagement of out-of-school youth with disabilities represented in NLTS2 is not compared here with that 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.

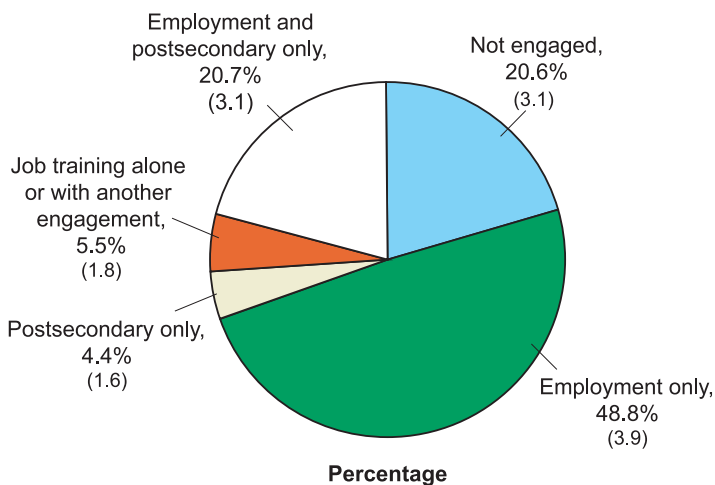
- **Postsecondary education**—(a) taking courses toward a GED or (b) attending a vocational, business, or technical school; a 2-year, junior, or community college; or a 4-year college or university.
- **Job training**—receiving training in specific job skills (e.g., car repair, Web page design, food service) from someone other than a family member, such as an agency or a government training program.

In examining the topic of engagement in school, work, or preparation for work, this chapter describes (1) the extent to which youth with disabilities participate in these activities within 2 years of leaving secondary school, (2) the most common activities comprising engagement, and (3) variations in rates and modes of engagement associated with differences in the disability category of youth and selected demographic characteristics.

### Prevalence and Modes of Engagement

A large majority of out-of-school youth with disabilities (79%) have been engaged in employment, postsecondary education, job training, or a combination of those activities since leaving high school (Exhibit 3-1). Employment is the most common activity shortly after high school, with about 7 in 10 youth with disabilities having been employed, including 49% whose

**Exhibit 3-1**  
**MODES OF ENGAGEMENT OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES**



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

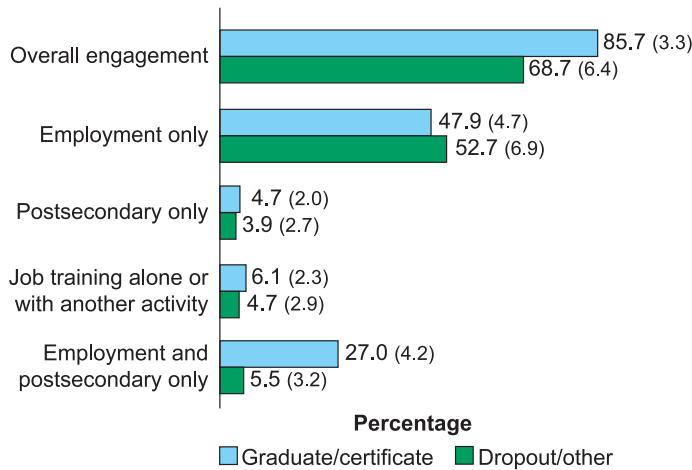
sole activity is paid employment. About 3 in 10 youth with disabilities have attended a postsecondary school, although only 4% engage in postsecondary activities exclusively. Multiple modes of engagement are not uncommon. For instance, 21% of youth with disabilities have both worked and gone to school. Six percent of youth have had job training, either alone or in combination with other activities.

### School-Leaving Status Differences in Engagement

Given the frequency of postsecondary attendance among youth with disabilities, it is not surprising that those who graduated from high school<sup>3</sup> are more likely to

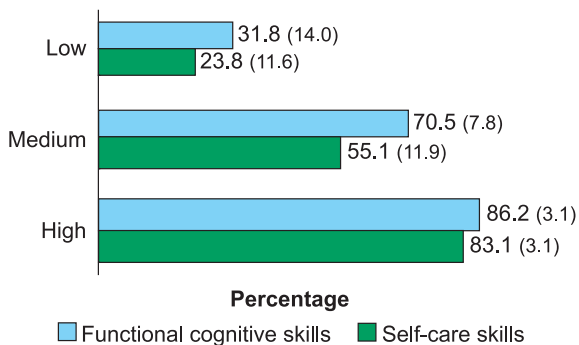
<sup>3</sup> Seventy-two percent of the out-of-school youth with disabilities represented in this report completed high school.

**Exhibit 3-2**  
**MODES OF ENGAGEMENT OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES, BY SCHOOL-LEAVING STATUS**



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

**Exhibit 3-3**  
**ENGAGEMENT OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES, BY FUNCTIONAL SKILLS**



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

## Disability and Functional Differences in Engagement

Chapter 2 pointed out important differences in the functioning of youth, both within and across primary disability categories. Although disability category is a key characteristic to understand 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. Both higher functional skills and primary disability category would be expected to differentiate youth in the extent to which they are engaged and the ways they are engaged shortly after high school.

