



The Well-being of Canadian Youth with Learning Difficulties: A Rights Based Perspective

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Aim: This study employed a rights-based framework to investigate the economic, social and subjective well-being/life satisfaction of Canadian young people with learning difficulties.

Method: The method is secondary analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) original cohort. Two hypotheses were tested. One hypothesis is that compared with their non-disabled peers, young people with learning difficulties report lower subjective well-being. The second hypothesis is that the lower subjective well-being of young people with learning difficulties can be explained by relative social and economic disadvantage.

Results: Findings demonstrate that young Canadians with learning difficulties fare poorer than their non-disabled peers on indicators of economic, social and subjective well-being. The poorer subjective well-being of young people with learning difficulties is partially explained by economic disadvantage.

Conclusion: Findings present an indication of the task ahead in improving the well-being and advancing the rights of young people with disability in Canada. Future efforts will follow a cohort of Canadian children into adolescence to identify disability-based inequities in the distribution of well-being and to further investigate mechanisms linking disability, disadvantage and subjective well-being over time.

Current Aim: To assess the nature and level of disadvantage faced by a cohort of young Canadians with learning difficulties.

The Long View: To investigate pathways over time linking disability, disadvantage and subjective well-being among Canadian youth.

The aim of the research I will be sharing today is to assess the nature and level of disadvantage faced by a cohort of young Canadians with learning difficulties by employing indicators grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

This data represents a segment of a larger project based in longitudinal analysis of a Canadian cohort from early childhood through adolescence. The global aim is to enhance our understanding of disability based inequities in the distribution of well-being in Canada, and identify pathways linking disability, disadvantage and subjective well-being over time.

National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth:

The original cohort

Cycle 1 94-95	Cycle 2 96-97	Cycle 3 98-99	Cycle 4 00-01	Cycle 5 02-03	Cycle 6 04-05	Cycle 7 06-07	Cycle 8 08-09
0	2	4	6	8	10	12	14
1	3	5	7	9	11	13	15
2	4	6	8	10	12	14	16
3	5	7	9	11	13	15	17
4	6	8	10	12	14	16	18
5	7	9	11	13	15	17	19
6	8	10	12	14	16	18	20
7	9	11	13	15	17	19	21
8	10	12	14	16	18	20	22
9	11	13	15	17	19	21	23
10	12	14	16	18	20	22	24
11	13	15	17	19	21	23	25

Legend: Primary Data
 Supplementary Data

The population under investigation is the original cohort of children participating in the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth or NLSCY. The original cohort was selected from households sampled by Statistics Canada’s Labour Force Survey (LFS) and represents over 22,000 children ages 0 – 11 as of December 1994. This sample was then followed bi-annually for 14 years. Today, I will be focusing on a sample of these children at early adolescence or 14-15 years of age.

National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY)

Strengths

- Large, nationally representative sample
- Allows for comparison
- Voices of youth themselves
- Cross-sectional & longitudinal samples

Limitations

- **Partial exclusion of:**
 - Children with profound intellectual disability
- **Total exclusion of:**
 - Aboriginal children living on reserve
 - Institutionalized children
- **Attrition of highest risk groups**

The NLSCY is the best nationally representative Canadian data source available, that allows for comparison across all children, and also captures the voices of youth themselves.

Unfortunately, relying on youth to convey their thoughts in a survey that was not tailored to their needs means a loss of those with severe or profound intellectual disability. This said, over 3/4th of youth identified as experiencing learning difficulties completed most self-report items, either in pencil and paper format or in a telephone interview. Like many of Statistics Canada's national surveys, the NLSCY excludes children living on reserve and in institutional or military settings (Statistics Canada, 2010).

This study is largely grounded in a human rights framework created by the unified principles of the CRC and CRPD. The children's convention has been widely adopted, and gained prominence as a tool for advocacy, as well as a means to study and monitor the well-being of children worldwide. Recently, the convention on the rights of persons with disability has taken a similar position within areas of disability research and activism. Both conventions implemented together create a more inclusive form of human rights practice that is sensitive to the multiple identities and challenges of youth with disability.



