Pilot Profile: New Jersey

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Data Collaborative Pilot Initiative is a component of the TANF Data Innovation project. The 30-month pilot offered technical assistance and training to support cross-disciplinary teams of staff at eight state and county TANF programs in the routine use of TANF and other administrative data to inform policy and practice.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS.** The New Jersey pilot team—a collaboration between the New Jersey Department of Human Services’ Division of Family Development (DFD) and the Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University—examined the characteristics and housing transitions of families who were experiencing homelessness and were participating in the state’s TANF Emergency Assistance (EA) program (families that included one adult and, in most cases, one or more children). The team’s analysis focused on families moving from emergency placements (in shelters or motels) to Temporary Rental Assistance (TRA), which provides a monthly housing voucher and assistance with move-in costs such as a security deposit and first month’s rent.

**DATA LANDSCAPE.** The team built a longitudinal data set from two key sources of administrative data: The state’s Family Assistance Management Information System provided monthly information about benefits issued to TANF participants, and records from the state’s Unemployment Insurance (UI) system captured quarterly earnings in UI-covered jobs. The team defined the cohort for its analysis as families receiving TANF who were placed in emergency shelter between January 2018 and December 2021.

**APPROACH AND RESEARCH METHODS.** The pilot team built statistical models to predict rates of transition from emergency shelter to TRA, by family and county characteristics, in a “pre-COVID” period and in a “during-COVID” period.
The team used administrative records of prior employment and earnings as predictors and developed a multivariate model to explain variation in the number of families who transitioned from emergency shelter to TRA. Additional predictor variables included location, financial circumstances, demographic characteristics of the household and the head of household, as well as allowable Fair Market Rents in each county and year.

The team used several methods, with increasing rigor and assumptions, to examine these rates of transition more closely across New Jersey's 21 counties. The team used various statistical models to control for the amount of time that families were eligible for TRA, the county, the pre-COVID versus during COVID period, and demographic and financial characteristics of the head of household and family. Ultimately the team used a “piece-wise exponential model,” an event-history model that allowed the team to customize the analysis to reflect varied stages of a potential transition to TRA.

**New Jersey TANF Snapshot**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>State Supervised</th>
<th>County Administered</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of TANF participants (November 2020)</td>
<td>$559</td>
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<td>$559</td>
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**INITIAL FINDINGS AND NEXT STEPS.** The pilot offered DFD staff one of the first longitudinal examinations of how many and what proportion of families placed in emergency shelters transitioned to TRA, as well as the characteristics of those families. The pilot also provided context for TANF data analysts, program managers, and administrators to explore variation in these outcomes and exposed them to state-of-the-art statistical techniques implemented by the Rutgers team.

Key findings from New Jersey’s initial analyses include the following:

- More than half of all transitions from emergency shelter into partially subsidized TRA apartments occurred in just three of New Jersey’s 21 counties, for reasons that were only partially described in the administrative data. If all else was equal (participants, markets), three urban counties transitioned people to TRA at much higher rates. Adjusting for the effects of time in more sophisticated ways, the team found that these counties also transitioned people to TRA at much faster rates, which suggests that variations in local TANF operating procedures may be a factor.

- The formal statistical models suggest that several individual, household, and county characteristics were associated with transitions from emergency shelter to TRA. For example, participants with fewer months of TANF receipt, younger
participants (in their twenties), parents with less than a high school diploma, and parents with more consistent work histories were all more likely to transition to TRA. Additionally, families who lived in counties with higher allowable Fair Market Rents were more likely to transition into TRA.

- Emergency shelter-to-TRA transition rates fell during the COVID period. In the pre-COVID period, nearly half of those who were placed into emergency shelter and continued to receive TANF benefits transitioned to TRA within two years. During the COVID period this proportion declined to less than one-third.

Looking forward, the pilot team identified two key questions for further exploration. To develop more informed hypotheses about why families in three counties transitioned to TRA at higher rates, the team identified the need to better understand how local program operating procedures vary. Second, the team intends to continue using event-history models to better understand which types of families successfully transition to more stable and sustainable housing and the extent to which post-shelter employment is associated with such outcomes.