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TRANSITIONAL JOBS: OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

By Abigail Coppock

Despite declining rates of U.S. unemployment, employment remains difficult for subsets of the American population, particularly among current and former welfare recipients, people with criminal records, and youth. Although past policy has tried to help these individuals into the labor market, largely through various programs addressing supply-side factors, barriers to employment still persist. The transitional jobs strategy is an effective solution that works with employers on the supply and demand sides to bridge the gap and transition individuals into the labor market.

Despite declining rates of U.S. unemployment (Sok, 2006), employment remains difficult for subsets of the American population, particularly for current and former recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), individuals with criminal histories, and youth (Lower-Basch, 2000; Holzer et al., 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). In the United States, hundreds of thousands of people are unemployed due to a variety of barriers that prevent them from finding and keeping a job (Bouman and Antolin, 2006). One approach that addresses specific barriers to employment for these populations is transitional jobs (TJ). This study examines the barriers to employment for these populations and whether the TJ strategy is an effective solution.

Unemployment rates for current and former TANF recipients, individuals with criminal histories, and youth are well above that of the general population (Lower-Basch, 2000; Holzer et al., 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Welfare reform reduced the numbers of TANF recipients, but unemployment rates remain high among current and former TANF recipients (Lower-Basch, 2000; Zedlewski, 2003). One study finds that unemployment rates among former

Illinois TANF recipients range from 48 to 62 percent, depending on location (Lower-Basch, 2000). The requirements of TANF recently intensified with passage of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2006 (DRA; U.S. Public Law 109-171), which increased work requirements and limited the number of activities that fulfill work requirements. Strict work requirements and time limits have forced many TANF recipients to look for jobs and participate in work activities, even if they are unable to obtain or keep a job (Bartik, 2001; Baider and Frank, 2006). Such requirements also erode the safety net of supportive services, which assist recipients in making successful transitions to work (Ewen, Lower-Basch, and Turetsky, 2007).

Individuals reentering communities from incarceration also face significantly higher unemployment rates than those faced by the general population (Holzer, 1996). Over 670,000 people were released from state prisons in 2004 (Harrison and Beck, 2006). According to Harry Holzer and associates (2003, p. 2), “Among the most challenging situations they face is that of reentry into the labor market.” Data on the employment status of this population is limited, but researchers such as Richard Freeman (1992) use the 1979 cohort of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) to estimate that employment rates averaged around 60 percent during the 1980s for all men who had previously been incarcerated (Freeman 1992; Holzer et al., 2003). These estimates are approximately 20–25 percentage points lower than those for men in the general NLSY data (Holzer et al., 2003). Research clearly documents the link between employment and reduced recidivism (Hirsch et al., 2002; Holzer et al. 2003; Kachnowski, 2005). It also establishes that the majority of individuals being released are hopeful that they will obtain employment (Kachnowski, 2005), but unemployment for individuals with criminal histories continues to be high (Holzer et al., 2003).

The youth population is another segment of society with increasingly high unemployment rates. Using data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Association of Career and Technical Education (ACTE) reports that “the employment level for teens is at its lowest in 57 years” (ACTE, 2005). The unemployment rate for youth ages 18 to 24 who are actively looking for work is three times that for the adult population (6.1 percent versus 2.6 percent; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). According to Andrew Sum (2003), rising youth unemployment is significant because of the link between early experience in paid work and future labor market success. This link is particularly important for youth who do not enroll in college (Sum, 2003). Many youth need work to meet their economic needs and those of their family (Sum, 2003). Youth who work are less likely to become teen parents

and use illegal drugs (Bouman and Antolin, 2006). They are more likely to graduate from high school, and their academic performance is better than that of those who do not work (ACTE, 2005). Due to their specific needs (e.g., lack of prior work experience and few workplace connections), youth often need extra support finding and maintaining jobs (Bouman and Antolin, 2006). This is particularly true of youth from low-income communities.

Multiple and compounding barriers impede the successful employment of current and former welfare recipients, reentry populations, and youth (Zedlewski, 1999; Hirsch et al., 2002; Wald and Martinez, 2003). These barriers exist on both the supply and the demand sides of the labor market (Bartik, 2001; Holzer et al., 2003).

