



# THE EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG ADULTS WITH SERIOUS MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

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# Acknowledgements

The Learning & Working Center at Transitions RTC 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/TransitionsRTC>

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## Background: Young adults with SMHC

**Young adulthood = critical time for establishing a foundation for adult working life and exploring career interests.**

**Early employment and education opportunities predict long term economic progress**



## Background: Young adults with SMHC

- Young adults with serious mental health conditions (SMHC) often struggle with school and work:
  - Lower rates of high school graduation
  - Lower rates of enrollment in post-secondary education, low graduation rates
  - Less likely to be employed, and when employed, often in “secondary labor market”
- Other struggles and complications (young parents, justice system involvement, substance use disorders, trauma)



# Why this research?

- Little is still known about *how* individuals with SMHC navigate employment, education, and training activities during young adulthood
- More knowledge to inform the development of future interventions to improve outcomes
- Let's talk to the source! Hear from young adults themselves.



## Objectives: Descriptive & Exploratory

- **Describe** the education, training and work experiences of YA with SMHC, including their successes and challenges
- **Explore** the impact of contextual circumstances (familial background characteristics, behavioral health patterns) and pivotal life events (involvement in justice system, hospitalizations) on education and employment activities



# METHODS

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The Collecting Histories of Education and Employment  
during Recovery (CHEER) Study



## Methods

- One-time 90 minute semi-structured interviews with young adults, ages 25-30 (22-30 if a young parent)
- Eligibility:
  - Have been diagnosed with at least one serious mental health condition (e.g. major depression, schizophrenia)
  - Reported significant treatment or disruption due to SMHC (e.g. hospitalization, IEP)
  - Some school and work history





# Methods continued

## Participants are asked:

- to describe their education, training, and employment experiences from age 14 to present
- how decisions were made regarding education, training, and employment activities and how goals shift over time
- the influence of their SMHC, other contextual life circumstances (e.g. family history) and pivotal life events (e.g. parenting, health issues) on these activities



# Recruitment Methods

- Recruitment Sources:
  - clubhouses, outpatient mental health providers, drop-in resource centers, and referrals from contacts within the MA Department of Mental Health
- Interviews conducted in the community by young adult staff members
- \$30 gift card incentive
- Data Collection: January 2016-March 2017



## Coding and Analysis

- Most interviews recorded, all transcribed
- Dedoose software
- Inductive, grounded theory approach
- Codebook development based on initial descriptive coding and discussions of ~30 interviews
- 8 transcripts thoroughly coded to date



# PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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# Demographics (N=55)

## Gender

Female	60%
Male	38%
Transgender	2%

## Age

Range	22-30
Average	27
Mode	27

## Race

White	78%
Black or African American	11%
Other	11%

## Ethnicity

Non-Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish	89%
Hispanic, Latino/a, or Spanish	11%



# Demographics (Cont'd) (N=55)

## Diagnoses Reported

Major Depression	69%
Anxiety Disorder	64%
PTSD	42%
Bipolar Disorder	38%
Schizophrenia or Schizoaffective Disorder	27%
Eating Disorder	16%
Borderline Personality Disorder	11%
Other	22%

