



Community Survey Results 2023

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 to guide community efforts to address them, the Tower Foundation asked residents to respond to a survey in fall 2017, fall 2019, fall 2021, and fall 2023. For the fall 2023 survey, a total of 927 residents from Erie and Niagara counties shared their attitudes and experiences related to intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, mental health, and substance use by responding to the survey. The highlights are presented below. Key differences between survey time points or groups are noted if they are at least 10 percentage points apart.

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

Of the three topics included in the survey, Erie and Niagara county residents were most likely to know someone who has a mental health issue, with 25% of respondents self-reporting an issue (Figure 1). Fewer respondents self-reported an intellectual disability (9%) or learning disability (12%); they were more likely to say they have a friend or other relative with an intellectual disability or learning disability. Around half of respondents have a connection to each of the three issues through neighbors, acquaintances, colleagues, and others they know. Overall, responses were similar across survey years.

Figure 1. Connection to learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and mental health issues¹

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%	12%	25%
Spouse or partner	7%	7%	20%
Parent	7%	8%	29%
Friend	32%	38%	51%
Other relative	33%	41%	55%
Other, including neighbors, acquaintances, colleagues ¹	45%	45%	51%

¹ In addition, between 3% and 15% 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 20% to 24%.

Demographics

A large majority of respondents identified as White (87%). White respondents were over-represented in this survey compared to the overall population in the region, in which 75% of individuals identify as White (2018-2022 American Community Survey). White respondents were more likely than respondents of color to know someone with a mental health issue (60%, versus 42%).

Thirty-one percent of respondents reported having a graduate or professional degree while 15% reported being high school graduates or an equivalent alternative. Survey respondents reported a higher education level than the overall population in this region, among which 35% had a high school diploma or less (2018-2022 American Community Survey). Respondents with a college degree or higher were the least likely to know someone with an intellectual disability (23%, versus 33-38%), while those with a high school education or less were the least likely to know someone with a mental health issue (49%, versus 59-60%).

Forty-two percent of respondents indicated making up to \$75,000, and 39% made between \$75,001-\$150,000. Survey respondents tended to have slightly higher household incomes than the overall population in this region, in which 55% of households had an income under \$75,000 (2015-2019 American Community Survey). People making \$50,000 or less were most likely to know someone with an intellectual disability (42%, versus 25-28%) or learning disability (46%, versus 28-34%).

Throughout this report, comparisons are made by demographic groupings to demonstrate differences in experiences and perceptions, and opportunities for more targeted action steps.

Figure 2. Race/Ethnicity (N=873)

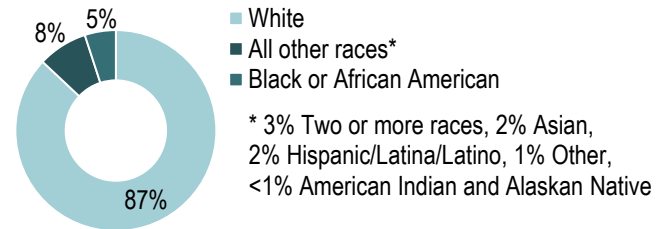


Figure 3. Educational attainment (N=899)

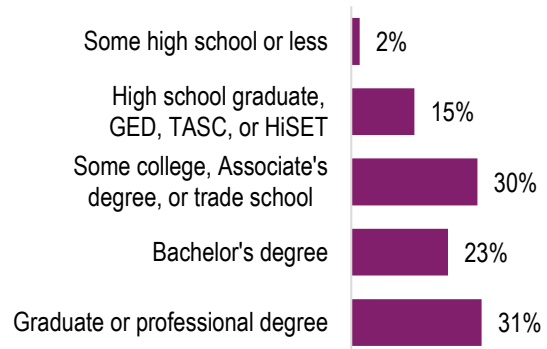
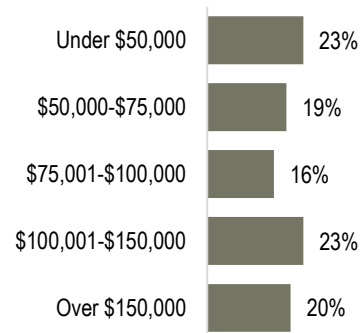


