

## Employment-related Experiences of Youths Who Are Visually Impaired: How Are These Youths Faring?

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**Abstract:** This article describes the results in the employment domain of a larger study of the lifestyles of 328 Canadian youths, aged 15-21 and 22-30, 131 of whom were blind and 197 of whom had low vision. The youths completed a survey on their work-related experiences, including their current employment status and job-search strategies. In addition to characterizing the overall employment-related experiences of the youths, the study explored differences by visual status, gender, and age group.

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The employment status of youths is a major concern to practitioners and scholars in the fields of vocational rehabilitation and education of people with visual impairments because only 32% of individuals aged 18-69 who are legally blind are employed (American Foundation for the Blind [AFB], 2006) and many more are underemployed (Rumrill & Scheff, 1997). Not working or not working in a job for which one is qualified can affect one's self-esteem and personality, increase one's feelings of hostility, and induce dependent relationships (Tuttle, 1984).

Although there is not a large body of literature on the employment experiences of young adults who are blind or have low vision, a few critical studies are reviewed here. Since the mid-1980s, the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education, has underwritten a series of longitudinal studies of the postschool outcomes of youths with disabilities, including those who are visually impaired. The two major studies have been the National Longitudinal Transition

## Study (NLTS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS-2).

The NLTS (<[www.sri.com/policy/cehs/dispolicy/nlts.html](http://www.sri.com/policy/cehs/dispolicy/nlts.html)>), conducted between 1983 and 1993, included more than 8,000 high school students, of whom 875 were visually impaired, in special education in the 1985-86 school year. NLTS found that in 1987, 51.7% of the visually impaired youths studied were unemployed, 13.8% were doing volunteer work, 12.4% were doing work-study, 3.8% were performing sheltered work, 10.9% were doing part-time competitive work, and 7.5% were doing full-time competitive work (Valdes, Williamson, & Wagner, 1990).

By the end of NLTS (Wagner, D'Amico, Marder, Newman, & Blackorby, 1992), 23.4% of the young adults who were visually impaired who had been out of school less than two years were competitively employed (12.9% part time and 10.4% full time), and 29.4% who had been out of school for three to five years were competitively employed (12.4% part time and 17% full time). These young adults were either blind or had low vision and had no additional disabilities. They had graduated with grades that were comparable to their classmates without disabilities and attended college in similar numbers. The greatest difference between the visually impaired, employed young adults and their peers without disabilities was the likelihood of obtaining full-time employment as adults. The only groups of young adults with disabilities who were less likely to report competitive employment outcomes were those with multiple disabilities, deaf-blindness, and orthopedic impairments (Wagner et al., 1992).

NLTS-2 (<[www.nlts2.org](http://www.nlts2.org)>), which began in 2000 and will continue through 2009; analyses of the study are expected to be completed in 2010. The preliminary data indicated that the percentage of youths with visual impairment who had worked for pay since they left high school had increased 36.6% for Cohort 1 (1987), and 62.4% for Cohort 2 (2003). This 25.8% increase is a

strong, positive change that indicates that these young adults are acquiring some work experience following school. Unfortunately, when the cohorts were asked if they were currently working for pay, the percentages dropped dramatically for both years: 29.9% for Cohort 1 (1987), and 27.6% for Cohort 2 (2003) (Cameto & Levine, 2005).

Youths who are visually impaired may face a number of barriers in their efforts to make the transition from school to employment and community life. At a societal level, governmental policies can create financial disincentives to engage in paid employment (Bina, 1991; Crudden, McBroom, Skinner, & Moore, 1998; O'Day, 1999), such as limiting the number of hours a recipient of disability benefits can work and retracting medical benefits when a person finds work. Furthermore, employers are often hesitant to hire people who are visually impaired (Crudden et al. 1998).

According to Wolffe and Candela (2002), employers are concerned about the perceived expenses that are associated with workplace accommodations, delays that workers who are visually impaired may experience in reaching full productivity, and potential difficulties in terminating a worker who is disabled whose performance is not acceptable. Wolffe and Candela found that employers who have had some experience with hiring individuals with disabilities are far more likely to recruit persons with disabilities in the future.