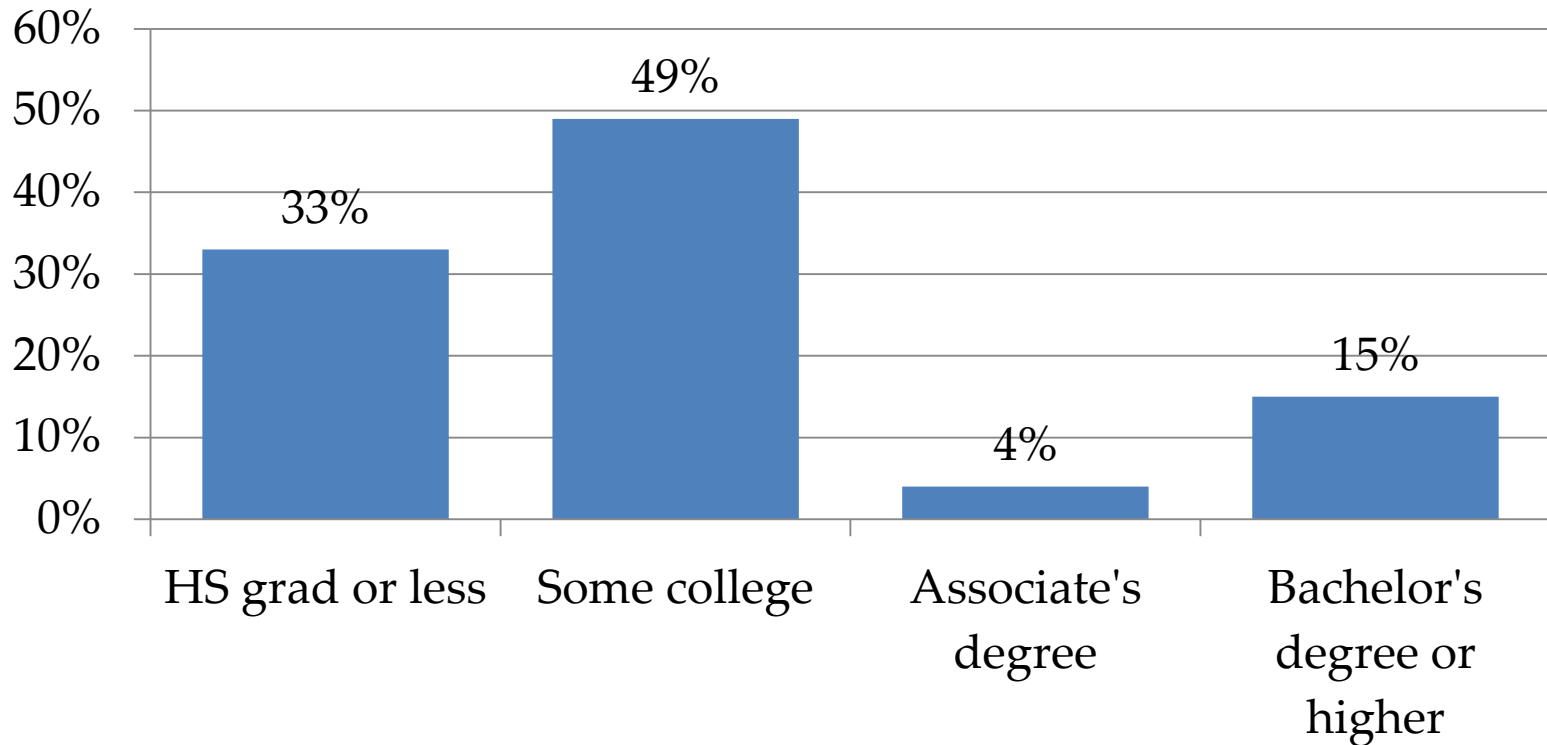
## Age of 1st Diagnosis

Under age 16	55%
Between 16-21	38%
Between 22-30	7%

Average number of diagnoses reported = 3

# Demographics (Cont'd) (N=55)

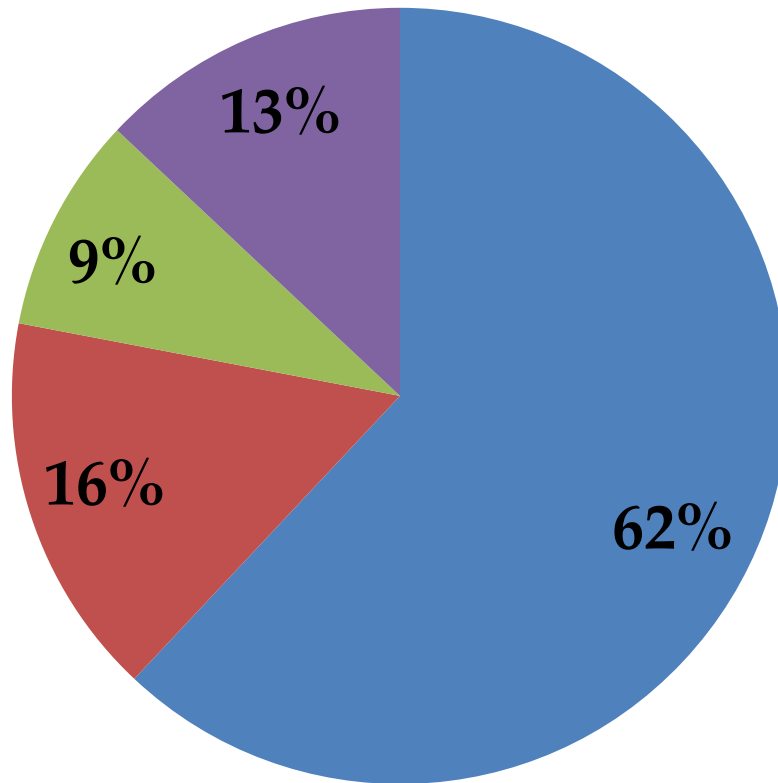
## Highest Education Level Completed



# Demographics (Cont'd) (N=55)

## Annual Income

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







# Navigating School, Training, and Work

- Back and forth between school and work
- Short-term employment, most jobs < 1 year
  - Retail
  - Restaurant/Service industry
  - Some volunteer positions
- Social connections = jobs

## Gaps in school and/or work

- Many starts and stops (i.e. “piecemeal” education)
  - Accrued student loan debt =  
Barrier to returning to school
  - Big commitment,  
lacking a clear goal/motivation





# Challenge: Pace or workload

- Jobs too stressful

*I worked at a grocery store as a bag boy. And I did that for a couple of weeks. And again my anxiety just kind of got the best of me. And so I left that after a couple of weeks. And then I got another job as a bag boy a few months later. And my anxiety got the best of me again, and I just always struggled with working and doing that type of stuff from my anxiety. And just some from my depression and stuff like that.....*

*I worked a lot of the busy shifts so it was kind of hectic. So that made it a little more harder to keep the job because I was not used to so much—so many people, so much busy-ness I guess. -Charlie, 26*

- Coursework too difficult or overwhelming
  - Unmet need for help or accommodations



## Challenge: social interaction

- Social interaction on the job
- Peer or roommate interactions in college
- Strongly tied to likes and dislikes

*It was really good because it was my first pizza delivery job. So like I had never done a delivery job before. And at the time I made more money. So I was kind of nervous a little bit, but I liked it because 1) you make really good money 2) Because you don't have to deal with people as much. Because you take food and run out the door. And then you drop it off to someone and then run back. So it was like you don't have to talk to people a lot. –Sonia, 28*



# Challenge: Attendance or scheduling

- Transportation
- Dislike of traditional classroom environment
- Insomnia
- Medication side effects
  
- Result:
  - Too many absences
- Or
- Stop showing up



## Challenges related to SMHC

- Symptom management: ongoing battle
- “too sick” to keep working or going to school
- Impact of medications: complicated relationship
- Suicide attempts, suicidal ideation

