# Competitive Employment Outcomes Among Veterans in VHA Therapeutic and Supported Employment Services Programs

## Article Metadata

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## Background

### Background Information  
  
#### Research Problem  
The research problem addressed in this study is the high rate of unemployment and social marginalization experienced by individuals with severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI). Despite advances in mental health treatment, many people with SPMI struggle to attain their vocational goals, leading to lifelong unemployment and social isolation. This issue is particularly salient in Australia, where effective mental health treatment alone does not suffice for achieving vocational rehabilitation.  
  
#### Previous Research and Existing Knowledge Gaps  
Previous research has established that the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) approach is an evidence-based form of supported employment that has shown effectiveness in improving competitive employment outcomes for people with SPMI. However, there are knowledge gaps regarding the generalizability of this approach outside the USA and its implementation within existing service systems in Australia.  
  
One previous Australian randomized controlled trial demonstrated the efficacy of IPS for young people experiencing a first episode of psychosis. This study aims to build on this evidence by assessing the effectiveness of IPS when implemented for adult consumers of public mental health services in Australia, utilizing existing service systems.  
  
#### Theoretical Framework or Model  
The theoretical framework underpinning this research is the IPS model, which emphasizes individualized job development and support tailored to each person's needs. This model has been shown to be more effective than traditional vocational rehabilitation approaches, which often rely on segregated work settings and pre-vocational training.  
  
#### Significance and Rationale for the Study  
The significance of this study lies in its potential to address a critical gap in mental health services in Australia. By demonstrating the effectiveness of IPS-supported employment within existing service systems, this research could lead to broader implementation of evidence-based vocational rehabilitation practices. This would not only improve employment outcomes for people with SPMI but also contribute to their social and economic integration, reducing the burden on public mental health services.  
  
The rationale for conducting this study is multifold:  
1. \*\*Addressing a Public Health Need\*\*: The high rates of unemployment among individuals with SPMI represent a significant public health issue.  
2. \*\*Evidence-Based Practice\*\*: There is a need to translate evidence-based practices from controlled settings into real-world applications within existing service systems.  
3. \*\*Policy and Service Improvement\*\*: Findings from this study could inform policy decisions and service improvements, leading to better outcomes for people with SPMI.  
  
In summary, the study aims to bridge the gap between research evidence and practical application, ultimately improving the lives of individuals with severe mental illness through effective vocational rehabilitation.

## Methods

### Methodology Summary  
  
#### Study Design  
The study employed a multi-site randomized controlled trial (RCT) design, involving four sites: Brisbane (two sites), Townsville, and Cairns. The RCT included 208 participants, with randomization ensuring that each participant had an equal chance of being assigned to either the intervention or control group.  
  
#### Population and Sampling  
The study population consisted of adults with severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI), including conditions such as schizophrenia and psychosis. Demographic details were not explicitly provided in the summary but can be inferred from the context, suggesting a diverse age range and likely a mix of genders given the nature of SPMI.  
  
#### Intervention Description  
The intervention was an Individual Placement and Support (IPS) supported employment service hosted by community mental health teams. This approach is designed to assist individuals with SPMI in securing competitive employment through personalized job development, integration of mental health treatment, and ongoing support. The IPS program included:  
- \*\*Type\*\*: Supported employment.  
- \*\*Duration\*\*: Not explicitly stated but implied to be long-term.  
- \*\*Components\*\*: Job development, vocational rehabilitation, and integration with mental health services.  
- \*\*Implementation\*\*: Co-location of disability employment services within mental health service premises.  
  
#### Control or Comparison Groups  
The control condition involved referral to other disability employment services in the local area by mental health teams. This group received standard care without the specialized IPS support.  
  
#### Outcome Measures  
- \*\*Primary Outcome Measure\*\*: Employment commencement.  
- \*\*Secondary Outcome Measures\*\*: Job duration, hours worked, and job diversity.  
  
#### Data Collection Procedures  
Data collection procedures were not explicitly detailed but can be inferred to include baseline interviews and follow-up assessments at 12 months. The high attrition rate (28.4%) suggests challenges in maintaining participant engagement throughout the study period.  
  
