

# Young Adults with Developmental Disabilities: Barriers to Employment

N Khanlou, S Asefaw, & M Hart

## Barriers to employment

Young people with developmental disabilities (DDs), like all young people, experience exciting opportunities as they move from adolescence to the demands of adulthood. Becoming an adult for the young person with a developmental disability entails exploring new interests, getting to know their community and new service workers, learning work skills and making new friends. Yet, young adults with DDs and their families experience many more challenges and barriers to achieve their goals than families of children with no disabilities.

Youth's transition to adulthood is a significant period for individuals and their families because it entails choices regarding further education or search for employment. Discrimination and stigma significantly impact on the chances people with disabilities have to find and keep a job. A study with adults with disabilities shows that in Canada, "the presence of workplace and employer discrimination and labelling" were the main factors impeding individuals' "success in securing and maintaining employment in the labour market" (Shier et al., 2009, p. 63). Young adults with DDs face important barriers to obtain paid employment, an issue that also is closely linked to the disadvantages they face in regard to advancing their education.

According to Statistics Canada (2017):

- ✓ Youth with disabilities are at a higher risk of not being in school or employed
- ✓ One-third of working age adults with more severe disabilities are living in poverty



## Our study

This Information Sheet reports on selected findings from our study that looked at the issues young adults with DDs face in securing access to financial support. Information #10 provides detailed information about the study. Briefly, we conducted in-depth interviews with young adults with DDs, caregivers and service providers. We wanted to know:

- ❖ What type of funding do young adults with DDs have access to?
- ❖ What are the problems they face in getting access to direct funding?

In this Information Sheet we discuss barriers young adults with DDs face in employment. We also discuss caregivers' experiences and views about employment challenges for their young adults, in the context of families' economic constraints and barriers to access social funding for their youth.

## What did caregivers of young adults with DDs

**tell us about the challenges their children face?**

Young adults with DDs have difficulties to secure full-time and stable employment. This is critical if we take into account the broader context of economic constraints and difficulties that they and their families face. Families “are more likely to stay poor than other families” without individuals with disabilities (Savage et al., 2014).

	<b>Persons aged 15 to 64 with a developmental disability</b>	<b>Persons aged 15 to 64 without a developmental disability</b>
Employment rate	22.3%	73.6%
Percentage of people that rely on government transfers as their major source of income	71.9%	18.7%

Source: Statistics Canada, 2015

In order to provide appropriate care for their children or young adults with DDs, caregivers participating in our study reported that often, mothers abandoned their full-time jobs. When parents cannot pay for support services or extra expenses, they cope by giving up family income in order to care for their young adults with DDs, leading to much reduced family resources and more stress.

She is living in an assisted living, so she gets \$1,110 but that pays for her rent and cable. That's it! That's all it pays for. We, as parents are paying for everything else ... out of our pocket (P11, Caregiver- mother).

Even when payment was not required, caregivers cited tremendous time commitments in helping to guide their young adults with DDs for obtaining volunteer opportunities or exposure to occupational possibilities.

“Low employment rates of chronically ill and disabled people are of serious concern. Being out of work increases the risk of poverty and social exclusion, which may further damage the health of these groups exacerbating health inequalities” (Holland, et al., 2011).

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and associated regulations establish accessibility standards that employers must meet. Despite this, caregivers reported barriers that reflect a lack of fair accessibility in employment and training.

- Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Ontario** is committed to creating an inclusive workplace culture that allows individuals with disabilities to perform to their potential (AODA, 2005). Employers will:
- ✓ Identify, remove and prevent barriers throughout the employment life cycle;
  - ✓ Provide inclusive employment systems and procedures;
  - ✓ Support persons with disabilities with accommodation during recruitment, assessment, selection and hiring stages;
  - ✓ Provide individualized accommodation to support employees with disabilities;
  - ✓ Provide alternate formats and other related communication supports and services upon request; and
  - ✓ Communicate with employees with disabilities in ways that take into account their disability.

## **economic challenges and employment?**

Young adults with DDs shared their thoughts about the relevance of diversity in work environments:

I really want to work for a company that, you know, would largely cater to people with disabilities. I wouldn't want to work for a company that is not really in the know about it too much. I want a company that is, you know, neuro-diverse... (P68, male youth).

