While all persons with disabilities face the possibility of stigmatization in the workplace as burdensome and incompetent, workers with childhood disability onset likely confront a distinctive set of challenges when entering the labor force.

According to stigmatization theory, not only are they particularly vulnerable to the long-term negative effects of stigma, having experienced stigmatization for much, if not all of their lives, but they also begin their careers with relatively little understanding of the workplace, little knowledge regarding occupational opportunities, and low self-efficacy regarding career success compared to workers who experienced disability in adulthood. Feelings of inadequacy, reduced aspirations, social isolation, and resulting performance and skill deficits linger to diminish outcomes throughout the life course.

But we know little about their actual experience of the workplace. Workers with disabilities remain an understudied group in the literature on career development and vocational well-being, and research on workers who experienced disability onset in childhood is even more limited.

The present study sheds some light on this question. It examines how life satisfaction and perceived workplace discrimination among people with disability vary whether disability occurred in childhood (at age 17 years or younger) or adulthood.

We further examined three sets of variables that may diminish or enhance their psychological well-being: the age of respondents to appreciate how exposure to discriminatory institutions and inequitable treatment for shorter or longer periods of time changes outcomes, the number of educational disruptions experienced (e.g. experiencing long interruptions in one’s schooling, taking fewer classes, having to leave one's community to go to school, taking special education classes, etc.) and the availability of workplace accommodation.

About this CRDCN Research Highlight


Data were accessed and the analysis done at the University of Western Ontario Research Data Centre.

It was prepared by Sarah Fortin, Knowledge Transfer Coordinator at the Canadian Research Data Centre Network (CRDCN), an infrastructure created to improve researchers’ access to Statistics Canada detailed micro-data, to expand the pool of skilled quantitative researchers and to improve communication between social scientists and research users.

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results

- Older workers with adult onset of disability show greater life satisfaction and report less discrimination.
- Older workers with childhood disability onset show no significant growth in life satisfaction or reduction in perceived workplace discrimination compared to their younger counterparts with childhood disability onset.
- Our results support the hypothesis that educational disruptions have long-term negative effects. They are associated with increased perceptions that one is a victim of workplace discrimination and lower level of satisfaction.
- Our results further suggest that it is not childhood onset of disability itself that reduces satisfaction and increases perceived discrimination for these workers. Rather, it is the exposure to separate and unequal educational and vocational experiences in childhood.
- When educational disruptions are taken into account, workers with childhood onset of disability are more satisfied with their lives and perceive less workplace discrimination than their counterparts with adult disability onset.
- Among individuals requiring accommodation, receiving a higher percentage of needed workplace accommodations is more strongly positively associated with life satisfaction and more strongly negatively associated with perceived discrimination for workers with childhood disability onset. This indicates that accommodations are more critical for workers experiencing disability onset in childhood.

workplace, policy and research implications

- Our findings highlight the importance of improving the educational experience and vocational training offered to disabled children and of minimizing the educational disruptions they experienced in order to give them the foundation necessary to experience growth in satisfaction as they age and as their careers progress.
- The provision of workplace accommodations is a vital mechanism for producing life satisfaction and a sense of equity among people with disabilities, and more so for workers with childhood onset. Partnerships between schools, employers and community organizations to improve outcomes for students with disabilities should also be considered.
- Childhood experiences of stigmatization as well as self-esteem and career self-efficacy should be directly measured in future research to determine their lifetime impact on vocational well-being, through longitudinal studies preferably.
- Additional investigations on the worth of school-to work programs to persons with early disability onset are recommended.
- Ottawa and the provinces should seek to coordinate their programs supporting the development of youths with disabilities. They should also avoid putting their needs in competition for resources and support with that of other groups such as aboriginal youths, recent immigrants, youths living in rural and remote areas and high school drop outs.

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A Word about the Survey Sample

Data for this study were provided by respondents to the 2006 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS) conducted by Statistics Canada. As a post-census survey, PALS applies the national census as a sampling frame. A stratified sample was drawn according to age, geography, and various activity limitations of prospective respondents whose disabilities ranged in scope from mild to severe. Respondents were surveyed via telephone during the latter period of 2006 through early 2007.

The PALS generated a total sample size of 28,632. After conducting quality checks of the data, about 21 percent of the respondents were found as not meeting Statistics Canada's established criteria for being classified as a person with a disability, and were not further considered for participation in the sample. Because we were interested in examining the working population, respondents under age 18 or over age 64 or permanently retired were excluded. These parameters reduced qualifying informants to 11,162. Respondents whose labor force status could not be determined or indicated that they were unable to participate in the labor force even if workplace accommodations were provided reduced the sample size to 9448. Deletion of missing data resulted in a sample size of 7189 of which 2997 indicated being employed and provided data on all of the predictors in our analyses.

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