

# DRC BRIEF

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## Reasons for Job Separations Among People with Psychiatric Disabilities

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## Introduction

Research has shown that people with psychiatric disabilities<sup>1</sup> curtail work hours and sometimes leave jobs in order to protect their disability status and benefits (Averett et al., 1999; Cook, 2006; MacDonald-Wilson et al., 2002; Schimmel et al., 2011). Less is known about other reasons that people with mental illness separate from employment. While Evidence-Based Practice Supported Employment has proven to be effective in helping this population obtain work, more information about job separations is needed to inform return to work interventions. This issue brief uses data from the SAMHSA-funded Employment Intervention Demonstration Program (EIDP). We present descriptive statistics and exploratory analyses regarding reasons for job separations. In particular, we examine the extent to which job separations are voluntary or involuntary, the relation of voluntary separations to disclosure of disability, and the extent to which separations occur with acute psychiatric episodes. We also present preliminary data on how the type of separation influences outcomes in subsequent months.

## Background and methods

Although evidence-based practice supported employment (EBP SE) has been shown to be effective in helping individuals with psychiatric disabilities to obtain employment, maintaining employment for more than six months even with ongoing support can be a challenge (Leff et al., 2005). Prior research on small samples indicates that jobs held by people diagnosed with serious mental illnesses usually end unsatisfactorily, either in firing or quitting without having another job (Cook et al., 1992; Becker et al., 1998).

The Employment Intervention Demonstration Program (EIDP) ran from 1996-2001 and was designed to generate knowledge about effective approaches for enhancing employment among adults with serious mental illnesses. Eight sites and a Coordinating Center were funded by the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, to conduct this multi-site evaluation, in which each participant was enrolled for at least two years (Cook et al., 2008). With a cohort of 1,648 adults, the EIDP provides a valuable resource for better understanding job separations which, in turn, can inform the development of effective job retention models in the future.

Job separation data were recorded by program and research staff, according to the EIDP Common Research Protocol (<http://www.psych.uic.edu/eidp/eidpdocs.htm>), for 2,086 (81%) of the 2,564 jobs held during the EIDP. These jobs were held by 892 of the EIDP participants.

Job separations were categorized as voluntary versus involuntary using definitions from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (2013). Voluntary separations were defined as job endings in which an individual decided to leave a job, i.e., to quit. Involuntary separations were defined as job endings initiated by the employer, including layoffs, firings, and terminations of seasonal employees and other temporary workers. While the

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<sup>1</sup> The term disability is used here to refer to the level of functional impairment experienced by study participants, all of whom met criteria for the designation of “severe and persistent mental illness” based on diagnosis, duration, and level of disability as established by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Manderscheid & Sonnenschein, 1992). Approximately 72% of participants were SSI/DI beneficiaries at some point during the 24-month study follow-up period.

focus of our analysis is on voluntary versus all involuntary separations, in some analyses we focus on quits versus firings.

## Results

### **Prevalence of voluntary/involuntary separations**

The 892 individuals started and ended an average of 2.4 jobs each (standard deviation = 1.8) over a 24 month period. Two-fifths of the participants (41.3%) had only one job included in the analysis. On the whole, EIDP jobs were low wage but overwhelmingly minimum wage or above (87.0%) (Table 1). The majority (65.6%) met the definition of competitive employment (i.e., a job available on the open labor market, paying at least minimum wage, not set aside for a person with a disability, and with a direct employer-employee relationship). Most jobs were in service occupations (44.0%) or clerical/sales occupations (25.4%). Most jobs were found through formal job placement assistance or through informal contacts (73.0%). Finally, half of all jobs (50.1%) were worked for at least 20 hours per week; and 53.0% of jobs lasted 2 months or less.

Over half of the 2,086 job separations met criteria for voluntary job ending or quits (59%). The remainder (41%) were involuntary separations: 17% were firings; 10% were layoffs; and 14% were endings of temporary jobs.

