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Improving TANF economic outcomes with Black participants and families in mind

TANF RESEARCH BRIEF

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Introduction

Understanding the relationship between the ability to find good jobs and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is critical for addressing the program's role in alleviating poverty. TANF's implementation varies significantly across states, as states are given substantial discretion in how they allocate their federal block grants. This flexibility results in inconsistencies, with some states investing more in workforce development while others allocate less to direct cash assistance, particularly affecting Black families in regions with higher poverty rates.

The United States Department of Labor defines a good job as one that offers family-sustaining benefits that promote economic security and growth, including a livable wage. This definition is particularly critical for Black TANF participants, who comprise over one-third of TANF recipients despite only representing 13% of the total U.S. population. For Black TANF participants, good jobs are essential not only for improving individual economic outcomes but also for addressing broader problems that substantially affect Black communities.

Historically, TANF's emphasis on employment aided by work requirements has limited the program's potential to promote self-sufficiency for all participants, especially for Black participants who face additional labor market challenges. The cash assistance program's shift from an entitlement program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), to a work conditional program, TANF, has restricted the program's ability to fully support economic opportunity for its participants. Work requirements and work supports for individuals on TANF have often prioritized immediate placement in low-wage jobs over sustainable economic advancement. In 2022, a Congressional Budget Office (CBO) report found that TANF's work requirements have generally increased program participants' employment while having little effect on their average income. However, little is understood about the linkage between TANF program participation and labor market outcomes by population group.

This research brief presents results from a document analysis of TANF outcomes studies to understand the degree to which employment and earnings outcomes for TANF recipients are reported by population group. Understanding how outcomes are disaggregated by these groups is crucial because it enables researchers, human services providers, policymakers, and others to assess whether state TANF programs are effectively promoting economic advancement with a focus on consistently applied standards. Understanding this also guides researchers in identifying areas for future studies to deepen insights into the experiences of families with TANF.



Overview of TANF

Cash assistance is a vital part of the social safety net. In an era of growing economic problems, cash aid serves as the front line of defense for individuals and families who experience financial instability. TANF is a critical component of the social safety net that can assist families in achieving economic stability through direct cash assistance, workforce development, and more. The TANF program is structured as a block grant, providing states with fixed federal funds to implement safety net programs tailored to their needs. Established under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, TANF replaced the previous AFDC program and shifted significant responsibility for welfare programs to the states. Each state receives a block grant based on its historical spending under AFDC, with the expectation that states will also contribute their funds, known as the maintenance of effort (MOE) requirement, to support TANF programs. This block grant model offers states considerable discretion in designing and administering TANF programs, leading to significant variation in spending patterns across the country.

States have the flexibility to allocate TANF funds across a range of services, including cash assistance, work supports, child care, and other social services aimed at promoting economic self-sufficiency. Despite this flexibility, evidence suggests that a relatively small portion of TANF funds is dedicated to direct cash assistance for families. For example, in 2021, only about 22% of TANF funds were used for basic assistance, while a substantial portion was diverted to other areas such as child welfare services and refundable tax credits.

