

Paid Employment of Transition-age Youth with Intellectual Disability and Autism Compared with Other Youth

By Belkis Choiseul-Praslin, Clare Papay, Meg Grigal, Alberto Migliore, and Jie Chen

INTRODUCTION

Paid employment for youth with disabilities is an important marker of independence in adult life. One's ability to secure and maintain employment in a paid position can have a significant impact on their overall quality of life, community participation, financial self-sufficiency, and pathway to a long-lasting career (Mamun et al., 2018). Despite federal policy and legislation aimed at supporting improved employment outcomes (e.g., Employment First Initiatives, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004; Workforce Innovation Opportunities Act of 2014) and concerted efforts from education, transition, vocational, and other professionals of related fields over the past 30+ years, the paid employment rate for youth and adults with a disability remains markedly lower than their peers without a disability (US Department of Labor, 2022).

Our understanding of national employment trends and outcomes for youth with disabilities has been heavily informed by the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and NLTS2, with data gathered in 1987–1991 and 2001–2009 respectively. The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2012 (NLTS 2012) dataset offers an updated look at employment of youth in 7th–12th grade with data gathered in 2012–2013. Using the NLTS 2012 data, we examined employment in the past 12 months of youth with intellectual disability (ID) and autism (collectively referred to here as ID/A) compared to other populations of youth with and without disabilities.

Despite consistent findings that paid employment while in high school is one of the strongest predictors of post-school paid employment, far too few students with ID/A and autism without an ID are engaged in paid employment.

METHODS

We conducted a secondary analysis of the NLTS 2012 dataset to determine the percentage of youth with and without disabilities who worked for pay in the last 12 months. We used tests for descriptive analysis and Cohen's h . The NLTS 2012 involved a nationally representative sample of youth with and without disabilities between ages 13–21 during the 2011–2012 school year. Mathematica Policy Research conducted the NLTS 2012 (see: Bloomenthal et al., 2017 and Burghardt et al., 2017). For this report, we focused on one variable for analysis: **N5R-“Youth worked for pay in the past 12 months”**.

Of the 12,000 youth included in the dataset, we selected youth who were ages 16 and older to ensure we focused only on those youth legally allowed to work. The sample consisted of:

- 9,600 youth with an Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- 600 youth with a 504 plan but not an IEP
- 1,800 youth with neither an IEP nor a 504 plan

The 9,600 youth with an IEP included youth from each of the 13 disability categories listed under IDEA of 2004. We divided the sample of youth with an IEP into three groups:

1. youth with ID/A
2. youth with autism but not ID
3. youth with other disabilities

Youth with 504 plans only and youth with no known disability were much more likely to have had paid employment in the past year than youth with ID/A.

FINDINGS

Youth with a 504 plan but no IEP had the highest employment rate (66%) among all youth included in the sample. This was followed by youth with neither a 504 plan nor an IEP (60%), youth with other disabilities (47%), youth with ID/A (32%), and youth with autism but not ID (25%; see Figure 1).

Results from the Cohen's h effect size test show only a small effect size for the difference between youth with ID/A compared with youth with autism but not ID ($h = 0.16$) and youth with other disabilities ($h = 0.29$). We found a medium effect size when comparing youth with ID/A to both youth with a 504 plan but no IEP ($h = 0.69$) and youth with neither a 504 plan nor an IEP ($h = 0.57$).

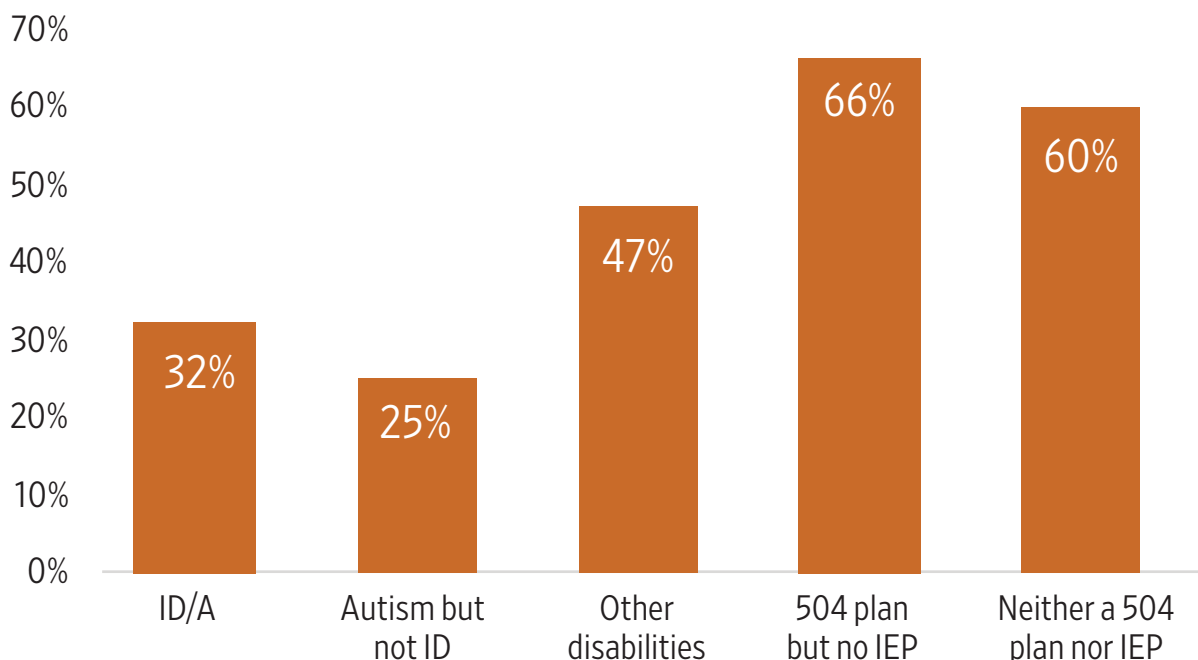
To summarize, youth with 504 plans only and youth with no known disability were much more likely to have had paid employment in the past year than youth with ID/A.

IMPLICATIONS

The data show a clear division between youth with ID/A or autism and those who have a 504 plan or no known disability. Youth with a 504 plan, or rather youth with disabilities whose needs can be accommodated without the implementation of a specialized program, are more likely to engage in paid employment than youth with more complex needs (Sanford et al., 2011; Test et al., 2009). Conversely, youth with ID/A are about half as likely to work while enrolled in high school. Youth with autism but not ID had the lowest paid employment rates of any student group we examined.

These findings align with those from the earlier NLTS studies, which is disappointing. Most students with ID/A and autism remain unemployed in high school. Despite consistent findings that paid employment while in high school is one of the strongest predictors of post-school paid employment (Carter et al., 2012; Mazzotti et al., 2021; Test et al., 2009), far too few students with ID/A and autism without an ID are engaged in paid employment. Large-scale and immediate changes are needed if we want to improve the employment rates for these youth.

FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF YOUTH WHO WORKED FOR PAY IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS



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