Figure 4. Household income (N=779)



For more information about the community demographics, please visit

<https://thetowerfoundation.org/community-snapshots/>

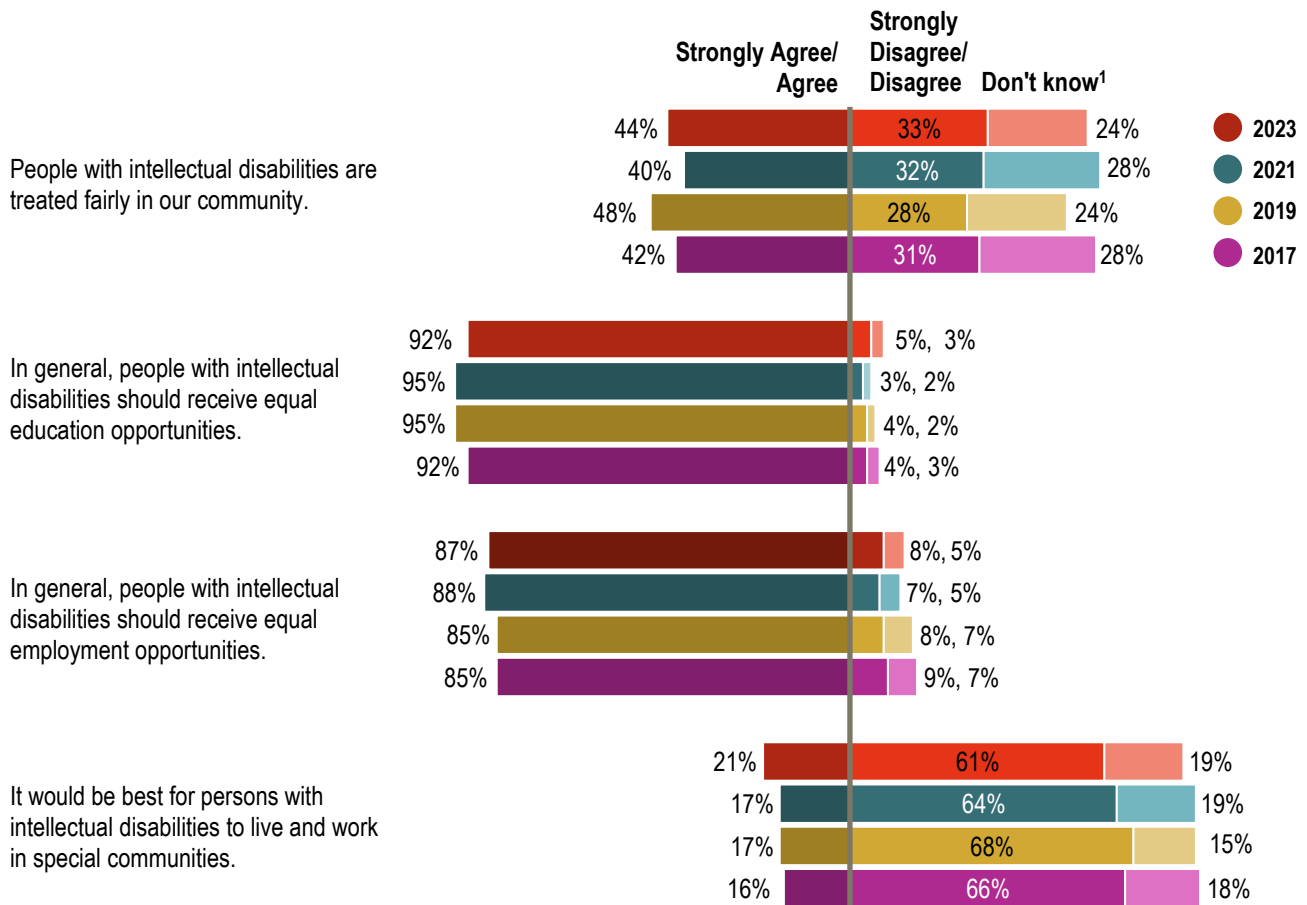
Intellectual disabilities

While most respondents indicated that people with intellectual disabilities should receive equal education (92%) or employment opportunities (87%), fewer agreed that people with intellectual disabilities are treated fairly (44%; Figure 5). Twenty-one percent agreed that people with intellectual disabilities should live and work in special communities. Responses in 2023 were similar to those in previous survey years.

