



Community Survey Results 2017

Erie and Niagara Counties

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 guide community efforts to address them, the Tower Foundation asked residents to respond to a survey in fall 2017. A total of 762 residents from Erie and Niagara Counties shared their attitudes and experiences related to intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental health by responding to the survey. The survey did not include questions about substance use disorders because reliable community-level data are already available for this topic.

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

Residents of Erie and Niagara counties were most likely to know someone who has a mental health issue and 18 percent self-reported an issue. Fewer respondents self-reported an intellectual disability (4%) or learning disability (10%); however, they were most likely to say they had a child or other relative with an intellectual disability or learning disability. Between 52 and 59 percent of respondents have a connection to these issues through neighbors, acquaintances, colleagues, and others they know.

1. Connection to learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and mental health issues

Do you know anyone in the following roles who have...	Percentage responding "yes" ¹		
	an intellectual disability?	a learning disability?	a mental health issue?
Yourself	4%	10%	18%
Spouse or partner	3%	5%	12%
Child	10%	18%	13%
Parent	5%	4%	24%
Other relative	27%	35%	42%
Neighbors, acquaintances, colleagues, and others ²	52%	57%	59%

Note. In the following tables, the data were analyzed by four categories according to the respondent's connection to individuals with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and mental health issues. The categories included close family relationship of self, spouse or partner, child, or parent; other family members; neighbors, acquaintances, colleagues, and others; and no connections.

¹ In addition, between 1% and 5% were unsure whether their spouse, child, parent, or they have an intellectual disability, learning disability, or mental health issue. The percentage of unsure responses for other categories was higher.

² Percentage of respondents who said "yes" to knowing someone in at least one of these four roles who has an intellectual disability, learning disability, or mental health issue.

Intellectual disabilities

Most respondents expressed that people with intellectual disabilities should receive equal education (92%) or employment opportunities (85%). Less than half (42%) agreed that people with intellectual disabilities are treated fairly in the community and 28 percent did not know whether people were treated fairly. Respondents with close family relationships were most likely to disagree that people are treated fairly. Sixteen percent of respondents agreed that people with intellectual disabilities should live and work in special communities.

Tower 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.

2. Opinions about intellectual disabilities

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know ¹
People with intellectual disabilities are treated fairly in our community.	4%	38%	26%	5%	28%
In general, people with intellectual disabilities should receive equal education opportunities.	45%	47%	4%	0%	3%
In general, people with intellectual disabilities should receive equal employment opportunities.	35%	50%	8%	1%	7%
It would be best for persons with intellectual disabilities to live and work in special communities.	2%	14%	47%	19%	18%

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

Learning disabilities

Four of ten respondents said they did not know whether there are enough resources for students (37%) or employees (40%) with learning disabilities. Less than one-third (29%) agreed that their community provides enough resources for students with learning disabilities and 19 percent said employers provide enough support or accommodation for employees with learning disabilities.

Tower 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.

Respondents with family connections to individuals with learning disabilities were more likely to express that there are not enough supports for students or employees.

3. Opinions about learning disabilities

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know ¹
Our community devotes enough resources to students with learning disabilities.	5%	24%	24%	10%	37%
Employers provide enough support or accommodation for employees with learning disabilities	2%	17%	30%	10%	40%

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

Mental health

Residents believe that treatment can help people with mental illness live normal lives (91%). They were less optimistic that people with mental health issues are treated well. Less than half of the responding residents (38%) agreed that people are generally caring and sympathetic to people with mental illness. Three-quarters of respondents with family connections to people with mental illness disagreed that people are caring and sympathetic to others with mental illness.

4. Opinions about mental health issues

Mental Health	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Treatment can help people with mental illness lead normal lives.	33%	58%	8%	0%
People are generally caring and sympathetic to people with mental illness.	3%	35%	52%	10%

¹ "Don't know" was not included as a response category for these questions to remain consistent with a national survey instrument.

Conclusions

The Tower Foundation conducted this survey because of its commitment to addressing these issues, along with substance use disorders, in the community. 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 most likely to have close connections to people with mental health issues and less likely to have connections to people with intellectual disabilities or learning disabilities.
- 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 less aware of how people are actually treated. Those without connections to individuals with any of these issues are more likely to say people are treated fairly. This could be another opportunity to raise awareness of appropriate treatment of local residents.

Methods and caveats

Residents living at 4,000 random addresses and post office boxes in Erie and Niagara counties were invited to participate in the survey. 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). 762 people returned completed surveys. 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 the 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.