The Right to...	CRC	CRPD
Social Inclusion	Art. 2, 23	Art. 3, 5, 9, 19, 27
Participate in Play, Cultural Life, Recreation, Leisure and Sport	Art. 15, 17, 31	Art. 29, 30
The Best Possible Health	Art. 6, 24	Art. 10, 25
Adequate Standard of Living	Art. 18, 26, 27	Art. 28
Education	Art. 28, 29	Art. 24
Family Life	Art. 9, 10, 18, 20	Art. 19, 23
Protection from all Forms of Violence and Abuse	Art. 19, 34, 37, 39	Art. 13, 15, 16
Justice and Liberty	Art. 12, 37, 40	Art. 13, 14
Emergency and Conflict	Art. 38	Art. 11

This table illustrates one of a number of ways the articles of the CRC and CRPD may be brought together. This particular framework is based on criteria established by Save The Children; a children's advocacy organization whose founder, Eglantyne Jebb, drafted the original Declaration of the Rights of the Child (Lansdown, 2009).

For the purposes of this presentation we will look at a selection of these amalgamated rights domains to explore the well-being of youth with learning difficulties in comparison to typical peers. Items within the NLSCY survey have been selected to represent the intersecting tenets of both conventions. To augment findings pulled from selected rights domains, I will also present a snap shot of how young people identified as having learning difficulties are faring with respect to indicators of subjective well-being.



Defining ‘Learning Difficulties’

- 1) “Mental disability” or “mental handicap” (n = 87) 1.4%
- 2) “Learning disability”; special needs education; Health Utility Index (HUI) scores indicating moderate to severe difficulties in cognitive function;

Excluding those with a score above the 25th percentile on the PPVT-R (n = 320)



Youth with learning difficulties (n=379)

‘Typically developing’ youth (n=3, 865)

Inclusion criteria was designed to identify young adolescents who demonstrate considerable difficulty in cognitive function and experience disability as termed by the CRPD.

All youth who have a past teacher report that a mental disability limits the kind or amount of activity the child could do OR a parent report that the child has been diagnosed with a “mental handicap” were included. This rate corresponds to published rates of diagnosed “intellectual disability or mental retardation” in this age group Canada wide, which tends to hover around 1% (Bradley, Thompson & Bryson, 2002; British Columbia, Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2001).

However, many children with considerable cognitive difficulties, who face barriers to equal societal participation, will never receive a formal diagnosis of intellectual disability. To capture this invisible majority youth are also included if they have a diagnosed “learning disability”; enrollment in a special needs education school program due to learning difficulties; or parent reported Health Utility Index scores that indicate moderate to severe difficulties in cognitive function. For example, a parent who reported that their child was “unable to think or solve problems” would meet inclusion criteria. Finally, youth with average or higher Peabody scores were excluded from the final sample to adjust for children that experience problems in learning such as ADHD, but do not demonstrate significant difficulties in cognitive function.

Adolescents identified as demonstrating learning difficulties were then compared to their “typically developing” peers. I.e. those without any reported chronic condition, impairment or disability.

Demographics

	Youth with Learning Difficulties n=379	Typical Peers n=3,865	
Gender (Female)	34.9%	50.6%	$\chi^2(1) = 34.39$, $p < 0.001$
Age (14)	48.2%	51.3%	n.s.
Aboriginal Status	4.7%	3.5%	n.s.
Language other than English or French spoken at home	3.7%	7.0%	$\chi^2(1) = 5.93$, $p = 0.015$
Urban Area > 100,000	58.9%	59.7%	n.s.
Cycle 6 (2004/05)	30.3%	34.8%	$\chi^2(2) = 6.35$, $p = 0.042$
Cycle 7 (2006/07)	39.9%	33.6%	
Cycle 8 (2008/09)	29.7%	31.6%	

Demographic factors that were not expressly of interest, but could potentially make direct comparison problematic were considered. Age, aboriginal status, province and place of residence were not significantly different between groups. Gender, language spoken at home, and cycle of entry were found to be significantly different and therefore controlled in later analysis.

The most evident difference in the circumstances of these young Canadians in comparison to their peers lies in the level of material disadvantage they face. Parents raising an adolescent with learning difficulties are more likely to worry that they will not be able to provide the basic needs of their family, and tend to bring home lower earnings than parents who are not raising a young person with marked cognitive difficulty. As such it comes as no surprise that considerably more of these families hang close to, or fall below, Canada's low income cut off.

