

October 20, 2015

Fiscal Research Center

Trends in TANF and SNAP Participation in Georgia

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We express our gratitude to Lakshmi Pandey for his assistance with creating the data files and to the Dan Sweat Chair for research support.

FRC DATA SERIES

This Fiscal Research Center (FRC) report uses data from FRC's data warehouse to show trends over time in SNAP and TANF data. The FRC collects and maintains a variety of data sets that are used by our research associates, affiliated faculty and graduate students. A list of the data can be found at frc.gsu.edu/data-collections.

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Introduction

Means-tested public assistance programs provide cash assistance and in-kind benefits (childcare, healthcare, housing, nutrition, to name just a few) to low-income families, thereby helping them to achieve a higher standard of living than would otherwise be possible if they relied solely on earnings from the labor market. In the short-run, these programs alleviate the economic consequences of poverty. Three programs, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), account for a large share of public funds allocated to relatively low-income households. SNAP and TANF are administered by the state, so detailed information regarding participation in these two programs by Georgia residents are available. Since participation in these programs are associated with economic conditions, tracking the trends in the participation in these two programs provides an indication of the effect of economic conditions on lower income Georgia residents.

This brief focuses on trends in participation of Georgia residents in the SNAP and TANF programs over a 14-year period to better understand the dynamics of these programs. In the next section, a brief summary of these two programs is provided. The third section shows participation trends in these two programs in Georgia.

SNAP and TANF

This section briefly summarizes SNAP and TANF and highlights some of the program changes in recent years.

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or food stamps (pre-1980) is a monthly benefit to help low-income families obtain food and is funded by the federal government and administered by the states. SNAP benefits cannot be used to buy alcoholic beverages, cigarettes or tobacco, household supplies such as soap and paper products, medicines, vitamins, pet foods, or any non-food items. Over the years, SNAP eligibility definitions have changed as have the benefit levels, albeit not dramatically so. In general, eligibility is determined by household size, income, and expenses. The income threshold is 130 percent of the poverty line (which is different based on family size).

Table 1: SNAP Monthly Benefit by Household Size in Georgia, 2012

HOUSEHOLD SIZE	MONTHLY BENEFIT	HOUSEHOLD SIZE	MONTHLY BENEFIT
1	\$200	8	\$1,202
2	\$367	9	\$1,352
3	\$526	10	\$1,502
4	\$668	11	\$1,652
5	\$793	12	\$1,802
6	\$952	13	\$1,952
7	\$1,052		

Source: Georgia Department of Human Services: Division of Family and Children Services (2012). Retrieved June 28, 2012, from: dfcs.dhs.georgia.gov/sites/dfcs.dhs.georgia.gov/files/imported/DHR-DFCS/DHR-DFCS_Food_Stamps/English.pdf.

Eligible households are those whose income is less than or equal to the poverty level or are living in a temporary crisis. The amount granted to each household is the difference between the maximum monthly benefit (Table 1) and 30 percent of family monthly income.

TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE FOR NEEDY FAMILIES

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program in 1996. AFDC was created in 1935 to provide financial support to those in need. TANF is jointly funded by the federal government (through block grants to the states) and state governments. States determine eligibility within broad guidelines set by the federal government. To qualify for TANF benefits, the family must contain a dependent child and must prove absence or disablement of one or both parents. Adult beneficiaries of TANF are required to work or participate in weekly work activities, have less than \$1,000 in resources such as bank accounts, stocks, or bonds, and make less than the listed income limits (Table 2). TANF provides low-income families with cash assistance for up to 48 months.

Table 2: TANF Income Allowance and Maximum Monthly Benefit, 2012

FAMILY SIZE	MONTHLY INCOME	MAXIMUM MONTHLY BENEFIT
2	\$659	\$235
3	\$784	\$280
4	\$925	\$330
5	\$1,060	\$378
6	\$1,149	\$410
7	\$1,243	\$672
8	\$1,319	\$713
9	\$1,389	\$751
10	\$1,487	\$804
11	\$1,591	\$860
12	\$1,635	\$884
13	\$1,679	\$908

Source: Georgia Department of Human Services (2012) Eligibility Requirements for TANF. Retrieved on June 20, 2012 from: dfcs.dhr.georgia.gov/portal/site/DHS-DFCS/menuitem.5d32235bb09bde9a50c8798dd03036a0/?vgnnextoid=2bea2b48d9a4%20ff00VgnVCM100000bf01010aRCRD.

