



University of
Connecticut

A.J. Pappanikou Center for Developmental Disabilities

A University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service

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COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN CONNECTICUT

Real Choice Briefing Paper #3

Dale Borman Fink, Ph.D.

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COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN CONNECTICUT

REAL CHOICE BRIEFING PAPER #3

Real Choice Briefing Papers

This paper and others in the series are a product of the Real Choice System Change project at the University of Connecticut's Center for Disabilities in Farmington, Connecticut. The project's aim is to help communities in Connecticut to become more inclusive of persons with disabilities in all arenas, including but not limited to schooling, employment, recreation, and community participation.

The papers in this series are based on a (non-random) sample of 250 individuals with disabilities who completed an in-depth survey. The respondents were self-selected within the universe of all those who learned about the survey and were eligible. We asked persons with disabilities to either contact the A. J. Pappanikou Center to schedule a telephone interview or to go on-line to answer the questions. In addition, we requested that family members, advocates, partners, and friends fill out the survey on behalf of children or adults who would not otherwise be able to respond. In discussing survey respondents, we refer to persons with disabilities who either responded on their own or had someone respond for them. Three-quarters of the respondents were adults and one-quarter children; they resided in 90 of Connecticut's 169 cities and towns.

For more information about the Center or the Real Choice System Change project, please visit our website, <http://www.uconnucedd.org/>.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN CONNECTICUT

We asked persons with disabilities responding to our survey about their participation in social, cultural, volunteer, and recreational activities in the community. The questions we used were adopted from a survey conducted in 2000 by the National Organization on Disabilities (NOD) and Harris Interactive, a well-established polling company.¹ Their data permits us to draw comparisons to their national samples of persons with and without disabilities. Table 1 compares selected data from the Harris survey and the Real Choice survey with reference to adult respondents.

A Gap Between Level Of Involvement And Feelings About Involvement

Across a wide range of community activities, respondents to our survey were very active, whether we compared them to the national sample of persons with disabilities or the national sample of persons without disabilities that Harris polled. However, when we asked them how welcomed they believed their opinions and participation within their communities were, many Connecticut citizens with disabilities expressed enormous discontent. These survey findings suggest that assuring the opportunity of participation is only one step in making communities more inclusive. Until individuals with disabilities get the message from town and city leaders as well as ordinary citizens that their participation is not only permitted but strongly encouraged and valued, many of them will continue to feel marginalized and left out.

Connecticut Respondents Very Active

The Harris survey did not find many large discrepancies in the frequency of participation of persons without disabilities compared to those with disabilities. We in turn found that respondents to the Connecticut survey reported a similar level of participation to their counterparts in the national survey. For example, 31% of persons with disabilities in the Harris sample attended events related to their hobbies at least once a month, and the same was true for the exact same percentage of respondents to our survey. In the Harris poll, the proportion of persons without disabilities who attended events related to their hobbies at least monthly was only marginally greater at 35%.

The largest gap that Harris found between respondents with and without disabilities was in the frequenting of outdoor community spaces such as parks and beaches. Harris reported that 40% of persons without disabilities and just 29% of persons with disabilities made use of these spaces at least twice a month. Among our respondents, all of whom had disabilities, the figure was 33%--in between the two Harris samples.

¹ Harris Interactive (2000). Community Participation Survey. Executive Summary online at <http://www.nod.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewPage&pageID=1430&nodeID=1&FeatureID=863&redirected=1&CFID=3210212&CFTOKEN=75686942>

In several arenas, our respondents appeared to be more involved than the Harris respondents—not only more active than the national sample of individuals with disabilities but also more active than the persons without disabilities. Harris found that 12% of persons without disabilities and an equal 12% of persons with disabilities went to a local service organization such as a YMCA, the Girl Scouts, or a 4-H Club at least once a month. Among our respondents, it was higher at 16%. Harris found that 37% of persons without disabilities reported going to a place of worship at least once a month and for persons with disabilities a nearly identical 36%. Among our sample, the figure was 42%. Harris found that 21% of persons without disabilities participated in volunteer work at least twice a month, compared to 16% of persons with disabilities. Among our respondents, the frequency was 33%.

We cannot assume these higher rates of participation hold true for all Connecticut residents with disabilities. We must factor in the self-selecting and non-random nature of our sample.

Table 1: Community Participation, Respondents Ages 18 and Older

	REAL CHOICE (N=193)	HARRIS	
	Persons with Disabilities	Persons with Disabilities	Persons without Disabilities
Attended sporting events or movies at least once a month	37%	38%	52%
Visited cultural events or organizations in community at least once a month	37%	31%	39%
Went to outdoor community spaces at least twice a month	33%	29%	40%
Went to a local service organization at least once a month	16%	12%	12%
Attended events related to their hobbies at least once a month	31%	31%	35%
Went to a place of worship at least once a month	42%	36%	37%
Participated in volunteer work at least twice a month	33%	16%	21%

Perceptions About Community Involvement

In addition to questions about the frequency of community involvement in specific arenas, our survey posed eight questions relating to the perceptions of respondents toward their community involvement. These questions, like the community participation questions, were adopted without revision from the Harris/N.O.D. survey. We have displayed some of these responses in Figure 1.

