

# The Long Commute: Closing the Gap in Rural Employment for People with Serious Mental Health Conditions

A significant portion of the United States is rural. As of the 2020 Census, 20.3% of the U.S. population (62.8 million people) and 87.4% of the country's land area were considered rural (Figure 1). In addition, almost a fifth of all U.S. counties (19%) are considered to be frontier and remote areas, characterized by a combination of low population size (< 5,000 people) and remoteness from populated areas.<sup>1</sup>

Employment is a crucial component of mental health recovery, and long-term unemployment has a profoundly detrimental impact on health and well-being.<sup>2,3</sup> However, despite wanting to work, only about half of adults with serious mental health conditions are in the labor force, and only about a quarter are employed at all.<sup>2,4</sup> Individuals living in rural communities face specific challenges in accessing employment and employment support services.

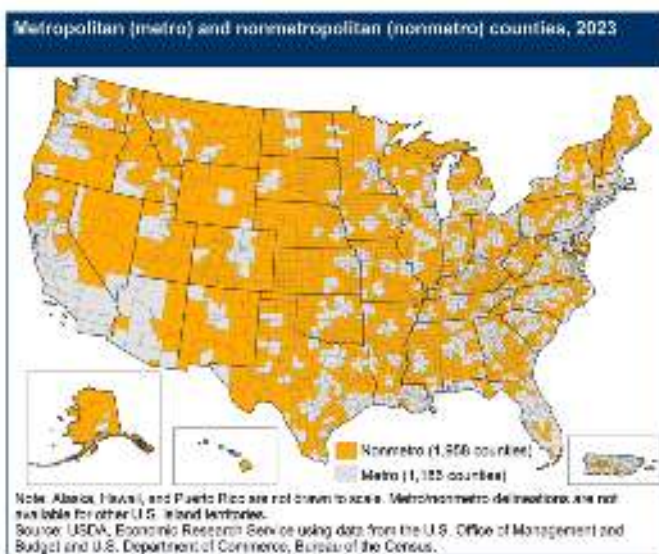


Figure 1.



Figure 2.

This Issue Brief is a product of the *Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation's* Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Improving Employment Outcomes for Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities. In this issue, we review the following topics related to the employment of adults with serious mental health conditions living in rural America:

- Challenges to obtaining and maintaining employment
- Challenges to obtaining supported employment
- Potential solutions to these barriers

## Challenges to Employment for People with Serious Mental Health Conditions in Rural Communities

### Employment Opportunity Barriers

- Compared to urban or metro areas, rural communities have less overall employment, less employment growth, have lower labor force participation rates,<sup>6</sup> and have higher unemployment rates (Figure 2).<sup>7,8</sup>

### Changing Workforce Barriers

- These employment challenges can be attributed to a general shift in the economy away from rural manufacturing and mining jobs toward technology-based industries, as well as technological advances that reduce the workforce needed for traditionally rural industries, including manufacturing, mining, and agriculture.<sup>7</sup>

## **Internet Connectivity Barriers**

- A shift to technology-based jobs can also pose a challenge for people living in rural areas that lack sufficient, reliable internet access to support remote work.<sup>8</sup>

## **Education and Skills Training Barriers**

- In addition, technology-based jobs tend to require higher levels of education and training, but overall, adults living in rural areas are less likely to have a post-secondary education than those in urban or metro areas.<sup>8</sup>

## **Transportation Barriers**

- Lack of public transportation, as well as greater travel distances in rural areas, can be a further barrier to employment.<sup>9</sup>

## **Bias & Discrimination**

- The lack of anonymity in rural areas with small population sizes may exacerbate bias against hiring individuals with psychiatric disabilities, substance use conditions, or justice system involvement.<sup>10</sup> Research has indicated that discrimination against people with serious mental health conditions can lead to work avoidance, reluctance to disclose disability, and an overall reduction in employment engagement.<sup>11</sup>

## **Potential Benefit Loss**

- When considering employment, individuals with disabilities and their family members are often concerned about how employment will impact their benefits.<sup>12</sup> Reluctance to seek employment due to the perceived and actual risk of losing disability benefits can be aggravated in rural areas with limited access to state and local public supports.<sup>12</sup>

# **Barriers to Supported Employment in Rural Areas**

## **Limited Opportunities for Job Placement**

- Fewer employment opportunities spread over larger areas lead vocational rehabilitation counselors working in rural communities to report greater challenges for job placement than those in urban settings.<sup>12</sup> Rural economies may depend on large companies from a single industry, leaving few employment options to choose from.<sup>13, 14</sup>