In 2005 (under the Deficit Reduction Act), TANF strengthened work requirements; in 2009 (under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act), benefits were increased and the federal government offered additional, short-term subsidies to states during the recession years of 2009 and 2010.

Trends in the Usage of TANF and SNAP in Georgia

Using administrative records for SNAP and TANF, this section explores trends in the usage of these two programs. In particular, monthly records from the Georgia Department of Human Services (GDHS) for the period covering January 2000 through December 2013, or 168 months, for participants in the SNAP and TANF programs are used. The unit of observation in these two datasets is an assistance unit (AU).¹ Two types of AUs exist in these two datasets: those AUs in which there is at least one adult member, and AUs in which there are children-only members.

While there are published reports showing the trends in the total number of TANF and SNAP participants, administrative data allows a breakdown of trends into changes in the rate of retention and the rate of new participants. In addition, by merging these two datasets using a unique identifier for the primary member of the AU, a joint enrollment dataset of AUs that are in both programs was created. By necessity, the unit of observation in the joint enrollment dataset is an individual enrollee.² There are approximately 2.3 million distinct AUs in the SNAP dataset; about 0.298 million AUs in the TANF dataset; and 0.253 million AUs in the joint enrollment dataset.

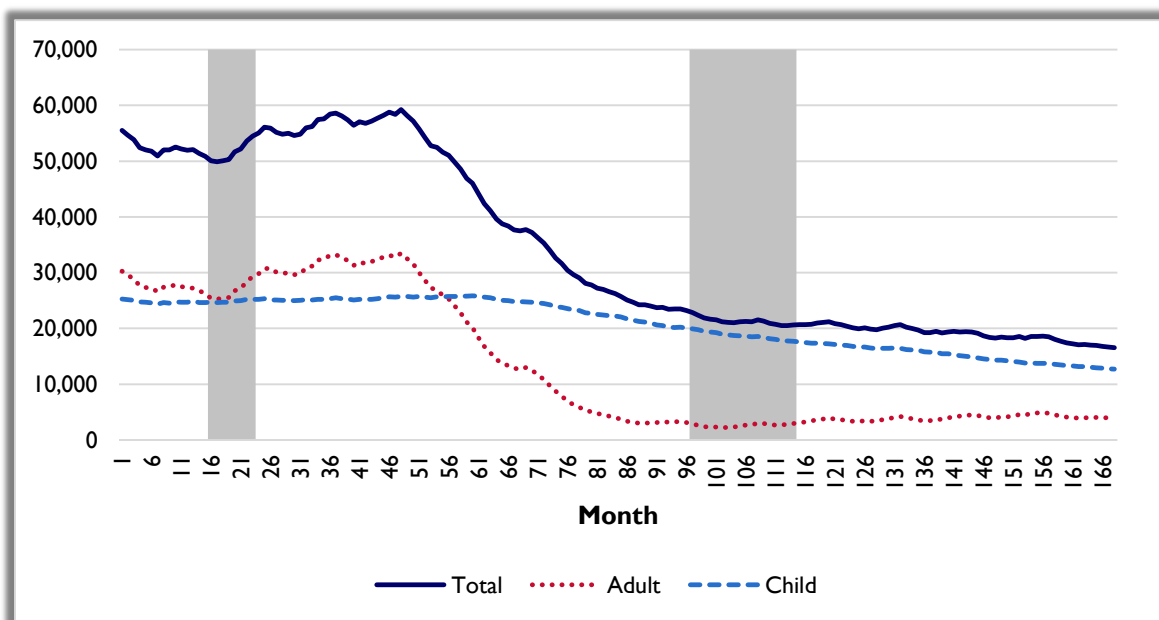
TANF TRENDS

Figures 1–4 illustrate trends in the number of AUs enrolled in TANF by month. The horizontal axis represents months from January 2000 (month 1) through December 2013 (month 168). The gray bars indicate the two recessions, as reported by the National Bureau of Economic Research, which occurred during the sample period.

