



# Community Survey Results 2019

## Essex County

The Tower family, like so many others, has been affected by intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, mental health issues, and substance use disorders. To learn about how these issues affect the community and to guide community efforts to address them, the Tower Foundation asked residents to respond to a survey in fall 2017 and again in fall 2019. For the fall 2019 survey, a total of 757 residents from Essex County shared their attitudes and experiences related to intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental health by responding to the survey. The highlights are presented below.

### Connection to intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental health issues

Of the three surveyed matters, Essex County residents were most likely to know someone who has a mental health issue, with 22% of respondents self-reporting an issue (Figure 1). Fewer respondents self-reported an intellectual disability (9%) or learning disability (14%); they were more likely to say they have a friend or other relative with an intellectual disability or learning disability. More than half of respondents have a connection to each of the three issues through neighbors, acquaintances, colleagues, and others they know.

**Figure 1. Connection to learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and mental health issues<sup>1</sup>**

Do you know anyone in the following roles who have...	Percentage responding “yes”		
	an intellectual disability?	a learning disability?	a mental health issue?
Myself	9%	14%	22%
Spouse or partner	8%	13%	19%
Parent	8%	11%	25%
Friend	41%	49%	54%
Other relative	39%	47%	51%
Other, including neighbors, acquaintances, colleagues <sup>2</sup>	55%	58%	56%

<sup>1</sup> The survey did not include questions about substance use disorders because reliable community-level data are already available for this topic.

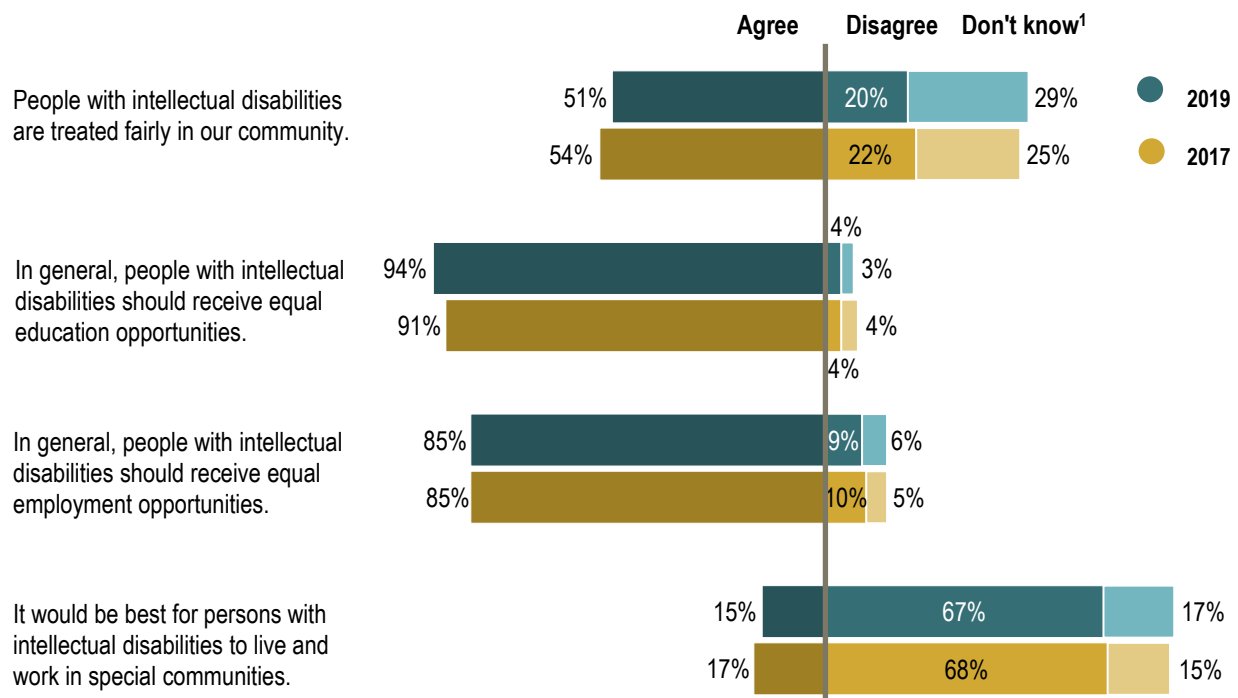
<sup>2</sup> In addition, between 4% and 12% were unsure whether they, their spouse or partner, parent, friend, or other relative have an intellectual disability, learning disability, or mental health issue. The percentage of unsure responses for neighbors, acquaintances, colleagues, and others ranged from 17% to 21%.