Demographic and psychosocial factors have also been found to affect opportunities for employment. Psychosocial factors may include the motivation to work, the development of skills, self-efficacy, self-esteem, social support, and the availability of social networks (Leonard & D'Allura, 2000). Demographic factors may include sex, age, race, educational level, health status, location of residence, and socioeconomic status (Kirchner, Schmeidler, & Todorov, 1999; Leonard & D'Allura, 1997; Nosek, Hughes, Swedlund, Taylor, & Swank, 2003). Although such factors can affect anyone's opportunities for employment, they may have a more profound impact on those with disabilities. For example,

living in an area in which transportation stops are distant or transportation is infrequent or not available may limit employment options for those who do not drive.

Wolffe and Sacks (1997) explored the vocational experiences of students in a study that examined the academic, daily living, social, and vocational lifestyle domains of youths with visual impairments and compared these lifestyles to those of sighted youths. These domains were identified as areas of need for youths who are visually impaired to make successful transitions to adulthood (Wolffe, Koenig, Sacks, & Lewis, 2003), and the items were designed to explore how youths (aged 15-21) spent their time in comparison to sighted youths. Within the vocational domain, Wolffe and Sacks (1997) found that the type and nature of employment was much narrower for students who were visually impaired than for those who were sighted.

The research just discussed has provided some insights into the employment experiences of young people who are visually impaired. However, most of these studies were conducted in the United States, and differences between the American and Canadian contexts may limit their generalizability to the United States. For example, income support programs in the two countries may differ, and a different legislative context exists in the United States because of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Much of the past research in the field of visual impairment has focused on identifying employment status and its relationship to the labor market. More needs to be known about the job-search strategies of young adults who are visually impaired, the degree of preparation that young adults receive for the transition from school to work, the level of support they require on the job, and their perceptions of their future. More also needs to be known about how employment experiences vary with the degree of vision loss.

## **The study**

The study presented in this article was part of a larger project that explored the daily lives of youths within four domains of life: vocational, social and leisure, academic, and activities of daily living. The theoretical framework of the larger study was the career-education model (Wolffe, 1998). The career-education model proposes that engaging children and youths in activities of daily living and summer work experience will go a long way toward helping them to develop the skills they will need later in life to live independently and be successful in their careers (Wolffe, 1998).

This article focuses primarily on the findings of this research in the vocational domain, specifically the work-related experiences of youths and aspects of their job-search endeavors. In addition to characterizing the experiences of the group as a whole, differences based on visual status, age, and sex were considered, as was the relationship between such factors as involvement in activities of daily living and current employment status (employed or not employed).

To assess the impact of visual impairment on employment-related experiences, we compared the experiences of youths who were blind and those with low vision. The participants included both males and females in two age cohorts: 15-21 and 22-30. The former group was generally either in school or in the process of making a transition from school to work, and the older cohort was typically either in a university or had entered the world of work. A sighted comparison group was not included because a large representative group of sighted youths was beyond the resources of this study and because the impact of visual impairment could be explored by referring to sighted norms in the literature and by comparing youths who are blind and youths who have low vision.

Past research has shown that people who are visually impaired encounter more challenges in finding and maintaining employment than do people who are sighted (see, for example, McBroom, Crudden, Skinner, & Moore, 1998). By extension, the

general expectation of the study presented here was that the youths with visual impairment would experience more challenges in the vocational domain than would youths with low vision. The specific hypotheses were designed to explore this theory in the context of various employment-related experiences. Age and sex differences were also explored using descriptive statistics. It was hypothesized that

1. the participants with low vision would be more likely to be working and more likely to have worked for pay than would those who were blind;
2. among those who were not working, the participants with low vision would be more likely to be looking for work than would those who were blind;
3. the participants with low vision would be less likely than those who were blind to perceive employment-related challenges, including finding and maintaining work;
4. the participants who were blind would find their work more difficult, feel less favorably about their performance at work, do more overtime work, and require more assistance with their work than would those with low vision; and
5. the employment status of youths who were working for pay versus not working for pay would be affected by the extent of their visual impairment, their level of education, their age, their perceived social support, the type of community in which they lived, and their relative autonomy with regard to activities of daily living.

