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NATIONAL LONGITUDINAL  
**TRANSITION STUDY 2**

# **AFTER HIGH SCHOOL: A FIRST LOOK AT THE POSTSCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES**

**A Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2  
(NLTS2)**

## **Executive Summary**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leaving high school is an exciting threshold for many youth in this country, both those with and those without disabilities. It can occasion many changes, which, taken together, can alter students' daily lives dramatically. A familiar schedule of early rising, classroom instruction until midafternoon, school-sponsored extracurricular activities after school, and homework in the evenings gives way to the often more flexible schedules of college for youth who pursue postsecondary education or the structure of a full- or part-time job for those who work. As youth no longer see their friends every day in and between classes or participate in school-sponsored extracurricular activities, the pattern of their social interactions also can change markedly when they leave high school. Perhaps the most dramatic changes following high school occur for youth whose plans entail leaving home, which can plunge them into environments that are fundamentally different from their earlier experiences. These changes can require youth quickly to "step up" to increased expectations for maturity and independence and, for college students, academic performance.

These transitions can be difficult for any youth, but they can be particularly difficult for youth with disabilities, who may encounter additional challenges to negotiating the transition to young adulthood, but are young people with disabilities able to overcome these challenges and succeed in their early transition years?

This question is being addressed through the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), a 10-year study funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education, which is generating information on the experiences and achievements of youth with disabilities in multiple domains during their secondary school years and in the transition to young adulthood. NLTS2 involves a nationally representative sample of more than 11,000 youth who were ages 13 through 16 and receiving special education services in grade 7 or above on December 1, 2000. NLTS2 findings generalize to youth with disabilities nationally and to youth in each of the 12 federal special education disability categories in use for students in the NLTS2 age range.

This report focuses on the 28% of youth with disabilities who were out of secondary school and ages 15 through 19 when telephone interviews were conducted with their parents and, whenever possible, with youth themselves in 2003 and for whom interviews also were conducted in 2001.<sup>1</sup> NLTS2 telephone interview findings presented in this document describe:

- The characteristics of out-of-school youth with disabilities.
- Their experiences in the postsecondary education, employment, independence, and social domains in their first 2 years out of high school.
- The individual and household characteristics and youth experiences that are associated with variations in the achievements of youth with disabilities in their early years after high school.

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<sup>1</sup> These two data collection time points are referred to as Wave 1 (2001 interviews) and Wave 2 (2003 interviews) throughout this report.

## Characteristics of Out-of-School Youth with Disabilities

Several characteristics of the population of youth with disabilities who have been out of secondary school up to 2 years provide important background for interpreting their early postschool experiences.

- 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%).
- Large majorities of out-of-school youth are classified as having learning disabilities or emotional disturbances, are male, and are 18 or 19 years old.
- Very few youth with disabilities have any trouble with self-care tasks, and the majority are reported by parents to have high functional cognitive skills, communicate with no trouble, and have excellent or very good health. However, some youth in every disability category have low ratings on these skills, including relatively larger proportions of youth with autism, traumatic brain injuries, or multiple disabilities.
- 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 skills. Low social skills ratings are particularly prevalent for youth with emotional disturbances.

## Engagement in School, Work, or Preparation for Work

The early postschool activities of the large majority of out-of-school youth with disabilities affirm that their secondary school years have, indeed, prepared them for further education and employment. At some time since leaving high school, almost 8 in 10 out-of-school youth with disabilities have been engaged in postsecondary education, paid employment, or training to prepare them for employment. Employment is the sole mode of engagement in the community for about half of out-of-school youth with disabilities, 4% have attended postsecondary school without working or participating in job training, and about one-fifth have both gone to school and worked since leaving high school.

## Postsecondary Education Participation

- About 3 in 10 out-of-school youth with disabilities have taken postsecondary education classes since leaving high school, with one in five currently attending a postsecondary school at the time of the Wave 2 interview. This current rate of attending postsecondary school is less than half that of their peers in the general population.
- More youth with disabilities are enrolled in 2-year or community colleges than in other types of postsecondary schools. One-fifth have done so at some time since high school, and 10% are attending such schools currently, a participation rate similar to that of youth in the general population.
- Since leaving high school, 9% of youth with disabilities have attended a 4-year college, with 6% doing so currently. Youth in the general population are more than four and one-half times as likely as youth with disabilities to be currently taking courses in 4-year colleges.

