Addressing Homelessness Through Steady, Sustainable Employment

Why This Analysis

Homelessness is a pressing national concern, and shelter alone cannot answer it. No city can build shelters fast enough to make a serious dent while people continue to lose housing. The way out of shelters and staying out of shelters has to involve income.

Yet little attention goes to earning one's way to self-sufficiency, largely because of stereotypes about who the homeless are. The familiar picture of long-term, chronic homelessness, outside the labor market, describes a minority. In January 2025, HUD counted 169,467 chronically homeless people among 745,652 experiencing homelessness: more than three in four are not chronically homeless, because for most their homelessness is situational. Their lives were spent several steps removed from it, and then something happened. Most are adults in their working years, with work experience behind them. The system needs to adapt to help them regain their footing.

The homeless who come to job centers for help finding work fit that reality, not the stereotype. Nationally, 64% of homeless job center clients had wages in the nine months before they enrolled. In New York City, home to about 17 percent of the nation's homeless, 75% did.

The building blocks for self-sufficiency are present. What has been missing is a sure path to assistance to regain employment, particularly employment in sectors that offer greater job stability.

Yet relatively few reach the help that exists. Despite prior work experience to market, few homeless people make it to a job center. In New York City, about 2.4% of the homeless count passes through one in a year, less than half the rate in Los Angeles and the next eight largest communities. Too many people with the most to gain from the job center never reach it. Shelter staff bring time, trust and knowledge of each resident's barriers, yet know little about helping residents market themselves toward sustainable employment.

The Challenge At Hand

Clients who have used job centers to move up have already marked the paths to economic mobility. The challenge is twofold: to learn from their experience which paths work for people starting where homeless adults start, and to equip the whole homeless assistance system, shelters included, to guide homeless adults through a meaningful job search that leads to stable, better-paying work.

Paths To Low Income Economic Mobility Go Unidentified For Lack Of Data

The working poor are counted, but rarely followed. National surveys identify who is poor, and the federal government publishes a yearly profile of the working poor. But a yearly snapshot cannot show how people move between jobs and industries within the year, and that movement is where stability is won or lost.

The surveys that do follow people are too small and too coarse. Panel surveys track households over several years, but earnings are self-reported, participants drop out over time, and samples run to thousands, not millions. They cannot be cut by work history, education and local labor market at once. State studies that link unemployment insurance wage records exist, but each covers one state, and none ties wages to a client's circumstances at intake across the nation. Only a national file has the numbers needed for defensible inference about narrow groups of similarly situated clients.

The question here is narrower still: what happens to the working poor who come to the workforce system for help. Only the system's own records, with quarterly wages and industry tied to each client's circumstances at intake and pooled across years, can answer it.

The Evidence Already Exists In Data Collected Every Year

The data already exists. Every job center in the country reports each client it serves to the U.S. Department of Labor, under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and the Wagner-Peyser Act that created the Job Service. These records follow one national layout, the Participant Individual Record Layout (PIRL), and together form the WIOA/Job Service transaction file. For each client they capture who the person is at intake: age, education, veteran status, disability, and circumstances such as homelessness, low

income or a prior conviction. They also capture what the person earned, and in which industry, in the quarters before enrolling and the quarters after leaving, drawn from state unemployment insurance wage records rather than self-report.

It is collected for accountability, then largely set aside. States report these records to meet federal performance requirements, and the Department publishes them annually with personal identifiers removed. Each release is used mainly to score programs against negotiated targets. Little of it returns to the job center desk, where it could inform the next client's search.

The National Workforce Outcomes File (NWOF) puts it to work. Path To A Job combined every public release from program years 2016 through 2023, the full universe of publicly available records rather than a selected sample, into a database of more than 23 million individual client outcomes. Each record follows one client from the quarters before entry to the quarters after exit: whether they found work, whether they kept it, what it paid, and whether they moved into a more stable industry.

Scale is what makes the question answerable. With this many records, clients can be grouped by work history, education, local labor market and circumstance at once, and the groups remain large enough to trust. That makes it possible to ask, for a homeless adult with a given background, where people like them landed and what it paid. No single state or local file can answer that.

Why Study The Low-Income Working Rather Than Homeless Adults Alone

Homeless clients belong to a larger sub-population of low-income adults. Nearly all homeless job center clients (97.7%) are also low-income. They are hired at similar rates, land in the same industries, and earn nearly the same once they reach the same kind of work. The way to understand and improve their outcomes is to study the far larger population they belong to.

The homeless data alone cannot carry the analysis.

- **Precision.** In New York City, the homeless records support a margin of about 1.8 points on an employment rate; the low-income working records support less than half a point.
- **Depth.** Work history, local labor market and education can be crossed for the low-income working. The same cuts go thin for the homeless.

- **Reliability.** Homeless status is self-reported at enrollment and unevenly reported by states.

Low-income working is the more exact definition. Low income is a status staff record at enrollment. Working is behavior, measured from wage records. We define the low-income working as clients who were low-income at entry and had recorded earnings in at least one of the three quarters before they enrolled. Nationally that is 71% of low-income clients; in New York City, 79%. Only a file that links eligibility to wage records before entry can draw this line.

The working can be graded, not just counted. The same three quarters before entry show how firmly each client held on to work:

Gradation	Rule (three quarters before entry)	What it says
Steady work	2 or more quarters in one industry	Attached, with a field to market
Shifting work	2 to 3 quarters, different industries	Working, but without footing
Little work	1 quarter	On the edge of the labor market
No recent work	No wages	Not working poor; referred for a full assessment

Steady work divides further by the kind of industry: better-paying, more stable industries, or those built on low wages and high turnover. That division is where the gap between homeless and low-income clients shows.