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.

Respondents with a connection to someone with an intellectual disability were more likely to report that people with intellectual disabilities are not treated fairly in their community (42%, versus 30% for those without a connection). Additionally, individuals with a high school education or less were the most likely to say that people with intellectual disabilities are treated fairly in the community (53%). Overall, responses were similar across race and income levels.

Figure 5. Opinions about intellectual disabilities



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

Note: Some totals do not sum to 100% because of rounding.

Children with intellectual disabilities

Fourteen percent of respondents indicated that they have a child with an intellectual disability. Seventy-one percent of respondents with a child age 26 or younger with an intellectual disability agree that they have enough information to understand their child’s intellectual disability (Figure 6). When asked whether they have received all needed services and supports for their child’s intellectual disability, half of these respondents agreed (50%), and half disagreed (50%). Responses were similar between 2021 and 2023 regarding access to information, but a higher proportion of families in 2023 said they had enough support compared to 2021.

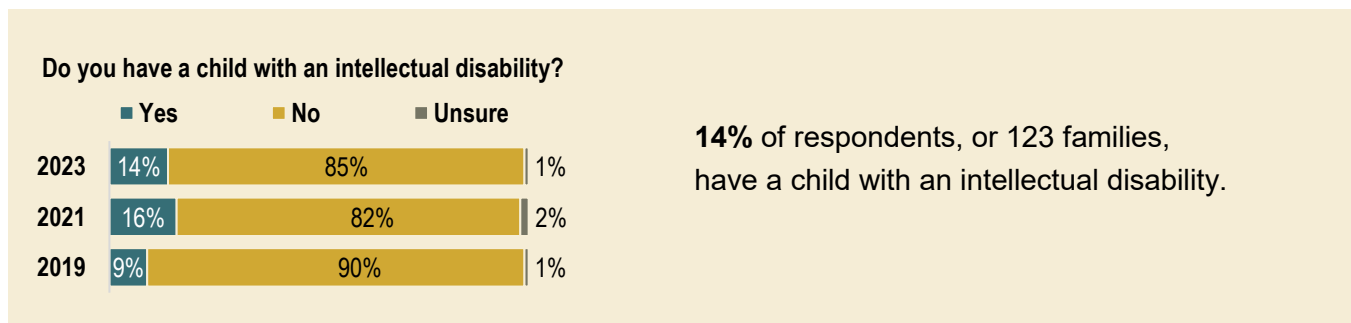
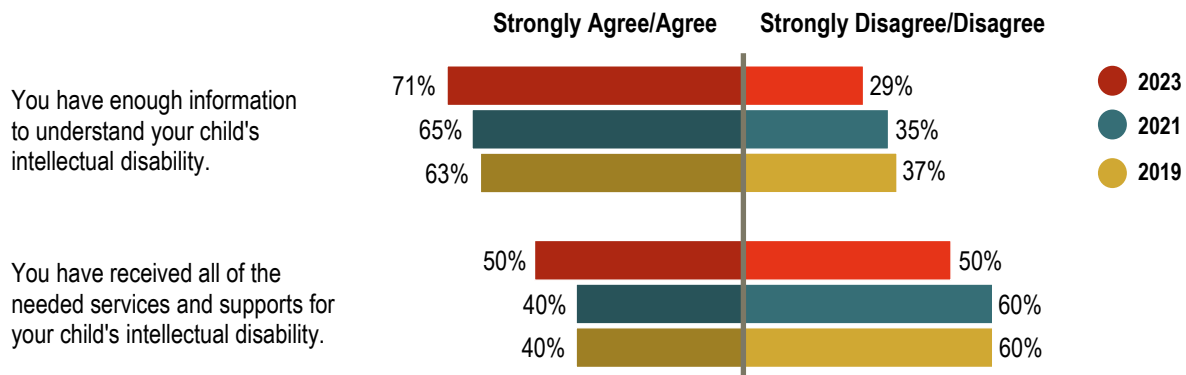


Figure 6. Opinions about information and resources for children age 26 or younger with intellectual disabilities