Figure 1 shows the number of AUs enrolled in TANF by month for the sample period of 168 months. Three separate series are reported in Figure 1. The series labeled “Adults” are the number of AUs with at least one adult member; the series labeled “Child” are the number of AUs with children-only members (that is, no adult members); and the series labeled “Total” includes both adult and children-only AUs.

¹ In the SNAP and TANF datasets, the unit of observation is an assistance unit (AU), typically representing a household. The datasets contain a variable indicating, for each month, whether the AU is enrolled. For a given month, enrollment is observed by the dated receipt from a transferred benefit payment to the AU. For each month, there is a binary variable indicating whether an adult is enrolled in the AU or the AU consists only of children. Note that the particular time limits that apply to adults on TANF do not apply to children.

² We are unable to match AUs in the SNAP and TANF datasets. To illustrate the difficulty of matching AUs in the two programs consider the following scenario. Suppose there is a TANF AU consisting of three individuals. These three individuals may not form a SNAP AU. In fact, they may be members of three different AUs for purposes of SNAP. Due to this feature of the data, we merged the SNAP and TANF datasets using the unique identifiers provided; therefore, the unit of observation is the individual and not an AU.

Figure 1: TANF Monthly Enrollment, 2000-2013

Source: Georgia Department of Labor administrative data for SNAP and TANF as compiled by the authors.

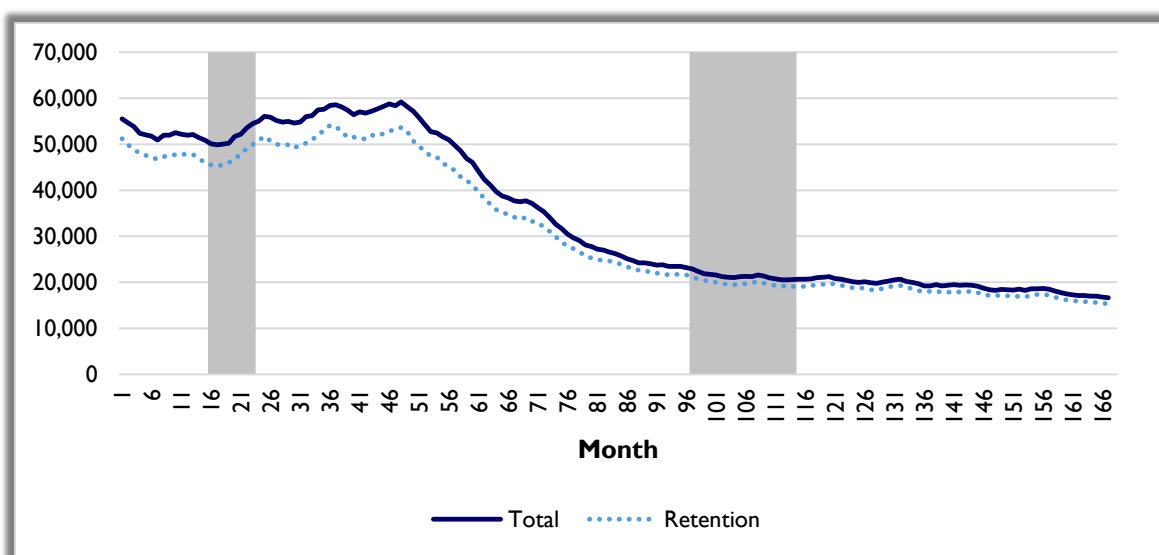
For the first year and a half of the sample period (months 1 through 18 in Figure 1), the total number of AUs enrolled in TANF (henceforth enrollment) is generally decreasing, although the decrease in enrollment among children-only AUs is very slight. Total enrollment begins to increase several months after the beginning of the 2001 recession and continues to increase until the early part of 2004 (month 51). Total enrollment decreases almost continuously thereafter, at first very rapidly and then more slowly throughout the Great Recession, which corresponds to periods 96 through 115. Since January 2009 (month 109), there has been a slight increase in the number of AUs with an adult member but a continuing decline in total and children-only enrollment. Beginning in mid-2003 (month 42), the number of children-only AUs begins to surpass the number of adult AUs.

