

The Canadian National Institute for the Blind

The Status of Canadian Youth who are Blind or Visually Impaired: A Study of Lifestyles, Quality of Life and Employment

Abstract

The Youth study is a first-ever comprehensive nation wide study aimed at learning more about the daily lives of youth who are blind or visually impaired. Three hundred and twenty (320) blind or visually impaired youth aged 15-30 participated in this study. The project was funded by the Social Development Partnerships Program of Social Development Canada. The study was designed to explore the lives of youth in four domains: employment, activities of daily living, social life, and academics. Comparisons were made between blind youth and those with visual impairments on a number of key variables. It was hoped that by learning more about youth within each of these life domains, more relevant service programs could be designed. It was hoped that findings from this study could also serve as a foundation for new research that could address more specific questions about youth who are blind or visually impaired.

Keywords

Youth, blindness, visual impairment, employment, daily living, social life, academics, survey research methodology.

The methodology

The main part of the study involved the use of an adapted version of a survey developed originally by Dr. Karen Wolffe of American Foundation for the Blind. Dr. Wolffe provided consultation on the present study. Three hundred and twenty (320) blind or visually impaired youth participated in this study. The adapted version of the survey consisted of questions tapping into each of the aforementioned domains of life. Specifically, within the vocational domain, youth were asked questions about their past work history, their current employment, their work load (if they were currently employed) and the degree and types of assistance that they required on the job. Within the social domain, youth were asked to describe their social networks and the kinds of activities they participated in with friends, as well as any obstacles they experienced in their social lives. They were also asked to indicate their marital status and/or their dating/relationship experiences.

Finally, within the social life domain, youth were asked to discuss the level of social support they received and the types of social and leisure activities that they involved themselves in. In the academic domain, youth indicated their level of education, the type(s) of schools they attended (e.g., residential or non-residential), the degree of assistance they required to do their homework, and how they were fairing in their classes. Finally, in the daily activities domain, youth reported on the types of activities they were able to perform, the degree of assistance they required to perform activities such as cooking meals or doing laundry, and whether they used any special adaptations to make this possible. They were also asked to indicate the extent to which their parents expected them to participate in these activities as they were growing up.

While all participants completed one basic type of survey (approximately 45 minutes long), fifty-one (51) participants also completed a long form of the questionnaire (approximately 1.5 hours long), which contained additional detailed questions.

Information was also solicited from participants through other avenues in this study. Specifically, some youth in the study participated in in-depth interviews designed to probe more deeply into issues explored in the general surveys (discussed above). Also, some youth participated in time diaries. In the time diaries, youth were asked to report on the nature and types of activities they had been involved in over the previous day. The purpose of the time diaries was to learn more about how youth spent their time and whether inordinate amounts of time were used in performing particular activities such as traveling. Focus groups served two purposes in this study – one was to help in the design of questions to be asked in the study, and the second purpose was to provide help in interpreting the results of the study. Finally, a number of parents of youth who had participated in the study were asked to complete a parent's survey. The purpose of this was twofold: one purpose was to provide additional information on the lives of youth with visual impairments and the second was to inquire into their experiences in raising a child with a visual impairment.

In the final scientific report, of which this paper is a short summary, results of findings were written up in two parts. The first part described findings based on statistical tests. The second part reported on general patterns in the data not tested statistically. In this executive summary, however, in order to avoid confusion and redundancy, the findings from both parts will be discussed jointly. Also we will focus on findings regarding the vocational and social domains. Many of the analyses took the form of comparisons between blind and partially sighted youth – the purpose here was to determine whether and to what degree the extent of vision loss impacts daily life in each of the lifestyle domains. Other analyses explore the extent to which different demographic, personal, and environmental factors affect the nature of involvement of youth in each of the four domains.

