

Canadian Disability Policy and Context, the Region's Disability Action Plan, and Youth with Disabilities

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INTRODUCTION

It is a pleasure to be invited to be part of your planning session on the BC/Yukon Region's Disability Action Plan. I have been asked to share my thoughts on the wider national social policy context affecting disability issues, the federal disability agenda generally, and more specifically, with particular attention to youth with disabilities.

I want to commend you and your colleagues in formulating a Region-level Disability Action Plan and on working on ways to improve the region's policy and programming in this field by enhancing accessibility to programs and by becoming a model employer.

The focus of my remarks is on youth with disabilities. That is, persons in the 15 to 24 age group, with a physical or mental impairment or health condition that restricts them in their ability to perform activities that are "normal" to their stage of development and in their social/cultural environment. For Canadian youth, depending on their age, these customary activities include attending a high school, college or university, working full- or part-time, personal care, travelling, partying, using email and other applications of computers, engaging in some art, cultural, sport or recreational activities.

As we consider disability policy and this age group it is well to remember how we think about disability. There are two principal mind-sets on understanding disability. A Government of Canada report explains the two approaches this way: "The first locates disability in the individual and proposes medical or technical interventions to treat the disability or provide rehabilitation so that the individual can function "normally." The second locates disability in the social/cultural environment and argues that social

arrangements make some forms of human difference into disabilities by failing to provide the necessary flexibility and resources.”¹

So, in thinking about the everyday experiences and the employment challenges and prospects for youth with disabilities, in addition to their age and disability other factors play a role; such factors as gender, visible minority status, geographic location, labour market structure, type and severity of disability, family capacity, among others. Nonetheless, it does seem helpful to focus on age groups be it children with disabilities, or youths, working age adults or seniors with disabilities. The evidence shows that across age groups, the rates and most common types of disabilities differ, and with those variations are different issues and life transitions.

The rest of my remarks are organized as follows: First, I will provide some context setting, and address what is happening on the national level in social policy and disability issues.

Next, I will present an overview of facts and figures with respect to youth with disabilities in Canada.

Then, I will offer some comments on the Discussion Paper on Youth with Disabilities that is part of the Region’s Disability Action Plan. Finally, I will draw some conclusions and summary remarks.

CONTEXT SETTING

As it pertains to social policy generally and disability issues more specifically the national context includes several developments. These include:

- The Government of Canada’s Disability Agenda, set out in 1999 in a document called *Future Directions*, a statement that still, presumably, stands as the guiding outlook of the federal government;
- The Participation Activity Limitation Survey (PALS), a national survey funded by HRDC and conducted by Statistics Canada in 2001, the most comprehensive survey on disability-related issues since 1991²;
- The federal/provincial/territorial statement on disability issues, *In Unison 2000*, an update from the original in 1998, released, that represents a shared intergovernmental vision in this area;

¹ Canada, *Advancing the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, A Government of Canada Report*, December 2002, p. 73.

² Unfortunately, the PALS data do not tell us much about labour market services used by Canadians with disabilities. The population surveyed also excluded persons living in institutions, on First Nation reserves, and in Yukon, NWT and Nunavut.

- The first federal report on disability, *Advancing the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities* published in December 2002, using PALS data and other sources to present a profile of disability in Canada. The next such report is expected in late 2004;
- Technical Advisory Committee on Tax Measures for Persons with Disabilities established from 2003 federal budget in response to parliamentary and community group concerns largely over efforts by Finance to restrict further the Disability Tax Credit. The Committee issued a preliminary report and some ideas reflected in the 2004 federal budget. Their final report is expected by the end of this year.
- A new Prime Minister, in December 2003, with various new organizational roles and structures, including the division of HRDC into 2 departments: HRSD and SDC, with lead federal responsibility on disability issues residing with SDC.
- Social Development Canada, through the Office for Disability Issues and other units, is working on a host of disability items: strengthening links with national disability organizations; exploring the idea of reconfiguring the Social Development Partnership Program/Disability [adding a new stream to contributions for vital investments, and developing a common framework of priorities and goals for funding decisions].
- The 2004 Throne Speech had the most prominent section on disability issues in at least a decade, if not ever at the federal level. [About 6 or 7 sentences! A sign of the low expectations of the community?] Promises on some tax measures, on expediting agreements with provinces/territories on labour market, and on committing to use the federal public sector a model employer in the hiring, accommodation and retention of persons with disabilities.
- March 2004 federal budget, with a handful of disability-related measures: an extra \$30 million annually for labour market programs, improved access to grants for students with disabilities, funding for a 2006 PALS, tax reforms, and the automatic reinstatement of CPP Disability benefits for clients who attempted a return to work.
- Changes to federal fiscal transfer arrangements, with the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) (in existence from 1996 to 2004), divided, as of April 2004, into two transfers, one for health care (CHT) and the other for social programs and services (CST).
- New Labour Market Agreements for Persons with Disabilities, approved in principle by Social Service Ministers in December 2003, replacing the