## **Financial Barriers for Providers**

- There are additional financial barriers for supported employment services in rural areas, with costs of mileage reimbursement and driving time deterring providers.<sup>12</sup> Travel requirements and job placement difficulties for providers working with rural populations make them more hesitant to accept work in these areas. The shift from fee-for-service to results-based funding of vocational rehabilitation and employment services has led to further attrition of rural providers.<sup>15</sup>





### **Access to Services**

- There is a nationwide shortage of behavioral health care providers, which is exacerbated in rural communities.<sup>16</sup> The Health Resources and Services Administration has previously identified 5,833 mental health professional shortage areas across the country, with two-thirds of these areas falling within rural communities.<sup>16</sup> Depleted provider numbers lead to staff generalization with individuals performing multiple roles and employment of non-credentialed or under-credentialed providers, which may lead to lower quality of care, reimbursement challenges, or waitlists to receive services.<sup>10</sup>

### **Reluctance to Engage with Employment Specialists**

- Service consumers' reluctance to engage with "outsiders," such as supported employment professionals, has been reported as a barrier to behavioral health care in rural communities.<sup>12,17</sup> Businesses in rural areas may advertise available positions through informal local networks, making it difficult for non-local supported employment providers to be aware of job placement opportunities.<sup>12</sup>

## **Strategies for Enhancing Supported Employment in Rural Communities**

### **Technology**

- The Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work program provides virtual employment services to eligible Social Security Disability beneficiaries in all 50 states.<sup>6</sup>
- Providing supported employment virtually may compensate for the lack of rural providers by allowing employment specialists to see more clients per day, reducing commute requirements, and facilitating interdisciplinary care in areas where practitioners may be geographically isolated.<sup>18,19</sup>
- Virtual supported employment may promote clients' competency in technological skills necessary for remote employment.<sup>18</sup> These skills also open doors to online education and job-related training.<sup>12</sup>
- Virtual reality is being explored as an enhancement to supported employment services, with a virtual reality job interview training system being shown to be effective in a community mental health setting, and could potentially be offered remotely.<sup>20</sup>
- State Vocational Rehabilitation programs are piloting the use of a generative AI chatbot to serve job seekers more efficiently, with preliminary results showing expedited outcomes.<sup>21</sup>

### **Self-Employment (for people with serious mental health conditions)**

- National statistics report that in the general population, self-employment occurs more often in rural counties than in non-rural counties.<sup>25</sup> A study showed that as a vocational rehabilitation client's community became more rural, they were more likely to discontinue services due to successful self-employment.<sup>23</sup>
- Self-employed vocational rehabilitation clients were closer to support, reported more flexible schedules, and had more say in which industry they worked in.<sup>23</sup>
- An online platform for planning and achieving self-employment has shown promising results in pilot research and could potentially be adopted as a State vocational rehabilitation or mental health system service.<sup>24</sup>

### **Benefits Counseling**

- Benefits counselors can educate clients receiving Social Security disability benefits on work incentives, housing assistance, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) eligibility, and healthcare benefits following employment.<sup>27</sup>
- Benefits counseling has been shown to enhance employment outcomes and is a core component of supported employment programs.<sup>28,29</sup>

## Enhanced Payment Options

- State incentives for supported employment providers who serve rural areas might increase the availability of services. Reducing the financial burden on rural behavioral health professionals may mitigate burnout, promote workforce retention, and encourage high-quality care.<sup>17</sup>
- Strategies for increasing income for employment specialists include: allowing for a choice between fee-for-service and results-based funding, guaranteed referrals, fixed payments, and travel reimbursement.<sup>15</sup>

## Community Integration of Providers

- Community integration of providers may provide access to non-traditional providers of supported employment, highlight employment opportunities, reduce service gaps, and strengthen rapport.<sup>15</sup>
- The IPS Employment Center provides online courses for IPS practitioners and Vocational Rehabilitation counselors in rural settings to access remotely. There is also potential for peer support providers to meet this need with peer-delivered supported employment in rural areas.<sup>16</sup>

## Key Takeaways

There are many commonalities between barriers to employment and challenges for supported employment service use in rural American communities: fewer employment opportunities; a rise in technology-based jobs; lack of technology education and training; stigma and discrimination; transportation challenges; concerns about benefits; the national behavioral health provider shortage which is even more severe in rural areas; and lack of funding or resources to support the behavioral health workforce.<sup>7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 16</sup>

Mental health recovery through employment in rural areas may be supported by the advancement of technological infrastructure and skills, telehealth and telecommuting opportunities, encouraging self-employment, incentivizing employment specialists and promoting their community integration, and increasing awareness of benefits counseling.<sup>12, 15, 17, 18, 24, 27</sup>



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