

Employment of Youth Disabilities

Presentation Brief to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance

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Introduction

My name is Gary Birch and I am here today representing the Neil Squire Society. Our mandate is to: use technology, knowledge and passion to empower Canadians with physical disabilities

The Neil Squire Society is a Canadian national non-profit organization committed to providing education, technology and career development for people with physical disabilities through complete end-to-end services. Specializing in skill enhancement and workplace empowerment, the Society has served over 25,000 people since 1984. The organization serves a culturally diverse population that is not limited to any specific “type” of disability, however traditionally we have worked with individuals who are most marginalized in society, particularly those who have had very long term detachment from the labour force.

I personally have had 30 plus years of experience through the Neil Squire Society championing opportunities for persons with disabilities. I recently also had the privilege to have served as a Member of the Federal Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities.

Importance of this Issue

- **Persons with Disabilities employment need:** 75.1% of persons without disabilities are employed while only 52.7% of persons with disabilities employed (2006)¹
- **Youth with disabilities often face bigger barriers:** employment rates lower for these individuals
- **Investment here (although always useful) is particularly important:** young age; return on investment (ROI); minimizing further marginalization often leading to long-term unemployment; cost alone of long-term reliance on social assistance

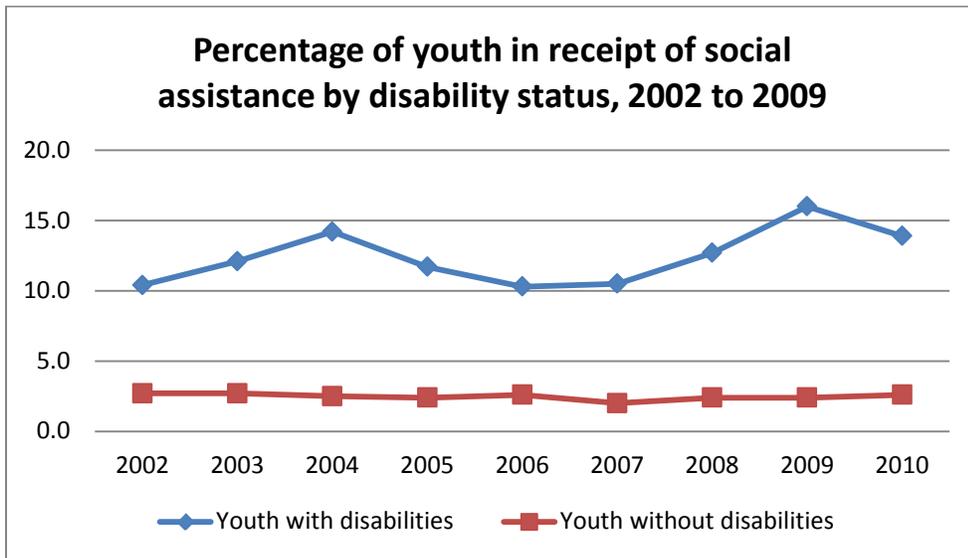
Current Situation for Youth with Disabilities

Youth continue to experience issues with respect to obtaining and retaining employment despite efforts on the part of the federal and provincial/territorial governments to increase opportunities to ameliorate the situation. Being a youth with a disability increases the

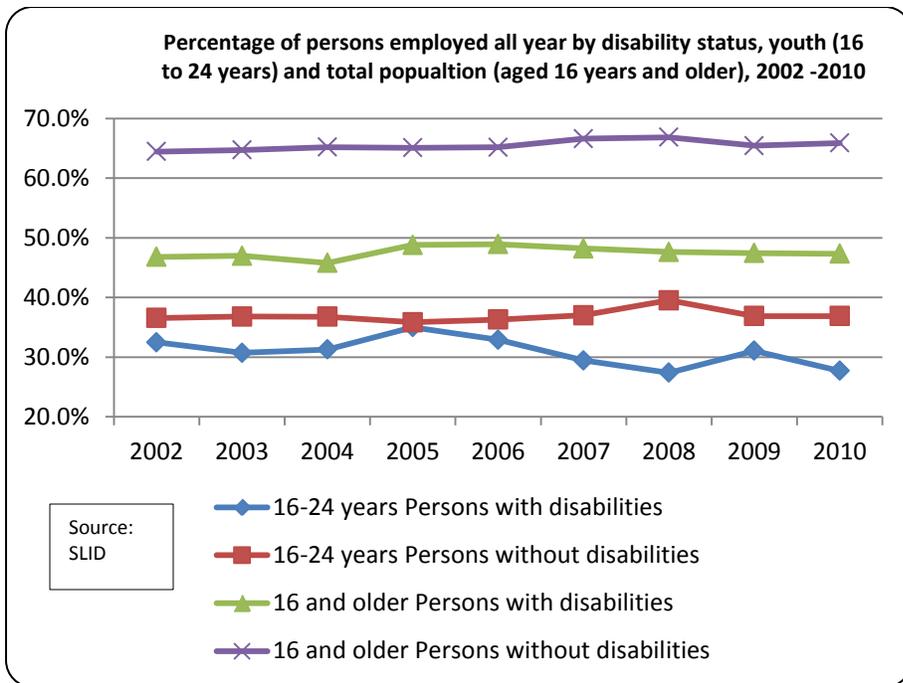
¹ Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS), 2006

