

**The Project on Devolution and Urban Change**

## **Food Stamp Caseload Dynamics**

**A Study of Four Big Cities**

**A Technical Report**

**Lashawn Richburg-Hayes  
MDRC**

**Isaac Kwakye  
Social Research and Demonstration Corporation**



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## Overview

The passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996 placed a federal time limit on the receipt of cash assistance and encouraged states to move welfare recipients off the rolls and into work, which was expected to place pressure on the federal Food Stamp Program (FSP) — a system designed to prevent hunger among the nation’s low-income population. In addition, PRWORA limited the extent to which able-bodied adults without dependent children (hereafter, adults without children) and immigrants could receive food stamps (some states, including California and Florida, used state funds to mitigate the impact of these changes, however). How did food stamp participation change during this period of new restrictions on both cash assistance and food stamp benefits? This report describes the dynamics of participation in the FSP: how quickly people enter and leave the program, how likely they are to return to it, and how the outcomes for those measures vary for different groups. The report analyzes data from January 1993 through December 2001 in four large, urban counties that are part of MDRC’s Project on Devolution and Urban Change: Cuyahoga County, Ohio; Los Angeles, California; Miami-Dade County, Florida; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

## Key Findings

- **In all four counties, food stamp caseloads declined over time.** Over the entire period from 1993 to 2001, overall food stamp caseloads decreased by 51 percent in Cuyahoga, 44 percent in Philadelphia, 22 percent in Los Angeles, and 18 percent in Miami-Dade. The decline occurred because the number of people leaving from 1994 onward was slightly greater than the number entering.
- **Rates of exit from the FSP varied widely among different populations.** Across the counties studied, adults without children were the most likely and the elderly were the least likely in each county to leave the FSP within any given time period.
- **The majority of FSP spells lasted for 7 months or more.** The median spell lengths of food stamp receipt were 11 months in both Cuyahoga and Philadelphia, 9 months in Miami-Dade, and 7 months in Los Angeles. Adults without children had shorter average spells than other household types, while the elderly had the longest spell lengths.
- **In most counties, the proportion of entrants who returned to the FSP after being off the rolls (that is, the recidivism rate) initially declined but eventually returned to pre-reform levels.** In March 1993, the percentage of people returning to the FSP within six months ranged from 26 percent in Philadelphia to 38 percent in Los Angeles. By September 1996, the percentage of individuals returning declined in Los Angeles, Miami-Dade, and Philadelphia but, by 2001, rose back up to 1993 levels in Miami-Dade and Los Angeles. In contrast, in Cuyahoga, the percentage of people returning to the FSP ranged from 28 percent in the beginning of 1993 to as high as 37 percent by 1998. However, the recidivism rate there declined back to 1993 levels by the end of 2001.

Overall, the study’s findings indicate that people in these four urban counties were leaving the FSP faster than others were entering. Future analyses should look at food stamp leavers, in addition to examining the factors that lead to FSP entry and exit.



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The Authors



## Introduction

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) — passed by Congress and signed into law by President Clinton in 1996 — transformed social welfare policy and fostered profound changes in how government agencies address the needs of the poor. It abolished welfare “as we knew it” and created a time-limited cash assistance program called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). It established strict work requirements for TANF recipients, eliminated federal funding for certain groups of legal immigrants, and transferred the administrative authority for welfare programs from the federal government to the states. The legislation affected the Food Stamp Program (FSP) as well. In particular, adults between the ages of 18 and 50 without children were limited to three months of FSP participation in any three-year period unless they were working, and new immigrants and most legal permanent resident aliens are ineligible for food stamp benefits.<sup>1</sup>

Changes introduced by PRWORA might have profound effects on the FSP. The most obvious example is restrictions on who can receive food stamps, but the legislation might have other effects. Restrictions on the receipt of cash assistance might make the FSP an even more important safety net. Work requirements and other policies that encourage welfare recipients to become employed could either increase or decrease the importance of food stamp benefits. For example, if parents are able to find good jobs, they might earn too much to remain eligible for the FSP. If not, they might rely more on food stamp benefits or they might choose to refrain from receiving benefits, either voluntarily or because they are confused about whether they are eligible.<sup>2</sup>

This report describes the dynamics of participation in the FSP — how quickly people leave the program, how likely they are to return to the program, and how those dynamics differ for different groups. The report uses administrative records on all individuals who received Medicaid, food stamps, or cash assistance between 1993 and 2001 in four large, urban counties: Cuyahoga (Cleveland), Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles. These data were collected as part of

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<sup>1</sup>In many states, the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture granted exemptions from work requirements and time limits for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs), if those states had an unemployment rate of 10 percent or more. Further, states were permitted to exempt up to 15 percent of their ABAWD cases from work requirements and time limits, using their own state criteria. Legal permanent resident aliens who had 40 quarters of work in the United States were exempted from the alien restrictions of FSP participation in the original PRWORA legislation. Veterans and other permanent resident aliens who were serving in the U.S. Armed Forces were also exempted, along with their spouses and minor children. The Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act of 1998 restored eligibility to legal permanent resident aliens who lived in the United States prior to 1996. The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Public Law 107-171) restored benefits to many legal immigrants (Rosso, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>Brock et al. (2002, 2004) and Michalopoulos et al. (2003) show that many welfare recipients were confused about which benefits they could receive if they left welfare for work.

MDRC's Project on Devolution and Urban Change ("Urban Change," for short), a research project to understand the implementation and effects of welfare reform in those counties. The main objective of Urban Change is to understand the effects of PRWORA on cash assistance. This report extends that analysis to the Food Stamp Program.

## Previous Studies

Despite the importance of food stamps to the diverse low-income populations that the FSP serves, there has been fairly little research on the dynamics of participation in the program. The last two major analyses of the experience of people receiving food stamps covered the early 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>3</sup> These studies used data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and contributed the most extensive information to date on spells in the FSP and on entry, reentry, and exit rates. These two studies found that 38 percent and 42 percent, respectively, of those who exited the FSP reentered the program within a year and that the spell lengths of most food stamp entrants in these studies were relatively short: a median length of nine months.<sup>4</sup>

Later studies extended parts of the analyses conducted in these two studies. Using administrative data and extending the analysis period to the early 1990s, one of these studies focused on an important subgroup — single mothers — to study the dynamics of spells of eligibility and participation in the FSP.<sup>5</sup> This study found that many short periods of FSP eligibility did not result in program participation. Rather, those single mothers who did elect to participate in the FSP tended to do so almost immediately on becoming eligible. Another study — using annual state-level data to analyze trends in the FSP that occurred through the mid-1990s — found that the changes in the FSP caseload appear to have resulted from a multitude of factors, including, but not limited to, the macroeconomy.<sup>6</sup> Still other studies used state-level data or existing survey data to estimate the effects of welfare reform, the business cycle, transaction costs, and the stigma of female-headed families on the decline in FSP participation.<sup>7</sup> Most recently, an

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<sup>3</sup>Burstein, 1993; Gleason, Schochet, and Moffitt, 1998.

<sup>4</sup>Gleason, Schochet, and Moffitt, 1998. Burstein (1993) reports that two-thirds of spells end in a year.

<sup>5</sup>Blank and Ruggles, 1996.

<sup>6</sup>Blank and Wallace, 1998.

<sup>7</sup>Grogger and Currie (2000) used the March Current Population Survey (CPS) data waves of 1989 to 1999 and found that TANF explained 66 percent of the recent decline in food stamp caseloads among female heads of household. Ziliak, Gunderson, and Figlio (2000) used state-level data for federal fiscal years 1980 to 1998 and found that the recent decline in food stamp caseloads was substantially influenced by the robustness of the economy. Wilde (2001) used quality-control data from the U.S. Food and Nutrition Service to investigate entry and exit rates over the 1990s and found that exit patterns changed between the early 1990s and late 1990s. Also, Staveley, Stevens, and Wilde (2002) used monthly individual-level administrative data from Maryland's Department of Human Resources for the period August 1998 to March 2001 to examine the dynamics of FSP entry and exits. They found that program exits in Maryland were associated with recertification periods and that the average exit rate declined as the spell length increased.

MDRC study examining participation in the FSP among welfare leavers using data from several random assignment studies found that, among those who did not continue on food stamps after leaving welfare, only 30 percent returned to the FSP within a year.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1 compares the period covered by the prior research studies and the average number of cases receiving food stamps since 1969. It shows that the period covered by prior studies eclipses both a rapid increase in caseloads in the early 1990s and a rapid decline in caseloads after 1995. Two studies cover the most recent period, but they lack some of the features of the data that are used in the present study. Of the two studies that cover the most recent period of caseload increase and decline, one uses repeated cross-sections, while the other focuses on welfare leavers.<sup>9</sup> As a result, their analyses do not provide information on longitudinal outcomes for families and individuals who receive food stamps but not cash assistance or for families who stay on cash assistance.

The majority of the existing studies use survey data, most commonly the SIPP. Although national in scope, the studies suffer from small sample sizes, possible recall problems, short time series, seam problems, a lack of disaggregated geographic information, and underreporting of the number of food stamp and cash assistance recipients as well as the number of able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs).<sup>10</sup> These studies also cannot investigate transitions over time. For example, the prior studies cannot analyze transitions among (1) groups receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and food stamps, (2) groups receiving AFDC but not food stamps, (3) groups receiving food stamps but not AFDC, and (4) groups receiving neither AFDC nor food stamps. Most important, these studies cover a period prior to the passage of PRWORA and, therefore, might not reflect current patterns of participation in the FSP. Longitudinal data, as used in this report, overcome many of the foregoing problems.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Miller, Redcross, and Henrichson, 2002.

<sup>9</sup>Wilde, 2001; Miller, Redcross, and Henrichson, 2002.

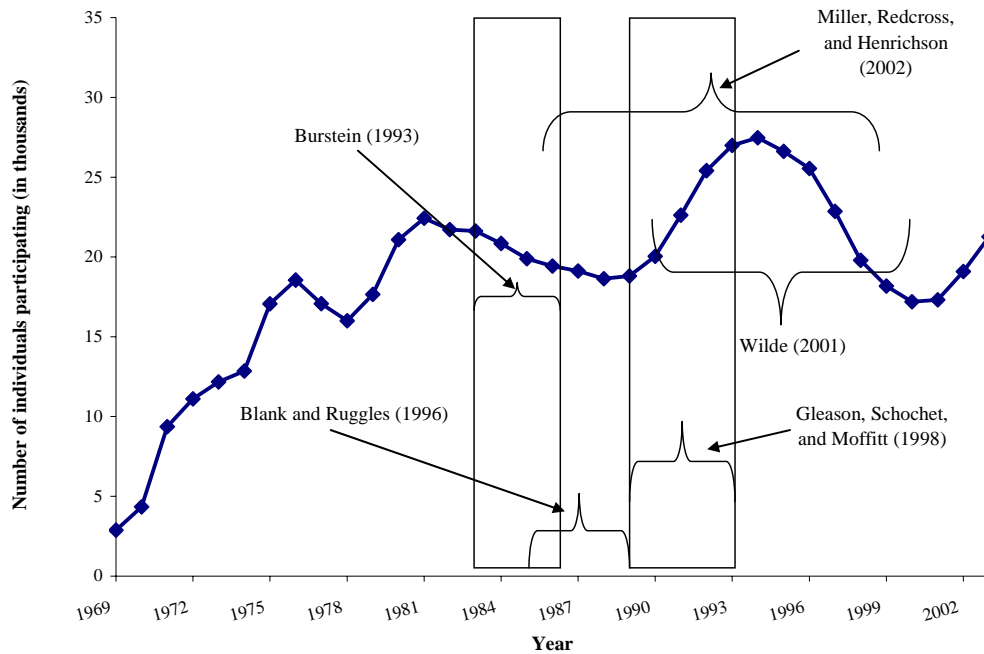
<sup>10</sup>The seam phenomenon exists when respondents tend to report the same status (for example, employment or program participation) and the same amounts (for example, Social Security income) for all four months within a wave, with most reported changes occurring between the last month of one wave and the first month of the subsequent wave. This phenomenon results in an overstatement of changes at the on-seam months (the boundary between interviews in successive waves of a panel) and an understatement of changes at the off-seam months. The seam phenomenon affects most variables for which monthly data are collected (*Survey of Income and Program Participation Users' Guide*, 2001).

<sup>11</sup>One disadvantage of administrative data is the limited ability to examine “trigger” events — events that could be expected to lead to the beginning or ending of a spell of FSP participation. Examples of trigger events include marital dissolution or engagement and loss of earnings (Bane and Ellwood, 1983). While the available data allow the linkage of changes in earnings with changes in FSP participation and the comparison of this linkage with that from people experiencing the same earnings loss but *no* FSP participation, these analyses are not provided in this report.

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Figure 1

Average Food Stamp Program Participation Levels and Research



SOURCES: Public Information data bank, Food Stamp Program, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service Web site.

NOTES: Data are as of September 23, 2004. "Food Stamp Program Participation" refers to the average monthly participation within the fiscal year.

The major studies of food stamp dynamics are indicated. Burnstein (1993) covers the period 1983 through 1986; Blank and Ruggles (1996) cover 1985 to 1989; Miller, Redcross, and Henrichson (2002) cover 1986 to 1999; Gleason, Schochet, and Moffitt (1998) cover 1989 to 1993; and Wilde (2001) covers 1990 to 2000. This report expands the period from 1993 to 2001.

## This Study

Welfare reform, the economy, and changes in eligibility requirements for the FSP all make it important to understand the current state of dynamics and how the dynamics of participation may have changed since early 1990s. This report focuses on the following questions:

- What are the entry rates for FSP participants, and how have these changed over time since 1993?
- How long do people receive food stamps and has this changed over time? Did FSP participation patterns change after the implementation of PRWORA?

- What are the average rates of return to the FSP? Which groups (for example, families, ABAWDS, the elderly) are more likely to return to the FSP?

The remainder of the report is organized as follows. First, the data sources utilized in the study are reviewed, and then the program context of the four counties is described. Next, the study's findings on FSP entries, exits, recidivism, and transitions in the four counties are reported, along with a discussion of pre- and post-PRWORA differences in selected outcomes. Finally, the report concludes with a discussion of the findings.

## Data Sources

### Background on the Urban Change Project

This report analyzes the food stamp caseloads in Cuyahoga (Cleveland), Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties, which are part of MDRC's Project on Devolution and Urban Change.<sup>12</sup> The Urban Change project is a five-year, nonexperimental, multicomponent study that chronicles the changes that PRWORA's implementation has wrought in the lives of low-income families, the communities in which they live, and the institutions that serve them.

A brief description of the four Urban Change sites and a summary of key findings from the Urban Change project follow.

#### ***Cuyahoga County (Cleveland)***

Cuyahoga County remade its welfare system in response to TANF by shifting to a neighborhood-based delivery system and dramatically increasing the percentage of recipients who participated in work activities. It also launched a major initiative to divert families from going on welfare. The county firmly enforced the statewide 36-month time limit, starting in October 2000, but it ensured that families were aware of their cutoff date, and it offered short-term extensions and transitional jobs to recipients who had employment barriers or no other income.

The Cleveland sample includes 536,256 recipients — the universe of all people (adults and children) who ever received Medicaid or food stamps from July 1992 through December 2000. The study found that, between 1993 and 2000, welfare receipt in the county declined, and employment among welfare recipients increased. A longitudinal survey of former and ongoing

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<sup>12</sup>Numerous Urban Change reports have been published, including *Post-TANF Food Stamps and Medicaid Benefits* (Quint and Widom, 2001); *Welfare Reform in Cleveland* (Brock et al., 2002); *Welfare Reform in Philadelphia* (Michalopoulos et al., 2003); *Welfare Reform in Miami* (Brock et al., 2004); and *Welfare Reform in Los Angeles* (Polit, Nelson, Richburg-Hayes, and Seith, 2005).

welfare mothers in Cleveland's poorest neighborhoods shows substantial increases in the percentage who were working and had "good" jobs between 1998 and 2001.

The study's findings counter the notion that welfare reform would lead to service retrenchment and a worsening of conditions for families and neighborhoods. To the contrary, there were many improvements in Cleveland — though the favorable economy played a major role, and time limits had just been implemented when the study ended.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Philadelphia County***

In Philadelphia,<sup>14</sup> the Urban Change project evaluated the effects of Pennsylvania's welfare reform on welfare receipt, employment, material hardship, and neighborhoods. The state focused its welfare-to-work program on employment, expanded and simplified the provisions that allowed welfare recipients to keep part of their welfare checks if they worked, and instituted two time limits: a 24-month limit that requires recipients to work or participate in a work activity for 20 hours per week and a 60-month lifetime limit on welfare receipt. In Philadelphia, implementation of the law was lenient in some respects. During the first two years on welfare, recipients were asked to conduct an eight-week job search but otherwise were not held to a strict work requirement. At the 24-month limit, many parents who were not working were placed in subsidized jobs. In addition, families received extensions to the lifetime limit if they participated in assigned activities.

The Philadelphia sample includes 778,510 recipients — all people who received cash assistance, food stamps, or Medicaid between January 1993 and July 1999. In Philadelphia between 1993 and 2000, welfare receipt declined, and employment increased. TANF seems to have encouraged long-term recipients to leave the rolls faster, to have increased employment (but mostly unstable employment), and to have raised the likelihood that some families would return quickly to welfare.

These Urban Change findings in Philadelphia are consistent with the findings in Cleveland, again countering the notion that welfare reform leads to service retrenchment and a worsening of conditions for families and neighborhoods.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Miami-Dade County***

Florida's Family Transition Program (FTP) imposed a 24-month time limit in any 60-month time period for most welfare recipients and a 36-month time limit in any 72-month period

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<sup>13</sup>For more information, see Brock et al. (2002).

<sup>14</sup>Because Philadelphia County is coterminous with the City of Philadelphia, the two terms are used interchangeably throughout this report.

<sup>15</sup>For more information, see Michalopoulos et al. (2003).

for the least job-ready. These regulations went beyond federal law by imposing relatively short time limits on benefit receipt and by cutting off all cash assistance when adults failed to comply with work requirements or other rules. However, to encourage work, FTP also allowed welfare recipients to keep more of their earnings without losing welfare eligibility. The county's heavy reliance on financial penalties to enforce work rules, along with the state's policy to allow welfare recipients to keep more of their earnings when they went to work, seemed to significantly affect the combining of work and welfare.