## **Method**

### **PARTICIPANTS**

Of the 328 15-30 year olds who were visually impaired who participated from all provinces of Canada, 131 were blind and 197 had low vision. Of these participants, 154 were aged 15-21, 173 were aged 22-30, 175 were male, and 143 were female (information on age was not available for 1 participant). Only

youths who were able to communicate in English or French and had no secondary disabilities or major health conditions were included. The youths were from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Most of the participants (300) were randomly selected from the client database of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), and the remainder (28) were recruited from the W. Ross MacDonald School for the Blind in Ontario and the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority in Nova Scotia.

Volunteers from these organizations were asked to select participants who met the eligibility criteria and were willing to participate in the study. Upon further investigation, all but 5 participants from these institutions were registered as clients of CNIB. The sample was stratified by level of impairment (whether they were classified as being blind or as having low vision), province of residence, and age cohort (15-21 or 22-30). An effort was made to recruit a similar number of participants from each age cohort and a similar number of participants who were blind or had low vision to facilitate the interpretation of comparisons between vision groups and age cohorts, and to ensure that there were a sufficient number of participants in each group to make such comparisons feasible. The number of participants who were recruited from the various provinces of Canada were proportionate to the number of youths who were CNIB clients in each region.

The participants were categorized as either being blind or having low vision on the basis of their functional vision code (which is available for each client who is logged in the CNIB database). Those who were categorized as blind had a visual acuity of between 20/1200 and no usable vision (no light perception), and those who were categorized as having low vision had a visual acuity of between 20/200 and 20/1200, as recommended by the World Health Organization (1973). Although the participants were categorized as being blind or having low vision, all would be considered legally blind according to the definition of legal

blindness (a visual acuity of 20/200 after best correction or a visual field of 20 degrees or less). Of the 328 participants, 51 completed a "long version" of the survey, and 277 completed a "short version."

## **MEASURES**

The lifestyles questionnaire used in this study is an adapted version of the Youth Lifestyles Questionnaire used by Wolffe and Sacks (1997) and has items in four lifestyle domains: vocational, social, academic, and activities of daily living. The original (unadapted) version of the questionnaire has high face validity and content validity, and is well suited to exploring the lives of youths who are visually impaired. The adaptations to the questionnaire included the addition of items that are pertinent to each domain, for example the inclusion of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988), and the development of a short and a long version of the questionnaire. The long version included all the questions in the short version, as well as additional questions that were pertinent to each domain. For example, in the vocational domain, the long version asked the participants to provide a chronology of their past work experiences.

The MSPSS (Zimet et al., 1988) was incorporated into the questionnaire because it had been demonstrated in past research to have high reliability and validity (see, for instance, Dahlem, Zimet, & Walker, 1991). A social-support scale was included because the original questionnaire inquired about support networks but not about perceptions of support. The MSPSS consists of three subscales: friends, family, and significant others.

## **PROCEDURE**

Approval for conducting the research presented here was received from an ad hoc ethics committee, consisting of a consumer; a health services research scientist; an associate professor in the Departments of Pediatrics, Genetics, Ophthalmology, and Vision



Sciences; a professor of early childhood education (chair of the committee) at Ryerson University; and a professor of sociology at Lakehead University. Ethics forms were modeled after those used by the Research Ethics Board at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. The forms were translated into French, so they could be understood by French-speaking participants.

After the ethics committee granted its approval, pilot testing of the instrument was conducted with volunteers from CNIB, most of whom were visually impaired. The 10 people who participated in the pilot test included both males and females with various degrees of vision loss from both age cohorts. Five of these participants completed the long version of the survey. The pilot testing was conducted to ensure that the questions in the tools flowed smoothly and that the time required for completion was reasonable. On the basis of feedback from the participants in the pilot test, some questions were rewritten to enhance their clarity, and other questions were removed to shorten the survey.