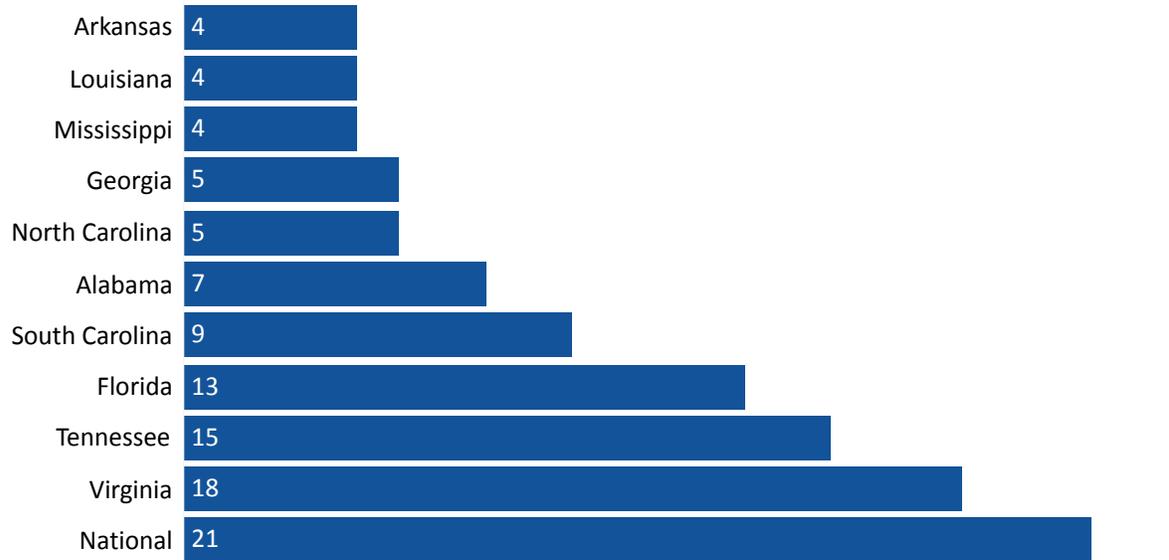
States in the South, where the need is often greater due to higher poverty rates, tend to allocate less to direct cash assistance and more to administrative costs and other non-welfare services. For example, Georgia's maximum benefit amount of \$280 for a family of three has remained unchanged since 1990, when the benefit was offered under AFDC. The value of TANF cash assistance continues to fall as the costs of basic goods like food, housing, and transportation continue to increase.





TANF should reach millions more

For every 100 families in poverty, just 21 received cash assistance nationally. The ratios are much smaller in select states.



**These ten states were selected because their TANF-to-poverty ratios fall below the national ratio and they have an outsized number of Black residents in poverty and participating in TANF.*

Chart: National African American Child and Family Research Center • Source: Adapted from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities analysis of poverty data from the Current Population Survey and AFDC/TANF caseload data from Department of Health and Human Services and (since September 2006) caseload data collected by CBPP from state agencies

Other concerns about TANF's sufficiency arise from the program's decentralized nature, which allows states considerable discretion in determining eligibility rules and designing program structures. This results in significant cross-state variation, as states have the authority to implement different policies regarding financing, rulemaking, and administration. Such decentralization often leads to the creation of more restrictive and punitive TANF policies and programs, particularly in the South. These states frequently impose stricter sanctioning policies, family caps, low benefit levels, and program time limits, in addition to eligibility rules like drug testing and felony drug bans. Scholars have pointed out that this state-level discretion can unfairly exacerbate judgment differences, with policies often reflecting underlying imbalances. As a result of strict eligibility rules, TANF assistance reaches fewer families in the South.



Work Requirements

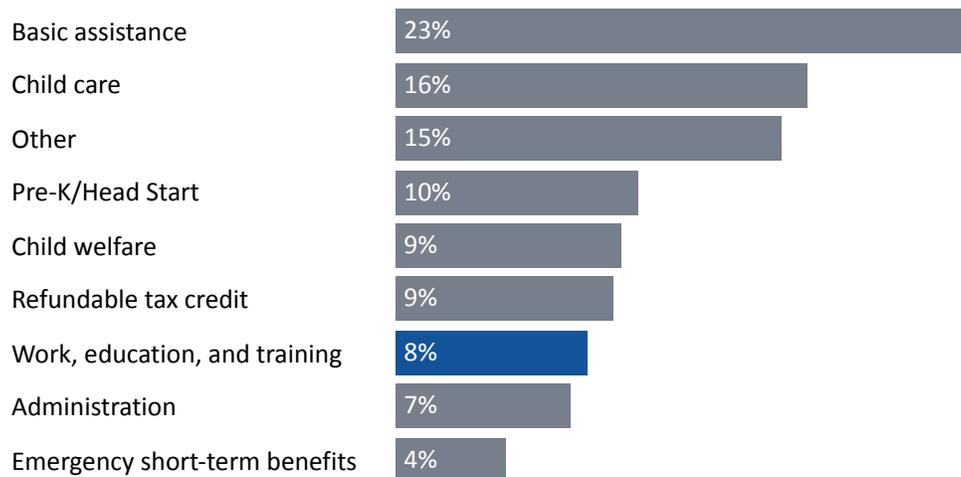
One of the most restrictive elements of TANF is the work requirement, which is intended to contribute to one of TANF's four broad purposes: to end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage. Work requirements mandate that recipients must engage in work-related activities to continue receiving benefits. These requirements often prioritize immediate job placement over sustainable employment opportunities, which can hinder long-term independence from public assistance.

