



Key points:

- **Report offers most comprehensive analysis to date of life outcomes for young adults with autism**
- **Nearly 30 percent had no job, were not continuing education or receiving services**
- **Transition planning critical for this population to succeed in life experiences, experts say**

Report: Transition efforts miss mark for young adults with autism

If special education were a "business" with billions of dollars invested in services for children with disabilities, the return on investment would be weak for the population of young adults with autism.

These individuals are having a hard time living independently, getting needed services after high school, transitioning into college or employment, and finding friends or participating in community activities, according to the recently released [National Autism Indicators Report](#).

The report, from the [A.J. Drexel Autism Institute](#) > at Drexel University in Philadelphia, gathered data from several federally funded national studies to see what is happening in the lives of people with autism after they leave high school through age 25.

The report is the most comprehensive gathering of information about life outcomes for this population to date and could help advocates and communities understand what supports are needed for young adults with autism and possibly prompt action to make improvements.

In the next decade, an estimated half a million youth with autism will enter adulthood, according to the report. Although people with autism fall on a spectrum -- with some needing more intensive supports than others -- young adults with autism and their families often dread the end of high school when special education services stop and they must seek out community-based services with which they are unfamiliar.

"Tens of billions of dollars are poured into special education and therapies. It's important to know if those dollars are making a difference. What this study says is we're missing the mark," said Anne Roux, the report's author and research scientist at the A.J. [Drexel Autism Institute](#).

Alarming statistics

In every life experience analyzed for this population, the results were discouraging. The report's most alarming statistic: 28 percent of young adults with autism had no job, were not in continuing education programs, and were not receiving services. This means they were completely disconnected at one point after leaving high school.

"All of these people qualified for special education, and [the need for supports] doesn't just go away when they are 18. You expect people to move into something," Roux said.

In some cases, these young adults don't need supports. However, Roux said she worries about the young adults who do need attention and aren't getting it. Using more federally funded data that are expected to be released this year, she plans to study why this is and look at potential large-scale solutions.

"If we don't have clues as to what the problem is, we don't know how to fix it," Roux said.

Another troublesome indicator from the report: Only 58 percent of young adults with autism had a postsecondary transition plan by age 14, the federally required age for having such plans at the time the survey question was first asked. Data show that 95 percent of this population had a transition plan in place by age 16, which is the current federal requirement.

Ways schools can help

School systems can help make the step into adulthood easier for youth with autism by starting transition planning earlier, say autism researchers and advocates.

"By age 16, you should be putting the finishing touches on the transition plan," said Stephen Shore, an assistant professor of special education at Adelphi University in Garden City, N.Y.

He said that transition planning needs to start at a much earlier age, even by the age of 4, so that parents and teachers can focus on a student's interests and strengths and build on those throughout the child's education so he has passion, focus, and experience that can lead to a sustainable and profitable career.

"It's so important to pay attention to this age bracket and get people off to a good start," said Shore, who was diagnosed with autism in the 1960s when he was 2 and a half years old.

His parents used music, movement, sensory integration, narration, and imitation to strengthen his verbal skills instead of institutionalizing him. After high school, he went to college and continued into his current career with the support of his friends and family. His teaching and research focus on matching best practices to the diverse needs of students with autism.

"[After high school] there's a drop off in services and a drop in opportunities. This report goes a long way toward opportunizing the potential of people with autism," he said.

Where postsecondary supports are lacking

Katy Beh Neas, executive vice president for public affairs for [Easter Seals](#), said communities need to prioritize giving youth with autism job skills before they leave high school. She is optimistic that the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act will increase options for job experiences for high school students with disabilities.

Post-high school supports for people with autism and other disabilities, however, need strengthening, she said. Particularly needed is access to behavioral and mental health services. Easter Seals currently is analyzing how the Affordable Care Act impacts health services for people with disabilities. Through that research, the group, which provides job training for people with disabilities, veterans, and older adults, hopes to understand what improvements are still needed, Beh Neas said.

"If we can create opportunities for kids that have this level of need, we'll see different outcomes," Beh Neas said.

Lydia Wayman was a young adult when she was diagnosed with autism six years ago. She said the discouraging statistics in the indicators report reflect her own experiences.

Employment training, along with access to medical services and social opportunities, are some of the greatest needs for young adults with autism, Wayman said in an email.

"Services and programming themselves are lacking ... occupational and speech therapy, counseling, interest groups ... this idea that learning stops at 21 is dangerous," wrote Wayman, who works as a writer and has adapted several accommodations, such as visual schedules, to help herself live independently.

"Work and making money may not be the same, and giving an autistic adult the time and support to get that foundation down, get that foot in the door, might mean a bright future of doing what he likes to do and does well," Wayman wrote.

Special Ed Connection® *related story*:

- [Key findings on postsecondary outcomes for young adults with autism](#) (May 28)

See also:

- [Study finds young adults with autism more likely to be jobless, isolated](#) (April 27)
- [OSERS to issue proposed rule on workforce law, transition services](#) (April 7)
- [Put students with autism on road to college success](#) (Feb. 23)
- [Teach employable skills to students with autism](#) (Nov. 14)

For more stories and guidance on this topic, see the [Postsecondary Transition Roundup](#) and the [Autism Direct Roundup](#).

Learn more about the pamphlet [Transition to College and Career: Experienced-Based Strategies to Improve Readiness of Students With Disabilities](#).

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