### **Job characteristics associated with voluntary and involuntary separations**

In an exploratory data analysis intended to identify patterns of separation predictors (Table 1), we examined the relationship between voluntary versus involuntary separations and a series of job characteristics and job holder characteristics (age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, work history, psychiatric diagnosis, co-occurring medical condition, functioning, SSA entitlement status, and receipt of EBP SE).<sup>2</sup> None of the worker characteristics were significantly associated with voluntary versus involuntary job separation status.

Voluntary exits were, however, significantly associated with several job characteristics (Table 1). Specifically, competitive jobs were more likely than other jobs to end voluntarily, while higher wage jobs were less likely to end voluntarily than lower wage jobs. Jobs that were obtained through formal job placement assistance or informal contacts also were less likely to end voluntarily than jobs obtained without any assistance.

### **Reasons for job separation: quits versus firings**

In our analysis of reasons for separation, we contrasted quits with firings rather than with all involuntary separations (Figure 1). We did this because many of the reasons explored were not relevant to lay-offs and endings of temporary positions, the other two types of involuntary separations. Program staff were asked to select from a list of separation reasons the one that contributed most to the job ending. The most common reason given for quitting a job was job

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<sup>2</sup> We conducted the analysis using a multivariate logistic regression model that also adjusted for geographic region. Using the threshold of zero-order correlation  $\geq .5$  to indicate multicollinearity, none of the variables was excluded from the model. Jobs were used as the unit of analysis as clustering of multiple jobs among individuals was insufficient to support use of multilevel analysis; however, data from workers with more than one job were weighted by the number of jobs they held during the observation period.

dissatisfaction, followed by psychiatric disability-related problems. Quitting a job to take another job was the third most common reason, and is a reason that many people consider to be a satisfactory job separation (Becker et al., 1998). Other reasons for job quits were lack of access to the job or job site (e.g., transportation barriers, inability to obtain a reasonable accommodation, or relocation of a business or firm), poor job performance, and quitting because of concerns about losing disability benefits or entitlements.

Reasons for firings were less varied with the majority attributed to poor job performance. Additional reasons for firings were job dissatisfaction (mostly difficulty in relationships with supervisor or co-workers) and the employee's psychiatric condition.

### **Disclosure of disability status and reasonable accommodations**

The prevalence of voluntary versus involuntary job separations was not related to disclosure of psychiatric disability to the job supervisor. However, jobs lasted longer on average when the supervisor was aware of the worker's psychiatric disability (131 days compared to 93 days,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that disclosure may support job retention. On the other hand, supervisor awareness was also associated with lower hourly wage (\$5.50 versus \$6.10,  $p < .001$ ) and fewer hours worked per week (16 versus 23,  $p < .001$ ) indicating that disclosure may be associated with less desirable jobs or employment that is not competitive. Disclosure also was related to the employee's prior work history. Supervisors were aware of the worker's disability status in 66% of situations in which the employee had not held a job in the prior 5 years, but in only 54% of jobs when employees had more recent work history ( $p < .001$ ). Supervisor awareness of psychiatric disability was also significantly associated with SSI/DI beneficiary status, with disclosure in 75% of jobs held by SSI/DI recipients, but only 56% of jobs held by non-SSA beneficiaries ( $p < .001$ ). It may be that in order to re-enter the work force, SSI/DI beneficiaries (who presumably experienced a higher level of disability than non-beneficiaries) were willing to take less desirable jobs, with more on-the-job support from supervisors who were aware of their psychiatric disability.

By definition, disclosure of disability status is necessary to obtain a reasonable accommodation but, even so, accommodations were the exception rather than the rule. Only 21% of all jobs were reported to have an accommodation made. Reasonable accommodations were most often related to schedule modifications, time off for medical reasons, and on-site use of job coaches or other vocational professionals (Figure 2). Jobs for which a reasonable accommodation was granted were more frequently represented among voluntary separations than involuntary separations (Table 1). As with supervisor disclosure, jobs with any accommodations tended to last longer than those without accommodations (144 days average tenure versus 107 days,  $p < .001$ ), be worked for fewer hours per week (16 hours per week average versus 21,  $p < .001$ ), and pay less (\$5.31 per hour average versus \$5.90,  $p < .001$ ). This finding is consistent with prior research showing that some injured workers who receive job accommodations also receive lower wages, in essence "paying the price" of their own accommodations (Gunderson, 1996).