Those who expressed an interest in participating in the study were given the choice of completing the long or short version of the questionnaire by telephone or hard copy. They were told that the longer version would include additional questions to probe more deeply into employment-related issues and would take longer to complete. Almost all the participants chose to be interviewed by telephone. An appointment for the telephone interview was generally made in advance.

## Results

The hypotheses were evaluated with *t*-tests and correlational analyses; other findings are based on descriptive statistics. The results are organized as follows: For each topic, the youths' overall experiences are presented first, followed by comparisons between the employment-related experiences of those who were blind and those who had low vision. Finally, comparisons between the age cohorts (collapsed across vision level and sex)

and sexes (collapsed across vision level and age group) are presented.

## **EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF YOUTHS**

Overall, 231 participants (71%) indicated that they had worked for pay. Chi-square analyses revealed that, in line with Hypothesis 1, those with low vision were more likely than those who were blind to have worked for pay ( $\chi^2 = [1, N = 324] = 11.757, p < .001$ ). Specifically, 152 (78%) participants with low vision versus 79 (61%) who were blind had worked for pay. With regard to age, 91 participants (60%) in the younger cohort, compared with 139 (81%) in the older cohort, had worked for pay. Similar percentages of male and female participants had worked for pay.

Overall, 94 (29%) youths were currently employed. In confirmation of Hypothesis 1, youths with low vision were more likely than those who were blind to be currently employed ( $\chi^2 = [1, N = 321] = 10.215, p < .001$ ). Specifically, 69 (36%) participants with low vision and 25 (19%) who were blind were currently employed. With regard to the age cohort, 24 (16 %) of the younger participants and 70 (41%) of the older participants were currently employed. Similar proportions of males and females were also currently employed.

## **THE JOB-SEARCH PROCESS**

Of the participants who were not currently working, 83 (37%) reported that they were actively looking for work. Differences between the participants with low vision and those who were blind in the likelihood of looking for work were not statistically significant (contrary to Hypothesis 2). In the younger age cohort, 40 (33%) youths were actively looking for work, compared with 43 (43%) in the older cohort. Similar proportions of males and females reported that they were actively looking for work.

The participants who were not working but were actively looking

for work were asked how much time they spent on an average day looking for work: one hour or less, one to two hours, more than two hours but less than three hours, and more than three hours. In total, 76 participants answered this question. The modal response, of 49 participants (78%), was one hour or less per day. This finding was similar when the data were reanalyzed using only nonstudents; 75% of the participants reported that they spent one hour or less each day looking for work. Subsequent analyses in this area did not exclude students. With regard to visual status, 25 (74%) percent of the youths with low vision and 24 (83%) of those who were blind spent one hour or less per day looking for work, and, by age cohort, 23 (89%) of the youths in the younger cohort versus 26 of the youths in the older cohort (70%) spent one hour or less looking for work each day. Similar proportions of males and females spent one hour or less per day looking for work.

The participants who were not working but were actively looking for work were asked to specify the number of applications they had submitted in the previous year. Overall, 16 (26%) of these participants reported that they had not submitted any applications in the previous year. This number was similar when only nonstudents were included; 10 (26%) nonstudents had submitted no applications in the previous year. Subsequent analyses regarding the number of applications submitted did not exclude students. In addition, 7 (21%) participants with low vision and 9 (33%) who were blind, 5 (20%) in the younger cohort and 11 (31%) in the older cohort, and 10 (29%) male participants and 6 (23%) female participants reported that they had not submitted any applications in the previous year.

The participants who were not working but were actively looking for work were asked to specify the number of interviews they had in the previous year. Overall, 26 (41%) of the 63 participants who responded and 16 (40%) nonstudents had not had any interviews in the previous year. With regard to visual status, 11 (31%) participants with low vision and 15 (54%) who were blind

reported they had not had interviews in the previous year; the results revealed similar figures for the two age cohorts. In addition 18 (50%) male participants and 8 (30%) female participants (results collapsed across vision and age) had not had any interviews in the previous year.