Right to an Adequate Standard of Living

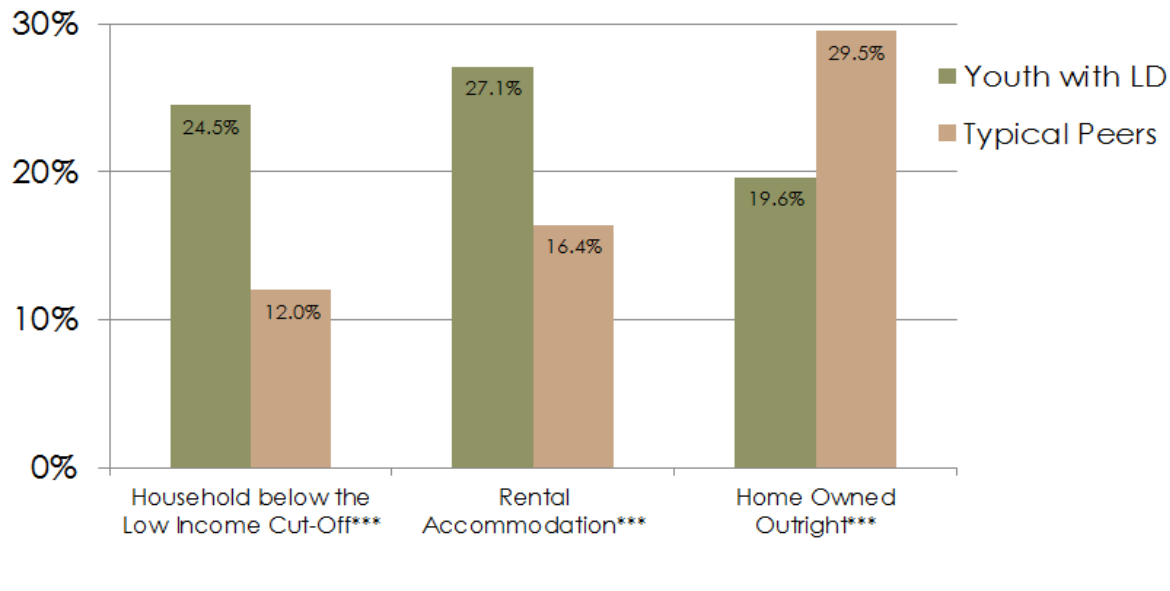
	CRPD	CRC
Adequate Standard of Living	Article. 28	Article. 27, 18 para 2, 26

	Youth with LD Mean(SD)	Typical Peers Mean(SD)	Significance
‡Parent worries about having enough money	2.52(.954)	2.37(.938)	$\beta = 0.050^{***}$
‡Total household income	\$71,674.67	\$89,602.45	$\beta = -0.088^{***}$
‡Ratio to the low income cut-off (LICO)	1.99(1.32)	2.53(1.73)	$\beta = -0.101^{***}$

‡ Adjusted for gender, cycle and language spoken at home

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$





In fact, twice the number of youth experiencing learning difficulties live below the low-income cut-off specific to their region. The LICO is designed by statistics Canada to identify households that are substantially worse off than the average, in that the family spends at least 20 percentage points more of their income than the Canadian average on food, shelter and clothing.

Results also suggest that far fewer families raising a young person with learning difficulties are able purchase the family home. Of those that do own a home, considerably fewer own that home outright.

Right to the Best Possible Health

	CRPD	CRC	
Health	Article. 25, 10	Article. 24, 6	
	Youth with LD	Typical Peers	
	Mean(SD)	Mean(SD)	Significance
‡Parental Rating of their child’s health	4.05(0.92)	4.49(0.68)	$\beta = - 0.178^{***}$
‡Young person’s rating of their health	3.94(0.95)	4.17(0.82)	$\beta = - 0.085^{***}$



