

Employment Outcomes of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Consumers who are Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) Beneficiaries

Research Question

What are the factors affecting competitive employment outcomes for individuals with blindness and low vision who receive SSDI benefits?

Project Description

This project used 2010 data from the Rehabilitation Services Administration to track employment outcomes for 4,478 individuals with blindness or low vision who were receiving both vocational rehabilitation services and SSDI benefits.

What Are the Most Important Things We Learned?

- **Across diverse backgrounds, having prior work experience increases consumers' chances of finding competitive employment.** In contrast to typical findings of race differences in employment outcomes, this study found that SSDI recipients who are African American, Hispanic, white, or multirace had almost identical levels of competitive sector employment after receiving VR services. This surprising finding suggests that no matter an individual's race or ethnicity, prior work experience can level the playing field and help overcome barriers to employment.
- **Higher amounts of SSDI benefits are associated with finding a job.** Researchers found that individuals receiving higher amounts of SSDI benefits at the time they applied for VR services had a greater likelihood of finding a job than applicants who were receiving lower amounts of benefits. Because SSDI benefit amounts are based on an individual's previous earnings, this means that individuals with significant past work experience had better employment outcomes than their peers with lower levels of previous experience on the job.
- **Some consumers served in blind agencies had a better chance of a competitive employment outcome than their peers served in combined agencies.** Consumers tend to see a decline in competitive employment as they age. However, this study found the decline in employment was much less dramatic and mostly eliminated for older, SSDI recipient consumers who were served by a blind agency. Female and Asian American individuals who are blind also had better employment outcomes when served by blind agencies. Blind agencies provide categorical services that are oriented specifically for consumers who are visually impaired, and these services are provided by counselors experienced with and focused on serving consumers who are visually impaired. Thus we expect that categorical blindness services wherever provided—even those provided in agencies other than blind agencies—will be most beneficial to blind consumers receiving SSDI and probably to blind consumers in general.

Research Takeaway

Employment outcomes were similar across all races and ethnicities for individuals with blindness or low vision who also receive Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits. This suggests that prior work experience (which an individual must have in order to receive SSDI benefits) has a positive influence on the chances of getting a job. In addition, some individuals from specific groups were more likely to have competitive employment outcomes when they were served by a blind (rather than a combined) Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency. Thus, services oriented specifically for consumers who are blind or visually impaired seem to be most effective for this population.

How Do These Findings Relate to Me?

- **Encourage work experience for consumers whenever and wherever you can.** Even work experiences such as internships (both paid and unpaid), apprenticeships, and job shadowing can allow individuals to gain some experience in the workplace. A focus on work experience opportunities for transition-age consumers as they enter the VR system, perhaps through partnerships with education agencies or through summer transition programs that include work components, could be particularly beneficial.
- **Consumers who receive SSDI make excellent job candidates due to their previous employment experience, but they may need help understanding how returning to work impacts their benefits.** Although SSDI benefits may be lost due to employment, there are a number of supports (e.g., Medicaid buy-in programs) in place to help individuals return to work without suffering a large financial blow. When working with a consumer who receives SSDI, try offering benefits planning services to help reduce their uncertainty and fear about returning to work. The many resources available at www.socialsecurity.gov/work/ are a great place to start.

Learn More

Findings were taken from the following article:

Giesen, J. M., & Cavanaugh, B. S. (2013). Disability insurance beneficiaries with visual impairments in vocational rehabilitation: Socio-demographic influences on employment. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 107(6), 453-467.

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