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ODEP
Office of Disability Employment Policy

Supporting Autistic Young Adults in Preparing for, Finding, and Sustaining Employment

Insights from the Research Support Services for Employment of Young Adults on the Autism Spectrum (REYAAS) project

September 16, 2026

Today’s agenda

01 Welcome and opening remarks

02 REYAAS project overview

03 Preparing for employment: Services and skill development

04 Finding employment: Job search and barriers to work

05 Sustaining employment: Job experiences, retention, and advancement

06 Closing reflections and next steps

07 Questions and discussion

Your participation in today's webinar

Questions welcome at any time

- Attendees may submit questions through the Q&A box whenever they come to mind
- We will group related questions and address as many as time allows

Interactive poll

- A live poll will run at the end of the session to capture your interests and priorities

Welcome and opening remarks

Julie Hocker
Assistant Secretary of Labor for Disability Employment Policy

REYAAS project overview

Why this work matters

~1.2 million autistic youth will enter adulthood over the next decade[1]

Autistic young adults may face complex school-to-work transitions

- Support needs may span communication, health, social participation, and learning
- Supports often require coordination across providers and systems
- High rates of co-occurring health conditions and household poverty[2]
- Lower employment rates after high school relative to peers[3]

Supporting the transition to work presents challenges for policy and practice

- Young adults with disabilities often face a “services cliff” when they leave school
- Wide range of support needs among autistic people makes one-size-fits-all solutions inappropriate
- Limited data and evidence on this topic make it hard to design effective solutions

Overview of the REYAAS project

Five-year project (2021–2026) funded by the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), one of the largest investments to date in research on this topic. Focused on young adults ages 16 to 28 who are on the autism spectrum.

Objectives

- Understand barriers and facilitators affecting employment of autistic young adults
- Identify specific practices, approaches, policies, and programs that can facilitate successful employment for young adults on the autism spectrum
- Highlight and fill gaps in the research literature
- Suggest and conduct new evidence-building activities

Structured as layered activities to develop knowledge and build evidence

Findings and resources are intended to inform policymakers, program leaders, employers, and researchers

Project activities

Knowledge development

- Two literature reviews[4,5]
- Listening sessions[6]
- Rapid-response analyses
- Technical working group

Evidence building

- Evaluation design options[9]
- Survey of autistic young adults[10]
- Interviews with autistic young adults

Data analyses

- Inventory of existing survey and administrative data[7]
- Analysis of vocational rehabilitation data[8]

Advisory resources

- Brief on employer best practices[11]
- Case study of coaching program[12]

Knowledge dissemination through reports, briefs, conferences, briefings, etc.

How we centered the perspectives of autistic young adults

Listening sessions
2022

97

participants across four virtual sessions

Approach
Open-ended discussion of experiences finding and keeping work, employment goals, services, and barriers

Key contribution
Early themes and priorities in young adults' own words

Survey
2025

3,440

autistic young adult survey respondents from two distinct samples[a]

Approach
Systematic data collection on education, skill development, work experience, services, and employment

Key contribution
Large-scale, recent data on autistic young adults' experiences and outcomes

Follow-up interviews
2025–2026

30

autistic young adults, interviewed after the survey

Approach
Deeper exploration of employment experiences and use of job-related services and training

Key contribution
Context and explanation behind patterns in survey data

[a] We fielded the survey to a "community outreach" sample and "research group" sample; neither is nationally representative.

Highlight: A groundbreaking survey

In 2025, we fielded a single survey instrument to two distinct samples

We drew the samples from two partner organizations that were selected after careful assessment of 15 organizations

Community outreach sample	Research group sample
• Autism Society: oldest autism advocacy organization in the U.S. • National office and 70 local and state affiliates • Selected to maximize reach into the community and contact people less engaged in research	• SPARK: largest autism research study in the U.S. • 30,000+ autistic people and family members • Selected to enhance representativeness, support data validation, and enable sampling

The two samples differed in characteristics that can lead to different experiences

Preparing for employment: Services and skill development

What services are available to help autistic young adults prepare for employment?

