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Original Research

Perception of Employment by the Veterans Participating in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games: A Survey Study

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Abstract

Background: Employment in those with disability is an important rehabilitation goal, along with achieving some measure of functional independence and is at the same time one of the most difficult goals to achieve. The number of people with disabilities participating in adaptive sports has been increasing steadily over the years. A few studies have looked at the relationship between physical fitness and employment status in those with disability, but there have been no studies that focused on the results of organized adaptive sports events affecting employment outcome.

Objective: To determine whether participation in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG) has a positive impact on employment in those with disability.

Study Design: Prospective, cross-sectional survey.

Setting: 2015 NVWG in Dallas, Texas (nonclinic setting).

Participants: A total of 338 survey participants; 36 surveys were excluded due to incompleteness.

Methods: Veterans who participated at the 2015 NVWG were given the opportunity to complete a 2-page survey. Survey participants received \$5.00 gift card as compensation.

Main Outcome Measurements: Percentage of those who perceived NVWG made a difference in attaining employment, risk ratio analyses.

Results: A total of 50% of the participants stated that the NVWG made a difference in attaining employment. Those currently working were 1.5 times more likely to say that the NVWG had a positive effect on employment than those not currently working ($P < .01$). Those who felt that the NVWG had a positive effect on employment attended 3-4 more wheelchair games on average than those reporting that the NVWG did not have an impact on employment ($P < .001$). Positive responses were obtained from the Likert scale distribution.

Conclusions: Our study suggests that participating in the NVWG provides psychosocial support to the veterans and may have a positive influence in employment outcomes.

Level of Evidence: To be determined.

Introduction

Adaptive Sports: Physical, and Psychological Impact

The number of people with disabilities participating in adaptive sports has been increasing steadily over the years with the development of improved equipment and increased opportunities for participation. It is estimated that in the United States, 2-3 million individuals with physical and mental disabilities compete in organized competitions each year [1]. The National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG) is the largest annually

occurring multi-event wheelchair sports and rehabilitation program sponsored jointly by the Department of Veterans Affairs and Paralyzed Veterans of America [2]. It is open to U.S. military veterans who use wheelchairs for sports competition as the result of their disability (amputations, spinal cord injury [SCI], and other neurologic conditions). Ever since its opening in 1981, there have been on average about 500 athletes who participate in this event, which hosts 19 adaptive sports [2].

The NVWG is one of the many adaptive sports programs hosted across the nation for those with disability with the goal of promoting improved health and fitness both physically and mentally via competition and

teamwork. The literature has shown that participants involved in adaptive sports programs achieved significant gains in their rehabilitation outcome, level of independence, quality of life, and community integration. Wetterhahn et al [3] linked the benefits of exercise in amputees by comparing outcome measures in appearance assessment and fitness evaluation between active and minimally active groups. A study by Sporer et al [4] at NVWG and Winter Sports Clinic demonstrated that adaptive sports events helped to increase participants' knowledge of sports equipment, learning sports, mobility skills, and acceptance of disability. It is well established in the literature on SCI that participating in adaptive sports or even engaging in an exercise program is associated with better quality of life and improved psychological profiles (reduction in pain, stress, anxiety, and depression) [5-9]. In addition, a study by Hanson et al [10] demonstrated better community integration in athletes with SCI after analyzing the Craig Handicap Assessment and Reporting Technique scores in people with SCI.

Employment in Those With Disability

Employment is an important rehabilitation goal along with achieving functional independence. There are many studies that investigate employment and return to work rates, barriers to employment, and other vocational aspects. The 2015 National Employment and Disability Survey by Kessler Foundation showed that the rate of employment among people with disabilities was 42.6% and that 68.4% of people with disabilities were striving for work [11]. Employment rate after SCI was 24.8%, and the time to obtain a first full-time job after SCI was about 6.3 years from Krause's studies [12,13]. In those with traumatic brain injury (TBI) with impaired cognitive functioning, employment rate was 55% at 3 years after trauma, and psychiatric symptoms were the most challenging barrier to employment [14].

A few studies have looked at the relationship between physical fitness and employment status. Active involvement in fitness and sports by those with SCI increased their likelihood of employment in some studies [15-17], but no significant correlation also has been reported in other studies [18]. To our knowledge, there have been no studies that focused on the results of organized adaptive sports programs (such as NVWG) in terms of employment outcome. The objective of this study was to determine whether participation in the NVWG positively influence employment outcome in people with disabilities.

Methods

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the research committee within Veterans Affairs Medical Center. A research grant was approved by the Paralyzed Veterans of America.

Participants

All those with qualifying disability who registered to participate in the 2015 NVWG were eligible for the study; veterans of all ages, genders, and medical diagnoses (stroke, TBI, SCI, multiple sclerosis, amputation) were enrolled. For those who were not able to fill out the survey because of physical impairment (eg tetraplegia), their caretakers helped to fill out the survey with verbal answers provided by the veterans. After completion of the survey, they were given a \$5.00 gift card as compensation for their time.

Survey Questionnaire

An 8-question survey was created by the investigators of the study (Appendix 1). The first page of the questionnaire focused on demographics. The following demographic data were obtained (Questions 1-2): age, gender, level of education, medical diagnosis for their injury, year of injury leading to disability, and years of participation in the NVWG. They were asked whether their medical diagnosis was service connected, but because of differing understanding (or lack of) the meaning, the answer to this question was later discarded after completion of the project. They also were asked when they were employed (Questions 3-5): employment status before their injury, employment status after their injury but before participating in the NVWG, and current employment status.

The second page of the survey contained questions about whether participating in NVWG made a difference

Table 1
Demographics of survey participants (n = 302)

Description	Numerical Values
Gender	
Male	274 (91)
Female	28 (9)
Age, y, mean; SD	54.8; 12.12
25-54	138 (46)
55-64	92 (30)
64+	72 (24)
Education (graduation level)	
High school	93 (31)
College	160 (53)
Postcollege	43 (14)
Other	6 (2)
Diagnosis	
Traumatic brain injury	20 (7)
Stroke	9 (3)
Multiple sclerosis	25 (8)
Amputations	49 (16)
Spinal cord injury	227 (75)
Paraplegic	146
Tetraplegic	66
Years since injury, mean; SD	20.6; 14.8
Times attending the NVWG, mean; SD	6.7; 6.8

Values are n (%) unless otherwise noted.

NVWG = National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

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