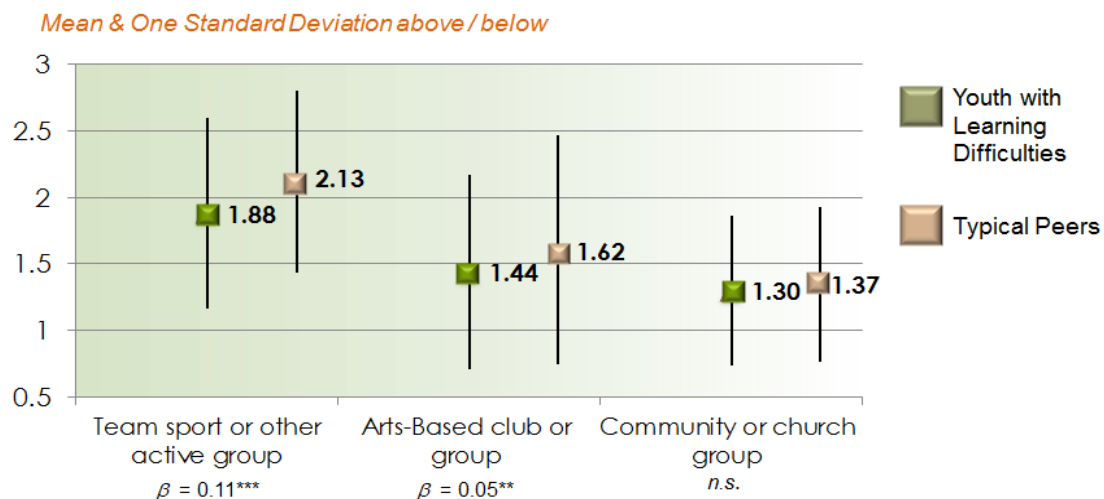
Parents and youth were asked to rate the young person’s general health on a 5 point scale from poor to excellent. Small but significant effects suggest that adolescents with learning difficulties are not as healthy as their typically developing counterparts.

Participation in meaningful social activities is positively associated with higher subjective well-being and greater quality of life (Brajša---Žganec, Merkaš, & Šverko, 2011; Bult, Verschuren, Jongmans, Lindeman, & Ketelaar, 2011; Cooper, Okamura, & Gurka, 1992). To investigate levels of participation in social activity, composite mean group scores were derived based on youth responses to a series of items questioning their level of involvement from ‘not at all’ to ‘several times per week’. Activities were divided into three categories.

‘Team sport or active group’ participation included physical activities such as hockey, dance, and gymnastics. Arts based groups included involvement in artistic pursuits such as music club or drama troupe. Community or church groups included taking part in organizations like 4H club, scouts and church youth groups.

Right to Participation

	CRPD	CRC
Participation	Article. 30, 29	Article. 15, 31, 17



Youth with learning difficulties were less likely to participate in active and arts based activities, but not significantly less likely to be involved in community or church groups. One interpretation might be that community organizations are more open to accommodating the diverse needs of all youth. Another could be that many active and arts based activities require substantial financial investment by parents, and that higher levels of financial hardship may be acting as a barrier to full and equal participation for these youth.



Right to Social Inclusion



	CRPD	CRC	
Social Inclusion	Article. 5, 19, 3, 9, 27	Article. 23, 2	
	Youth with LD	Typical Peers	
	Mean(SD)	Mean(SD)	Significance
‡Friendship score (higher score indicates closer peer relationships)	12.73(2.72)	13.51(2.48)	$\beta = - 0.075^{***}$
‡Time spent with friends outside school	3.79(1.50)	4.11(1.18)	$\beta = - 0.082^{***}$

There is considerable evidence demonstrating a link between positive social relationships and the subjective well-being of young people (Chou, 1999; Morgan et al., 2011). The extant literature also indicates that youth with cognitive limitations often have more difficulty acquiring and maintaining peer relationships (Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007; Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Rotheram-Fuller, Kasari, Chamberlain, & Locke, 2010). Findings from the NLSCY cohort suggest that youth with learning difficulties struggle with friendships in comparison to their typically developing peers.

Subjective Well-Being (SWB)

Hedonic SWB is commonly measured in terms of its three principle components- life satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect.

- ⊕ **Positive affect:** joy, elation, contentment, or pride
- ⊕ **Negative affect:** shame, sadness, anxiety, stress, or anger



Subjective well-being, in the hedonic sense, is typically measured in terms of three principle components - life satisfaction, positive affect and negative affect (Diener, 2009; Scorsolini-Comin & Dos Santos, 2010). Pleasant/positive affect may include emotional states such as joy, elation, contentment, or pride; whereas unpleasant/negative affect is often measured in terms of shame, sadness, anxiety, stress, or anger. Youth from the NLSCY cohort were asked to rate the statement ‘In general, I am happy with how things are for me in my life now’ on a 4 point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This item was chosen as an indicator of general life satisfaction. A measure of projected life satisfaction was also considered based on the same 4 point rating of the statement “The next five years look good to me”.

