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## What's the Big Deal?

Young adulthood is a critical time for establishing adult working life, beginning to explore possible career interests, and honing in on particular career trajectories. Youth and Young Adults (Y&YAs) with serious mental health conditions (SMHCs), however, often struggle to pursue and achieve their education and working goals.

#### Did you know?

- Over 50% of students aged 14 years or older with SMHCs never finish high school.<sup>1</sup>
- Y&YA with SMHCs experience longer delays in entering college,<sup>2</sup> and have extremely high college dropout rates.<sup>3</sup>
- Young adults with psychiatric conditions were found to have a 50% employment rate in a study that included individuals that were out of high school for 8 or less years.<sup>2</sup>

Y&YAs with SMHC can be delayed in participating in settings where early career development and exploration activities typically occur. **Delays in early career exploration can have long-lasting effects on** vocational and educational attainment.

#### **Did you know?**

- Adults with mental illness who miss early employment and school opportunities often achieve little or no economic progress.<sup>4</sup>
- Career efforts in young adulthood predict later career success.<sup>5</sup>

**Y&YAs with SMHCs who are parents are a particularly vulnerable** population.

#### Did you know?

- Y&YAs with SMHCs are more likely to become first-time parents at an earlier age than their peers without SMHCs.<sup>6,7,8</sup>
- Young adults with SMHCs have the highest high school dropout rate among individuals with identified general health or mental health challenges, and experience low employment rates, in mostly low-wage, part time positions.<sup>9</sup>
- Young parents with SMHCs are more likely to be living in poverty and dependent on government assistance than those without SMHCs.<sup>10</sup>
- Children of parents with SMHCs are at increased risk of poor psychosocial outcomes,<sup>11</sup> separation from their parents,<sup>12</sup> and subsequently developing mental illness.<sup>13</sup>

# Collecting Histories of Education and Employment Activities from Young Adults with Serious Mental Health Conditions

A growing body of literature has begun to emerge describing the diverse pathways, including the impact of early parenting, that lead to differing levels of vocational success in adulthood among Y&YAs without SMHCs. However, we know little about the early career development activities and pathways of Y&YAs, including young parents, with SMHCs.

#### What do we want to learn from Y&YAs with SMHCs?

This study aims to provide a longitudinal understanding of education and employment activities among Y&YA with SMHCs in order to:

Describe education and employment experiences, specifically:

- Types of education and employment
- □ Kinds of jobs held
- □ Education and employment starts and stops (and reasons why)
- Challenges and successes
- Professional growth or accomplishments over time
- □ How and why career goals change over time

Explore barriers and facilitators to achieving employment and education goals, including the role of:

- Mental illness and stigma
- □ Family, friends, and significant others
- □ Race, class, gender and other sociodemographic factors
- □ Formal services (e.g., treatment, vocational rehabilitation)

Describe the impact of parenting on education and employment experiences and activities, including how:

- Parenting can impact education or employment activities
- Young parents manage childcare
- Mental illness affects parenting

## The importance of using **Participatory Action Research** strategies.

This study is grounded in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework. Y&YAs with SMHCs are involved in all levels of the research, from defining research questions, to developing, testing and refining survey instruments, to data collection, analysis, knowledge translation and dissemination. Study Y&YA with SMHCs are research associates of the UMass Transitions Research and Training Center, at the UMass Systems and Psychosocial Advances Research Center.

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## Who are we talking to?

We aim to recruit 60 Y&YA with SMHCs, including approximately 20 young parents. Participants will be recruited from community mental health and employment agencies in Massachusetts including clubhouses and drop-in centers, Massachusetts-based listservs, websites and social media.

To be eligible participants must:

- □ Be between the ages of 25-30
- □ Have been diagnosed with a SMHC before the age of 22
- ☐ Have a history of either:
  - overnight hospitalization
  - participation in a day treatment program
  - being a client of the MA Department of Mental Health
  - receiving special education services, or needing to take a formal leave of absence from school or work due to their mental health condition
- ☐ Have some post-secondary education or employment experience

#### What are we asking?

Each participant will complete a one-time, 90-minute, semi-structured interview. Interviews will be conducted in person, primarily by PAR staff, at the location of the participant's choice. Interviews will ask about past and current education, training, and employment experiences, successes, and challenges. All participants receive a \$30 gift card for their time.

The cornerstone of the interview guide is a chronological documentation of education and employment experiences. Participants are asked about aspects of their lives and how their experiences affected their education and employment activities.

Areas of focus include:

- □ General and family background
- Mental health and general health
- Major life events
- Parenting and child rearing (if applicable)

## Why is this work important?

Milestones that occur in young adulthood are critical to shaping the pathways that lead to adult life. Experiences of education and early employment are primary among these milestones, and barriers to early success can have repercussions that last across the lifespan. This research will help better understand the education and employment experiences of Y&YA with SMHCs, and will identify malleable factors that can be potential targets for future interventions. This research will also shine a light on the particular challenges and needs of Y&YA with SMHCs who are also parents, again to inform support strategies and interventions.













## What Y&YA are saying.

Data collection began in February 2016. These interview quotes suggest there is much to learn about the experiences of school and work for Y&YA, which can help inform Y&YA supports and resources moving forward.

*"It was actually really helpful that by my junior and senior year, I actually* took part in a lot of activities...And when I was sort of having a flareup, or my emotions were getting the better of me, it was great to have a distraction that made me feel really good about myself."

– Kristle, age 27

*"Structure is very good for me. When I fall out of my routine and"* structure, that is when I tend to start to get very depressed and panicky. *My supervisor is really good about trying to figure out why I'm anxious...* what task or meeting I have coming up that day that is going to make me anxious and really saying, "Alright, can you really try to get through that meeting and then take the rest of the day off to decompress?" So they're really good at pushing me but in a supportive way."



– Chandra, age 28

"I always thought that with my depression that I could never work because I would always exile myself and be in a little shell of my own. But *I learned from the work experience that it's not always going to be like* that, that I can break (out of) my own shell and socialize and do work." – Mark, age 29

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