## Intellectual disabilities

While about half of respondents agreed that people with intellectual disabilities are treated fairly, most respondents indicated that people with intellectual disabilities should receive equal education (94%) or employment opportunities (85%; Figure 2). Fifteen percent agreed that people with intellectual disabilities should live and work in special communities. Responses in 2019 were similar to those in 2017.

The Tower Foundation defines intellectual disabilities as disabilities characterized by significant limitations both in mental capacity, such as learning, reasoning, and problem-solving, and in adaptive behavior, such as conceptual skills, social skills, and daily living skills. Individuals on the autism spectrum are also included in this group.

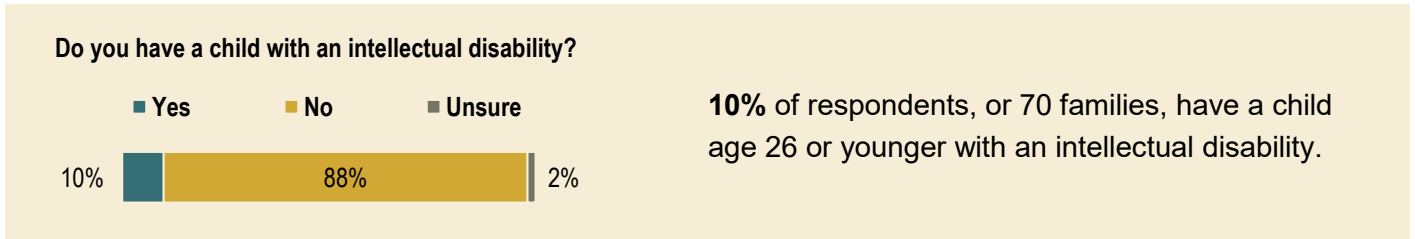
**Figure 2. Opinions about intellectual disabilities**



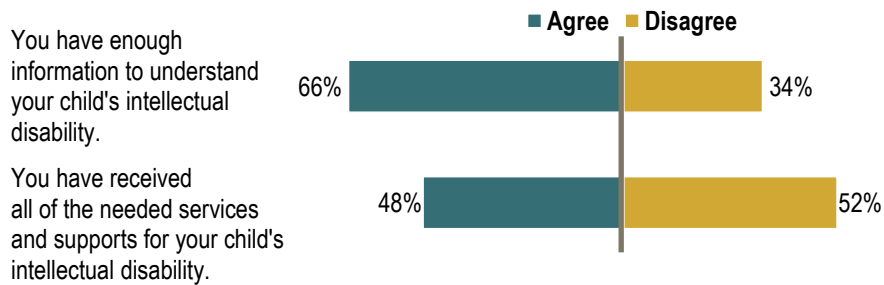
<sup>1</sup> "Don't know" was included as a response option for these survey questions to capture the level of uncertainty around these topics.

## Children with intellectual disabilities

Ten percent of respondents indicated that they have a child age 26 or younger with an intellectual disability. About a third of these respondents did not agree that they have enough information to understand their child's disability (Figure 3). When asked whether they have received all of the needed services and supports for their child's intellectual disability, respondents were split, with slightly more (52%) indicating that they have not received all of the needed services and supports for their child.



