

Research In Focus: A Weekly Digest of New Research from the NIDILRR Community

Black Young Adults with Serious Mental Illness Experience Barriers to Vocational Growth, Find Support from Vocational Counselors Who Seek to Understand Their Needs

A study funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR).

Recent research has shown that psychiatric disorders have become a leading cause of disability among young adults (i.e., ages 18-30) and the most common reason for this population to collect Social Security Disability (SSD) benefits. In particular, serious mental illness appears to be at its highest rate during this stage of adulthood. Serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or depression creates challenges for young adults to achieve their social, vocational, and educational goals. Further research has shown that only about half of this population is gainfully employed eight years after high school graduation. This is nearly 16% lower than the post-high school employment rate for young adults without mental illness.

This trend of decreased gainful employment among young adults with serious mental illness is magnified when considering racial disparities. Specifically, Black young adults with serious mental illness are even less likely to be gainfully employed than their White counterparts. This trend is particularly concerning because Black people are noted to be disproportionately represented among young adults with emotional disturbances and receiving SSD benefits. While gainful employment improves the long-term recovery for adults with serious mental illness, research suggests that Black young adults face significant systemic barriers that impede their vocational success. These barriers include a history of poverty, unstable housing, poor school quality, and disproportionate involvement with the criminal justice system. Prior involvement with the criminal justice system is especially challenging because many potential employment opportunities automatically disqualify applicants with a criminal history. Adding this to the general racial discrimination experienced by Black people and the stigma of mental illness, vocational development is difficult.

In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers examined the potential facilitators of and barriers to vocational development among Black young adults with serious mental illness. The researchers also wanted to learn the vocational needs and preferences of this population.

Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 Black young adults with a documented history of serious mental illness. All were between the ages of 19 and 30. All had worked or were working with a vocational counselor. During the interviews, the participants were asked several open-ended questions related to their work and school experiences. The first question was: "In your own words, can you tell me about your experiences working/going to school?" The participants were asked to give a step-by-

step description of their experiences. They were then asked to describe any barriers to achieving vocational growth and their greatest frustrations with school/work, as well as what they deemed most helpful for achieving growth in work/school. In addition to these questions, the researchers also used topical prompts to further engage the participants that were less talkative and to make sure they covered the topics they found to be relevant based on their review of past research. These topics included poverty, quality of schools attended, involvement in the criminal justice system, mental health treatment, public benefits, and discrimination. Additional prompts were used if discrimination was identified by the participant to examine the bases of discrimination, specifically race, ethnicity, mental illness, and court involvement.

The researchers analyzed the interviews, looking for common themes and issues. They found the following overarching themes:

- The participants believed that vocational counselors that were open-minded, relatable, and provided service options that accounted for the client's personal preferences were most qualified to help their vocational growth.
- Workplace supervisors that provided adequate job training, communicated clearly, and used shared personal experiences to motivate were facilitators to vocational growth.
- The presence of Black people in positions of authority and as peers added to the participants' development/growth at school and in the workplace.
- Experiences of day-to-day racial discrimination were common and were a source of frustration and a barrier to vocational and educational growth.

The authors noted that, though many participants thought it would be better to have a vocational counselor of the same race, it wasn't the most important factor. They noted that counselors being relatable, non-judgmental, and willing to provide several service options were more important factors for vocational and educational growth than race.

The authors noted that cultural misunderstandings between vocational counselors and their clients could be a significant factor that impedes vocational growth. In addition to their findings from the interviews, the authors noted that research has shown that frequent exposure to discrimination against Black people with serious mental illness may result in anticipatory stress and anxiety, which may present additional barriers to vocational growth and lower their quality of life. They suggested that because of these challenges, future considerations in evidence-based practices may benefit from the inclusion of cultural adaptations to better accommodate the needs of historically marginalized groups, encouraging counselors to openly discuss racial and cultural factors that impact their clients' lives, and developing policies and practices that address racial disadvantages and align with community needs and client preferences. The

authors suggested that this study highlights areas for future research exploring ways to improve vocational development in this population.

[To Learn More](#)

The Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Learning and Working During the Transition to Adulthood offers [a range of information resources on employment, working with counselors](#), and more. [They also published a fact sheet on this study](#).

Jonathan Delman, lead author for this study, [offered a summary of the research, as well as his perspective](#) as a person with lived experience of serious mental illness.

[To Learn More About this Study](#)

Delman, J., & Adams, L.B. (2021). [Barriers to and Facilitators of Vocational Development for Black Young Adults with Serious Mental Illnesses](#). Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal. This article is available from the NARIC collection under Accession Number J87358.

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