We asked, “How involved would you say that you are in your community?” Among the Harris sample, 38% of persons without disabilities were very or somewhat involved, and 30% of persons with disabilities were very or somewhat involved. Among our Connecticut respondents, nearly half (49%) were either very or somewhat involved—more than either of the Harris samples. While 35% of the national sample of persons with disabilities stated they were not at all involved, that was the case only for half as many (16%) of our Connecticut sample.

We asked respondents, “Over the past year, how satisfied have you been with your experience with community involvement?” In the Harris sample, 20% of persons without disabilities and 15% of persons with disabilities reported that they were very satisfied. Among our respondents, nearly 22% were very satisfied.

Nearly half (49%) of persons with disabilities answering the Harris poll and over half (55%) of persons without disabilities somewhat or strongly agreed they were “valuable and contributing members” of their communities. Among our Connecticut sample, 63% either somewhat or strongly agreed with this statement. Slim majorities of persons with disabilities in both surveys somewhat or strongly agreed that they were “informed about the ways” they could volunteer or otherwise participate in their communities (53% of the Harris sample, 50% of our sample). A similar percentage (51%) of our sample somewhat or strongly agreed they were informed “about community groups or organizations” that could provide assistance; a smaller proportion of persons with disabilities in the national sample (41%) selected those responses.

Troubling Responses

All the responses we have highlighted up to this point reinforce the idea that our Connecticut sample was heavily weighted towards individuals with disabilities who were highly engaged in their communities—more so than those in a nationally drawn random sample—and largely satisfied with their engagement.

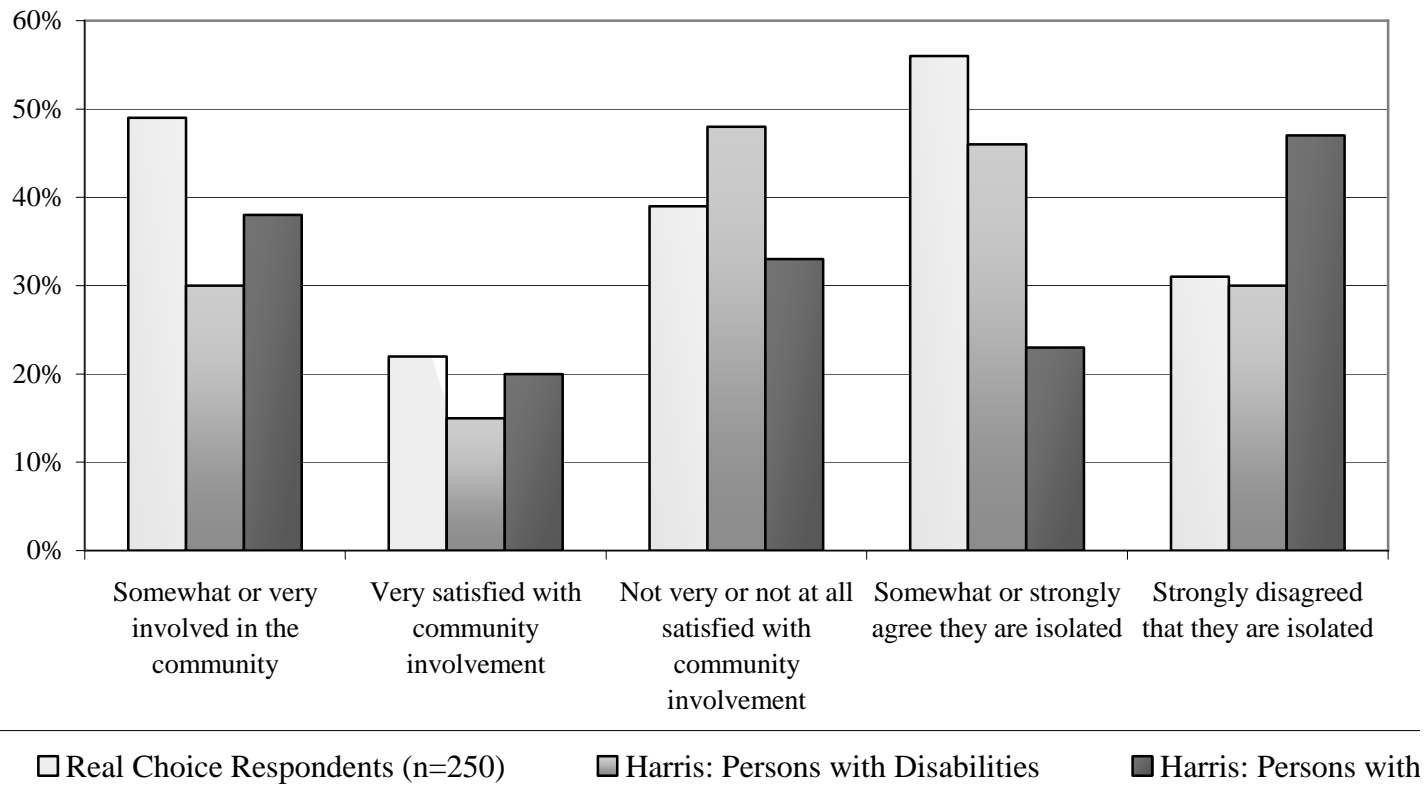
However, in looking beyond these results to measures of dissatisfaction, we found different and somewhat troubling responses. We found that 39% of our respondents were either not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with their community involvement. This is considerably lower than the 49% proportion that NOD/Harris found among a national sample of persons with disabilities, but it is still disturbingly high, considering the levels of community engagement our sample reported.