Employability Assistance for Persons with Disabilities agreements. As of early September 2004, eight provinces had signed bilateral agreements with Ottawa.³

- General election June 2004: major social policy issue was health care. Minority Liberal government elected. Fiscal agenda one of limited new resources for at least next few fiscal years. Social agenda likely to concentrate to health care and child care. Other notable social policy promises are the Aboriginal agenda and the cities agenda, latter of which seems to have morphed into a communities/infrastructure agenda from a focus on the major cities of the country.

What to make of these developments and initiatives for disability policy and programming?

- A vision of full citizenship and inclusion expressed by both orders of government.
- New and enhanced information sets and research.
- Growing emphasis on accountability and performance measures with indicators and outcomes.

Yet:

- Disability policy in shadows of larger social issues of health care and early childhood development and childcare.
- Challenge of coordinating disparate actions on disability, housed in numerous programs and departments and often with different program definitions of disability.
- Many community groups and service providers struggle with growing needs and shrinking funding.

A PROFILE OF YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES IN CANADA

In 2001, the latest year available for this information, there were close to 3.9 million Canadians between the ages of 15 and 24 of whom 3.9% or 151,030 youth had disabilities.⁴

Most youth with disabilities have more than one disability: 33% have one disability, 20% have two, and 47% have three or more disabilities. A sizeable majority of youth with disabilities, 69%, have mild to moderate disabilities, while 31% have severe or very severe disabilities. Of all age groups of adults with disabilities, the youth group has the

³ For further details on the Multilateral Framework for Labour Market Agreements for Persons with Disabilities and the bilateral agreements, see www.sdc.gc.ca. As of mid September 2004, the provinces of Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador have yet to sign agreements.

⁴ The following discussion draws on results published by Statistics Canada and by Human Resources Development Canada, from the Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2001.

smallest share of severe/very severe. Overall for adults, 58% have mild/moderate and 42% have severe/very severe.⁵

The most common types of disability for youths are pain (51%), then learning (44%), and mobility (42%), followed by agility (35%). Seeing (10%) and hearing-related (14%) disabilities are among the least common for this age group. The rate of developmental disabilities at 17% is higher for youths than for the rest of the working-age population with disabilities. Psychological disabilities with 23% of youths reporting them, is also noteworthy as an “invisible” type of disability.⁶

In terms of education, 48% of youths with disabilities are full-time students (compared to 57% of youths without disabilities). With respect to highest level of education attained, a greater proportion of youths with disabilities have less than a high school education than do their counterparts without disabilities (51% compared to 42%). [We may surmise that youths with disabilities take longer or have greater difficulty completing high school.] There is little difference between youth with and without disabilities in completing high school (34% v. 36%) or attaining a trade certificate or diploma (4% v. 5%). Differences are more significant at the college and especially the university levels.⁷

In terms of labour force participation, among youths with disabilities who are no longer in school (67,010 people), 50% are employed, compared to a 72% employment rate for youths without disabilities. There is a gender difference among youth with disabilities, with males reporting an employment rate of 44.8% and females 54.3%. In Canada, youths with disabilities are three times as likely to be unemployed as youths without disabilities (29.7% v. 9.1%).

Of course, besides education and work, youth with disabilities participate in various community activities, including athletic, consumer, cultural, and leisure activities. *In terms of such social participation*, just over half (53%) of youth with disabilities indicated that they wanted to do more of these activities but were prevented by a number of obstacles. The most frequently mentioned obstacles were financial cost (25%), inaccessible transportation (12%), and the need for someone’s assistance (12%). Evidence from the survey on income suggests the concern for cost.

In terms of average annual income, the individual earnings of youth with disabilities is 11 per cent lower than for youth without disabilities (\$9,082 v. \$10,203), and youth with disabilities are in households with incomes 13 per cent lower than households of youth without disabilities (\$63,815 v. \$73,111).

⁵ Disability severity was determined on self-reporting of respondents based on the intensity and frequency of the activity limitations. Severity was classified in PALS into four groups: mild, moderate, severe, and very severe.

⁶ Developmental disabilities refer to cognitive limitations and examples include Down syndrome and autism. Psychological disabilities refer to limitations that derive from an emotional, psychological or psychiatric condition, such as phobias, depression, and drinking or drug problems.