The Miami-Dade sample includes 754,672 recipients — all people who received cash assistance, food stamps, or Medicaid between January 1992 and December 2001. Between 1993 and 2002, Miami-Dade's welfare caseload dropped by 75 percent as families both left welfare at a faster rate and came onto the rolls more slowly. A review of county welfare records found that these trends began well before 1996 and continued unabated thereafter, making it difficult to discern whether welfare reform had any effect. After 1996, there was a sudden and significant increase both in the percentage of welfare recipients who became employed and in the duration of their employment.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Los Angeles County***

California's Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) — the state TANF program that was signed into law in 1997 — implemented a participation requirement of 32 hours per week, starting immediately on benefit approval, and a work-trigger time limit after 18 months (24 months, for those on the rolls when the program was put in place). CalWORKs adheres to the federal lifetime time limits on cash assistance — 60 months — but, unlike most other states, the time limits (as well as sanctions for noncompliance) apply only to the adult portion of the case's grant. California protected immigrants' access to benefits by using federal TANF funds to provide benefits to immigrants who qualify, but using state funds to provide TANF and Medi-Cal benefits to legal immigrants who immigrated after the federal cutoff date or who are in their first five years of immigration.<sup>17</sup>

Los Angeles County has the largest cash assistance caseload of any county in the United States. Additionally, nearly half its participants do not speak English as a native language. This combination, along with the size of the county agency (some 13,000 staff in 2002), created a challenging environment for effecting change. The Urban Change Los Angeles sample includes 5,854,789 recipients — all people who received cash assistance, food stamps, or Medicaid between January 1992 and December 2001. A longitudinal survey of nearly 700 women who re-

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<sup>16</sup>For more information, see Brock et al. (2004).

<sup>17</sup>Immigrants who entered the United States before August 22, 1996, or who have been in the country for at least five years are covered by TANF under federal law. For more information on the report, see Polit, Nelson, Richburg-Hayes, and Seith (2005).

ceived welfare in Los Angeles in May 1995 reveals that half the women were still on welfare in 2001, despite the continued decline in caseloads in the country. While overall economic services improved among these women, respondents continued to earn low wages and to experience a range of material hardships. While these outcomes are not necessarily due to welfare reform, the study's findings do not suggest that many families were hurt by PRWORA.<sup>18</sup>

\* \* \*

While the Urban Change project measures a wide range of family, program, and neighborhood outcomes in the counties, using multiple data sources, this report looks only at the administrative assistance and unemployment insurance (UI) records for the sites. The analysis for Philadelphia County is performed using case-level data, while the analyses for the remaining counties are performed using individual-level data.<sup>19</sup>

The bottom of Table 1 shows the sample sizes of the data sources used in this report, by site. The administrative data contain monthly estimated payments and eligibility status for almost 3.8 million recipients — the universe of all people (adults and children) who ever received Medicaid or food stamps from January 1992 through December 2001 across the four sites.<sup>20</sup> In addition, earnings data from UI records for 1992 through 2001 are available to define individuals who have ever received UI-reported earnings.

## Program Environments

It is important to get an idea of the economic environment that was present over time in each site, as this may have affected the outcomes for food stamp recipients. Table 1 shows

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<sup>18</sup>At the time of this publication, impact results are not available. For more information, see the full report (Polit, Nelson, Richburg-Hayes, and Seith, 2005).

<sup>19</sup>Case-level data are analyzed in Philadelphia because eligibility information is available for the entire case only (that is, individual-level eligibility data are unavailable).

<sup>20</sup>Because recipients of AFDC and TANF are categorically eligible for Medicaid, the universe of people receiving Medicaid includes all people who received cash assistance. The data in Cuyahoga are available from July 1992, and the data in Philadelphia extend to 2001 for some observations. The data periods vary by site because of limitations of data collection. Because the data extend back only to January 1992, there is no way to know whether a person received benefits prior to January 1992. A recipient is therefore defined as new if she had not received benefits since January 1992. New food stamp recipients in January 1993 might have received benefits as recently as 13 months prior (in December 1991), while new food stamp recipients in January 1999 had not received benefits for at least seven years. Earlier groups of “new” recipients might therefore contain a fair number of relatively recent recipients. To diminish problems that might arise from this data limitation — and because those who received benefits in 1992 had substantially different characteristics than other recipients (that is, the average sizes of these groups are much larger, indicating that many recipients may, in fact, have started earlier) — the analyses in this report exclude recipients who first received benefits in 1992. Therefore, the analysis period that is examined ranges from 1993 to 2001.

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**Table 1**

**Demographic Characteristics, by County**

Characteristic	Cuyahoga	Philadelphia	Miami-Dade	Los Angeles
Total population	1,393,978	1,517,550	2,253,362	9,519,338
Percentage of state population living in county	12.3	12.4	14.1	28.1
Poverty rate in county	13.1	22.9	18.0	17.9
Poverty rate in state	10.6	11.0	12.5	14.2
Racial/ethnic composition of FSP recipients				
Black	43.1	56.2	--	20.6
White	34.1	22.8	--	17.9
Other	22.8	5.1	--	13.3
Hispanic	--	15.9	--	48.1
Number of observations	536,256	748,412	1,127,467	2,591,094
Period covered	1992-2000	1992-1999	1992-2001	1992-2001

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using administrative records from Cuyahoga, Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties from January 1992 to December 2001 and data from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of the Census, 2000.

NOTES: The Hispanic categories are not listed for Cuyahoga and Miami-Dade because the administrative data do not contain adequate information for the categories. Race information is also unavailable for Miami-Dade.

selected background characteristics for each county. In 2000, Cuyahoga County was the most populous of Ohio's 88 counties, with nearly 1.4 million residents (12.3 percent of Ohio's population).<sup>21</sup> Philadelphia County was similar in size, with about 1.5 million residents in 2000 (12.4 percent of Pennsylvania's population).<sup>22</sup> Miami-Dade County was significantly more populous, with nearly 2.3 million residents in 2000 (14.1 percent of Florida's population).<sup>23</sup> Los Angeles County is nearly four times larger, with more than 9.5 million residents, who represent 28.1 percent of California's population.

About 30 percent of residents in Cleveland — Cuyahoga County's principal city — were living in poverty in 1999 (not shown in the table). Poverty rates in Ohio and Cuyahoga County were

<sup>21</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of the Census, 2000.

<sup>22</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of the Census, 2000.

<sup>23</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of the Census, 2000.

10.6 percent and 13.1 percent, respectively, compared with the national poverty rate of 12.4 percent.<sup>24</sup> Poverty rates in Pennsylvania and Philadelphia County in 1999 were 11.0 percent and 22.9 percent, respectively. In Miami — the principal city in Miami-Dade County — roughly 18 percent of residents were living in poverty in 1999. Los Angeles is very similar to Miami-Dade in this regard; poverty rates in Los Angeles and California in 1999 were 17.9 and 14.2 percent, respectively.

In 1997, more than 20 percent of Ohio's TANF population lived in Cuyahoga County. Similarly, 25 percent of Florida's average monthly state TANF population lived in Miami-Dade County in 1997. In contrast, about 43 percent of Pennsylvania's TANF population lived in Philadelphia County. (These numbers are not shown in the table.)

Table 2 shows selected economic statistics and welfare caseloads for each site over a nine-year period, from 1993 through 2001. Employment growth ranged from around 2 or 3 percent in Philadelphia and Cleveland to more than 9 percent in both Miami-Dade and Los Angeles Counties. Growth in employment was greatest in Los Angeles and most limited in Philadelphia. The table also shows that unemployment rates generally declined over the period. The decline was largest in Los Angeles, where the unemployment rate reached 5.7 percentage points by 2001, down from a high of 9.8 percentage points in 1993. In 1993, Los Angeles experienced the highest level of unemployment, followed closely by Philadelphia. However, by 2001, the county with the highest unemployment rate was Miami-Dade, which experienced the slowest decline in unemployment over the period.

Consistent with national trends, welfare caseloads declined dramatically (between 61 percent and 81 percent) in all four sites, with the greatest decrease occurring in Florida, followed by Ohio. This large change in Florida may be explained by the extraordinary changes in both the state and the federal welfare policies during the implementation years. For example, in addition to the Florida legislature's voting to expand the Family Transition Project (FTP) from one county to several other counties, it then passed the state's welfare reform act in May 1996, and the federal welfare reform act was passed just three months later. All these changes were widely publicized. Another possible explanation for Florida's relatively large caseload decline may be its very high caseload level in the early 1990s. Perhaps because the state's caseload was so high, the rate of decline since that time has been much greater in Florida than in most other states; the national caseload declined by 59 percent during the same period. The Urban Change report shows that the dramatic decline in caseloads in Cleveland occurred prior to the implementation of welfare reform and may be partially due to the strong economy or other factors.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of the Census, 2000.

<sup>25</sup>Brock et al., 2002.

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**Table 2**

**Economic Statistics and Welfare Caseloads, by County**

Characteristic	Cuyahoga	Philadelphia	Miami-Dade	Los Angeles
<b>Total employed<sup>a</sup></b>				
1993	626,742	616,765	959,540	3,906,104
1994	633,368	609,230	974,312	3,897,253
1995	640,868	600,940	980,000	3,938,500
1996	642,240	604,211	984,213	3,956,448
1997	647,952	607,517	1,005,446	4,110,410
1998	642,750	603,920	1,013,264	4,254,800
1999	644,721	603,870	1,025,785	4,291,386
2000	645,807	623,172	1,036,945	4,421,930
2001	646,291	627,596	1,050,472	4,506,923
<b>Employment growth (%)</b>				
1993-1996	2.5	-2.0	2.6	1.3
1997-2001	-0.3	3.3	4.5	9.6
1993-2001 (entire period)	3.1	1.8	9.5	15.4
<b>Unemployment rate<sup>b</sup> (%)</b>				
1993	7.1	9.5	8.2	9.8
1994	6.0	8.0	8.4	9.4
1995	5.0	7.7	7.4	7.9
1996	5.2	7.1	7.3	8.2
1997	4.9	7.0	7.1	6.8
1998	4.5	6.3	6.4	6.5
1999	4.6	6.1	5.8	5.9
2000	4.5	5.9	5.3	5.4
2001	4.6	6.2	6.9	5.7
<b>Welfare caseload<sup>c</sup></b>				
1993	720,476	604,701	701,842	2,415,121
1994	691,099	615,581	689,135	2,621,383
1995	629,719	611,215	657,313	2,692,202
1996	552,304	553,148	575,553	2,648,772
1997	518,595	484,321	478,329	2,476,564
1998	386,239	395,107	320,886	2,144,495
1999	311,872	313,821	220,216	1,845,919
2000	238,351	232,976	135,903	1,272,468
<b>Change in welfare caseload, 1993-2000 (%)</b>				
	-66.9	-61.5	-80.6	-47.3

SOURCES: MDRC calculations from data collected from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics Web site, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families Web site.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>Employment totals are monthly averages, not seasonally adjusted.

<sup>b</sup>Unemployment rates are monthly averages, not seasonally adjusted.

<sup>c</sup>Welfare caseload totals are state monthly averages.

Figure 2 shows the number of active food stamp recipients each month in the four counties. As in the rest of the nation, food stamp participation declined notably in the sites. The number of eligible food stamp recipients in Cuyahoga County in each month declined from nearly 218,000 individuals in January 1993 to about 107,000 in December 2000 — a decline of more than 50 percent. Miami-Dade County had the second-largest caseload of those studied in this report, which increased during the early 1990s and then declined by 22 percent over the period from 1993 to 1997. Philadelphia County, which had the smallest FSP caseload in the early period, experienced a decline of about 44 percent in food stamp cases over the longer period.<sup>26</sup> The caseload pattern in Los Angeles — by far the largest of the four sites — resembles the pattern in Miami-Dade: The number of food stamp recipients in Los Angeles increased steadily from 1993 to 1994 and then declined, until it attained a trough of 543,432 active recipients in December 2001 — a decline of about 22 percent over the period from 1993 to 2001.

Table 3 shows the decline in food stamp receipt over the period from January 1993 through December 2001, by subgroups. The table reveals that the decline in the number of recipients was not evenly experienced by all subgroups. Most notably, while the number of ABAWDs declined significantly in both Cuyahoga and Philadelphia, the number of recipients in this subgroup increased just as dramatically in both Miami-Dade and Los Angeles, by 34 percent and 22 percent, respectively. Other research suggests that Florida had moderately lax policies toward ABAWDs after the 1996 PRWORA eligibility restrictions limited this group's access to federal food stamp benefits.<sup>27</sup> In Florida, this increase in the number of ABAWDs may have lessened the effect that the nearly 24 percent decline in families had on the overall caseload decline. In other words, ABAWDs may have been largely responsible for the leveling off and slight increase in Miami-Dade's caseloads, as illustrated in Figure 2. While the elderly experienced a large percentage increase in representation in Los Angeles, the numbers of elderly food stamp recipients are small and therefore not programmatically meaningful. For example, in January 1993, there were 298 elderly food stamp recipients in Los Angeles County, compared with 1,846 in December 2001.

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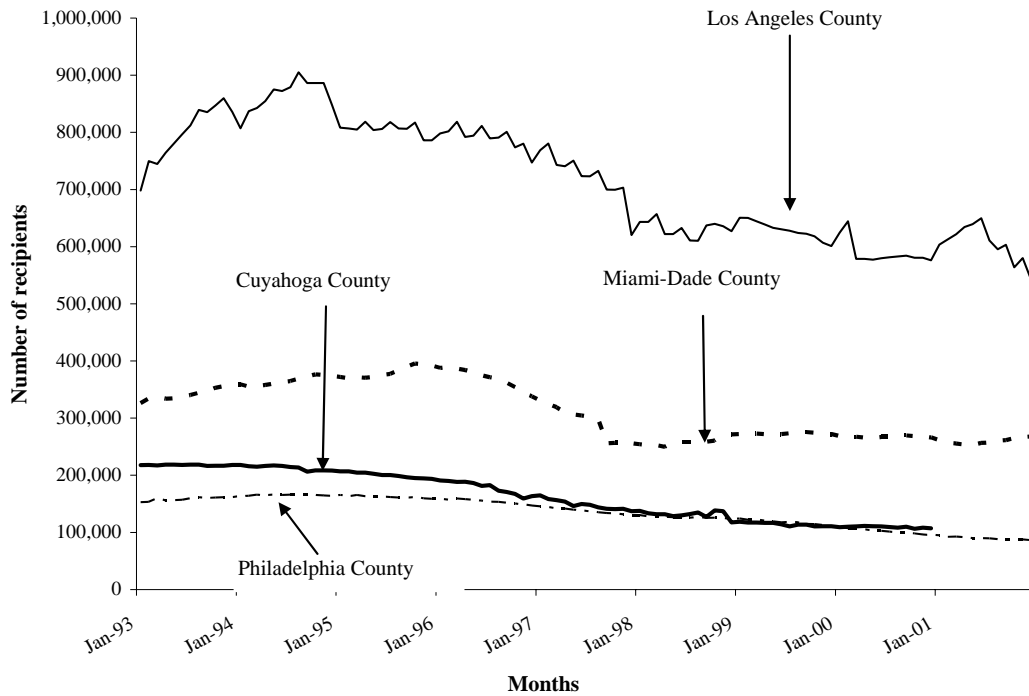
<sup>26</sup>Recall that the analysis for Philadelphia County is performed using case-level data, while the analyses for the remaining counties are performed using individual-level data. Thus, in Philadelphia, the decline in the number of recipients may be larger or smaller than the decline in cases.

<sup>27</sup>See Czajka, McConnell, Cody, and Rodriguez, 2001. Their Table 11.5 shows that, of Florida's 8,993 ABAWDs, 6,600 (or 73 percent) were not subject to the ABAWD time limits because of waivers. Of 33,176 ABAWDs in Pennsylvania, 29,177 (or 88 percent) were waived. The authors note that the reduction in the number of single, childless adults who are subject to the ABAWD time limit appears to increase the total number of ABAWD participants in a state, by limiting the cumulative effect of the time limit.

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Figure 2

Number of Active Food Stamp Recipients in Each Month, by County, January 1993 Through December 2001



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using administrative records from Philadelphia, Miami Dade, Los Angeles, and Cuyahoga Counties.

NOTES: Case-level data are utilized for Philadelphia because individual-level eligibility information was unavailable. Cuyahoga County data end in 2000.

## Key Findings

### What were the entry rates for FSP participants and how did these change over time?

In this study, the flows of participants into the FSP may have changed over time. The strengthened economy might have reduced entry to the program by allowing low-wage adults to find better jobs that paid enough to make them ineligible for food stamps. Diversion policies like those used in Cuyahoga County, for example, attempted to encourage some families to receive food stamps instead of cash assistance. Alternatively, restrictions on cash assistance and food

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**Table 3**

**Food Stamp Program Benefit Receipt, by County,  
January 1993 Through December 2001**

Characteristic	Cuyahoga	Philadelphia	Miami-Dade	Los Angeles
Average monthly number of food stamp recipients in the county <sup>a</sup>	164,177	134,998	312,169	715,281
Percentage change in the number of food stamp recipients (1993-2001)	-50.8	-43.5	-18.0	-22.3
Percentage change in the number of food stamp recipients (1993-2001), by group				
ABAWDs <sup>b</sup>	-51.4	-47.5	34.3	22.5
Families	-50.6	-40.6	-23.7	-13.9
Elderly (65 years and older)	-34.2	-54.9	-11.8	511.6
Number of observations	218,492	294,707	754,672	1,663,030
Period covered	1993-2000	1993-1999	1993-2001	1993-2001

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using administrative records from Cuyahoga, Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

NOTES: All calculations are made using county administrative data.

<sup>a</sup>The Philadelphia figure reports the average monthly number of food stamp cases, which will be lower than the average number of recipients.

<sup>b</sup>"ABAWDs" are able-bodied adults without dependents (nonelderly).

stamp receipt might have discouraged some families from receiving public assistance altogether. This section takes a closer look at entry to the FSP.

To analyze how many people begin receiving food stamps and how this has changed over time since 1992, a multiple cohort comparison strategy is used. This technique examines outcomes for a number of cohorts, or groups, of food stamp recipients defined by when they first start to receive food stamp benefits.

The data for the counties extend back to 1992, so there is no way to know whether an individual received benefits prior to that year. As a result, groups of "new" entrants to the FSP may contain individuals who had received food stamp benefits prior to 1992 but not between 1992 and the month when they began receiving benefits anew. Later groups of "new" entrants to the FSP are likely to contain fewer relatively recent entrants and more truly new entrants. Because indi-

viduals receiving food stamps in 1992 were most likely to have received food stamps before this study's data began, these groups are omitted from all the analyses in this report.

To determine whether the distribution of entrants to the FSP has changed over time, cohorts are followed over a number of years to compare the experiences and patterns of behavior of earlier cohorts and later cohorts. A cohort could consist, for example, of all people who began receiving food stamps in a particular month. The January 1993 cohort would include all people who received food stamps in January 1993 but not in 1992; the February 1993 cohort would include all people who received food stamps in February 1993 but not in 1992 and January 1993; and so on. Each cohort is followed for a number of months, and comparisons across cohorts indicate whether outcomes have changed over time.

Figure 3 shows the number of new entrants to the FSP in each month between January 1993 and December 2001. The figure indicates that the number of new food stamp recipients declined over time in each county. For example, although 5,231 individuals entered the FSP for the first time in January 1993 in Cuyahoga County, the number of individuals entering the FSP for the first time in November 2000 was only 1,660 — a 68 percent decline in new food stamp recipients in Cuyahoga County.<sup>28</sup> The trends for Philadelphia and Miami-Dade Counties reveal a decline of 85 percent and 78 percent, respectively, in new food stamp recipients.<sup>29</sup> The trend for Los Angeles reveals noticeable spikes in entry in January and July.<sup>30</sup> Despite this, the overall trend is U-shaped — first declining and then increasing by the end of the period.