probability of being without employment and this situation has not changed radically during the period 2002 to 2010.

The following statistics, tables and charts have been derived from the public use microdata files of the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID) conducted by Statistics Canada. This survey has provided an excellent resource for data concerning both employment and income since 1993. Unfortunately, it was cancelled in 2012 and replaced with the new Canada Income Survey. While this new survey covers many of the same topics, the cancellation of SLID results in a break in the time series and will limit analyses such as this in the immediate future.

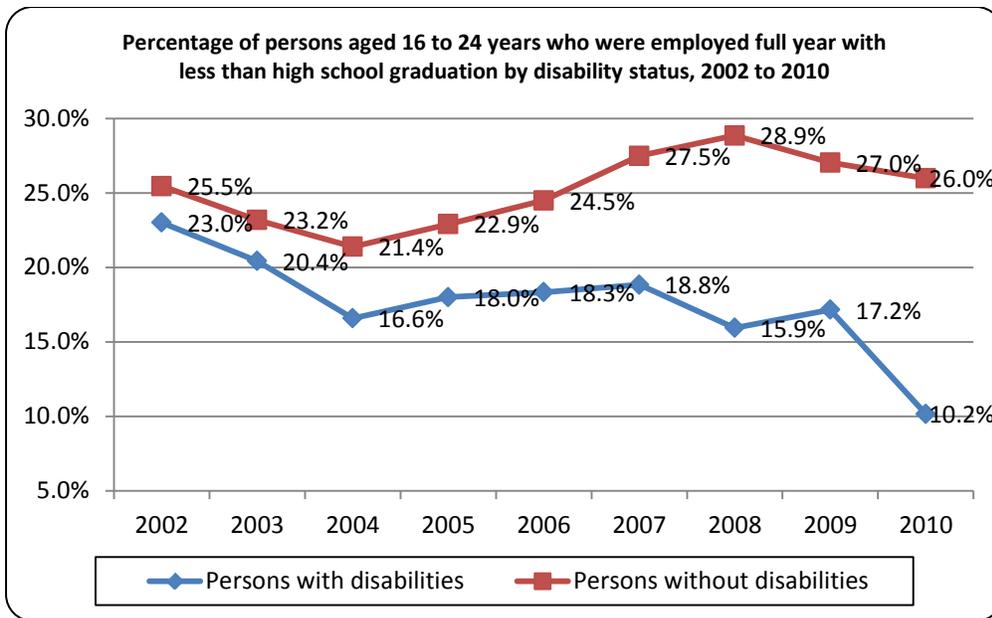


For instance, 16% of youth with disabilities were in receipt of social assistance in 2009 compared to 2.4% of youth without disabilities.

