



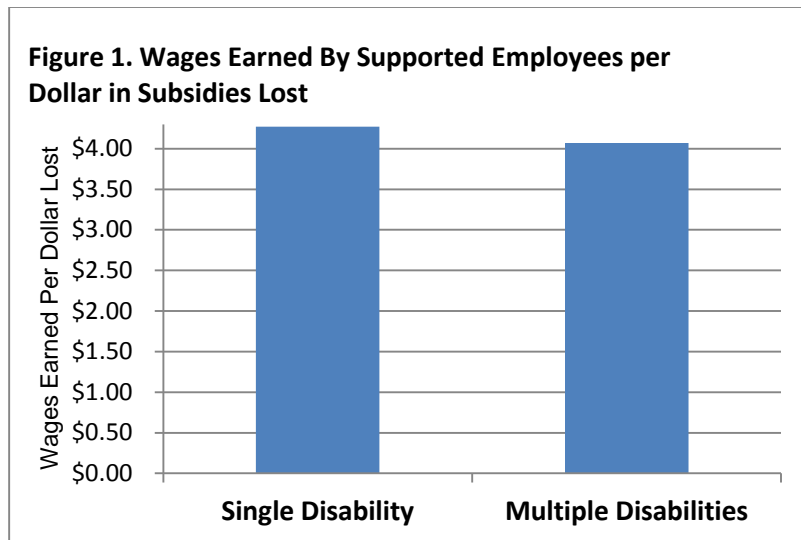
Should People with Disabilities Work in Their Communities?

Or do they earn more from governmental subsidies?

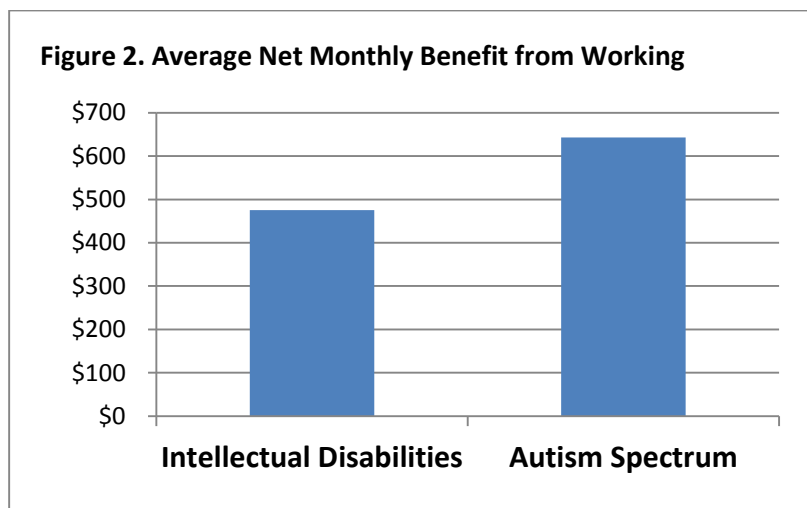
Prior to the 1970s, many people doubted that individuals with disabilities were capable of working. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, study after study found that not only can individuals with disabilities perform meaningful vocational tasks, but that they also prefer competitive employment to sheltered workshops. However, twenty years later, many people still insist that, while individuals with disabilities *can* and *want* to work, they shouldn't do so because they will lose their government benefits and end up with less money than they would have received had they not worked at all. Several recent studies have explored this issue.

For example, Cimera (2010)¹ examined data from 104,213 supported employees with intellectual disabilities throughout the United States. He found that supported employees averaged earning a net benefit of \$475.35 per month. That is, although supported employees may have lost government subsidies as the result of working, they earned far more than they lost. Stated another way, for every dollar supported employees lost, they earned \$4.20 in wages.

These findings were even observed for individuals with multiple disabilities. According to Cimera (2010), supported employees with two or more disabilities averaged earning a monthly net benefit of \$454.51. Further, for every dollar that they lost, they earned \$4.07. These results held true in every U.S. state and territory (see Figure 1).



