

## **Summary for “TANF and Food Assistance Program Dynamics”**

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Poverty among children was at 18 percent in 2007, while poverty among all age groups was 12 percent. Poverty among children has been higher than that among other age groups since the mid 1970s, rising to over 20 percent in the early 1980s and again in the early 1990s. In the 1990s, several important changes were made to federally-funded assistance programs that particularly affect children, and the combined effects of those changes are not well understood.

In the mid-1990s, a major entitlement program that directly targeted children in poor families, Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), was replaced by the much more limited Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. In contrast, food assistance programs, which are heavily used by families with children, have grown since the early 1990s, and they are now seen as one of the more important parts of the nation’s safety net for children. The main food assistance programs are the Food Stamp Program (FSP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and what we are calling “school meals”, the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program.

In order to understand the current role of food assistance programs in the safety net for children, this project examines how children have benefited over time from the following

four programs: TANF, FSP, WIC, and school meals. We describe multiple program access, benefit levels, spell dynamics, and the SES characteristics of children who receive benefits from different program bundles. Our analysis focuses on data from two periods—the first in the early 1990s, prior to major welfare reform, and the second in the early 2000s. The purpose of using these two time periods is to roughly capture the effects of policy changes in these programs while looking at similar economic periods.

Participation in the FSP was historically linked to AFDC and saw a decline in the late 1990s that was partially attributed to the change from AFDC to TANF, but was also due to the strong economy of the late 1990s. FSP participation has since rebounded, due in part to the slow-down in the economy, but also due to program rule changes and greater administrative outreach efforts. More importantly, participation in WIC and school meals programs have expanded steadily since their inception.

We compare trends in children's program access and spell duration over time. Do children participate in more food assistance programs than before welfare reform? We look at this by different demographic groups and the ages of children in particular. Do they participate for longer periods; has the median spell length increased over time? Are children more likely to participate in multiple programs now since there is one less program specifically aimed to help families with children (TANF)? Or, alternatively, are they more likely to participate in one program at a time because stigma is more likely to affect program participation overall? Program access will differ as a result of many factors, primarily economic conditions. We attempt to control for basic economic

conditions by choosing two similar periods of economic growth and unemployment to compare. We will control for changes in eligibility and take-up rates for the different programs among children from low-income families.

We also measure differences in the values of benefits received by children's households over time. Have the amounts received from these four programs decreased as a result of the decline in TANF participation, or have benefits received from food assistance programs increased enough to compensate or surpass the amounts received in the early 1990s?

The changes experienced by recipients of food assistance are related to TANF in some direct ways, although we believe that most of the participation changes are the result of program-specific policy changes and technological developments such as the use of the EBT cards in the FSP. This exercise is primarily intended to shed light on the interactions between the food assistance programs and how they have changed over time. Another question that we hope to answer is what efficiencies might be gained from a more combined approach to program administration? For example, if a student qualifies for food stamps, they become automatically qualified for school meals, but not the other way around. What are the various percentages of overlapping eligibilities (that at least appear in the data), and are they large enough to be relevant for program administration concerns?

The analysis uses data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). SIPP is a longitudinal survey which collects data from all individuals in sampled households for typically three years, sometimes four years. The resulting monthly data on income and program participation combined with a rich set of household and individual variables provides a unique opportunity to trace program access changes over time. We compare trends from the 1990 SIPP panel, which covers 1990-1992, the 2001 Panel (2001 through 2003), and the 2004 Panel (2004 through 2006).