#### Statistical Analysis Methods  
Statistical analysis methods were not explicitly described, but it is implied that they included comparisons of employment outcomes between the intervention and control groups. Likely methods include chi-square tests for categorical outcomes and t-tests or ANOVA for continuous variables.  
  
### Summary  
The study aimed to assess the effectiveness of an evidence-based supported employment program (IPS) within existing mental health service systems in Australia. The RCT design involved 208 participants with SPMI, randomized across four sites. The IPS intervention was delivered by community mental health teams, while the control group received standard disability employment services. Primary outcomes focused on employment commencement, with secondary measures assessing job duration and diversity. Despite high attrition rates, the results supported previous international findings that IPS is more effective than non-integrated supported employment, though with a reduced effect size compared to U.S. trials. This suggests that while IPS can be successfully implemented in Australia, it may face challenges related to service integration and fidelity to evidence-based practices.

## Results

### Summary of Key Results  
  
#### Primary Outcome Results  
The study compared the effectiveness of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) intervention versus control conditions on employment outcomes for individuals with mental health disorders.  
  
- \*\*Employment Rates\*\*: At 12 months, 42.5% of participants in the IPS intervention group obtained competitive employment compared to 17.6% in the control group.  
- \*\*Odds Ratio\*\*: Participants receiving IPS had nearly 3.5 times greater odds (CI = 1.70–7.05) of commencing competitive employment than controls.  
  
#### Secondary Outcome Results  
Secondary outcomes included mental health improvements and quality of life, though specific data on these were not provided in the excerpt.  
  
- \*\*Vocational Benefits\*\*: Those in the intervention group had 2.7 times greater odds (CI = 1.41–5.12) of obtaining a vocational benefit compared to controls (48.1% vs. 25.7%).  
  
#### Subgroup Analyses  
Subgroup analyses were not explicitly mentioned, but regional differences were noted:  
  
- \*\*West Moreton\*\*: In this region, the proportion commencing competitive employment increased to 47.6% in the intervention condition versus 21.7% in the control service (OR: 3.27, 95% CI: 1.02–10.45).  
  
#### Statistical Significance and Effect Sizes  
- \*\*Statistical Significance\*\*: The differences in employment rates were statistically significant.  
- \*\*Effect Size\*\*: The odds ratios indicated a substantial effect size for both competitive employment (OR = 3.5) and vocational benefits (OR = 2.7).  
  
#### Unexpected or Negative Findings  
- \*\*Employment Duration and Hours\*\*: There was no significant difference in the duration of employment or hours worked between intervention and control groups.  
- \*\*Hourly Wage\*\*: Although participants in the intervention group appeared to earn a higher hourly wage ($AUS18.5 per hour vs. $AUS16.0 per hour), this difference was not statistically significant.  
  
### Interpretation  
  
The study demonstrates that IPS can be effectively implemented within existing mental health services in Australia, leading to significantly better employment outcomes compared to standard referral practices. However, the results also highlight the need for more integrated and formal arrangements between mental health services and disability employment providers to achieve outcomes comparable to those seen in controlled trials elsewhere.  
  
### Conclusion  
  
The findings suggest that IPS is a viable and effective intervention for improving employment outcomes for individuals with mental health disorders. Future implementations should focus on enhancing integration and formal relationships between service providers to maximize benefits.

## Discussion

### Summary of Discussion Section  
  
#### Main Findings  
The authors found that the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) intervention significantly improved employment outcomes compared to control services. By 12 months, 42.5% of participants in the IPS condition commenced competitive employment, nearly 3.5 times greater odds than those in the control group. Additionally, participants in the IPS condition had 2.7 times greater odds of obtaining a vocational benefit.  
  
#### Relation to Previous Research  
The findings align with previous research showing the effectiveness of IPS interventions but also highlight that implementation can vary. The results are less robust compared to controlled trials in the USA and regional Australia, where higher rates of employment commencement were reported. However, they exceed outcomes from multi-site trials in the UK, indicating a mixed landscape of effectiveness.  
  
#### Implications for Practice or Policy  
The study suggests that IPS can be successfully implemented within existing mental health services, provided there is adequate support and integration with disability employment services. This has implications for policy, suggesting that community mental health services should adopt evidence-based supported employment programs like IPS to enhance outcomes for people with mental health disorders.  
  
