

The Transitional Jobs Reentry Demonstration:

Advancing the Field of Transitional Jobs

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The field of Transitional Jobs (TJ) is committed to providing employment opportunities to people throughout our nation who have struggled to find or keep a job. The National Transitional Jobs Network is committed to helping practitioners implement tested best practices to improve TJ program outcomes. In action, this commitment by the field translates into concerted efforts to:

1. **Build a base of evidence to understand how the TJ model works;**
2. **Use that evidence to enhance the model and improve TJ program quality; and**
3. **Apply research and on-the-ground experience to inform policy and systems change.**

The TJ field is unlike many others in its willingness and determination to undertake the most rigorous form of program evaluation – random assignment, control group studies. Results of previous studies indicate that TJ yields significant improvements in outcomes for both TANF recipients and the formerly incarcerated. Participation in TJ has been shown to increase employment and earnings for both groups, although those impacts faded over time. Prior studies also show reduced TANF receipt and lower TANF payments among long-term TANF recipients for 18 months, and reductions in recidivism among former prisoners that remained significant at the three year follow-up period.

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Early findings from the latest of these random assignment studies, the Transitional Jobs Reentry Demonstration (TJRD), have just become available. This new information is vitally important to helping a growing TJ field set its course for this new decade of work.

Transitional Jobs Reentry Demonstration Overview

The Transitional Jobs Reentry Demonstration (TJRD) was developed and funded by The Joyce Foundation with additional funding from the JEHT Foundation and the U.S. Department of Labor. The study was conducted by MDRC along with the Urban Institute and the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. TJRD was designed to measure the employment and recidivism impacts of TJ programs in four cities—Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee and St. Paul—using a rigorous, random assignment research design that compared the results of the TJ programs with those of job-search assistance and placement services. Over 1,800 men recently released from prison were randomly assigned to either a TJ program or a job search/placement program. There was also an ethnographic component consisting of interviews and follow-up with TJ participants.

An overview of TJRD from The Joyce Foundation is available at www.joycefdn.org. The full report, including detailed information on the TJRD study design, is available at www.mdrc.org.

TJRD Key Findings

Employment impacts

- High participation rates in the TJ programs indicate a strong desire to work among people exiting prison. Given the opportunity to work, 85% of the study group worked in a Transitional Job, with participation as high as 97% at some sites.
- During the first part of the study, there was a large increase in employment for TJ participants due to the Transitional Jobs themselves.
- The employment impacts faded over time as the TJ ended. By quarter 4 post-enrollment there were no significant differences in unsubsidized employment between the TJ group and the job search/placement recipients.

Recession cohort impacts

- A comparison between an early cohort (entered the program between January of 2007 and March 2008), and a late cohort (those who entered between April 2008 and September 2008 and experienced the worst part of the recession during their follow-up period) provides preliminary evidence that the Transitional Jobs programs may have been more effective in weaker labor markets at stabilizing employment.
- In quarters 3 and 4 post-enrollment, the TJ programs produced a modest increase in earnings from the unsubsidized jobs for the late cohort.

Retention bonus impacts

- Employment retention bonus payments were tested on a portion of the study sample. Analysis of outcomes at the St. Paul site shows that the use of monetary employment retention bonuses may have improved employment for the TJ group. Earnings and employment appear more positive for those who received retention bonuses – for example they were more likely to be employed for all four quarters of follow-up.

Recidivism impacts

- Just over one third of TJ participants ended up returning to prison (35.1%) during the first year of the follow-up period, most for technical parole violations. There were no consistent significant effects of TJ on recidivism, though in one site, St. Paul, the TJ group spent fewer days in prison.

Ethnography findings

- TJ participants in the ethnographic study generally felt positive about the program while they were receiving TJ, and saw TJ as an opportunity to shed the identity of “ex-offender.” As most subsequently struggled to find unsubsidized employment, many felt as if their expectations of TJ had not been met. However, during later interviews, many of the participants had come to see their time in TJ as a period of stability during an otherwise difficult time.

Lessons and Context

People reentering communities from prison have a strong willingness to work, but face daunting challenges in doing so.

High participation rates in the TJ programs indicate a strong desire to work among people exiting prison. This high participation rate suggests a large unmet demand for employment among people returning from prison, underlining the need for creating both subsidized and unsubsidized jobs. In spite of this demonstrated motivation to work, the labor market offers few employment opportunities for people with criminal records, with many occupations, and often entire sectors, off-limits for these potential productive workers. In addition many employers are unwilling to take the risk—perceived or real—of hiring a candidate who has been incarcerated. This situation represents a need for fundamental systems and policy change that is beyond the scope of subsidized employment interventions.

Transitional Jobs provided much-needed, immediate earned income even in bad economic times.

The Transitional Jobs programs successfully provided income and employment for the men in this study before and during the recession. This demonstrates that even in times of economic crisis, Transitional Jobs programs serve as a much-needed source of income and stability. The income earned by TJ participants helped them to meet basic needs at a time when they most needed it—and likely would not otherwise have been working. Given that the labor market is not expected to recover quickly or strongly in the next two years, this finding has real salience and import for programming now.

