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EVIDENCE IN LABOR MARKET POLICIES AND
IMPLICATIONS FOR BRAZIL:

JOB SEARCH ASSISTANCE



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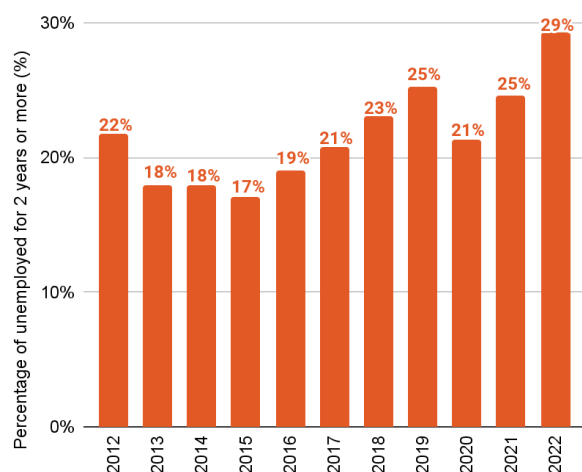
EVIDENCE IN LABOR MARKET POLICIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR BRAZIL: JOB SEARCH ASSISTANCE

Authors: **Filipe Cavalcanti**, JOI Brazil. **Laísa Ratcher**, IDB. **Livia Gouvêa**, IDB. **Luiz Felipe Fontes**, JOI Brazil. Technical support: **Edivaldo Constantino**, JOI Brazil. **Kelly Miranda**, IDB.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the proportion of Brazilians experiencing long-term unemployment, defined as unemployed and looking for work for at least two years (Figure 1), has grown to a record high. In 2022, among the total unemployed people in the country, 29 percent were looking for jobs for at least 24 months, the highest percentage since the government started reporting this figure in 2012. In absolute terms, that represents 3.2 million people.

Figure 1 - Percentage of unemployed for two years or more in Brazil, in %



Source: IBGE, PNAD-Contínua, average for the first two quarters.

While low economic activity is one cited source of long-term unemployment, other factors also increase the time people spend looking for a job. Difficulties in communicating skills and obtaining information about the labor market, geographical barriers, and behavioral biases may be some of the challenges workers face ([Babcock et al, 2012](#)). There might also be a scarring effect, that is, workers who are unemployed for a long time are viewed negatively by potential employers ([Kroft et al, 2013](#)). Additionally, the simple fact that a

worker spends significant time unemployed can lead to a lack of confidence. All these difficulties can also hurt firms by decreasing their chances of finding suitable workers.

In light of this problem, several interventions have been already carried out to make the job search process more efficient, by lowering the time to find a job and increasing the quality of matches between jobseekers and firms. These job search assistance policies are classified as active labor market policies, intended to increase both employment rates and workers' incomes ([Mazza, 2011](#)).¹

Job search assistance is typically offered through Public Employment Services (PESs), although private institutions can offer similar services. In Brazil, the PES is the National Employment System (SINE), which has more than 1,400 units throughout the country ([IPEA, 2020](#)). The primary purpose of job search assistance programs is to bring workers and employers together by offering a variety of services, such as collecting and disseminating job openings, professional counseling, referring participants to vacancies that match their profiles, certifying skills, and providing guidance on how to prepare for interviews and how or where to look for job opportunities.

Research on the impact of job assistance programs has found mixed results. Some studies found positive impacts on outcomes such as interview offers, job offers, employment, and quality employment, but not all of the studies measured or showed sustained benefits to earnings, total employment, or well-being

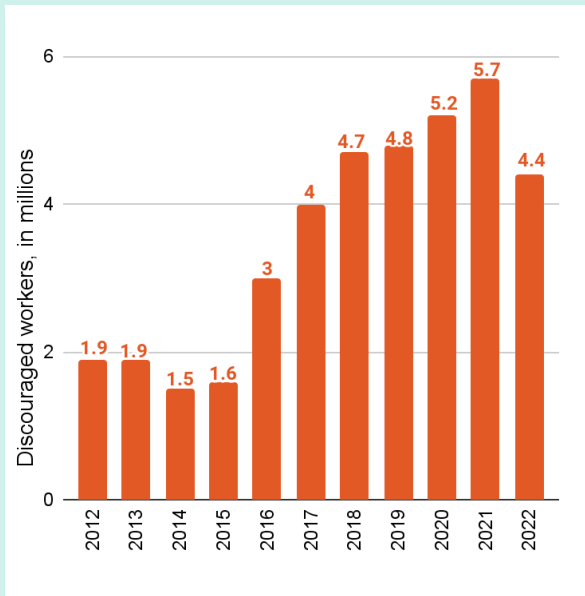
¹Active policies also include job training programs, for example. In contrast, passive policies seek to maintain workers' income during periods of unemployment. For example, unemployment insurance.

