



DISPARITIES IN VOCATIONAL SUPPORTS FOR BLACK YOUNG ADULTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

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Research Brief

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Young adult Black people with disabilities, including serious mental health conditions (SMHCs), are less likely to find and keep jobs than peers who are White.¹ Data from the Second National Longitudinal Transition Study shows that after high school graduation Black students with disabilities are significantly less likely to find a competitive job (42%) as compared to White students with disabilities (63%).² In addition, young adult Black people are disproportionately represented among both young people diagnosed with emotional disturbances³ and among recipients of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits.⁴

The Problem

There are significant disparities in both the delivery and outcomes of vocational services in favor of White people over Black people.^{1,5} Black people with disabilities are less likely to be accepted for government funded vocational rehabilitation (VR) services than White peers.⁶ If accepted into VR, minorities are less likely to receive training or have their cases closed successfully when compared to people who are White with disabilities.⁶ A study using VR data found that the VR cases of Black clients with mental health conditions, if screened in, were more likely to be closed as non-rehabilitated when compared to White clients with mental health conditions.^{1,6,7}

When looking at VR services outcomes, Black people are less likely to achieve gainful employment and they have lower salaries.⁸ These dispar-



ities hold as well for integrated care approaches to supported employment such as Individualized Placement and Support (IPS). Data from 5-year study of supported employment programs for people with serious mental health conditions demonstrated that people who are White were more likely to achieve competitive employment than people who are Black.⁹

Research on Barriers and Facilitators to Employment

The research on Black young adults with serious mental health conditions (SMHCs) is limited and leaves major gaps. To date there have been no systemic studies on barriers and facilitators to employment for Black young adults with SMHCs.

Related research studies that have been published suggest that socioeconomic status (SES), discrimination, court involvement, and vocational services all impact vocational success. On the other hand, age and gender to date have shown a negli-

gible impact on vocational outcomes for this population.⁷

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Poverty is a major deterrent to job success.² Black young adults have a 31% poverty rate in the United States, which is three times the number of White young adults that face poverty. Economic inequity reduces access to mental health services, which can leave Black young adults at a disadvantage to receiving vocational and other support services. Families and students from lower economic statuses often do not have the resources and knowledge to advocate for vocational services.

Black young adults with SMHCs have significantly higher rates of dropping out of high school and not enrolling in post-secondary education or training programs than Whites.¹⁰ Thus, they can lack the job skills that introduce the potential for career development.¹⁰

Receipt of government benefits such as social security income (especially Supplemental Security Income prior to age 18), health insurance, and housing can be major disincentives to work, because said benefits supply basic needs to the young adult and other family members¹¹ and individuals fear losing these benefits if they work. Further, living in poverty can impact a person's belief that they can work, making it more difficult for them to engage in vocational rehabilitation (VR) services.

Discrimination

Black people encounter discrimination in their daily lives, and thus Black people with SMHCs are doubly stigmatized. Due to this stigma, Black people with SMHCs are seriously disadvantaged in their attempts to pursue community integration and rehabilitation goals.¹² Black consumers of VR services have reported feeling that their VR counselor lacked awareness of issues with race and disability, and that this impacted communication and the therapeutic alliance with VR counselors, and their employment outcomes. For example, Black clients of VR services who received employment services report dissatisfaction because they were

