People with Serious Mental Illnesses Can and Want to Work

Yet only 22% of people with serious mental illnesses are employed, and only about 12% work full-time. By comparison, the labor participation rate for the general U.S. population was 63.7% in 2012.

- The disparity is not because people with serious mental illnesses are incapable of working. This false preconception has been repeatedly debunked.

Supported Employment Services Help People Work

- Supported employment, an evidenced-based way to help people with mental illnesses secure and keep employment, begins with the idea that “every person with a serious mental illness is capable of working competitively in the community.” Among other services, supported employment provides job identification, job search, job coaching, and benefits counseling.

- The Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model of supported employment has an extensive fidelity scale and has been thoroughly tested, with 11 randomized controlled trials of IPS programs serving individuals with serious mental illness.

- IPS consistently results in good vocational outcomes. Approximately 60 percent of IPS participants at any given time secure employment, compared to 23 percent who receive traditional services. Better vocational outcomes are also consistent across subpopulations, including individuals with substance abuse issues and individuals who are homeless.

Work Plays a Critical Role in Improving Quality of Life and Mental Health Outcomes

- IPS supported employment is not only highly successful in getting people with serious mental illness into work, but also results in better clinical and social outcomes.

- Work helps people with serious mental illnesses become part of the community and helps build an individual’s sense of purpose, self-esteem, and self-worth. Given the importance of work, it is not surprising that IPS has been shown to reduce symptoms of a person’s mental illness, and reduce the need for other services.

- A study of individuals experiencing homelessness who received IPS supported employment services found that 71% of all individuals served achieved employment and that obtaining employment assisted participants in reintegration into society, helped prevent relapses, and promoted economic self-sufficiency.

Despite Their Effectiveness, Supported Employment Services Are Not Widely Available

- In 2012, only 1.7 percent of individuals served by state mental health authorities received supported employment services.

- Expanding the availability of these services would help change the current employment rate for people with serious mental illnesses and offer them better lives and better health.
1. Robert E. Drake et al., Social Security And Mental Illness: Reducing Disability With Supported Employment, 28 Health Affairs 761, 767 (May/June 2009); Written Testimony of Dr. Gary Bond, Professor of Psychiatry, Dartmouth Psychiatric Research Center, for U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission public meeting on Employment of People with Mental Disabilities (May 15, 2011) (hereinafter Bond Testimony), http://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/meetings/3-15-11/bond.cfm. See also Michael McQuilken et al., The Work Project Survey: Consumer Perspectives on Work, 18 Journal of Voc. Rehab. 59, 60 (2003) ("most studies suggest that a majority of people with severe mental illness want to work . . . [citing one survey finding that 71 percent of respondents, individuals with serious mental illnesses receiving case management services, who were not employed indicated that they wanted to become employed, and one study finding that 53 to 61 percent of participants, individuals with schizophrenia spectrum disorders following a symptom relapse, who were not working reported an interest in working] . . . Other studies have found similar results."). This includes people who are homeless or have been absent from the workforce for years. Bond Testimony.

2. U.S. Dep’t of Health and Human Services, Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Office of Disability, Aging and Long-Term Care Policy, Toward a Social Cost-Effectiveness Analysis of Programs to Expand Supported Employment Services: An Interpretive Review of the Literature vii (2010), available at http://aspe.hhs.gov/daltcp/reports/2011/supempFR.pdf. ASPE’s estimates are derived from historical data. The SAMHSA data used later on in this fact sheet reflects the actual rates of supported employment services provided to people with serious mental illness by state mental health agencies in 2012.


6. See SAMHSA TOOLKIT, supra note 5; Interview by Bazelon Center Staff with Staff at Cornerstone Montgomery, an IPS supported employment provider (May 22, 2014) (hereinafter Cornerstone Interview).


11. Campbell, supra note 9, at 373-75.

12. Id. See also Morris D. Bell et al., Clinical Benefits of Paid Work in Schizophrenia, 22 Schizophrenia Bulletin 57 (1996) and Laura Blankertz and Susan Robinson, Adding a Vocational Focus to Mental Health Rehabilitation, 47 Psychiatric Services 1216 (1996).

13. Corrigan and McCracken, supra note 4, at 36; Deborah Becker et. al, Long-Term Employment Trajectories Among Participants With Severe Mental Illness in Supported Employment, 58 Psychiatric Services 922, 927 (Jul. 2007); Philip W. Bush et al., The Long-Term Impact of Employment on Mental Health Service Use and Costs for Persons With Severe Mental Illness, 60 Psychiatric Services 1024, 955-56 (Aug. 2009).