(J-PAL, 2022). Regarding this issue, it is worth taking a rigorous analysis at the characteristics that made these interventions more effective in improving the design of future programs.

This publication reviews the available evidence on job search assistance programs and reflects on its implications for public policy in Brazil. It adds to other publications already done by J-PAL and the IDB that address this issue. For a more comprehensive description of this literature, see [IADB \(2021\)](#) and [J-PAL \(2022\)](#).

JOB SEARCH AND DISCOURAGEMENT

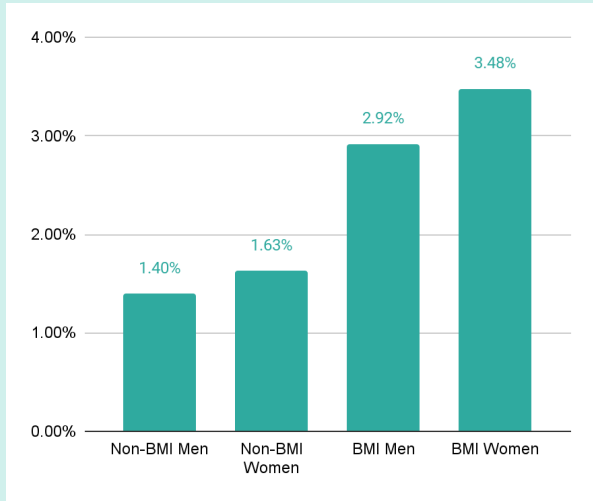
Figure 2 - Number of discouraged workers in Brazil, in millions



Source: IBGE, PNAD-Contínua, average for the first two quarters. The discouraged are people who would like to work and would be available to do so but did not look for a job because they thought they would not find one.

Those most affected by discouragement are women and Black, Mixed-Race and Indigenous (BMI) people. Discouragement relative to the working-age population among BMI women is more than twice as big as that of non-BMI men (Figure 3). Therefore, it is particularly important to think about ways to create evidence-based policies to improve labor market outcomes for these groups. We present some promising interventions in Section 3.

Figure 3 - Discouraged workers, % of respective Working-Age Population (WAP), by sex and race (2022, Q2)



Source: IBGE, PNAD-Contínua, 2022 (2nd quarter). WAP refers to the number of people over 14 years old in each subgroup of race/gender.

PROMISING INTERVENTIONS IN THE JOB SEARCH PROCESS

Programs that sought to help workers in the job search process were generally most effective when they identified and addressed specific barriers. Many interventions were designed through PESs, which fostered the incorporation of evidence into PES programs and policies in some cases (see, for example, [how evidence](#)

[from randomized evaluations informed France's PES](#)). There are various channels through which programs can reduce search barriers for job seekers. Some of the channels where rigorous evidence exists are discussed below.

Overcoming financial and geographic constraints

Looking for a job is usually expensive, and unemployed people often have even less financial resources to cover such costs, which include, for example, transportation fees to deliver resumes and conduct interviews. Although unemployment insurance can cover some of these costs, in Brazil it is only offered to formal workers who meet a given criteria.² Lack of resources can cause applicants to lessen the intensity with which they seek employment, leading to poorer labor market outcomes. In **Ethiopia**, one evaluation showed that transport subsidies helped youth find better quality work but did not increase overall employment ([Franklin, 2018](#)); the study also found that the program reduced worker discouragement. In **South Africa**, a transport subsidy that helped youth explore job options in the city center changed their sense of their job prospects and led them to revise down their wage expectations and accept jobs closer to home ([Banerjee and Sequeira, 2022](#)). In addition, in **Jordan**, Syrian refugee job seekers did not have enough available cash to search for a job; providing cash transfers to these job seekers increased their job search effort, earnings, and employment ([Caria et al., 2021](#)).

² In Brazil, these criteria are related to the length of service prior to the insurance. Furthermore, the unemployment insurance has a fixed term. In general, informal workers and people who have been unemployed for a long period of time will not have access to this benefit.