Research on programs and strategies used to support autistic young adults' employment

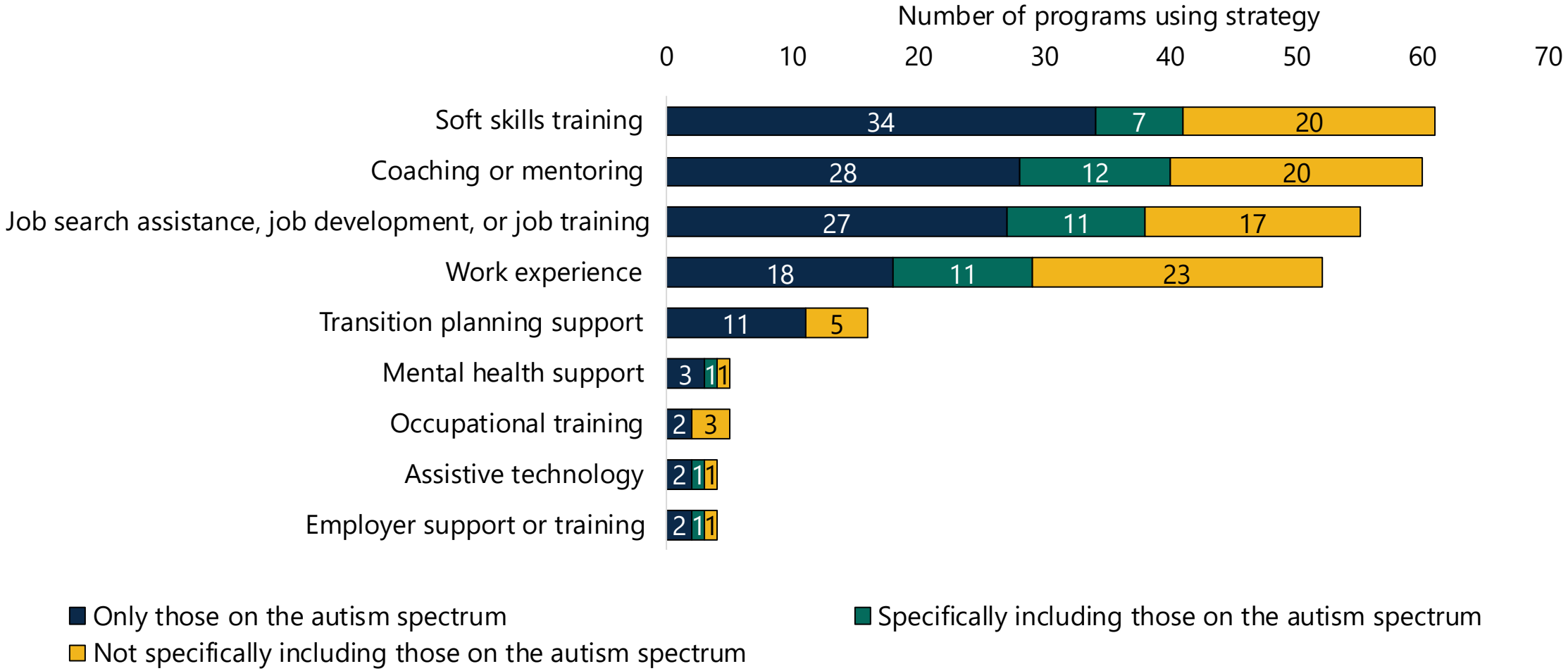
New data on skill development and use of employment-related services

Practice example: Life Management Assistance Program (LifeMAP) case study

Reflections from Jeffrey Hemmeter (Social Security Administration)

Programming landscape

A range of strategies are used to help autistic young adults with employment



Many strategies have been studied, but rigorous evidence remains limited

Many studies have examined…		Limited studies have examined…
Design, implementation, or reported outcomes of programs	vs.	Rigorous tests of programs' effectiveness in improving outcomes
Pilot or small-scale programs		Established programs
Programs' effects on job-related skills and behaviors		Programs' effects on employment and earnings

Source: REYAAS literature review.

Skill-development opportunities

Most survey respondents had opportunities to develop employment-related skills, particularly in school or other educational settings.



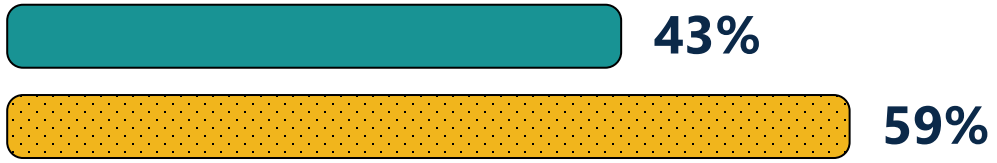
Source: REYAAS young adult survey.