Learning disabilities

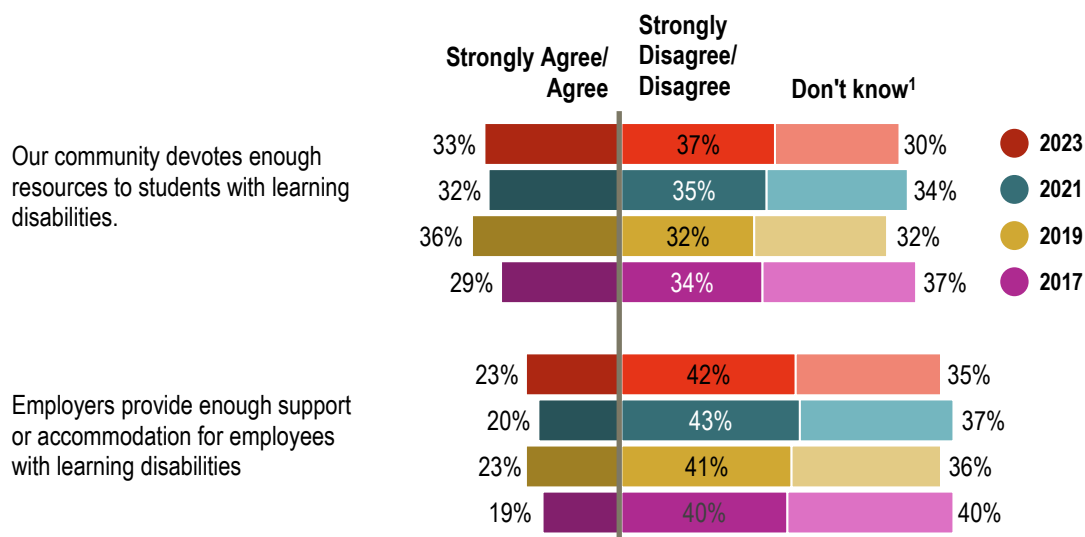
Respondents were roughly split over whether their community devotes enough resources to students with learning disabilities, with 33% agreeing, 37% disagreeing, and 30% not knowing (Figure 7). Fewer respondents agreed (23%) than disagreed (42%) that employers provide enough support to employees with learning disabilities. Thirty-five percent didn't know if employers provided enough support. Responses were similar across survey years.

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.

Respondents connected to individuals with learning disabilities were more likely to report that the community doesn't devote enough resources to students with learning disabilities (45%, versus 34% of those without connections) and were slightly more likely to say that employers don't provide enough support for employees with learning disabilities (48%, versus 39% of those without connections). In addition, roughly a third 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 – a higher proportion than respondents with a connection (32%, versus 22%).

Those with a high school education or less were the most likely to report that there is enough support for students with learning disabilities (41%). Respondents of color were the most likely to believe there is not enough support for both students (51%) and employees (54%) with learning disabilities.

Figure 7. Opinions about learning disabilities



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

Note: Some totals do not sum to 100% because of rounding.

Children with learning disabilities

Seventeen percent of respondents indicated that they have a child with a learning disability. Sixty percent of respondents with a child age 26 or younger with a learning disability agree that they had enough information to understand their child’s disability (Figure 8). When asked whether they have received all needed services and supports for their child’s learning disability, more than half indicated that they have not (57%).