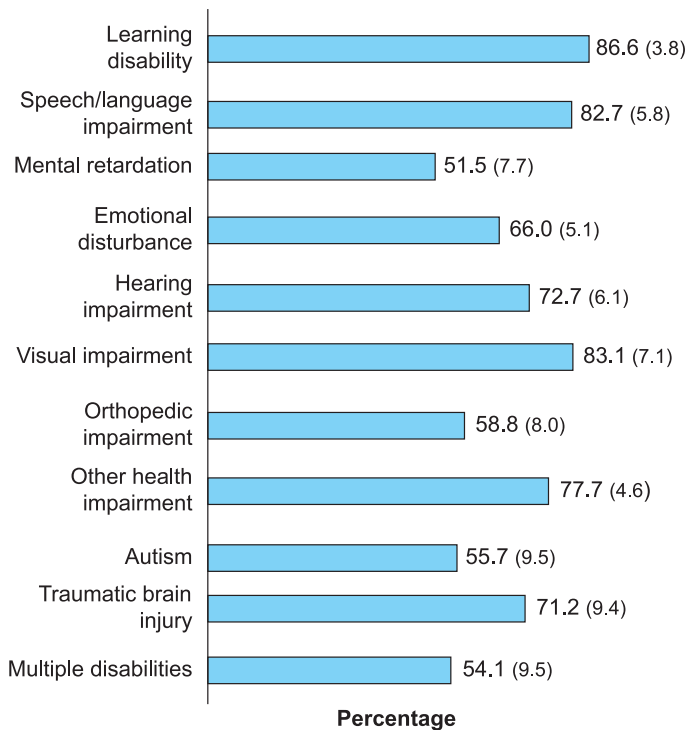
For example, youth with disabilities with medium and high functional cognitive skills<sup>4</sup> are more likely to be engaged (70% and 86%, respectively) than youth with low functional cognitive skills (32%,  $p < .05$  and  $p < .001$ ; Exhibit 3-3). Youth with high self-care skills<sup>5</sup> are more likely to be engaged (83%) than youth with skills in the medium or low range (55% and 24%,  $p < .05$  and  $p < .001$ ). Nonetheless, sizable percentages of youth with the lowest functional cognitive and self-care skills are engaged (32% and 24%, respectively). Although low levels of these kinds of skills may somewhat

constrain the types of postschool activities in which some youth engage, the majority of youth in all disability categories are engaged in school, work, or preparation for work; percentages range from 52% to 87% (Exhibit 3-4). Youth with mental retardation have the lowest rate of engagement (52%), followed by those with multiple disabilities (54%), autism (56%) and orthopedic impairments (59%). In contrast, 83% or more of youth with learning disabilities or speech or visual impairments, 78% of those with other health impairments, and 73% of those

<sup>4</sup> Functional cognitive skills are defined on a scale from 4 to 16 as follows: low (4-7), medium (8-12), high (13-16). The components of this scale are described in Appendix B.

<sup>5</sup> Self-care skills are measured on a scale from 2 to 8 as follows: low (2-4), medium (5-7), high (8). Components of the scale are described in Appendix B.

**Exhibit 3-4  
ENGAGEMENT OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH,  
BY DISABILITY CATEGORY**



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

youth with speech, hearing, or visual impairments are involved only in work (36%, 22%, and 16%,  $p < .05$  and  $p < .001$  compared with youth with learning disabilities); indeed, the latter are most likely to be both working and going to school (39%, 36%, and 34%, respectively). Although being engaged solely in postsecondary education is uncommon among youth in most categories, 14% of youth with visual or orthopedic impairments and 15% of youth with autism are engaged in that way.

Employment dominates the activities of youth with emotional disturbances, with 44% being involved solely in employment and 18% both working and going to school. Employment also is the most common activity among youth with mental retardation, traumatic brain injuries, or multiple disabilities, among whom 31%, 49%, and 40% are employed without engaging in other activities. Job training is common among nearly one-fifth of youth with visual impairments (18%) and among youth with mental retardation (12%), autism (13%), or traumatic brain injuries (12%).

with hearing impairments have engaged in school, work, or preparation for work ( $p < .001$  comparing youth with learning disabilities and those with mental retardation). The engagement rate of youth with emotional disturbances is in the mid range of the distribution (66%,  $p < .01$  and  $p < .05$  compared with youth with learning disabilities and speech impairments, respectively).