⁷ For example, youths with disabilities are less than half as likely to complete university (3.2%v. 6.8%) than their counterparts without disabilities.

In terms of use of and need for aids and devices and help with everyday activities, how do youth with disabilities compare to older adults with disabilities?

Relatively fewer youth with disabilities, but still a majority (53.8%), have all the aids and devices they need as compared to adults with disabilities (61.1%). Conversely, one-in-six youth with disabilities do not use aid and devices but say they need some, whereas only one-in-ten adults with disabilities report the same gap in supports.

With respect to help with everyday activities, youth with disabilities compare favourably to adults with disabilities. Fully two-thirds of youth with disabilities indicate that they receive all the help needed with everyday activities, with adults with disabilities close behind (66.6% v. 64.8%). On the other hand, three-in-ten of both youth with disabilities and adults with disabilities, say that while they receive help with everyday activities, they require more assistance.

In terms of unpaid volunteer activities, how do youth with disabilities compare to older adults with disabilities?

Youth with disabilities engage at a higher level of volunteerism than do older adults with disabilities in certain activities. Examples of such activities include: giving help to schools, religious and community organizations; organizing or supervising activities or events; teaching, coaching, providing care or friendly visits through an organization; and, canvassing for fund raising.

Youth with disabilities are less active, compared to adults with disabilities, in doing other kinds of volunteer work: perhaps not surprisingly, these include serving as a board or committee member in a community organization; and in performing consulting, executive office or administrative work. Overall, a significant minority of youth with disabilities (upwards of 24%) engage in an array of voluntary activities in communities across Canada.

THE BC/YUKON REGION'S DISCUSSION PAPER ON YOUTH DISABILITIES

I now wish to comment on the discussion paper on youth with disabilities that is part of the BC/Yukon Region's Disability Action Plan. The paper, *Building Tomorrow Together: Improving Employment Opportunities for Youth with Disabilities*, presents options to improve the participation in HRSDC and SDC programs and services of youth with disabilities in order to increase their attachment to the paid labour force. The paper includes eight recommendations, each with a number of accompanying strategies and suggested activities, for enhancing services and improving results for this client group.⁸

In reviewing a summary version of the paper, I think the eight recommendations can be clustered into three core themes. The three themes and the recommendations that relate to

⁸ These recommendations are based on focus groups held with youth with disabilities, service providers, and HRSDC staff, as well as subsequent examination with both staff and community representatives working with youth with disabilities.

each, and the locus of responsibility for approving and undertaking them, can be presented as follows:

Theme	Recommendations	Locus of Responsibility
Performance Management: Goal Setting and Evaluation	#5 Redefine Success	Requires making changes to accountability framework at the national level. The Region's ability to make such changes alone is likely limited.
Better Governance	#1 Improve Coordination #2 Work with Employers #8 Strengthen Community Relationships	Regional level and local HRCCs.
Program Activities	#3 More Opportunities to Work #4 Provide Information Early #6 Longer Interventions #7 Broaden Skill Development	Regional level and local HRCCs.

The first theme refers to the *mission* or underlying purpose of the strategy. The second theme, on governance, relates to recommended actions that concern the *processes* of reform associated with service provision and program delivery. The third theme groups together recommendations that pertain to the *substance* of reform.

Does this make sense and ring true to you? Would you change any of the themes or the placement of the recommendations? Does it help focus and clarify thinking on what the strategies for improving employment opportunities are really about?

I start with Recommendation #5 because it raises some fundamental questions about the purpose, scope and intended results of programs and service for young people with disabilities. If you were contemplating broadening the definition of success to include more than employment placement outcomes that suggests there would be broader goals and objectives to be identified as well.

At the conceptual or philosophical level of full citizenship and advancing inclusion, this broader approach to success seems appropriate with attention to a range of skill activities and outcomes over the short, the medium and the longer terms.

Yet, at the level of administrative accountability and or community support, I wonder what the benefits are of using a broader definition of success? What are the risks, and benefits or risks for whom? One risk for example might be that undue emphasis and resources are devoted to immediate outcomes at the expense of the ultimate objective of increased labour force participation of youth with disabilities in the region. One benefit is that a broader definition fits with, and could support the indicators for measuring progress in skills development, learning and employment in the federal government's reporting framework for the programs and activities that are part of its disability agenda.⁹

I also wonder what a broader definition means for interdepartmental relations in the federal public service and for intergovernmental relations between Canada and the BC government in terms of the distribution and coordination of roles and responsibilities.