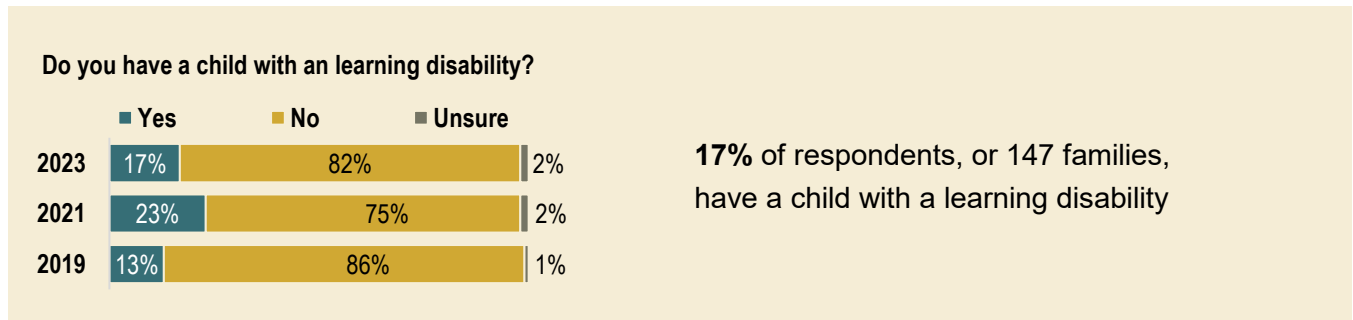
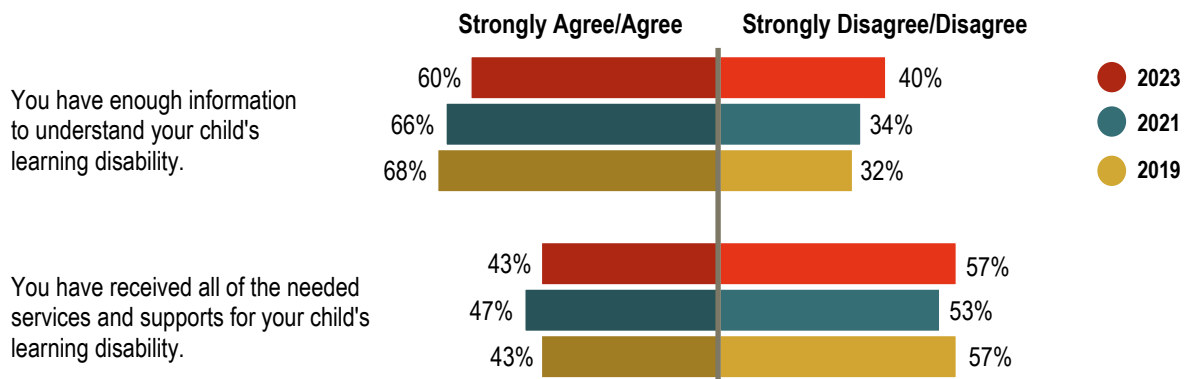


Figure 8. Opinions about information and resources for children age 26 or younger with learning disabilities



Mental health

Residents believe that treatment can help people with mental illness lead normal lives (94%; Figure 9). They were less optimistic that people with mental health issues are treated well. Less than half of the respondents (41%) agreed that people are generally caring and sympathetic to people with mental illness. Responses were similar across survey years.

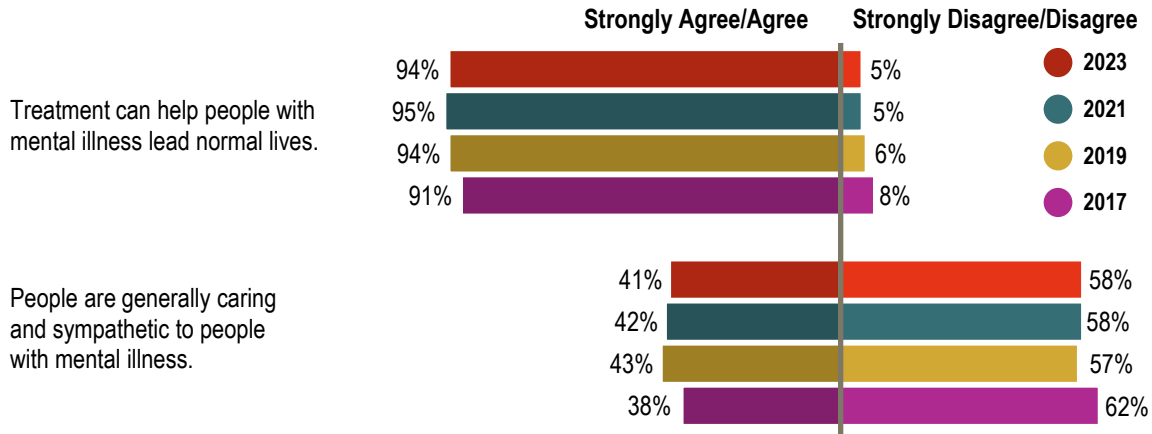
The Tower Foundation defines mental illnesses as medical conditions that disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others, and daily functioning.