Table 4 reports the distribution of characteristics among the at-risk population and the data samples, in addition to entry rates, in each of the four counties. The first column to the right of the characteristics shows the distribution of the at-risk population, while the second column

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<sup>28</sup>Part of this decline may reflect the fact that it is unknown whether people were receiving food stamps prior to July 1992. That is, the decline in the number of new entrants to the FSP may be too steep because of how new entrants are defined. To verify this, the authors calculated the number of people who began receiving food stamps after being away from the program for six months or more. This provides a consistent definition of entry over time. The results also show a steep decline in the number of people entering the FSP, but the decline is not as steep as that of the new entrants in Figure 3. Compared with the 68 percent decline between 1993 and 2000, entry among those who had not received food stamps for six months or more declined by about 57 percent in Cuyahoga County.

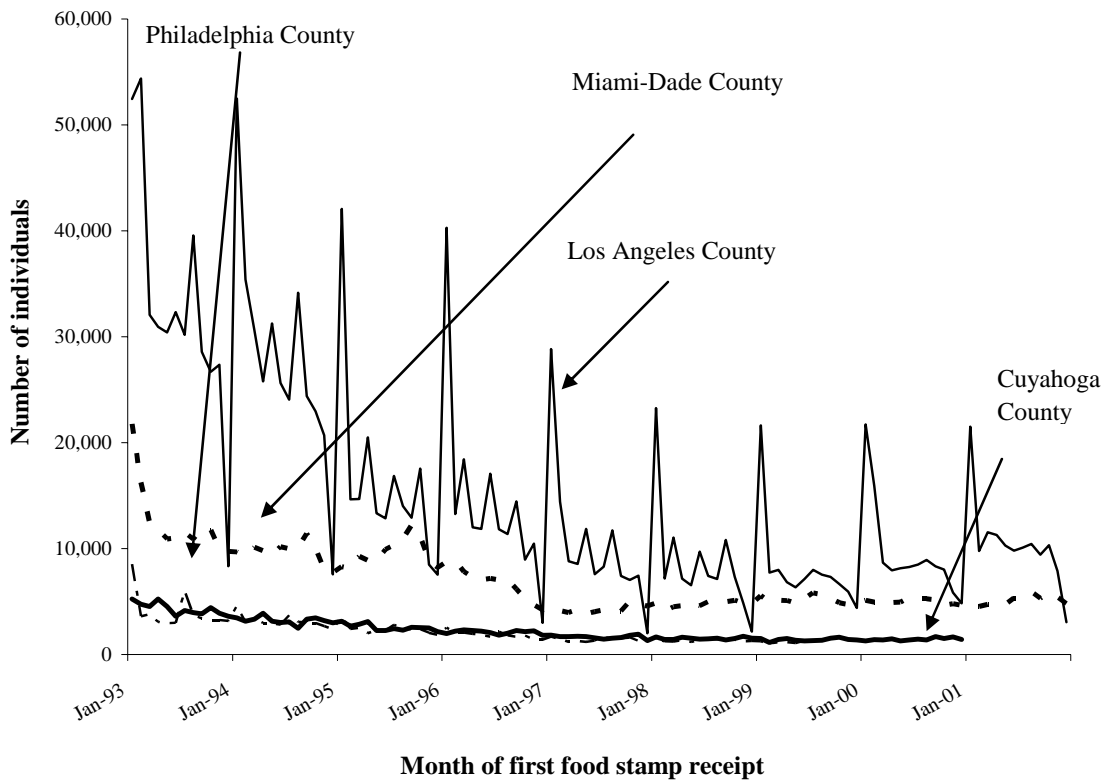
<sup>29</sup>The Philadelphia data report trends in cases opening. Note that new-case data for Philadelphia end in July 1999.

<sup>30</sup>The higher-than-average number of active food stamp recipients in the months of January and July (Figure 3) has been determined by the Medical Care Statistics Section of the California Department of Health Statistics to be a real effect of the eligibility process, rather than an artifact of data corruption (Klein, 2000). Other researchers using these data have also noted the higher-than-average numbers of recipients in these months. The analyses for this report utilize all the data, including the months of January and July, and evaluate the sensitivity of the results to these inclusions. Although some patterns differed slightly when the analyses controlled for the January and July starts, the overall results remained the same.

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Figure 3

Number of Individuals Entering the Food Stamp Program for the First Time in Each Month, by County, January 1993 Through December 2001



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using administrative records from Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, Cuyahoga, and Los Angeles Counties.

NOTES: Case-level data are utilized for Philadelphia because individual-level eligibility information was unavailable.

Cuyahoga County new-entrant data end in December 2000.

Philadelphia County new-entrant data end in July 1999.

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Table 4

Food Stamp Program Entry Rates, by Characteristics,  
January 1993 Through December 2001

Characteristic	Distribution of Characteristic		Entry Rate Among FSP Sample	
	At-Risk		Monthly	Yearly
	Population	FSP Entrants		
<b><u>Cuyahoga County</u></b>				
All individuals (%)	100.0	100.0	1.2	14.8
Age (%)				
Less than 18 years	37.8	51.6	1.7	20.2
18 to 59 years	47.1	41.9	1.1	13.2
60 years or older	15.1	6.5	0.5	6.3
Gender (%)				
Male	40.7	55.0	1.7	20.0
Female	59.3	45.0	0.9	11.2
Race/ethnicity (%)				
Black	53.4	43.1	0.9	11.4
White	37.6	34.1	1.1	12.8
Other	9.0	22.8	6.3	75.4
Sample size	191,149	218,492		
<b><u>Philadelphia County</u></b>				
All individuals (%)	100.0	100.0	1.1	13.0
Age (%)				
Younger than 18 years	35.9	41.4	1.3	14.9
18 to 59 years	48.2	54.4	1.3	14.6
60 years and older	15.9	4.3	0.3	3.5
Gender (%)				
Male	40.8	49.0	1.4	15.6
Female	59.2	51.0	1.0	11.1
Race/ethnicity (%)				
Black	57.2	56.2	1.1	12.7
White	29.3	22.8	0.9	10.1
Other	13.5	21.0	1.8	20.2
Sample size	313,374	294,707		

(continued)

**Table 4 (continued)**

Characteristic	Distribution of Characteristic		Entry Rate Among	
	At-Risk		FSP Sample	
	Population	FSP Entrants	Monthly	Yearly
<b><u>Miami-Dade County</u></b>				
All individuals (%)	100.0	100.0	1.9	23.3
Age (%)				
Less than 18 years	32.7	42.6	2.5	30.0
18 to 59 years	48.0	46.4	1.9	22.6
60 years or older	19.3	11.0	1.1	13.4
Gender (%)				
Male	42.4	48.9	2.2	26.8
Female	57.6	51.1	1.7	20.7
Sample size	341,261	754,672		
<b><u>Los Angeles County</u></b>				
All individuals (%)	100.0	100.0	1.1	12.8
Age (%)				
Less than 18 years	38.0	40.5	1.6	19.4
18 to 59 years	54.0	57.9	0.8	9.7
60 years or older	8.0	1.7	0.2	2.4
Gender (%)				
Male	46.6	47.5	1.2	14.4
Female	53.4	52.5	0.9	11.4
Race/ethnicity (%)				
Black	15.5	17.6	1.2	14.5
White	40.0	17.9	0.5	5.8
Other	44.5	14.5	1.5	18.5
Sample size	1,308,255	1,663,030		

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using administrative records data from Cuyahoga, Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties. Data for the at-risk population were collected from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of the Census Web site, Database C90STF3A, 1990.

NOTES: The at-risk population comprises the individuals in each county with 1990 income below the poverty level for that year. The proportion of the at-risk population by characteristics is obtained by dividing the number of people in the specific category with incomes below the poverty level by the total number of people in the county with incomes beneath the poverty level. The total population under poverty by race/ethnicity is greater than the total population under poverty for the counties in 1990. This may be due to individuals reporting more than one race. Race/ethnicity information is not reported for Miami-Dade because the administrative data do not contain adequate information for the categories.

shows the distribution of actual food stamp entrants. The at-risk population is proxied by the total number of people in the county who had income less than the poverty level, taken from the 2000 Census. For example, the top panel shows results for Cuyahoga County. The first column shows that 37.8 percent of the estimated population at risk of entering the FSP included children up to age 18. The second column reports that 51.6 percent of the actual monthly food stamp entrants in Cuyahoga County were children. The second column also reveals that only 6.5 percent of monthly food stamp entrants were elderly and that close to 42 percent were between ages 18 and 59.<sup>31</sup> Comparing the first and second columns across the panels reveals interesting patterns between the characteristics of people most at risk of entering the FSP and actual monthly entrants to the program. In all four counties, the incidence of food stamp receipt among children was higher than the estimated proportion of children at risk. The opposite is true for the elderly; that is, program participation by the elderly was much lower than the estimated proportion of the elderly who were at risk of participating.

The two right-hand columns of Table 4 report the monthly and yearly FSP entry rates. The *entry rate* is defined as the number of people who began receiving food stamps in a month (or year) divided by the number of poor people who were not receiving food stamps in the previous month (or year).<sup>32</sup> The second column from the right shows that the monthly entry rate in Cuyahoga County was 1.2 percent; that is, among individuals not receiving food stamps at the beginning of the month, roughly 1.2 percent began receiving food stamps during the month. The yearly entry rate in the top panel of Table 4 is 14.8 percent, indicating that, among individuals not receiving food stamps at the beginning of a given year, 14.8 percent began receiving food stamps during the year.

Table 4 also reports entry rates by characteristics. In Cuyahoga County, age seems to be negatively related to FSP entry. The annual entry rate is 6 percent for individuals who were 60 years or older, about 13 percent for individuals who were 18 to 59 years old, and 20 percent for children under 18.

The remaining panels of Table 4 report similar characteristics for Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties. Generally, the monthly and yearly entry rates for Philadelphia County, by characteristics, were similar to the rates for Cuyahoga County. The single notable difference occurred among the elderly. FSP entry for this group in Philadelphia County was half the rate for the elderly in Cuyahoga.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, the overall monthly and yearly FSP entry rates in Miami-

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<sup>31</sup>Gleason, Schochet, and Moffitt (1998) report that 6 percent of food stamp entrants from the SIPP are elderly, that 53 percent are between 18 and 59 years of age, and that 42 percent are younger than age 18.

<sup>32</sup>That is, the entry rate is equal to the number of new entrants divided by the number at risk of entering. The total county population with income below the poverty threshold in each year is here used as a proxy for the number of people at risk of entering the FSP.

<sup>33</sup>The “other” race/ethnicity category was also different. However, since race/ethnicity classifications were determined differently in each county’s administrative offices, it is difficult to interpret what the disparities mean.

Dade County were more than 50 percent higher than Cuyahoga County's rates. Among individuals not receiving food stamps at the beginning of the month in Miami-Dade County, roughly 1.9 percent began receiving food stamps during the month, and 23.3 percent began receiving food stamps during the year. As expected, Miami-Dade had the largest elderly entry rate of all the sites.

The last panel of Table 4 shows characteristics and entry rates for Los Angeles County. Monthly and yearly entry rates in Los Angeles were similar to those in Cuyahoga and Philadelphia, with 1.1 percent of people who did not receive food stamps at the beginning of the month joining during the month. The annual rate was 12.8 percent. Given the increase in the food stamp caseload evidenced in Figure 2, these entry findings suggest that the majority of the increase in the food stamp caseload in Los Angeles was not necessarily occurring among new people unrelated to the system but, possibly, among people who have had some prior experience with the FSP.

### **How long did people receive food stamp benefits and did this change over time?**

The dramatic decline in food stamp caseloads over time has focused attention on the process of exiting from the program. There are several ways of looking at how quickly people leave the FSP. This report describes trends in exiting by examining the likelihood that spells end at different times (the *hazard rate*), analyzing the percentage of food stamp recipients who continue to receive benefits for various lengths of time (the *survivor rate*), and reviewing the percentage of food stamp recipients who stop receiving benefits after some length of time (the *cumulative exit rate*).<sup>34</sup> Research has shown that families with children, single parents, households with no workers, and families participating in other federal public assistance programs are more likely to begin receiving food stamps and to stay in the program longer.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, this analysis examines and compares information on FSP spells by key subgroups (that is, families and ABAWDs), in addition to the full sample, using the above methods.<sup>36</sup>

The analysis also examines how long people stay in the FSP, by analyzing the proportion of new participants who leave the program within some fixed period of time, such as six months. The rate at which people exit the FSP may be related to some of their demographic characteristics. To investigate this possibility, the log-odds of leaving the FSP is estimated, using a model of the following form:

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<sup>34</sup>For most of the analyses, an exit from the FSP is defined as not receiving benefits for two consecutive months. The exception to this rule occurs in the monthly transition analysis.

<sup>35</sup>Gleason, Schochet, and Moffitt, 1998.

<sup>36</sup>All analyses were also performed for elderly recipients. However, these results are not shown in the remaining tables and figures of this report. Important patterns among the elderly are noted in footnotes to the text.

$$\log\left(\frac{P(\text{exit}_t)}{1 - P(\text{exit}_t)}\right) = \alpha + \beta_t X_t + \varepsilon_t,$$

where  $P(\text{exit}_t)$  is the probability of leaving the FSP within, say, six months of starting and where  $X_t$  is a set of personal characteristics such as gender and workforce attachment. The dependent variable is the log-odds of exiting welfare. This equation answers questions of the form: “Of new food stamp participants, how does the likelihood of leaving within, say, six months, vary by such demographic characteristics as gender, race/ethnicity, employment status, and household type?”

Figure 4 shows the trends in recipients’ leaving the FSP within six months of starting their first spell of food stamp benefits. For example, consider the leftmost point of the figure for Los Angeles County. This point indicates that 23 percent of all food stamp recipients who entered the FSP for the first time in January 1993 subsequently exited the program in the next six months. Similarly, the rightmost point indicates that 42 percent of recipients who first began food stamp participation in April 2001 left benefit receipt by December 2001. The overall trend of leavers shows that a larger number of recipients exited the FSP within six months in the mid-1990s than in the later period. In Cuyahoga and Miami-Dade Counties, the trend of exits within six months of starting benefit receipt increased over time. In Philadelphia, the trend of leaving the FSP within six months increased until December 1997, after which the trend decreased and then stabilized.

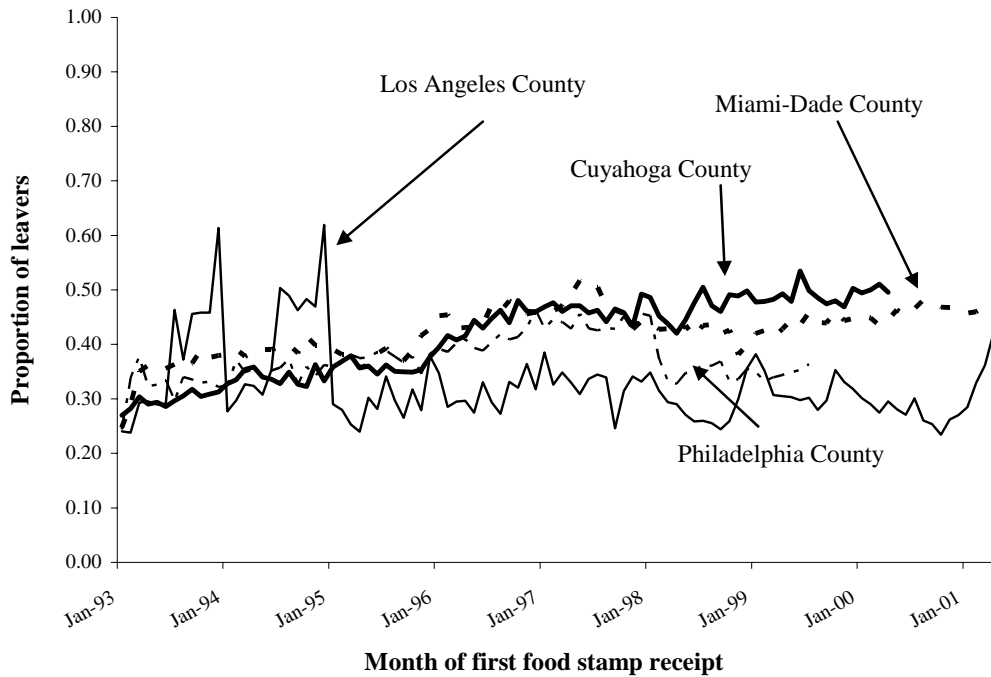
Table 5 reports FSP exit rates over various time periods for the four counties. The first panel of the table shows that 17.8 percent of food stamp recipients in Cuyahoga County left the FSP within three months, while 38.3 percent left within six months. Before two years of food stamp benefit receipt, 74.0 percent of all recipients left the FSP. The table also shows that adults were more likely to leave the FSP than children and that white recipients were more likely to leave than recipients of other races/ethnicities; those who worked at some point between 1993 and 2001 were more likely to leave than those who did not work at all; and ABAWDs were more likely to leave within any given time period, compared with other household types.

In Philadelphia, 20.4 percent of food stamp recipients left benefit receipt within three months of entering the FSP. Before two years of benefit receipt, 66.5 percent of all recipients had left the program, indicating that more than 34.0 percent of Philadelphia’s food stamp recipients stayed on for longer than two years. Miami-Dade’s and Los Angeles’s exit-rate patterns closely resemble Cuyahoga’s: About 20 percent of recipients received benefits for longer than two years; adults were more likely to leave the rolls than either children or the elderly; and those with earnings were more likely to leave than their respective counterparts.

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Figure 4

Proportion of New Food Stamp Recipients Who Left Within Six Months of Starting Food Stamp Receipt, by County, January 1993 Through April 2001



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using administrative records from Cuyahoga, Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

NOTES: Cuyahoga County data end in April 2000.  
Philadelphia County data end in July 1999.