More than 85 percent of respondents had recently received at least one employment-related service

The two most common services were ones that indirectly (rather than directly) facilitated employment.

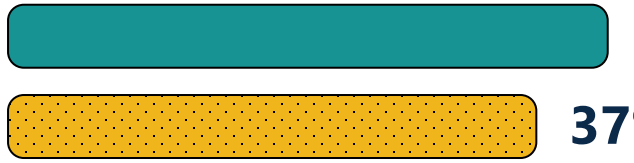
Mental health support

Psychological or mental health services or counseling



Executive function support

Instruction on or help with managing attention; organization; ADHD; challenges related to autism, emotions, or time management



Community outreach sample

Research group sample

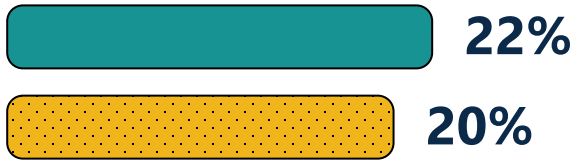
Source: REYAAS young adult survey.
ADHD = attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

Many respondents had unmet service needs

Several respondents said they wanted, but had not received, employment-focused services such as career counseling and job-retention help.

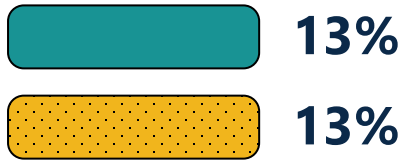
Career counseling

Help figuring out paid jobs they might be suited to, or testing to find out their work interests or abilities



Job-retention help

Professional help in keeping a paid job after they get hired



Community outreach sample

Research group sample

Source: REYAAS young adult survey.

Practice example: LifeMAP uses coaching to help clients work toward employment and other goals

Clients choose the goals, which could be finding or keeping a job or work-related needs such as executive functioning, communication, or stress management.

Coaches aim to help clients move from identifying a goal to using strategies independently.



On average, clients receive coaching for six months[13]

LifeMAP: descriptive findings

One provider, Massability, tracked outcomes of 170 vocational rehabilitation (VR) clients in Massachusetts who had been referred to LifeMAP in fiscal year 2023[14]



40 job placements (as of 2024)



94 percent of closed cases had a successful employment outcome



LifeMAP clients worked **23 hours/week** (similar hours to other autistic VR clients)



LifeMAP clients earned on average **$19/hour** (higher than other autistic VR clients)



The project findings suggest that skill-development opportunities are available but need to be connected more consistently with career counseling and ongoing, coordinated employment supports.

Opportunities to support autistic young adults' work preparation

— Reflections from
Jeffrey Hemmeter
Social Security Administration

Finding employment:
Job search and barriers to work

What helps or hinders autistic young adults looking for employment?

Research on promising programs and strategies for supporting the employment of autistic young adults

New data on autistic young adults' barriers to work and job search experiences

Practice opportunity: Employer strategies for hiring autistic employees

Reflections from Scott Robertson (ODEP)

Evidence from effectiveness studies

62
Effectiveness studies of employment programs for autistic young adults

17
Studies examined employment outcomes

6
Rigorous studies showed promising impacts

Promising models identified through rigorous tests:

Project SEARCH plus ASD Supports
Transition-based employment model for high school students

Virtual Interview Training for Transition-Age Youth
Interactive job interview simulator

Supported Employment Services
For young adult VR clients with intellectual or developmental disabilities

Source: REYAAS literature review.