Homelessness is then studied within the context of their low-income cohort. Grade for grade, the two groups look alike. Homeless clients who start from steady work are no more likely to end with no work: 11.6% have no wages in the year after exit, against 11.1% of the low-income working. In the same kind of work they earn within 5% of their low-income peers: $6,947 against $7,296 a quarter for those who held steady work in stable industries. The one real difference is a stability penalty. Of clients with steady work in better-paying, more stable industries before entry, 48.0% of the homeless stay in such work, against 55.8% of the low-income working. The penalty lies in holding the job, not getting it, which calls for retention support rather than different destinations.

That similarity turns the difference in numbers into an advantage. Of the 2.8 million low-income and homeless clients who left job centers in the analysis window, 1.55 million were low-income working and 150,000 homeless working, about ten to one. Because homeless clients follow their low-income cohort in hiring, industry and pay, the far larger cohort can guide them where their own numbers run thin. It is large enough to cross work history, local labor market and education at once and still produce reliable results, down to a single city. The homeless records then answer the narrower question the cohort cannot: where, and by how much, homeless outcomes depart from it. In practice, a homeless client sees where people like them in the low-income cohort landed, with the stability penalty flagged for follow-up.

NWOF Analysis Shows The Paths Low-Income Adults Took To Self-Sufficiency

The law of large numbers works in the analysis's favor. The larger the group behind a figure, the less any one person's luck moves it, and the closer the figure comes to what that group truly experiences. Small groups swing from year to year; large ones settle. That is why this analysis rests on the low-income cohort rather than on homeless clients alone.

Every finding here is supported by at least 1,000 outcomes. No result is reported from a smaller group. At that size, the margin of error on an employment rate is about three percentage points either way, and the national comparisons rest on far more.

Examples Of Applied Outcome Analysis That Shapes Service Delivery

- **Steady work holds.** Of low-income working clients with steady work in better-paying, more stable industries before entry, 55.8% were in such work after exit. *So staff can market these clients back into their field quickly, rather than starting them over.*
- **Shifting work more often led to better work than steady low-wage work.** Of clients who moved between industries before entry, 37.6% reached steady work in better-paying industries. Of those who held steady work in low-wage, high-turnover industries, only 28.7% did. *So staff should not treat steady low-wage work as a safe place to stop because the work is often readily available, with fewer barriers to entry; those clients deserve a push toward industries that offer better wages and, equally important, greater job stability.*
- **Even a little work opens the door.** A third (33.0%) of clients with just one quarter of recent work reached steady work in better-paying industries. *So staff should treat even brief recent work as something to build on, not a reason to steer a client away*

from job search.

- **Older steady workers are most often without wages after exit.** Among steady workers aged 55 and over, 21.8% had no wages in the year after exit, against 5.4% of those under 25. Some of this likely reflects retirement. *So clients 55 and over get follow-up from the start.*

Employed Low Income And Homeless Adults: The Difference

Homeless clients fall behind at every starting point. The share who reached steady work in better-paying, more stable industries after exit:

Starting point before entry	Low-income working	Homeless working	Gap (points)
Steady work, better-paying industries	55.8%	48.0%	−7.8
Steady work, low-wage industries	28.7%	24.1%	−4.6
Shifting work	37.6%	30.5%	−7.1
Little work	33.0%	24.6%	−8.4

Pay is not where homeless clients differ. In the same kind of work, homeless clients earn within 5% of their low-income peers, and the gap narrows with education: 7.0 percent with no diploma, 4.2 percent with a bachelor's degree. *So homeless clients need support in keeping the job after placement, not different destinations.*

Large Data Research Is Needed To Guide Homeless Adults Toward Stable Work

The findings above come from one analysis. What is needed is a standing body of research. Research at this scale, on the workforce system's own records, turns data collected for accountability into decision support at the desk, and provides much-needed insight into how different client segments generate different outcomes.

It changes what staff can do.

- **From averages to segments.** Staff see the outcomes of people like the client in front of them, not of the system as a whole.

- **From the next opening to the best destination.** The evidence shows where steady, better-paid work was actually reached from each starting point.
- **From hope to evidence.** For clients with the thinnest work histories, it is evidence that a better path exists.

It provides insights staff can share with their homeless clients. Staff can show a homeless client where people with the same work history landed, what it paid, and what it took to stay: the insight to regain their footing, and to move beyond it.

It requires nothing new to be collected. Each annual federal release refreshes it, and today's results become a baseline against which changes in practice can be evaluated.

It can travel. The same research can feed staff tools, a state's case management system, managers' dashboards or a researcher's model. Its value lies in the records and how they are grouped, not in any one screen.

Its limits are stated plainly. It describes where people like a client went; it does not predict where any one client will go. It is only as good as states' reporting, and wage records miss work outside state unemployment insurance, so its employment figures are a floor.

The NWOF Will Be Made Available For Workforce And Economic Mobility Research

The file will be released for non-commercial research at no cost. The research this document calls for should not depend on any one organization. Path To A Job will make the National Workforce Outcomes File available to universities, policy institutes and public agencies studying the economic mobility of the working poor to generate evidence that shapes service delivery.

The file presently holds over 23 million outcome records and is about 1 GB as a compressed Parquet file. The records carry no personal identifiers, and users agree not to attempt to identify any individual. An update is expected in late 2026 or early 2027, when the federal release with data through June 30, 2026 becomes available.

A companion file of 127,833 WIOA trainees from program year 2022 is also available. Researchers can compare the employment of low-income adults after they leave the job center, with and without skills training, to assess what training adds to their prospects.

Researchers interested in the file are invited to get in touch.

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