Overall, residents feel that having a mental illness can influence how others view them. The majority of respondents agreed that they may not be viewed as 'normal' if they were treated for a mental illness (76%; Figure 10). Most respondents also agreed that if they had a child with a mental illness, they would be concerned that other children would not socialize or play with them (87%) and that they would not be considered normal by others (89%). However, 75% of residents report feeling comfortable talking to a family member about a mental health issue, and 85% indicated that they would be likely to contact a professional for help if they or a family member had a mental health issue (Figure 11). In addition, the majority of respondents agree that they would know where to go for help if they had a mental health concern (65%). Forty-one percent of residents felt that a person with mental illness is not able to change the way they behave. This was a new set of questions in 2023.

Respondents with a connection to someone with a mental health issue were more likely to believe that people are not caring or sympathetic to those with mental health issues (64%, versus 54% of those without a connection). In addition, those with a connection to someone with a mental health issue were more likely to say they know where to go for help with a mental health concern (71%, versus 55% of those without a connection).

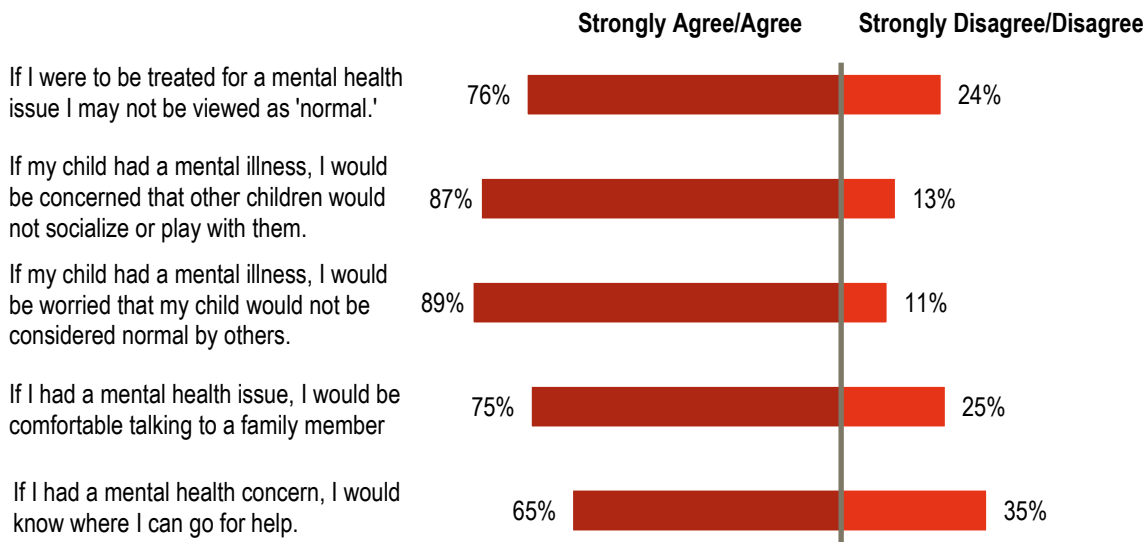
Respondents of color were more likely to say that people are caring and sympathetic to those with mental illness (51%), and respondents with a high school education or less were slightly more likely to agree with this statement compared to other education levels (52%). White respondents were more likely to agree that that they may not be viewed as 'normal' if they were treated for a mental illness (78%) and that they would be concerned that other children would not socialize with their child if they had a mental illness (88%). Respondents with a Bachelor's degree or higher (62%) and those making over \$100,000 (63%) were slightly more likely to agree that a person with mental illness is able to change the way they behave. Residents making under \$50,000 were the least likely to say they would be comfortable talking to a family member about a mental health issue (66%).

Figure 9. Opinions about mental health issues



Note: Some totals do not sum to 100% because of rounding.

Figure 10. Opinions about mental health perceptions and support



Note: All data is from 2023, as this was a new set of questions in 2023.