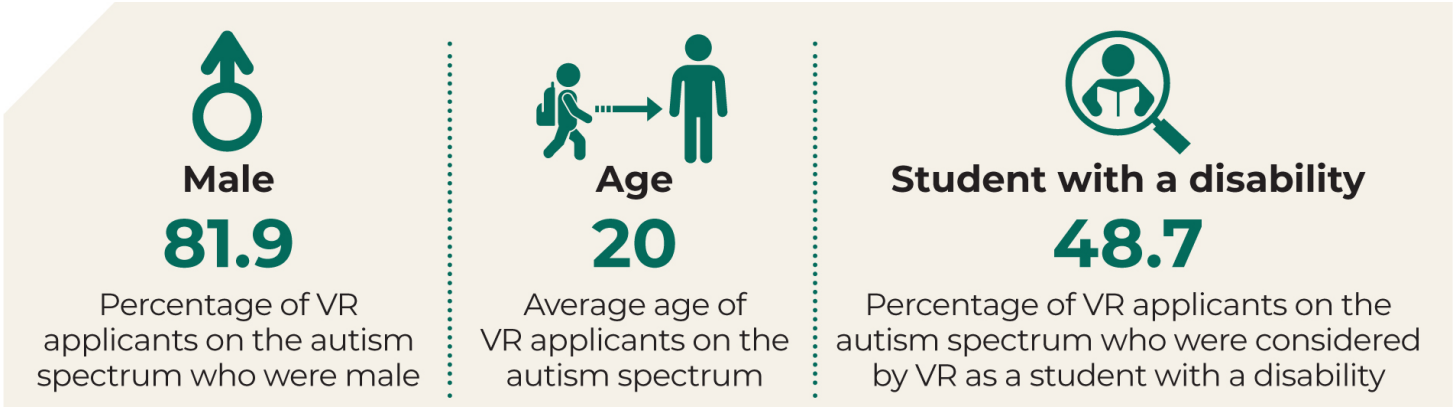
Evidence from analyses of VR data

VR is a major public system through which autistic young adults seek employment support

- 78 VR agencies in states and territories provide employment services to people with disabilities
- Services can include assessment, career counseling, on-the-job training, job coaching, and job placement

We examined the outcomes of 115,640 autistic young adults with open VR cases in 2017–2019

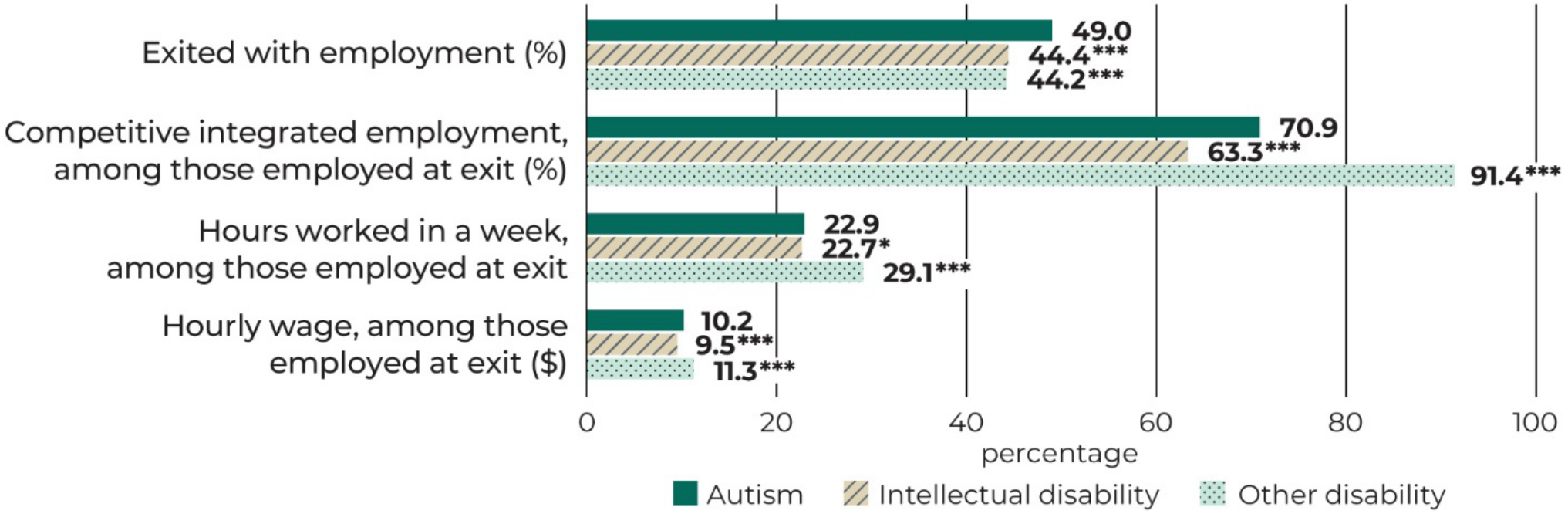
Key characteristics of the analysis sample



Source: REYAAS VR data analysis report.

Upon exiting VR, about half of autistic young adult clients were employed

Autistic young adults had better outcomes than those with only an intellectual disability but worse outcomes than those with other disabilities.



Source: REYAAS VR data analysis report.

*/**/*** indicates the difference between the comparison group and autistic young adults is statistically significant (*p*-value<.10/.05/.01).