**Figure 3. Opinions about information and resources for children with intellectual disabilities**



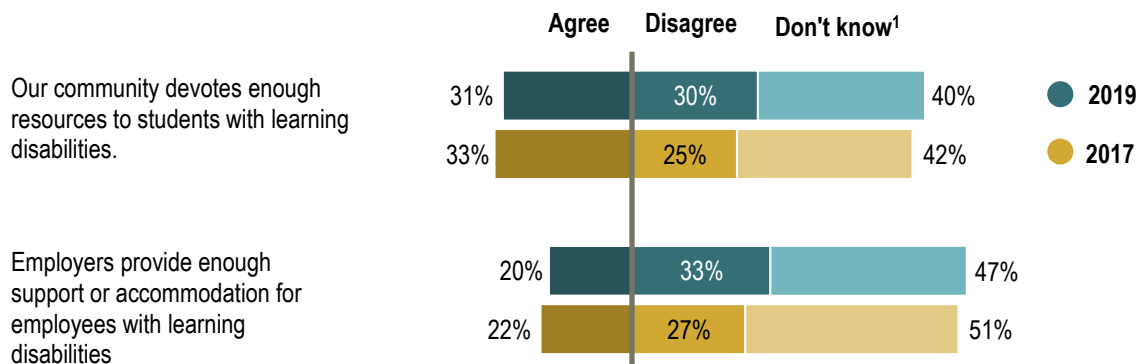
## Learning disabilities

Roughly equal proportions of respondents agreed (31%) or disagreed (30%) that their community devotes enough resources to students with learning disabilities, with 40% not knowing (Figure 4). Fewer respondents agreed (20%) that employers provide enough support to employees with learning disabilities, with one-third (33%) disagreeing. Nearly half of respondents (47%) didn't know if employers provided enough support. Responses were similar between 2017 and 2019.

The Tower Foundation defines learning disabilities as lifelong conditions that interfere with the ability to learn. They are neurological disorders that affect the ability of the brain to process, store, and respond to information.

Approximately half of respondents who had no connections to individuals with learning disabilities didn't know if their community devoted enough resources to students with learning disabilities (47%) or whether employers provided enough support to employees with learning disabilities (50%)

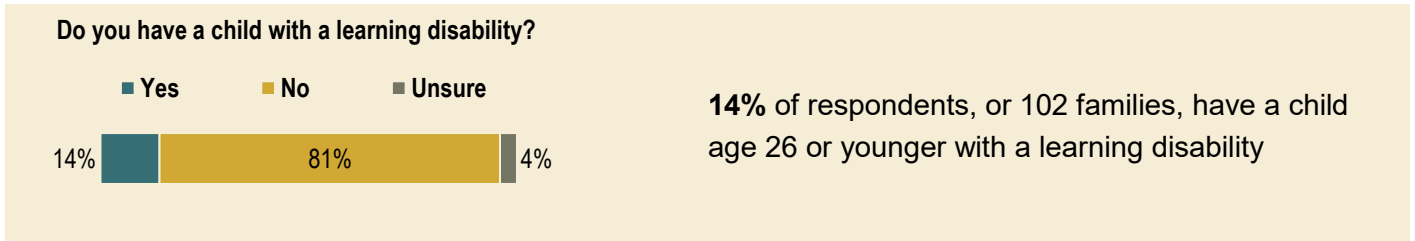
**Figure 4. Opinions about learning disabilities**



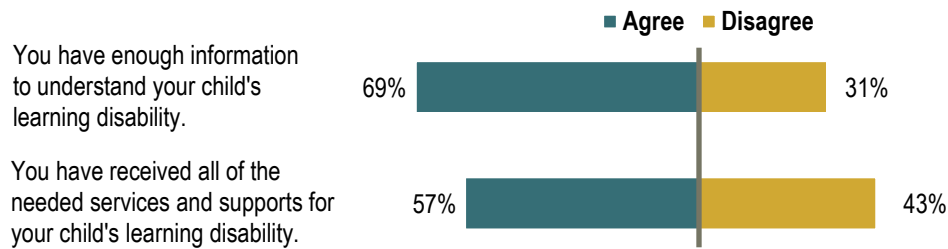
<sup>1</sup> "Don't know" was included as a response option for these survey questions to capture the level of uncertainty around these topics.

## Children with learning disabilities

Fourteen percent of respondents indicated that they have a child age 26 or younger with a learning disability. A little less than a third of these respondents (31%) did not agree that they had enough information to understand their child's disability (Figure 5). When asked whether they have received all of the needed services and supports for their child's learning disability, a slight minority of respondents (43%) indicated that they have not received all of the needed services and supports for their child.



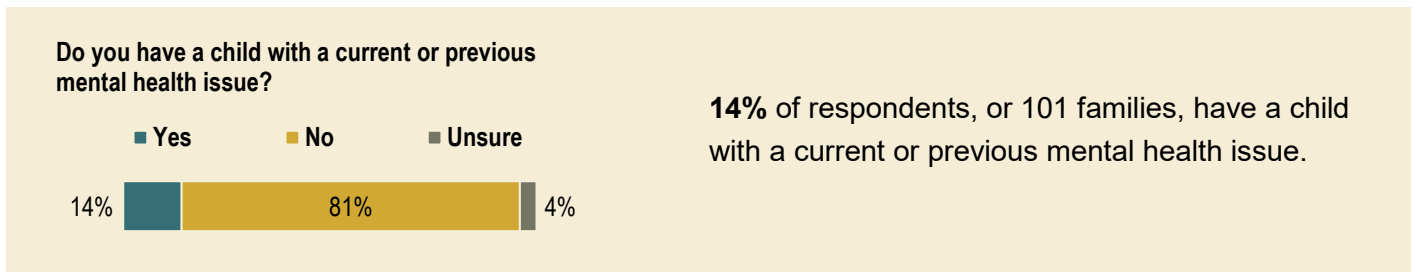
**Figure 5. Opinions about information and resources for children with learning disabilities**



