

Veterans' Attitudes Toward Work and Disability Compensation: Associations with Substance Abuse

AUTHORS: Sarah Meshberg-Cohen, Ph.D.
Kathryn Reid-Quiñones, Ph.D.
Anne C. Black, Ph.D.
Marc I. Rosen, M.D.

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Veterans deemed disabled for conditions resulting from, or aggravated by, their service in the military are eligible for service-connected disability payments. Despite many positive effects of disability payments, one concern is that Veterans with psychiatric conditions who receive disability payments are less likely to be employed compared to those who are denied benefits. Little is known about the attitudes of substance using Veterans, for whom work is a particularly important part of recovery, toward work and disability compensation. *Methods:* This study compared the responses of Veterans with (n=33) and without substance use problems (n = 51) to questions about work's significance and its relationship to disability payments. T- and chi-square tests were conducted to determine if Veterans with substance use problems differed from the others on work-related attitudes and perceptions of the relation between work and Veterans' benefits. *Results:* Veterans endorsed high levels of agreement with statements that working would lead to loss of benefits. Veterans with substance use agreed more strongly that they would rather turn down a job offer than lose financial benefits. *Conclusions:* The greater preference for disability payments among substance-using Veterans may reflect a realistic concern that they are particularly likely to have difficulty maintaining employment. The widespread concern among Veterans that work will lead to loss of VA disability payments is striking given the ambiguity about how likely loss of benefits actually is, and should be addressed during the service-connection application process."

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- This study compares attitudes toward employment and service-connected disabilities among substance using and non-using veterans. Assessing attitudes toward employment may guide new strategies for policymakers to encourage veterans to gain employment.
- Findings show that both substance using and non-using veterans highly prioritize work, ranking work immediately after family, and before leisure, religion, and community. This prioritization demonstrates that veterans view employment as an important aspect of life. However, veterans with substance abuse issues expressed an underlying concern that job acquisition would lead to the loss of their financial disability benefits provided by the VA.
- Substance using veterans preferred receiving benefits payments over being employed. This finding may highlight that substance users, despite wanting to be employed, are reluctant to forfeit the stability that disability benefits provide. Future research is needed on why substance-using veterans think they might lose their disability benefits if they become employed.

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

Veterans place a high value on being employed, regardless of whether they use substances. However, veterans who used substances were more likely to express fear of losing disability benefits if they became employed. For many veterans, being employed could serve as a means to address their substance issues as well as potentially improve their medical, legal, familial, social, and psychiatric functions. Given that successful employment can play a key role in reducing substance misuse, veterans with substance use problems should pursue employment for their economic benefit and to aid in their rehabilitation from substance abuse. Furthermore, substance abuse counselors and employment counselors should inform veterans with a service-connected disability that they may still be eligible to receive their financial disability benefits if they obtain a job because disability status is not determined by economic status. Using the Code of Federal Regulations regarding service-connected benefits, counselors should explain to veterans who are concerned about losing benefits that VA disability ratings are primarily based upon “the economic or industrial handicap which must be overcome and not from individual success in overcoming it.”

FOR POLICY

The VA and the DoL have a number of existing programs that offer job search assistance, job training, the Veterans' Preference System, and counseling for veterans. However, some veterans may have trouble navigating the realm of veteran benefits and employment. In order to de-mystify the process surrounding receipt of disability benefits after employment is acquired, the VA and the DoL might conduct more outreach and market their services to veteran populations not aware of the abovementioned programs. These federal-level outreach programs might address the specific needs of substance-using veterans to assist in the transition to employment. These programs might include specialized counseling and job-training resources. In addition to federal programs, many state-level VA departments offer specific programs to help veterans with disabilities secure employment. State-level agencies and programs might work with counseling centers to determine the most productive ways to address the specific employment needs of veterans with disabilities and/or substance use issues.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A limitation of this study is that a small convenience sample of veterans with and without histories of substance abuse who were enrolled in a larger parent clinical trial were used for this analysis. Future studies should sample larger populations on a randomized basis to ensure that the results found here are geographically and demographically generalizable. Participants of this study were predominantly Caucasian men in their late 30's. Future studies should include more diverse racial populations. Additionally, future studies should include women veterans who are users and non-users of substances to determine if women veterans have the same attitudes toward employment and receipt of financial disability benefits. This study was limited by not including standardized chemical testing method for substance use. Assessment of substance use was performed by analyzing patient records and disability claims. Though this method typically finds true positives, a more standardized approach to assessing substance use may further increase the validity of future studies. Future studies should examine the reasons substance using veterans fear losing their disability benefits if they gain employment. Since families play an important role in a veteran's life, future researchers should assess the perceptions family members of substance using veterans have on their veteran gaining employment.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Sarah Meshberg-Cohen, Ph.D.^{1,2,3}

Kathryn Reid-Quñones, Ph.D.³

Anne C. Black, Ph.D.²

Marc I. Rosen, M.D.²

¹ sarah.meshberg-cohen@yale.edu

² VA Connecticut Healthcare System; Yale University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry

³ National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Medical University of South Carolina