# Program evaluation of a community organization offering supported employment services for adults with autism

## Article Metadata

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## Background

### Background Information  
  
#### Research Problem  
The research problem addressed in this study is the high unemployment rate among individuals who have experienced homelessness and have a mental illness. Despite their desire for regular work, these individuals face significant obstacles to returning to employment, including those stemming from simultaneous homelessness and mental illness. The study focuses on determining whether Individual Placement and Support (IPS), an evidence-based supported employment model, can improve competitive employment outcomes for people with mental illnesses who have recently been housed through a scattered-site Housing First program.  
  
#### Previous Research and Existing Knowledge Gaps  
Previous research has established that IPS is the most effective supported employment model for individuals with mental illness to obtain and maintain competitive employment. However, there are gaps in knowledge regarding the effectiveness of IPS specifically for people who have experienced homelessness. While some studies have shown modest positive results from non-IPS employment programs for recently homeless individuals, there has been limited experimental evidence on the efficacy of IPS within this population.  
  
#### Theoretical Framework or Model  
The study is grounded in the theoretical framework of supported employment, particularly the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model. This model emphasizes individualized job development, rapid placement into competitive jobs, and continuous support to maintain employment. The effectiveness of IPS has been well-documented in general populations with mental illness but had not been tested experimentally among people recently housed through a scattered-site Housing First program.  
  
#### Significance and Rationale for the Study  
The significance of this study lies in addressing a critical gap in knowledge about effective interventions for a vulnerable population. By conducting a randomized controlled trial, the researchers aim to provide empirical evidence on whether IPS can enhance employment outcomes for individuals with mental illness who have recently been housed through a Housing First program. This is particularly important given the high unemployment rates and barriers faced by this group. The study also seeks to evaluate participant satisfaction with vocational services, highlighting the practical implications of improving service delivery and outcomes for people with mental health disorders.  
  
This background information sets the stage for understanding the importance and context of the study, focusing on the need to improve employment outcomes through evidence-based interventions like IPS for individuals who have experienced homelessness and have a mental illness.

## Methods

### Methodology Summary  
  
#### Study Design  
The study is a Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) designed to compare the effectiveness of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) with usual vocational services among individuals who have recently been homeless and have mental health disorders.  
  
#### Population and Sampling  
- \*\*Population\*\*: The study included 90 participants who were part of the Montreal site of the At Home/Chez Soi study, specifically those classified as having moderate needs and assigned to a scattered-site Housing First program.  
- \*\*Mental Health Condition\*\*: Participants had various mental illnesses such as major depression, mania or hypomania, post-traumatic stress disorder, panic disorder, mood disorders with psychotic features, and psychotic disorders.  
- \*\*Demographic Details\*\*: All participants were aged 18 years or older and had experienced homelessness, defined as sleeping in street locations or having precarious housing.  
  
#### Intervention Description  
- \*\*Type\*\*: Individual Placement and Support (IPS).  
- \*\*Duration\*\*: The intervention was implemented over an 8-month follow-up period.  
- \*\*Components\*\*:  
 - \*\*IPS Group\*\*: Participants received high-fidelity IPS, which included employment specialists trained to support clients in obtaining competitive employment. These specialists worked closely with clinical teams.  
 - \*\*Control Group\*\*: Participants had access to usual vocational services, including training and placement in jobs reserved for people receiving social assistance or disability payments.  
  
#### Control or Comparison Groups  
- \*\*IPS Group\*\*: Received high-fidelity IPS intervention.  
- \*\*Control Group\*\*: Received usual vocational services, including some support from case managers and community-based services.  
  
#### Outcome Measures  
- \*\*Primary Outcome\*\*: Obtaining competitive employment.  
- \*\*Secondary Outcomes\*\*: Satisfaction with services, other employment-related outcomes.  
  
#### Data Collection Procedures  
Participants were recruited through repeated invitations during the baseline, 6-month, and up to the 12-month interviews of the parent study. Recruitment was stratified by Intensive Case Management (ICM) team and past work experience. All participants provided informed consent, and the study was approved by the ethics review board of the Douglas Mental Health University Institute.  
  
#### Statistical Analysis Methods  
- \*\*Statistical Model\*\*: Regression models estimated via Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE).  
- \*\*Outcome Comparison\*\*: Employment outcomes were compared between the IPS group and the control group over an 8-month follow-up period.  
- \*\*Significance Testing\*\*: Adjusted odds ratios were calculated to determine the likelihood of obtaining competitive employment in the IPS group compared to the control group.  
  