Acquiring more information about the job market

Having access to broader information about the labor market can encourage job seekers to take a more realistic approach to their search, which in turn may improve employability, salary, and job retention outcomes. Researchers have found positive effects of broadening the available information about job vacancies and providing advice about jobs similar to those being sought by candidates ([Gee, 2019](#); [Belot et al., 2019](#)).³ In **Germany**, researchers found that providing information about the job search process and the consequences of unemployment increased employment and earnings for those at risk of long-term unemployment ([Altmann et al., 2018](#)). Furthermore, an evaluation in **South Africa** showed that supplementing labor market preparation programs with training about online employment platforms increased the likelihood of participants being employed, mainly because using these tools allowed them to acquire more information about potential employers ([Wheeler et al. 2022](#))⁴. Research in **Ethiopia** revealed that job fairs provided a means to bridge information gaps in the labor market, resulting in enhanced job search and improved employment outcomes for job seekers who had strong misconceptions about their employment prospects ([Abebe et al., 2022](#)). Similarly, research in the **Philippines** found that a job

³ [Gee, \(2019\)](#) was a large-scale experimental study carried out on an online platform present in more than 230 countries. [Belot et al., \(2019\)](#) was a smaller experiment carried out in Scotland.

⁴ Also, the results are larger for candidates with low communication skills. The authors say that “this is consistent with LinkedIn profiles providing an alternative source of information that offsets weak written or verbal communication in applications or interviews” ([Wheeler et al. 2022](#)).

fair providing participants with information about the overseas labor market boosted their likelihood of seeking employment outside the region and formal-sector employment ([Beam et al., 2016](#)).

Improving communication of skills

Workers may have difficulty conveying their skills to employers, which decreases their chances of being hired. In this sense, helping job applicants better understand and communicate their skills can be a way to improve their labor market outcomes and help firms choose candidates in a more informed way.

For example, evaluations of interventions in **South Africa** and the **United States** that encouraged the use of reference letters found that this practice increased the chances of progressing in selection processes and the workers' chances of getting jobs ([Abel et al., 2020](#); [Heller and Kessler, 2021](#))⁵. In addition, interventions in **Ethiopia** and **South Africa** that promoted skills certification of candidates had positive impacts on employability, especially among those individuals who used to have work and earn less ([Abebe et al., 2021](#); [Carranza et al., 2020](#)). Researchers in **Uganda** evaluated the effects of disclosing non-cognitive skill certificates to both job seekers and small and medium enterprises after a training. They found that firms revised upwards their beliefs for workers' skills in the upper part of skill distribution and that jobseekers increased their labor market expectations; this led to an increase in the earnings of high-skilled workers

⁵ [Heller and Kessler \(2021\)](#) also found that earnings grew over 4 years.

conditional on employment ([Bassi and Nansamba, 2021](#)).

Overcoming limitations and behavioral biases

Job search success depends strongly on candidates' decisions regarding intensity, diversity, and persistence in this activity. These efforts, however, can be affected by psychological and behavioral barriers. For instance, the tendency to overweight immediate costs relative to future benefits⁶ may explain why some candidates procrastinate their job search activities ([DellaVigna and Paserman, 2005](#)). In addition, candidates may become more easily discouraged when they believe that their job search efforts will not be effective⁷ ([McGee, 2015](#), [Caliendo et al., 2015](#), [McGee and McGee, 2016](#)).

A study with **South Africa's** PES found that candidates tend to apply for fewer vacancies than they would like ([Abel et al., 2019](#)). The authors then showed that encouraging recipients to create a detailed action plan about their job search process reduced the gap between the intention to apply for job vacancies and the actual number of applications, expanded the range of search channels used by applicants, and led to higher employment levels. In addition, an evaluation in **Germany** showed that teaching innovative behavioral strategies to increase the chance of goal achievement helped increase job applications ([Berger et al., 2022](#))⁸.

⁶ This phenomenon is known as "Present Bias".

⁷ This is connected to the concept "Locus of Control", the degree to which people believe that they control the events that influence their success as opposed to external forces.

