

A CHALLENGING YET MOTIVATING
JOURNEY:
EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG ADULT PARENTS WITH
SERIOUS MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

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Acknowledgements

The Learning & Working Center at Transitions ACR is a national effort that aims to improve the supports for youth and young adults, ages 14-30, with serious mental health conditions to successfully complete their schooling and training and move into rewarding work lives. We are located at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester, MA, Department of Psychiatry, Systems & Psychosocial Advances Research Center. Visit us at:

<http://www.umassmed.edu/TransitionsACR>

The Transitions ACR incorporates Participatory Action Research with young adults with lived experience in the design, conduct and interpretation of research and knowledge translation activities.

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Contributors

- **Kathryn Sabella, PhD** Principle Investigator
- **Laura Golden, BA** Research Coordinator II and qualitative interviewer
- **Kathleen Biebel, PhD** Co-investigator



BACKGROUND



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Why Young Adult Parents?

- Young adulthood is a time of significant life transitions (e.g., career development)
- People with serious mental health conditions (SMHC) tend to parent at an earlier age than general population

Average Age Becoming a Parent		
	General Population	People with SMHC
Women	24 years old	19-22 years old
Men	27 years old	24-25 years old

Nicholson, J., Biebel, K., Katz-Leavy, J., & Williams, V. (2002). The prevalence of parenthood in adults with mental illness: Implications for state and federal policymakers, programs, and providers.



A Vulnerable Yet Understudied Population

- Compared to parents without SMHC, parents living with SMHC in the U.S. are more likely to be:
 - Unemployed
 - Living below poverty threshold
 - Dependent on government assistance
 - Have lower educational attainment
- Despite the outcomes, **little is known about the first-hand experiences of young parents with SMHC** as they navigate multiple roles and transitions.

Luciano, A., Nicholson, J., & Meara, E. (2014). The economic status of parents with serious mental illness in the United States. *Psychiatric rehabilitation, 37*(3), 242.



Webinar Objectives

1. Present themes from **qualitative interviews** with 19 young adult parents living with SMHC
2. Share **Jennifer's personal story** about her journey as a young adult parent



THE CHEER STUDY

*Collecting Histories of Education and Employment
during Recovery*



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Methods

- One-time, 90 minute qualitative interviews (Total $n=61$)
 - Mental health experiences
 - School and work history
 - Other life events (e.g., incarceration, homelessness)
- **Young adult parent sample ($n=19$)** were asked additional questions about being a parent including:
 - Changes in activities after having children
 - Custody and living arrangements with children
 - Challenges of parenting
 - Supports for parenting responsibilities



Eligibility Criteria for Parents

- 22-30 years old
- Have been diagnosed with at least one of the following:
 - Major Depression
 - Anxiety Disorder
 - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
 - Schizophrenia or Schizoaffective Disorder
 - Bipolar Disorder
 - Eating Disorder
 - Borderline Personality Disorder
- Reported significant treatment or disruption due to SMHC
 - Inpatient hospitalization
 - Partial hospitalization
 - Client of DMH
 - Received Special Education Services
 - Formal Leave of Absence
- Some school and work history



Coding and Analysis

- Most interviews recorded, all transcribed
- Dedoose coding software
- Inductive, Grounded Theory approach
- Codebook developed through group process
 - 3 coders, inter-rater reliability of at least 80%



SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

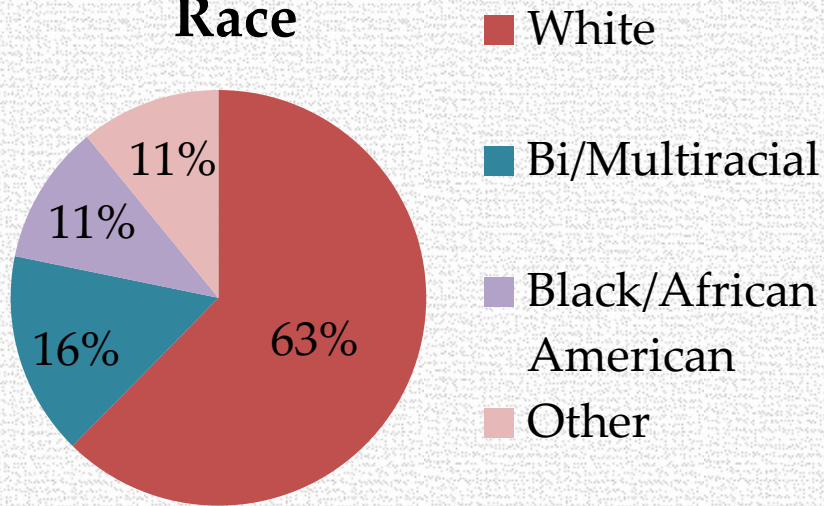
Young Adult Parent Sample (n=19)