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Table 5

Food Stamp Program Exit Rates, by Characteristics,  
January 1993 Through December 2001

Characteristic	Exit the FSP Within:			
	3 Months or Less	6 Months or Less	12 Months or Less	24 Months or Less
<b><u>Cuyahoga County</u></b>				
All individuals (%)	17.8	38.3	56.7	74.0
Age (%)				
Younger than 18 years	14.7	32.6	49.0	67.1
18 to 59 years	22.4	47.5	67.0	82.9
60 years or older	12.5	24.0	49.6	67.1
Gender (%)				
Male	18.1	38.8	57.0	74.4
Female	17.4	37.7	56.4	73.5
Race/ethnicity (%)				
Black	16.9	37.2	54.9	71.6
White	20.9	43.8	63.3	79.8
Other	15.0	32.5	50.5	70.0
Earnings <sup>a</sup> (%)				
Positive earnings	22.3	48.2	67.9	84.2
No earnings	17.7	33.9	56.2	71.8
Household type (%)				
ABAWDs	22.3	45.1	66.3	81.4
Families	16.5	36.3	53.9	71.8
Elderly (65 years or older)	11.9	22.3	49.2	66.5
Sample size	210,849	206,714	198,399	181,133

(continued)

**Table 5 (continued)**

Characteristic	Exit the FSP Within:			
	3 Months or Less	6 Months or Less	12 Months or Less	24 Months or Less
<b><u>Philadelphia County</u></b>				
All individuals (%)	20.4	32.8	50.6	66.5
Age (%)				
Younger than 18 years	11.2	18.5	37.3	53.3
18 to 59 years	23.2	38.1	57.8	74.1
60 years or older	17.7	27.3	42.5	57.8
Gender (%)				
Male	22.2	35.8	54.4	70.3
Female	18.6	29.9	46.8	62.8
Race/ethnicity (%)				
Black	22.3	34.6	52.5	68.4
White	18.9	31.5	50.5	67.7
Hispanic	18.1	31.9	48.6	62.8
Other	12.4	21.2	35.3	50.5
Earnings <sup>a</sup> (%)				
Positive earnings	22.1	37.4	58.4	75.7
No earnings	22.8	34.6	51.1	64.8
Household type (%)				
ABAWDs	27.2	44.8	66.4	82.3
Families	17.9	28.4	44.6	60.6
Elderly (65 years or older)	9.9	15.7	36.3	51.2
Sample size	293,192	293,192	293,192	279,245
<b><u>Miami-Dade County</u></b>				
All individuals (%)	18.4	40.6	62.4	78.5
Age (%)				
Younger than 18 years	14.9	35.9	57.3	75.5
18 to 59 years	23.6	50.0	73.7	87.7
60 years or older	9.7	19.2	34.8	51.2
Gender (%)				
Male	20.6	44.3	66.5	81.6
Female	16.2	37.1	58.6	75.6
Earnings <sup>a</sup> (%)				
Positive earnings	22.4	48.9	73.0	87.5
No earnings	17.6	33.5	51.0	65.7
Household type (%)				
ABAWDs	31.8	57.8	78.5	87.6
Families	16.4	38.8	61.2	78.7
Elderly (65 years or older)	7.6	14.4	29.2	45.1
Sample size	727,418	711,995	683,819	623,346

(continued)

**Table 5 (continued)**

Characteristic	Exit the FSP Within:			
	3 Months or Less	6 Months or Less	12 Months or Less	24 Months or Less
	<b><u>Los Angeles County</u></b>			
All individuals (%)	17.4	33.2	54.2	71.1
Age (%)				
Younger than 18 years	12.6	25.6	44.9	62.8
18 to 59 years	24.0	43.7	66.7	82.0
60 years or older	21.2	39.4	66.1	85.2
Gender (%)				
Male	20.1	37.1	58.5	74.6
Female	15.0	29.5	50.3	67.9
Race/ethnicity (%)				
Black	16.1	29.9	49.0	64.7
White	21.6	41.4	65.3	80.5
Hispanic	13.5	26.5	46.1	64.9
Other	27.2	49.6	73.4	86.5
Earnings <sup>a</sup> (%)				
Positive earnings	23.7	43.6	66.8	82.1
No earnings	24.4	43.3	66.4	81.9
Household type (%)				
ABAWDs	33.8	59.6	83.5	93.0
Families	14.7	28.8	49.2	67.3
Elderly (65 years or older)	22.2	37.1	62.3	81.4
Sample size	1,621,921	1,591,760	1,526,980	1,412,272

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using administrative records from Cuyahoga, Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties and unemployment insurance wage records from Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, and California.

NOTE: The sample sizes for Philadelphia County are unchanged for the first three categories because the analysis is limited to new entrants. In Philadelphia, the last cohort of new entrants is July 1999.

Race/ethnicity information is not reported for Miami-Dade because the administrative data do not contain adequate information for the categories.

The category "Exit 3 Months or Less" considers first entry data before August 2001.

The category "Exit 6 Months or Less" considers first entry data before May 2001.

The category "Exit 12 Months or Less" considers first entry data before November 2000.

The category "Exit 24 Months or Less" considers first entry data before November 1999.

<sup>a</sup>Data are presented if an individual has positive earnings at any point in time from January 1993 to December 2001. Earnings data are restricted to individuals 18 years and older.

To better understand the factors that affect FSP exits, a multivariate analysis of the probability of leaving the program within six months was conducted. Table 6 provides the odds ratios of the likelihood that a recipient would exit the FSP within six months, as opposed to leaving at some point after six months. To interpret the odds ratios, note that ratios greater than 1 indicate a positive effect on exiting and that ratios less than 1 indicate a negative effect. In the top panel, for example, the 1.260 coefficient on the ABAWDs variable indicates that being a single, childless adult increased the likelihood that a respondent would exit the FSP within six months, by 26 percent (compared with other household types). In contrast, the 0.995 coefficient in the top panel indicates that as the age at entry increased by one year, the likelihood that a respondent would exit the FSP decreased, by 0.5 percent. Several other variables are significant in predicting the likelihood of exiting within six months. In addition to household status, working at any point during 1993 to 2001 was positively related to a recipient's exiting the FSP within six months during the observation period. Generally, across the counties, older recipients were significantly less likely to exit than younger recipients, and female recipients were less likely to exit than males.

Another way of examining how quickly people leave the FSP is to analyze benefit spell lengths. The *survival function* is defined as the probability that a food stamp spell would last longer than a given number of months. Figure 5 shows that about 88 percent of spells in Cuyahoga County lasted for 3 months or more but that only about 25 percent of spells lasted for 24 months or more. Similarly, in Philadelphia County, about 84 percent of spells lasted for 3 months or more, with about 30 percent of spells lasting for 24 months or more. Again, Miami-Dade differed, with about 90 percent of spells lasting for 3 months or more and about 22 percent of spells lasting for 24 months or more. Food stamp spell lengths were slightly longer in Los Angeles than in the other counties. In Los Angeles, 71 percent of food stamp spells ended in 6 months, compared with approximately 68 percent of food stamp spells ending in that time period in Cuyahoga, Philadelphia, and Miami. In this sense, the analysis of survival curves presents the same information as the exit analysis above.

In addition to exit trends, the analysis of survival curves allows the calculation of median spell lengths. The horizontal line in Figure 5 represents the median. The median spell length in both Los Angeles and Philadelphia Counties was about 11 months, slightly less than in Cuyahoga, while the median spell length in Miami-Dade was about 9 months.

In all four counties, the survival function for first spells of food stamp benefits differs by whether the spell started before or after PRWORA's welfare reforms were implemented in 1996. For example, Figure 6 shows that, in Cuyahoga County, 29 percent of spells lasted for 24 months or more before the implementation of welfare reform but that only 18 percent of spells lasted for 24 months or more after reform — a statistically significant difference. Similarly, the median spell length of FSP recipients in Cuyahoga before welfare reform was 12 months, which declined to 8 months after the implementation of PRWORA. This suggests that PRWORA affected FSP participation in Cuyahoga by shortening benefit receipt periods. In Miami-Dade County, about 26

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**Table 6**

**Odds Ratios of Leaving Food Stamp Receipt  
Within Six Months of Starting, by County,  
January 1993 Through December 2001**

Characteristic	Odds Ratios and Statistical Significance <sup>a</sup>
<b><u>Cuyahoga County</u></b>	
Age at first entry to FSP	0.995***
ABAWDs	1.260***
Female	0.827***
Black	0.750***
Other	0.928***
Positive earnings	1.968***
Sample size	218,449
<b><u>Philadelphia County</u></b>	
Age at first entry to FSP	0.997 ***
ABAWDs	3.415***
Families	1.756***
Female	0.900 ***
Black	1.123***
Hispanic	1.061***
Other	0.656***
Positive earnings	1.148***
Sample size	293,190
<b><u>Miami-Dade County</u></b>	
Age at first entry to FSP	0.994***
ABAWDs	4.932***
Families	2.350***
Female	0.846***
Positive earnings	1.535***
Sample size	711,995
<b><u>Los Angeles County</u></b>	
Age at first entry to FSP	1.010***
ABAWDs	3.264***
Families	1.354***
Female	0.734***
Black	0.606***
Hispanic	0.597***
Other	1.066***
Positive earnings	1.105***
Sample size	1,591,760

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using administrative records from Cuyahoga, Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties and unemployment insurance wage records from Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, and California.

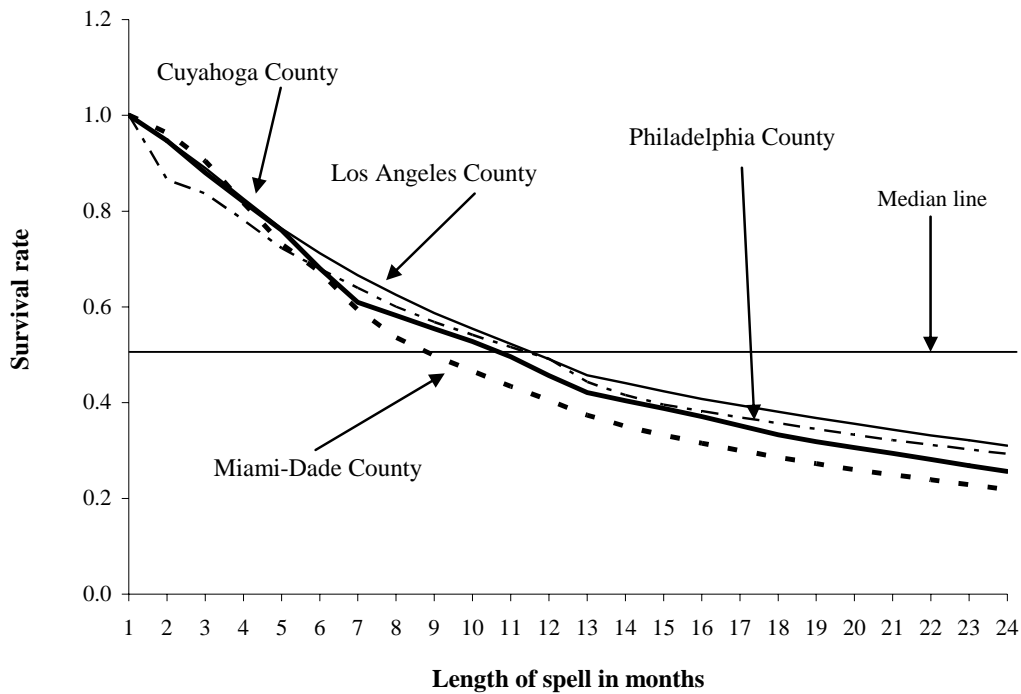
NOTES: Effects were estimated with logistic regression with the "proportion of leavers within six months" as the dependent variable. All regressions include monthly indicators representing the first month of food stamp receipt. The positive earnings variable indicates earnings at any point in time from January 1993 to December 2001.

<sup>a</sup>Three asterisks indicate statistical significance at the 0.01 level or less.

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Figure 5

Food Stamp Program Spell Lengths, by County,  
January 1993 Through December 2001



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using Cuyahoga County's Income Maintenance records and administrative records from Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

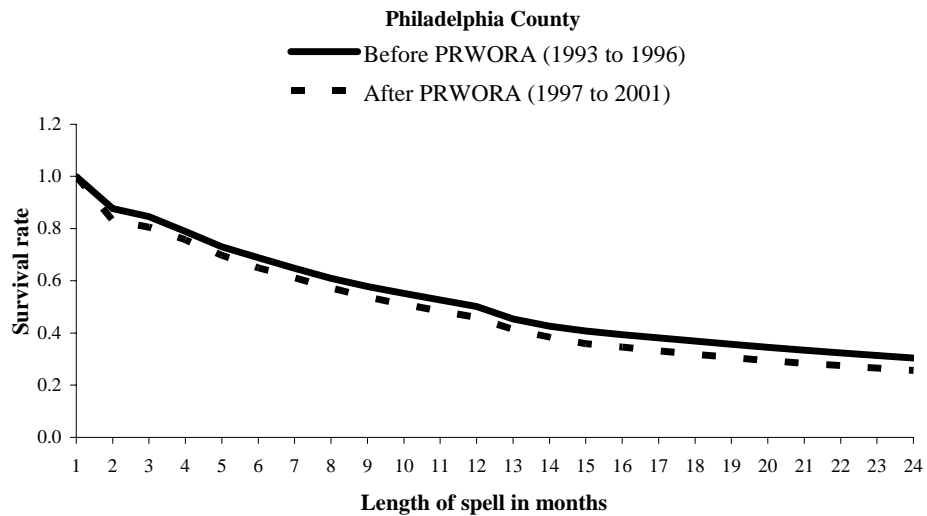
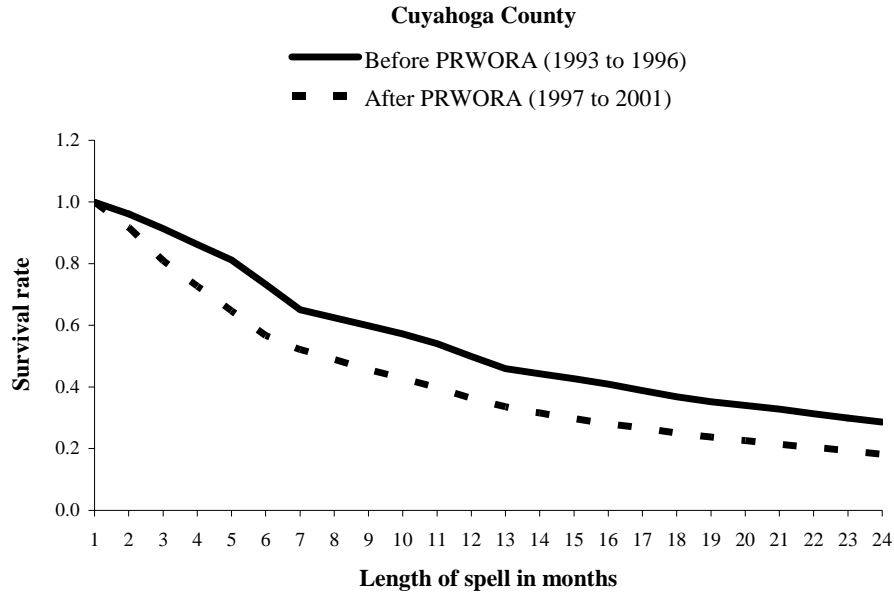
percent of spells lasted for 24 months or more before reform, but only 17 percent of spells lasted for 24 months or more after reform. In Philadelphia County, spell length did not seem to be materially affected by PRWORA.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Spell lengths for subgroups were also analyzed. All subgroups showed significant differences in spell length after TANF was implemented in Cuyahoga County. In Philadelphia, only families appeared to shorten their first spell of food stamp receipt after the implementation of welfare reform. In Miami-Dade County, both families and the elderly shortened their first spell of food stamp receipt after welfare reform. Notably, the spell length of ABAWDs changed only in Cuyahoga County.

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Figure 6

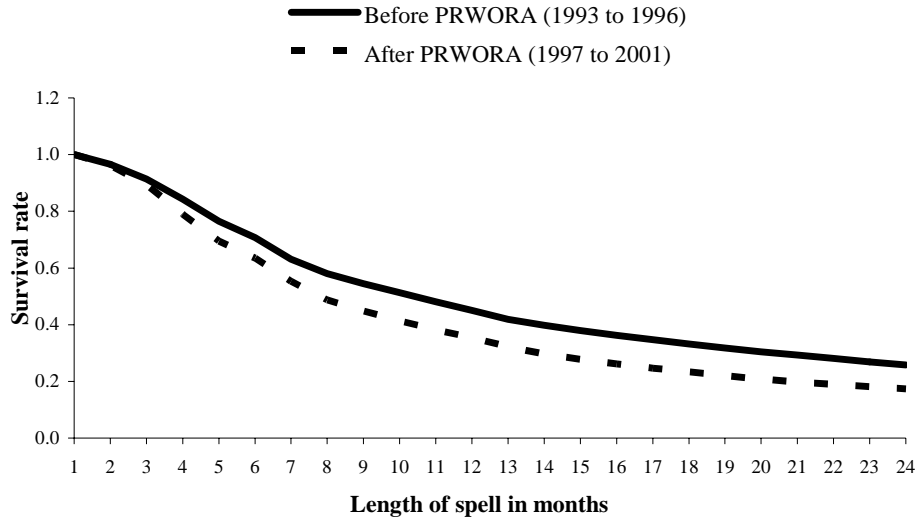
Food Stamp Program Spell Lengths, by County,  
Before and After PRWORA,  
January 1993 Through December 2001



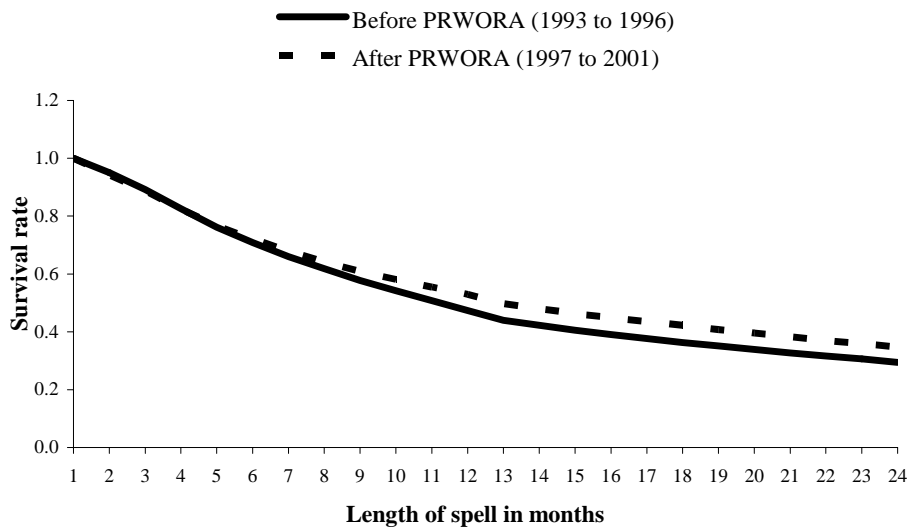
(continued)

**Figure 6 (continued)**

**Miami-Dade County**



**Los Angeles County**



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using administrative records from Cuyahoga, Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

Los Angeles is the only county in which recipients stayed on food stamp receipt longer after PRWORA was implemented. While spell lengths in Los Angeles were slightly longer than in the other counties in general, they increased somewhat after welfare reform. Figure 6 shows that, before PRWORA, 53 percent of spells ended after 12 months (that is, 47 percent of spells “survived” to 12 months), compared with 47 percent of spells ending (or 53 percent “surviving”) after its implementation — a statistically significant increase.<sup>38</sup>

Another means of representing similar information is through the *hazard rate*, which shows the likelihood that a person would leave the FSP in a given month if he or she has received food stamps up to that month. For example, a hazard rate of 10 percent in Month 6 means that 10 percent of the cases that received food stamps for six consecutive months stopped receiving benefits in the seventh month. Three possible patterns are of interest. One possibility is that the hazard rate is fairly constant over time. This would mean that how long someone has received food stamps is unrelated to whether they receive food stamps in the next month. A second possibility is that the hazard rate declines over time. This would indicate that many people leave the FSP quickly but that long-term recipients are much less likely to leave subsequently. Finally, it is possible for the hazard rate to increase over time. This would be consistent with a policy that limits the amount of time that someone can receive benefits. For example, people might begin to leave the program in greater numbers when their time limit approaches.

