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Is Supported Employment Effective for Youth and Young Adults?

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DATA TRENDS

IS SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT EFFECTIVE FOR YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS?

SOURCE

Burke-Miller, J., Razzano, L. A., Grey, D. D., Blyler, C. R., & Cook, J. A. (2012). Supported employment outcomes for transition age youth and young adults. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 35*, 171-179.

Supported Employment (SE) is an evidence-based practice to assist people with disabilities in finding and maintaining employment. The types of services provided by SE include job coaching and training, resume development, and transportation. More recently, proof of the effectiveness of this approach for those with mental health challenges has been documented.¹ The purpose of this research was to determine whether SE proved to be effective among persons with mental health challenges across different age groups.

METHODS

Data from the Employment Intervention Demonstration Program (EIDP) were used for this age-comparison analysis. The EIDP was a randomized-control trial that investigated the effectiveness of SE over five years; data for this particular analysis were collected over a 24-month period during the study. Inclusion criteria for participation consisted of being at least 18 years old and unemployed at the start of the study; being willing and able to provide informed consent for study participation; and having an Axis I DSM-IV mental health diagnosis.

Enrolled participants were randomly assigned to SE or a comparison condition. The three age groups used in this analysis to compare the effectiveness of SE by age were youth (ages 18-24), young adults (ages 25-30), and older adults (30 and over). Sample sizes for these three age groups were 81, 168, and 1,023, respectively. Approximately one-third of participants were African-American, and almost half had a schizophrenia spectrum or bipolar disorder diagnosis.

There were two primary outcome measures. The first outcome, paid employment, evaluated whether individuals were employed at any time during the study. All paid employment, including transitional and sheltered employment (i.e., employment provided in settings that are designed for persons who are considered incapable of holding more traditional jobs), was considered for this outcome measure. The second outcome, competitive employment, needed to meet the following four criteria: compensation was of at least minimum wage; location of employment was in an integrated setting; employment was not set aside for persons with mental health challenges; and the employment was not granted by the SE program itself.

The high levels of employment of young adults with serious mental health conditions – especially those who receive SE – are especially encouraging, given that it has been found that having a job can lower mental health symptoms in those who are challenged by them.

RESULTS

Regardless of study condition (SE or control), older adults were least likely to be employed (58.3%) when compared to youth (69.1%) and young adults (73.2%). Similarly, only 42.4% of older adults were competitively employed as compared to 50.6% of youth and 56.0% of young adults. After controlling for factors such as education level and prior work experience, youth were no different from older adults in achieving employment or competitive employment. However, young adults were approximately three times more likely than older adults to have been employed (odds ratio = 3.13, $p < .01$) and competitively employed (odds ratio = 2.94, $p < .01$). There were no age group differences when measuring total dollars earned during employment.

Supported employment showed different levels of effectiveness when compared across age groups. Both young adults and older adults in the SE condition were more likely to be employed than their counterparts in the control condition. However, the opposite was true for youth; within that age group, those in SE were less likely to be employed when compared to those in the control condition. However, in a two-way analysis of variance, this interaction of age group and study condition did not reach statistical significance.

Similar results were found when examining who was most likely to achieve competitive employment. Both young adults and older adults who were in SE were more likely to obtain competitive employment when compared to their counterparts in the control condition. Study condition, however, was not statistically significant in predicting competitive employment in youth; overall rates demonstrated that a lower percentage of youth in SE were competitively employed.

CONCLUSION

This study found that SE can be effective for young adults (ages 25-30), but not for youth (ages 18-24). One possible explanation for this finding is that SE programs may encourage younger people to pursue educational,

rather than employment, goals. Another possibility is that the prioritization of employment retention within SE programs may be developmentally inappropriate for youth, as youth tend to change jobs frequently as they establish their identity.² People in this age group may benefit more from having a program support the process of employment exploration via learning job skills and applying for jobs, not the outcome of obtaining employment.³ Or, it may be the case that young adults are more motivated to find and keep a job; such motivation can come from internal drive or social supports.⁴ Finally, young adults may be more career-oriented and therefore may benefit more from the structure and goals of SE.

The high levels of employment of young adults with serious mental health conditions – especially those who receive SE – are especially encouraging, given that it has been found that having a job can lower mental health symptoms in those who are challenged by them.⁵ More research is needed to determine what aspects of SE are effective in securing employment for young adults; there is some evidence that young adults with serious mental health conditions who are consistently employed are better able to exhibit appropriate job norms (cultural capital) such as controlling emotions, acting professionally, navigating the workplace, and adopting a different “role” conducive to job success.⁴ Additionally, more research is needed to determine how, if possible, to tailor SE to better meet the needs of youth.

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