



# 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.



The New Jersey pilot team included Siyanbade Adegoke, Camisha Burchett, and Ryan Kennedy from the newly created Data Analytics and Research Team (DART) in DFD, Rutgers University Professor Andrea Hetling, and Rutgers researcher David Seith, who led the analysis and report writing and whose time was funded by DFD.

**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.

## PILOT HIGHLIGHTS

The New Jersey TDC pilot team built a learning community of more than a dozen staff members across organizations who met twice a month to identify, review, and refine research questions. In view of the unforeseen housing crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the pilot team studied what proportion of families took up EA services in the months following emergency shelter placement as well.

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



Number of TANF participants (November 2020)<sup>a</sup>

**5,990**

Adults

**16,902**

Children



**\$ 559**

Maximum Monthly Earnings Threshold for Family of 3 (July 2020)<sup>b</sup>

**\$ 559**

Monthly Cash Benefit for Family of 3 with No Income (July 2020)<sup>c</sup>

**\$ 1.5b**

TANF and State Maintenance-of-Effort Spending (FY 2020)<sup>d</sup>

(a) Congressional Research Service, [The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families \(TANF\) Block Grant: Responses to Frequently Asked Questions](#) (b) Urban Institute, Welfare Rules Database, [Table I.E.3. Standards for Determining Eligibility, July 2020](#) (c) Urban Institute, Welfare Rules Database, [Table II.A.4. Maximum Monthly Benefit for a Family with No Income, July 2020](#) (d) Office of Family Assistance, [TANF and MOE Spending and Transfers by Activity, FY 2020](#)

**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.

BB

I think that increased collaboration helped us define the outcomes of the research that we're doing. We're not doing research for research's sake . . . We are informing policy. We are informing operations.

DD

AMMAN DEEP SINGH SEEHRA

New Jersey Department of Human Services

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.

This profile was based primarily on reports and presentations produced by the pilot team at the New Jersey Department of Human Services. Please contact Annette Riordan ([annette.riordan@dhs.nj.gov](mailto:annette.riordan@dhs.nj.gov)) or Amman Seehra ([amman.seehra@dhs.nj.gov](mailto:amman.seehra@dhs.nj.gov)) information about the New Jersey program and study. The TANF Data Innovation (TDI) project team – which includes MDRC (lead), Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, the Coleridge Initiative, and Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy at the University of Pennsylvania – provided technical assistance and training. Melissa Wavelet of MDRC was the New Jersey TDC pilot coach. MDRC edited this document and it was designed by Public Strategies.

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