

Journey Toward Self-Sufficiency: A Qualitative Study

A Research Project for Cincinnati Works

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Introduction

Cincinnati Works, founded in 1996, is a privately funded job initiative program. The purpose of Cincinnati Works is to provide assistance in searching for and holding full-time employment with health benefits to people who are living in poverty. The vision of the organization is to eliminate poverty in the Greater Cincinnati area. Cincinnati Works offers support from job counselors, psychological counseling, legal assistance, access to a clothes closet, referrals, and job leads.

Cincinnati Works recognizes that for a person to successfully achieve self-sufficiency, retention of employment is critical. Although Cincinnati Works membership is lifelong and retention services and employment support are ongoing, there are members who are not successful in retaining employment.

Recent legislation, such as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, has made important modifications in existing laws, with the goal of encouraging families and individuals to leave welfare and go to work. The government has imposed lifetime limits on the number of months families may receive monetary welfare assistance. State governments may require welfare recipients to participate in work-related activities and programs, as well as impose sanctions for non-participation and change benefit levels.

A broad range of personal and family issues has been found to impact the process of transitioning to self-sufficiency. Because there has been minimal attention to the role these issues play in the lives of impoverished people, there has been little documentation of the prevalence of these issues. Researchers have proposed many actual and potential barriers and supports to explain the success or lack of success in the transition to self-sufficiency. Health issues impact absenteeism and may be a factor in the ability to obtain and keep employment. To better understand the experience of people attempting to become self-sufficient, Cincinnati Works conducted a qualitative study to identify the factors that support or hinder successful employment.

Methodology

In designing this study, pertinent focus questions included, “How much do healthcare-related issues actually affect the successful pursuit of self-sufficiency?” and “What other factors promote or inhibit the successful pursuit of self-sufficiency?” The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the experience of individuals as they attempted to make the transition to self-sufficiency. One aim was to understand and identify factors that effect success in finding and keeping employment.

Qualitative inquiry guided this study, which involved in-depth interviews with study participants who were encouraged to discuss, clarify, and give examples, with the reassurance that their own ideas were valued.

Cincinnati Works staff members recruited 45 individuals to participate in the study. There were three groups of 15 participants:

1. Those who were successful in obtaining and keeping employment
2. Those who cycled in and out of full-time employment
3. Those who were ineffective or resistant to seeking full-time employment

Thirty participants were women and 15 were men. The majority (42) was African American and three were Caucasian. Participants’ ages ranged from 19 to 47 (mean 32.5 years). Most participants were single parents living with their children. Participants’ involvement with the Cincinnati Works program ranged from four months to almost three years.

While over half of this group (25) stated that they perceived no health problems, the remaining participants described a wide variety of difficulties, including alcoholism, arthritis, asthma, bronchitis, depression, gestational diabetes, hypothyroidism, hypertension, irritable bowel syndrome, lupus (SLE), multiple sclerosis, sickle cell trait, tuberculosis, surgeries to the knee and wrist, and back injuries. Additionally, 25 participants were mildly to morbidly overweight. Many participants stated that they lacked health insurance or would lose coverage when they lost their public assistance benefits.

Findings

Positive Factors in Working Toward Self-Sufficiency

Participants cited responsibilities, family needs, educational needs, and material needs as the most common positive factors associated with the decision to make a life change and work toward becoming self-sufficient. Examples included material needs of children such as clothes and school supplies and the desire to provide a stable home environment.

The desire for self-betterment through attaining additional educational credentials was also frequently cited as a positive factor influencing the attempted transition to self-sufficiency. The desire for independence was a positive factor for 15 participants, while emotional needs were a focus for 12 others. Participants generally felt that their decision to make a life change was supported by family and friends.

Participants from the third group tended to have only one motivating factor that spurred them toward making a life change toward self-sufficiency: the loss of or limits to public assistance benefits. This group cited their children as both a positive factor towards and a barrier against making life changes and moving toward independence. Other characteristics of several participants of this group were the tendency to place life changes in the hands of God and to speak about spirituality as a motivating factor.

