For Young African American Men with Substance Use Disorders, VR May Be a Promising Path to Employment

The unemployment rate for young African American men was as high as 33 percent in 2013 according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The problem of unemployment is even more profound for young African American men with substance use disorders who face additional stressors that may worsen symptoms of substance abuse and interfere with opportunities for employment. Disadvantages in education, employment, and healthcare can also have a negative impact on work participation and health-related quality of life for young African American men in general as well as for those with substance use disorders.

Competitive employment provides access to income and healthcare, and can increased quality-of-life through increased self-esteem, community connections, and life structure - all of which may support recovery from substance use. State vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies offer employment intervention programs which are often used by people with disabilities to find a job or return to the workplace. Young African American men with substance use disorders are also eligible for these programs but such programs may be overlooked as a resource by case managers, parole officers, or other service providers. A recent NIDILRR-funded study looked at which group of young African American men with substance use disorders might get the most benefit from VR interventions and what services might be most effective in leading to successful employment.

Researchers from the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Evidence-Based Practice in Vocational Rehabilitation (RRTC EBP-VR) analyzed data of more than 680 young African American men with substance use disorders who received VR services in 2011. The data included demographics such as age and education, types of services, and employment outcomes. VR services offered to participants included a wide variety of academic training, job related training, and personal support services.

The researchers found that 45 percent of the participants receiving VR services achieved competitive employment where they worked an average of 35.44 hours and earned an average of $324.55 per week. They also identified demographic differences between those who did and did not achieve competitive employment, as listed below:

- Men between the ages of 19 and 25 had higher employment rates than those who were 16 to 18;
- Men who had an associate or bachelor’s degree or higher had better employment rates than those who completed high school, did not complete high school, or went through special education;
Men who received cash benefits such as Supplemental Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) were less likely to be employed than those who did not receive such benefits.

The authors indicated that although the 45 percent success rate for young African American men with substance use disorders was lower than the overall success rate of 55 percent for other VR clients, it was still relatively high given the low employment rates of 33 percent for young African American men in general. They suggested that individuals who are in their 20s may have more work experience, maturity, and motivation than younger men, making them more attractive candidates for employers. They also suggested that employers may be less comfortable hiring teens recovering from substance use disorders than men in their 20s. Additionally, while SSDI and other benefits were found to have a negative impact on attaining employment, very few participants in the study received such benefits. The authors suggested that lack of financial support through benefit programs might motivate young African American men in their 20s to obtain employment.

The authors found that services such as on-the-job supports, job placement, information and referral, and other auxiliary services, such as assistance in obtaining occupational licenses or initial stocks or supplies were found to be the most significant predictors of successful employment outcomes for this particular subpopulation served by State-Federal VR counselors. On the contrary, job readiness training and job search assistance were found to have negative effects. The authors suggested that on-the-job supports might have been effective in helping these young men find and maintain employment by giving them tools to meet the demands of the workplace and avoid relapse and loss of employment. On-the-job supports have also been shown to help people with mental health disorders cope with the stress of work, develop good work habits, and build meaningful work histories, and this service might have offered similar benefit to young African American men in recovery from substance use disorders. They noted that a selective placement approach to job placement, where counselors directly matched young African American men in recovery with job openings, might have lessened any hesitation employers may have had about hiring members of this group. Regarding information and referral services, the authors suggested that young African American men in recovery might have had multiple service needs such as healthcare or access to other benefit programs, and those needs were met through the information and referral services and therefore contributed positively to employment success.

The researchers concluded that VR services, particularly job placement, on-the-job supports, and information and referral, may improve the likelihood of successful employment outcomes for young African American men with substance use disorders, especially those between 19 and 25 with college degrees. The researchers suggested that rehabilitation counselors may be able to use this information to improve VR services for their clients in recovery, which may lead to better employment outcomes.
and improved quality of life for young African American men with substance abuse disorders.

To learn more:
The Dartmouth Supported Employment Center is home to two NIDILRR-funded projects on supported employment and offers extensive information on individual placement and support as an employment services model: http://www.dartmouthips.org/

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers Getting Started with Evidence-Based Practices: Supported Employment. The kit provides practice principles about supported employment as a VR approach: http://store.samhsa.gov/product/SMA08-4365

To find a state vocational rehabilitation office, visit http://askjan.org/cgi-win/TypeQuery.exe?902

To learn more about this study:

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