According to Loprest (2012), the patterns evident in Figure 1 are generally consistent with national trends, although Georgia's percentage decrease in total TANF enrollment is larger than the decrease in the national average. Georgia experienced a decrease in enrollment of 80.6 percent during this period, which is the fourth largest decrease in TANF enrollment among the states. According to Blank (2002), Grogger and Karoly (2005), and Bitler and Hoynes (2010), several factors account for the national decline in TANF enrollment, including strong economic growth during this period, the EITC reforms in 1993, and the substitution of TANF for AFDC in 1996. TANF includes time limits on benefits and work requirements, usually after 24 months of enrollment, which contributed to the decline in TANF enrollments. State policies also affect TANF enrollment. For example, according to the U.S. General Accountability Office (2011), many states moved some TANF cases to "solely state-funded" programs.

The patterns in Figure 1 are the result of two processes: the number of beneficiaries retained from previous months (i.e., retention) and the number of new enrollees. Figures 2 – 5 describe these two processes. Figure 2 focuses on TANF retention. This figure shows two series: total enrollment by month and the number of beneficiaries retained by month. The closer the two series are to one another in a

given month, the greater the rate of retention in that month.³ The retention rate is about 2 percentage points greater in the latter years as compared to the first four years, about 93.1 percent compared to 90.9 percent, respectively. This is the case for both adult and children-only AUs. The average month-to-month retention rate over the sample period is 92.5 percent. This pattern is virtually the same for adults and those with children-only AUs.

Figure 2: Total Monthly TANF Retention, 2000-2013

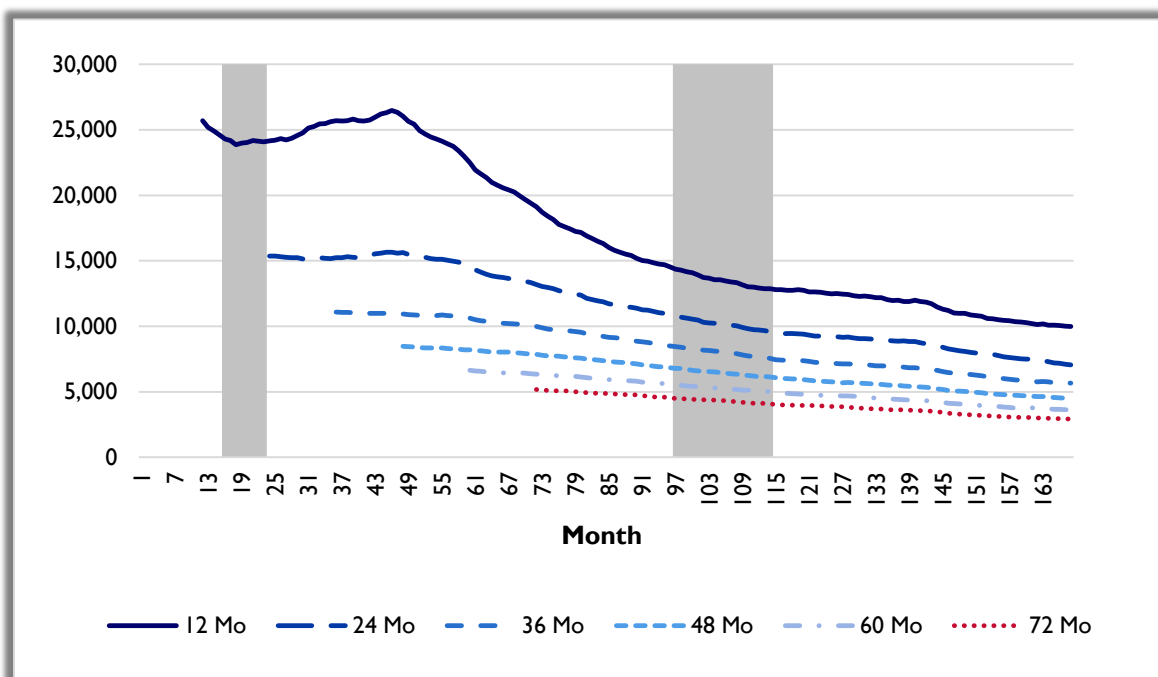


Source: Georgia Department of Labor administrative data for SNAP and TANF as compiled by the authors.