### Summary  
The study is a well-designed RCT that aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of IPS for individuals with mental health disorders who had recently been homeless and were part of a Housing First program. The intervention was implemented with high fidelity, and data collection procedures ensured robust recruitment and follow-up. Statistical analysis using regression models via GEE provided insights into the impact of IPS on employment outcomes, showing modest but significant benefits in terms of competitive employment and service satisfaction for participants receiving IPS.

## Results

### Summary of Key Results from the Study  
  
#### Primary Outcome Results  
The primary outcome of this study focused on employment rates and job retention among participants with mental health disorders who were recently homeless and received Individualized Placement and Support (IPS) services or usual vocational services.  
  
- \*\*Employment Rates\*\*: Participants receiving IPS during periods of good fidelity were more than twice as likely to obtain competitive employment compared to those receiving usual services. The odds ratio for obtaining employment was 2.509, with a p-value of 0.011.  
- \*\*Job Retention and Hours Worked\*\*: There were no significant differences in job tenure, hours worked per week, or wages between the IPS group and the control group.  
  
#### Secondary Outcome Results  
Secondary outcomes included mental health improvements and quality of life measures, though these are not explicitly detailed in the provided text. However, satisfaction with vocational support was measured:  
  
- \*\*Service Satisfaction\*\*: Participants in the IPS group reported significantly higher satisfaction with the vocational support they received compared to the control group. The mean total score on the Service Satisfaction Scale for the IPS group was 41 (SD 8) versus 34 (SD 12) for the control group, with a p-value of <0.001.  
  
#### Subgroup Analyses  
Subgroup analyses were conducted based on fidelity levels:  
  
- \*\*Good Fidelity Period\*\*: During periods of good fidelity, IPS participants had significantly better employment outcomes.  
- \*\*Fair and Poor Fidelity Periods\*\*: There were no significant differences in employment outcomes during periods of fair or poor fidelity.  
  
#### Statistical Significance and Effect Sizes  
The study found that the odds ratio for obtaining employment was 2.509 (p = 0.011, 95% CI 1.437–5.106) during periods of good fidelity. This indicates a statistically significant effect size favoring IPS.  
  
#### Unexpected or Negative Findings  
- \*\*Non-significant Results\*\*: Despite the positive findings related to employment rates during periods of good fidelity, there were no significant differences in job tenure, hours worked per week, or wages between groups.  
- \*\*Fidelity Impact\*\*: The study highlights that the impact of IPS on employment outcomes was contingent on the fidelity level. During periods of poor fidelity, the results were not significantly different from usual services.  
  
### Interpretation  
The study demonstrates that IPS services can significantly improve employment rates for people with mental health disorders when implemented with good fidelity. However, the benefits are contingent on maintaining high levels of fidelity in service delivery. This underscores the importance of adhering to evidence-based practices in vocational support programs for this population. Additionally, while satisfaction with services was higher among IPS participants, other vocational outcomes did not show significant improvements, suggesting that more work is needed to fully realize the benefits of IPS across all dimensions.  
  
### Conclusion  
This randomized trial provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of IPS for recently homeless individuals with mental health disorders. The findings emphasize the critical role of fidelity in achieving positive employment outcomes and highlight the need for continued research to enhance the impact of such interventions on broader vocational and quality-of-life measures.

## Discussion

### Summary of Discussion Section  
  
#### Main Findings  
The authors found that participants receiving Individual Placement and Support (IPS) services during periods of good fidelity were more than twice as likely to obtain competitive employment compared to those receiving usual services. This finding was significant when controlling for confounders, indicating the positive impact of IPS on employment outcomes.  
  
#### Relation to Previous Research  
The results align with previous studies that highlight the effectiveness of IPS models, particularly in achieving better employment outcomes for individuals with mental health disorders (Bond et al., 2012; Latimer et al., 2006). However, the study's findings are more similar to those targeting homeless populations specifically, suggesting that fidelity to the IPS model is crucial for successful outcomes.  
  
#### Implications for Practice or Policy  
The study underscores the importance of high-fidelity implementation of evidence-based supported employment programs like IPS. Policymakers and practitioners should ensure that vocational support services adhere closely to proven models to maximize their effectiveness in helping individuals with mental health disorders achieve competitive employment.  
  
#### Limitations of the Study  
Several limitations are noted:  
1. \*\*Fidelity Assessment\*\*: Fidelity was assessed only twice, which may not capture the full range of fidelity levels over time.  
2. \*\*Learning Effects\*\*: Clinical teams might have learned from the study, potentially influencing job acquisition rates.  
3. \*\*Sample Size\*\*: The relatively small sample size reduces statistical power.  
4. \*\*Confounders\*\*: Significant differences in job acquisition rates only emerged after restricting the observation period to periods of good fidelity and adjusting for confounders.  
  
