



Labour Market Matters

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Special points of interest:

- Relative age differences of a few months found to be significant factor in probability of childhood disability diagnosis
- Income support programs that discourage disabled individuals from volunteering could hinder their chances of re-entering workplace.

“[T]he additional months of development and learning that relatively older children have over their younger counterparts could give them an advantage”



Stephen Lipscomb
(Mathematica Policy Research Inc.)

Not Just a Number: School-age start may be linked to probability of disability diagnosis

In 2006, 202,350 children (3.7 percent of children) between the ages of 0 and 14 years were reported to have a disability in Canada. Among school-aged children with disabilities (aged 5 to 14), learning disabilities ranked as the most common form of disability for boys (72.7 percent) and for girls (63.3 percent).¹ There is recent evidence that children who start school at older ages are less likely to be classified with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) by the fifth Grade.² A study by CLSRN affiliates Elizabeth Dhuey (University of Toronto) and Stephen Lipscomb (Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.) entitled *“Disabled or Young? Relative Age and Special Education Diagnoses in Schools”* ([CLSRN Working Paper no. 55](#)) examine the underlying reasons behind special education diagnosis in the U.S. and find that relatively younger children (even by a few months) are more likely than their relatively older classmates to receive a special education diagnosis.

Using data from the *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS)*, as well as data from two other national samples, the researchers find that an additional month of age is associated with a 2 to 5 percent reduction in the probability of receiving special education services. The researchers found consistent evidence that relatively older students are both less likely to be evaluated for a possible disability and less likely to be diagnosed with one. The strongest evidence of relative age effects is for learning problems. Interestingly, relative age effects in categories such as hearing problems and orthopaedic problems are

statistically insignificant and numerically small – which suggests the results are consistent with the notion that identifying learning disabilities is a more subjective process.

While there is currently no definitive answer as to how age affects outcomes, a common explanation attributes the age effect to the inherent difficulty in distinguishing between maturity and ability when children are young and beginning their formal schooling. This difficulty may lead some relatively younger students to be placed in a lower stream or track in school. Other researchers suggest that relative age effects are the outcome of differences in early educational experiences prior to beginning formal schooling. This means that the additional months of development and learning that relatively older children have over their younger counterparts could give them an advantage.³

The study finds a bias towards special education diagnosis for boys over girls in the earlier school years. Previous research has found that classroom disruption, which is often associated with lack of maturity, is a primary cause of referrals for boys.⁴ There has also been evidence that teacher referrals for special education diagnosis are often affected by the gender of the student referred and that these referrals are influenced by classroom behaviour,⁵ and in order for a girl to be diagnosed with a learning disability, she must be older and more severely impaired than her male counterparts.⁶

The fiscal and social implications of disability diagnosis are important because the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that



Elizabeth Dhuey
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there is a duty to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities to allow them to access educational services equally, unless to do so would cause undue hardship – therefore, diagnosing children may have significant cost implications. In addition, students diagnosed may also be placed in lower-stream classes once diagnosed which could limit their learning unnecessarily. In light of this study’s findings, it stands to reason that special consideration to student age when rendering special education diagnosis is warranted, as it appears that even age differences of even a few months can have a significant impact on the probability that a child is given a disability diagnosis.

¹Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). *Canadians in Context – People with Disabilities*.

²Elder, T. E. & Lubotsky, D. H. (2009). Kindergarten Entrance Age and Children’s Achievement: Impacts of State Policies, Family Background, and Peers. *Journal of Human Resources*, 44(3), 641-683.

³Elder and Lubotsky (2009).

⁴Anderson, K. (1997). Gender Bias and Special Education Referrals. *Annals of Dyslexia* 47, 151-162.

⁵Anderson (1997)

⁶Vogel, S. (1990). Gender Differences in Intelligence, Language, Visual-Motor Abilities, and Academic Achievement in Students with Learning Disabilities: A Review of the Literature. *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 23 (1), 44-52.

The effect of income support programs on volunteerism among disabled persons

Volunteer activities have long served as an important form of work-experience and as a bridge to paid employment. Volunteering can also work to provide deeper engagement in the workforce for many groups who have problems with transitions into or back into the labour market such as youth, older workers, women and the unemployed. Some private sector employers, such as Delta Airlines, have also used volunteer activity as a transitional activity in their return-to-work strategy for injured employees who are well enough to do volunteer work but not yet well enough to return to their regular job. In spite of its obvious policy and practical importance, the volunteer activity of disabled persons (as a means of facilitating transitions back to work) has not been systematically analysed. In a study entitled **“Volunteering, Income Support Programs and Disabled Persons”** ([CLSRN Working Paper no. 9](#)), CLSRN affiliates Michele Campolieti (University of Toronto), Rafael Gomez (University of Toronto) and Morley Gunderson (University of Toronto) examine the effects of various income support programs on disabled individual’s participation in volunteer activities.

For disabled individuals, volunteer activity can play a vital transitional role for integration and re-integration into the workforce. Many disabled individuals are on income support programs; and

while some support programs actively encourage volunteer activities; others may view the ability to volunteer as evidence that an individual may be able to return-to-paid work and therefore become ineligible for disability benefits. Income support programs that discourage volunteer activities can therefore work to hinder an important workforce-integration activity which could allow disabled individuals to more easily enter the workforce at some later date.

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Using data from the Canadian Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS) the researchers examine whether the propensity of disabled individuals to engage in volunteer activity is affected by the kind of program they are receiving income support from. They find that income support programs accessed by disabled individuals can have a significant



Volunteering can be a valuable bridge to paid employment for those who are having a hard time getting into or getting back into the Labour Market—such as disabled individuals.
Image: [HealingDream](#)

effect on encouraging or discouraging volunteer activity. In particular, there is a deterrent effect that often occurs for income support program recipients, such as those in receipt of Worker’s Compensation, who are monitored carefully, and where volunteer activities could be interpreted as a sign that the disabled individual is able to return to work. These types of income support programs can create a strong incentive for disabled individuals *not* to volunteer as this activity could jeopardize their receipt of income support. Volunteering is much more likely to occur under income support programs that encourage volunteerism such as the Canadian Public Pension Disability (CPP-D) program, where volunteering falls under its “Return-to-Work” incentives.

Interestingly, in income support programs that have offsetting incentive effects (such as: welfare,

unemployment insurance and private insurance programs) or no incentive effects on volunteering (such as: Guaranteed Income Supplement, veteran’s disability and the CPP early retirement) no significant relationships with respect to volunteering were found. The researchers found that even after controlling for a number of what the researchers call “warm glow” predictors of why people typically volunteer, the researchers still found highly significant and empirically important effects linked to the two kinds income support programs, which either actively supported or deterred volunteer activities. This means that negative or positive incentives that are found in various income support programmes accessed by disabled individuals can respectively discourage or encourage volunteering, and those programs that have no incentive effects appear to have no effect on volunteering.

Given the importance of volunteering for both the volunteers and the recipients, and the fact that volunteering can be a viable way for disabled individuals to “test the waters” before engaging in more formal work activities, the “incentive effects” of income supplement programs merit consideration as possible ways by which to facilitate volunteering and integration or re-integration into the labour market for disabled individuals in North America.

Endnotes

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