Pursuing Employment: A longitudinal qualitative study of Housing First participants

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Objective:

The key objective was to identify and specify:

- How participants perceive and process their experiences with job search, application, and hiring—including barriers and facilitators to employment.

The ultimate goal is to use the results to improve IPS services provided to formerly homeless adults with psychiatric diagnoses.

Methods:

Research was conducted at *Pathways to Housing,* the originator of the Housing First model. Pathways to Housing New York currently serves over 700 adults.

Participants—all of whom were formerly homeless adults, 18 years of age or older, who had a psychiatric diagnosis—were recruited through the agency's Individual Placement and Support (IPS) initiative, in which employment services were provided by a team of three employment specialists (including two peers), a job developer, and a supervising director.

Key Events

Over the study period, participants were interviewed each time they experienced a:

- Job interview
- Job offer
- 1-month placement
- Job loss (any reason)

No Key Events

Comparison groups

A: Experienced no key events, remained engaged in the program

B: Experienced no key events, stopped participating in program

Interviews averaged 25-30 minutes each and were transcribed verbatim, coded by hand, then entered into Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software. Quotations associated with the most frequently occurring codes were examined across groups, guided by grounded theory. All research practices and protocols were approved by the Pathways to Housing and the City University of New York Institutional Review Boards.

Sample Demographics (n = 26)				
	Key Events (n and % of KEs)		No Key Events (n and % of NKEs)	
Gender				
Male	16	80%	5	83.3%
Female	3	15%	1	16.7%
Transgender	1	5%	0	0%
Race/Ethnicity				
Black/African American	14	70%	3	50%
White/Euro-American	3	15%	1	16.7%
Hispanic/Latino	1	5%	1	16.7%
Other	2	10%	1	16.7%
Age				
Age (Range and mean)	20-63 (Mean 45)		29-65 (Mean 46)	

Results & Discussion		
Finding	Sample Quote(s)	Implications for Policy & Practice
"I'll just be getting by": Risking basic needs to pursue goals. Participants carefully weighed the risk of losing SSI/DI and thus the potential of being unable to meet basic needs against the financial opportunity that work provides to pursue higher-order goals, in line with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.[5] The emphasis many participants placed on contributing to family was greater than literature has suggested and ties in with Maslow's hierarchy, which notes the importance of belonging and being loved, but also of feeling worthwhile and valued.	"Like, I'm on a fixed income and I don't mind being there [on the SSI rolls] cause it's…I know that's coming in and everything else is in place, like I have everything in a row." I just want a steady job with decent income…I want to see what it's like to be financially independent or financially stable. You know, I'm sick of struggling. It'd be nice to go in somewhere nice and just pick something by choice, not by calculating and everything else.	Guaranteeing basic necessities may encourage growth, particularly for those with histories of homelessness. Enacting policies that minimize the likelihood of risking basic necessities would incentivize work. Greater emphasis on special savings programs designed for persons with low incomes may allow employment programs to provide counseling for financial security.[6] Housing can be sustained if housing programs can flexibly tie rent to income. Implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act may alleviate concerns about losing health insurance when working.
"You'd like to love your job": enjoying a career or working just for pay. Many participants distinguished between jobs and careers along the axis of enjoyment: jobs were just for money, careers involved enjoyable work.	"…you'd like to love your job, or like…not a job, but a career…something that you love, to enjoy, so it wouldn't seem like it's work. It'd seem like that's something natural that you do if you have a talent for it. Um, I've had previous positions like that, but due to my background, I've lost those positions. So, I've had to have jobs that just…to make money. And, um, it sucks."	In other studies, giving back has been identified as a factor influencing consumers to pursue jobs in social services, but not in other fields.[2] Our data suggest that meaningfulness applies to a wide range of professions and affects not just job retention, but motivation to work. Employment programs should consider how job roles may incorporate participants' social needs, as these connections underlie many job seekers' interest in and enjoyment of work.
"Everything is computerized": Technology as an integral part of job search. Technology generally acted as a barrier for older participants and a facilitator for younger participants.	Younger participant: "The Internet, surfing the web? Excellent thing to do, like I have the LinkedIn Internet thing. I have Google. I have everything set up." Older participant: "I took Excel like 3 times, every time I only got a little bit, still don't know what to do. Just the very beginning parts—not even the basics—just the very beginning of it, so that maybe I could work in the office. I can still work in the office, but, I do my typing light, so I need to pick up my typing skills.	Employment programs should place a greater emphasis on computer and internet skills to ensure that participants can search for jobs independently and be competitive candidates. Policies that promote affordable national access to high-speed Internet would also help diminish digital divides.
"I don't know why they don't hire me": Making sense of uncertainty. At all phases of job-seeking, participants encountered a lack of response from employers and faced the stressful task of making sense of uncertainty. Often, waiting led to self-doubt, frustration, and/or anger.	"…I don't know why they don't hire me. That's the second time, I don't know why. Maybe because she wants a tall person. Or maybe she wants girls…I was the only male. I don't know."	Providers may need to educate participants that job search is normally a sustained process that naturally involves periods of waiting. Providers should also help participants develop constructive ways to respond to and cope with uncertainty and delay.
"I hold on to things": Focus on the past. Generally, participants without key events focused more on the past than participants who did experience key events. Many spoke about the past in greater detail, and often with greater emotion than when discussing their present thoughts about work and plans for the future.	"I'm pretty much sure I won't have the confidence to go on an interview…Shit's changed ever since I got locked up, man, been homeless, seems like everything changed. I feel hopeless sometimes…when I feel hopeless looking for a job, it doesn't help…because I got the thoughts in my head saying, 'I'm hopeless. I ain't gonna get the job.' You know, trying feels like a waste of my time."	More research is needed to explore the role of trauma-informed care in supported employment and IPS programs.

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