Autistic young adults' perspectives on barriers to and facilitators of employment (1)

Insights from the listening sessions

Barriers	Facilitators
Challenges in job search and finding a good work environment	Encouragement and advice from family members, friends, and staff from job-readiness programs Paid internships, career mentoring programs, and customized employment
Challenges navigating typical recruitment and interview process	Training for employers to encourage recruitment, hiring, and work environments that support autistic young adults
Need for greater and enhanced supports and services (addressing transportation or technology, providing ongoing supports, or developing self-advocacy and career advancement skills)	Greater collaboration and funding for supports Partnering with neurodivergent consultants or career coaches with disabilities

Autistic young adults' perspectives on barriers to and facilitators of employment (2)

Insights from the survey and interviews

Top three reasons for not working, among non-employed survey respondents



Cannot find a job they want



A physical or mental condition prevents them from working



Lacks reliable transportation to and from work

"I struggle real hard with having days where I wake up and my support needs are a lot higher. And explaining to an employer why I either can't come in that day or why I would need extra help compared to what I've needed in times past is really difficult."

"For me, what I'm noticing is bigger companies, despite the fact that there are laws in place to ensure that they still hire autistic people, they seem to be evading that in a way by making it that they're only hiring for this many hours. If you can't match that because your stress levels are too high, then too bad. Essentially, that means that even though they're not refusing to hire me because I'm on the autism spectrum, it still makes it limited for people on the autism spectrum."

Autistic young adults' perspectives on barriers to and facilitators of employment (3)

Insights from the survey and interviews

Common sources of help to find a job, among survey respondents who are currently working or who recently worked


A family member


Someone in an employment agency or other program


Someone in a disability agency

"Most of the jobs I have had were with someone that I know personally who I already had a connection with…they've been able to get me an in, so while I would still do an interview and make sure I have the right credentials, I felt comfortable being able to slide in because I knew someone there. But I have not tried to apply for say, a local food place or a grocery store, because that kind of process of trying to talk with someone who I don't know, seems so intimidating."

"I started applying for services [through state employment agencies] in my junior year of high school and I've pretty much stayed with them ever since…the one-on-one planning, what jobs I'm going to apply for, what interviews I'm going to take, and talking through the pros and cons of what job opportunities are ahead. Those are the kind of things that they've been helping me with over time."

Practice opportunity: Employer strategies for hiring autistic employees



Focus on key skills and outcomes instead of specific degrees, experience, or modes of work

Evaluate work requirements and consider which ones are necessary for key outcomes

Use plain language to describe job requirements and in the application process

Offer alternative methods to assess candidates for job fit instead of relying on behavioral interviews

Source: Interviews with employers and service providers.



For many autistic young adults, finding suitable employment depends on access to quality case management and wraparound supports and on hiring processes that enable candidates to demonstrate their strengths.

Opportunities to help autistic young adults find employment

— Reflections from
Scott Robertson
U.S. Department of Labor

Sustaining employment: Job experiences, retention, and advancement

What are autistic young adults' experiences once they find employment?