Figure 3 is an alternative measure of retention. It shows, for a given month, the number of enrollees who have been continuously enrolled in TANF for a given number of months. For example, consider the top line (i.e., the solid line) in Figure 3. For a given month, the height of the line reflects the total enrollment in that month for those who have been enrolled for at least the previous 11 months, that is, for one year. Since enrollees before January 2000 are not included, it is not possible to determine enrollment prior to December 2000; therefore, the top line starts on December 2000. The other lines in Figure 3 represent longer minimum durations, and thus the lines start on more recent dates. The five lines reflect durations of at least one year (12 months) to at least six years (72 months).

³ The retention rate for a given month is the ratio of TANF enrollees who were in the program in the prior month and total enrollment in the given month.

Figure 3: Consecutive Total TANF Enrollment by Year, 2000-2013



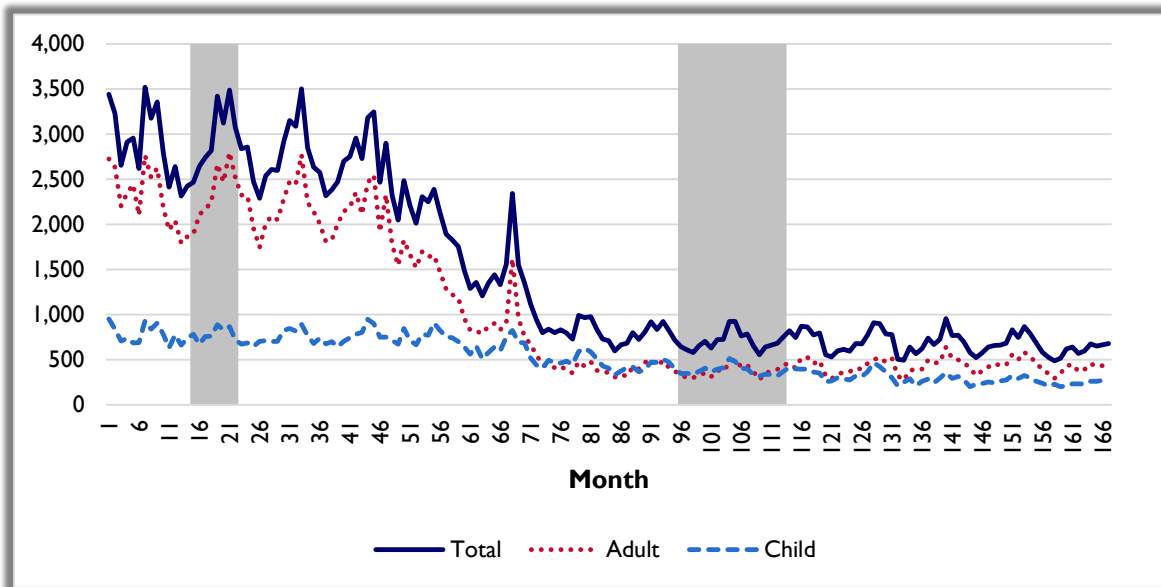
Source: Georgia Department of Labor administrative data for SNAP and TANF as compiled by the authors.

While 40.6 percent of the total TANF AUs in 2013 have been enrolled for less than 12 months, 4,562, or 26.9 percent, of the AUs have been in the program for at least four years, and 2,963, or 17.5 percent, have been in the program for at least six years. In short, a substantial percentage of total TANF enrollments have rather long durations. These numbers are consistent with national duration patterns. Loprest (2012) reports that 41 percent of fiscal year 2009 cases have been on TANF for less than a year, and only 12 percent have cumulative durations of more than four years.