Recipients are typically required to participate in specific work activities for a set number of hours each week, which may include job searches, community service, or vocational training. Failure to meet these requirements can result in sanctions or complete loss of benefits. Additionally, the strict nature of these requirements does not always consider the availability of suitable jobs nor child care, transportation, or other limitations that unfairly affect participants. These restrictive policies often trap families in a cycle of low-wage employment without the opportunity for upward movement, as they focus on immediate job placement rather than sustainable career advancement.

States have the discretion to decide how much of their TANF block grant they will allocate towards work activities to help participants comply with work requirements. Work activities, such as job preparation and training, are intended to promote employment and participant self-sufficiency and accounted for about \$2.3 billion of TANF spending in the 2021 fiscal year – just 8% of total TANF spending despite the program's rigid emphasis on work.

States only spend 8 percent of TANF funds to support work, education, and training

Use of federal TANF and state funds, by category, Fiscal Year 2021



Total: \$30.3 Billion

Chart: National African American Child and Family Research Center • Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS), based on data from the Department of Health and Human Services



The restrictive nature of TANF's work requirements and the limited investment in work-related activities highlight structural issues within the program that exacerbate economic challenges. While these policies aim to promote self-sufficiency, they often fail to consider the diverse needs of TANF recipients, particularly those from resource-limited communities who face additional obstacles in finding employment.

TANF Leaver Outcomes

Significant gaps remain in understanding the outcomes of former TANF participants, or TANF leavers. TANF leavers are individuals and families who have exited the program and no longer receive the program's assistance. Leavers can include those who no longer qualify for assistance due to increased income or changes in family circumstances, those who are removed due to time limits and sanctions for not complying with work requirements, as well as those who voluntarily leave the program for other reasons. Many studies have examined TANF leavers' transitions from welfare to work, but these studies often focus on short-term employment outcomes without considering the long-term economic stability of former participants.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities analyzed leaver studies to understand the employment outcomes of recipients, finding that "while employment that pays sufficient wages and provides regular hours can be a path from poverty towards financial stability, most TANF recipients are not on that path." Another study found that "TANF leavers appear to graduate into the ranks of the working poor, and the very poor at that, with only 13 to 15 percent rising above the poverty line," and an analysis by the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute found that "of those who left TANF in 2014, 36.6 percent had employment at their time of exit. Among TANF leavers in 2018, only 35.9 percent of them left with employment, a net decrease of -0.7 percent."

Most of the existing research lacks longitudinal data that tracks TANF leavers over an extended period, making it difficult to assess whether these individuals achieve lasting economic self-sufficiency or fall back into poverty. Additionally, most studies tend to aggregate data without disaggregating by crucial variables such as population group, geographic location, or specific obstacles faced by different demographic groups. This oversight limits the ability to understand the nuanced experiences of TANF leavers and to identify the unique challenges specific groups face in achieving economic growth.