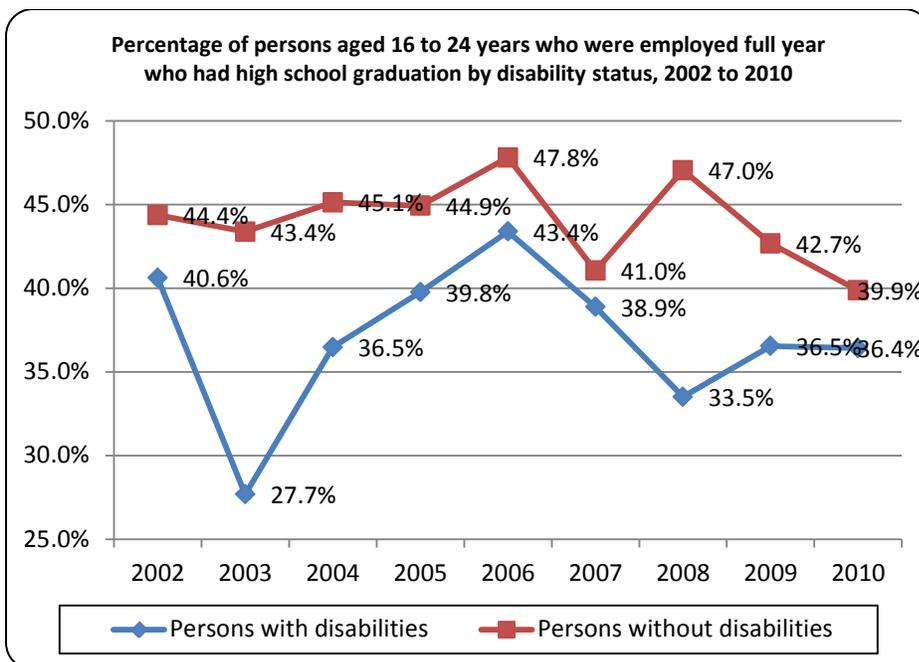


As this chart shows, it's a rough ride for youth with disabilities in the employment in the workforce. They have less opportunity to be employed for the full year in all of the nine years shown on the chart. They were hardest hit during the recession when only 27.4% reported that they were employed for the full year. The gains that they made in 2005 – going from 31.3% to 35% was short-lived and then there was a steady decline. This up-and-down roller coaster ride was not seen with youth without disabilities nor with the total population 16 years and over, with and without disabilities.

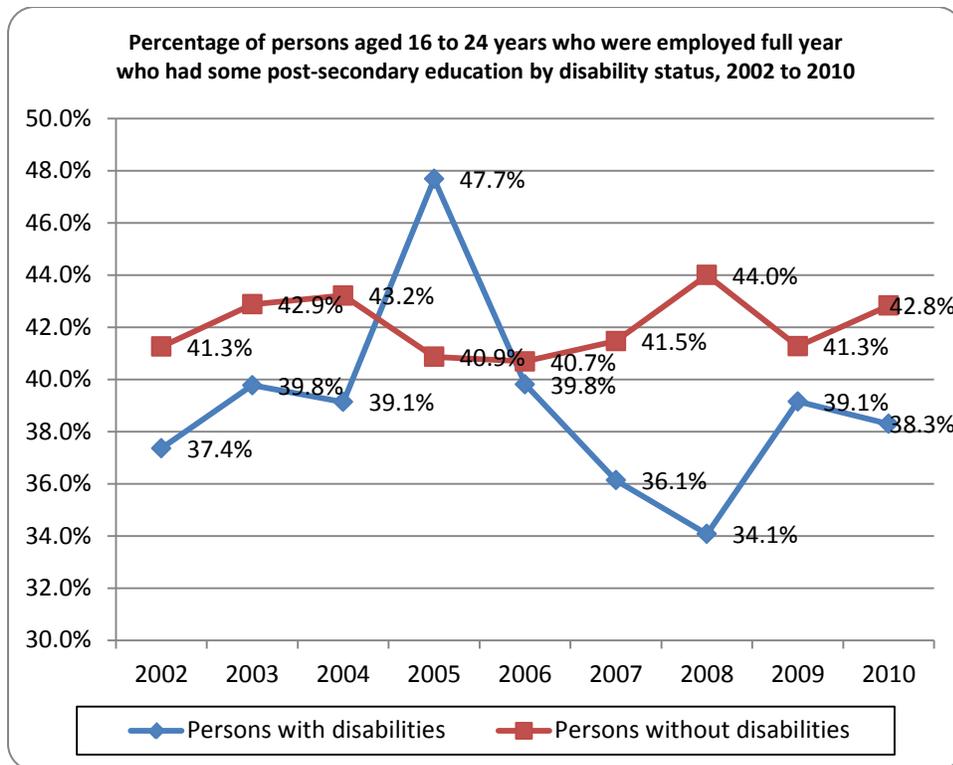
The next three charts factor in highest level of education for youth. As level of education increases, the percentage of persons employed full year increases for both youth with disabilities and those without disabilities.



For youth with disabilities who have not completed high school, full employment opportunities are scarce and declining and the gap between youth with and without disabilities is widening. In 2002, the gap between the two youth groups was only 2.5 percentage points. Nine years later (in 2010), the gap is almost 16 percentage points.



For youth with a high school diploma, the latter years (in the nine years shown on the chart) show a narrowing of the gap except for 2008.



As the chart above shows, the percentage of youth who have some post-secondary education are more likely than their peers with lower levels of education to be employed full year. Again, 2008 sees youth with disabilities being hard hit with some recovery in 2009 and 2010.

