



The Economic Status of Parents with Serious Mental Illness in the United States

Introduction

Like other parents with disabilities, parents whose mental illnesses convey the greatest likelihood of disability are more likely to be low-income than are parents without psychiatric disabilities. This lack of income increases their eligibility for government benefits like Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/food stamps), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Our data showed that there were major differences between the characteristics of parents with serious mental illness, non-parents with serious mental illness, and parents with no mental illness.

Compared to mothers without serious mental illness, mothers with serious mental illness were

- **More likely to be under 35**
- **More likely to be white**
- **More likely to be in fair or poor health**
- **More likely to have problems with substance use**
- **Less likely to have ever been married**
- **Less well educated**

Compared to fathers without serious mental illness, fathers with serious mental illness were

- **More likely to be in fair or poor health**
- **More likely to have problems with substance use**
- **Less likely to have a college education**

Compared to non-parents with serious mental illness, parents with serious mental illness were

- **More likely to have ever been married**
- **Less likely to have problems with substance use**
- **More likely to be in better health**

Though parents with serious mental illness are more likely to be employed than non-parents with the same illness severity, they were more likely than non-parents to use government benefits like food stamps, public assistance, government-sponsored job-placement programs, and federal benefits.

There is an important caveat to these results. The nature of our study—a cross-sectional examination of nationally distributed surveys—prevents us from determining causal relationships. We can, however, still use these data to highlight disparities that can be addressed with inclusive policy proposals.

Policy Implications

Parents with serious mental illness experience less economic stability than parents without serious mental illness. They are also more likely to be below the poverty line than people with serious mental illnesses who do not have children. Moreover, current programs intended for low-income parents in the general population may not adequately address the needs of parents with serious mental illness. For example, TANF's strict 30- to 40-hour work requirements may make it difficult for parents to access treatment outside work hours.

To redress these economic disparities, we recommend providing support to parents with mental illness seeking employment or education. Access to better jobs and education will improve economic and social outcomes both for parents and children. Economically stable parents are better able to provide for their children and may be less vulnerable to custody loss.

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