

Research In Focus: A Weekly Digest of New Research from the NIDILRR Community

For Youth with Disabilities Seeking Employment, Work Experience May Matter More Than School Factors

Young adults with disabilities are less likely to find employment than young adults without disabilities, and those youth with disabilities who are employed may earn less than their peers without disabilities. Unemployment and under-employment rates are especially high for young women with disabilities and some ethnic minority youth, such as African Americans.

School factors such as low budgets or large class sizes could contribute to high unemployment rates in youth with disabilities because youth with disabilities who attend these under-resourced high schools may not be getting the support they need to obtain employment after graduation. On the other hand, youth with disabilities may benefit from paid work experiences and job placement support, regardless of the resources available at school. A recent NIDILRR-funded study looked at both school factors and work experience to see how they contributed to employment success for youth with disabilities.

Researchers from the [Center on Transition to Employment for Youth with Disabilities](#) and the Florida State University looked at data from youth with disabilities who had participated in a multisite transition program to see if those who attended high schools in higher-income neighborhoods or with smaller class sizes were more likely to get a job after completing the program. They also examined whether youth with disabilities who had more previous work experience were more likely to get a job regardless of the type of school they attended.

The researchers analyzed data from 3,289 youth with disabilities who had participated in the Bridges From School to Work (Bridges) transition program between 2005 and 2010. Bridges is a vocational training program that enrolls youth with disabilities during their final year of high school and continues for one year post-high school. Over these approximately two years, Bridges participants receive vocational

counseling and assessment, job skills training, and job placement support. The goal of the program is to match the youth with competitive job placements in the community. Bridges serves youth with disabilities living in eight large United States metropolitan areas including Atlanta, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, Oakland, and Dallas.

The participants provided data about their ethnicity, gender, disability status, and previous work experience they had before beginning Bridges. To measure job success, researchers tracked two outcomes: whether or not the youth obtained a job after completing the Bridges program, and the amount of money they earned per week.

The researchers also gathered data about the students' high schools from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). They looked at three school factors to see if they were related to job success: economic status of the community measured by the percentage of students at the school who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, the percentage of students at the school who were minorities, and the ratio of students to teachers in the school the student attended.

In this study, most participants were minority youth who were either African American (64%) or Hispanic (21%). The most common disability type was a learning disability (73%). The researchers found that previous work experience was the most important factor for employment success, both in terms of job attainment and earnings. In contrast, none of the school factors were related to whether or not the youth obtained a job, and only one school factor, student-teacher ratio, was related to earnings.

Specifically, the researchers found:

- Only 16% of the students had prior work experience before they started the Bridges program. With other things being equal, these students were about 38% more likely to get a job than the students without work experience, and they earned about \$19 more per week on average.
- Students attending schools with a higher ratio of students per teacher had higher earnings.

- The economic status of the community and the percentage of minority students had no significant impact on employment success.

In addition to these results, the researchers found that:

- About 35% of the students were labeled as having “significant disabilities” by the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) system. These students were about 22% more likely to get a job than those with less significant disabilities. According to the authors, this may be because students classified as having a significant disability may be offered VR services and supports at an earlier age.
- There was a gender gap, with female students being about 31% less likely to get a job than male students and earning about \$20 less per week.
- While minority and non-minority students were equal in their job placement rates, minority students earned about \$12 more per week than non-minority students in the program.

The researchers only looked at data for students who chose to be in the Bridges program, so it is not clear whether data from young people who do not voluntarily sign up for a job placement assistance program like Bridges would yield the same results. Also, the researchers did not measure community factors, such as the availability of entry-level jobs, which might influence success in securing a job.

Based on the results of this study, the authors suggested that early vocational training and integrated work experience can benefit all youth with disabilities, including minority youth and those from lower income school districts. The authors recommended that vocational services, especially paid work experience opportunities, should be offered to youth while they are still in high school. School districts may want to collaborate with VR agencies to ensure that all youth with disabilities receive effective transition services.

[To Learn More](#)

The NIDILRR-funded Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for Evidence-Based Practice in Vocational Rehabilitation offers resources for vocational rehabilitation

professionals to understand and implement new and promising practices in VR, including supports for youth in transition: <http://www.research2vrpractice.org>

Project SEARCH is an evidence-based internship program for high school students with autism spectrum disorders or other intellectual or developmental disabilities which has been studied under several NIDILRR grants. <http://www.projectsearch.us/>

The Bridges to Work Program matches the workforce development needs of local employers with the skills and interests of motivated young people. Find program information and local opportunities: <http://www.bridgestowork.org/>

To Learn More about this Study

Dong, S., Fabian, E., & Luecking, R. G. (2016) [Impacts of School Structural Factors and Student Factors on Employment Outcomes for Youth With Disabilities in Transition: A Secondary Data Analysis](#). Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin 59, 224-234. This article is available from the NARIC collection under Accession Number J7xxxx.

Research In Focus is a publication of the National Rehabilitation Information Center (NARIC), a library and information center focusing on disability and rehabilitation research, with a special focus on the research funded by NIDILRR. NARIC provides information, referral, and document delivery on a wide range of disability and rehabilitation topics. To learn more about this study and the work of the greater NIDILRR grantee community, visit NARIC at www.naric.com or call 800/346-2742 to speak to an information specialist.

NARIC operates under a contract from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services, contract #GS-06F-0726Z.