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Vocational rehabilitation service usage and outcomes for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder



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ABSTRACT

Background: In the pursuit of improving employment outcomes for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), understanding how participants are using Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), and which services result in competitive integrated employment is of great interest to advocates, families, professionals, and policy makers. The primary objective of this study was to examine the relationships between participant characteristics, service delivery, and employment outcomes for individuals with ASD in state VR programs.

Method: The Rehabilitation Services Administration's Case Service Report (RSA-911) database for fiscal year 2013 was examined using a binary logistic regression analysis to explore ASD characteristics and service variables.

Results: Results indicate that ASD characteristics, defined as a source of impairment by VR, had predictive capacity for administrative VR services participants received (e.g. assessment and vocational rehabilitation counseling and guidance (VRCG)), but not for job-related services (e.g. job search, job placement, and on-the-job supports). In addition, job-related VR services were more likely to be associated with integrated employment at closure as compared to administrative VR services. In some cases, additional variables related to gender, race, and state system decreased the likelihood of a VR recipient receiving specific services or achieving integrated employment.

Conclusion: Discussion includes how awareness of service access and equity can assist in improving the quality and outcomes of VR services.

1. Introduction and background

Having a job plays a central role in an individual's personal, social, and economic identity. Employment is a central component of community living and often a necessary component for affordable housing, accessing healthcare, utilizing transportation, and maintaining and developing relationships with others. Many individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are not employed, and have not experienced the benefits of having a job. Individuals with ASD are employed at lower rates than other individuals with disabilities (Hendricks, 2010; Roux, Rast, Anderson, & Shattuck, 2016; Shattuck et al., 2012). Despite more than 30 years of investment in promoting and supporting employment for individuals with disabilities, little movement has been seen in the rates of labor force participation and integrated employment in the community for individuals with disabilities, including people with ASD (Butterworth, Winsor et al., 2015; Nicholas, Attridge, Zwaigenbaum, & Clarke, 2014). Renewed interest and investment from multiple state and federal agencies is ever present and stems from various legislative, litigation, policy and advocacy efforts. These include but are not limited to: Workforce Innovations and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Employment First policies and advocacy, Olmstead

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litigation and settlement agreements, and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid's (CMS) "final rule" for home and community based services (HCBS). These efforts have placed the promotion of competitive integrated employment as a high priority regarding disability services and long term services so that support for the employment and career aspirations and potential of all individuals with disabilities can be realized ([Advisory Committee on Increasing Competitive Integrated Employment for Individuals with Disabilities \[ACICIEID\], 2016](#); [Novak, 2015](#)). State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs play an important role in both the access and quality of employment service and supports to individuals with ASD. The ability to access VR services that lead to employment outcomes is a critical pathway for individuals with ASD in VR programs. The opportunity to have a job, and experience the social and economic benefits of work is a core feature of adulthood in western society, and is just as valuable for individuals with ASD, as it is for individuals without a disability.

It is estimated that there are approximately 3.5 million individuals with ASD in the United States ([Buescher, Cidav, Knapp, & Mandell, 2014](#)), and the CDC reports ASD prevalence at 1 in 68 children ([Baio, 2014](#); [CDC, 2016](#); [Wingate et al., 2014](#)). *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* (2013) defines ASD as a condition with "persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts ... and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities" (p. 27). Manifestations of ASD are unique to the individual, therefore understanding what types of employment supports are most beneficial can be challenging. Regardless of an ASD diagnosis, many individuals and their families express the desire to be employed ([Butterworth, Winsor et al., 2015](#); [Human Services Research Institute, 2014](#); [Morisse, Vandemaele, Claes, Claes, & Vandeveldel, 2013](#)).