New data on autistic young adults' employment outcomes and experiences

Practice opportunity: Employer strategies for retaining autistic employees

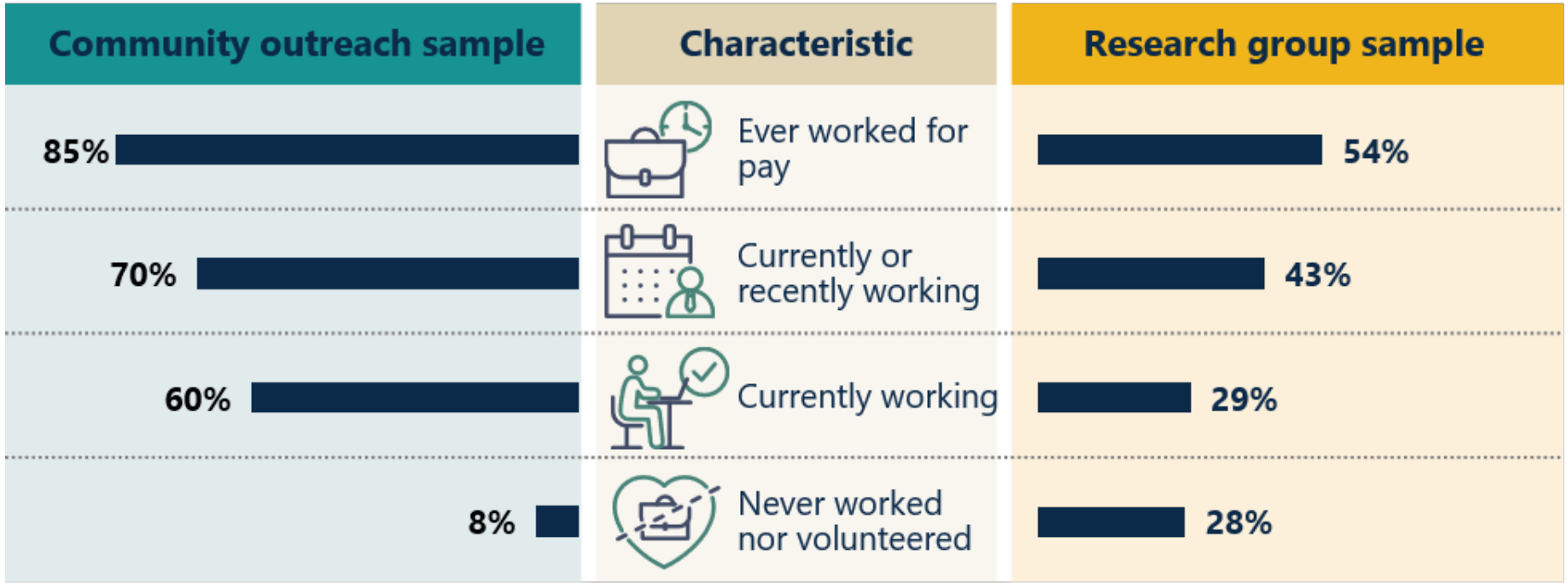
Reflections from Tiffany Jameson (Grit and Flow)

Respondents in the research group sample were younger and had more support needs, on average

Community outreach sample	Characteristic	Research group sample
15%	SSI/ SSDI Received federal disability benefits	43%
51%	Any difficulty communicating	87%
2%	Ages 16–17	24%
82%	Completed high school or equivalent	52%
56%	Enrolled in school or education program	50%

Source: REYAAS young adult survey.

Many survey respondents had worked in the past, but fewer were working at the time of the survey



Source: REYAAS young adult survey.

Most employed respondents did not have access to fringe benefits through their job

Community outreach sample	Received job benefits	Research group sample
42%	Paid time off, vacation days, or sick leave	34%
46%	Health insurance	23%

Source: REYAAS young adult survey.

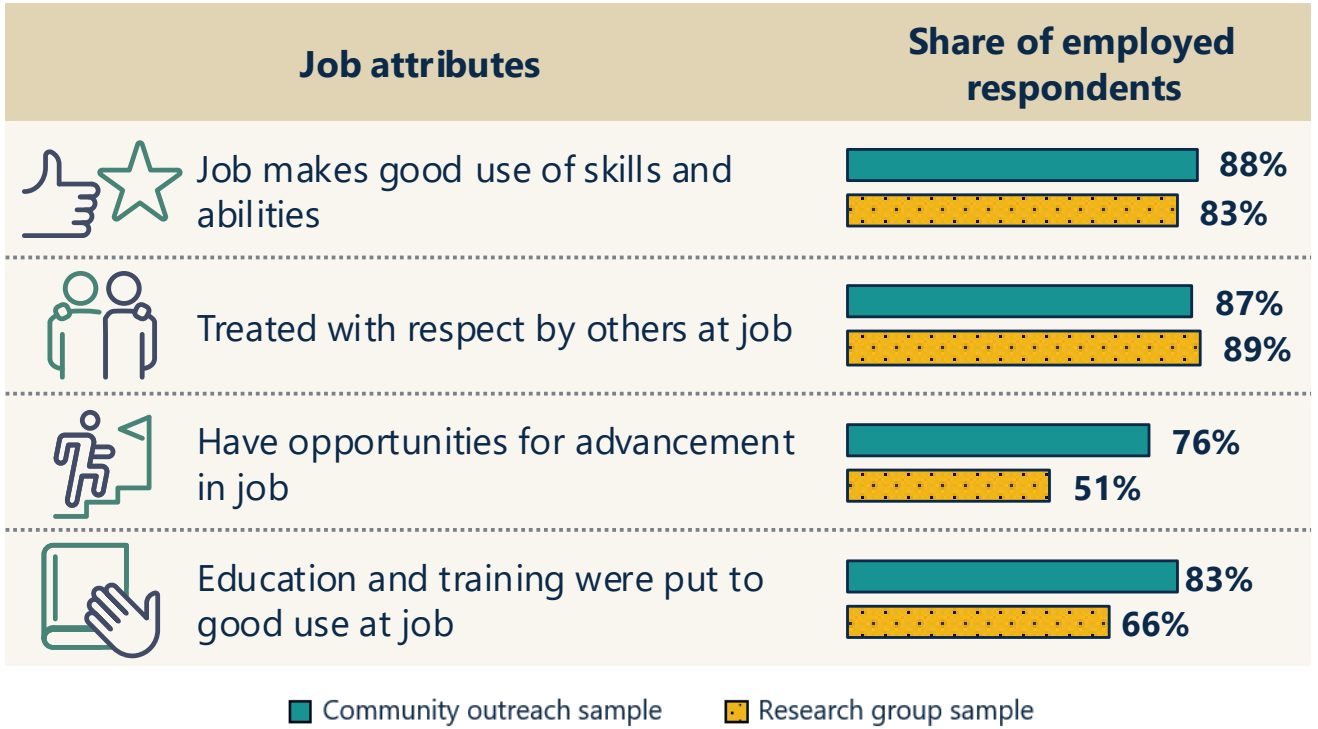
Respondents worked across a range of occupations