It is imperative that TJ programs and the model evolve to strengthen implementation—practitioners are already using these lessons to do just that.

The Transitional Jobs model as it is currently implemented has many demonstrable benefits for hard-to-employ individuals and has demonstrated positive results in a number of evaluations and studies. It is necessary however to continuously improve practices at the program level as well as seek out ways to strengthen the overall model. The TJRD findings reinforce this imperative—in order to produce more consistent, significant and lasting impacts on participant employment and recidivism, we must redouble our efforts to identify ways to improve the model and implement these new practices at the program level.

TJ programs across the country are committed to ongoing program improvement, and use findings such as those from TJRD as an opportunity to learn and innovate to produce better results for their participants. Likewise, the NTJN is investigating and disseminating innovative and evidence-based practices, and is already gleaning valuable lessons from the findings of the TJRD study, some of which are listed in this document. Programs have made considerable strides since the study began.

The challenges faced by people reentering from prison are substantial and complex.

Employment, while critical, is part of a broad range of needs.

People reentering communities from incarceration face a wide range of challenges beyond employment, such as the need for stable housing, family reunification, substance abuse and mental health treatment, as well as meeting the requirements of conditional release, criminal justice system user fees, and child support obligations. Rapid attachment to employment, as provided by TJ, can be a critical component of successfully reentering from prison and avoiding reincarceration, but it is far from the only piece. TJ can be a key part of a continuum of necessary services for people exiting prison, but it is necessary to determine how the need for employment opportunity can be met in a way that is integrated with other critical needs in order to significantly impact recidivism.

Relationships with the criminal justice community and other support systems are critical.

Effective programs working with people exiting prison have found that fostering positive relationships and building effective communications systems with parole officers, probation officials and other members of the criminal justice oversight community are essential for ensuring that TJ programs are able to recruit participants who are likely to benefit from TJ, as well as for helping participants manage the conditions of their release. Because TJ programs that serve people reentering from prison typically receive referrals directly from parole, a close partnership with referring agents helps them select and recruit the candidates who most need TJ. Such relationships allow TJ providers to educate criminal justice officials about the goals, processes and outcomes of TJ as well as the characteristics of good TJ candidates.

Good relationships may also help participants comply with their parole or probation requirements. In the TJRD study, most of the prison admissions for study participants were due to technical parole violations, not for new crimes. Positive relationships and good communication with parole and probation officers can allow TJ providers to better help participants comply with the conditions of their community supervision to avoid reincarceration. Relationships within other systems that impact the reentry population, such as child support, work release facilities and transitional housing, are also critical. Building relationships within these systems helps TJ providers to better understand how the systems involved impact TJ participant success, and can allow practitioners to positively influence these systems and reorient them toward the goals of employment, economic independence, and averted reincarceration for people exiting prison. For more population-specific best practices for serving people reentering from prison, watch for the NTJN's forthcoming TJ best practice guide for reentry.

These findings should be viewed in the context of a growing body of evidence favorable to TJ.

Overall, the Transitional Jobs model has produced positive results in many evaluations and studies, and the current findings should be considered within this broader perspective. A similar study by MDRC of the Center for Employment Opportunities found that the TJ group had significantly lower rates of recidivism on a variety of measures that lasted three years out after joining the program¹. A related study by MDRC of Transitional Work Corporation found that the TJ program consistently reduced the average TANF benefit amounts that sample members received, impacts that continued through quarter 6 (the last quarter studied to date)². In addition, those workers who were the most disadvantaged (little or no recent work history, long terms welfare receipt as well as those without a high school diploma) benefited more from the transitional jobs program.³ Moreover, random assignment studies typically do not capture the full picture of how a program or model positively impacts its participants—factors such as the value of immediate earned income on the families of reentering individuals, or of the period of relative stability in their lives, are not measured by random assignment research. For more information on TJ research and impacts visit the [research](#) section of the NTJN website

¹ Redcross, C. (2009). *Transitional Jobs for Ex-Prisoners: Three Year Results from a Random Assignment Evaluation of the Center for Employment Opportunities*. APPAM Annual Research Conference Presentation. New York: MDRC.

² Bloom, D. et al. (2009). [Alternative Welfare-to-Work strategies for the Hard-to-Employ: Testing Transitional Jobs and Pre-employment Services in Philadelphia](#). New York: MDRC.

³ Bloom, D. et al. (2009). [Alternative Welfare-to-Work strategies for the Hard-to-Employ: Testing Transitional Jobs and Pre-employment Services in Philadelphia](#). New York: MDRC.

Advancing the TJ Field

Using information from this growing body of Transitional Jobs research, the National Transitional Jobs Network (NTJN) is prepared to support the field in advancing the model and enhancing outcomes. The NTJN is developing new resources and identifying promising practices to improve outcomes for hard-to-employ participants, and is currently using the TJRD study findings to inform its efforts to develop and implement an enhanced, more effective iteration of the TJ model. There are a number of promising and/or evidence-based practices that TJ programs can implement in their efforts to improve participant outcomes. Some are population-specific and others can be implemented by any program regardless of target population.

