Helping the hard-to-employ transition to employment

Some cash welfare clients and disadvantaged parents with child support obligations have significant barriers to finding and keeping a job.

Barriers include low education, physical or mental health issues, criminal history, caregiving responsibilities for a disabled child, and recent experience of domestic violence.

Approaches include caseworkers providing personal attention and robust supports; incentives for employment and/or child support compliance; and interventions informed by behavioral science.

When cash welfare became a temporary program with work requirements (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, TANF) in 1997, many former recipients successfully made the transition from welfare to work. But those with substantial barriers to employment continue to struggle. Similarly, low-income parents with unpaid child support obligations often face significant obstacles to finding and keeping a job. Together, these groups form a substantial share of the “hard-to-employ.” This brief explores their challenges and current research on a range of programs to address their difficulties and connect them to employment.

Barriers to work include low education and physical or mental illness.

Research has documented that the substantial barriers to work faced by hard-to-employ populations include low education, physical or mental health issues (such as depression), caregiving responsibilities for a disabled child, recent experience of domestic violence, criminal history, lack of transportation, lack of social capital, learning disabilities, limited work experience, housing instability, and substance use problems. Child support orders can constitute an additional barrier to formal employment for noncustodial parents who don’t earn enough to cover their own living expenses after paying child support (which may make formal employment less attractive).

Figures 1 and 2 (see page 2) show the prevalence of select barriers. These obstacles to work suggest a need to develop specialized programs to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged TANF clients and noncustodial parents.

The most disadvantaged individuals require innovative and intensive strategies.

Some TANF programs assess clients to identify their barriers, while hiring specialized staff or limiting caseload size for staff assigned more difficult cases. This allows caseworkers to provide intensive case management and more supportive services to address participants’ barriers. Evaluations have found that such comprehensive strategies, when combined with a strong emphasis on rapid participation in employment activities or work, can increase employment for the hard-to-employ, compared with standard agency services.

Many child support agencies are moving beyond a sole focus on collections to develop intensive work-focused case management and services similar to those used in TANF. Employment services include individualized employment plans, job search assistance, job readiness training, job application assistance, interviewing skills, and education obtainment. Some TANF programs provide monetary or nonmonetary incentives to program participants to motivate them to engage in workforce development activities and employment. Similarly, some employment-related programs that target noncustodial parents have utilized incentives to encourage program participation and employment.

Strengths-based interventions and coaching show promise.

A number of TANF agencies are helping clients assess and access their strengths to achieve their personal goals, based on the belief that people are most successful at achieving their goals when they identify and utilize their strengths, abilities, and assets. Motivational interviewing focuses on using an empathic, supportive counseling style to help increase individuals’ motivation to change. Strengths-based interventions have been shown to improve various outcomes for individuals with serious mental illness; and motivational interviewing has shown promise at changing short-term behaviors in areas such as health. Goal setting and coaching models are also being implemented by specially trained staff who help participants identify goals for change and coach them through the steps needed to attain them to increase employment. Rigorous evaluations of this approach are ongoing.

Peer interaction and mentoring have proven effective.

Some TANF programs have incorporated peer mentoring, support groups, and other activities that may help participants encourage and learn from other participants.
experience or other barriers to employment. Such strategies have successfully placed TANF clients in jobs and boosted short-term employment and earnings. One randomized controlled trial found that subsidized jobs for TANF clients produced large, statistically significant gains in employment and reductions in welfare assistance in the short-run, but those impacts faded quickly as individuals left the temporary jobs.20 Subsidized employment programs have also been found to boost employment for formerly incarcerated and noncustodial parent populations, although effects fade as the temporary subsidies end.21

Alternative staffing organizations might also be effective.

A related approach to helping hard-to-employ individuals find work is alternative staffing organizations.22 These firms adapt the temporary staffing business model of providing staffing services to employers for a fee, but place a stronger emphasis on providing greater job readiness, case management, and support services to boost successful job placements and job retention for the workers.23

Conclusion

TANF and child support programs have developed and implemented a number of strategies for engaging participants in work-related activities to address program participants’ significant barriers to employment. While some promising practices have been identified, additional research is needed to prioritize strategies that consistently work for different types of hard-to-employ TANF recipients and noncustodial parents.

For sources and more information, go to https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/helping-the-hard-to-employ-transition-to-employment
employment services and intensive job development services (necessitating small caseloads per worker). Drake and Bond found the program to be more effective than other vocational rehabilitation approaches in 20 randomized controlled trials. Catholic Charities Fort Worth’s Padua program, which is also undergoing an RCT evaluation, focuses on providing intensive case management, individualized assessments and service plans, as well as financial supports to poor families. Another good example of this kind of comprehensive model at scale in a TANF program is New York City’s Wellness, Comprehensive Assessment, Rehabilitation and Employment program, although it has not undergone rigorous impact evaluation to determine its efficacy.

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ENDNOTES


4. At least two variations of this comprehensive approach are currently undergoing rigorous impact evaluation. The Breaking Barriers San Diego project, implemented by the Workforce Investment Board for San Diego County, California, is seeking to replicate the findings from an earlier pilot in Minnesota that found that the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model could help TANF recipients with disabilities achieve employment. The IPS model emphasizes that employment is an integral part of treatment and recovery. It therefore emphasizes rapid employment of people with disabilities and promotes job placement through personalized case management.