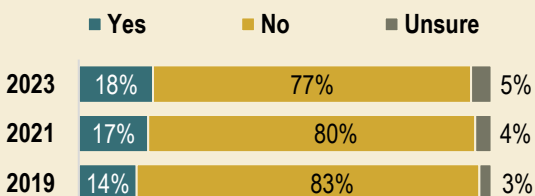
Figure 11. Likelihood of seeking professional help for a mental health issue

If you or a family member were to have a mental health issue how likely would you be to contact a professional for help?

Very Likely/Somewhat Likely Neither Likely nor Unlikely Very Unlikely/Somewhat Unlikely



Do you have a child with a current or previous mental health issue?



18% of respondents, or 134 families, have a child with a current or previous mental health issue.

Substance Use

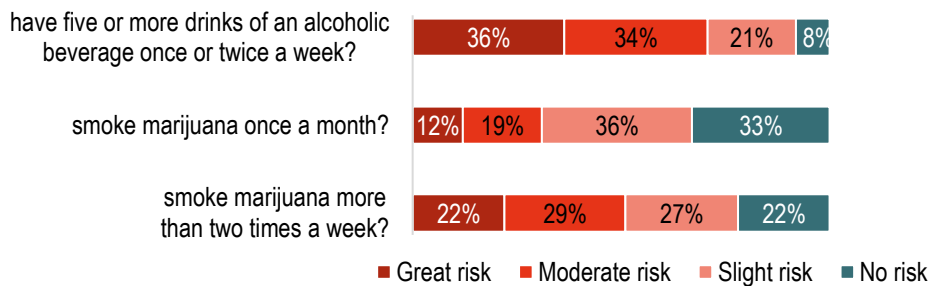
Twenty-nine percent of residents believe that there is a slight or no risk of people harming themselves physically and in other ways when they have five or more drinks of an alcoholic beverage once or twice a week (Figure 12). Most respondents said there is a slight or no risk of people harming themselves when they smoke marijuana once a month (69%). When asked about the risk posed to people smoking marijuana more than two times a week, about half of respondents believed there was a slight or no risk (49%). This is a new set of questions in 2023.

The Tower Foundation defines substance use disorders as the recurrent use of alcohol and/or drugs that causes clinically and functionally significant impairment, such as health problems, disability, and failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school, or home.

Respondents making over \$100,000 were the most likely to say there is no risk or a slight risk of people harming themselves when they have five or more alcoholic drinks once or twice a week (36%). While responses about the risk of smoking marijuana once a month were consistent across race, when asked about the risk of smoking marijuana more than two times a week, respondents of color were more likely to say there was no or a slight risk (60%).

Figure 12. Opinions about substance use

How much do people risk harming themselves physically and in other ways when they...



Note: Some totals do not sum to 100% because of rounding.

Conclusions

The Tower Foundation conducted this survey because of its commitment to addressing issues in Erie and Niagara counties 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. Those with connections were less likely to report that people are caring and sympathetic toward people with mental health issues. This may suggest that continued efforts to destigmatize mental health are warranted.
- While the majority of residents felt that having a mental illness would influence the way others view them, most respondents reported feeling comfortable speaking to a family member or seeking professional help for a mental health issue. Those with connections to people with mental health issues were more likely to say they know where to go for help with a mental health concern, which may suggest an opportunity to further expand visibility of mental health resources in the community.
- Half of parents with children with intellectual disabilities do not believe they have all the services and supports their children need. Although this represents an improvement from the previous survey year, it still suggests an opportunity to continue addressing and bringing attention to this need.
- Roughly two-thirds of respondents said there are either not enough or they do not know if there are enough 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 experiencing any of these issues. For instance, compared to those with connections, those without are more likely to indicate that people with disabilities are treated fairly and have enough support. This could be another opportunity to raise awareness of each of these issues and to identify what appropriate treatment could look like.
- The majority of respondents feel there is a great or moderate risk of people harming themselves due to frequent consumption of alcoholic beverages, while considerably fewer – around half – of respondents perceive a similar risk from frequent consumption of marijuana. A non-trivial number of respondents see no risk from marijuana use, regardless of frequency. Thus, there may be an opportunity to raise awareness around known risks (impaired driving, for example).