Figure 7 shows the second, declining pattern for all four counties. In Cuyahoga County, the hazard rate rapidly declined from 4 months to 21 months, with spikes at the 6-month and 12-month spell lengths. The hazard rate for the period after the 21-month spell length was fairly constant, however, at about 5 percent. Thus, food stamp participants in Cuyahoga County tended to exit the program at a steady rate after a spell of 21 months. The hazard rate in Philadelphia County rapidly declined from the 4-month to 15-month spell lengths, with a spike at the 12-month point. The hazard rate for the period after the 15-month spell length was fairly constant, at about 3 percent. However, the hazard rate increased at the 24-month point, to 5.6 percent. In Miami-Dade, the hazard rate declined between the 6-month to 18-month spell lengths, and participants exited the program at a steady rate of 4 percent after a spell length of 18 months. The hazard rate in Los Angeles generally declined, peaking at the 12-month point and turning upward once again at the 22-month point.

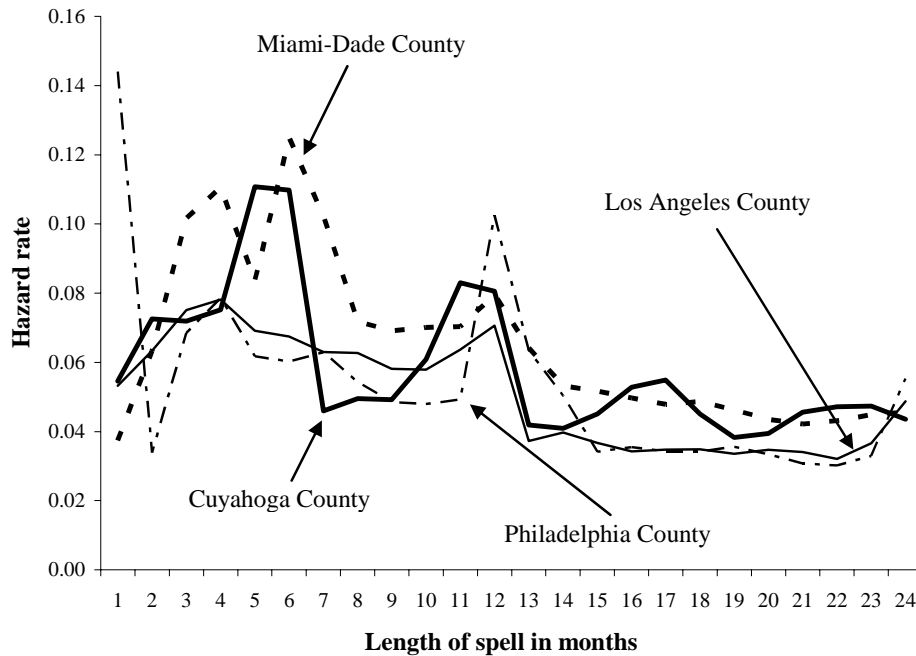
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<sup>38</sup>Given the descriptive evidence thus far, there are several possible explanations for this finding. Either the data are biased — the dramatic jumps in entry (Figure 3) skew the calculation of the spell durations — or the data are real and the jumps may be explained by California’s income disregard policy, the use of food stamps as a diversion from welfare, or the result of some other policy. On the assumption that the data are real (see footnote 30), other possibilities were examined. The analyses suggest that neither the diversion explanation nor the generosity of the income disregard policy explains the increase in spell lengths (results are not shown). These sensitivity checks suggest that the findings are not an artifact of the data sample but, rather, may be a result of a real policy change.

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Figure 7

Hazard Rates of Food Stamp Program Participants, by County,  
January 1993 Through December 2001



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using administrative records from Cuyahoga, Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

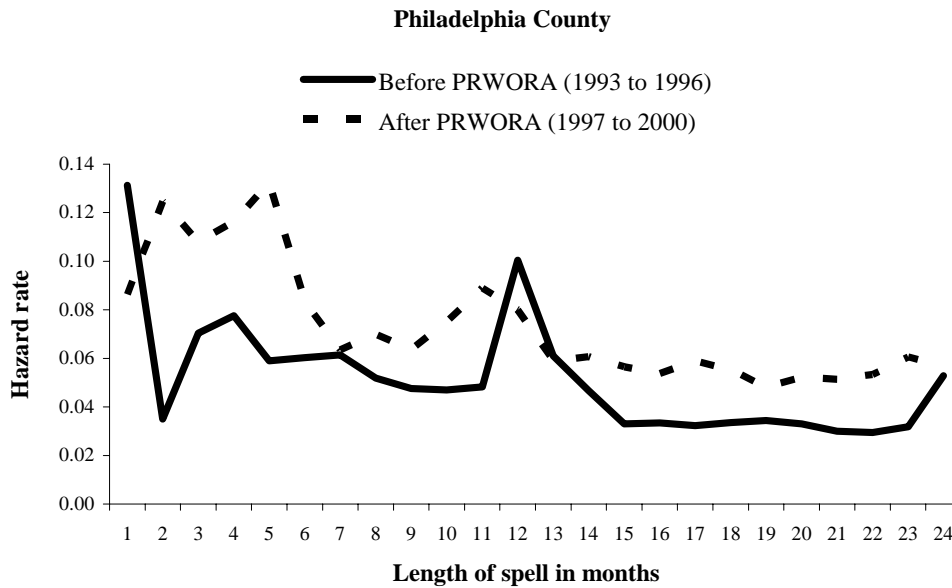
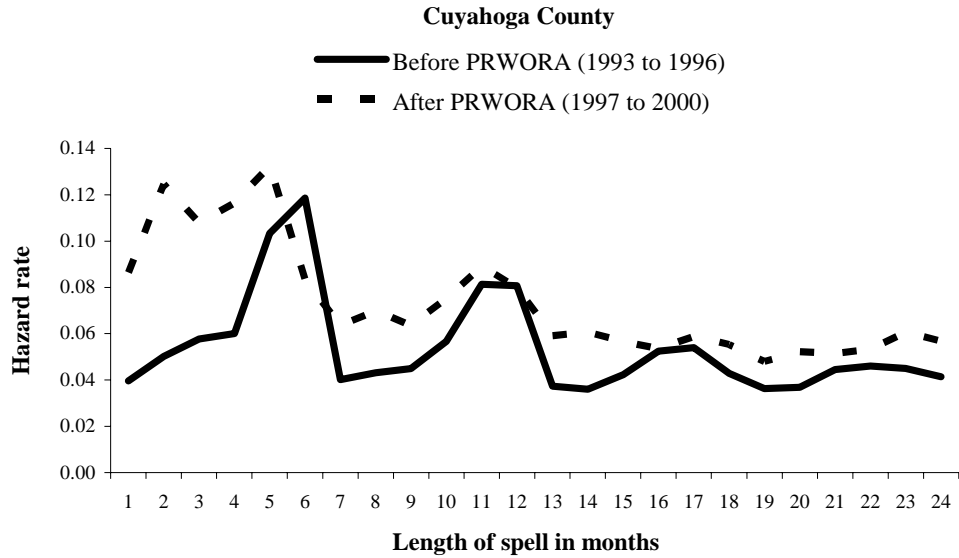
The likelihood that an individual would leave the FSP in a given month after receiving food stamps up to that month differed by whether the spell began before or after the implementation of welfare reform. Figure 8 shows the changes in the hazard rate by whether the spell began before or after the county implemented welfare reform.<sup>39</sup> In Cuyahoga County, for example, the hazard rate at 8 months before welfare reform was 4.3 percent, but the hazard rate was higher after welfare reform, at 7.0 percent. Philadelphia had a similar pattern. In Miami-Dade, the hazard rate

<sup>39</sup>Appendix Table A.1 shows the duration of first spells of food stamp receipt, by county.

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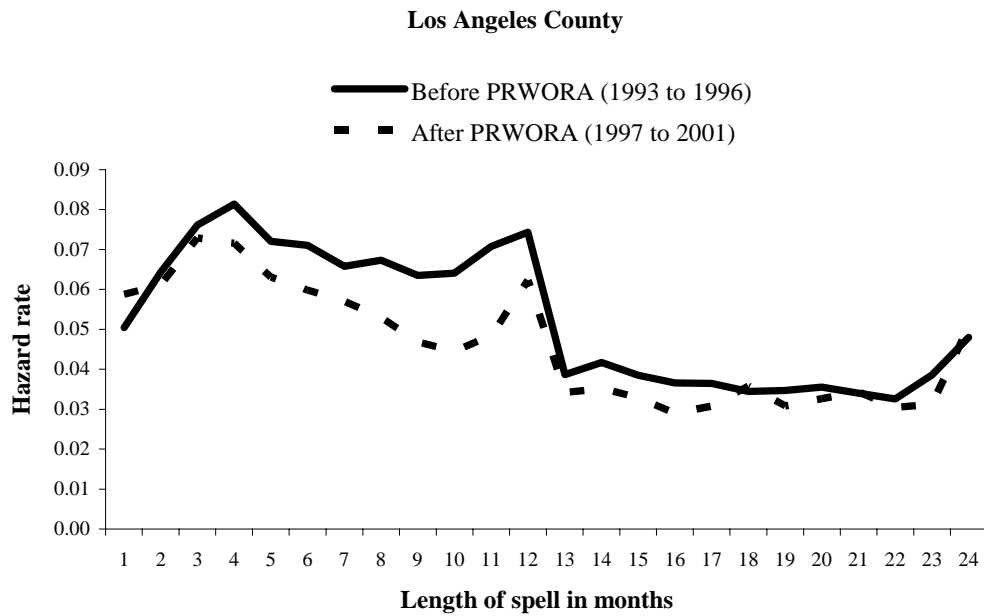
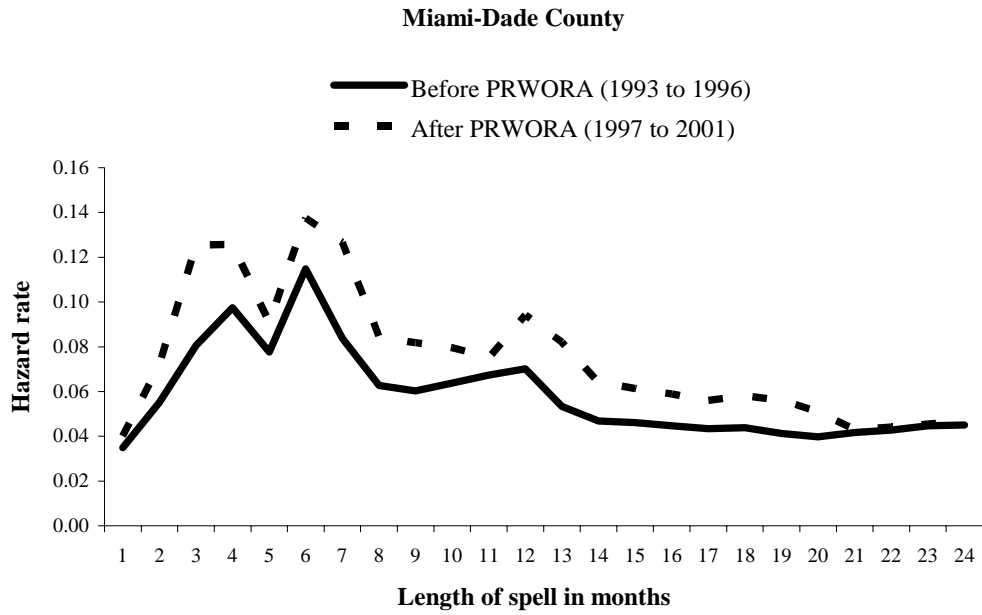
Figure 8

Hazard Rates of Food Stamp Program Participants Before and After PRWORA, January 1993 Through December 2001



(continued)

**Figure 8 (continued)**



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using administrative records from Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, Cuyahoga, and Los Angeles Counties.

at the 6-month point was higher after welfare reform (13.7 percent) than before (11.5 percent). This indicates that more recipients who had stayed on the FSP for at least 6 months were more likely to exit the next month after welfare reform was implemented than before reform. Los Angeles was the only county that had lower hazard rates after welfare reform. For example, at the 12-month point, 15 percent of recipients in Los Angeles would exit the program prior to PRWORA, compared with 9.8 percent after reform.

In summary, spell lengths appear to have been similar across three of the four counties. In all counties, spell lengths appear to have changed after the implementation of PRWORA. While spell lengths decreased in Cuyahoga, Philadelphia, and Miami-Dade Counties, they increased noticeably in Los Angeles.

### **What groups were more likely to return to the FSP?**

If the goal of policy is to help families leave public assistance permanently, then it is important to know whether people who left the FSP stayed away from the program. Likewise, if the FSP is supposed to provide a safety net for low-income families, then it might be important to allow families with uncertain employment prospects to return to the program quickly. This section examines the likelihood that people returned to the FSP quickly and whether that likelihood changed over time. In this section, a person who returns to the FSP within a specified period of time after first leaving the program is considered a “recidivist.”

To investigate how recidivism has changed over time, this report defines a recidivist as an individual who returned to the FSP after having been away from it for at least two months. For example, an individual who first participated in the program in January 1993 and who left it in January 1994 and started again in April 1994 (three months later) was a new entrant in January 1993, was at risk of returning to the FSP in March 1994 (having been off the rolls for January and February 1994), and was a recidivist in April 1994. The proportion of food stamp recipients who returned to the program within a given period for each month between January 1993 and December 2000 is examined, and the recidivism rate — the proportion of recipients who returned to the FSP within some specified time after leaving the program — is estimated for selected subgroups.

Figure 9 shows the proportion of individuals who returned to the FSP within six months after being off the rolls for two consecutive months. Among individuals in Cuyahoga County who stopped receiving food stamps in January 1993 (that is, became at risk of returning to the program in March 1993), about 28 percent returned within six months. This is represented by the leftmost point in Figure 9. This number increased to about 32 percent for individuals who stopped receiving food stamps in January 2000 (that is, became at risk of returning to the FSP in March 2000).<sup>40</sup>

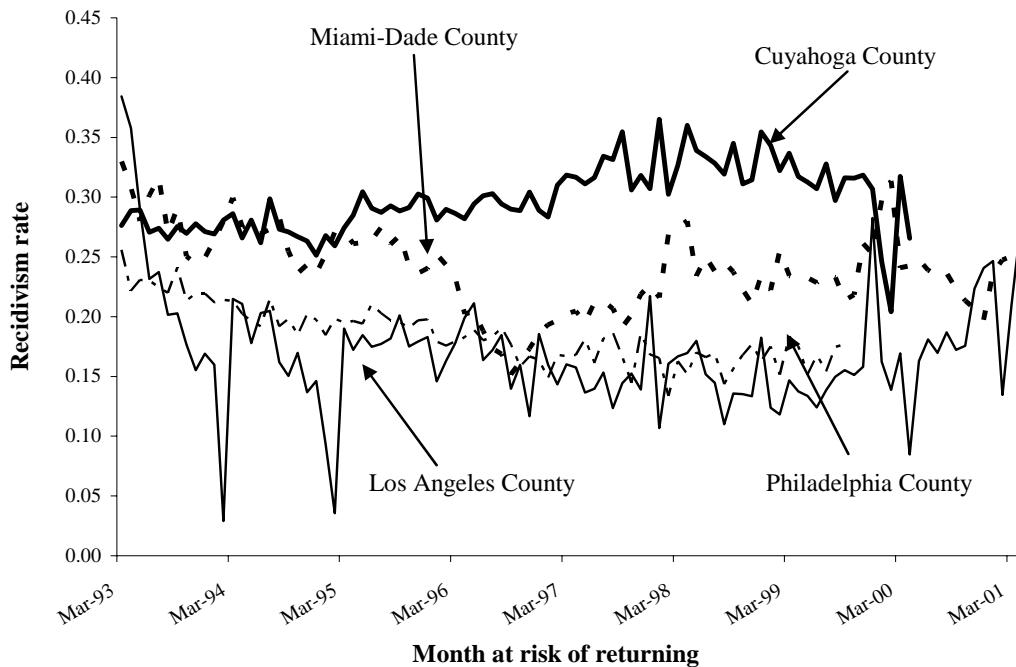
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<sup>40</sup>The trend in the proportion of ABAWDs who were recidivists decreased over time, while the proportion of families who returned to the FSP increased (not shown).

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Figure 9

Rate of Return to Food Stamp Benefit Receipt  
Within Six Months, by County,  
March 1993 Through April 2001



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using Cuyahoga County's Income Maintenance records and administrative records from Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

NOTES: Cuyahoga County data end in April 2000.  
Philadelphia County data end in September 1999.

Among individuals who stopped receiving food stamps in January 1993 in Philadelphia County and became at risk of returning to the FSP in March 1993, about 32 percent returned to the program within the next six months. This number decreased to about 18 percent for individuals who stopped receiving food stamps in June 1999 (that is, became at risk of returning to the FSP in August 1999). The recidivism trend in Philadelphia declined over the period and reached a trough (of 13.5 percent) in October 1997, after which it increased. Miami-Dade had results like those in

Philadelphia County, reaching a trough in October 1996 at 15 percent and then increasing to about 31 percent of recipients at risk of returning in February 2000. Of the four counties, Los Angeles County experienced the most striking change in recidivism, having begun the period with about 38 percent of cases at risk of returning to the rolls, dropping to about 10 percent during the late 1990s, and finally ending the period with only 28 percent of individuals at risk of returning to benefit receipt within six months.

These findings are supported by Table 7, which shows recidivism rates according to recipients' characteristics. The top panel of the table shows that, on average, about 35 percent of individuals in Cuyahoga County returned to the FSP within one year after being off the program for two consecutive months. This finding is comparable to the recidivism rate of 38 percent within one year that was found by Burstein.<sup>41</sup> In Philadelphia, about 27 percent of individuals returned to the FSP within a year after being off the program for two consecutive months; in Miami-Dade County, about 31 percent of individuals returned to the FSP within a year; and only about 14 percent of individuals in Los Angeles County returned to the FSP within a year.

The likelihood of returning to food stamp receipt varied by subgroup. ABAWDs in Cuyahoga County were less likely (20 percent) to return to the FSP within six months than were families (32 percent). In Philadelphia County, ABAWDs were less likely (16 percent) to return to the FSP within six months than were families (22 percent) and the elderly (15 percent). Los Angeles had little difference in recidivism rates by subgroup type.