Specifically, participants from the first and second groups generally cited more than one positive motivating factor in their lives. While these groups cited children as a motivating factor, they also focused on educational opportunities, self-esteem issues, and the desire to find a job that would be enjoyable and stimulating. Additionally, people in the first and second groups were influenced to a higher degree by the potential to become independent and meet their perceived responsibilities. Participants from the first two groups generally described more positive or motivating factors in their lives and less barriers to overcome than people from the third group. Likewise, participants from the first two groups perceived more positive personal strengths and less need for personal improvement.

Barriers to Working Toward Self-Sufficiency

Common barriers to seeking employment and making a life change toward self-sufficiency included transportation (71%), childcare (71%), legal problems (62%), poor work history (62%), unstable housing arrangements (51%), lack of education (55%), and lack of credentials (42%).

A common but unexpected barrier was the perception of a learning disability among 24 participants. In general, participants stated that their difficulties with learning had not been evaluated, diagnosed, or documented professionally. This barrier did not seem to affect participants from the first group, while participants from the third group were twice as likely to describe perceived learning disabilities as those from the second group.

Additional barriers included the fear of failure or rejection (49%), poor self-esteem (36%), lack of support (40%), abuse (27%), and negative cycles (18%).

While 38 participants admitted the use of substances, only 16 spoke of a history of substance abuse. The most commonly abused substance was alcohol. Five participants stated that alcohol or drug use had interfered with their ability to find or hold a job.

Health problems were a barrier across all groups. Physical health problems occurred twice as often with people in the second group as in either of the other groups. Several participants of the second group described injuries or physical changes that prohibited continuing the type of work they had been doing, which was often physically demanding. Health problems that necessitated a career change included wrist and knee surgeries, back injuries, arthritis, and asthma.

All participants who suffered from diagnosed mental depression were from the third group. These participants described histories of physical or mental abuse while growing up as well as drug and alcohol abuse.

A poor work history or a work history punctuated by temporary service positions was viewed as a problem by participants. Some felt they needed to work, but also felt that the pattern of taking temporary positions made their resumes less attractive to potential full-time employers.

The overwhelming majority of participants cited that taking the necessary steps to initiate and complete a job search was the most difficult barrier to overcome. Examples of concerns included getting up in the morning, getting out of the house, going to interviews, lacking education or pertinent job skills, and overcoming fears of failure and rejection.

The most common barriers cited by participants in the first group were transportation and fear of failure or rejection. People in the second group cited childcare as the most common barrier, followed by lack of education and transportation. Barriers most frequently cited from participants in the third group were lack of education, poor work history, self-esteem issues, and transportation.

Among participants who stated they did not feel successful, participants from the first two groups cited unmet goals, while participants from the third cited monetary concerns and inability to find and hold a good job.

Life Changes as Participants Worked Toward Self-Sufficiency

The most common life change, discussed by participants across all groups, was how they felt about themselves when they were working or looking for work as opposed to when they were not working. Roles and relationships were perceived as improved as a result of the decision to work or look for work. While parents were proud of their ability to provide for their families, they were also concerned about the decreased amount of time left to spend with their children. Participants from the first two groups most commonly expressed positive changes in life roles of parent or spouse, while participants from the third group spoke more often about the difficulties of moving away from values formerly shared with friends.

When participants were not working, they managed to survive by public assistance (60%), odd jobs and temporary agencies (40%), help from family and friends (29%), illegal activities (19%), and living off others (18%).

What Made Jobs Attractive

Factors that made a job attractive to participants were benefits (71%), type of work (64%), and pay rate (56%). Several participants described their ideal job as one they could look forward to every day. The two most popular types of jobs for which the participants were looking were business- and healthcare-oriented. The third most commonly sought field of work was labor-related, including construction, manufacturing, and housekeeping. Participants perceived labor-related fields as sources of potentially good jobs because of the presence of labor unions and higher pay rates.

