



Suggested Research Topics

SSA Disability Beneficiaries

- There is a wide range of impairments among individuals receiving disability payments from Social Security. Are some impairments associated with higher levels of return to work?
- What are the most common services used by beneficiaries with different types of impairments (e.g., mental impairments compared to those with physical impairments)? How does the use of employment services differ across these groups?
- How does age affect the ability to work among individuals with different types of impairments (e.g., degenerative disc disease or major depressive disorder)?
- What are the job characteristics in terms of wages, hours, and job benefits among beneficiaries working in sheltered workshops? How do work goals and expectations, and the use of vocational services, differ for those working in sheltered workshops compared to other beneficiaries?
- SSA currently uses a formula called the Specific Vocational Profile as a proxy for an occupation's skill level. The model considers educational requirements, prior work experience, pre-employment training (such as licenses and certifications), and post-employment (on the job) training. What other models exist to provide a proxy measurement for skill? How do the models compare to one another?
- How significantly does the amount of time an individual has been out of the workforce affect his or her ability to re-enter the workforce? Is there a point at which it would be unlikely that an individual would be successful in this effort to return to the workforce? Do the vocational factors of age, education, or past work experience affect this?

SSA Work Incentive Programs

- How do beneficiaries become aware of, and receive accurate information about, the many employment and benefit programs for which they are potentially eligible?
- How does the complexity of our work incentives, other work incentive programs, insurance, asset retention, and employment services affect beneficiaries' willingness to go to work?
- What services are being utilized by individuals with disabilities? What are outcomes for users?

- What happens when individuals leave vocational rehabilitation programs? Are they employed long term? Do they hold a number of short-term jobs? Do they stop working?
- How many individuals with disabilities are able to find successful employment without using support services? What kind of employment? Why didn't they use support services? Are they more successful if employment is in the same or similar field as past work experience?
- How does the length of time to secure a job vary among beneficiaries who utilize employment services from a private employment agency, a medical/vocational rehabilitation center, or vocational services through State welfare agency? Do beneficiaries utilize multiple sources? How does the job placement retention and attrition rate differ based on the type of impairment and type of services used to secure the job?
- Does reporting work have a negative effect on job retention for beneficiaries?
- What is the average length of time at one job, and the number of jobs held, by the current work force and how does it vary from past generations?
- At what frequency do the requirements and skill-level of a job change? Does it vary by occupation and industry type?

Workplace Accommodations

- How do job accommodations differ by impairment or by occupation, industry type, or size of employer?
- How do large, industrial organizations optimize inclusiveness for workers with disabilities in their workforce?
- Has the greater availability of telework affected the success rate of individuals with disabilities returning to work? Does the potential isolation telework causes have a negative effect on individuals with disabilities who work?

Other Factors Affecting Return to Work

- *Youth with Disabilities*
 - Does work-study (i.e., learning about how to work) improve the likelihood of employment success among youth with disabilities?
 - How do success rates compare between youth that live in states with state-run transitional vocational rehabilitation programs and youth that live in states without state-run transitional services?
 - What happens in regards to employment when children with individualized education programs (IEPs) reach adulthood? How many received support services? What is their employment rate?

- What additional arrangements do parents of children and youth with disabilities need to make in order to stay employed themselves?
- *Finances*
 - Social Security benefits are modest (roughly \$1,200 per month). How does the replacement rate (how much of an individual's pre-disability income benefits replace) effect efforts to return to work following disability onset? Are individuals for whom the replacement rate is low more or less likely to attempt to return to work than individuals for whom the replacement rate is high?
 - Disability is highly correlated with poverty. Individuals living in poverty often do not have the resources necessary to overcome barriers to work that may or may not be disability related, but may still cause them to quit working, be fired, or reduce hours to their own financial detriment. Does access to additional resources increase the likelihood of employment continuity? When controlling for type of benefit and amount of benefit within a tolerance, would this correlation continue to exist?
 - Is there a point at which the eligibility criteria for benefits make work unaffordable?
- *Education*
 - Do beneficiaries explore education programs that could improve their prospect for returning to work? Do they focus on building upon skills and knowledge obtained prior to disability or switch to new educational programs to support transition to new industry/field of work?
 - Do educational accommodations at the secondary and post-secondary levels support job placements for youth or adult beneficiaries? Is there a connection between educational accommodations and school work-study, co-op, or internship programs?
 - How does education affect the ability to work among individuals with impairments?
 - Does the age at which a worker earns a degree impact employability/career change? Does higher education always provide a competitive advantage for a worker, or does this advantage decrease over time?
 - Which is a better predictor of return to work among our disability population – education level or past work experience? If education – what level of education? If past work experience – is the skill level of past work a factor or the length of time a person worked?
 - What is the functional definition of illiteracy? Is there a level of education at which you can assume that an individual is illiterate? If so, at what level?

- *Policy*
 - The Affordable Care Act made health insurance more accessible through exchanges and Medicaid. How did these changes effect individuals' abilities to keep working or to return to work? Were individuals able to delay filing for Social Security disability insurance due to continued employment?
 - How do the policies of other federal and state agencies that serve individuals with disabilities interact with SSA's policies? Do policies from different organizations conflict with each other or cause disincentives for return to work?
 - Are youth with disabilities and their families aware of the ABLE Act? How are they learning about it? What, if any, effect has the ABLE Act had on youths' plans for work?
 - How are health care incentive programs influencing health care utilization, including quantity, types of care (e.g., laboratory, testing, prescription), delivery settings (e.g., outpatient vs. inpatient and alternatives such as urgent care), and providers of care?
 - How are the CDC's standards on prescribing opioids affecting the disabled population's ability to return to work?
- *Other*
 - What impact does an individual's ability (or inability) to obtain transportation have on return to work?
 - Does interaction with positive disability role models affect the likelihood someone with a disability will attempt work?
 - Thirty-six states had certification programs for individuals with mental illness to become service providers in their respective states. What is the effect of that program on employment outcomes for certification participants?
 - When individuals with disabilities become parents, what additional work or parental supports are needed to continue working?
 - Have there been structural changes in the economy, policy environments, or workplace cultures that make employers more or less likely to engage individuals with health impairments, different levels of education, or different types of past work experience? For example, in the U.S., over time, has the culture, sociology, or economics of the workplace become more or less accommodating of individuals with limited education or advanced age (defined by SSA as age 55 and over)?
 - Can workers of advanced age (defined by SSA as age 55 and over) adapt to changes in work? Can (and will) they learn new tasks and skills? Is this ability to adapt and learn new tasks and skills affected by educational attainment and work experience (or lack thereof)?

- How does the changing nature of work affect individuals with disabilities? For instance, does gig economy employment provide more opportunity for individuals with disabilities to return to work?
- Individuals are staying in the workforce longer now – many older workers are changing to new occupations. What type of occupations are commonly held by older workers? What are the exertional and skill requirements of these occupations? Do employers in these occupations make accommodations for older workers?
- How long do skills acquired through past work experience stay relevant? Is this time affected by the individual's educational attainment? If so, how?
- What is the impact of technology such as computers, tablets, and automation on return to work? How does technology influence the exertion and skill required to perform jobs?
- What lessons can SSA learn from how private insurance companies and/or government entities are using social media in the determination of an individual's ability to work? Can social media help inform the need or the effect of workplace accommodations for individuals with impairments?