SUPPLY-SIDE BARRIERS LIMIT READINESS TO EMPLOYMENT

Supply-side barriers are impediments that affect the quality and the supply of labor. The supply side of labor includes everything that individuals bring to prospective employers (e.g. strengths, weaknesses, and personal circumstances; Holzer et al., 2003). Supply-side employment barriers for welfare recipients, individuals with criminal histories, and youth often include lack of work experience, lack of education, lack of skills, lack of transportation, lack of available child care, limited English proficiency, substance abuse, and physical and mental health needs (Freeman, 1992; Fleischer, 2001; Burchfield and Yatsko, 2002; Derr, Pavetti, and Ramani, 2002; Hirsch et al., 2002; Kirby et al., 2002; Holzer et al., 2003; Norris and Speigman, 2003; Wald and Martinez, 2003; Pavetti and Kauff, 2006).

Supply-side barriers limit welfare recipients' ability to obtain employment. A study of data from the 2002 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) identifies six variables that expose significant obstacles for welfare recipients (Zedlewski, 2003). These variables include low education level (defined as less than a high school degree), no recent work experience (defined as no work within the 3 years prior to the survey), caring for an infant, caring for a child on Supplemental Security Income (SSI), a Spanish-language interview (which is used as a proxy for lack of English language proficiency), and indicators that the individual has poor mental health or physical health problems that limit work (Zedlewski, 2003). One study of TANF recipients in Minnesota finds that 34 percent of recipients nearing the 5-year time limit for receipt of welfare benefits were identified as having low levels of cognitive functioning, and 65 percent of recipients in the study were granted extensions on their TANF grant due to extenuating physical or mental needs (Pavetti and Kauff, 2006). Another study identifies low education levels and lack of work skills as the

most significant factors keeping TANF recipients from work (Norris and Speigman, 2003). Research indicates that as the number of barriers to employment increases, the likelihood of working decreases (Norris and Speigman, 2003). A study by Sheila Zedlewski (2003) reports that 51 percent of welfare recipients with no barriers to employment are working; by contrast, only 14 percent of recipients with two or more barriers are working (Zedlewski, 2003). Long-term recipients of TANF (i.e., those receiving for over 2 years) and those who cycle on and off reported multiple barriers to employment (Zedlewski, 2003). Since many of these barriers still exist for individuals after they stop receiving TANF (Lower-Basch, 2000), addressing barriers to employment is an important consideration for any employment program that works with current or former TANF recipients.

Similarly, supply-side barriers limit the employment ability of individuals with criminal histories. Research shows that time spent in incarceration depreciates an individual's work skills, prevents work experience, and severs interpersonal and employer contacts (Western, Kling, and Weiman, 2001). After release, individuals commonly face drug and alcohol use, posttraumatic stress disorder, and lack of housing (Kachnowski, 2005). All of these can lead to general life instability, which affects employment. It is estimated that 75 percent of people with criminal histories have substance abuse problems, 70 percent have not graduated from high school (Freeman, 1992; Travis, Solomon, and Waul, 2001), and about half are functionally illiterate (Hirsch et al., 2002). The family and community support systems available to newly released individuals are only minimal (Center for Employment Opportunities, 2006). These characteristics pose barriers to employment.

Supply-side barriers also restrict the employment prospects of youth. Researchers repeatedly note the link between obtaining a high school education and the likelihood of future employment (Sum, 2003; Wald and Martinez, 2003; Edelman, Holzer, and Offner, 2006). Christopher Swanson (2004) reports that the national graduation rate for the United States in 2001 was only 68 percent; nearly one-third of all public high school students failed to graduate. Graduation rates for students who attend school in high poverty, racially segregated, and urban school districts lag 15 to 18 percent behind those of their peers in other districts (Swanson, 2004). Research also indicates that youth are likely to be disconnected from school or employment if they have limited formal schooling, untreated mental illness, substance abuse, and other disabilities, a history of behavioral problems, experience with the juvenile justice or child welfare system, or grow up in high poverty neighborhoods (Wald and Martinez, 2003). These barriers prevent successful connection to the labor market (Wald and Martinez, 2003).