Job satisfaction

More than 90 percent of employed respondents were "happy" or "very happy" with their jobs.

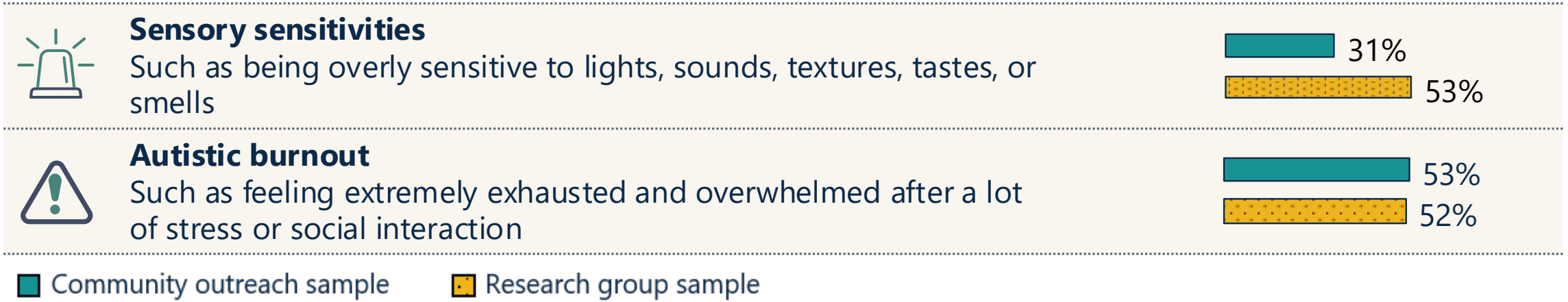
Most employed respondents agreed with positive statements about their jobs.



Source: REYAAS young adult survey.

Autism-related difficulties affected work

The most-reported difficulties were sensory sensitivities and autistic burnout.



At least 25 percent also reported each of the following: executive functioning challenges, social exhaustion, intense focus on interests, and emotional ups and downs.

Source: REYAAS young adult survey.

Examples of autistic burnout shared by young adults

An emergency medical technician described overstimulation and difficulty communicating on the job as reasons they might search for a new job.

A live-in personal support worker noted they can take breaks when experiencing burnout or overstimulation.

One interviewee had recently stopped working full time and said they need to take breaks from work every three months to recenter.

"I'm always under pressure 100 percent of the time, and eventually I feel like I'm burned out. It could take a couple of weeks, or it could take a couple of months, but then I need to have at least a week's break for my brain to just relax. And the biggest problem with jobs is I don't get that, and that's not to mention the individual things inside of the job that made things difficult."

"It was the consistency of being overstimulated days on end, and I couldn't do it.... I felt like I was dying."

Source: REYAAS young adult interviews.

Supportive managers and workplaces shape job experiences

"Sometimes my managers can be a little not understanding of my disability. For instance, when I first started working, I had a patch that said "Please be patient, I'm autistic," and I was told I can't wear that and that it was bad for the company."