Another significant gap in understanding TANF leavers is the lack of comprehensive data on the limitations they encounter when exiting the program and attempting to enter the workforce. Research highlights that while many studies focus on employment rates, they often do not account for the quality of employment or whether the jobs provide a livable wage and necessary benefits. Moreover, the role of external factors such as unfair hiring practices and the limited availability of child care, transportation, and mental health support in influencing TANF leavers' outcomes is frequently underexplored. Researchers also point out that most of the research fails to examine how these external factors interact with TANF policies, potentially affecting leavers' success in maintaining employment.



Approach

This research brief seeks to answer the following question:

To what extent are TANF program outcomes disaggregated by population group, particularly for Black participants, across various states as evidenced by state-level policy documents and outcome reports?

To answer this question, the researchers conducted a document analysis of reports on evaluations and empirical findings about the employment outcomes of TANF leavers. Document analysis was selected as the methodology for this brief due to its effectiveness in providing a comprehensive understanding of existing research on TANF outcomes. Document analysis allows for the structural examination of existing studies, reports, and policy documents, enabling a thorough exploration of the extent to which TANF outcomes are disaggregated by population group. This method is particularly valuable for synthesizing a wide range of data sources, offering insights into patterns and trends that may not be apparent through primary data collection alone. This approach ensures that the findings are grounded in a broad and diverse set of existing studies, providing a robust foundation for drawing conclusions about the structural factors influencing TANF outcomes.

The selection process for the literature used in this document analysis involved a comprehensive and organized search for peer-reviewed studies, government reports, and policy analyses related to TANF leavers and program outcomes. The types of literature sought included empirical research studies, policy evaluation reports, and meta-analyses that provide insights into the economic and social outcomes of TANF participants, with a specific focus on imbalances experienced by demographic groups. The studies selected for this analysis were published between 1998 and 2019, a range that provides a comprehensive understanding of TANF outcomes over time. The search was conducted using several academic and governmental databases to ensure a robust and diverse collection of sources.

The primary platform utilized for this search was the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services database of *TANF "Leavers," Applicants, and Caseload Studies*. Additional studies were sourced using Google Scholar and academic journal repositories such as the Public Administration Review and the Journal of Policy Analysis and Management. The research team also pulled reports from state TANF agency websites. Search terms used included "TANF leavers," "TANF outcomes," "welfare reform," and "employment outcomes." These terms were used to capture both the general and specific aspects of TANF program evaluations and outcomes. Searches were conducted in various fields within these platforms, focusing on abstracts, titles, keywords, and full texts where available, to ensure comprehensive coverage and relevance of the selected literature.

By employing this detailed and methodical approach to literature selection, the analysis aimed to gather a representative and thorough set of studies that provide a clear picture of TANF leaver outcomes, with an emphasis on employment and earnings outcomes. The studies were ultimately included in our analysis if they meet the following baseline criteria:

- The study reports employment outcomes for TANF leavers; and/or
- The study reports earnings outcomes for TANF leavers



In our literature search, we categorized the studies in two ways: (a) leaver studies and (b) program evaluations. Leaver studies, often commissioned by state agencies or the federal government, assess the outcomes of participants that have recently left the TANF program. The program evaluations in our dataset are generally multistage, multiyear evaluations of specific TANF program interventions, such as workforce development programs tailored for TANF participants. This includes randomized control trial evaluations and other experimental and quasi-experimental studies. It is important to emphasize the focus on outcomes – not just characteristics, which are far more likely to be recorded in our database. In this brief, “outcomes” refer to the measurable economic and employment results experienced by TANF leavers, such as income levels, job retention, and wage growth, while “characteristics” describe the demographic and socioeconomic attributes of the TANF participants, such as age, population group, educational attainment, and family composition.