Asked to agree or disagree with the statement, “I am not regularly invited to give my opinion on important issues,” Harris found that about half of persons without disabilities agreed (54%)

either somewhat or strongly, while half disagreed (46%) either somewhat or strongly. Among the national sample of persons with disabilities, more persons with disabilities agreed (65%) and fewer disagreed (35%) with the statement. Among our Connecticut respondents, we found the same percentage as among those with disabilities in the national poll (65%) agreeing either somewhat or strongly that they were not invited to give their opinions. An even larger percentage strongly agreed with the statement among our Connecticut sample (38%) than in the national sample of persons with disabilities (30%).

When asked to agree or disagree with the statement, “I am isolated from others,” only one-third of persons with disabilities in our survey and the Harris poll of persons with disabilities strongly disagreed (31% and 30%, respectively). Fully 56% of the Connecticut respondents agreed they were isolated, either somewhat or strongly. This was higher than the proportion (46%) that gave these responses among the Harris sample of persons with disabilities. Among the Harris respondents without disabilities, in contrast, just 23% somewhat or strongly agreed they were isolated and 47% strongly disagreed.

Figure 1: Feelings About Communities and Involvement



What Does This Mean For Me?

In many of our communities, opportunities for full participation in social, cultural, and recreational venues by citizens with disabilities are approaching those for all others. At least, that was the case for members of our sample, who were probably more active and assertive compared to the population with disabilities as a whole. Our survey respondents told us that they were volunteering, pursuing their hobbies, attending community events, and attending houses of worship in proportions quite similar to their peers without disabilities. If you encounter barriers to these kinds of activities in your community, then, you should not assume this is just “the way things are” in Connecticut. You should express your wishes, seek support as needed, and take appropriate action. Only in the area of accessing outdoor spaces does there appear to be a bit of a lag. This can be attributed in part to the greater complexity of renovating outdoor spaces to make them more truly accessible for all citizens. Be sure to let authorities in your community know if there are barriers that are interfering with your ability to enjoy a beach, park, playground, or other space.

Regrettably, we don't have any easy answers to the questions raised in the last segment of our data regarding perceptions by large percentages of persons with disabilities in Connecticut that they are dissatisfied with their community involvement, that their opinions are not solicited, and that they are isolated. Changing these perceptions is a challenge jointly shared by people with and without disabilities. Community members without disabilities must seek out the presence, ideas and contributions of persons with disabilities, and otherwise signal that their involvement is not only accepted but also enthusiastically welcomed. In the same spirit, people with disabilities must not shrink from the challenge of inclusion. In many cases simply their visibility in the community can subtly change the attitudes of the community as a whole.

The isolation and lack of validation experienced by persons with disabilities could be a result of a lack of directness in communication. When persons with disabilities participate in a service club, attend a community event, or go to religious services, the persons without disabilities may feel they have embraced the spirit of inclusion by simply sharing that experience together. But the person with the disability, not knowing what thoughts occupy anyone's head, may not assume the presence of such an inclusive spirit. Silent acceptance may look and feel like grudging or reluctant acceptance. Due to a misguided idea about what is polite, or perhaps the fear of saying the wrong words, some Connecticut citizens may be failing to send out the very positive message that is in their hearts. In so doing, they could be inadvertently contributing to the negative perceptions expressed by respondents to this survey.

Being present and being included are not the same. In every community there are some of us who learn, communicate, play, move about and behave in a variety of ways. When any of these differences creates a barrier it is everyone's job to find ways to get across

this barrier. If one's fellow participants in a religious service, recreation center, or painting class avoid acknowledging physical, sensory, learning, behavioral, or other differences, then how sincere is their desire to accommodate individual needs?

One step in generating dialogue on this topic would be to share copies of this publication with others in your community — with and without disabilities. We encourage you to do so, and we look forward to hearing about the outcomes of your discussions.

For more information about the University of Connecticut's A. J. Papanikou Center on Developmental Disabilities, or the Real Choice System Change project, please visit our website, <http://www.uconnucedd.org/> or call us at (860) 679-1500.