Two raters examined the responses to the question, "What kind of jobs are you seeking?" and agreed on the categorization scheme outlined in [Table 1](#). They then independently assigned each participant's comments to one of the categories. There was a high consensus between the raters on the terms of the category to which they assigned the responses ( $\kappa = .82$ ). Table 1 lists these job categories, along with the frequency with which they were mentioned by the participants. The small frequencies in this table reflect the fact that only the participants who completed the long form of the survey were asked to describe the specific barriers or challenges that they had encountered (and that not all these participants reported that they experienced such barriers).

Overall, 185 (59%) participants claimed they had experienced challenges or barriers to employment. Contrary to Hypothesis 3, those with low vision were not less likely than those who were blind to report that they experienced such barriers or challenges. In fact, the pattern was reversed: 119 (63%) with low vision versus 60 (54%) who were blind perceived such challenges. In addition, 65 (46%) in the younger age cohort and 120 (71%) in the older cohort and 103 (57%) male participants and 82 (63%) female participants reported that they had experienced such challenges.

The participants reported a variety of types of challenges or barriers. On the basis of the responses, two coders arrived at the categorization scheme presented in [Table 2](#), and then independently assigned each participant's responses to the question to one of the categories. There was a high consensus among the coders in how responses were categorized ( $\kappa = .86$ ). Table 2 lists the challenges or barriers, along with the

frequency with which they were mentioned by the participants. The small frequencies in this table reflect the fact that only the participants who completed the long form of the survey were asked to describe the specific barriers or challenges that they had encountered (and that not all these participants reported that they experienced such barriers).

The participants who completed the long form of the survey and reported that they experienced employment-related challenges were asked whether these barriers could be overcome. Of the 22 who responded, 19 (86%) thought that these barriers could be overcome by making use of technology (giving examples such as "learn technology and keep trying"), advocacy and education of the public (for example, "making people aware of the potentials of people with low vision"), seeking additional financial support (for instance, "with some help from the government"), or a positive attitude and perseverance (such as "realizing that everybody goes through the same process").

Hypothesis 4 stated that youths who were blind would find their work more difficult, feel less favorably about their performance at work, do more overtime work, and require more assistance with their work than would youths with low vision. The results revealed that there were no significant differences between these two groups of participants in their perceptions of how difficult their work was or how they felt about their performance at work. Participants who were blind were more likely to take work home and to receive assistance with work, although these findings only approached statistical significance. The number of participants ( $n = 87$ ) who were working and who responded to these questions was sufficient only to reveal a small effect size, so it is possible that, with a greater number of participants, these differences would have been statistically significant.

Spearman rho correlations revealed that, as Hypothesis 5 predicted, participants who had lower levels of visual impairment ( $r = -.225, p < .001$ ), higher levels of education ( $r = .272, p$

< .001), greater involvement in activities of daily living ( $r = .209$ ,  $p < .001$ ), parents with higher expectations that they would participate in activities of daily living while they were growing up ( $r = .209$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and greater maturity ( $r = -.291$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were more likely to be employed. However, the type of community in which the participants lived and the social support they perceived were not significantly correlated with employment status.

## Discussion

Previous research, conducted mainly in the United States, revealed that young people who are visually impaired have extremely low rates of employment compared with those who are sighted and those in other disability groups (see, for example, Wagner et al., 1992). The purpose of this study was to learn more about the vocational experiences of Canadian youths, including their employment status, job-search preparation, and job-search strategies, and to explore the extent to which these factors varied by degree of vision loss, age, and sex.

Overall, 29% of the participants (aged 15-30) reported that they were currently employed. This figure is similar to the U.S. statistic (AFB, 2006) that 32% of legally blind people aged 18-69 are currently employed. In the older cohort of this study (aged 22-30), 41% were currently employed. This figure is midway between the aforementioned rate of 32% and the 50% employment rate in the United States for people who are visually impaired aged 22-50 (AFB, 2006). Given that there were likely to be proportionately more students aged 22-30 in the current study than in the 22-50 age range of the U.S. sample, the employment rates in Canada may be similar to the U.S. rates. The phenomenon of such low employment rates in significantly different legislative contexts may indicate that social stigma regarding blindness persists despite various equity and human rights initiatives. When one considers that the employment rate in Canada for people aged 25-54 with no disabilities is 82% and for people with disabilities

in general is 51% (Government of Canada, 2002), a rate of 41% for those aged 22-30 may be considered low, even when the age differences in the various studies are taken into account.