That leads to a consideration of governance issues and Recommendations #1, # 2 and #8. These contain a number of worthwhile and practical suggestions.¹⁰ They will though entail the investment of some additional resources, at least in the short term, before payoffs occur.

Youth with disabilities obviously face a number of *challenges and barriers* in entering the labour market. The discussion paper mentions the following challenges:

- More limited access to appropriate education and training, thus lacking some life skills, knowledge and work-relevant skills;
- May not acquire the same early volunteer, part-time or summer work experience as their peers without disabilities;
- Obtaining accessible information about resources, career development opportunities and other services;
- HRSDC/SDC programs are not available to youth with disabilities who are in school but still face significant obstacles to employment¹¹;
- Demands and complexities of administrative and program requirements of government programs on community service providers;
- Attitudinal barriers in the form of employers' prejudice and discrimination;
- Lack of attendant care and other supports such as accessible transportation;
- Lack of workplace accommodations; and
- Financial barriers (lower incomes and costs considerations).

⁹ In *Advancing the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities* (2002), indicators for measuring progress in the area of skills development, learning and employment include working-age adults with post-secondary diplomas or degrees, employment rate, persons employed all year (that is, full-time, full-year employment), median hourly wage, and employers providing facilities, equipment or aids to accommodate persons with disabilities.

¹⁰ For a further examination of governance in this field, see Michael J. Prince, "The governance of children with disabilities and their families: Charting the public-sector regime in Canada," *Canadian Public Administration*, Vol. 45, No. 3, Fall 2002, pp. 398-409.

¹¹ While several programs focus on "at risk" youth, for example, not in school, some programs, such as Hire-a-Student, are available to students with disabilities. The issue remains, though, of the accessibility of these programs.

From the research literature in Canada, we also know that: people with a severe level of disability are much less likely to be employed than people with a lesser degree of disability; people with multiple disabilities have very low employment levels; multiple factors such as gender and visible minority status affect employment prospects; and, we know that “people needing accessible transportation are less likely to be employed than people needing technical aids/devices in the workplace.”¹²

In reviewing this list, questions to reflect on include:

Which of these barriers are seen to be located in the individual or family context¹³ and which are located in the larger environment of public beliefs, the area economy, the school system, and government programs? Which are general demographic factors affecting employment prospects and which are factors specific to disability?

Which of these various barriers are addressed by the eight recommendations set out in the region’s discussion paper? Are some barriers not addressed at all or only partially? If so, why?

SUMMARY

I applaud your continued efforts and interest in striving to advance the vision of the greater inclusion of young people with disabilities in the economy. As the evidence presented shows, youth with disabilities in Canada, as a group, do not have the same opportunities and employment experiences as other young people. Research also identifies the conditions for employment success by Canadians with disabilities, namely, gaining a good education, and having access to transition programs (e.g. from school to work or welfare to work), quality training and community transportation, as well as the essential supports necessary for everyday activities at home and in the work place.

The information presented here has been at the national level. Further analysis of the PALS data (and other information sources) could and should be done at the provincial level in order to offer all groups in this policy community a finer understanding of the issues affecting young people and others living with disabilities in BC.

Our focus has been on how disability interacts with life experiences at a certain age category. Further research also needs to explore in more detail how other factors, such as gender, geographic location, family forms, Aboriginal status and ethnicity, interact with and shape the socio-economic status and life chances of young Canadians with disabilities.

¹² The Roeher Institute, *Improving the Odds: Employment, Disability and Public Programs in Canada*, North York: 2004, pp. 8-10.

¹³ For example, family and friends may discourage the search for work or family responsibilities may prevent outside work. See *Improving the Odd*, p.10.

With respect to the multiple barriers outlined, these are linked in many ways. If youth do not get appropriate education and training or volunteer experience or part-time work, they have lesser access to jobs further down the road, and therefore lesser access to the money needed to further their education at the post-secondary level, which aggravates economic marginalization. Also, the supports – be they human, curricular or technological – needed to succeed at college, university, and in training programs are critically important yet difficult to secure, coordinate and afford for many people.¹⁴

One of the many positive features of the discussion paper is the recognition that we need a policy mix or bundle of strategies for enhancing the employment status of youth with disabilities. No one program or single government department or level of government or sector can do the job. Schools, employers, the federal and provincial governments, and other groups need to rethink current practices and move toward establishing a more accessible, integrated and supportive set of arrangements so that youth with disabilities have the means to participate as fully and equally as possible in all aspects of their communities, including the labour market.

Thank you.

¹⁴ I wish to thank Cam Crawford for this point.