

1 in 3 autistic young adults lack jobs, education

May 14 2012, By LINDSEY TANNER , AP Medical Writer



In this March 2011 photo provided by Jeff Martin, Ian Wells sits on a bicycle in North Hanover, N.J. Wells, 21, of Allentown, N.J., has autism and has had trouble finding paid employment. A study being published Monday in *Pediatrics* says 1 in 3 young adults with autism have no jobs or college or technical school education nearly seven years after high school, and fare worse than those with other disabilities. (AP Photo/Courtesy of Jeff Martin)

(AP) -- One in 3 young adults with autism have no paid job experience, college or technical schooling nearly seven years after high school graduation, a study finds. That's a poorer showing than those with other disabilities including those who are mentally disabled, the researchers said.

With roughly half a million [autistic kids](#) reaching [adulthood](#) in the next

decade, experts say it's an issue policymakers urgently need to address.

The study was done well before unemployment peaked from the [recession](#). The situation today is tough even for [young adults](#) who don't have such limitations.

Ian Wells of Allentown, N.J., is 21, autistic and won't graduate from high school until next year. He is unlikely to attend college because of his [autism](#). He wants a job but has only found unpaid internships and is currently working part-time and unpaid as a worker at a fastener factory.

He's a hard worker, with good mechanical skills, but has trouble reading and speaking, said his mother, Barbara Wells. She said his difficulties understanding [social cues](#) and [body language](#) can make other people uncomfortable.

"I'm very afraid" about his prospects for ever finding long-term employment, she said. "It keeps me up at night."

The study, published online Monday in *Pediatrics*, was based on data from 2007-08. It found that within two years of leaving high school, more than half of those with autism had no job experience, college or technical education.

Things improved as they got older. Yet nearly seven years after high school, 35 percent of autistic young adults still had no paid employment or education beyond high school.

Those figures compare with 26 percent of mentally disabled young adults, 7 percent of young adults with speech and language problems, and 3 percent of those with learning disabilities.

Those with autism may fare worse because many also have each of the

other disabilities studied.

The researchers analyzed data from a national study of kids receiving special education services, prepared for the U.S. Department of Education. About 2,000 young adults with one of four types of disabilities were involved, including 500 with autism.

It's the largest study to date on the topic and the results "are quite a cause for concern," said lead author Paul Shattuck, an assistant professor at Washington University's Brown School of Social Work in St. Louis.

"There is this wave of young children who have been diagnosed with autism who are aging toward adulthood. We're kind of setting ourselves up for a scary situation if we don't think about that and how we're going to help these folks and their families," Shattuck said.

Government data suggest that 1 in 88 U.S. kids have autism and there's evidence that the rate is rising.

Within the next 10 years, more than 500,000 kids with autism will reach adulthood, said Peter Bell, vice president for programs and services at Autism Speaks, an advocacy group that helped pay for the study.

"It's a huge, huge issue," Bell said. "Unfortunately there are many families that really struggle to understand what that transition ultimately entails. ...They face the reality of having a child who may potentially not be able to have enough services to keep them busy during the day."

"It's only going to get worse ..." Bell said.

His own 19-year-old son has autism and is being home-schooled and Bell has hired therapists to prepare him for jobs and other life skills.

Carol Schall, a special education policy specialist, said the results confirm smaller studies showing difficulties facing kids with autism as they transition into adulthood, and also highlight a need for better job training services offered in public schools for special education students.

She is involved in research at Virginia Commonwealth University investigating whether on-the-job training and teaching social cues to [high school](#) students with autism makes them more employable.

Kids are taught a range of practical skills and appropriate behavior. "It takes a much higher degree of intensity for them to learn skills" than for other kids, she said.

Preliminary results show this training has helped kids with autism find and keep jobs, she said.

More information: <http://www.pediatrics.org>

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Citation: 1 in 3 autistic young adults lack jobs, education (2012, May 14) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-05-autistic-young-adults-lack-jobs.html>

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