

Helping the hard-to-employ transition to employment

TAKEAWAYS

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.



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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.¹

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.² 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).³ 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.⁴ This allows caseworkers to provide intensive case management and more supportive services to address participants' barriers.⁵ 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.⁶

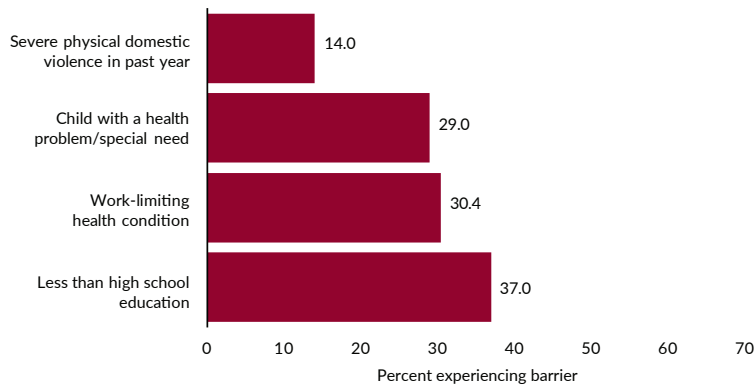
Many child support agencies are moving beyond a sole focus on collections to develop intensive work-focused case management and services similar to those used in TANF. Employment services include individualized employment plans, job search assistance, job readiness training, job application assistance, interviewing skills, and education obtainment.⁷ Some TANF programs provide monetary or nonmonetary incentives to program participants to motivate them to engage in workforce development activities and employment.⁸ Similarly, some employment-related programs that target noncustodial parents have utilized incentives to encourage program participation and employment.⁹

Strengths-based interventions and coaching show promise.

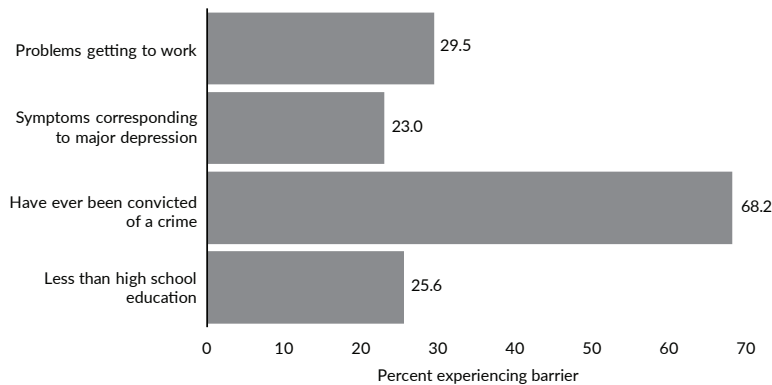
A number of TANF agencies are helping clients assess and access their strengths to achieve their personal goals, based on the belief that people are most successful at achieving their goals when they identify and utilize their strengths, abilities, and assets.¹⁰ Motivational interviewing focuses on using 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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

Figure 1. Prevalence of select barriers to employment among TANF recipients.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, various reports.

Figure 2. Prevalence of select barriers to employment among noncustodial parents.

Source: M. Cancian, A. Guarin, L. Hodges, and D. R. Meyer, "Characteristics of Participants in the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration Evaluation," Madison, WI: Institute for Research on Poverty, December 2018.

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>

one another.¹³ And, some child support programs have stressed the importance of peer interaction and support as an essential feature of helping noncustodial parents with personal development that leads to employment.¹⁴

Behavioral science strategies have worked across multiple populations.

Behavioral science insights are increasingly being used to boost participant engagement in human services programs. Modest interventions to help improve individual decision making ("nudges") have been effective across multiple populations.¹⁵ For child support, behavioral interventions such as simplified agency processes and redesigned communications have successfully increased the percentage of noncustodial parents who receive modifications of their child support order amounts, make monthly payments, and visit the agency to accept service voluntarily.¹⁶

Transportation services remove a common barrier to work.