Strengths and Areas for Improvement for Participants and Cincinnati Works

Participants were asked to list their personal strengths and areas for improvement. The most commonly cited personal strengths were spirituality, a strong work ethic, ability to learn quickly, and a strong work history. Personal areas in need of improvement included laziness, motivation, temper control, work performance, and coping with stress.

All participants stated that they would recommend the Cincinnati Works program to others, and 39 made this statement without prompting. The most commonly cited positive services were interview skills, resume creation, and job leads. Twenty-one participants stated that no additional services were needed for the program. The two most commonly recommended additional services were computer classes and stress management.

Cincinnati Works is perceived as providing not only useful services for these clients, but also professional and personal support. Even research participants who did not feel supported by family and friends felt supported by the Cincinnati Works staff. Positive

services repeatedly discussed by participants were the long-term nature of the help offered and the non-judgmental nature of the staff.

Determining Success

Meeting goals (42%), having a good job (40%), and earning enough money to have savings (42%) were the three most commonly cited definitions of success among study participants. Material signs of success included owning one's home.

Participants from the first two groups cited the accomplishment of goals, independence, and education as indicators of success. In contrast, participants from the third group tended to perceive their success in relation to outside forces, such as praise from supervisors, or to simply getting into the work force. Major themes that were consistent across all groups focused on success in raising children, material gains such as having a home, and self-esteem.

Implications

This study provided insight into the transition from poverty to self-sufficiency from the perspective of the clients. Participant data supported the necessity of continued focus on inadequate transportation and quality, affordable, trustworthy childcare as barriers to seeking and keeping employment. Participants across all groups supported the need for technology-based training and computer skills.

A related issue that will require additional attention by agencies providing support for the transition into the work force is the problem of perceived learning disabilities. Few participants were evaluated by professionals or diagnosed with a specific problem. Not only will these difficulties affect the ability to complete GED programs, but also they will affect the ability to participate in and complete other training programs.

Participants' descriptions of their fears of failure and rejection may also be related to self-esteem and learning difficulties. Because these fears immobilized the change-oriented efforts of clients, they must be acknowledged, and strategies must be developed to assist clients to recognize and cope with their fears.

The data also suggest that participants with the greatest difficulty finding and maintaining employment perceive fewer internal resources and may be more inclined to attribute their lack of success to external factors outside the realm of their control. Participants from the first group tended to follow discussions of barriers with potential and actual strategies for coping, which implies that they have stronger problem-solving skills. This highlights the need for greater amounts of long-term support and resources for some participants, as well as additional training in problem-solving skills.

Nine participants stated that a useful service provided by Cincinnati Works was helping them to perform a self-assessment. Additional emphasis on self-assessment, focusing on both personal strengths and areas for improvement, would be beneficial. Clients with more barriers and less positive factors in their lives will most likely demand increased resources, more support, and additional, frequent follow-up to achieve a successful transition. For some clients, the demands of their personal responsibilities in the role of care provider for dependent or ill children and aging parents may preclude or delay a successful transition.

Health problems were a factor for 20 study participants, who described a wide variety of ailments that limited the types of work they could perform. Healthcare benefits were among the top three most popular attractions to a job, yet several of the participants who worked full-time were not covered by health benefits. Participants need assistance in finding jobs with healthcare benefits or in finding affordable, non-employer sponsored healthcare benefits.

Thirty-three of the 45 participants ended their interviews by thanking the researcher for the opportunity to share their stories. The interview was a therapeutic and useful experience that helped them gain focus and perspective on their individual situations and needs, as well as their strengths and areas for improvement.

Given the differences between the three groups of participants, an intervention study should be designed to focus clients on barriers, perceived strengths, and problem-solving skills. This can lead to the discovery of potential helpful strategies for the clients with multiple obstacles to overcome in the search for and maintenance of employment. Additional research of interest would be a study of the experiences of Cincinnati Works staff members while working with clients attempting to transition from poverty to self-sufficiency.