Differences also exist across categories in the kinds of productive activities youth pursue after leaving high school (Exhibit 3-5). For example, although youth with learning disabilities or speech, hearing, visual, or other health impairments all are highly likely to be engaged, employment alone is the most common mode of engagement for youth with learning disabilities or other health impairments (54% and 41%, respectively), whereas many fewer

**Exhibit 3-5**  
**MODES OF ENGAGEMENT 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
<b>Percentage engaged in:</b>											
Employment only	54.3 (5.5)	35.7 (7.4)	30.8 (7.1)	43.8 (5.3)	21.6 (5.7)	16.5 (7.0)	27.0 (7.2)	41.2 (5.4)	14.0 (6.7)	49.4 (10.4)	40.4 (9.3)
Postsecondary education only	5.1 (2.4)	1.9 (2.1)	2.9 (2.6)	.9 (1.0)	5.9 (3.3)	14.3 (6.6)	14.2 (5.7)	5.9 (2.6)	15.0 (6.9)	1.8 (2.8)	2.4 (2.9)
Employment and postsecondary education	22.3 (4.6)	38.6 (7.5)	5.3 (3.5)	17.9 (4.1)	35.9 (6.6)	34.5 (9.0)	15.1 (5.8)	24.0 (4.7)	13.6 (6.6)	8.0 (5.6)	9.4 (5.5)
Job training alone or with another activity	4.9 (2.4)	6.5 (3.8)	12.5 (5.1)	3.4 (2.0)	9.3 (4.0)	17.8 (7.2)	2.5 (2.5)	6.6 (2.7)	13.1 (6.5)	12.0 (6.8)	1.9 (2.6)

Source: NLTS2 Wave 2 parent/youth interviews.

Standard errors are in parentheses.

### Demographic Differences in Engagement

**Age.** Although it might be reasonable to assume that older youth would be more likely to be engaged because they tend to have been out of school somewhat longer (see Chapter 2), research suggests that interpreting outcome differences across age groups can be complicated (Levine & Nourse, 1998). For instance, youth ages 15 through 18 who are out of school may not be engaged, but for very different reasons. Some may not have had the chance to attend a postsecondary institution because they only recently graduated. Others may not be engaged because dropping out of school at a young age hampers their ability to pursue both education and work. As one might expect, youth age 17 are less likely to be engaged than youth age 19 (58% vs. 84%,  $p < .05$ ). In addition, youth ages 18 and 19 are more likely to be pursuing job training than youth age 16 (6% vs. 0%,  $p < .05$ ), and youth age 19 are more likely to be engaged in both postsecondary education and employment than youth age 17 or 18 (29% vs. 5%,  $p < .01$ , and 15%,  $p < .05$ ).

**Gender.** Research has demonstrated significant gender differences in the experiences of youth with disabilities since the mid-1990s. Many studies, including NLTS, found that female youth with disabilities had poorer outcomes than their male counterparts (Doren & Benz, 1998; Levine & Nourse, 1998; Fulton & Sabornie, 1994; Wagner, 1992). Female youth with disabilities were not as engaged, were less likely to be employed, made less money, and did not attend postsecondary school at the rates of their male counterparts, in part because many girls were bearing and raising children at a young age (Jay, 1991; Levine & Nourse, 1998; Wagner, 1992). However, among out-of-school youth represented in NLTS2, male and female youth are nearly equally likely to be engaged (79% and 81%, respectively), and there are no significant differences in the activities in which they are engaged.

**Household income.** NLTS2 findings suggest a link between income and engagement. Whereas almost all youth with disabilities (93%) from families with household incomes of more

than \$50,000 a year are engaged, 70% of youth from families with household incomes of \$25,000 or less a year are engaged ( $p < .01$ ).

**Race/ethnicity.** There are no significant racial/ethnic differences in the level of engagement among youth with disabilities.

## Summary

The out-of-school youth with disabilities who are the focus of this report have just entered the adult world. Many are just beginning to realize that they have a place and function in their community and have sought to engage actively in it by working, attending postsecondary school, or enrolling in job training programs. A large percentage of youth with disabilities (79%) are engaged in such activities, and 26% have been engaged in more than one activity since leaving high school. Employment is the most common activity, with about three-fourths working for pay since high school, including half (49%) for whom working is their sole activity. About one-fourth of youth with disabilities have enrolled in a postsecondary school at some time since leaving high school, with the large majority both working and going to school.

Although there are relatively large percentages of youth in every disability category who are engaged, the notable differences in the functional skills of youth in different disability categories pointed out in Chapter 2 probably influence levels and type of engagement. Youth with low functional cognitive and self-care skills are not as engaged as their more skilled counterparts. Consistent with this pattern, engagement is most common for youth with learning disabilities or speech, visual, or other health impairments; more than three-fourths of youth in these categories are engaged. In contrast, youth with mental retardation (52%), multiple disabilities (54%), autism (56%), and orthopedic impairments (59%) have the lowest rates of engagement.

Engagement for youth with disabilities has little to do with their demographic characteristics. Among the few significant findings is a higher likelihood of dual engagement (both employment and postsecondary education) for the oldest group of youth with disabilities. Also, youth from the wealthiest households are more likely to be engaged than youth from the poorest households.

Although rates of engagement are relatively high for out-of-school youth with disabilities as a whole and for most subgroups, it is troubling that approximately one in five (21%) of youth with disabilities have not engaged in their community in the early years after high school, although many are looking for work; few youth have formed families. Some in this group may be finding barriers to engagement or may not know how to advocate for the supports necessary to overcome them. As this group of youth with disabilities age, it will be important to examine whether and how their productive engagement changes with experience.