#### Limitations of the Study  
The study acknowledges several limitations, including contamination from participants switching conditions and early attrition. The exclusion of 28 participants who switched from control to intervention conditions could have influenced results. Additionally, the trial did not match the strength of combined results reported in other studies, indicating potential areas for improvement.  
  
#### Suggestions for Future Research  
Future research should focus on addressing contamination issues by ensuring clear separation between intervention and control groups. Longer follow-up periods and larger sample sizes could provide more robust data. Researchers should also explore ways to enhance the effectiveness of IPS implementation, particularly in contexts where results have been less than optimal.  
  
In summary, while the study demonstrates the potential of IPS interventions for improving employment outcomes, it also underscores the need for careful implementation and further research to maximize benefits.

## Conclusions

The authors conclude that the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) approach, an evidence-based supported employment program, is more effective than non-integrated supported employment services for adults with severe and persistent mental illness in Australia. At 12 months, participants in the IPS condition had 2.4 times greater odds of starting a job compared to those in the control condition. However, the effect size was smaller than previously reported in U.S. trials.  
  
The main takeaway is that IPS can be successfully implemented in Australia using existing service systems, but with some loss of effectiveness. The findings highlight the importance of integrating employment support within mental health services to improve vocational outcomes for people with severe mental illness.  
  
Recommendations for implementation include adopting the IPS model and ensuring integration with mental health services. Despite higher-than-expected attrition rates, the results underscore the significance of supported employment interventions in reducing unemployment among individuals with severe mental illness, a critical area for reform in Australia's mental health landscape.

## Critical Synthesis

### Critical Synthesis of the Study on Supported Employment for People with Mental Health Disorders  
  
#### Assessment of Study Quality  
The study by Waghorn et al. presents a robust methodological framework with several strengths and weaknesses. The use of a multi-site randomized controlled trial (RCT) design is a significant strength, as it enhances the internal validity of the findings. The inclusion of multiple sites (Brisbane, Townsville, and Cairns) increases generalizability to different regions within Australia. However, the study also faces challenges with attrition rates, which are higher than expected. This high dropout rate (28.4%) could introduce bias and reduce the reliability of the results.  
  
#### Significance to the Field  
The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the evidence base supporting the effectiveness of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) employment interventions for people with severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI). The findings align with previous international research, demonstrating that IPS is more effective than non-integrated supported employment services. This study is particularly valuable because it extends the generalizability of IPS to Australian contexts, showing that this intervention can be successfully implemented in different settings.  
  
#### Comparison to Other Approaches  
Compared to other approaches in the literature, IPS stands out as a highly specialized and effective form of vocational rehabilitation. Unlike traditional employment services, which often rely on referral systems, IPS integrates mental health treatment with job support, providing tailored assistance that aligns with individual needs. This integrated approach has been shown to be more impactful than conventional methods, which typically do not address the specific challenges faced by people with SPMI.  
  
#### Practical Implications for Employment Support Services  
The practical implications of this study are substantial for employment support services. The findings underscore the need for integrated, specialized interventions like IPS. For service providers, this means investing in training and resources to deliver IPS effectively. Policymakers should consider mandating evidence-based practices such as IPS to improve vocational outcomes for people with SPMI. Additionally, addressing high attrition rates through better engagement strategies could enhance the effectiveness of future programs.  
  
#### Generalizability of Findings  
The generalizability of these findings to different populations or settings is somewhat limited by the study's design and context. While the multi-site approach within Australia enhances external validity, the results may not fully translate to other countries with different healthcare systems and cultural contexts. Future research should aim to replicate this study in diverse international settings to confirm its applicability on a global scale.  
  
In conclusion, Waghorn et al.'s study provides compelling evidence for the effectiveness of IPS-supported employment for people with SPMI in Australia. Despite methodological challenges such as high attrition rates, the findings support the integration of specialized vocational rehabilitation services within mental health care systems. This research has significant implications for practice and policy, highlighting the need for tailored, integrated approaches to improve employment outcomes for individuals with severe mental illness.