Lack of access to a reliable car or public transportation is a common barrier to employment for both TANF clients and low-income noncustodial parents. Numerous studies have found that transportation access is associated with improved employment outcomes for welfare clients.¹⁷ Potential strategies for helping clients include lifting vehicle asset limits, and helping individuals save for and maintain an automobile.¹⁸ Similarly, some programs emphasize provision of practical support services, such as gas cards, vouchers, bus passes, car insurance, or lifting driver's license suspensions due to nonpayment of child support.¹⁹

Supported job placements often prove successful in short-term.

Programs may better serve hard-to-employ populations by emphasizing subsidized employment programs

Helping the hard-to-employ transition to employment

ENDNOTES

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.

⁵P. J. Loprest, P. A. Holcomb, K. Martinson, and S. R. Zedlewski, "TANF Policies for the Hard-to-Employ: Understanding State Approaches and Future Directions," *Assessing the New Federalism Discussion Paper* No. 07-03, Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2007.

⁶M. Meckstroth, A. Burwick, Q. Moore, M. Ponza, S. Marsh, A. McGuirk, T. Novak, and Z. Zhao, *Teaching Self-Sufficiency: An Impact and Benefit-Cost Analysis of a Home Visitation and Life Skills Education Program*, Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008; J. Morgenstern, C. J. Neighbors, A. Kuerbis, A. Riordan, K. A. Blanchard, K. H. McVeigh, T. J. Morgan, and B. McCrady, "Improving 24-Month Abstinence and Employment Outcomes for Substance-Dependent Women Receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families with Intensive Case Management," *American Journal of Public Health* 99, No. 2 (2009): 328–333; D. Butler, J. Alson, D. Bloom, V. Deitch, A. Hill, J. Hsueh, E. J. Valentine, S. Kim, R. McRoberts, and C. Redcross, *What Strategies Work for the Hard-to-Employ? Final Results of the Hard-to-Employ Demonstration and Evaluation Project and Selected Sites from the Employment Retention and Advancement Project*, Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012; M. Farrell, P. Baird, B. Barden, M. Fishman, and R. Pardoe, "The TANF/SSI Disability Transition Project: Innovative Strategies for Serving TANF Recipients with Disabilities," New York: MDRRC, 2013.

⁷For 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, 2009) 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 following up on milestones outlined in the individualized service plan, making arrangements or referrals for specialized services, assisting with child support issues, following up on job leads and referrals, and providing general support.

⁸S. Wissel and K. Borradaile, *Financial Incentives and Sanctions: Can They Improve Employment Outcomes for Low-Income Adults? Employment Strategies for Low-Income Adults Evidence Review Issue Brief*, Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016. More recently, agencies in Connecticut, Utah, and Florida have provided incentives to encourage individuals to participate in work-related activities, achieve key milestones such as completing a GED, and meet the monthly federal work requirement.

⁹Programs 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 obligators who participated in the work-related program, and noncustodial parents could receive reductions in state-owed child support arrears for program participation.

¹⁰T. J. Manthey, B. Knowles, D. Asher, and S. Wahab, "Strengths-Based Practice and Motivational Interviewing," *Advances in Social Work* 12, No. 2 (2011): 126–151.

¹D. Bloom, P. J. Loprest, and S. R. Zedlewski, S. R., "TANF Recipients with Barriers to Employment," *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program—Research Synthesis Brief No. 1*, Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2012.

²G. Acs and P. J. Loprest, *TANF Caseload Composition and Leavers Synthesis Report*, Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007; Z. R. Zedlewski, P. Holcomb and P. J. Loprest, "Hard-to-Employ Parents: A Review of Their Characteristics and the Programs Designed to Serve Their Needs," *Low-Income Working Families Paper* No. 9, Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 2007; R. Phinney, S. Danziger, H. A. Pollack, and K. Seefeldt, "Housing Instability among Current and Former Welfare Recipients," *American Journal of Public Health* 97, No. 5 (2007): 832–837; S. J. Lee and A. D. Vinokur, "Work Barriers in the Context of Pathways to the Employment of Welfare-to-Work Clients," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 40, Nos. 3–4 (2007): 301–312; T. S. Haney, "Off to Market: Neighborhood and Individual Employment Barriers for Women in 21st Century American Cities," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 35, No. 3 (2013): 303–325; E. Blumenberg and G. Pierce, "The Drive to Work: The Relationship between Transportation Access, Housing Assistance, and Employment among Participants in the Welfare-to-Work Voucher Program," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 37 No. 1 (2017): 66–82; D. Paulsell, J. L. Noyes, R. Selekmán, L. K. Vogel, S. Sattar, and B. Nerad, "Helping Noncustodial Parents Support Their Children: Early Implementation Findings from the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) Evaluation," Washington, D.C.: Office of Child Support Enforcement, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015.