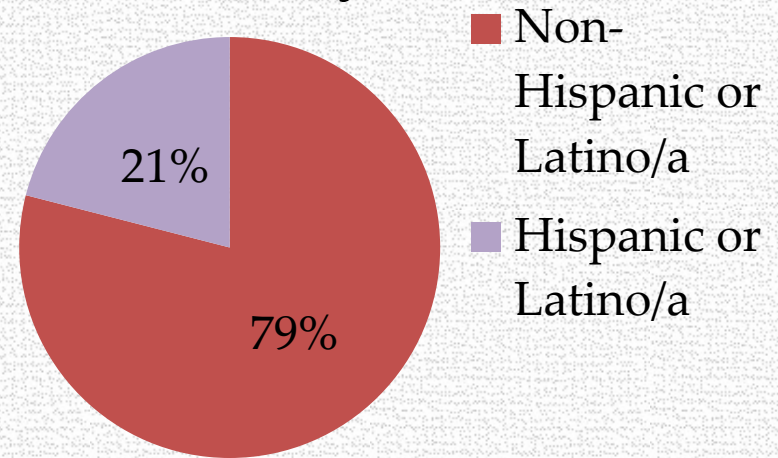
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Demographics

Race



Ethnicity



Gender

Female	16 (84%)
Male	3 (16%)