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- About 5% of youth with disabilities attend postsecondary vocational, business, or technical schools.

Multivariate analyses indicate that several youth and household characteristics and experiences are associated with a higher probability of having enrolled in 2- or 4-year colleges, including having higher functional cognitive skills, being female, having a better educated head of household, progressing to the next grade level each year in school, and graduating from high school. Only having attention deficit disorder or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD) is associated with the likelihood of enrolling in a postsecondary vocational, business, or technical school.

Regarding the experiences of postsecondary students with disabilities:

- Almost three-fourths of postsecondary students with disabilities go to school full-time, and about 8 in 10 are enrolled steadily, rather than a semester or quarter here and there.
- About two-thirds of postsecondary students with disabilities receive no accommodations from their schools, primarily because their schools are unaware of their disabilities. About half of postsecondary students with disabilities reported that they do not consider themselves to have a disability, and another 7% acknowledged a disability but have not informed their schools of it. Only 40% of postsecondary students with disabilities have informed their schools of their disabilities. Thus, the 35% who receive accommodations are 88% of those whose schools are aware of their disabilities.

## Employment after High School

- About 7 in 10 out-of-school youth with disabilities have worked for pay at some time since leaving high school, and more than 4 in 10 were employed at the time of the Wave 2 interview. This rate is substantially below the 63% employment rate among same-age out-of-school youth in the general population.
- Reliance on typically low-paying personal-care jobs has decreased markedly over time among girls with disabilities; at the same time, there have been substantial increases in jobs in the trades among boys.
- Youth with disabilities have experienced an overall increase in the average number of hours they work per week and a nearly 20-percentage-point increase (to 40%) in those working full-time.
- Wages increased an average of \$1.30 in 2 years, resulting from a significant drop in the percentage of youth with disabilities working for less than minimum wage and a 25-percentage-point increase (to 40%) in the number of youth earning more than \$7.00 per hour. However, receiving benefits as part of a total compensation package is not common; about one-third of out-of-school youth with disabilities receive any benefits (i.e., paid vacation or sick leave, health insurance, or retirement benefits).
- Only 4% of working youth with disabilities receive accommodations for their disabilities, largely because most youth have employers who are unaware of their disabilities. Among those whose employers are aware of their disabilities, 25% are receiving workplace accommodations for them.

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- Most working youth with disabilities have positive feelings about their employment experiences. Four in 10 say they like their current job very much, three-fourths believe their job has put their education to good use and that they are well paid, and two-thirds believe they have opportunities for advancement. Among youth employed more than 6 months, about 60% reported having been promoted, taking on more responsibility, or receiving a pay increase.

### **Emerging Independence**

- Up to 2 years after high school, about three-quarters of youth with disabilities still are living with their parents, a significant decline from 2 years earlier and a similar rate to that of the general population of youth.
- The likelihood that youth with disabilities live independently is enhanced by the sizable increase over time in the proportion of age-eligible youth who have driving privileges; two-thirds can drive, whereas fewer than half could do so 2 years earlier.
- About 12% of out-of-school youth are living with a spouse or roommate outside of their parents' home in Wave 2, and two-thirds of these youth are reported to have annual incomes of \$5,000 or less.
- About 1 in 10 out-of-school youth with disabilities participated in government benefit programs during high school, and participation has changed little during the first 2 postschool years.
- Personal financial management tools also are being used by more youth with disabilities; about one-third have personal checking accounts, and almost one in five have a credit card or charge account in their own name, significantly more youth than 2 years earlier.
- Eight percent of out-of-school youth with disabilities are reported to have had or fathered a child by Wave 2, a rate of parenting similar to that for the general population.