³M. Cancian, A. Guarín, L. Hodges, and D. R. Meyer, "Characteristics of Participants in the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED)," Madison, WI: Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2018.

⁴At 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

ENDNOTES, CONT.

¹¹B. Lundahl and B. L. Burke, “The Effectiveness and Applicability of Motivational Interviewing: A Practice-Friendly Review of Four Meta-Analyses,” *Motivational Interviewing and Psychotherapy* 65, No. 11 (2009): 1232–1245; C. A. Green, S. L. Janoff, B. H. Yarborough, and R. I. Paulson, “The Recovery Group Project: Development of an Intervention Led Jointly by Peer and Professional Counselors,” *Psychiatric Services* 64, No. 12 (2013): 1211–1217. Kentucky’s Targeted Assessment Program is a good example of how these approaches can be incorporated into TANF, with assessment specialists, typically with Master’s degrees, helping individuals obtain services for mental health, substance use, intimate partner abuse, and learning disabilities. A pre/post evaluation, albeit without a control group, found that the model may have helped hard-to-employ TANF recipients increase their employment (see C. Leukfeld, E. L. Carlton, M. Staton-Tindall, and M. Delaney, “Six-Month Follow-Up Changes for TANF-Eligible Clients Involved in Kentucky’s Targeted Assessment Program,” *Journal of Social Service Research* 38, No. 3 (2012): 366–381).

¹²One 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 \$3,400, 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).

¹³(Vu et al., 2009) The groups were designed to help people who have experienced adversity work towards 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.

¹⁴For 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.

¹⁵L. Richburg-Hayes, C. Anzelone, and N. Dechausay, with P. Landers, *Nudging Change in Human Services: Final Report of the Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) Project*, Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017; M. Darling, C. O’Leary, I. Perez-Johnson, J. Lefkowitz, K. Kline, B. Damerow, R. Eberts, S. Amin, and G. Chojnacki, *Using Behavioral Insights to Improve Take-Up of a Reemployment Program: Trial Design and Findings*, Washington, D.C.: Chief Evaluation Office, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Policy, U.S. Department of Labor, 2017.

¹⁶Richburg-Hayes et al., *Nudging Change in Human Services*; C. Anzelone, J. Timm, and Y. Kusayeva, *Dates and Deadlines: Behavioral Strategies to Increase Engagement in Child Support*, Washington, D.C.: Office of Child Support Enforcement, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017.

¹⁷For a review, see Blumenberg and Pierce, “The Drive to Work.”

¹⁸For 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>).

¹⁹Program 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).

²⁰E. J. Valentine, and D. Bloom, *Alternative Employment Strategies for Hard-to-Employ TANF Recipients: Final Results from a Test of Transitional Jobs and Pre-employment Services in Philadelphia*, Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011.

²¹C. Redcross, M. Millenky, T. Rudd, and V. Levshin, *More Than a Job: Final Results from the Evaluation of the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) Transitional Jobs Program*, Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012; E. J. Valentine, “Returning to Work After Prison: Final Results from the Transitional Jobs Reentry Demonstration,” New York, NY: MDRC, 2012.

²²F. Hossain and R. Kazis, “Temporary Staffing for the Hard-to-Employ: Findings from a Brief Study of Alternative Staffing Organizations,” New York, NY: MDRC, 2015.

²³Alternative 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.