A very small percentage of currently enrolled adult AUs have durations of more than 12 months. And even in the middle years, there are very few adult AUs with durations exceeding two years. This pattern is consistent with the work requirement after 24 months of enrollment. Since TANF benefits are phased-out dollar for dollar of earnings, it makes sense for individuals to discontinue TANF enrollment when they begin working. The average length of an uninterrupted spell on TANF over the sample period is 6.3 months for AUs with at least one adult and 19.1 for children-only AUs. In contrast, the average number of months on TANF over the sample period, including multiple spells, is 11.1 for adults and 27.8 for children-only AUs. The average number of spells is 1.76 for adult cases and 1.45 for children-only cases during the sample period.

Figure 4 reports new TANF enrollees by month. For each month, the height of the series represents the number of AUs that were not enrolled in any previous month of the sample period, so these AUs are “new” to the TANF program. The number of new AUs generally declines over the first half of the sample period. According to Loprest (2012), this pattern is generally consistent with the decrease in the national take-up rate for TANF.

Figure 4: Unique Monthly TANF Enrollment, 2000-2013



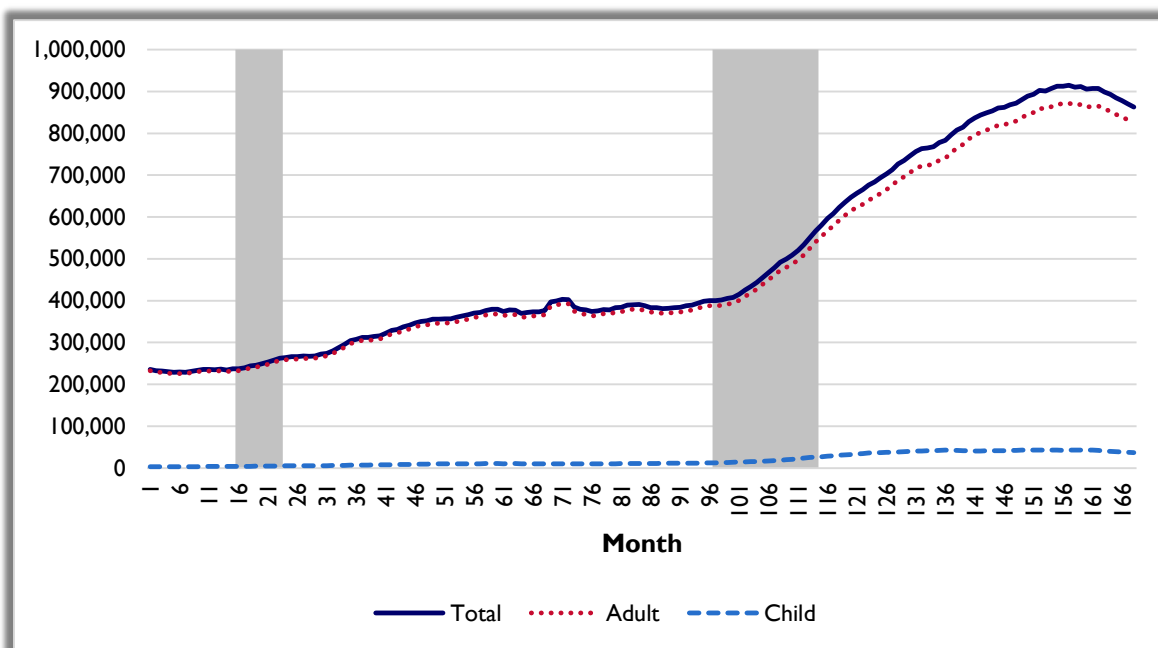
Source: Georgia Department of Labor administrative data for SNAP and TANF as compiled by the authors.

The patterns evident in these two processes – the declines in new adult AUs and in the retention rate among adult AUs – explain the sharp decline in the total number of adult AUs that begins in July 2003 (Figure 1).

SNAP TRENDS

Figures 5–8 describe the trends in SNAP participation in Georgia during the period 2000 through 2013. In contrast to total TANF enrollment, which decreases over the sample period, total SNAP enrollment increases over this period.

