

NLTS2 Data Brief

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National Center on Secondary
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Creating Opportunities for Youth With
Disabilities to Achieve Successful Futures



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Who Are Secondary Students in Special Education Today?

by Mary Wagner, Renée Cameto, and Anne-Marie Guzmán

Although the disability of a student who receives special education can be a powerful influence on his or her experiences, other characteristics of youth also affect their lives in important ways. For example, gender has both obvious and subtle influences on the ways they develop. Racial/ethnic background can involve rich cultural traditions and patterns of relationships within families and communities that can generate important differences in values, perspectives, expectations, and practices. The households where youth grow up, the resources available in them, and the characteristics of the parents who head them can have implications for students' economic security and emotional support.

Understanding the complex set of characteristics that youth with disabilities bring to their experiences at school and in the community is a foundation for serving them well. The following brief on the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)¹ provides information on those characteristics.

Individual Characteristics of Youth

Disabilities

Youth who received special education were almost 13% of all youth age 13 through 16 who were enrolled in school in the 2000-01 school year. More than six in 10 students (62%) in this age group who were receiving special education were classified as having a learning disability. Those with mental retardation comprised 12% of students receiving special education, and those with emotional disturbances comprised 11%. Youth with other health impairments comprised 5%, and those with speech/language impairments comprised 4% of students receiving special education. The remaining disability categories comprised 6% of secondary-school-age students receiving special education. More than half (55%) of all youth with disabilities were reported to have more than

¹ NLTS2 has a nationally representative sample of more than 11,000 youth who on December 1, 2000, were ages 13 through 16, receiving special education, and in at least 7th grade. Information from NLTS2 is weighted to represent youth with disabilities nationally as a group, as well as youth in each federal special education disability category. The information reported here was gathered from parents/guardians of NLTS2 youth in telephone interviews or through mail questionnaires in the summer and fall of 2001.

one kind of disability. Besides those classified as having multiple disabilities or deaf-blindness, secondary disabilities were particularly common for youth with mental retardation (81%) or emotional disturbances (76%) and least common for those with hearing or visual impairments (38%).

Age

When NLTS2 interviews were conducted with parents, youth spanned the age range of 13 through 17, with an average age of 15.2. Youth with speech impairments were younger (14.9 years on average), whereas those with visual impairments, traumatic brain injuries, or multiple disabilities were older (15.4 on average).

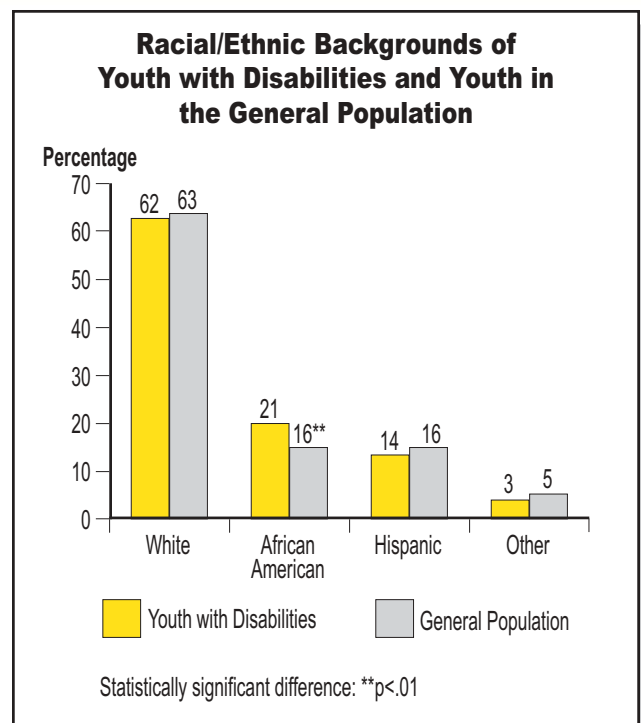
Gender

Two-thirds (67%) of youth with disabilities were boys. OSEP longitudinal studies of infants and toddlers (Hebbeler et al., 2001) and of elementary and middle school students (Wagner et al., 2002) with disabilities show that boys are a similarly large proportion of children and youth with disabilities across the age range. Among adolescents, boys comprised particularly large percentages of those with autism (85%), emotional disturbances (76%), or other health impairments (73%). In contrast, the proportion of boys among youth with hearing or visual impairments was very close to that of the general population.²