⁸ The behavioral strategy consisted of a technique developed by psychologists for setting goals in order to improve the



Aligning service provider incentives

Payment structures for providers of job search assistance services may influence the outcomes of these programs.⁹ In **France**, an evaluation of a counseling program for those at risk of long-term unemployment showed that it was less effective in increasing participants' employability when offered by the private sector. The researchers suggest that the private providers were less effective because the payment structure encouraged them to maximize the number of participants rather than focusing on allocating participants to the most suitable jobs ([Behaghel et al., 2014](#)). In **Switzerland**, job search assistance programs for those already unemployed for one year offered by the private sector led to better employment outcomes in the short term but worse outcomes in the long run. Researchers found that the payment structure encouraged them to prioritize faster job placements over quality placements ([Cottier et al., 2018](#)). Therefore, provider incentive structures seem to play an important role in the success of the programs.



Creating incentives for workers to look for jobs

PEs often manage social benefits such as unemployment insurance. Conditioning the

achievement of results. For more details, see [Oettingen and Gollwitzer \(2010\)](#).

⁹ The payment structure defines which indicators are linked to the remuneration of program providers. Examples of indicators can be the number of job seekers enrolled and the number of workers allocated to job opportunities.

receipt of these benefits on job search-related criteria (e.g., the number of applications submitted) can lead to positive results. Indeed, experimental research has shown that introducing such job search requirements can lower unemployment duration ([Marinescu, 2017](#)).

For example, an evaluation in the **United States** showed that conditioning the receipt of unemployment insurance to job search requirements induced a more intensive job search and reduced the length of unemployment insurance receipt ([Klepinger et al., 2002](#)). At the same time, quasi-experimental research suggests this can occur at the expense of job quality, leading to negative effects in the long run ([Petrongolo, 2009](#)). Moreover, raising job search requirements beyond standard levels may induce workers to give up searching and thus increase worker discouragement ([Marinescu, 2017](#), [Manning, 2009](#)). Therefore, it is important that incentives are designed with those potential negative effects in mind, and that they are always monitored for any need for correction. Further research on the consequences of job search monitoring on workers' decisions and labor market outcomes would provide a valuable contribution.

EMPLOYMENT PLATFORMS AND ALGORITHMS

The digitization of employment platforms makes it possible to use algorithms (such as Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence) to fulfill some functions in labor market intermediation. For example, by using existing data from candidates and job openings, algorithms can create methods for automatically screening resumes, linking employers and job seekers, and suggesting skills training for workers ([Urquidí and Ortega, 2020](#)). For instance, an evaluation

showed that algorithmically recommending workers to employers improved the quality of the recruits' pool and increased hiring in a large online labor market ([Horton, 2017](#)). Another evaluation found that job seekers that received algorithmic writing assistance experienced an eight percent increase in the probability of getting hired in an online labor market ([van Inwegen et al., 2023](#)).

However, the use of algorithms also presents risks that would be valuable to study further. One recurring concern is that the data used to train these algorithms may have biases due to past discrimination patterns that tend to be reproduced if the algorithms do not take this factor into account ([Urquidi and Ortega, 2020](#)). Indeed, one recent study found that two hiring algorithms improved hiring rates, but selected far fewer Black and Hispanic candidates ([Li et al., 2021](#)). However, there are alternatives to deal with this problem. In an extension, the same authors showed that using a different algorithm increased demographic diversity while keeping hiring rates high. Further rigorous evaluations about the implications of algorithms in job search platforms would be valuable.

GENDER- AND RACE-SPECIFIC BARRIERS

Social markers of gender and race can affect the job search process. For example, several studies show that women and Blacks may face additional difficulties in the job search process due to discrimination ([Goldin and Rouse, 2000](#), [Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004](#)). Selection processes that created mechanisms to make it impossible for the hiring firms to know some characteristics of the candidates have increased hiring of underrepresented groups in some cases ([Goldin and Rouse, 2000](#)), while it

increased discrimination in other situations ([Behagel et al., 2015](#), [Agan and Starr, 2017](#)).