### **Leisure Activities, Social Involvement, and Citizenship**

- Passive uses of leisure time, such as watching television or videos and listening to music, have declined in the 2 years since youth with disabilities left high school, as have electronic forms of communication.
- Participation in organized community groups and in volunteer and community service activities also has declined. In Wave 2, about one-fourth of out-of-school youth with disabilities belong to organized community groups, and a similar share take part in volunteer activities, down from 45% pursuing each activity in Wave 1.
- In contrast, out-of-school youth with disabilities are seeing friends much more often than they were 2 years earlier. Just over half of youth with disabilities reported seeing friends at least weekly outside of organized groups and any school they may attend, an increase from about one-third of youth 2 years earlier.
- Almost two-thirds of youth with disabilities who are 18 or older are registered to vote, a rate similar to that for the general population of youth.

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- When they have been out of secondary school up to 2 years, about half of youth with disabilities have been stopped by police for other than a traffic violation, and 16% have spent a night in jail, both significant increases in a 2-year period. Almost 3 in 10 have been arrested at least once, and 1 in 5 are on probation or parole. These rates of arrest and being on probation or parole have not increased significantly since leaving high school, and the arrest rate is not significantly different from that of peers in the general population.

## **Results Associated with Dropping Out of School**

Failure to complete high school is associated with a variety of negative consequences for youth with disabilities in their early postschool years.

- Dropouts are significantly less likely to be engaged in school, work, or preparation for work shortly after high school than are school completers; two-thirds of dropouts have been engaged in these activities, compared with almost seven in eight school completers.
- Not surprisingly, the forms of engagement of dropouts are unlikely to include postsecondary education. Controlling for other differences between dropouts and completers, including their functional cognitive abilities and previous academic achievement, dropouts with disabilities are 18 percentage points less likely to have enrolled in a 2- or 4-year college shortly after high school than are school completers. Eight percent of dropouts have attended vocational, business, or technical schools, and 1% have attended a 2-year college at some time since leaving high school.
- The rate of holding a paid job since high school among both dropouts and school completers is about 85%. However, dropouts with disabilities tend to work more hours per week (an average of 34 vs. 27 for school completers). Because dropouts and school completers earn quite similar hourly wages, the longer hours worked by dropouts result, in the short run, in their total earnings being higher on average than those of completers.
- Dropouts are more likely to support independent households and children than are school completers. More than one-fourth of dropouts with disabilities are living independently with a spouse or partner, and one-fifth are parenting, rates of independent living and parenting that are more than four times those of youth with disabilities who completed high school.
- Dropouts are less likely than school completers to have such supports for independence as a driver's license or a checking account, and they are much less likely to be registered to vote.
- More than one-third of dropouts with disabilities have spent a night in jail, three times the rate of youth with disabilities who finished high school. Controlling for other differences between them, dropouts are 10 percentage points more likely to have been arrested than youth with disabilities who finished high school.

## **Disability Has Differential Effects across Outcome Domains**

There are markedly different patterns of early postschool experience for youth who differ in their disability category, as noted below.

### ***Youth with Learning Disabilities or Other Health Impairments***

- About three-fourths of out-of-school youth with learning disabilities or other health impairments have completed high school, almost all of those with a regular diploma.
- More than three-fourths have been engaged in school, work, or preparation for work since leaving high school, and about 45% were currently employed at the time of the Wave 2 interview.
- About one-third were expected by their parents “definitely” to go on to postsecondary education after high school, and about that many have done so within 2 years of leaving high school. Two-year college is their typical pursuit.
- Youth with learning disabilities or other health impairments have experienced among the broadest changes in their leisure-time and friendship pursuits, with large reductions in passive leisure activities (e.g., watching television or using a computer) and large increases in seeing friends often.
- Although these youth are among the most likely to be registered to vote (about 70%), they also have experienced the largest declines in participation in prosocial organized groups and volunteer activities.
- Youth in these categories are second only to youth with emotional disturbances in the likelihood of being involved with the criminal justice system, and those with other health impairments show the only significant increase in arrest rates in the 2 years between Waves 1 and 2.

### ***Youth with Emotional Disturbances***

The early postschool experiences of youth with emotional disturbances are troubling in several respects.