### **How have people moved between benefit programs over time?**

Since the number of food stamp recipients has declined over time, two natural questions are whether these recipients have moved to other forms of public assistance and, if so, how these movements have changed over time. Analysis of such movements may shed light on participant inflows and outflows that jointly produce caseload changes, while also providing a small indication of how well former participants fare after leaving the FSP. A *transition* is defined as a movement from one program to another. For example, a food stamp recipient who received only food stamp benefits in January 1993 and who then went on to receive both food stamps and cash assistance in April 1993 represents a transition from food stamps only to combined benefit receipt. Several policy-relevant transitions may occur:

1. Transitions into and out of the FSP
2. Transitions from the FSP to other programs
3. Transitions into the FSP from other programs

---

<sup>41</sup>Burstein, 1993.

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Table 7

Food Stamp Program Recidivism Rates, by Characteristics,  
January 1993 Through December 2001

Characteristic	Return in 3 Months or Less	Return in 6 Months or Less	Return in 12 Months or Less	Return in 24 Months or Less
<b><u>Cuyahoga County</u></b>				
All individuals	0.230	0.290	0.349	0.392
Age				
Younger than 18 years	0.294	0.358	0.420	0.457
18 to 59 years	0.166	0.226	0.287	0.342
60 years or older	0.172	0.209	0.250	0.289
Female	0.242	0.304	0.366	0.409
Race/ethnicity				
Black	0.285	0.351	0.415	0.458
White	0.167	0.221	0.275	0.321
Other	0.192	0.250	0.310	0.352
Household type				
ABAWDs	0.145	0.198	0.256	0.313
Families	0.255	0.318	0.378	0.418
Elderly (65 years or older)	0.177	0.214	0.254	0.289
Sample size	186,708	181,735	172,371	148,870
<b><u>Philadelphia County</u></b>				
All individuals	0.142	0.204	0.274	0.347
Age				
Older than 60 years	0.118	0.158	0.201	0.261
18 to 59 years	0.132	0.193	0.265	0.341
Younger than 18 years	0.160	0.226	0.298	0.368
Female	0.149	0.211	0.281	0.354
Race/ethnicity				
Black	0.152	0.220	0.296	0.372
White	0.124	0.177	0.238	0.304
Hispanic	0.132	0.191	0.259	0.330
Other	0.133	0.184	0.238	0.321
Household type				
ABAWDs	0.110	0.164	0.230	0.301
Families	0.157	0.224	0.298	0.373
Elderly (65 years or older)	0.118	0.148	0.183	0.218
Sample size	246,939	245,148	240,511	225,926

(continued)

**Table 7 (continued)**

Characteristic	Return in 3 Months or Less	Return in 6 Months or Less	Return in 12 Months or Less	Return in 24 Months or Less
<b><u>Miami-Dade County</u></b>				
All individuals	0.162	0.233	0.309	0.389
Age				
Younger than 18 years	0.196	0.280	0.365	0.441
18 to 59 years	0.134	0.197	0.265	0.338
60 years or older	0.152	0.215	0.297	0.439
Gender				
Male	0.153	0.222	0.295	0.370
Female	0.170	0.244	0.324	0.409
Earnings <sup>a</sup>				
Positive earnings	0.175	0.253	0.333	0.413
No earnings	0.201	0.286	0.373	0.449
Household type				
ABAWDs	0.119	0.175	0.241	0.321
Families	0.171	0.246	0.324	0.401
Elderly (65 years or older)	0.154	0.210	0.286	0.435
Sample size	644,721	629,763	597,804	535,297
<b><u>Los Angeles County</u></b>				
All individuals	0.065	0.097	0.137	0.177
Age				
Younger than 18 years	0.065	0.093	0.127	0.161
18 to 59 years	0.065	0.100	0.146	0.192
60 years or older	0.050	0.069	0.087	0.104
Gender				
Male	0.065	0.098	0.138	0.179
Female	0.064	0.096	0.135	0.175
Race/ethnicity				
Black	0.070	0.110	0.165	0.230
White	0.054	0.083	0.118	0.151
Hispanic	0.073	0.106	0.149	0.189
Other	0.050	0.074	0.102	0.129
Earnings <sup>a</sup>				
Positive earnings	0.057	0.090	0.134	0.186
No earnings	0.065	0.094	0.127	0.158
Household type				
ABAWDs	0.062	0.097	0.140	0.182
Families	0.065	0.097	0.136	0.176
Elderly (65 years or older)	0.039	0.054	0.066	0.080
Sample size	961,323	929,351	892,026	813,216

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using Cuyohoga County's Income Maintenance files and administrative records from Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

NOTES: <sup>a</sup>Data are presented for the earnings category if an individual has positive earnings at any point in time from January 1993 to December 2001. Earnings data are restricted to individuals 18 years and older.

### ***Transitions into and out of the FSP***

The decline in the food stamp caseload described above and illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 could be due to people leaving the FSP faster or to fewer people coming into the program due to the economy and policy changes. To further understand the decline in active food stamp recipients, Figure 10 shows the trend of people moving from not receiving food stamps to receiving food stamps each month and the trend of people moving from food stamp receipt to no receipt each month in the four counties. Panel A in the figure shows transitions each month in Cuyahoga County. The leftmost point of the solid black line in the figure indicates that approximately 10,800 recipients left the FSP in February 1993 (that is, received benefits in January 1993 but not in February). In other words, these recipients transitioned from food stamp receipt to nonreceipt. The leftmost point of the dashed line indicates that about 11,300 people who did not receive food stamps in January 1993 went on to obtain benefits in February. That is, these recipients transitioned to food stamp receipt from nonreceipt. The trend line closest to the axis in the figure represents the net number of transitions into the FSP. The trend shows that, in February 1993, approximately 500 recipients joined the program rather than left (11,300 new recipients minus 10,800 leavers).

Surprisingly, the number of people moving into and out of the FSP increased somewhat between 1993 and 1997. Despite these increases, the net transitions trend in the figure shows that, in most months, more food stamp recipients left the program than entered it. This is consistent with the decline in food stamp receipt that is shown in Figure 1.

The remaining graphs in Figure 10 show similar transitions for Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties. Panel B shows that, in most months, more food stamp recipients in Philadelphia County left the program than entered it. In contrast, Panel C shows a fairly constant rate of entry to and exit from food stamp receipt prior to 1995 and after 1997 in Miami-Dade County. During the period spanning 1996 to 1997, there appears to have been a large net outflow of people from the FSP.<sup>42</sup>

Figures 11 and 12 show transitions into and out of the FSP in the four counties for the subgroups of families and for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs), respectively. The patterns in the transitions among families (Figure 11) closely resembles the patterns in Figure 10. For example, for Cuyahoga, Philadelphia, and Miami-Dade, there were either no changes in inflows to the FSP or small net outflows from the FSP, similar to those depicted in Figure 10. The pattern of large net outflows in Los Angeles also remains.

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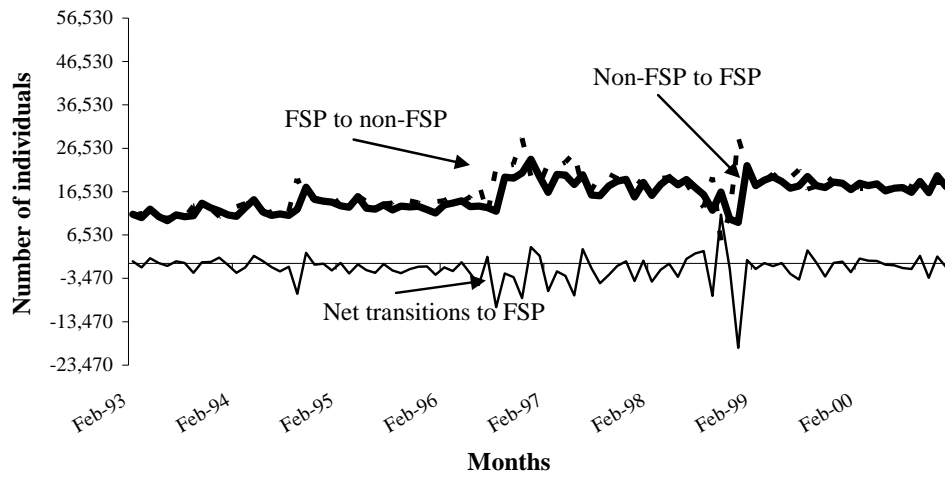
<sup>42</sup>It is not yet determined whether this result reflects a policy change or is simply an anomaly of the data.

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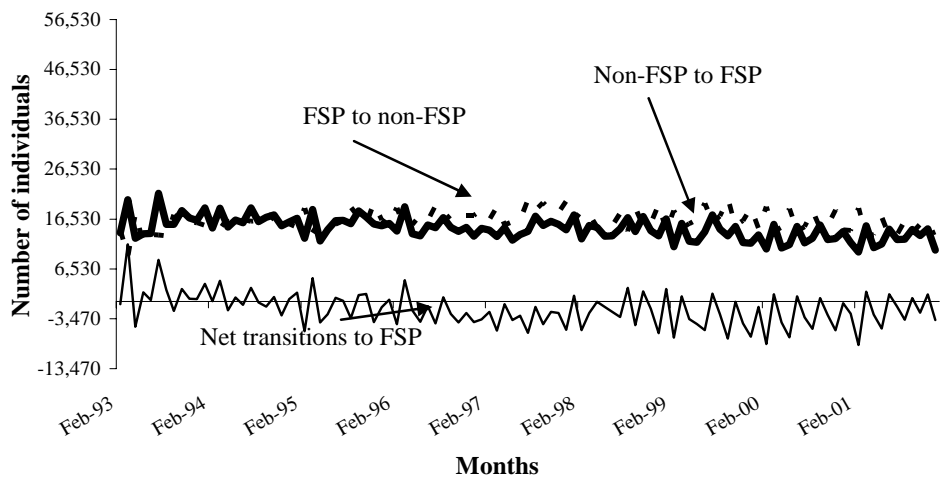
Figure 10

Transitions into and out of the Food Stamp Program in a Month, by County,  
February 1993 Through December 2001

A. Cuyahoga County



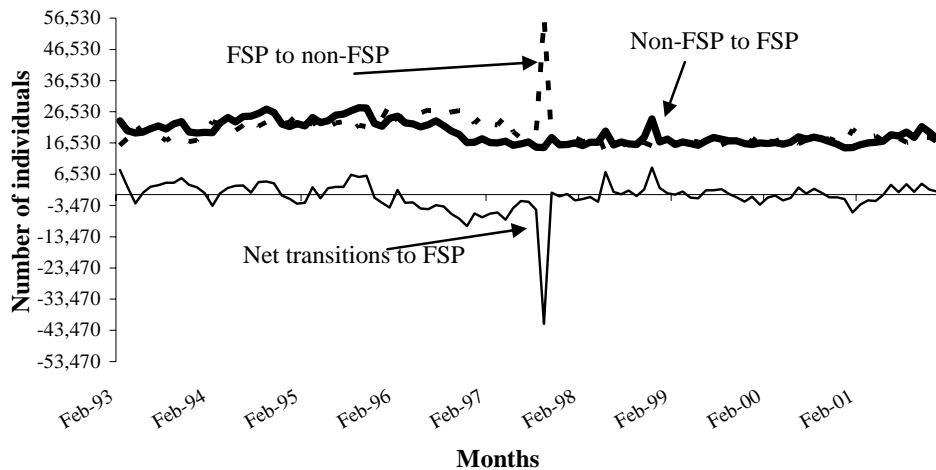
B. Philadelphia County



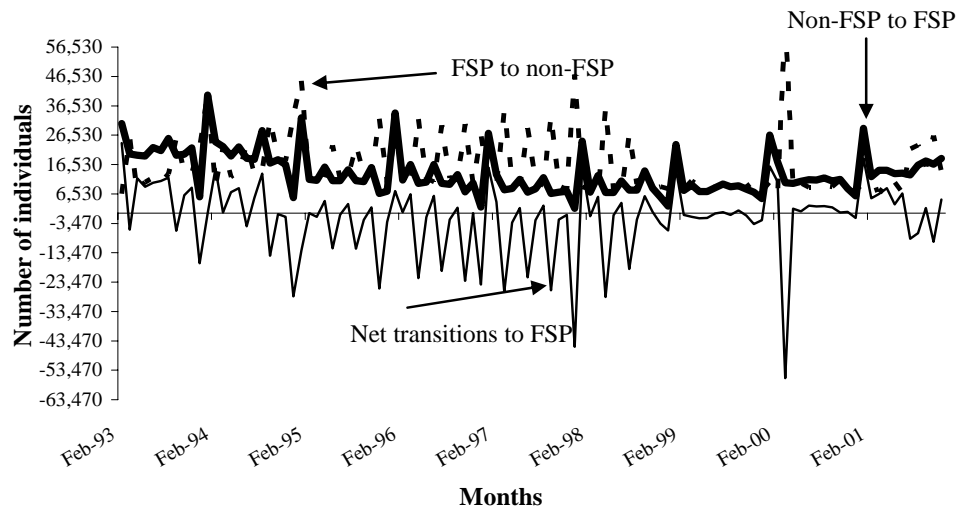
(continued)

**Figure 10 (continued)**

**C. Miami-Dade County**



**D. Los Angeles County**



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using Cuyahoga County's Income Maintenance records and administrative records from Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

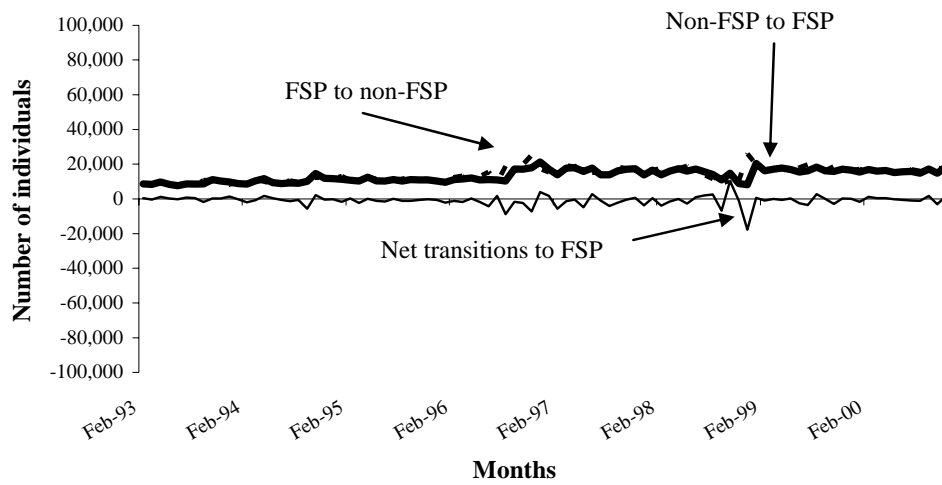
NOTE: Data for Cuyahoga County extend through December 2000.

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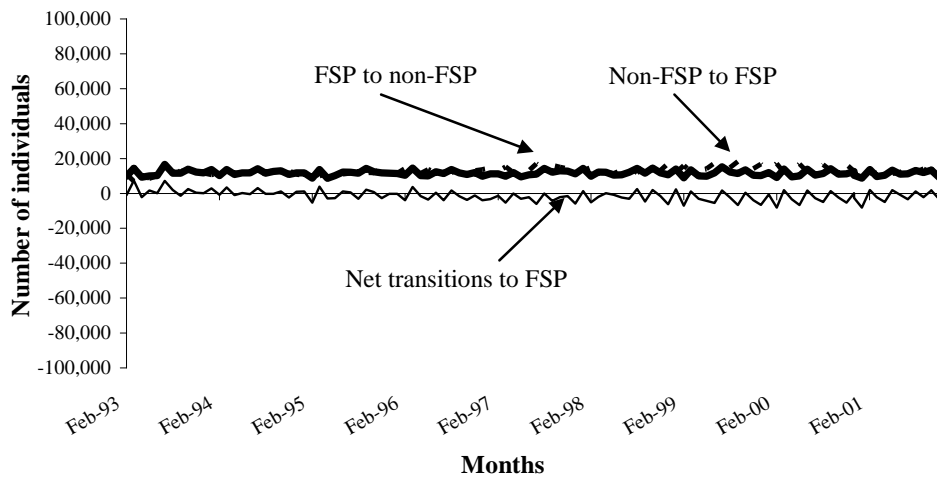
Figure 11

Transitions into and out of the Food Stamp Program in a Month  
for Families, by County,  
February 1993 Through December 2001

A. Cuyahoga County



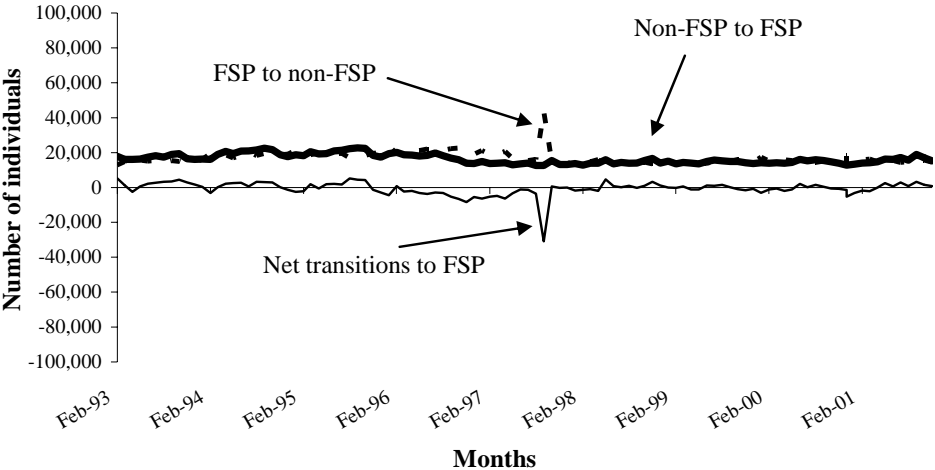
B. Philadelphia County



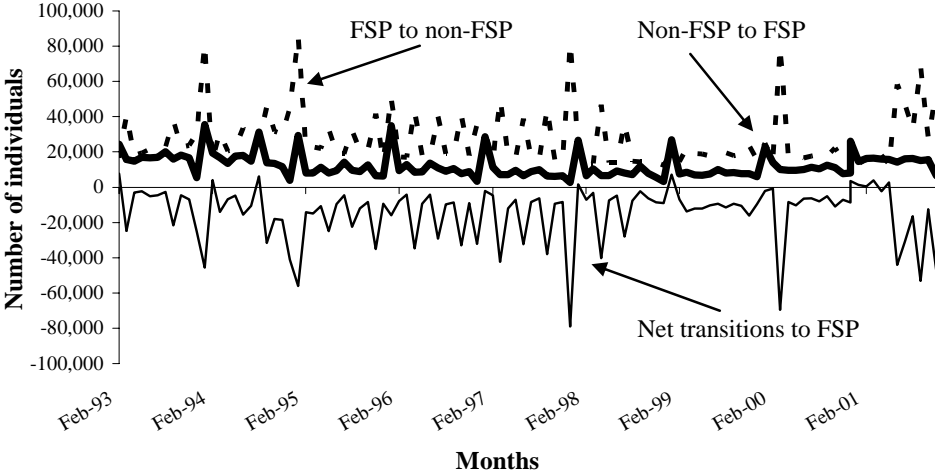
(continued)

Figure 11 (continued)

C. Miami-Dade County



D. Los Angeles County



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using Cuyahoga County's Income Maintenance records and administrative records from Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

NOTE: Data for Cuyahoga County extend through December 2000.