"Being supported at work feels good, for example, being treated equally like others. Secondly, them being understanding of my way of talking. Next, being given opportunities to learn more."

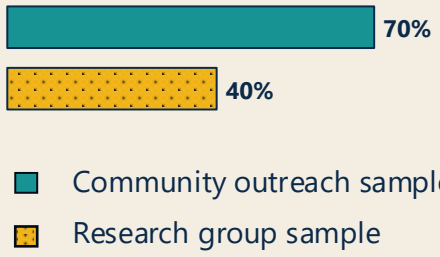
"...when I get stressed, I have sort of a skill regression in a way where it becomes very difficult for me to communicate with other people.... The manager could tell I was having a very bad time and would say to take a breather. That alone was a huge thing."

Source: REYAAS listening sessions with autistic young adults and REYAAS interviews with autistic young adults.

Accommodations support success at work

Survey results

Had any accommodations at current or most recent job, among recently employed



Scheduling accommodations were the most common.

Described in interviews

- **Flexible scheduling or work hours**
- **More breaks throughout the day**
- **Modifications to the work uniform**
- **Sensory supports such as headphones**
- **Detailed list of tasks for the day**
- **More one-on-one support**

Source: REYAAS young adult survey and interviews.

These new data identify both gaps and opportunities for helping autistic young adults

Work experience does not always translate to long-term employment

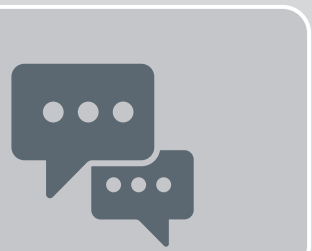
Employed respondents had high job satisfaction but there was room for improvement

- Many employed respondents could not access health insurance or paid sick leave through their job
- Some saw limited opportunities to advance and grow
- Some felt they needed more help with keeping their job after being hired

Findings suggest certain supports could make a difference

- Career counseling to navigate next steps and identify jobs that are a good fit
- Help with identifying and requesting appropriate accommodations
- One-on-one help from a supervisor or job coach

Practice opportunity: Employer strategies for retaining autistic employees



Ask each employee what they need to be successful in the job



Consider workplace norms and whether they should be valued or communicated differently



Streamline steps for requesting and providing accommodations without requiring documentation of a medical need



Provide regular and specific feedback



Provide resources on autism to all employees

Source: Interviews with employers and service providers.



Getting hired is the beginning. Job fit, supportive workplaces and managers, accommodations, and opportunities to grow are key to sustained employment.

Opportunities to strengthen job retention for autistic young adults

— Reflections from
Tiffany Jameson
Grit and Flow

Questions and discussion



Closing reflections and next steps

Project impact: REYAAS after five years



Groundbreaking investment

Significant investment from ODEP in understanding and addressing barriers to work that autistic young adults face



Evidence and ideas

Combined layered evidence building with production of new ideas, data, and resources for stakeholders, including employers



Highlighted intersections

Focused on employment but highlighted issues, such as mental health, access to diagnoses in childhood, and transportation challenges



Community engagement

Engaged stakeholders in many ways, including a survey conducted in partnership with autism-focused organizations



Autistic voices

Centered autistic people's voices through listening sessions, interviews, and technical working group members' review of reports and products

Opportunities to continue evidence-building

TEST & SCALE EXISTING PROGRAMS

- **Adapt proven models**
  Registered Apprenticeship • YouthBuild
- **Scale promising supports**
  VR-supported employment • VIT-TAY
- **Measure impact efficiently**
  Program + administrative data

EVIDENCE
WHAT WORKS
for whom — and why

CONNECT & LEARN FROM DATA

- **Reveal drivers of employment success**
- **Assess accommodations, services & supports**
- **Track pathways to career growth**

REYAAS survey provides comprehensive employment data

Other sources add breadth, context, longitudinal insight, etc.

How can I learn more?

Available online now

- Literature review (report 1 and report 2)
- Listening sessions report
- Vocational rehabilitation data analysis report
- Evaluation design options report
- Case study of LifeMAP
- Brief for employers
- Inventory of data sources
- "Spotlight summaries" of our findings (see project website)

Available later this year

- Updated data inventory
- Report on survey and interview findings
- Brief focused on interview findings
- Spotlight summary of survey findings
- Restricted-use file of survey data
- Project fact sheet

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