7. For instance, the New York Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers programs (see T. G. Tannehill, C. T. O’Brien, and E. J. Sorensen, “Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Initiative: Process Evaluation Report,” Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2007) adopted a one-on-one case management approach for providing services. Program participants and their dedicated case managers work closely throughout the period of participation. Case managers reported that they had some type of contact with participants at least once a month, although most described more frequent interaction by phone or e-mail, and less in person, depending on participants’ level of engagement. Case management activities include more regular case management activities, including and referrals for specialized services, assisting with child support issues, following up on job leads and referrals, and providing general support.


9. Programs in the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) evaluation provided participants with gift cards or cash payments for achieving specific milestones, such as obtaining employment, sustaining consistent employment, or making consistent child support payments (Paulsell et al., 2015). In addition, the Parents and Children Together programs and the Massachusetts Parent Support Program (see J. Pearson, R. Kaunelis, and N. Thoennes, “Massachusetts Parent Support Program Final Report,” Denver, CO: Center for Policy Research, 2012) offered financial incentives such as temporary minimum or zero-dollar orders for unemployed obligors who participated in the work-related program, and noncustodial parents could receive reductions in state-owed child support arrears for program participation.

of “set-aside” provisions in government contracts, DePaul has diversified so that nearly two-thirds of its clients are private employers.

Another well-established example of applying one-on-one coaching and goal-setting model to a population very similar to that of TANF is EMPath, a Massachusetts nonprofit that has shown impressive outcome results (see https://www.empathways.org/approach). EMPath has worked with academics to develop Mobility Mentoring®, which pairs low-income people with trained mentors who use a coaching method rooted in the latest brain science. A longitudinal evaluation of an intensive, five-year, community-based implementation of Mobility Mentoring found that the program increased participants’ average earnings by 72 percent to more than $27 per hour, savings by more than $34,000, and postsecondary degree attainment from 30 percent to over 90 percent (see review in Babcock, 2018). TANF programs in multiple states recently piloted versions of goal setting and coaching models through the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) Systems to Family Stability National Policy Academy (OFA, 2017).

The groups were designed to help people building a stable foundation that supports their relationships with each other, within their families and communities, and give participants opportunities to express their goals and potential for success. At 15 months after study entry, participants assigned to the peer support group and 28 weeks of financial education classes reported greater earnings (but lower levels of employment) than participants in the control group who received standard TANF programming.

For example, Parents and Children Together (PACT) implemented specific activities designed to encourage noncustodial parents, specifically men, to share their experiences and receive feedback and support from their peers (see R. Dion, P. Holcomb, H. Zaveri, A. V. D’Angelo, E. Clary, D. Friend, and S. Baumgartner, “Parents and Children Together: The Complex Needs of Low-Income Men and How Responsible Fatherhood Programs Address Them,” Washington, D.C.: Mathematica Policy Research, 2018). More specifically, at the fully integrated cohort program (Family Formation Program, FFP), workshop sessions begin with each father describing his previous day’s experience as a parent, partner, or job-seeker. Fathers who reach a milestone (such as getting an employment interview) were typically given positive reinforcement by their peers, while fathers who were struggling could receive emotional support and empathy from men who understood their challenges.

For a review, see Blumenberg and Pierce, “The Drive to Work.”

For example, the Ways to Work program in Milwaukee provides borrowers with low-cost financing for a car. Instead of basing the provision of the loan on borrowers’ credit scores, the loan officer evaluates each borrower’s work history and motivation to improve his or her economic situation (character-based lending). Employment outcomes for the program are promising (see ICF International, “Evaluation of the National Ways to Work Program,” Milwaukee, WI: Ways to Work, 2011). Also, The State of Washington recently provided enhanced, mostly private vehicle-based transportation services to assist adult TANF clients with participation-related activities. A “separate pre-post samples” pilot evaluation reported some positive findings on work-related outcomes (see B. L. Baxter, “Evaluating the Impact of Washington State’s Transportation Initiative for TANF Adults,” presented at the National Association for Welfare Research and Statistics 2017 Workshop, July 31, Pittsburgh, PA. Retrieved from https://nawrs.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/2-3-Baxter-Impact-of-WA-State-Transportation-Initiative.pdf).

Program participants who reported that they lacked access to reliable transportation were significantly less likely to fully participate in the project and attended fewer workforce development activities than their counterparts (38% vs. 50%). Specifically, those who reported having reliable transportation succeeded in participating in multiple intensive job club sessions and other activities. For example, the Parents to Work program (see J. Pearson, L. Davis, and J. Venohr, “Parents to Work,” Denver, CO: Center for Policy Research, 2011) found that the second most commonly cited barrier to employment for program participants was a lack of transportation (32%). See also, M. Cancian, D. R. Meyer, and R. G. Wood, “Can a Redesigned Child Support System Do Better?” Focus 35 (July 2019); and J. Noyes, L. Klein Vogel, and L. Howard, “Culture Change: Implementing a New Approach to Child Support,” Focus 35 (July 2019).

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Alternative staffing organizations mostly operate at a small scale and, in 2014, placed a total of about 30,000 people in jobs across the country. At present, this model has not been rigorously evaluated. A good example is DePaul Industries, based out of Portland, Oregon, which focuses on placing people with disabilities into jobs. After starting out by placing individuals with organizations that are required to employ people with disabilities because of “set-aside” provisions in government contracts, DePaul has diversified so that nearly two-thirds of its clients are private employers.