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What Are the Employment Experiences of Youth with Autism After High School?

By Alberto Migliore and Agnieszka Zalewska

As the number of youth diagnosed with autism increases across the nation, there is a growing interest in knowing about their employment experiences after high school. To explore this, we examined the findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2.

As Table 1 shows, over half of youth with autism worked at some point after leaving high school (67%). This figure was greater than for their peers with an intellectual disability (ID) (53%), although smaller compared with their peers with other disabilities (86%). When looking only at those employed at the time of the interview, however, the figures were smaller across all disability groups.

Youth with autism were more likely to work in office and administrative support (21%) compared to youth with ID (7%) and youth with other disabilities (8%). They were also less likely to work in the food industry (12%) or to do cleaning and maintenance (10%) compared to their peers with ID (20% and 19%).

Almost half of the youth with autism earned less than the federal minimum wage and reported that the majority of their co-workers were people with disabilities (42%). In addition, only about a third of youth with autism received paid vacation or sick leave (29%), and even less received health insurance (11%) or retirement benefits (10%). Despite these limitations, respondents indicated that work was an important positive experience: Over 85% of youth across the three disability groups reported liking their job very much or fairly well.

As the number of youth diagnosed with autism increases nationally, knowing more about their employment experiences after high school is an important first step toward improvement.

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) includes a nationally representative sample of students with disabilities who were 13 to 16 years old and in special education in 2000. Data were collected through five waves over a period of ten years. For this data note we focused on data collected in 2008–2009 (Wave Five), when all youth were 21 to 25 years old.

The questions about employment were the following:

1. Did you do any work for pay, other than work around the house, at any time since high school?
2. Do you have a paid job now, other than work around the house?

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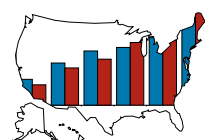


Table 1. Employment Outcomes of Transition-Age Youth

	Autism (%)	ID (%)	Other (%)
Worked for pay other than work around the house since leaving high school			
Yes	67	53 *	86 *
No	33	47	14
Total	100	100	100
Currently has a paid job other than work around the house			
Yes	45	37	61 *
No	55	63	39
Total	100	100	100
Type of current or most recent job			
Office and administrative support	21	7 *	8 *
Production	17	22	6 *
Food preparation and serving	12	20 *	12
Cleaning and maintenance	10	19 *	5
Transportation and material moving	8	10	8
Sales	3	7	10 *
Other	29	14 *	50 *
Total	100	100	100
Paid at least \$5.15/hour and coworkers without disability			
Yes	58	69 *	99 ***
No	42	31	1
Total	100	100	100
Received paid vacation or sick leave			
Yes	29	38	36
No	71	62	64
Total	100	100	100
Received health insurance			
Yes	11	22	29 *
No	89	78 *	71
Total	100	100	100
Received retirement benefits			
Yes	10	22	25 *
No	90	78 *	75
Total	100	100	100
How well youth likes/liked his/her current or most recent job			
Very much	34	64 **	44 *
Fairly well	53	28 **	43 *
Not much	3	8 *	8 *
Not at all	10	na	5
Total	100	100	100

Note. Cohen h effect sizes (Autism baseline): *Small **Medium ***Large

Because some youth may have reported wages relative to jobs performed in as early as 2006, we used the federal minimum wage of \$5.15 in place at that time.

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