Racial/ethnic background

Although white youth were about the same percentage of youth with disabilities as of the general population, African Americans were 21% of youth with disabilities, compared with 16% of the general student population (see chart). In contrast, there were somewhat fewer Hispanics among youth with disabilities than among youth as a whole (14% vs. 16%), and fewer of those of mixed or other racial/ethnic backgrounds (3% vs. 5%). Similar differences in the distributions of the various races/ethnicities occur across the age range. For example, in 1998 among infants and toddlers with disabilities, 21% were African American, compared with 15% in the general population of young children (Hebbeler et al., 2001).

² Data for the general population are from the U.S. Census unless otherwise noted.



Adolescents in most disability categories were very like the general population in their racial/ethnic makeup. However, African Americans were a larger proportion of youth with mental retardation (33%) and a smaller proportion of those with other health impairments (13%). There were particularly few Hispanic youth with other health impairments (8%).

Household Characteristics

Household income

Youth with disabilities were more likely to be poor than youth in general. More than one-third (37%) of youth with disabilities came from households with incomes of \$25,000 or less, compared with 20% of the general population. Similar to the general population, students of color were more likely than white youth to come from low-income households. More than half of African American and Hispanic youth with disabilities came from households with incomes of \$25,000 or less, compared with 25% of white youth.

Living arrangements

Almost one-third (31%) of youth with disabilities lived in single-parent households, similar to the general population. Single-parent households were much more common among low-income youth with disabilities (55%) than among their wealthier peers (9%). Youth with disabilities were more likely to be living in households without a parent than were youth in the general population (8% vs. 5%). More than one-third of adolescents with disabilities (36%) lived in households in which another child also had a disability.

Parents' characteristics

Compared with the general population, youth with disabilities were twice as likely to have a head of household who had not graduated from high school (21% vs. 10%). Their heads of household also were much more likely to be unemployed (17% vs. 11%). Heads of household who were high school dropouts were more common among low-income households than among higher-income households (39% vs. 7%), as were heads of household who were unemployed (35% vs. 5%).³

Disability Category Differences in Household Characteristics

Youth with different disabilities had very different household environments (see table). For example, youth with mental retardation were much more likely than most others to have a cluster of household characteristics that could be risk factors for poor outcomes. More than half of youth with mental retardation (55%) came from low-income households, and 34% were living with a single parent. The heads of household of one-third of such youth were high school dropouts, and 28% were not working. Youth with emotional disturbances also were more likely than most others to experience several of these risk factors.

In contrast, these characteristics were least common for youth with autism or other health impairments. One-fourth came from low-income households or lived with one parent. Their heads of household also were among the least likely to be high school dropouts or unemployed.

NLTS2 data suggest that youth with disabilities differ in important ways from the general population. The differences *between* disability categories in many of the individual and household characteristics presented here are even more striking. Understanding these variations in the characteris-

Household Characteristics, 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	Deaf-Blindness
<i>Percentage of youth:</i>												
From households with:												
Low income (<=\$25,000)	34	29	55	44	29	32	31	24	23	32	35	35
A single parent	31	25	34	38	26	31	27	22	27	30	25	36
Another child with a disability	35	34	39	39	26	32	26	40	29	26	35	23
With a head of household who was:												
A high school dropout	20	20	32	20	18	15	15	13	11	15	14	18
Unemployed	14	15	28	24	14	18	16	12	16	17	20	19

³ Computed by using data from the National Household Education Survey, 1999.

tics of youth with disabilities provides an important context for interpreting differences in their experiences and achievements in school and in early adulthood. As NLTS2 unfolds throughout this decade, analyses will highlight key aspects of those experiences and achievements and identify factors that contribute to more successful outcomes for youth with disabilities.

References

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NLTS2 Welcomes Feedback!

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