### **Consequence of voluntary versus involuntary terminations**

Voluntary job ending status was not associated with the length of the time the job was held, or with the number of jobs held by an individual during the study. In addition, people who quit

their first job were not more likely than others to quit another job later in the study. However, people who were fired from their first job were twice as likely to be fired again, with an unadjusted odds ratio of 2.02 ( $p < .01$ ).

### Discussion/policy implications

Consistent with the limited prior research, very few of the 2,086 jobs that were ended in the EIDP study ended satisfactorily, with workers moving on to another job. A high proportion of people with psychiatric disabilities quit due to job dissatisfaction, which is likely a reflection of their typical underemployment or employment in poor quality jobs (Cook, 2006). In the EIDP study, lower wage jobs were significantly associated with greater likelihood of workers voluntarily separating from jobs rather than being involuntarily separated. Only 5% of voluntary job separations were attributed to concern over loss of benefits, most likely because low earnings and short job tenures generally did not reach levels at which benefits would be reduced or terminated due to Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) or completion of Trial Work Periods (TWP).<sup>3</sup>

Separations due to the worker being fired were most often associated with poor job performance. Most firings were not attributed to the employee's psychiatric status, while psychiatric difficulties were a common reason attributed to worker quits. In these cases, workers having difficulty with psychiatric issues may be quitting as a hedge against being fired. Given that being fired from a job was significantly associated with a much greater likelihood of being fired again in the EIDP, prevention of firing or of the conditions that lead to firing would seem to be a worthy goal for job retention models. Voluntary and involuntary separations that are related to psychiatric crises or poor job performance could be reduced by on-going job support and integrated vocational and clinical services which are the hallmarks of EBP SE (Cook et al., 2005) and have been shown to enhance job retention (Leff et al., 2005).

Our analysis suggests that job tenure may be enhanced by disclosure of psychiatric disability status and the use of job accommodations. Yet, disclosure was associated with lower pay and fewer hours worked. Engaging employers in job retention may be an effective strategy, but it should not come at the cost of lower wages. Rather, the employer engagement should be a win-win situation in which employees benefit with high quality jobs that build careers as much as employers benefit from lower job turnover. This win-win context should be the basis of any new policies aimed at employers such as tax credits or rebates.

While it is was not common in the EIDP, it is clearly possible for workers with psychiatric disabilities to experience satisfactory job endings in which they leave one position in order to take another position. It may be that job retention support should be redefined as *employment* retention assistance, with flexibility for workers to transition smoothly between jobs either to pursue career development or satisfy other life choices.

A challenge facing return to work and job retention efforts is the development of living-wage, career-oriented employment opportunities that help people with psychiatric disabilities to escape from a cycle of poverty and dependence on Social Security disability benefits. Policies

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<sup>3</sup> For further information about SGA and TWP see <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/OACT/COLA/sga.html>.

supporting career-building could include supported employment programs that help workers keep working or return more easily to work after experiencing the onset or recurrence of a psychiatric condition.

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Table 1. Job characteristics and associations with voluntary versus involuntary job separations

Job Characteristic	All Separations N=2,086 (%)	Voluntary Separation N=1,231 (%)	Involuntary Separation N=855 (%)	Chi-square or ANOVA p-value	Multivariate Odds Ratio <sup>a</sup>
Competitive job	65.6	69.6	59.9	<.001	1.93***
Less than minimum wage	13.0	14.2	11.3	.055	1.43
Service job occupation	44.0	46.4	40.6	.011	1.18
Clerical and sales occupation	25.4	23.7	27.8	.041	0.94
Job placement assistance	73.0	70.6	76.5	.003	0.62*
Employer aware of psychiatric disability	56.3	55.0	58.2	.165	0.99
Reasonable accommodation	21.1	23.1	18.3	.009	1.49*
More than half time (>=20 hrs/week)	50.1	50.1	50.1	.977	1.03
Any benefits (health benefits, sick leave)	12.1	13.1	10.7	.093	1.32
Jobs lasting <=60 days (vs longer)	53.0	52.7	53.4	.749	0.97
Job sequence					
First EIDP job	41.8	41.7	41.9		---
Second EIDP job	24.9	23.7	26.5	.221	0.92
Third or later EIDP job	33.3	34.6	21.5		1.19
Average hourly wage, \$ (s.d.)	Mean (s.d.) \$5.77 (\$2.02)	Mean (s.d.) \$5.62 (\$1.76)	Mean (s.d.) \$6.00 (\$2.32)	<.001	0.91*