The results

Vocational domain:

Twenty nine percent of youth in our sample reported that they were currently employed, which is highly consistent with the literature indicating that roughly 70% of vision impaired persons in Canada are not gainfully employed (as it also is in the United States). Such similar rates of unemployment across the significantly different legislative contexts in the United States and Canada may indicate that social stigma regarding blindness persists despite equity and human rights initiatives. Among the employed participants, those who were partially sighted were more likely than blind participants to have worked for pay and were also more likely to be working for pay presently. This is also consistent with findings in the literature that employment rates are lower among those who are blind than among those with less severe vision impairments.

Thirty-seven percent of all the participants who were not currently working were actively looking for work. However, when they were asked how much time they spent on a daily basis looking for work, 78% stated that they spent “one hour or less” per day on their job search activities (the lowest choice on the scale presented to them). Although blind and partially sighted participants were equally likely to report themselves as actively looking for work, the former group was more likely to say that they spent only one hour or less per day in their efforts to find work. Participants who were blind were also more likely to report that they had not submitted a single employment application in the previous year and that they had not had an interview in the previous year.

It is interesting that many participants who claimed to be actively looking for work spent such a limited amount of time in job search related activities, and that many of them had not submitted even a single application in the previous year. Of particular interest is whether youth with vision impairments understand that finding a job involves a number of different tasks including scanning job postings, networking, researching organizations, and further developing skills when necessary. Again, this raises two questions: 1. Are young people aware of the different tasks involved in effectively searching for employment? and 2. Are youth adequately prepared for a broad range of employment options? Given that so many youth overall had not filled out an application nor attended a job interview in the past year, this is a significant concern for young people and for professionals.

An examination of the types of jobs that participants reported they were pursuing revealed the following sectors: office work; customer service; information technology; retail sales; physical labor; social and educational services; and arts. The most commonly sought positions fell within the office work, customer service and social services/education categories. This finding is consistent with literature in the field of vision impairment which suggests that youth with vision impairments are offered a limited range of vocational options compared to the real-life options available to them. Anecdotal information from vocational counselors also suggests that youth who have vision impairments are often streamlined towards particular types of jobs, most often based on stereotypical assumptions about the employment potential and skills capacities of vision impaired individuals.

The range of employment related barriers or challenges that participants reported are consistent with those found in previous studies (references in full report). These include the following: restricted access to adapted materials and equipment, and to information; negative attitude of employers or potential employers; a need for tolerance of others, public awareness; improved access to transportation; personal problems; and job requirements.

Despite the fact that participants reported encountering a great number of barriers and challenges to employment, those who reported such barriers also expressed great optimism that they could be overcome. This optimism was particularly strong among the younger participants (100%); this may be because many of them have not yet had to deal with these challenges first hand and were not yet at a time in their lives when they had to be financially self supporting. However, optimism was also high among the older participants (84%) who presumably have had the experience of dealing first hand with many employment-related barriers. This finding is encouraging given the challenges we know lie ahead for many youth with vision impairments. It is noteworthy, however, that parents did not share this optimism that their children could overcome such barriers. In fact roughly half of the parents who were interviewed felt that these barriers could not be surmounted.

Social Domain

Differences were not found between blind and partially sighted participants in terms of social support or size of social networks; however, an examination of the dating and romantic lives of participants suggests that there are marked differences between the experiences of these groups. Specifically, although participants who were blind and

those who were partially sighted were similar in their likelihood to be married, 28% of partially sighted participants and 20% of blind participants reported that they had a boyfriend or girlfriend. Also, 56% of partially sighted youth reported that they were dating as compared with 44% of blind youth.

Participants were asked whether they experienced challenges or barriers in their social lives. Although roughly half of the participants reported that they did experience such challenges, this was more likely to be the case for participants who were partially sighted. Specifically, 56% of youth who were partially sighted experienced such barriers as compared with 40% of youth who were blind. Also 54% of older youth as compared to 45% of younger youth experienced these barriers. Older youth may experience more challenges because they are no longer in school where they are surrounded by peers, and instead must find other social outlets. However, given a number of comments in the qualitative interviews that indicate that social life is actually better than it was in high school, we cannot assume that growing older automatically brings reductions in social opportunities. Older youth, however, may also be living near the workplace, which may not be situated ideally for access to a full social life.