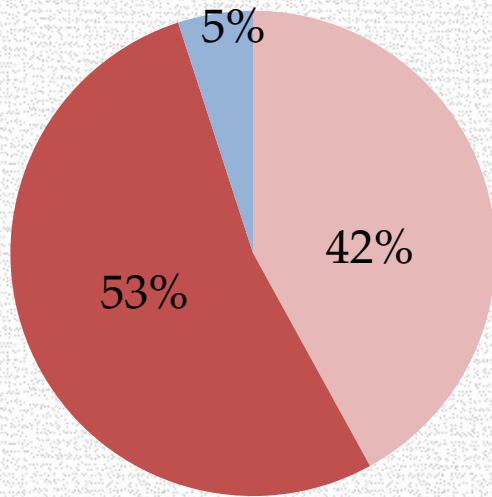
Age

Range	22-30
Average	26



Parenthood

Age Became Parent



- Under 20 years old
- 20-25 years old
- Over 25 years old

Age of Children

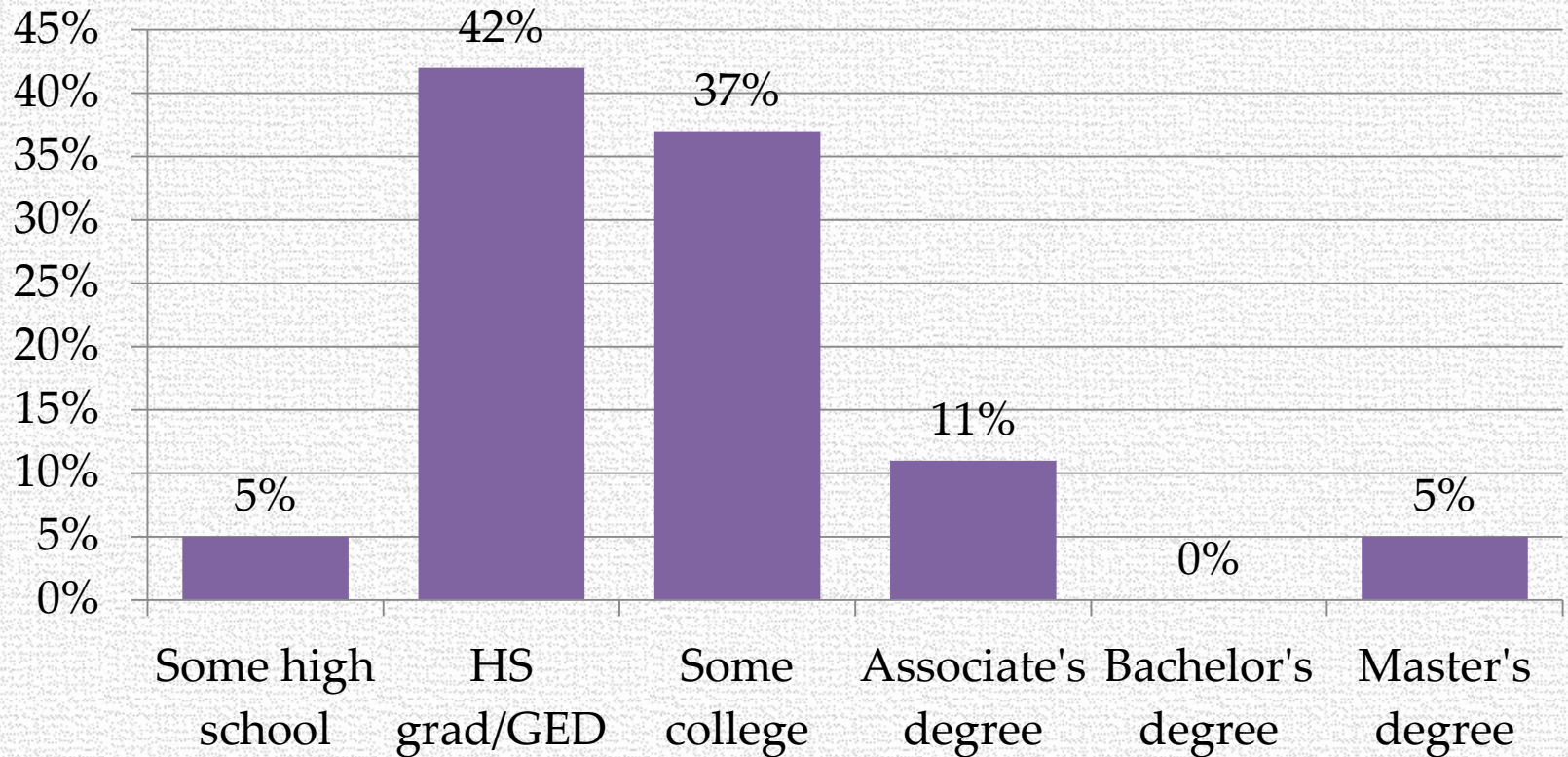
Range	2 weeks – 12 years
Average	5 years

Number of Children

1	10 (53%)
2	7 (37%)
3	1 (5%)
4	1 (5%)

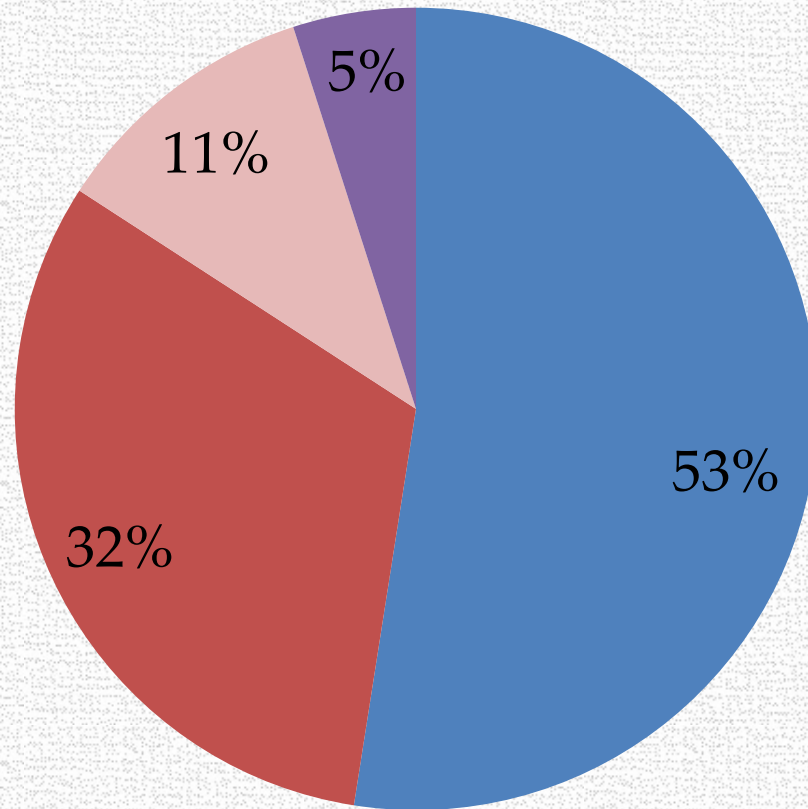


Highest Level of Education



Annual Income*

■ <\$10,000 ■ \$10K-\$20K ■ \$20-\$30K ■ >\$30K



*Does not include financial assistance (e.g., SSI, SSDI)



QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

First-person narratives from young adult parents



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Custody Arrangements

- 14 moms had primary custody
 - 4 living with biological father
 - 10 were single mothers (over 1/2 of sample)

“I am mom and I am dad. So I have to look out for her safety and her well-being all the time, and cook dinner and laundry and everything.”