Source: Employment Intervention Demonstration Program, 1996-2001

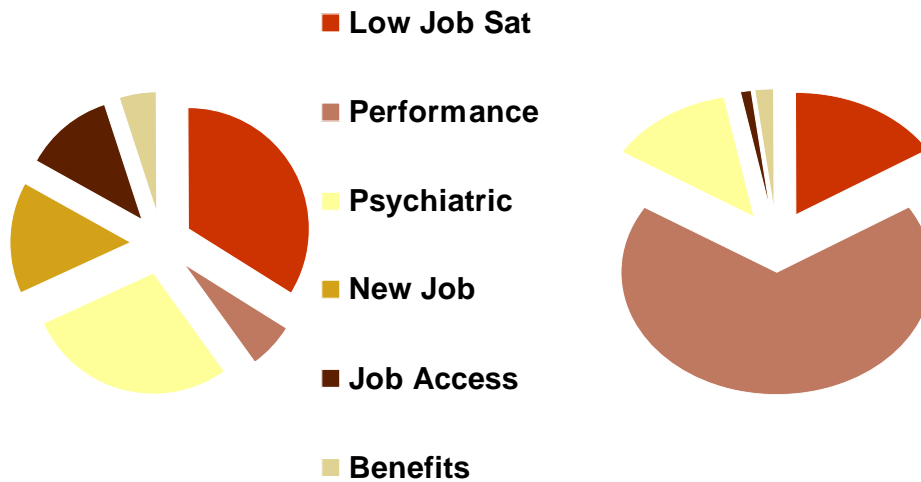
<sup>a</sup> Logistic regression models weighted by number of jobs held by respondent. Multivariate logistic regression model adjusted for geographic region and job holder characteristics including age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, work history, psychiatric diagnosis, co-morbid substance use or other condition, functioning, SSA entitlement status, and receipt of EBP SE.

s.d.= standard deviation

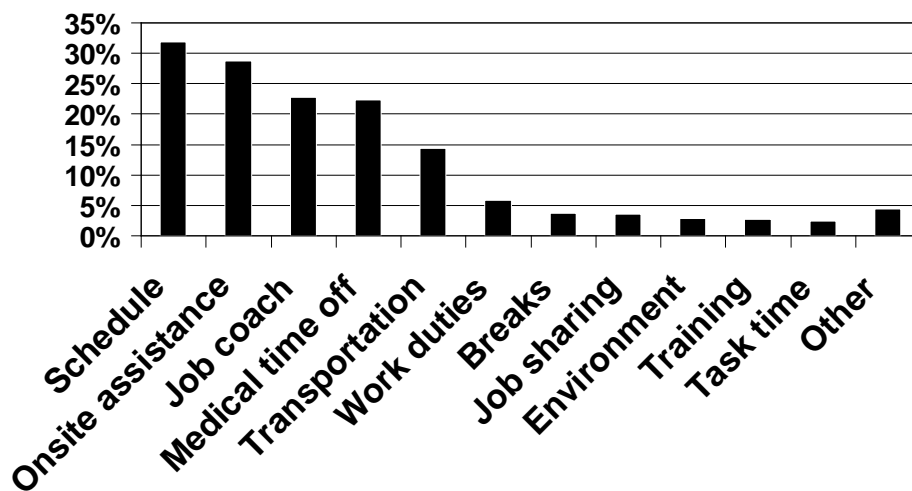
\*\*\*p<.001, \*p<.05,



**Figure 1. Job Separation Reasons**



**Figure 2. Types of Reasonable Accommodations**





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