Despite these low rates of employment, the participants' educational attainment was similar to or higher than that of the general Canadian population. The Government of Canada (2002) reported that 25% of adults without disabilities have university degrees. In the older cohort in this study, 31% ( $n = 53$ ) of the youths had some college or university education, 21% had university degrees, and 3% had graduate degrees. The finding of high levels of educational attainment but a low employment rate among students with visual impairment is consistent with the findings reported by Wagner et al. (1992).

As hypothesized, the participants with low vision were significantly more likely than were those who were blind to have worked and to be currently working for pay. This finding is consistent with previous findings that employment rates are lower among those who are blind than among those with low vision (see, for example, Houtenville, 2003). Further research is required to discover the deeper meaning of this result. One may conjecture that people who are blind are not finding jobs as easily as those with low vision. Other research has shown that employers' attitudes are barriers to employment (Gold, Simson, & Zuvela, 2005) and that these barriers may be greater for those who are blind than for those with low vision because their disability is more visible to prospective employers.

Another key finding was that 37% of the participants who were not currently working were actively looking for work. However, when asked how much time they spent daily looking for work, 78% stated that they spent one hour or less. Although youths who were blind and those with low vision were equally likely to state that they were actively looking for work, the former were more likely to report that they spent only one hour or less per day doing so, that they had submitted no applications in the previous year,

and that they had not had an interview in the previous year. These patterns were evident even if only nonstudents were included in the analyses.

It is interesting that the participants who claimed to be actively looking for work spent such a limited amount of time in job search-related activities and that some had submitted no employment applications in the previous year. This finding raises questions about how the participants may have interpreted the term *actively looking*. Perhaps the participants interpreted this term to include a number of different tasks, such as scanning job postings, networking, researching organizations, and further developing skills, rather than actually applying for work. If they did so, they may have thought that one hour or less of job-search activity per day was sufficient to check for new job postings, particularly since they generally checked for updated listings on a few key Internet job sites. Given that many youths who are visually impaired consider a narrow range of career options (Wolffe & Sacks, 1997), the participants may have thought there were a limited number of places that were appropriate for their searches.

Another possible explanation for why the participants spent so little time looking for work is that they felt discouraged because of their previous failed attempts to find work. Perhaps a number of them were not expecting to work. Anecdotal information, gathered in conversations with vision health and rehabilitation service providers, indicates that some young people who are blind may not see employment in their future, and perhaps certain social policies (such as the provincial disability income-support programs) act as disincentives to searching for jobs. Certainly, CNIB is aware of families who are afraid that their children will lose disability benefits or the associated health care benefits if they find a job. Again, further research on this issue is required, but, as Tuttle (1984) suggested, unemployment can induce dependence in persons who are blind. The creation of such a cycle of dependence is also worthy of further study. In particular,



this population provides a unique opportunity to study social policies through the lens of a particular disability and to glean information about the actual impact of these policies on the everyday lives of people who can work but do not.

The participants were also asked to report on barriers or challenges that they encountered in the employment process. This question was asked of all the participants (not just those who were currently working), and thus it likely tapped barriers that are associated with both the job-search process and workplace challenges. Contrary to Hypothesis 3, the participants with low vision were more likely to perceive employment-related challenges than were those who were blind. An examination of the types of challenges experienced by the youths with low vision revealed that many were on-the-job challenges, such as employers' reluctance to provide appropriate accommodations.

The employment-related barriers or challenges that the participants reported are consistent with those found in previous studies (Candela & Wolffe, 2001; Corn, Muscella, Cannon, & Shepler, 1985; Crudden & McBroom 1999; McBroom et al., 1998; O'Day 1999). They included restricted resources (adaptive material, equipment, and information), employers' or potential employers' attitudes, others' tolerance of them and public awareness, transportation, personal problems, and job requirements.