- Youth with emotional disturbances are the most likely youth with disabilities to be out of secondary school, with 44% of those leaving school without finishing, the highest dropout rate of any disability category. School completers with emotional disturbances also are among the least likely to have graduated with a regular diploma.
- Thirty-five percent of youth with emotional disturbances no longer live with parents, the largest of any category of youth with disabilities, and they are the only group to show a significant increase in the likelihood of living in “other” arrangements, including in criminal justice or mental health facilities, under legal guardianship, in foster care, or on the street.
- Youth in this category have experienced the largest increase in their rate of parenting; 11% of youth with emotional disturbances report having had or fathered a child, a 10-percentage-point increase from Wave 1.
- One-third of these youth have not found a way to become engaged in their community since leaving high school; for those who have, employment is the usual mode of

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engagement. Although more than 6 in 10 youth with emotional disturbances have been employed at some time since leaving high school, only about half as many are working currently, attesting to the difficulty many of these youth have in keeping a job.

- Only about one in five have been enrolled in any kind of postsecondary education since leaving high school, indicating that few youth in this category are getting the education that might help them find and hold better and more stable jobs.
- Although youth with emotional disturbances are by far the most likely to be rated by parents as having low social skills, they also are among the most likely to see friends often. However, they are among the least likely to take part in prosocial organized community groups or volunteer activities or to be registered to vote.
- More than three-fourths have been stopped by police other than for a traffic violation, 58% have been arrested at least once, and 43% have been on probation or parole. These rates are not significantly higher than rates for these youth 2 years earlier.

### ***Youth with Mental Retardation or Multiple Disabilities***

These are the categories of youth most likely to be reported to have low functional cognitive skills and to have difficulty communicating, functional limitations that can affect all aspects of life and set them apart from other youth with disabilities.

- They are among the least likely to be out of school, consistent with their tendency to remain in high school until they reach age 21. Those who have left high school are among the least likely to have completed high school, and among completers, they are among the least likely to have graduated with a regular diploma.
- Their rates of engagement in school, work, or preparation for work shortly after high school are the lowest of all disability categories, yet youth with mental retardation are among the most likely to be living on their own and to be parenting. Few have tools to support that independence, including driving privileges or checking accounts.
- Independent of other differences in functioning between them, youth with multiple disabilities are 17 percentage points less likely to see friends often than are youth with learning disabilities, and when more functional domains are affected by their disabilities, the likelihood of frequent friendship interactions falls even lower.
- Youth with mental retardation and those with multiple disabilities also are among the least likely to take part in organized community groups or volunteer activities up to 2 years after leaving high school.

### ***Youth with Hearing or Visual Impairments***

Youth with hearing or visual impairments are the most likely of all categories to experience academic success.

- Ninety percent or more finish high school, virtually all with a regular diploma.
- Youth with hearing or visual impairments are more than twice as likely as youth with disabilities as a whole to have enrolled in a postsecondary school; about two-thirds have done so up to 2 years after high school. Further, they are the most likely to attend a



4-year college or university; about 4 in 10 have enrolled in such schools, a rate four times that of youth with disabilities as a whole.

- Unlike youth with disabilities as a whole, youth with these sensory impairments show no significant decline over time in their participation in organized community groups or volunteer activities; almost twice as many of them volunteer, compared with youth with disabilities as a whole. They are as likely to be registered to vote as any other category of youth.
- The rates of criminal justice system involvement are low for these groups of youth, as are their parenting rates.

Despite these largely positive experiences being shared by youth with hearing and visual impairments, their experiences with friends and jobs differ.

- The communication challenges faced by youth with hearing impairments may help explain why they are significantly less likely than youth with disabilities as a whole to get together with friends frequently, a difference not observed for youth with visual impairments.
- In contrast, irrespective of other differences in disability, functioning, and demographics, youth with visual impairments are 21 percentage points less likely to be employed currently than youth with learning disabilities; there is no difference in the probability of employment between youth with learning disabilities and those with hearing impairments.
- Some of the difference between employment rates of youth with hearing and visual impairments may be attributable to the access to jobs that youth with hearing impairments have because they can drive; more than 80% of them who are age-eligible have driving privileges, compared with fewer than 20% of youth with visual impairments.

## **Demographic Differences Are Not Powerful**

Youth with disabilities differ in many respects other than the nature of their disability, including such important characteristics as age, gender, household income, and race/ethnicity. However, these differences are not associated with strong or consistent differences across outcome domains, although there are some exceptions, as noted below.

