

Pilot Profile: Minnesota

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. Staff members from the TANF program in Olmsted and Dakota counties in southeastern Minnesota, in collaboration with the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS), analyzed data about TANF benefit sanctions and the notices that agencies sent to participants who were at risk of receiving a sanction (that is, the withholding of aid or the termination of benefits). Notices of intent to sanction (NOITS) are sent to TANF participants to nudge them into following the program rules. The pilot team sought to better understand the relationship between NOITS rates and sanction rates and then to explore how NOITS and sanctions are associated with race, language, age, and immigration status. Sanctions cause real hardships to families, and past research has uncovered significant racial variation in women’s likelihood of experiencing sanctions. By focusing on these questions, the pilot sought to bring together insights from both state and county TANF agencies and build on recent efforts in Olmsted and Dakota counties to pilot new service delivery practices.



The Minnesota pilot team included a data scientist from the state data analytics unit and a mix of analytics and program staff in each county who were new users of R programming language.

DATA LANDSCAPE. The pilot team identified variables that state staff members extracted from DHS’s existing statewide data warehouse and then merged into a specially crafted data set for each county—the first time a Minnesota county had access to data organized in this way. The data originated from more than a dozen tables in the database. The data covered the period 2017 to 2021 and included variables at both the case level and the individual level for all TANF programs. Most of the key data within the warehouse originated with two state management information systems. One system is used by state and county workers to determine eligibility for public assistance and health care coverage, the

PILOT HIGHLIGHTS

The TDC pilot in Minnesota was a unique collaboration between the state and counties. Team members from the state agency and Dakota and Olmsted counties collaborated to identify which data fields would be extracted to generate a specially crafted data set that team members cleaned, organized, and repeatedly analyzed throughout the 30-month pilot project.

appropriate benefit levels, and to issue benefits for cash assistance and food support programs. A second system tracks employment and training services as part of case management by program administrators and service providers.

APPROACH AND RESEARCH METHODS. Early in the pilot, the team used data visualization tools to familiarize itself with the data set; later, the team used these tools to help communicate the results of its analysis. For its main analysis, the team used linear regression models to explore the relationship between racial identity and receipt of NOITS and sanctions. The team identified a cohort of adults who participated in TANF in 2018 but

not in 2017. The team performed several rounds of regression analysis, adding more covariates with each round.

The team first predicted the number of NOITS a participant would receive and then predicted the number of sanctions. For the latter, the team used the number of NOITS as an additional predictor. A subsequent analysis performed a regression on sanction outcomes using *all* covariates for participants who had at least one NOITS during the observation window. All of these regressions were implemented using the ordinary least squares (OLS) method. The team performed regressions for Olmsted County and Dakota County separately and for the state as a whole.

Minnesota TANF Snapshot



\$ 1,148

Maximum Monthly Earnings Threshold for Family of 3 (July 2020)^b

\$ 632

Monthly Cash Benefit for Family of 3 with No Income (July 2020)^c

\$ 573m

TANF and State Maintenance-of-Effort Spending (FY 2020)^d

Number of TANF participants (November 2020)^a

12,484

Adults

35,101

Children

(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. Key findings from Minnesota's initial analyses focused on rates of participants receiving NOITS and sanctions. The analyses estimated variance from rates experienced by White TANF participants, who represent the largest racial identity group (between 40 and 45 percent) both statewide and in each of the two counties.

- Statewide, African American, multiple-race, and American Indian TANF participants were most likely to receive NOITS, accounting for program participation and other demographic factors. American Indian participants were the only group to consistently receive more sanctions than White participants, regardless of whether participants received a NOITS.
- In Olmsted County, the number of NOITS was only slightly larger than the number of sanctions; this contrasts with Dakota County and with statewide patterns. Asian American and American Indian participants were more likely to receive NOITS and sanctions than White participants. Hispanic and Latinx participants also received more sanctions.
- In Dakota County, there were no statistically significant differences in the receipt of NOITS. Asian Americans had

elevated sanctions rates, regardless of whether participants received a NOITS.

- Prior to the pilot, Minnesota DHS and local TANF agencies did not collaboratively review, compare, or analyze NOITS and sanction data. The state and counties developed new processes to extract and deliver data to the participating counties; this provided a template for how DHS could share data with additional counties. In turn, county input and perspectives helped provide answers and illuminate new questions about the use of NOITS and sanctions.



We know that in order for our program to really improve, we have to have partners at the county and tribal level.



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Looking ahead, the pilot team will work to make it easier for Minnesota and its other counties to share and analyze TANF data. This work will include formalizing a data request process from state to county; modifying R programming code instructions to eliminate unnecessary steps and document instructions and decision points; and engaging program staff in reviewing data. The project provided an encouraging “proof of concept” for new forms of collaboration between the state and county. A third county has been invited to join the team, and future analyses could filter results by caseworker or service provider. In addition, the team may conduct analyses focused on rates of NOITS issuance and sanctions over time, and associations among sanctions, sanction types, closing reasons, benefit amounts, and demographics. Additional variables might include assessment tool results, living arrangements, employment markets, child care availability and affordability, and transportation.

This profile was based primarily on reports and presentations produced by the pilot team at the Minnesota Department of Human Services. For more information, contact Ben Jaques-Leslie, data scientist (benjamin.jaques-leslie@state.mn.us). 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 Minnesota TDC pilot coach. MDRC edited this document and it was designed by Public Strategies.

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