Women and Black people may also have more difficulty communicating their skills in the job market. This difficulty may occur due to discrimination or to other reasons, such as an absence of prior work experience on their resumes. For this reason, providing reference letters and other forms of support for communicating skills may generate stronger positive outcomes for these groups. In **South Africa**, reference letters increased employment for women, while they had no effect on men. According to the authors, the results suggest that employers were less confident in the skills reported by women, and the reference letters helped correct this bias¹⁰ ([Abel et al., 2020](#)). In the **United States**, researchers have also found positive effects of reference letters on employability and income in a population consisting mostly of non-white people ([Heller and Kessler, 2021](#)). In **Ethiopia**, researchers showed that helping individuals better communicate their skills through a workshop and certification mainly benefited people who usually face higher difficulties in the labor market ([Abebe et al., 2021](#)). In **Australia**, supplementing a job-search assistance program with information on how to fill out a resume and write cover letters was shown to be more effective in helping women find jobs than men ([Briscese et al., 2020](#)).¹¹

Finally, women may also decrease their job search intensity due to low expectations about labor market opportunities. One strategy to

¹⁰ Also, women were more likely to use the letters. According to the authors, “this is consistent with the idea that groups who feel in a position of disadvantage are more likely to welcome additional tools to prove their ability” ([Abel et al., 2020](#), p. 21).

¹¹ The effects in employment were also higher for jobseekers in the age range 35 to 50.

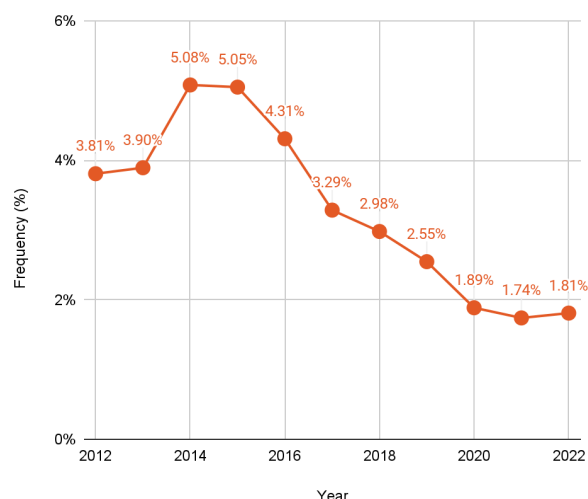
address this is to provide more information about available jobs. In **India**, providing information about vacancies for women with a job search assistance service increased the likelihood that women would work outside their homes for pay. In addition, women also increased investments in their education and demonstrated a greater desire to work outside the home ([Jensen, 2012](#)).

JOB SEARCH ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

A descriptive study points out that most Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) countries have PES, but that in general they offer few services and have low population coverage compared to OECD countries ([Mazza, 2011](#)). These services also suffer from low funding: less than 0.04% of GDP in LAC countries, while the average for the OECD is 0.17% ([IDB, 2015](#)). Few evaluations have been conducted in the region to evaluate how efficient these programs are and how to improve them.

Since 1975, **Brazil** has operated a national public job search assistance system, the SINE (National Employment System). This system runs both in-person and digital programs, with more than 1,400 physical units spread throughout the country. It is also the system through which individuals receive unemployment insurance ([IPEA, 2020](#)). In recent years, fewer job seekers have been using SINE as their main tool to search for work. From 2012 to 2022, the use of this system among job seekers dropped from 3.81 percent to 1.81 percent (Figure 4). This decrease may be related to a lack of knowledge about the system, as well as its low effectiveness.

Figure 4 - Use of the SINE among jobseekers



Source: IBGE, PNAD-C, average for the first two quarters. The figure represents the share of workers that use SINE as the main action to get a job.

A process evaluation suggests that the SINE faces difficulties in capturing vacancies from companies, which limits its ability to refer workers to opportunities appropriate to their professional profile ([IPEA, 2020](#)). Researchers also stress the importance of implementing changes in the management of the SINE in order to make it more effective, mainly through the implementation of more robust monitoring systems. Brazil has ample capacity to use administrative data to create indicators that can more accurately identify the effectiveness of each of the more than 1,400 centers, and thereby define responsibilities and roles to improve results ([World Bank, 2015](#)).

A quasi-experimental evaluation of SINE assessed the trajectory of two groups of workers with similar characteristics, but where only one of them received a referral for a job interview through the system. Comparing the groups before and after the referral, the authors found that receiving a referral increased the chances of getting a job. However, they also observed a

decrease in the salary of those who received a referral in comparison to their previous job (O'Leary et al., 2021). The authors suggest that the system's lack of capacity to attract high-quality jobs may be contributing to this negative effect. These results further emphasize the need for rigorous evaluations in the region to improve the effectiveness of existing programs

Recently, SINE has incorporated the use of digital technologies, changes in financing rules, and data sharing with companies which can help to overcome those issues (IPEA, 2020). However, few evaluations of these changes have been made since then, and strategies in this direction would be welcome.