In current policy and practice environments, it is necessary to highlight some of the significant challenges and barriers individuals with ASD encounter when they pursue and engage in employment. Individuals with ASD experience high rates of unemployment and low rates of workforce participation ([Burgess & Cimera, 2014](#); [Hendricks, 2010](#)) and they have some of the lowest employment and post-secondary education rates compared to other disability groups ([Cimera, Burgess, & Wiley, 2013](#); [Nicholas et al., 2014](#); [Wilczynski, Trammell, & Clarke, 2013](#)). Individuals with ASD have varied social, communication, and behavioral experiences. The social, communication, and behavioral challenges experienced by people with ASD may result in other perceiving them as being challenging to employ ([Hendricks, 2010](#); [Westbrook, Nye, Fong, Wan, Cortopassi, & Martin, 2012](#)). However, individuals with ASD can be successfully employed in a variety jobs and settings ([Baldwin, Costley, & Warren, 2014](#); [Hillier et al., 2007](#); [Schall et al., 2015](#); [Wehman et al., 2012](#); [Wehman et al., 2014](#)). Across the United States and worldwide individuals with ASD are working in professional, service, manufacturing, and technology fields ([Autism Speaks, 2015](#)). There are also many small business owners and entrepreneurs who have ASD nationwide.

Unique and variable characteristics of ASD influence the types and intensity of employment supports and therefore, this support is likely to be highly individualized. Certain social, communication, and behavioral characteristics can make it difficult to secure and maintain employment using typical strategies utilized individuals without disabilities. For example, individuals with social challenges may benefit from support around the more social aspects of job interviewing or interacting with coworkers, whereas individuals with behavioral challenges may benefit from assistive technology, social cues, environmental modifications, or other customized supports. Although the body of research on individuals with ASD continues to grow, existing employment intervention studies often focus on specific subgroups within the broader ASD population or using specific support strategies. [Hillier et al. \(2007\)](#) studied individuals with ASD between 16 and 36 years old, with IQ scores ranging from 95 to 133, in specialized ASD employment programs. Furthermore, [Bennett, Ramasamy, and Honsberger \(2013\)](#) evaluated the effectiveness of covert audio coaching with young adults, ages 13–22 with ASD. In addition, [Burke, Andersen, Bowen, Howard, and Allen \(2010\)](#) explored behavioral skills training and a performance cue system (PCS) intervention using an iPhone for young adults with ASD to complete assigned job tasks. Lastly, [Kellems and Morningstar \(2012\)](#) and [Allen, Wallace, Renes, Bowen, and Burke \(2010\)](#) utilized video modeling techniques to teach students with ASD new vocational tasks across different work environments. The variability in ASD and support needs can make it exceedingly challenging to rigorously evaluate specific employment services or interventions in such a heterogeneous population. Systematic reviews examining employment interventions for both youth ([Westbrook et al., 2012](#)), and adults ([Taylor et al., 2012](#)) with ASD both concluded that the evidence for what works with individuals with ASD is limited, and that the body of current evidence exhibits a number of shortcomings including: the use of convenience sampling, a focus on young adults or those with higher IQs, utilization of segregated settings for testing, and placements in "stereotypical" job for individuals with disabilities. The exploration of the diversity of needs for employment supports based upon the core features of ASD (social, communication, and behavioral) has not be adequately examined in the literature.

State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs are one the largest providers of employment services and supports for individuals with disabilities, including people with ASD. State VR programs served nearly 600,000 individuals in fiscal year 2013 (FY 2013), and a growing number of individuals with ASD are seeking employment support from VR ([Burgess & Cimera, 2014](#); [GAO, 2012](#); [Roux et al., 2016](#)). Studying state VR programs can provide insight into the types of services and supports that produce the best outcomes for individuals with ASD. VR programs seek to assist individuals with disabilities to experience self-sufficiency and independence through employment ([Roux et al., 2016](#); [United States Department of Education, 2016](#)). Yet many VR programs struggle to achieve positive employment outcomes for individuals with ASD. A number of studies report that despite being one of the most expensive populations to serve, only approximately 60% of individuals leave with a job ([Burgess & Cimera, 2014](#); [Cimera & Burgess, 2011](#); [Cimera & Cowan, 2009](#); [Green, 2006](#); [Roux et al., 2016](#); [Shaller & Yang, 2005](#)).

State VR program data provides an opportunity to look across the ASD population at which services utilized, and which outcomes are achieved within a federally directed, state implemented employment program. Looking within the services provided by state VR programs reveals there are differences in the services received by individuals with ASD. [Migliore, Timmons, Butterworth, and Lugas \(2012\)](#) explored predictors of employment and post-secondary education in youth with ASD, and found that job placement services

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