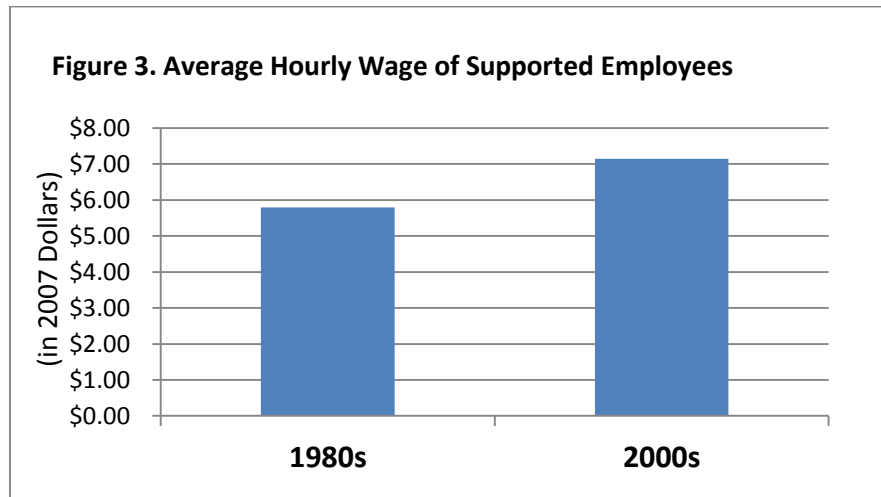
The following year, Cimera and Burgess (2011)² examined data from 19,436 supported employees with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Similar to Cimera (2010), these authors found that supported employees with ASD averaged earning a net benefit of \$643.20 per month and obtained \$5.28 per every dollar of governmental subsidy lost (see Figure 2).



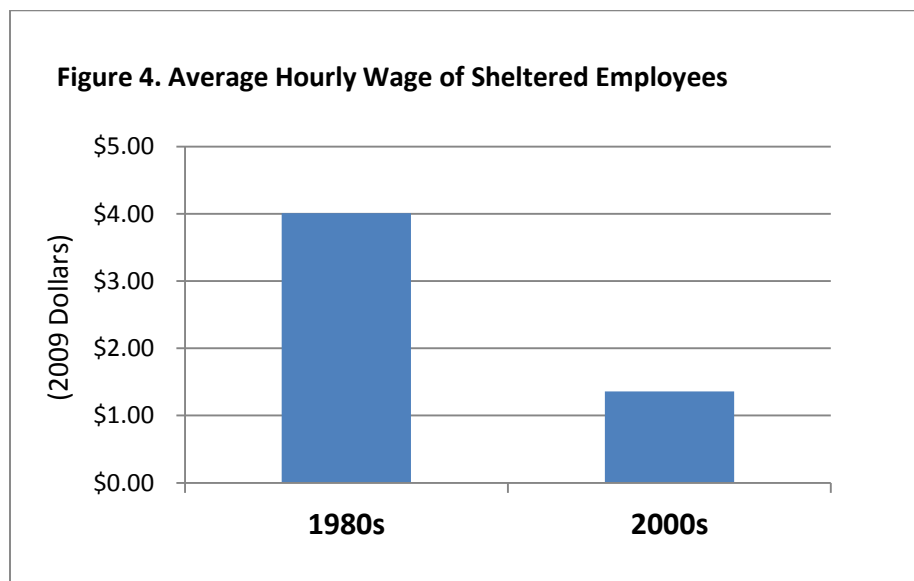
Interestingly, the monetary benefits of working are increasing over time. For instance, in the 1980s, supported employees with intellectual disabilities earned \$1.43 for every dollar that they lost as a result of working in the community. Twenty-three years later, this figure was \$4.20 per dollar lost.

The primary reason for this increased return-on-investment is that supported employees earn more per hour now than they did in the 1980s. Specifically, in 1980,

supported employees earned an average of \$2.30 per hour (\$5.79 in 2007 dollars); whereas, in 2007 supported employees averaged earning \$7.15 per hour (see Figure 3).



Unfortunately, the wages earned by sheltered employees have not fared as well. In 1980, sheltered employees earned \$1.54 per hour (\$4.01 in 2009 dollars). This is compared to \$1.36 in 2009. In other words, while supported employees experienced a **17.4% increase** in adjusted wages since the 1980s, sheltered employees have actually experienced a **66.1% decrease** over the same period (see Figure 4).



So, should people with disabilities work competitively in their communities? Absolutely. While they may lose some government subsidies as a result of being employed, they gain far more money than they lose. Further, in addition to earning wages, working in the community provides individuals with disabilities numerous non-monetary benefits

as well, such as rewarding friendships and increased self-esteem. Working, in other words, makes both financial and non-financial sense.

¹ Cimera, R.E. (2010). The national cost-efficiency of supported employees with intellectual disabilities: The worker's perspective. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 33*, 123-131

² Cimera, R.E. & Burgess, S. (2011). Do adults with autism benefit monetarily from working in their communities? *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 34*, 173-180.