The federal food stamp regulations regarding benefits to ABAWDs changed in 1996, when PRWORA imposed a work requirement and time limit on those viewed as fit to work. ABAWDs are limited to three months of food stamp benefits in a three-year period, unless they meet work requirements or are exempted by the state. Figure 12 shows transitions for ABAWDs. As expected, the number of ABAWDs transitioning to and exiting from the FSP decreased in the period after 1996. This is visible in both Cuyahoga and Philadelphia, two counties in states with strict enforcement policies for ABAWDs.<sup>43</sup> Surprisingly, there was a small net transfer into the FSP among ABAWDs in Miami-Dade and Los Angeles toward the end of the period. However, research suggests that Florida may have had lenient policies toward ABAWDs, which may explain the net increase.<sup>44</sup> In addition, the upswing in Los Angeles could reflect California's use of state funds to pay for food stamps for immigrants, who lost eligibility with the passage of PRWORA until the federal government restored eligibility to nearly all immigrants in 2002.<sup>45</sup>

### ***Transitions from the FSP to other programs***

Since the number of food stamp recipients has declined over time, a natural question is whether they have moved to other forms of public assistance. People who stopped receiving only food stamps (that is, such recipients did not simultaneously receive cash assistance) could move to other welfare programs — either alone or in combination with food stamps — or to no other assistance program. Three movements from the FSP are analyzed: (1) movements from receiving only food stamps to receiving no assistance of any form, (2) movements from receiving only food stamps to receiving a combination of food stamps and welfare, and (3) movements from receiving only food stamps to receiving only welfare. Trends for welfare are also shown, for comparison; namely, the analysis shows (4) movements from welfare to no assistance and (5) movements from welfare and food stamp receipt to no assistance.

Figure 13 shows the number of individuals in the four counties who made the transition from food stamps without cash assistance to either cash assistance or to no other program. For example, the leftmost dots (of the three food stamps-only trend lines) for Cuyahoga County represent the number of people who received food stamps and not cash assistance in January 1993 but who either stopped receiving food stamps without cash assistance or began combining food stamps with cash assistance in February 1993. That is, Panel A of Figure 13 shows that, in Cuyahoga County, 5,348 people who received only food stamps in January 1993 did not enter another program in February; 1,271 people went on to receive both cash assistance and food stamps in February, and 17 individuals went on to receive cash assistance only. In other words, there were 6,636 food stamp-only leavers (that is, people who received food stamps without cash assistance)

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<sup>43</sup>Czajka, McConnell, Cody, and Rodriguez, 2001.

<sup>44</sup>Czajka, McConnell, Cody, and Rodriguez, 2001.

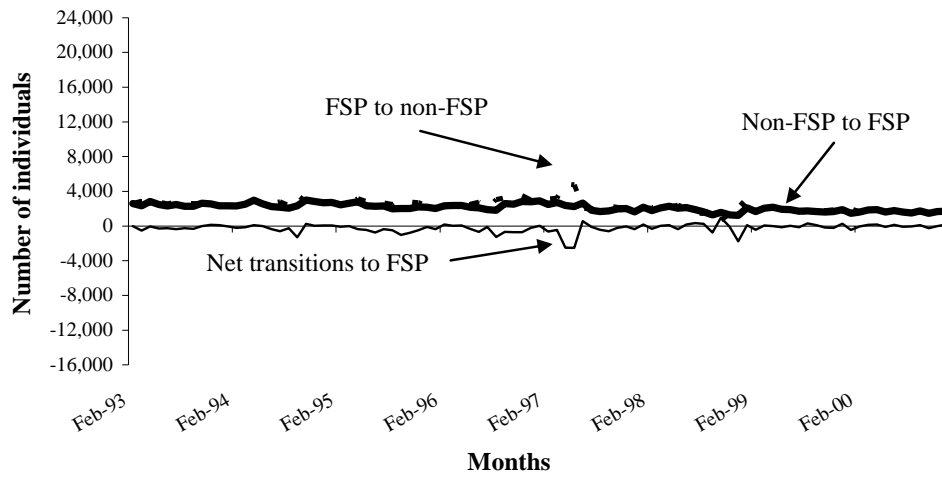
<sup>45</sup>Polit, Nelson, Richburg-Hayes, and Seith, 2005.

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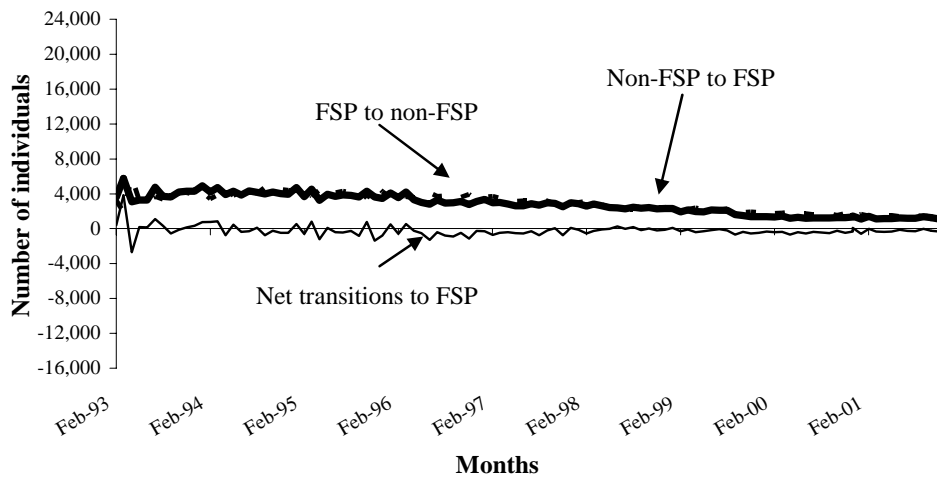
Figure 12

Transitions into and out of the Food Stamp Program in a Month  
for ABAWDs, by County,  
February 1993 Through December 2001

A. Cuyahoga County



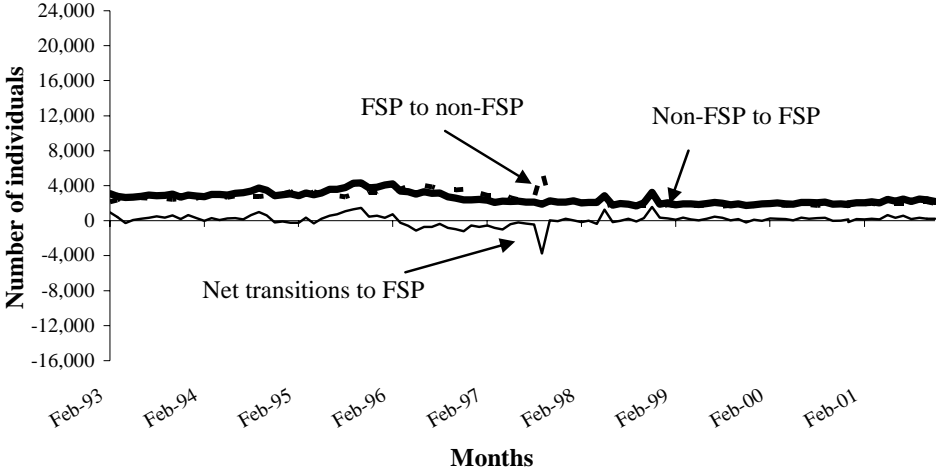
B. Philadelphia County



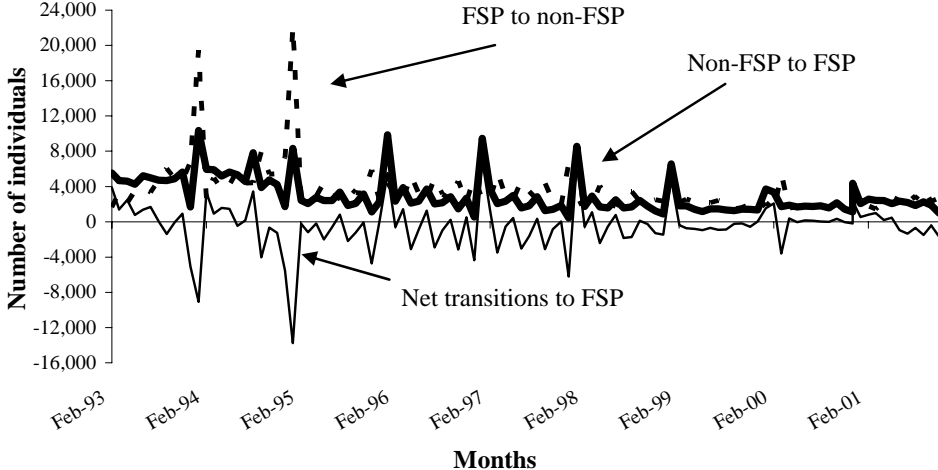
(continued)

**Figure 12 (continued)**

**C. Miami-Dade County**



**D. Los Angeles County**



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using Cuyahoga County's Income Maintenance records and administrative records from Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

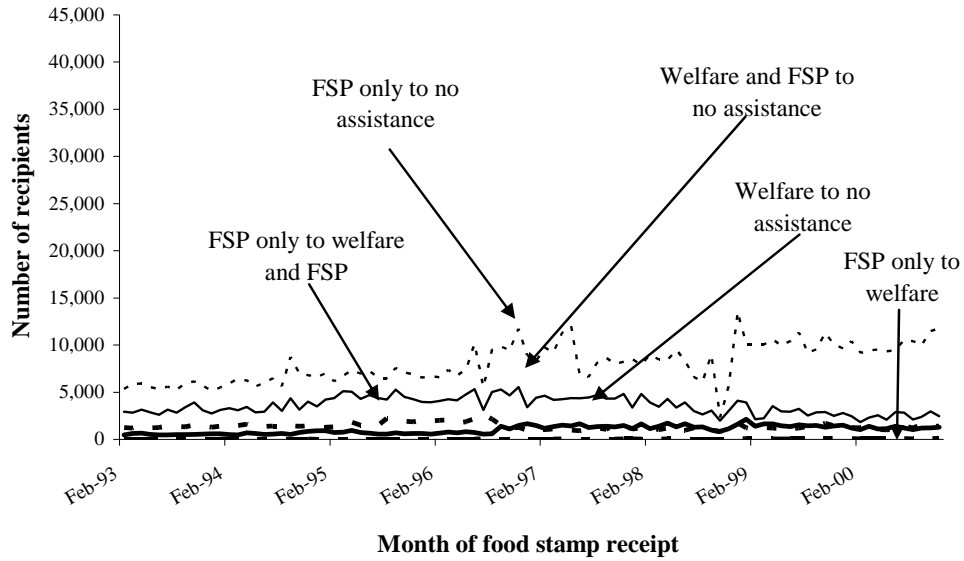
NOTE: Data for Cuyahoga County extend through December 2000.

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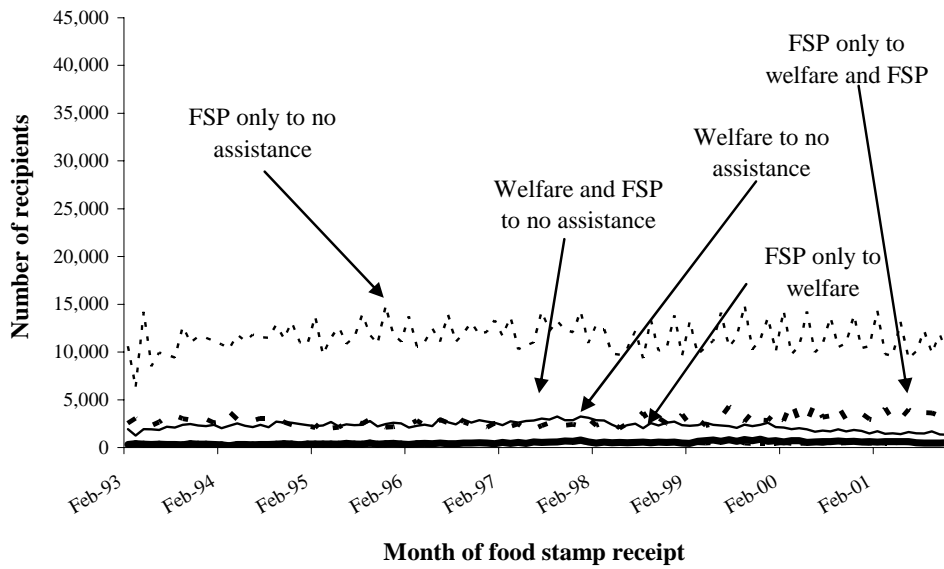
Figure 13

Transitions from the Food Stamp Program to Other Programs in a Month, by County, February 1993 Through December 2001

A. Cuyahoga County



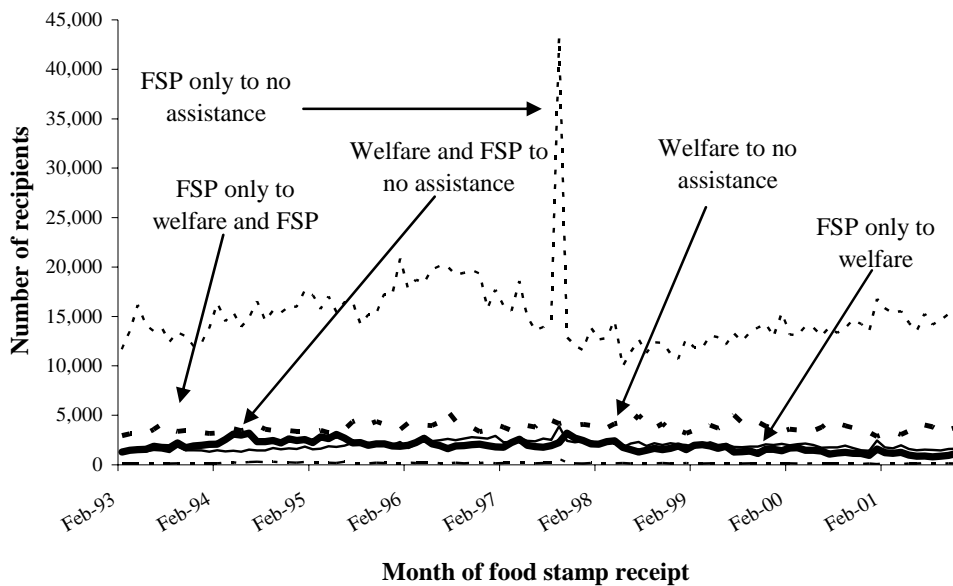
B. Philadelphia County



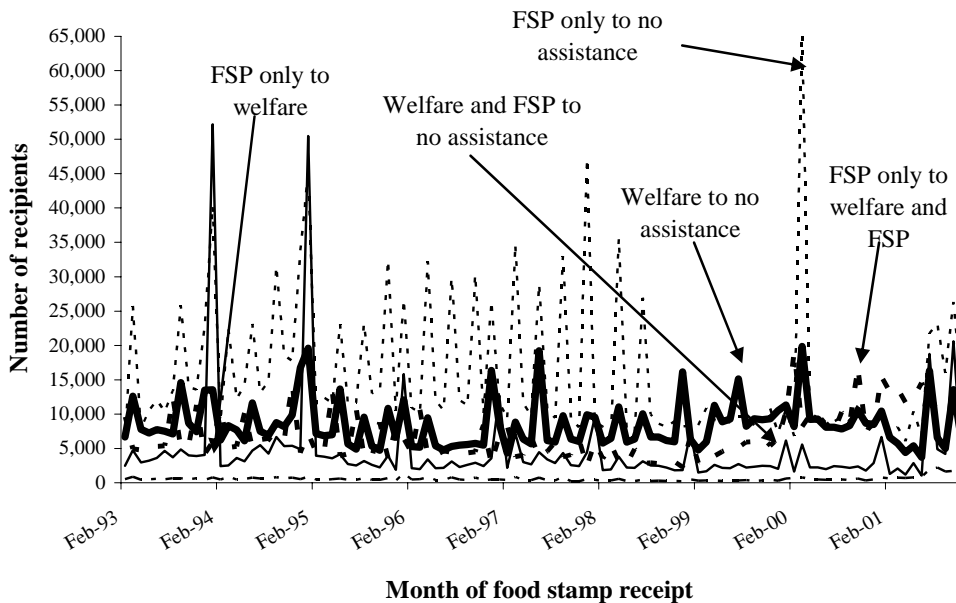
(continued)

**Figure 13 (continued)**

**C. Miami-Dade County**



**D. Los Angeles County**



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using Cuyahoga County's Income Maintenance records and administrative records from Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

NOTE: Data for Cuyahoga County extend through December 2000.

in February 1993, and 80.6 percent of these leavers (5,348 out of 6,636) did not enter another program; 19.2 percent received a combination of cash assistance and food stamps; and less than 0.3 percent received only cash assistance one month after leaving the FSP.

The remaining panels of Figure 13 provide similar analyses for Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties. Panel B shows that there were 13,334 food stamp leavers (without cash assistance) in February 1993 in Philadelphia County and that 79 percent of these leavers (10,588 out of 13,440) did not enter another program; 19 percent received a combination of cash assistance and food stamps; and about 2 percent received only cash assistance. In Miami-Dade County (Panel C), there were 14,776 food stamp-only leavers in February 1993, and 79 percent (11,679 out of 14,776) of these leavers did not enter another program; 20 percent received a combination of cash assistance and food stamps; and about 1 percent received only cash assistance.

Panel D of Figure 13 shows that there were 16,703 leavers in Los Angeles County in February 1993 and that only 40 percent of those leavers did not enter into another program. In contrast to the other counties, 57 percent (9,577 out of 16,703) of Los Angeles's food stamp-only leavers did receive a combination of benefits in the month of transition while 3 percent received only cash assistance.

### ***Transitions into the FSP from other programs***

The unique nature of the data used in this analysis allows a glance into where food stamp recipients come from, that is, whether most recipients transition into the FSP from nonbenefit receipt versus some benefit in various combinations. Three sources of transitions into the FSP are analyzed: (1) movements from no assistance to receiving only food stamps, (2) movements from welfare and food stamps to receiving only food stamps, and (3) movements from welfare to receiving only food stamps.

Figure 14 shows transitions into the FSP from other programs, by county. The leftmost points of Panel A indicate that 5,284 of Cuyahoga's food stamp recipients in February 1993 did not receive any benefits a month earlier, in January 1993. In that same month, 1,520 food stamp-only recipients received a combination of welfare and food stamps in the prior month. Finally, a small amount (134 recipients) went from receiving welfare only in January 1993 to receiving food stamps only in February. In other words, of all new food stamp-only recipients in February, 76 percent (5,284 out of 6,938) entered the food stamp-only status from no assistance, and nearly 22 percent (1,520 out of 6,938) entered food stamp-only status from receiving a combination of benefits.