CASE STUDY: SMS USE AND JOB SEARCH IN PERU

In partnership with Peru's PES, Dammert et al., (2015) carried out an experimental study to understand both the effectiveness of traditional PES and to test the introduction of new technologies in this type of policy. Specifically, the authors evaluated the effect of providing up-to-date information on job vacancies via SMS to two groups of individuals. One group received information about vacancies only from the PES database, and another group received vacancies from both inside and outside the PES database. The results show that integrating technologies into these services can improve their outcomes.

Integrating SMS communication into this PES resulted in modest positive impacts on participants' short-term (2-month) employment, while participation in the traditional non-digital intermediation did not result in any detectable effects. The group that also received

information via SMS about vacancies outside the PES database showed larger effects on employability and increased online job search activities.

These results suggest that integrating mobile phone technologies with traditional intermediation systems and expanding the pool of information available to jobseekers may be a cost-effective initiative, as the costs of sending additional information via SMS were small.

FINAL REMARKS

In order to motivate improvements in Brazil's PES, SINE, and help in the creation and improvement of other solutions outside this system, this publication has presented insights from evidence on job search assistance programs. We now present some concluding remarks.

Identifying the barriers of unemployed workers

Jobseekers face a number of barriers. In general, the evaluations reviewed in this publication showed the programs had positive results when they correctly identified these barriers and created ways to reduce them. Also, many successful programs have used innovative practices, with advances in several areas of knowledge, such as psychology and statistics, to achieve their results.

The use of new technologies

Many interventions reviewed in this publication used technological tools in order to facilitate the job search process. For instance, using online platforms to provide more information about the labor market had positive effects on job

seekers' labor outcomes. Moreover, training individuals on how to use these platforms led to positive results. In addition, text messages providing information to job seekers improved the functioning of a PES in Peru. Open questions remain about how algorithms can be incorporated into online platforms and used to make the job search process more efficient without harming groups of individuals.

Improving the efficiency and use of PES

Despite its nationwide reach, SINE is used by only a low fraction of jobseekers in Brazil. To overcome that, it is important to make this program more efficient and attractive to both workers and firms. One way to achieve this goal is by using research to drive action toward more effective policies. In addition, another promising change is the adoption of more effective monitoring systems by building indicators that can be tracked over time and used in future evaluations.

Coordination with other social policies

PESs can be used to identify other barriers that individuals face when looking for work, such as lack of training and poor physical and mental health conditions. Administrative records from these systems can be cross-referenced with other government records, such as those for health and social protection, thus opening doors for broader coordination of social policies for citizens. Further evaluations could measure the effectiveness of such an approach on welfare variables in addition to the usual employability variables.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RANDOMIZED EVALUATIONS

Randomized evaluations are a powerful tool for identifying the impact of a program or policy and can provide reflections on the reasons behind the impact of an intervention. These reflections can help practitioners and decision-makers seeking to improve the design of their programs and use their resources efficiently. J-PAL's Jobs and Opportunity Initiative (JOI) Brazil was created in 2021 to expand the body of evidence on solutions to Brazil's labor market challenges by supporting randomized evaluations. If your company, organization, or government agency is implementing a labor market related intervention and would like to explore the opportunity to collaborate with researchers to evaluate your intervention accurately, please contact us at jo-br@povertyactionlab.org.

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Using the most recent rigorous evidence in the literature, this publication consolidates the main reflections on the topic of job search assistance, indicating paths for the promotion of quality jobs in Brazil. We hope that this study has contributed to this discussion, and we welcome new efforts aimed at expanding the frontiers of knowledge. We invite readers to explore the

other contents of our series of publications, such as the first available study on job training.

JOI Brazil is a J-PAL initiative whose objectives are to strengthen innovative actions, foster rigorous research, qualify the debate about the Brazilian labor market, and disseminate knowledge to governments, civil society, companies, and foundations in the country. We seek to promote a policy-making culture informed by evidence. We would like to thank our partners - Arymax Foundation, B3 Social, Tide Setubal Foundation, Potencia Ventures, the Inter-American Development Bank, and Insper - for their support in fostering rigorous research in the country. We would also like to thank Marianne Bertrand, Lisa Corsetto, Natalie Valent, David Kaplan and Giovanni Di Pietra for the valuable feedback that allowed us to improve this article. We extend our thanks to all who put effort into making this publication possible.

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