Supply-side barriers limit the stability and preparedness of future workers (Holzer et al., 2003); stability and preparedness are often labeled “job readiness” characteristics (Gibson, 2000, p. 29; Holzer et al., 2003, p. 5). Employment programs often include job readiness components, yet such programs often ignore issues stemming from employers’ needs (Gibson, 2000). Employer concerns fall into the demand side of the labor market. Thus, employment programs should address both supply- and demand-side barriers to employment.

DEMAND-SIDE BARRIERS FURTHER REDUCE THE LIKELIHOOD OF EMPLOYMENT

Employment barriers on the demand side of the labor market are driven by employer hiring practices. One barrier to employment for welfare recipients, individuals with criminal histories, and youth is that their skills and experiences are seen by employers as being mismatched to the requirements of the jobs (Gibson, 2000; Holzer et al., 2003). As the U.S. economy becomes increasingly knowledge-based, industries will require employees to have better skills (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2004). In urban labor markets, 95 percent of unskilled jobs that do not require formal training or a college diploma still require a high school diploma, work experience, or other relevant skills (Holzer, 1996). Despite the need for employees with these qualifications, the short tenure of today’s workers leaves many employers unwilling to spend large amounts of money for on-the-job training (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2004). As a result, employers expect employees to already possess a set of transferable baseline skills (e.g., verbal communication, problem-solving, and customer service skills) by the time they are hired (Fleischer, 2001; Holzer et al., 2003). A basic skill requirement thus poses a demand-side barrier to employment for individuals lacking those skills, regardless of whether the individual is able to actually perform the duties of the job.

Employers also expect their employees to possess baseline “soft skills” (Fleischer, 2001, p. 15). Soft skills include attributes like the willingness to work hard, habits like good attendance and dressing well, and abilities like conflict resolution (Bartik, 2001; Fleischer, 2001; American Society for Training and Development, 2003). According to employers, these skills are difficult to measure but are sometimes more important than job-specific skills, which are easier to teach (Gibson, 2000; Bartik, 2001; Fleischer, 2001; American Society for Training and Development, 2003). A 2001 study by the National Association of Manufacturers (as cited in American Society for Training and Development, 2003) finds that four out of five companies reported moderate to serious skill shortages among current employees and job

applicants. Employers indicated that their top problem in filling openings is the shortage of such “basic employability skills” as good attendance, punctuality, and work ethic (American Society for Training and Development, 2003, p. 9). Soft skills are usually learned through prior work experience (Bartik, 2001). If employers demand these skills from their employees, such unspoken expectations can become points of miscommunication and confusion for individuals who have limited work history (Bartik, 2001). Thus, these skills are barriers both to getting employed and to staying employed.

Racial discrimination by employers is another demand-side barrier to employment. Devah Pager (2003) conducted an audit study of roughly 200 employers in Milwaukee, WI. She sent out matched pairs of white and black males to apply for jobs, giving them credentials that were identical with respect to education and experience. She found that black men obtained approximately half as many job offers as white men (17 percent vs. 34 percent; Pager, 2003). This finding has serious implications for the employment prospects of welfare recipients and individuals with criminal histories, in particular, due to the high prevalence of minority representation in those populations. Nearly one-half of formerly incarcerated individuals are African American and nearly one-fifth are Latino or Asian (Holzer et al., 2003). Statistics from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS, 1999) reveal that three out of five TANF recipients are minorities. Statistical discrimination occurs when racial stereotypes are attributed to individual job applicants and systematically affect hiring decisions (Holzer, 1996). Racial discrimination by employers is a demand-side barrier that needs to be recognized by employment programs working with minority populations (Holzer, 1996).