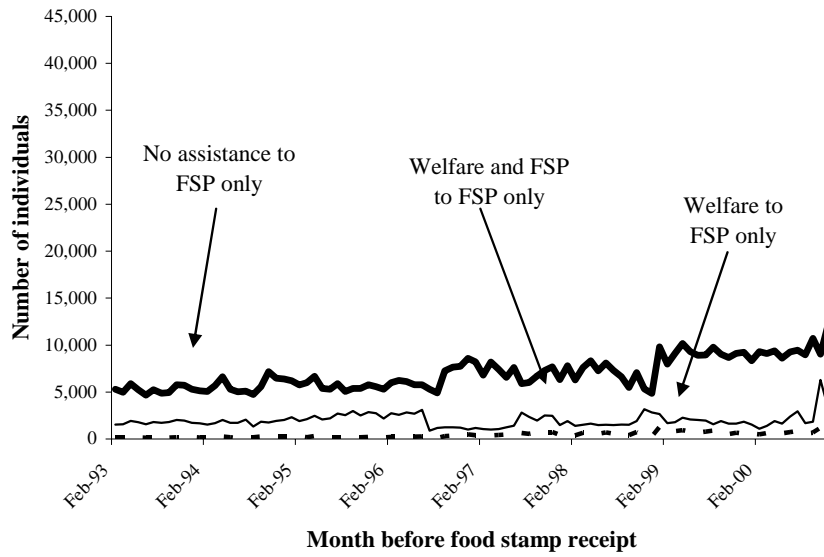
In summary, it appears that food stamp exits in all four counties were led by food stamp-only recipients (that is, by recipients who initially received only food stamp benefits) who did not turn to other programs after leaving. However, Los Angeles County (Panel D in Figure 13) was

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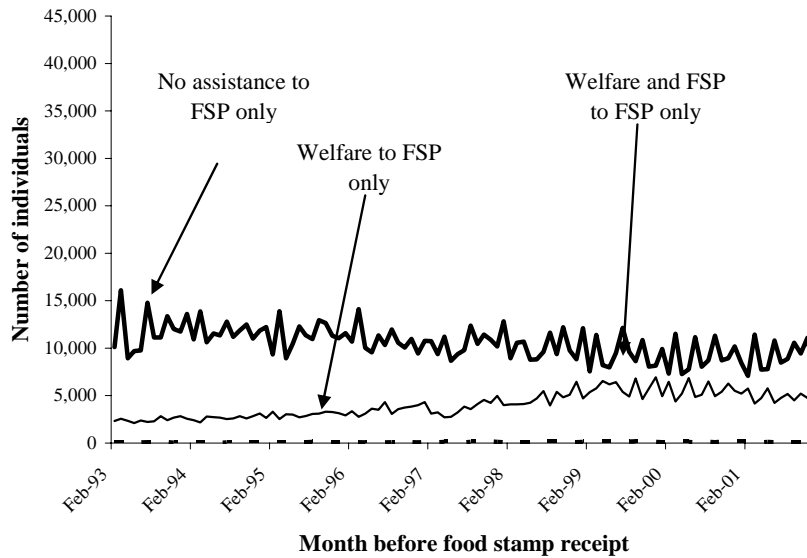
Figure 14

Transitions to the Food Stamp Program from Other Programs  
in a Month, by County,  
February 1993 Through December 2001

A. Cuyahoga County



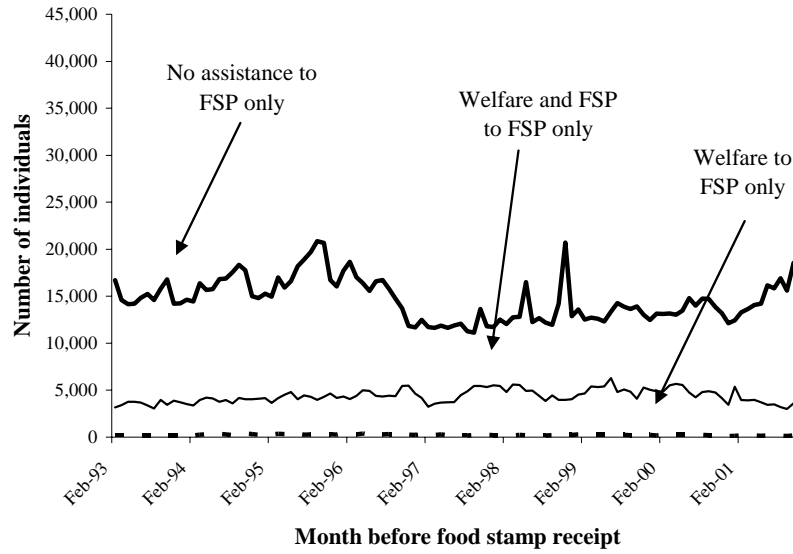
B. Philadelphia County



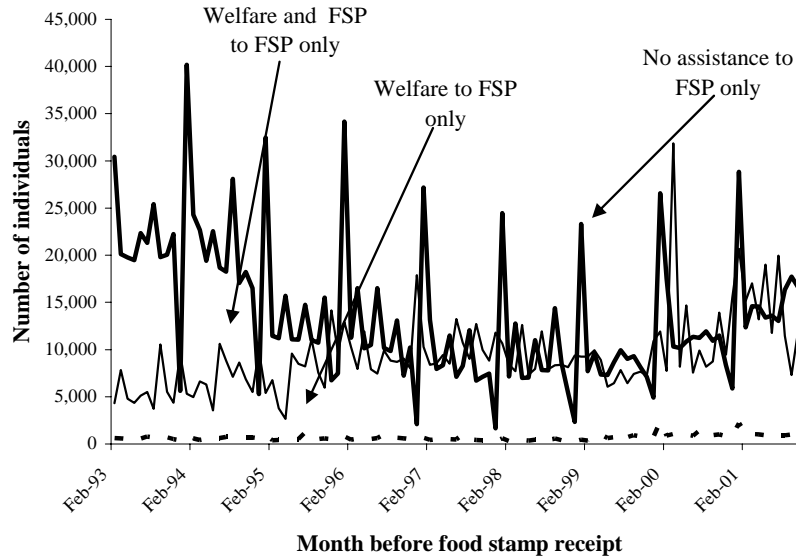
(continued)

**Figure 14 (continued)**

**C. Miami-Dade County**



**D. Los Angeles County**



SOURCES: MDRC calculations using Cuyahoga County's Income Maintenance records and administrative records from Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

NOTE: Data for Cuyahoga County extend through December 2000.

the only site for which a significant number of food stamp recipients left the program to transition to receiving both cash assistance and food stamps (33 percent of cases leaving, on average, compared with 20 percent of cases leaving in the other sites). This could be due to the immigration restriction, which limited benefits to immigrants who came to the United States before 1996. In California, state funds were used to provide cash assistance benefits for those immigrants not covered by federal benefits, which could explain Los Angeles County's increase in food stamp-only transitions to joint cash assistance and food stamp receipt.

## **Discussion of the Findings**

This report examines food stamp use in four urban counties from 1993 through 2001, describing how quickly people left the Food Stamp Program (FSP), how often they returned to it, and who began receiving food stamps in the first place. The results show that FSP participation decreased dramatically after 1993 in all four counties and that this decline was concentrated among family cases. It appears that the decline in food stamp use is explained neither by an increase in the rate at which people left the FSP nor by a decrease in the number of people entering the program. Instead, more people both left the system and entered the system over time; beginning in 1994, however, the number leaving the FSP was slightly greater than the number entering. Among entrants, there is substantial evidence that more nonwelfare individuals made the transition to the FSP than individuals from the cash assistance program and than individuals from both the cash assistance program and the FSP. Finally, the analyses show that the dynamics of food stamp participation were different for different people. For example, the elderly were less likely to begin receiving food stamps than other groups, and ABAWDs had the shortest average spells of food stamp receipt.

In addition to these overall trends, each county experienced the unique outcomes that are described below.

### **Cuyahoga County**

Cuyahoga County began and ended the period studied with the second-smallest food stamp caseload (after Philadelphia County), even though it was the least-populated county of the four studied and had the fewest people with incomes below the poverty level. Cuyahoga County also experienced the largest food stamp caseload decline over the period (50.8 percent). One intriguing finding is that the number of people who moved from receiving neither food stamps nor cash assistance to receiving only food stamps actually increased somewhat over time in Cuyahoga County, especially after 1996. This might reflect Cuyahoga County's diversion policy under welfare reform, which sought to encourage families to receive food stamps rather than TANF. In addition, the proportion of entrants who returned to the FSP after being off the rolls for two months increased slightly over time, especially after 1997. In fact, Cuyahoga

County had the highest number of recidivists among the four counties. This could possibly be a result of the county's focus on work among welfare recipients. Its employment initiatives might have helped people find jobs that allowed them to leave the food stamp system temporarily, but those jobs might not have been stable enough to allow people to stay off the FSP for long. It is important to note, however, that an analysis of TANF reforms in Cuyahoga County does not show an increase in the number of people who returned to cash assistance.<sup>46</sup>

### **Philadelphia County**

Only slightly more populous than Cuyahoga County, Philadelphia County was the poorest county in the sample, with a poverty rate of nearly 23 percent in 1999. In addition, it experienced the least employment growth over the period studied; in fact, during the early period (from 1993 to 1996), Philadelphia experienced a decline in employment growth, while the other three counties were still experiencing economic expansion. Nevertheless, Philadelphia County's FSP dynamics look similar to Cuyahoga's. That is, more people left the FSP than entered, and most entrants moved from receiving no assistance to receiving only food stamps.

### **Miami-Dade County**

Miami-Dade County started and ended the study period with the second-largest food stamp caseload of the four counties, even though its population was more than four times smaller than Los Angeles County's. The analysis shows that the number of people entering the FSP each month in Miami-Dade was large — averaging 7,000 new recipients each month, an amount exceeded only in Los Angeles. However, Miami-Dade had the highest entry rate among the eligible the population; that is, of people with incomes below the poverty level, 23 percent entered the FSP each year. Combined with a moderate exit rate similar to the rates in Cuyahoga and Philadelphia Counties, this may explain the large continuing caseload in Miami-Dade.

### **Los Angeles County**

Los Angeles was by far the most populous county studied and had the largest food stamp caseloads. As in the other counties and the nation as a whole, the FSP caseload in Los Angeles declined during the mid to late 1990s — a period of economic expansion. Unlike the other counties' caseloads, however, Los Angeles's increased rapidly in 2000 and 2001, for a net decrease of only 22 percent over the study period. The transition analysis shows that this overall decrease was fueled by food stamp-only recipients leaving the rolls. One possible reason for the modest overall decline in caseloads, as compared with the other sites, may be the notably larger proportion of food stamp-only recipients who transitioned to receiving both food stamps and cash assistance.

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<sup>46</sup>Brock et al., 2002.

Finally, Los Angeles had the longest spell lengths of all the counties, indicating that recipients tended to stay in the program once they began food stamp benefit receipt.

\* \* \*

Overall, the study's findings suggest that people in these four counties were leaving the FSP faster than others were entering. This leads to questions concerning the welfare of the FSP leavers. Future analyses should look at this group, in addition to examining the factors that lead to FSP entry and exit.



## **Appendix A**

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Appendix Table A.1

Spell-Length Durations Before Exiting the Food Stamp Program, by County,  
January 1993 Through December 2001

Month	Number at Risk of Exiting	Number Exiting	Hazard Rate (%)	Survivor Rate (%)	Cumulative Exit Rate (%)
<b><u>Cuyahoga County</u></b>					
1	216,203	11,478	5.5	100.0	0.0
2	203,212	14,227	7.3	94.7	5.3
3	187,622	13,020	7.2	88.1	11.9
4	173,428	12,559	7.5	82.0	18.1
5	159,922	16,775	11.1	76.0	24.0
6	142,327	14,805	11.0	68.0	32.0
7	126,851	5,697	4.6	61.0	39.0
8	120,497	5,824	5.0	58.2	41.8
9	114,042	5,476	4.9	55.4	44.6
10	108,022	6,383	6.1	52.8	47.3
11	101,140	8,059	8.3	49.6	50.4
12	92,621	7,171	8.1	45.7	54.3
13 to 18	84,040	20,511	4.6	42.4	57.6
19 to 24	61,465	14,115	4.3	32.0	68.0
25 to 30	45,803	9,108	3.7	24.7	75.3
31 to 36	35,513	7,253	3.8	19.8	80.2
37 to 42	27,255	5,145	3.5	15.7	84.3
42 to 48	21,222	4,042	3.5	12.8	87.2
49 to 54	16,400	3,020	3.4	10.3	89.7
55 to 60	12,575	2,425	3.6	8.4	91.6
61 to 66	9,311	1,684	3.3	6.8	93.2
67 to 72	6,783	1,351	3.7	5.6	94.4
73 to 78	4,578	808	3.2	4.5	95.5
79 to 84	2,955	549	3.4	3.7	96.3
<b><u>Philadelphia County</u></b>					
1	179,231	24,080	14.4	100.0	0.0
2	155,138	5,171	3.4	86.6	13.4
3	149,959	9,931	6.8	83.7	16.3
4	140,021	10,593	7.9	78.1	21.9
5	129,423	7,752	6.2	72.2	27.8
6	121,667	7,116	6.0	67.9	32.1
7	114,547	6,980	6.3	63.9	36.1
8	107,562	5,681	5.4	60.0	40.0
9	101,876	4,830	4.9	56.9	43.1
10	97,043	4,540	4.8	54.2	45.8
11	92,500	4,447	4.9	51.6	48.4
12	88,048	8,582	10.2	49.2	50.9
13 to 18	79,453	17,695	4.2	44.4	55.6
19 to 24	61,736	12,098	3.6	34.5	65.5
25 to 30	49,265	7,980	2.9	27.7	72.3
31 to 36	40,262	6,280	2.8	23.2	76.8
37 to 42	32,675	4,574	2.5	19.6	80.4
42 to 48	26,979	3,710	2.5	16.9	83.1
49 to 54	22,314	2,720	2.2	14.6	85.5
55 to 60	18,712	2,449	2.3	12.8	87.2
61 to 66	15,413	1,782	2.0	11.1	88.9
67 to 72	12,702	1,465	2.0	9.8	90.2
73 to 78	10,239	1,146	2.0	8.7	91.3
79 to 84	8,076	910	2.0	7.7	92.3

(continued)

**Appendix Table A.1 (continued)**

Month	Number at Risk of Exiting	Number Exiting	Hazard Rate (%)	Survivor Rate (%)	Cumulative Exit Rate (%)
<b><u>Miami-Dade County</u></b>					
1	747,208	27,459	3.7	100.0	0.0
2	714,230	43,755	6.3	96.3	3.7
3	665,299	64,392	10.2	90.4	9.6
4	596,150	62,389	11.0	81.7	18.3
5	529,583	42,449	8.4	73.1	26.9
6	483,686	56,813	12.5	67.3	32.7
7	423,965	41,196	10.2	59.4	40.6
8	380,416	26,359	7.2	53.6	46.4
9	351,956	23,503	6.9	49.9	50.1
10	326,558	22,109	7.0	46.6	53.5
11	302,674	20,570	7.0	43.4	56.6
12	280,492	21,446	7.9	40.5	59.6
13 to 18	254,509	68,780	5.2	37.6	62.4
19 to 24	179,066	41,684	4.4	27.4	72.6
25 to 30	132,138	26,999	3.8	21.0	79.0
31 to 36	100,789	18,939	3.5	16.7	83.3
37 to 42	78,164	13,386	3.1	13.6	86.4
42 to 48	61,777	10,203	3.0	11.3	88.7
49 to 54	49,230	7,756	2.9	9.4	90.6
55 to 60	39,498	6,634	3.1	7.9	92.1
61 to 66	30,974	3,531	2.0	6.6	93.4
67 to 72	25,548	2,693	1.9	5.8	94.2
73 to 78	20,853	2,130	1.8	5.2	94.8
79 to 84	16,757	1,734	1.8	4.7	95.3
<b><u>Los Angeles County</u></b>					
1	1,656,036	85,895	5.3	100.0	0.0
2	1,561,400	95,852	6.3	94.8	5.2
3	1,456,922	105,431	7.5	89.0	11.0
4	1,343,792	101,107	7.8	82.6	17.5
5	1,235,603	82,571	6.9	76.3	23.7
6	1,147,041	74,794	6.7	71.2	28.8
7	1,066,724	65,135	6.3	66.6	33.4
8	995,796	60,561	6.3	62.5	37.5
9	929,088	52,507	5.8	58.7	41.3
10	870,864	48,958	5.8	55.4	44.6
11	813,403	50,172	6.4	52.3	47.7
12	756,004	51,541	7.1	49.1	50.9
13 to 18	690,886	135,115	3.6	45.8	54.2
19 to 24	529,332	104,242	3.6	36.9	63.2
25 to 30	403,787	64,279	2.9	29.6	70.4
31 to 36	326,180	53,490	3.0	24.9	75.1
37 to 42	261,645	39,926	2.8	20.8	79.2
42 to 48	212,433	33,771	2.9	17.6	82.4
49 to 54	170,442	27,244	2.9	14.8	85.2
55 to 60	135,317	21,168	2.8	12.5	87.5
61 to 66	106,065	13,264	2.2	10.5	89.5
67 to 72	84,638	10,558	2.2	9.2	90.8
73 to 78	66,552	8,796	2.4	8.1	92.0
79 to 84	50,668	7,173	2.5	7.0	93.0

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using Cuyahoga County's Income Maintenance records and administrative records from Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

NOTES: The analysis omits data from 1992 for all sites. Spells are right-censored. The spells contribute information to the table until they end or are right-censored.

**The Project on Devolution and Urban Change**

**Appendix Table A.2**

**Median Spell Lengths, by County,  
January 1993 Through December 2001**

Characteristic	Cuyahoga	Philadelphia	Miami-Dade	Los Angeles
Median spell length (months)	11.0	11.0	9.0	12.0
Median spell length, by group				
ABAWDs	8.0	8.0	6.0	6.0
Families	11.0	16.0	9.0	13.0
Elderly (65 years or older)	13.0	24.0	30.0	11.0
Median spell length				
Before PRWORA	12	12	10	11
After PRWORA	8	10	8	13
Number of observations	218,492	292,707	693,280	2,591,094
Period covered	1993-2000	1993-1999	1993-2001	1993-2001

SOURCES: MDRC calculations using administrative records from Cuyahoga, Philadelphia, Miami-Dade, and Los Angeles Counties.

NOTES: All calculations are made using county administrative data, unless otherwise noted. The Philadelphia figures report the average spell length of food stamp cases, which may be longer or shorter than the spell lengths of recipients.

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- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

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