Young adulthood is a critical time for establishing adult working relationships, beginning to explore possible career interests, and focusing on one’s trajectory. Youth and Young Adults (Y&YAs) with serious mental health conditions (SMHCs), however, often struggle to pursue and achieve their education and working goals.

What do you know?
- Approximately 76% of youths aged 14 years or older with SMHCs never finish high school.
- Y&YAs with SMHCs experience longer delays in entering college and are more likely to drop out of college.

Adults with mental illness who miss early employment and school transitions may experience negative psychosocial outcomes, may have extremely high college dropout rates, and are more likely to rely on government assistance than those without SMHCs.

The importance of using Participatory Action Research strategies.
This study is grounded in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework. Y&YAs with SMHCs are involved in all levels of the research, from defining research questions, to developing and testing measurement instruments, to designing translation and dissemination. Study Y&YAs with SMHCs are research and translation research, and from the Center for Mental Health Services of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, United States Department of Health and Human Services.

What do we want to learn from Y&YAs with SMHCs?
This study aims to provide a longitudinal understanding of education and employment activities among Y&YAs with SMHCs in order to:

- Describe education and employment experiences, specifically:
  - Type of education and employment
  - Kind of jobs held
  - Education and employment starts and stops (and reasons why)
  - Challenges and successes
  - Professional growth or accomplishments over time
  - How career goals change over time

- Explore barriers and facilitators to achieving education and employment goals, including the role of:
  - Mental illness and stigma
  - Family, friends, and significant others
  - Race, class, and gender and sociodemographic factors
  - Formal services (e.g., treatment, vocational rehabilitation)

- Describe the impact of parenting on education and employment experiences and activities, including how:
  - Parenting can impact education or employment activities
  - Young parents manage childcare
  - Mental illness affects parenting

- Y&YAs with SMHCs who are parents are a particularly vulnerable population.

- Y&YAs with SMHCs are more likely to become first-time parents at an earlier age than their peers without SMHCs.
- Y&YAs with SMHCs have the highest high school dropout rate among individuals with identified general mental health or mental health challenges, and experience low employment rates, in mostly low-skill part-time positions.
- Y&YAs with SMHCs are more likely to be living in poverty and dependent on government assistance than those without SMHCs.
- Children of parents with SMHCs are at increased risk of poor psychological outcomes,” separation from their parents, and subsequently developing mental illness.

Who are we asking?
- Each participant will complete a one-time, 90-minute, semi-structured interview. Interviews will be conducted in person, primarily by PAR staff, at the location of the participant’s choice. Interviews will ask about past and current education, training, and employment experiences, successes, and challenges. All participants receive a $30 gift card for their time.

- The cornerstone of the interview guide is a chronological documentation of education and employment experiences. Participants are asked about aspects of their lives and how their experiences affected their education and employment activities.

- Areas of focus include:
  - General and family background
  - Mental health and general health
  - Major life events
  - Parenting and child rearing (if applicable)

- Why is this work important?
  - Milestones that occur in young adulthood are critical to shaping the pathways that lead to adult life. Experiences of education and early success can have repercussions that last across the lifespan. This research will help better understand the education and employment experiences among Y&YAs with SMHCs and what makes it hard for some youth, even with supports, to achieve formal goals of leaving school or work due to their mental health condition.

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- Data collection began in February 2016. These interview quotes suggest there is much to learn about the experiences of school and work for Y&YAs, which can help inform Y&YAs supports and services moving forward.

- It was actually really helpful that I was in my junior and senior year, I actually took part in a lot of activities... And when I was sort of having a flare-up, my emotions were not getting the better of me, it was good to have a structure that made me feel really good about myself.”

  - Kristle, age 27

- “Structure is very good for me. When fall out of my routine and structure, that is when I tend to start to get very depressed and anxious. My supervisor is really good about trying to figure out why I’m anxious... what task or meeting I keep coming up that day that is going to make me anxious and really say, ‘Alright, can you really try to get through that meeting and then take the rest of the day off to decompress?’ So they’re really good at pushing me in a supportive way.”

  - Chandi, age 28

- “I always thought that self-esteem that I could not work because I would not have the self-confidence and to do things by my own. But I learned from the work experience that it’s not always going to be like that, that I can break out of my own shell and socialize and do work.”

  - Mark, age 29

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