Methods and caveats

Residents living at 6,000 random addresses and with post office boxes in Erie and Niagara counties were invited to participate in the survey in 2021, 2019, and 2023, while only 4,000 addresses were invited in 2017. At all 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 927 people in 2023, 1,028 people in 2021, 1,155 people in 2019 and 762 people in 2017. Data were weighted to represent the actual age and gender distribution of the counties. Because of the low number of 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 the topics covered in the survey may have been more likely to respond. In addition, a larger proportion of survey respondents identified as White, had a graduate or professional degree, and had higher income compared to the general population. For these reasons, the results may not be representative of the entire population.

Data tables

INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

A1. Residents' perspectives on intellectual disabilities

		N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
People with intellectual disabilities are treated fairly in our community.	2017	756	4%	38%	26%	5%	28%
	2019	1145	6%	42%	24%	5%	24%
	2021	1019	5%	35%	27%	5%	28%
	2023	923	6%	38%	28%	5%	24%
In general, people with intellectual disabilities should receive equal education opportunities.	2017	760	45%	47%	4%	<1%	3%
	2019	1148	45%	49%	3%	<1%	2%
	2021	1024	49%	46%	3%	<1%	2%
	2023	926	47%	45%	4%	2%	3%
In general, people with intellectual disabilities should receive equal employment opportunities.	2017	755	35%	50%	8%	1%	7%
	2019	1146	35%	51%	8%	1%	7%
	2021	1023	37%	51%	6%	1%	5%
	2023	921	37%	50%	7%	1%	5%
It would be best for persons with intellectual disabilities to live and work in special communities.	2017	750	2%	14%	47%	19%	18%
	2019	1146	3%	14%	43%	25%	15%
	2021	1016	4%	13%	42%	22%	19%
	2023	913	4%	17%	42%	18%	19%

A2. Information and services available for parents and guardians with children age 26 or younger with intellectual disabilities

		N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
You have enough information to understand your child's intellectual disability.	2019	84	17%	46%	32%	5%
	2021	95	21%	44%	27%	9%
	2023	84	23%	48%	24%	5%
You have received all of the needed services and supports for your child's intellectual disability.	2019	84	15%	25%	42%	18%
	2021	86	7%	34%	42%	18%
	2023	83	16%	34%	26%	24%

LEARNING DISABILITIES

A3. Residents' perspectives on learning disabilities

		N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
Our community devotes enough resources to students with learning disabilities.	2017	757	5%	24%	24%	10%	37%
	2019	1152	6%	30%	25%	8%	32%
	2021	1025	8%	24%	24%	11%	34%
	2023	927	7%	26%	26%	11%	30%
Employers provide enough support or accommodation for employees with learning disabilities.	2017	759	2%	17%	30%	10%	40%
	2019	1151	4%	20%	32%	8%	36%
	2021	1018	4%	16%	32%	11%	37%
	2023	925	4%	19%	31%	12%	35%

A4. Information and services available for parents and guardians with children age 26 or younger with learning disabilities

		N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
You have enough information to understand your child's learning disability.	2019	120	21%	47%	25%	7%
	2021	155	19%	48%	25%	9%
	2023	91	23%	37%	31%	10%
You have received all of the needed services and supports for your child's learning disability.	2019	117	18%	25%	45%	13%
	2021	149	12%	35%	41%	12%
	2023	90	12%	31%	37%	19%

MENTAL HEALTH

A5. Residents' perspectives on mental health

		N	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Treatment can help people with mental illness lead normal lives.	2017	753	33%	58%	8%	<1%
	2019	1147	36%	59%	5%	1%
	2021	1021	35%	60%	4%	1%
	2023	921	35%	59%	4%	1%
People are generally caring and sympathetic to people with mental illness.	2017	751	3%	35%	52%	10%
	2019	1144	3%	40%	50%	7%
	2021	1017	4%	38%	47%	11%
	2023	916	3%	38%	49%	9%

SUBSTANCE USE

A6. Residents' perspectives on substance use

How much do people risk harming themselves physically and in other ways when they...		N	Great risk	Moderate risk	Slight risk	No risk
Have five or more drinks of an alcoholic beverage once or twice a week?	2023	923	36%	34%	21%	8%
Smoke marijuana once a month?	2023	924	12%	19%	36%	33%
Smoke marijuana more than two times a week?	2023	923	22%	29%	27%	22%