#### Suggestions for Future Research  
Future research should:  
1. \*\*Longer Follow-Up Periods\*\*: Extend follow-up durations to better understand long-term employment outcomes.  
2. \*\*More Frequent Fidelity Assessments\*\*: Conduct more frequent assessments of fidelity to capture variations over time.  
3. \*\*Larger Sample Sizes\*\*: Increase sample sizes to enhance statistical power and generalizability.  
4. \*\*Qualitative Insights\*\*: Incorporate qualitative data to better understand motivational factors and obstacles faced by participants.  
  
In summary, the study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of IPS for individuals with mental health disorders, particularly when implemented with high fidelity. Future research should address the identified limitations to build on these findings and enhance the impact of supported employment interventions.

## Conclusions

### Summary of Authors' Conclusions  
  
\*\*Main Takeaway Messages:\*\*  
The study found that Individual Placement and Support (IPS), an evidence-based supported employment model, was modestly effective in helping individuals with mental illnesses who had recently been homeless to achieve competitive employment. Participants in the IPS group had higher odds of obtaining competitive employment compared to those receiving usual services. Additionally, satisfaction with services was greater among those receiving IPS.  
  
\*\*Recommendations for Implementation:\*\*  
The authors recommend integrating IPS into scattered-site Housing First programs as a useful adjunct to support individuals with mental illnesses who have experienced homelessness. This approach can enhance both employment outcomes and service satisfaction, addressing the significant barriers these individuals face in returning to work.  
  
\*\*Significance of Findings:\*\*  
This study is significant because it provides empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of IPS for people with mental illness who are recently housed after experiencing homelessness. The findings highlight the potential benefits of tailored employment interventions within housing programs, contributing to the broader field by demonstrating that supported employment models can be effective even in challenging populations.

## Critical Synthesis

### Critical Synthesis of the Study on Supported Employment for People Recently Homeless and with Mental Illness  
  
#### Assessment of Study Quality  
The study by Poremski et al. (2015) presents a randomized controlled trial (RCT) investigating the effectiveness of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) for individuals who have recently been homeless and have mental health disorders. The methodological strengths include the use of an RCT design, which is considered the gold standard for clinical trials, ensuring that participants were randomly assigned to either IPS or usual services. This randomization helps mitigate selection bias and enhances the internal validity of the findings.  
  
However, several weaknesses are notable. The sample size is relatively small (90 participants), which limits the statistical power and generalizability of the results. Additionally, the follow-up duration was extended beyond the initial 8-month period, leading to a non-significant odds ratio for IPS when including fidelity as a covariate. This suggests that the intervention's effectiveness may be context-dependent and influenced by implementation quality.  
  
#### Significance to the Field  
This study is significant because it is one of the first RCTs to test IPS within a scattered-site Housing First program, specifically targeting individuals who have recently been homeless and have mental health disorders. The findings that participants receiving IPS were more likely to obtain competitive employment and expressed greater satisfaction with their services compared to those receiving usual services are valuable contributions to the field.  
  
#### Comparison to Other Approaches  
IPS has been well-documented as an effective supported employment model for people with mental illness (Bond & Drake, 2012; Marshall et al., 2014). This study reinforces IPS's effectiveness but also highlights the challenges of implementing it within a Housing First context. Other studies have shown similar positive outcomes for IPS in different settings, suggesting that while IPS is effective, its implementation and fidelity are crucial factors.  
  
#### Practical Implications for Employment Support Services  
The study underscores the importance of high-fidelity implementation of evidence-based interventions like IPS. For employment support services, this implies the need for rigorous training and supervision to ensure that practitioners deliver the intervention as intended. Additionally, integrating supported employment services within Housing First programs could enhance outcomes for individuals who have recently been homeless.  
  
#### Generalizability of Findings  
The findings may not be generalizable to different populations or settings due to the study's specific context and sample size. However, the positive results for IPS suggest that similar interventions could benefit other populations with mental health disorders, particularly those experiencing homelessness. Further research with larger samples and diverse populations is needed to confirm these findings.  
  
In conclusion, Poremski et al.'s study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of IPS within a Housing First program but also highlights the challenges in achieving high-fidelity implementation. Future research should focus on larger, more diverse samples and ensure rigorous fidelity assessments to build upon these promising results.