In addition to racial discrimination, employer bias against individuals with criminal records is another demand-side barrier to employment. Over 3,000 employers in large metropolitan areas were surveyed in 2001 (Holzer et al., 2003). Findings indicate that only 40 percent of employers report that they would consider filling their most recent job vacancy with a worker who had a criminal history, yet 90 percent were willing to consider employing a welfare recipient (Holzer et al., 2003). Although this study shows that employers have less bias towards welfare status than towards a criminal record, it nonetheless identifies a significant barrier for those with a criminal history. Pager’s (2003) study of employer hiring practices also included pairs of black and white job applicants who listed a period of incarceration for a nonviolent drug sale on their job applications. In each racial combination (one white male, one black male), applicants with criminal records fared worse than those without criminal records (Pager, 2003). Black applicants with criminal histories received two-thirds fewer job offers than did white applicants with criminal

histories (5 percent vs. 14 percent; Pager, 2003). These studies indicate how race and criminal history can combine to act as a double-edged sword and to pose serious barriers to employment.

Barriers to employment on both the supply and demand sides of the labor market are often viewed by both social service agencies and employers as directly impinging upon an individual's ability for successful employment (Fleischer, 2001). According to Bouman and Antolin (2006), employment barriers are related to a variety of complex factors that are embedded within larger problems and issues. Strategies that rely on removing barriers prior to employment are "extremely difficult and involve exact guesswork about how various problems actually interfere with the ability to work and how best to cope with them" (Bouman and Antolin, 2006, p. 107). Although it is necessary to address the specific issues that function as barriers to employment, it is also necessary for employment strategies to start with the desired outcome of employment and to address any additional issues within a supportive employment context (Bouman and Antolin, 2006). Unfortunately, that has not been the traditional approach used to address employment barriers.

PREVIOUS EFFORTS

Past attempts to address unemployment among these populations largely focused on supply-side factors. According to Timothy Bartik (2001), programs offering job readiness classes, skills training, and work supports (e.g., transportation and child care vouchers) seek to increase employment by improving the quantity and quality of the labor supply. Supply-side approaches can be seen in TANF policies and prisoner reentry programs that place high priority on the training and job readiness services of workforce intermediaries like OneStop centers (Bartik, 2001). A supply-side approach is also evident in the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which seeks to entice workers into the labor force (Bartik, 2001). Supply-side solutions, however, can only go so far.

Supply-side strategies have produced low long-term returns on investment. James Heckman and Lance Lochner (2000) examine various welfare training programs. One of these is the National Supported Work program, which provided intensive training and job search assistance at a cost of about \$16,550 per participant. The estimated rate of return in increasing participants' earnings and employment was only 3.5 percent. Training programs do show a positive effect, but the gain is modest. Because of the high cost, training programs alone are an unlikely solution. The programs that are somewhat successful are those with direct ties to the local labor market (Heckman and Lochner, 2000).

Similarly, wage supplements, such as the EITC, help working Americans out of poverty but have had only small effects on rates of employment (Bartik, 2001). It is estimated that, at most, the EITC has only increased employment by 500,000 persons (Bartik, 2001).

One explanation for the marginal effects of supply-side strategies is that the demand for low-level employees is not equal to the supply. Training and incentives may encourage people into the labor market, but finding and keeping a job is still difficult. One argument is that the existing labor pool does not have the skills or experience required by employers (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2004). This argument notes that, “it is not capital equipment or technology that differentiates organizations, it is their workforce” (American Society for Training and Development, 2003, p. 5). This implies that organizations want the best and the brightest of the labor pool for their employees, so a low-level workforce is not in demand. Eileen Appelbaum, Annette Bernhardt, and Richard Murnane (2003), however, document employer responses to economic globalization, industry deregulation, and advances in technology. They find that new opportunities exist and employers still have choices in how they respond to economic pressure (Appelbaum et al., 2003). Some employers in the telecommunications industry, for example, compete on the basis of service quality rather than low prices (Batt, Hunter, and Will, 2003). These employers choose to hire low-skilled employees and provide specialized internal training; the strategy ultimately reduces the employers’ turnover (Batt et al., 2003). Thus, employer demands do not necessitate exclusion of low-level workers.

These examples illustrate the need for employment strategies that incorporate the demand-side requirements of individual employers. Employment programs have an opportunity to work with employers to redefine entry-level requirements and expand applicant pools to include participants from disadvantaged populations (Gibson, 2000). The TJ strategy is one approach that incorporates both the supply-side and the demand-side factors.