- Only 1 of the 3 dads had partial custody

“I haven’t seen my son in 8 years. It’s been very, very difficult.”

“Even though there’s no restriction on my visitation, [the mother] refuses to let me see [my son]. And the fact that I’m not there really hurts him.”



Parenting Challenges

- Co-parenting
 - Many navigating **complex relationships** with other parent
- Lack of Childcare
 - **Daycare** is expensive (grandparents often helped with childcare)
 - A **barrier to work** especially for single moms
- Homelessness or Housing Instability
 - Some experienced **homelessness** while living with children
 - Separated from child due to unstable housing

“I was just really depressed. I was in a trance. I didn’t feel like myself. Not without my kid. I didn’t feel like I was accountable for anything.”



Children as Motivators

Caring for children can be a motivating force that helps young parents:

- Keep moving through depressive episodes

“I refuse to not be able to provide for my son. I’ve been super determined. Even though I have my depression and my anxiety, I still go forward.”

- Maintain sobriety
- Avoid risky behaviors (e.g., to ensure custody of child)
- Develop career ambitions

“I knew I wanted to be a role model for her. So that’s why I went to school.”

- Feel a sense of purpose and meaning



Stigma is a Reality for Parents with SMHC

- 1 dad experienced discrimination in court

“I’ve definitely been discriminated against by the judge. It was horrible. They’d talk to me like I was five. They looked at me like I was a disease a father.

I wanted to be there for my kid, but was never given the opportunity by the courts to do it.”

- A reminder from a young mom:

“Having a mental illness and being a parent is possible.

If you have PTSD, it doesn’t mean your child is going to go through that with you. It doesn’t mean you’re bad. You can still be a great parent regardless of your mental illness.”



PERSONAL STORY

*Being a young adult parent has been to say the least:
a journey*



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My Journey as a Young Mom

- I became a parent at age 21
- My daughter Emily is 6 years old
- I have been a **single mother** since she was 2 years old
 - Co-parenting challenges
 - Main support is my mother (aka Emily's "mimi")
- Emily and I make a great team and our relationship continues to blossom!



Stigma and Disclosure as a Parent with SMHC

- Being a parent with a mental health condition can be very stigmatizing experience
- Fear of **discrimination** and **losing my child**
 - Traumatic past experience with DCF
 - Difficulty disclosing to service providers in authority settings
- However, these situations have only make me stronger



Proud to be Your Mom!

Hi Jennifer.

I just wanted to send you a quick email about Emily. I am very proud of how much progress she is making and she has been working very hard with her reading and writing. She's been a great helper, too! She's doing great!

Ms. O



ry School



Parenting and Recovery

- It is necessary to **take care of myself** so I can be a role model for my daughter
 - Keep a steady routine
 - Sustain my job for over 8 years
 - Consistent with therapy and medication
 - Maintain healthy, positive relationships
- Caring for Emily has helped with my **recovery**
 - She is my **motivation** every day!



CONCLUSIONS



Starting the Conversation...

- **Personal narratives can provide valuable insight on the lives of parents with SMHC**
 - Parenting presents an opportunity for motivation and recovery
 - Often poverty and housing instability are the greater challenges
- **Implications to support young adult parents with SMHC**
 - Employment, education, and housing supports
 - Providers should be aware of clients who are parents and integrate this meaningful life role into their care
 - Acknowledge and recognize stigma or judgments



Resources

Local Resources:

- Healthy Families Mass
- SMOC
- <http://www.waysideyouth.org/OurServices/WaysideMetroWest/ParentSupportServices.aspx>

National Resources:

- <http://www.tucollaborative.org/parenting>
- <https://psychcentral.com/lib/tips-for-parenting-with-a-mental-illness>
- <http://www.nationalparenthelpline.org/find-support>



Thank You!

Contact us at Emma.PiciDOttavio@umassmed.edu
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