Youth who are partially sighted may experience more challenges simply because they are more involved in activities such as dating, and because they are more likely to have sighted friends who involve them in activities that require high levels of vision. Furthermore, youth who are partially sighted are often able to see what they are missing. Previous studies and anecdotal reports (e.g., Goffman, 1967) indicate that young people with partial vision are keenly aware of the stigma associated with their visual impairment, and feel a strong sense of desire to “fit in.” Not being able to drive a car, for example, may constitute a barrier to social engagement for vision impaired youth who live in small towns with poor or non-existent transit facilities, where most young people drive cars and all terrain vehicles and dirt bikes are popular social and recreational tools. In these instances, the lack of visual capacity to operate motorized vehicles may be compounded by lack of friends who are willing to drive them to social engagements or include them in other ways.

The finding that participants who were partially sighted perceived greater challenges both in the employment and the social domains supports suggestions in the literature that persons with vision impairments may have a particularly difficult time as they engage in activities alongside sighted peers. One possibility is that others expect them to perform at levels comparable to sighted youth. This expectation may in some cases stem from the fact that sighted youth may not be aware of their visual impairment. In fact, 36% of participants who were partially sighted felt that their vision impairment was not evident to others. This compares with 28% for participants who were blind. These findings were more pronounced among participants who were younger and male, which may suggest that either a) partially sighted young men may experience particular challenges associated with having to live in a sighted world or b) partially sighted young men go to greater extents to hide their vision impairment in order to try to “pass” for sighted.

Activities of Daily Living

Within each of the subdomains of the activities of daily living questionnaire (time management, money management, personal management, and home management) participants who were blind performed **fewer** activities than participants who were partially sighted. These findings support the literature which suggests that lower levels

of vision are associated with reduced involvement in performing activities of daily living (see full document for references).

The most straightforward explanation for why lesser vision would be associated with performing fewer activities of daily living is that performance of many of these activities require substantial vision. However, an examination of reports within the blind group reveals great variability among participants in the number and types of activities they performed. In fact they use a number of strategies in order to perform these activities. These strategies include putting Braille stickers on microwaves so that they can set the appropriate timings, and using adaptive software so that they can use internet banking. This finding suggests that the variability is the result not simply of vision level, but of one's use of accommodative strategies to compensate for lack of vision. Furthermore, this may suggest that with exposure and training, many youth, including those with little or no vision, *could* perform most or all of the activities of daily life.

This study also explored the impact of parental expectations on participants' levels of involvement in activities of daily living. The data establishes that the higher the level of parental expectations when participants were younger, the greater the extent to which they participated in activities of daily living when they were older. The study establishes that this is the case even after we take into account a number of confounding factors such as age, vision level and level of education. Furthermore, the higher the parental expectations in the area of activities of daily living when participants were younger, the greater the likelihood that these same youth would be currently employed. One possible explanation for these findings is that children who are not encouraged by parents to learn activities of daily living do not learn the fundamental skills of independent living that they will need later on in their lives in order to secure and maintain employment. This supports the career education model proposed by Wolffe and Sacks (1997), in which it is posited that the learning of activities of daily living is a key building block in the acquisition of employment-related skills. : As with sighted children, families will differ in the degree to which they foster independence. However, with blind children this is likely to be a greater liability when they are adults.

Recommendations

Some of the recommendations that can be drawn from these findings are:

1. Youth may be ill prepared for the job search process and unaware of what it takes to find a job. Therefore, it is important that they receive extensive vocational counseling, ideally, as early in their lives as possible.
2. It is important that parents of youth with visual impairments be educated about just how important it is that their children develop and utilize skills of daily living. These skills are the building blocks for later employment and independent living. Parents should be made aware that their children *can* learn to perform these activities with appropriate accommodations.
3. It is important that counselors have an appreciation for some of the difficulties that youth who are partially sighted may experience as they engage in activities alongside sighted peers who may or may not be aware of their visual impairment.