TRANSITIONAL JOBS AS A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

The transitional jobs (TJ) strategy works with participants and employers to address both the supply and demand sides of employment. It is “a workforce strategy designed to overcome employment obstacles by using time-limited, wage-paying jobs and combining real work, skill development, and supportive services to transition participants successfully into the labor market” (National Transitional Jobs Network, 2006, p. 1). The TJ model can be

adapted to fit different target populations and contexts, yet it maintains common design elements.

In the TJ strategy, community and social service agencies partner with participating public and private employers to help participants gain skills and experience through paid on-the-job learning in subsidized transitional jobs, which typically last 2 to 6 months. Participants earn a wage, usually between \$5.15 and \$8.00 per hour, and work between 20 and 35 hours per week (National Transitional Jobs Network, 2006). The job is supplemented by additional vocational training, soft skills training, case management, and other supportive services (Baider and Frank, 2006). The goal is to provide the participant with experiential learning and training from an actual employer (National Transitional Jobs Network, 2006). At the end of the transitional period, the program works to find a permanent unsubsidized job for the participant, whether with the same employer or with a different one (National Transitional Jobs Network, 2006).

On the supply side, the goal of the TJ strategy is to provide participants with a range of tangible skills and training in a real work environment. According to the National Transitional Jobs Network (2006), the transitional job provides participants with an opportunity to learn the skills and routines of work while building a work history in a supportive atmosphere. Supportive services are an important element in the TJ model, providing participants with assistance during times of transition (National Transitional Jobs Network, 2006). The TJ strategy is able to reinforce learning while providing needed financial stability (Baider and Frank, 2006). By being an employee, participants learn what is expected by employers and how to navigate the world of work (National Transitional Jobs Network, 2006).

On the demand side, employers are a key element in the TJ strategy, ensuring that TJ participants are trained in the skills that are useful to their organizations and to the general labor market (Baider and Frank, 2006). The TJ program also works with participants to address skills gaps and the transitions to the work environment; for example, the program helps participants to adhere to workplace rules and culture (Baider and Frank, 2006). The program acts as a mediator between the employer and the participant, resolving potential problems that may arise as a result of skill deficits or miscommunication (Gibson, 2000). For example, employers may not be aware of the life circumstances and barriers facing low-level employees. One company representative notes that "People don't get to work because of basic things like they can't get daycare. All employers see is that the employee isn't there so they fire the people for being late or not showing up, when much of it is just a

breakdown in communication” (Gibson, 2000, p. 25). On a structural level, workforce development programs such as TJ may challenge employer hiring practices and “help employers discern whether biases are rooted in blatantly discriminatory attitudes or are simply the result of hiring policies that unintentionally keep low-income or minority workers out of jobs” (Gibson, 2000, p. 25). Thus, the TJ strategy attempts to address the employer’s need for competent employees as well as the participant’s need to overcome barriers that might otherwise impede successful employment.

TRANSITIONAL JOBS WORK

Research suggests that the TJ approach is an effective workforce strategy (Burchfield and Yatsko, 2002; Derr et al., 2002; Kirby et al., 2002; Rynell and Beachy-Quick, 2003). For many hard-to-employ individuals, obtaining a job is a first step towards self-sufficiency and positive life changes (Baider and Frank, 2006). Washington State’s Community Jobs (CJ) program places 50 to 75 percent of participants into unsubsidized jobs within 6 to 9 months of enrollment (Burchfield and Yatsko, 2002). This placement rate is approximately one-third higher than that among less-intensive employment programs serving similar populations (Burchfield and Yatsko, 2002). Income of post-CJ participants also increases by an average of 60 percent during their first 2 years in the workforce. That income is 148 percent higher than their average pre-CJ income (Burchfield and Yatsko, 2002). Georgia’s GoodWorks! program works with TANF recipients who are at the 5-year limit on receipt of benefits (Derr et al., 2002). Program officials report that 73 percent of participants find jobs after completing the TJ program (Derr et al., 2002). A study of six TJ programs finds that 81–94 percent of participants who completed the TJ program were placed into unsubsidized employment (Kirby et al., 2002). In a study of a bridge program operated by the Marriott Foundation for youth with disabilities, Ellen Fabian (2007) found that 68 percent of participants secured jobs above the minimum wage (Fabian, 2007). The TJ strategy not only helps participants obtain jobs, it also helps them keep jobs.