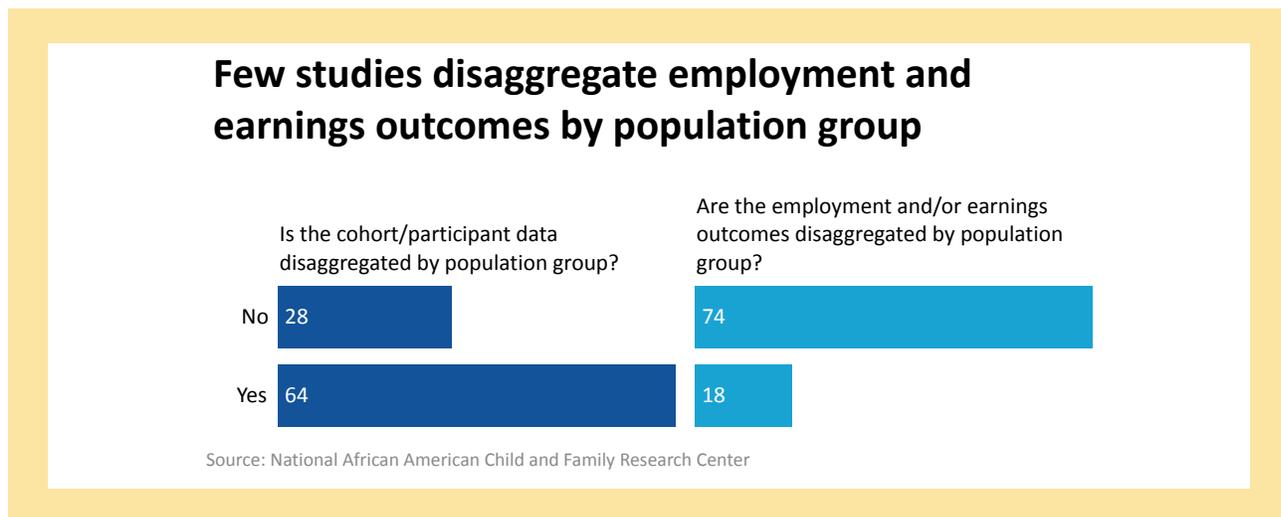
After performing an extensive online search of studies to add to our database, we found 92 state-level studies that examined the employment and earnings outcomes of TANF participants between 1998 and 2019. Studies were closely read line-by-line and analyzed using Nvivo, which allows for sophisticated custom queries of certain words. Out of those 92 studies, 64 collected cohort demographic information, including the characteristics of TANF leavers. The studies were further analyzed to determine if the employment and/or earnings outcomes that were reported included any results that are disaggregated by population group.





Findings

The analysis of state-level policy documents and outcome reports reveals that there are few studies that disaggregate TANF program outcomes by population groups. Based on our review, we find that just 18 (19% of studies of TANF leavers) over a 25-year period report employment and/or earnings outcomes by these populations. The graph below underscores this point, showing that while 64 studies disaggregated cohort/participant data by these populations, only 18 extended this disaggregation to outcomes, leaving a substantial gap in comprehensive understanding. This lack of detailed limits the development of targeted interventions that address the specific needs of demographic groups.



Among the 18 studies that disaggregated outcomes in earnings and/or employment by population group, two reported positive outcomes. For instance, one of the leaver evaluations from South Carolina found that Black TANF leavers were more likely to be employed after exiting the program when compared to other subgroups. Even among the 18 studies that do include some form of disaggregation by population group or subgroup, not all of them include specific outcomes results for Black TANF leavers. For instance, one study from Louisiana separates leavers into two categories, “white” and “minority” or “white and nonwhite.”

The limited number of studies that do disaggregate by population group often fail to provide granular data that can inform effective policy changes. The broad categories used, such as “minority” or “nonwhite,” are insufficient for capturing the diverse experiences within these groups. This broad categorization masks the specific obstacles faced by some TANF leavers, such as unfair treatment in the labor market and limited availability of resources that can facilitate sustainable employment.