Young adults also pointed to the challenges they face to get a paid employment:

Finding work and steady pay is definitely difficult. Part of it is that different people have to have different experiences. I have Asperger's, the place that is hiring may have had somebody that has had Asperger's and they stole from the store or assaulted a customer and they don't know what I'm going to be like... [employers] have difficulty trusting and giving somebody a chance (P75, male youth).

Young adults shared their strategies to be able to make ends meet in a context of economic constraints:

...there's also stuff that I get for free like the food banks, and also sometimes when I don't have money to get enough food I also go to free dinners and community lunches and dinners... and sometimes clothing donations, and get free clothes from there so that I don't really have to buy it, and I can just get free stuff from there (P77, female youth).

Youth told us what they would do in case they have a better economic situation:

...well then I'd find more programs for myself, so like I would move out and I would find somebody that has my needs, like basically have common things that I'd like to do. I would maybe like to find a social worker [for me] (P78, female youth).

## **What did participants suggest to promote young adults with DDs inclusion in the labor market?**

Caregivers pointed to the need to promote the inclusion of young adults with DDs because a lack of opportunities means that society is also missing out on the chance to take advantage of youth's skills and potential:

... young adults with DDs want to feel a part of the community... They just want to feel included; they just want to feel that they are a part of something. When they do, the progression that they will go through is astronomical because they're feeling that 'I'm a part of something; I am proud... proud to be a Canadian!' It's just inclusion – giving them that self-worth that 'I'm valued within my community' (P60, caregiver- mother).

Young adults with DDs shared with us their frustration when they apply for a job. A male youth explained to us that he found it extremely difficult to conduct job interviews because he becomes extremely anxious about it. He suggested that employers should consider other evaluation procedures for youth with developmental disabilities. Despite new programs that are made available to support young adults with DDs and their families, youth transitioning into adulthood experience a variety of barriers. At the same time, young adults and their families identified opportunities that support successful transition.

## Recommendations

The following are some of the opportunities that young adults with DDs, their caregivers and service providers recommended:

- ✓ Opportunities for post-secondary education, including college and vocational training at an affordable cost, to gain knowledge and skills to allow young adults to attain supported jobs.
- ✓ Fair and reasonable wages and benefits.
- ✓ Opportunities for self-employment and integrated, supportive work settings.
- ✓ Opportunities for more day programs and recreational activities.
- ✓ Accommodative employment interview protocols.

- ✓ Opportunities to work and increase earnings without losing eligibility for needed disability benefits.
- ✓ Opportunities to receive transportation to work and targeted training support.

### Selected References:

- Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Ontario (AODA) (2005). [http://accessibility.uwo.ca/doc/aoda/guide\\_to\\_the\\_accessibility\\_standards.pdf](http://accessibility.uwo.ca/doc/aoda/guide_to_the_accessibility_standards.pdf)
- Shier, M., Graham, J. R., & Jones, M. E. (2009). Barriers to employment as experienced by disabled people: a qualitative analysis in Calgary and Regina, Canada. *Disability & Society*, 24(1), 63-75.
- Sutherland, G., Couch, M., & Iacono, T. (2002). Health issues for adults with developmental disability. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 23(6), 422-445.
- Statistics Canada. (2015). [STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca](http://STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca)

### ABOUT THE INFORMATION SHEET

This information sheet is part of a series produced at our Office as part of the Intersectional Approach to Immigration Status, Gender and Disability Research Program. It provides some of the key findings from our recently completed qualitative study titled *Impact of Gender and Migration Status on Accessing Direct/flexible/self-directed Social Funding for Developmental Services in Ontario* (the YADD project).

### WOMEN'S HEALTH RESEARCH CHAIR IN MENTAL HEALTH

The Office of Women's Health Research Chair in Mental Health is part of the Faculty of the Health at York University. We are interested in studying social factors that affect the mental health and wellbeing of women, youth, and children. To learn more about other projects conducted at this Office, please visit <http://nkhanlou.info.yorku.ca/research/community-based/>. Twitter: <https://twitter.com/YorkUOWHC>

### ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Dr. Nazilla Khanlou is Associate Professor at York University; she is the Principal Investigator of this study and Women's Health Research Chair in Mental Health. Sadora Asefaw was the Research Assistant of the YADD project. Megan Hart is a service provider at Family Service Toronto.

**FUNDING:** Funding for the YADD Study was provided by the Ministry of Community and Social Services (Research Grant Fund 2015-2017).