### **Age**

Youth in the narrow age range of 15- through 19-year-olds are similar in several respects. Age does not have an independent relationship with the likelihood that youth with disabilities see friends often or enroll in a vocational, business, or technical school, nor are there age differences in the likelihood that youth participate in volunteer or organized community group activities. Similarly, age is not associated with the likelihood of parenting or of being involved with the criminal justice system. However, some differences are evident.

- Age is strongly associated with a higher likelihood of employment and postsecondary education participation, independent of the influences of disability, functioning, and other demographic differences between youth.

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- Nineteen-year-olds have experienced the largest drop over time in the proportion living with parents and the largest increase in having a checking account or personal credit card or charge account.
- The only significant increases in earning driving privileges have occurred among 18- and 19-year-olds, who are more likely than younger peers to have earned those privileges, potentially giving them greater access to employment, educational, and other community opportunities.

### **Gender**

The experiences of boys and girls with disabilities differ in many, although not all, respects. Similarities across genders include their school-leaving status; the likelihood of being engaged in school, work, or preparation for work since leaving high school; current employment rates; and most aspects of independence, including residential arrangements, having driving privileges, using personal financial management tools, and having had or fathered a child.

Important differences are apparent in other experiences, however:

- Girls with disabilities are 6 percentage points more likely to have been enrolled in a 2- or 4-year college since high school than are boys, controlling for other differences between them.
- A large increase over time in seeing friends frequently has occurred only among girls with disabilities. This differential change has eliminated the difference between genders that existed in Wave 1.
- The significant increase in the likelihood of being stopped and questioned by police other than for a traffic violation and of spending a night in jail that is evident among youth with disabilities as a whole occurs solely among boys, resulting in boys being significantly more likely than girls to have stayed overnight in jail.
- Girls with disabilities are significantly less likely than boys to be single; about one-fourth are engaged, married, or in a marriage-like relationship. Girls who are living independently are significantly more likely than boys to be supporting themselves on less than \$5,000 per year.

### **Household Income**

Youth with disabilities who come from households with different income levels are similar in several aspects of their early postschool experiences. Their leisure-time use and social lives have not changed differentially, nor have many aspects of their independence, including their residential arrangements or parenting status. Income also is unrelated to the likelihood of currently being employed or ever having been arrested, irrespective of other differences between youth. Also, having a better-educated head of household, which tends to be more common among higher-income households, outweighs income itself in helping explain the variation in the likelihood that youth with disabilities will enroll in 2- or 4-year colleges up to 2 years after leaving high school.

However, youth with disabilities from wealthier households are more likely to be engaged in school, work, or preparation for work; whereas 93% of youth with disabilities from families with incomes of more than \$50,000 a year are engaged in such activities after high school, 70%

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of youth from families with household incomes of \$25,000 or less a year are thus engaged. Similarly, youth with disabilities from wealthier households are more likely than peers from low-income households to have earned driving privileges (perhaps because they are more likely to have access to a car) and to have a personal checking or charge account or credit card.

### ***Race/Ethnicity***

There are no differences across racial/ethnic groups in the likelihood of being engaged in school, work, or preparation for work shortly after high school; enrolling in college or a vocational, business, or technical school; living independently; having active friendships; having had or fathered a child; or ever having been arrested. However, independent of other differences between them, African-American youth with disabilities are at a 16-percentage-point disadvantage relative to white youth in their rate of current employment. Also, white youth with disabilities are more likely than others to have driving privileges and a personal checking account.

This summary of the postschool experiences of youth with disabilities reaffirms the great diversity in the experiences of youth with disabilities. Most have finished high school, become engaged in their communities, see friends regularly, and show signs of emerging independence; but on every dimension, it is evident that some youth are struggling because of their disability, poverty, the absence of a high school education, or other factors. Yet it is important to be cautious in assigning either success or failure to transition outcomes achieved during this very early period after high school. NLTS2 will continue to describe the experiences of youth with disabilities as they age and to investigate the programs and experiences during secondary school and the early transition years that are associated with positive results in young adulthood.