These findings indicate a critical need for more detailed and population group-specific reporting in TANF outcome studies. Such data is essential for identifying inconsistencies, understanding the effectiveness of TANF programs for different population groups, and ensuring that policy interventions can be tailored to promote positive outcomes for all populations. Without this level of detail, policymakers and researchers are left with an incomplete picture that undermines efforts to improve TANF’s impact on economic growth.



Implications

Differences in program outcomes are not consistently documented, leaving a gap in the literature regarding how TANF impacts Black families specifically. Without comprehensive data on the differences in TANF leaver outcomes, it is challenging to identify targeted policy interventions that could address these imbalances. The limited number of studies that do disaggregate by population group often fail to provide detailed data about these populations, which is necessary for understanding the distinct challenges faced by Black TANF participants. Without this level of granularity, it is difficult to assess whether TANF programs are effectively promoting fairness. The lack of detailed disaggregated data hinders efforts to develop targeted interventions and limits policymakers' ability to address differences in employment and earnings outcomes.

In addition to requiring the reporting of employment and earnings after exit from TANF by these factors, researchers, agency staff, and program evaluators should ask the following questions when assessing outcomes and opportunities to improve TANF-funded job preparation programs:

- **What are the experiences of TANF recipients who are receiving employment services (e.g., coaching)?**
- **Are participants from all backgrounds receiving the same services at the same rate?**
- **Are there patterns in the characteristics of participants who are and are not achieving self-sufficiency while receiving TANF?**
- **Are there patterns in differing perceptions of the program by groups of participants identified through interviews, surveys, and focus groups?**

The Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA) of 2023 represents a promising step towards ensuring equitable outcomes by incorporating comprehensive data reporting requirements for TANF programs. The law requires states to disaggregate work outcomes and other crucial performance indicators by demographic characteristics. Such detailed reporting will illuminate imbalances and inform targeted policy interventions aimed at improving the effectiveness of TANF programs for all population groups.



To build on this progress, HHS and state agencies could actively engage in the following steps:

- **Implement Robust Data Collection and Reporting:** States could ensure their data collection systems can capture and accurately report disaggregated data. This might involve updating current systems, establishing new data-sharing agreements, and ensuring comprehensive training for staff on data collection and reporting procedures.
- **Use Disaggregated Data to Inform Programs and Policy:** Utilize the disaggregated data to identify specific areas where Black TANF participants and leavers may be experiencing challenges. These data can then be used to design and implement targeted interventions that address these inequities.
- **Foster Collaboration Across Agencies:** Encourage collaboration between TANF programs and other state agencies, such as workforce development and education, to create a holistic approach to addressing the needs of TANF participants. This collaboration can help in sharing best practices and leveraging resources to support program improvements.
- **Provide Technical Assistance and Guidance:** Administration for Children and Families (ACF) could continue to offer technical assistance and clear guidance to states to ensure the smooth implementation of these reporting requirements. This support will be crucial in helping states to navigate any challenges and to ensure the accuracy and utility of the collected data.

By following these recommendations, states can take meaningful steps towards ensuring that the benefits of the program are realized by all, regardless of group.





Conclusion

The study of TANF leavers' earnings and employment outcomes is important for understanding whether state efforts are improving self-sufficiency for Black TANF participants. The ability to study this depends, in part, on the availability of data on outcomes. Specifically, we need disaggregated data about TANF leaver outcomes to ensure that the program is not reinforcing – or even worsening – stratification in the labor market.

The current body of research underscores a critical need for more detailed analyses of TANF leavers' experiences to inform policy improvements. The decentralized nature of TANF allows states to implement policies that can inadvertently perpetuate imbalances, leading to varying outcomes based on geographic and demographic factors. Moreover, the overlapping influence of different factors is often inadequately addressed in studies, which limits the understanding of how these factors jointly affect Black families' economic advancement. To bridge these gaps, future research should prioritize collecting and analyzing data disaggregated by population group. This approach would enable policymakers and human services agencies to design more balanced and effective programs that account for various factors, ultimately improving outcomes for all families transitioning off TANF.

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