

Postsecondary Employment Experiences Among Young Adults With an Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Objective: We examined postsecondary employment experiences of young adults with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and compared these outcomes with those of young adults with different disabilities. **Method:** Data were from Wave 5 of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), a nationally representative survey of young adults who had received special education services during high school. We examined the prevalence of ever having had, and currently having, a paid job at 21 to 25 years of age. We analyzed rates of full-time employment, wages earned, number of jobs held since high school, and job types. **Results:** Approximately one-half (53.4%) of young adults with an ASD had ever worked for pay outside the home since leaving high school, the lowest rate among disability groups. Young adults with an ASD earned an average of \$8.10 per hour, significantly lower than average wages for young adults in the comparison groups, and held jobs that clustered within fewer occupational types. Odds of ever having had a paid job were higher for those who were older, from higher-income households, and with better conversational abilities or functional skills. **Conclusions:** Findings of worse employment outcomes for young adults with an ASD suggest that this population is experiencing particular difficulty in successfully transitioning into employment. Research is needed to determine strategies for improving outcomes as these young adults transition into adulthood. *J. Am. Acad. Child Adolesc. Psychiatry*, 2013;52(9):931–939. **Key Words:** adolescent, autism, employment, outcomes, young adult

A growing population of adolescents diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is aging toward adulthood. An estimated 50,000 youth with an ASD turn 18 years of age each year in the United States.¹ However, research about the adult stage of life for those with an ASD remains extremely underdeveloped relative to research on young children with an ASD.^{2,3} The 2011 Strategic Plan for Autism Spectrum Disorder Research of the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee emphasized the critical need for longitudinal studies of adult outcomes, such as employment, as a basis for policy recommendations.⁴

Parents of youth with an ASD need information about employment prospects and often turn to medical providers for anticipatory guidance regarding the transition to adulthood.⁵ The Society for Adolescent Medicine affirms the importance of family–professional partnerships in planning for the transitional care needs of youth, and specifies “vocational progress” as a developmental area that must be addressed.⁶ For psychiatrists and mental health practitioners, participation in transition planning is especially important, given that the onset of many commonly co-occurring psychiatric disorders occurs during adolescence and persists into early adulthood.^{7,8}

Employment is a socially normative activity that often occupies the majority of adult lives and is a key component of passage into adulthood.⁹ Employment for wages contributes to individual economic and social well-being, is linked to positive health outcomes, is a gateway to health insurance, and is a factor in quality of life. For



This article is discussed in an editorial by Dr. Patricia Howlin on page 897.



Clinical guidance is available at the end of this article.

youth with disabilities, achieving employment through an effective transition process is a primary intended outcome of special education per federal law.¹⁰ Yet, historically, employment has not been easily achieved or maintained for young adults with developmental disabilities.¹¹ There are few nationally representative findings characterizing the employment experiences of young adults with an ASD.

A cross-sectional study of young adults 18 to 24 years of age conducted in the United States found that 54% were employed in 2011.¹² A separate national survey of adults 26 to 31 years of age asked participants if they ever had at least 1 job between age 18 and 25 years; of the participants, 98.6% replied that they had.¹³ Similarly, the vast majority (91%) of young adults with disabilities find some form of paid employment outside the home within the first 8 years after high school.¹⁴

Young adults with an ASD appear to fare worse in employment outcomes when compared with young adults with other types of disabilities. Shattuck *et al.* (2012) found that 55% of young adults with an ASD had ever worked outside the home for pay at least once in the first 6 years after high school—the lowest rate across comparison disability groups.¹

Very few details about the characteristics of employment experiences of young adults with an ASD have been published.^{15,16} Prior research suggests that few who are employed work independently or in competitive employment, and most are employed in sheltered workshop settings.¹⁷ Difficulty securing and maintaining employment also extends to individuals with autism who have average or above-average intellectual ability.^{18,19} Factors related to employment and other outcomes in adults with an ASD include intelligence, communication abilities, adaptive functioning level, co-occurring mental health and medical issues, and family socioeconomic status.^{2,3} Evidence about employment of young adults with an ASD is largely derived from samples that are small or not population based, and studies of those who are already engaged with the U.S. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) system, thereby limiting the generalizability of findings.

This study characterizes employment experiences among postsecondary young adults with an ASD using data collected in 2009 as part of a nationally representative, cohort study of young adults with disabilities who had been receiving special education services when in high school at

the start of the study in 2000. We describe rates of employment, wages earned, types of jobs held, and covariate-adjusted group comparisons. Our study compares findings for the ASD group with those of young adults who had previously been served in the special education enrollment categories of mental retardation (MR), learning disability (LD), emotional disturbance (ED), and speech/language impairment (SLI).

METHOD

Study Participants

We used secondary data from wave 5 (collected in 2009) of the National Longitudinal Transition Study–2 (NLTS2), a 10-year prospective study of youth who were receiving special education services at the start of the study. NLTS2 has ended, and it is not possible to contact study participants to collect additional data. Use of these data is governed by an agreement with the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) and was deemed exempt by the Washington University Institutional Review Board. Unweighted sample sizes were rounded to the nearest 10 as required by the USDE.

Sampling and Generalizability

This study used special education classifications for determining groups. Determination of special education eligibility and specific classification within the autism category was made by each student's school district as per federal law.¹⁰ Independent, clinical validation of ASD diagnosis by our team was not an option. The USDE does not require use of diagnostic criteria from the *DSM-IV-TR* in special education eligibility determination. Each state is allowed to operationalize its own eligibility criteria for the special educational category of autism within broad boundaries established in federal law.²⁰ The federal definition of autism in special education law is consistent with *DSM-IV-TR* criteria, but is much less detailed. Prior research has indicated that 99% of students eligible for special education under the category of autism also meet *DSM-IV*-derived case criteria for an ASD.^{21,22} The autism special education category tends to be highly specific and moderately sensitive. Some youth with an ASD might receive special education services under a disability category other than autism, and some might not receive special education. We excluded youth from comparison groups if parents reported that their children had ever received an autism spectrum diagnosis. Youth with an ASD who are not receiving special education services would also not be included in this study's estimates.

NLTS2 findings generalize to the population of youth who were ages 13 through 16 years as of December 1, 2000, and receiving special education services. A multistage process was used to sample by

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