*I would have like mood swings. There would be like times where I'm like really happy and really excited to go to work. And then there'd be other times where I'm just like really depressed and I really didn't want to go. And that would be the time where I just didn't show up for work. And then I would try to save my job and call them and just tell them I was sick or something. And that didn't really work most of the time. So I'd have to go out and find a new job, and it was just stressful and depressing at the same time because I didn't know if I would get hired or what would happen. - Charlie, 26 yr old*



## Successes in school or work

- Promotions
- Good grades
- Praise from others
- Especially when they involve overcoming obstacles or adversities

*But yeah, especially considering that I had dropped out of school anything that I could latch onto to give my family an ability to brag was important so you know being promoted quickly and holding a position that you know if you haven't worked in retail you might not realize how difficult it is. Because basically I was doing all the work of a manager without being on salary. That's basically what a frontend supervisor does. But yeah, I was proud of that. –Ashley, 27*



## Supports that are helpful

- Finding the right fit, navigating services
  - DMH Caseworkers
  - Job placement programs
  - Clubhouses, social interaction, volunteering
- Emphasis on “knowledgeable” staff
- Parental support, when present and helpful
- Understanding mental health over time
  - Confusion of multiple diagnoses





# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

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# Helping YA in “career exploration”

- Aspects of the job that seem to be most influential
  - Level of social interaction
  - Pace, stressfulness
  - Schedule demands and flexibility
- Aspects of post-secondary schooling that seem to be influential
  - Paying for school
  - Setting clear goals
  - Planning ahead to manage workload (formal or informal supports)



# Limitations

- Retrospective recall
  - Accuracy of recall
  - Retrospective lens





## A work in progress.....

- Exploring the influences of early childhood/adolescent experiences on school and work experiences in young adulthood
  - Stress process theory, coping skills
- Exploring the experience of managing a SMHC, stigma, labeling and self-perceptions
  - Modified labeling theory
  - Medications...it's complicated
- Exploring subsample of parents



# THANK YOU!!!

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