Positive and negative affect scales were derived based on the frequently cited Bradburn affect scale (Bradburn, 1969). Positive items such as “I enjoy the things I do” and “I am happier than other people my age” form a 5 point scale with higher scores indicating greater positive affect. Similarly, a 3 point negative item scale was derived from responses to items such as “I am restless” and “I am unhappy or sad”. Both scales demonstrate acceptable internal consistency (Alpha = .754 and .710 respectively) .



Indicators of Subjective Well-Being

	Youth with LD	Typical Peers	
	Mean(SD)	Mean(SD)	Significance
‡Life Satisfaction <i>1-5 scale indicating increasing life satisfaction</i>	3.17(0.76)	3.27(0.64)	$\beta = - 0.048^{**}$
‡Projected Life Satisfaction	3.04(0.64)	3.26(0.60)	$\beta = - 0.104^{***}$
‡Positive Affect <i>1-5 scale indicating increasing positive affect</i>	3.35(0.60)	3.47(0.51)	$\beta = - 0.068^{***}$
‡Negative Affect <i>1-3 scale indicating increasing negative affect</i>	1.59(0.38)	1.55 (0.35)	$\beta = 0.045^{**}$

Findings from the NLSCY data suggest that while the gap is quite small, young adolescents with learning difficulties consistently fair worse than their typical counterparts across a broad range of subjective well-being indicators.

There is growing support for the notion that the lower subjective well-being of young people with physical and cognitive limitations is not a natural consequence of impairment. Rather, emerging evidence suggests that disability based disparities in subjective well-being may be contingent upon exposure to social and economic disadvantage (Emerson, Honey, & Llewellyn, 2008; Emerson, Llewellyn, Honey, & Kariuki, 2012). As such there is reason to believe that youth with learning difficulties are not inherently predisposed to experiencing lower levels of subjective well-being, but that this deficit may largely reflect unjust social arrangements.



Preliminary study of adolescents from the NLSCY cohort align with emergent international findings. Perhaps not surprisingly, all youth whose families are struggling financially and who report feeling socially excluded, are also more likely to report lower life satisfaction. Learning difficulties appears to diminish

Seminal Research

Emerson, E., Honey, A., Madden, R. & Llewellyn, G. (2009). The Well-being of Australian Adolescents and Young Adults with Self-reported Long-term Health Conditions, Impairments or Disabilities: 2001 and 2006. *The Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 44(1), 39-54.

life satisfaction further. However, when economic pressures are alleviated and young people feel socially included, the gap in life satisfaction between youth with and without learning difficulties seems to narrow. While a divergence remains, this suggests that the relationship between learning difficulties and low life satisfaction may be largely indicative of increased exposure to disadvantage and exclusion rather than difficulties in cognitive function per se. It should be noted that this graph is intended to be merely illustrative of potential trends. This said,

these preliminary findings provide an indication of the task ahead in addressing the rights and the well-being of young Canadians with marked difficulties in cognitive function.

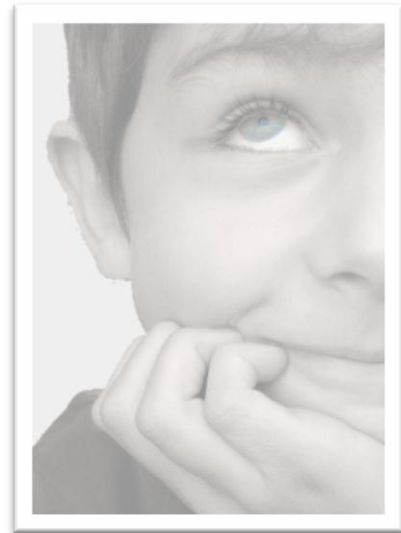
Mean normalized life satisfaction scores by financial hardship and social inclusion



In terms of policy implication, these findings suggest that interventions seeking to improve the subjective well-being of young people with learning difficulties, should consider focusing on reducing socioeconomic inequality, and addressing socially determined disadvantage, as a means to foster a culture of inclusion, and alleviate barriers to full and equal societal participation. Continuing efforts will follow the original NLSCY cohort across childhood through adolescence to investigate mechanisms linking disability, disadvantage and subjective well-being over time.

"Not everything that is faced can be changed,
but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

- James Arthur Baldwin



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