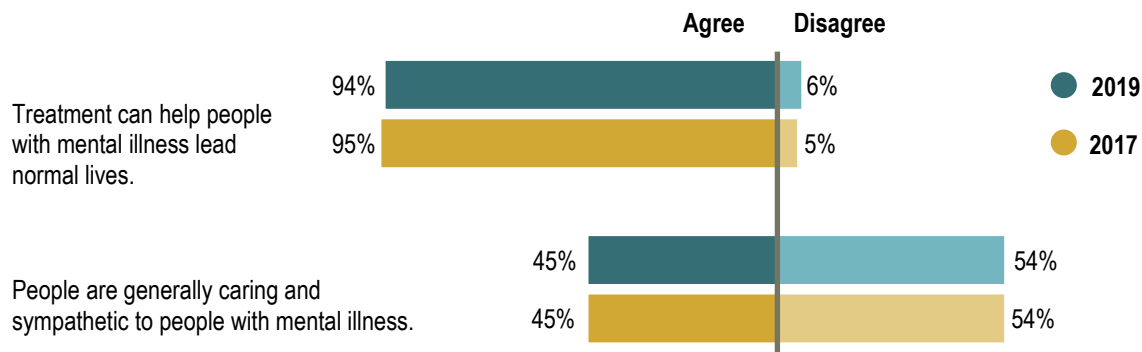
## Mental health

Residents believe that treatment can help people with mental illness lead normal lives (95%; Figure 6). They were less optimistic that people with mental health issues are treated well. Less than half of the respondents (46%) agreed that people are generally caring and sympathetic to people with mental illness. Nearly two-thirds of people with a connection to a person with mental health issues disagreed that people are caring and sympathetic to others with mental illness. Responses were similar between 2017 and 2019.

The Tower Foundation defines mental illnesses as medical conditions that disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others, and daily functioning.



**Figure 6. Opinions about mental health issues**



Totals do not sum to 100% because of rounding.

## Conclusions

The Tower Foundation conducted this survey because of its commitment to addressing issues in Essex County associated with intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental health, along with substance use disorders. Foundation staff and Trustees will look at these data in connection with community-level data about the same topics to help community organizations explore what they can do to better support families and youth. The following can help guide future discussions and decisions.

- Respondents were more likely to have close connections to people with mental health issues than they were to people with intellectual disabilities or learning disabilities. Although relatively few people indicated having a child with one of these disabilities, those who did cited learning disabilities and mental health issues more often than intellectual disabilities.
- A little more than half of parents with children with intellectual disabilities do not believe they have all of the services and supports needed to support their children, suggesting an opportunity to bring attention to this need.
- The majority of respondents said there are either not enough or they do not know if there are resources or supports for people with learning disabilities. This could be an opportunity to raise awareness of community resources or needs.
- Most respondents are in favor of fair treatment for each population but are often unaware of how people are actually treated. This is particularly true for those without connections to individuals with any of these issues. Compared to those *with* connections, those without are more likely to indicate that they don't know whether people with disabilities are treated fairly. This could be another opportunity to raise awareness of each of these issues and to identify what appropriate treatment could look like.

## Methods and caveats

Residents living at 6,000 random addresses and with post office boxes in Essex County were invited to participate in the survey in 2019, while only 4,000 addresses were invited in 2017. At both time points, each address was sent an introduction letter, a survey packet with a \$1 bill incentive, a reminder postcard, and a second survey packet (if needed). Wilder Research received completed surveys from 757 people in 2019 and 542 people in 2017. Data were weighted to represent the actual age and gender distribution of the county. Because of the low number of male respondents between age 18 and 29, there are no weighted results for this group. When considering these data, please remember that people affected individually or by association with family or friends by intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, or mental health issues may have been more likely to respond to the survey. The results may not be representative of the entire population.