- ✓ **Accurate targeting to determine who will benefit most from TJ:** The Transitional Jobs model is designed for people who would not otherwise be working, and who are unsuccessful in getting and keeping a job on their own. TJ programs appear to be most effective when they focus primarily on people with substantial barriers to employment—such as little or no work experience or no high school diploma or GED—as opposed to individuals with better prospects of finding work on their own or with less-intensive help. Up-front screening to identify barriers can help target Transitional Jobs to those who would benefit the most.
- ✓ **Improving the developmental nature of the transitional employment experience:** One of the primary goals of a Transitional Jobs program is the transition to unsubsidized employment for participants in the program. In order to achieve this outcome more consistently, we must continue to learn how to best structure the transitional employment experience. Possible program enhancements for maximizing the experiential learning effects of TJ include further structuring and intensifying on-site mentoring and coaching activities, gradually increasing responsibilities and stress, and providing participants with daily structured feedback on their basic work readiness—such factors as punctuality, cooperation, and effort. Consideration should be given to lengthening the period of time spent in the Transitional Job, particularly for participants whose chances of success in the competitive labor market are especially limited.
- ✓ **Sector-based hard skills training:** There is evidence that offering training and transitional work experience that is directly linked to occupation-specific skills in growing industry sectors is associated with better employment outcomes such as long-term employment and increases in earnings. Sector programs use local labor-market information and input from employers to target occupations with anticipated growth and opportunity for advancement, and then design short-term training specifically aimed at building skills for those occupations for low-income job seekers. Such training works best when employers in the targeted sector are closely involved in determining training curriculum content and design. Such sector-focused training could be integrated with TJ work experience and training, or TJ could be configured as an “on ramp” that delivers the foundational basic skills and experience to prepare hard-to-employ individuals for success in such training that may lead directly to unsubsidized employment in a growing sector. For more information on sector strategies see resources provided by [Public/Private Ventures](#).

- ✓ **Improved job development strategies:** Some findings in the TJRD study regarding program implementation indicate that TJ programs could benefit from improved job development and placement practices, such as presenting potential employers with a “business case” for hiring candidates from TJ programs over the general pool of applicants. Watch for the NTJN’s forthcoming best practice guide for job development.

- ✓ **Enhanced job retention and advancement services:** Keeping participants employed once they are placed in unsubsidized jobs is critical to improving the long-term employment impacts of TJ, and post-placement retention follow-up is an essential core element of the TJ model. Best practices for job retention include providing follow-up for at least six months with no fewer than three contacts per month, forming support groups and other activities to keep participants involved beyond the TJ period, and incorporating retention bonuses as an incentive to participate in retention services. The TJRD findings add to the evidence that retention bonuses in particular can be effective in increasing unsubsidized job retention. For more information please review the NTJN’s [best practice guide for job retention](#).

- ✓ **Integrating contextualized adult learning:** Low literacy or numeracy can be a significant barrier to employment, and many TJ participants need adult basic education services in order to qualify for sectoral training programs, certification classes and entry-level occupations. Contextualized instruction—in which the curriculum and lessons are drawn directly from the relevant work activities—is an effective way to improve both academic skills and work-related competencies, and prepare participants for further training, certification programs, or career-path occupations. Program experience is beginning to shed light on the value of integrating contextualized adult learning into Transitional Jobs programs in order to help increase participants’ literacy and basic math competencies. We must continue to learn how best to integrate these elements into current programs and to explore other ways by which we can help participants improve these competencies in order to take advantage of training programs.

Conclusion

The level of current need—high unemployment, poverty, and large numbers of people reentering from prison—indicates that doing less for the hard-to-employ is not an option.

There is much at stake in how our country responds to the issue of prisoner reentry. The US is currently experiencing a weak and tenuous recovery from the worst recession in generations. Even as the economy begins to grow again, unemployment remains exceptionally high and continues to rise. People with serious barriers to employment are among the hardest-hit in any economic downturn, and suffer from increased competition for entry-level positions. Moreover, over 735,000 people were released from prison in 2008 (the most recent data available)⁴, mostly returning to economically disadvantaged neighborhoods with few employment opportunities and unemployment rates that far exceed the national rate

Combined with the strong desire of formerly incarcerated individuals to work, as evidenced by high TJ participation rates, these facts present a mandate to enhance our response.

Clearly, more effort and investment is necessary to offer employment assistance and opportunity for people with barriers to employment, including people reentering their communities from incarceration. Transitional Jobs, by providing work experience, training opportunities, supportive services, and immediate, stabilizing earned income to people who would not otherwise be working, remains an important strategy to help people exiting prison successfully reenter their communities.

If you have further questions regarding how the TJRD findings may affect your TJ program, or if you would like to request technical assistance with implementing program improvements, please contact the National Transitional Jobs Network at 312-870-4959 or ntjn@heartlandalliance.org.