For some participants, keeping a job is a greater challenge to long-term stability than getting a job is. In a study that compares a Workfirst program in Chicago with a TJ program, participants in the TJ program are found to have better retention outcomes than the Workfirst participants, who received job readiness and employment assistance services (Rynell and Beachy-Quick, 2003). Three months after completing their respective programs, 71 percent

of TJ participants were still employed, but the same was true for only 49 percent of Workfirst participants. Six months after the program, 65 percent of TJ participants were employed, but the rate was only 47 percent among Workfirst participants (Rynell and Beachy-Quick, 2003). Six months after the program, the earnings of TJ participants were also 32 percent higher than those of participants in the Workfirst group. More importantly, TJ participants maintained their gains in earnings. By contrast, the Workfirst group's average earnings began to diminish over time (Rynell and Beachy-Quick, 2003).

THE NEED FOR NATIONAL SUPPORT OF TRANSITIONAL JOBS

Although the TJ strategy has been proven as an effective program model, to date, there is only fledgling national support and no dedicated funding stream for TJ programs. According to John Bouman and Joe Antolin (2006, p. 108), existing TJ programs have pieced together enough funding from private and public sources "to operate pilot programs and a handful of statewide programs, but there has not been enough to make the strategy as available as it needs to be." Existing funding streams, such as those through TANF, the Workforce Investment Act (U.S. Public Law 105-220 [1998]), Community Development Block Grants, and the McKinney-Vento Grant, are all potential sources that can and do support TJ programs (Kass, 2003). Because these funding streams contain ambiguous language and do not specifically mention that TJ is an allowable use of the funds, policy makers have hesitated to fund TJ programs, particularly wages for TJ participants (Bouman and Antolin, 2006). National support would increase the availability of funds for TJ. It also could increase funds designated for employment and training.

CONCLUSION

Numerous barriers impede the employment of such disadvantaged populations as TANF recipients, individuals with criminal histories, and youth. Employment strategies cannot be limited to improving supply-side characteristics of employees. Rather, effective solutions must also address the demand-side factors facing employers. The TJ strategy incorporates both supply- and demand-side factors. It has been proven to successfully assist thousands of individuals with significant barriers to employment.

Although the TJ strategy has produced successful outcomes, helping participants find and keep jobs, issues of job design, working conditions, and long-term poverty reduction are not directly addressed in the TJ strategy.

For many TJ participants, permanent job placements do not offer living wages, benefits, or opportunities for advancement. The absence of these features may undermine the original intent of employment as a means to self-sufficiency. Researchers assert, for example, that jobs remain personally demoralizing and ineffective in reducing poverty if wages remain low (Appelbaum et al., 2003). It must be noted, however, that the TJ strategy is intended for individuals who are the hardest to employ. The strategy emphasizes work supports and supportive services to participants for that very reason. The average wages paid by TJ are higher than those paid in other employment strategies. Some might argue, however, that the wages are not high enough. Over time, with proven success and strengthened ties to employers, TJ programs and policy may garner opportunities to challenge employer practices and job structure, just as they are beginning to challenge hiring practices. However, outcome measurements are currently based on job placement rates, and employee retention is viewed as the employee's responsibility rather than the employer's. In this environment, the TJ strategy offers little leverage for structural change.

In order to continue strengthening communities that face TANF's time limits and work requirements, growing reentry populations, and low high-school completion rates, policy decisions must account for significant barriers to employment among these and other populations. Policy decisions at the state and federal levels must include practical, programmatic solutions for assisting these populations with successful entry and retention in the labor market. With broader state and national support, the TJ strategy could effectively strengthen communities and build the workforce of the future by addressing both supply- and demand-side factors.

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