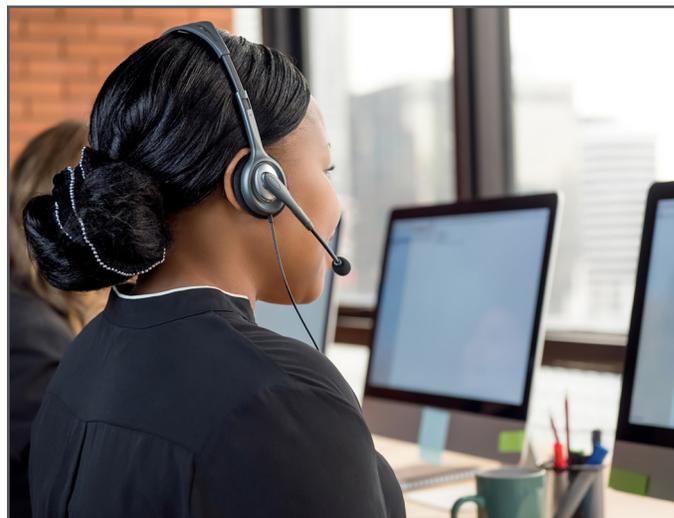
placed in jobs they felt did not fit their skill sets or that failed to consider race relations in the employment settings.¹³ This may contribute to mistrust of the VR counselor and programs, and unsuccessful employment outcomes.

Court Involvement

Court involvement is another factor that often significantly hinders employment success. A study that examine race, sex, and self-reported arrest histories (excluding arrests for minor traffic violations) from a 1997 national longitudinal survey of youth showed that by the age of 23, almost one-half (49%) of Black men had been arrested compared to about 38% of White men.¹⁴ Adolescents transitioning to adulthood with a serious mental health condition (SMHC) are two to three times more likely to become justice involved than adolescents without SMHCs, and Black people are disproportionately represented within this group.¹⁵

Black ex-offenders with SMHCs often have difficulty obtaining employment because of common ways in which employers tend to screen for applicants with criminal history.¹⁶ Current vocational rehabilitation practices inconsistently take criminal history into account when developing vocational plans,¹⁷ which can have an especially negative impact on Black young adult clients with SMHCs.

Engagement and Access to Vocational Services



Although current vocational services, such as supported employment, can produce good outcomes generally, they struggle to meet the access and engagement needs of adults from marginalized racial/ethnic backgrounds.^{1, 12} Researchers have consistently found that Black people are less likely than White people to be deemed eligible for VR services, and more likely to lose them, often due to a “failure to cooperate” or “lost contact”.⁸ Black people have felt that jobs suggested by VR counselors do not fit their skill set and that their VR counselors fail to consider race relations with employers.⁵ VR counselors tend to support and train clients (e.g., how to interview for jobs, goal setting) in the same way regardless of race and ethnicity, and these approaches are often not appealing or relevant to Black people.⁶ Thus, Black people receive fewer vocational training opportunities, fewer college and university opportunities, and are less likely to be placed in competitive employment positions.

In addition, Black people have greater difficulty accessing vocational services, often due to the socioeconomic barriers as discussed above. Black young adults with SMHCs and their families often do not know about the availability of and eligibility standards for formal supports from Vocational Rehabilitation agencies, American Job Centers (also known as One-Stop Career Centers), and Independent Living Centers.⁶ In addition, Black young adults are less likely to use mental health services, which may include supported employment, including vocational services that are often integrated therein.^{7, 18}

Research Needed to Provide Effective and Desirable Services

Research on how vocational services support and impact Black young adults with SMHCs remains demonstrably underdeveloped. Currently, little is known about the specific factors that facilitate or hinder vocational services engagement for Black people with SMHCs, including young adults.^{18, 19} In addition, there is little research on the perspectives of Black people with mental illnesses vocational services and supports. Also, there persists a belief

among many researchers and policy makers that evidence based vocational practices apply to specific racial and ethnic groups as they do to White Americans, but that is not necessarily the case.²⁰ Research has shown that VR services and supports often must be adapted to be applicable and attractive to young adults with SMHCs. Therefore, it can be extrapolated that these supports, and services may need to be adapted specifically for specific young adult racial and ethnic groups.



Research is needed to obtain the perspectives of Black young adults with SMHCs on the factors that facilitate and impede successful employment, including experiences of oppression and discrimination in finding work and in working with vocational counselors. Future research could also explore perspectives of Black young adults with SMHC on the challenges of accessing, engaging, and navigating the vocational rehabilitation system. Proper vocational intervention and supports for Black young adults with SMHCs must be developed with the systemic input of this population, through community-based participatory action research.^{12, 21}

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