Recommendations

1. **Overall theme: Ensure there are well coordinated, contiguous programs available to support youth with disabilities in the transition from the K-12 system through to sustainable work opportunities which in many cases will include paid work experience and appropriate, targetted educational opportunities.**
2. **Education: create proactive models to maximize the number of youth with disabilities who are obtaining appropriate post-secondary education**
 I think there's a lesson to be learned from the vocational rehabilitation model from the 1970s. This model ensured that persons with disabilities were matched with appropriate educational opportunities. This model had the resources to proactively remove barriers to education, funded tuition (in some cases even for university degrees where indicated), paid for required books, provided resources to support these individuals while they were at school. This created a cohort of persons with disabilities who are now in their late 50s who have long term well-paying careers. Being very proactive in ensuring youth with disabilities get the appropriate education pays huge dividends –

great ROI. This proactive approach to education is needed because today so many youth with disabilities do not have the same opportunities to get the resources and supports they need: particularly a system that is well coordinated and makes the connection between existing resources enabling rather than a series of disconnected services where many youth with disabilities do not or are not able to take advantage of educational opportunities. This is borne out by the statistics. Youth with disabilities are much more likely not to be in school. For instance, according to PALS 2006, 31.8% of youth with disabilities between the ages of 19 and 24 were in school compared to 51.5% those without disabilities in the same age group – a gap of about 20%². Moreover, if individuals with disabilities think or perceive that they are going to be saddled with large student loan debt, even if there are mechanisms that might help to mitigate the potential debt, this becomes a huge disincentive for these individuals. There are added challenges of finding and maintaining employment, as well as hidden and often substantial real costs related to disability that are no longer covered when they are employed and off social assistance. It is essential that we remove as many of the barriers as possible³ to these individuals pursuing education as is demonstrated so dramatically in the statistics given above. The return on investment to take such an approach is obvious.

3. Develop and sustain single source contiguous programing that ensures a strong supply for employers

Ensure that youth with disabilities receive opportunities that ensure that their essential skills, self-discovery and self-confidence are developed such they can take full advantage of both educational and workplace opportunities.⁴ In addition, these programs must provide Employment-focused approaches (e.g., place and train) that achieve a good fit between individual's interests and aptitudes and employment opportunities/employer needs. Youth with disabilities may need opportunities to "try on" various options, such as through work experience, career counselling, and counselling about post-secondary educational interests and options.⁵ These programs also need to provide coordination across programs and systems (funding, supports, education / training, employment - see also recommendation above). Whether all these elements are found in one program or in a suite of available programs together they will greatly improve the odds of long-term, satisfying attachment to the workforce. The complexity of the navigation of existing programming is in itself a significant barrier so the need for this coordination is imperative as opposed to having to root through the myriad of options. It is also essential that these programs are designed with the necessary flexibility to meet the

² Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS), 2006

³ This approach is supported by a number of research papers. One in particular is: Crawford, C., "Youth with Disabilities in Transition from School to Work or Post-Secondary Education and Training: A Review of the Literature in the United States and United Kingdom"; Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society (IRIS); ISBN 978-1-897292-04-4, 2012.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

spectrum of needs from those youth that have multiple barriers and have had minimal opportunities compared to those who are close if not fully ready to jump into appropriate education or work. It is critical that we support the “supply” side of the equation so that employers who are becoming more educated to the advantages of hiring persons with disabilities can source individuals from this stakeholder group that have the skills and experience they are looking for.

4. Paid work experience, in k-12, after grade 12 graduation and if needed after post-secondary education

In a recent study by Carter, Austin & Trainor (2012)⁶ “The single strongest predictor youth (23 to 26 years) with severe disability having a paying job at or above the minimum wage two years after leaving high school is – Having a job for pay while attending high school.” For those youth with disabilities who have not had an opportunity to get this kind of paid work experience, opportunities need to be available for them after they graduated from high school. In many cases the same individuals will need to build up some basic essential skills before taking advantage of these work experience opportunities as discussed in the recommendation above.

5. Disability supports

Among youth with disabilities active in the labour force within 5 years (active in the labour force at some point from 2001 through 2006) according to PALS⁷, employment prospects were much better where needed job supports were available - 75.8% of those individuals who had no unmet need in their disability supports compared to 24.8% of those who had unmet needs in their disability sports. These stats support the critical need to ensure that youth with disabilities have the supports they need to maintain long term attachment to the workforce.

Summary

Investing in youth with disabilities needs to be one of our primary focuses. Although investments in persons with disabilities in general are important the return on investment for youth with disabilities is that much more substantial over the longer term of their working life. We must make our programs and supports appropriately resourced, well-integrated and coordinated to minimize the barriers for youth with disabilities to achieve appropriate long-term attachment to the workforce. This type of investment will be good for all of Canada and will help to ensure youth with disabilities have the maximum opportunity to be full participating citizens of Canada.

⁶ Carter, E., Austin, D., & Trainor, A.; “Predictors of Postschool Employment Outcomes for Young Adults With Severe Disabilities”, Journal of Disability Policy Studies June 2012 vol. 23 no. 1 50-63

⁷ Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS), 2006