Even though the participants reported encountering a great number of barriers and challenges to employment, those who reported such barriers also expressed great optimism that the barriers could be overcome. This finding is encouraging, given the challenges that lie ahead for many youths who are visually impaired. When the participants were asked what made them optimistic that such barriers could be overcome, they stated that they would use specific strategies to pursue their interests: make use of available technology, advocate for themselves, educate the public, seek financial support, have positive attitudes, and

persevere. It is interesting that most participants seemed to believe that the way to create change was to update their skills or alter the ways in which they presented themselves to others. Although this attitude is admirable and certainly optimistic, it may understate the need for a change in factors that are external to them. It also has a significant implication for advocacy groups and policy makers, since young people with disabilities may be empowered when they understand the prevailing social structures and strategies for working for social change. Furthermore, young people with disabilities may become disillusioned and disempowered when they are older if they discover that it is far more difficult to obtain jobs than they had hoped or predicted.

Among the participants who currently held a job, those who were blind were more likely than were those with low vision to take work home at the end of the day. There are a number of possible explanations for this difference. For example, the participants who were blind may have found that they needed to invest time outside regular work hours to compensate for their blindness or for the slowness of adaptive technology or to be perceived as competent. They were also more likely to report that they received assistance from others with their work. Finally, during an interpretation panel that was held with teachers at the end of the study, it was suggested that employees who are blind were once students with heavy workloads and, hence, may have developed these work habits at a much younger age because all the work had to be completed using audio and braille formats.

The types of jobs (see Table 1) that the participants sought included office work, customer service, information technology, retail sales, physical labor, social and educational services, and the arts. The most commonly sought positions fell within the categories of office work, customer service, and social services-education. This finding is consistent with the literature, which has suggested that youths who are visually impaired are offered a limited range of vocational options compared with the real-life options that are available to them (Sacks, Wolffe, & Tierney,

1998).

Correlational analyses revealed that a number of factors were associated with whether a participant was currently employed: greater levels of functional vision, higher levels of education, and greater maturity, as well as involvement in activities of daily living and parents' higher expectations that the youths would perform these activities. The finding that the type of community (rural or urban) was not significantly correlated with current employment status likely reflects the fact that most participants were from big cities. Although correlation does not imply causality, the finding that the performance of activities of daily living and high expectations of parents were related to the likelihood of being currently employed is consistent with the career education model (Wolffe, 1996), which suggests that proficiency with activities of daily living early in life helps to develop the building blocks for later independence and the ability to find and maintain employment. Future research could examine the relationship between the nature of parental expectations and employment and independent living outcomes later in life.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this research was to describe the employment status of Canadian youths who are visually impaired. In general, the findings revealed low employment rates among these youths despite levels of education that were similar to those of the general population. However, since there was a significant positive correlation between employment status and educational attainment, parents should be encouraged to ensure that their children obtain the highest possible level of education.

The findings also revealed that many youths spent little time actively searching for jobs and that many submitted few job applications. Future research could further explore the effectiveness of their job-search strategies. In addition, the participants reported that they experienced a number of barriers to

employment--barriers that are similar to those documented in the literature on visual impairment--but they also expressed great optimism about overcoming the barriers.

A few limitations of this study are noteworthy. First, in some instances, when sighted norms from previous studies were not available, a sighted comparison group of youths may have been helpful in interpreting the findings. Second, since the study was conducted by CNIB, a service provider for people who are visually impaired, it is possible that the responses would have been different if the research were based elsewhere or the interviewer had less knowledge about visual impairment. The findings may also have limited generalizability for several reasons. First, most participants in the study were clients of CNIB, and it is not clear to what extent the findings may be applicable to nonclients. Second, because only a subset of the randomly selected participants was successfully contacted, the results may not be generalizable to those who did not participate; perhaps those who were unavailable or not interested in participating were busy working, looking for work, or otherwise occupied. Finally, most of the participants in the CNIB database were from urban areas, so the findings may not be generalizable to those who live in rural areas.

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