Figure 5 shows the trends in total monthly SNAP enrollment, as well as enrollment by adult AUs and children-only AUs. Total SNAP enrollment increases nearly continuously from the beginning of our sample period. Starting with the onset of the Great Recession (month 97), there is a sharp increase in the total number of AUs enrolled in SNAP. At the end of 2012, however, the total number of AUs begins to decline. The patterns in Figure 5 are similar to those for the United States, although the rate of increase since 2007 has been greater in Georgia than in the average state. Between 2007 and 2011, the increase in total monthly SNAP enrollment in Georgia was 89.3 percent, which is larger than the 70 percent increase for the nation (Congressional Budget Office 2012).

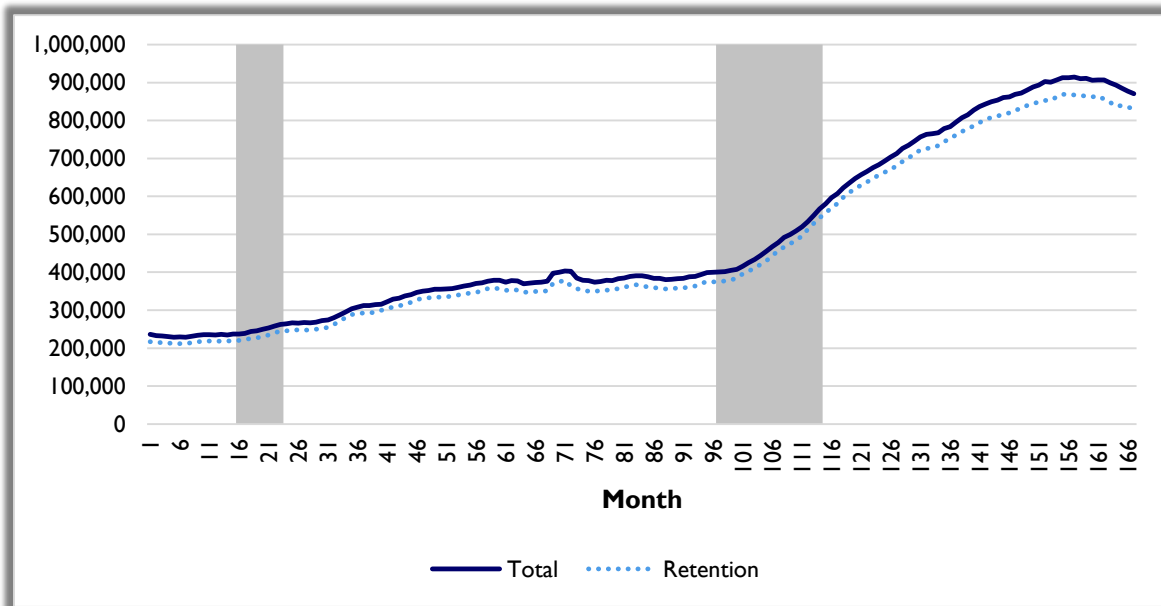
Figure 5: SNAP Monthly Enrollment, 2000-2013

Source: Georgia Department of Labor administrative data for SNAP and TANF as compiled by the authors.

The growth in SNAP enrollment since 2007 is largely attributed to the economic downturn experienced during the Great Recession. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that nationally SNAP participation increases by an average of 2 to 3 million people for each percentage point increase in the unemployment rate (Hanson and Oliveira 2012). There is also an increase in the SNAP take-up rate during this period from 54 percent in 2001 to 79 percent in 2013 (Eslami et al. 2012).⁴ Ziliak (2013) finds that the 13.6 percent increase in SNAP benefits as part of ARRA (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) increased national participation by an estimated 12.2 percent. In addition, administrative changes, such as simplified reporting requirements increased SNAP participation.

As with TANF, two processes explain the patterns in SNAP enrollment evident in Figure 5, specifically the rates of retention and new enrollees. Figure 6 examines SNAP retention. It shows total monthly enrollment and the number of enrolled AUs in a given month who were also enrolled in the prior month. Until the beginning of 2009 (month 109), the number of retained AUs is very close to total SNAP enrollment. After 2009, the absolute difference between the two series increases, although the retention rate actually decreases very slightly. The average month-to-month retention rate is 94.2 percent over the period 2000 through 2009, and 94.5 percent over the period 2010 through 2013.

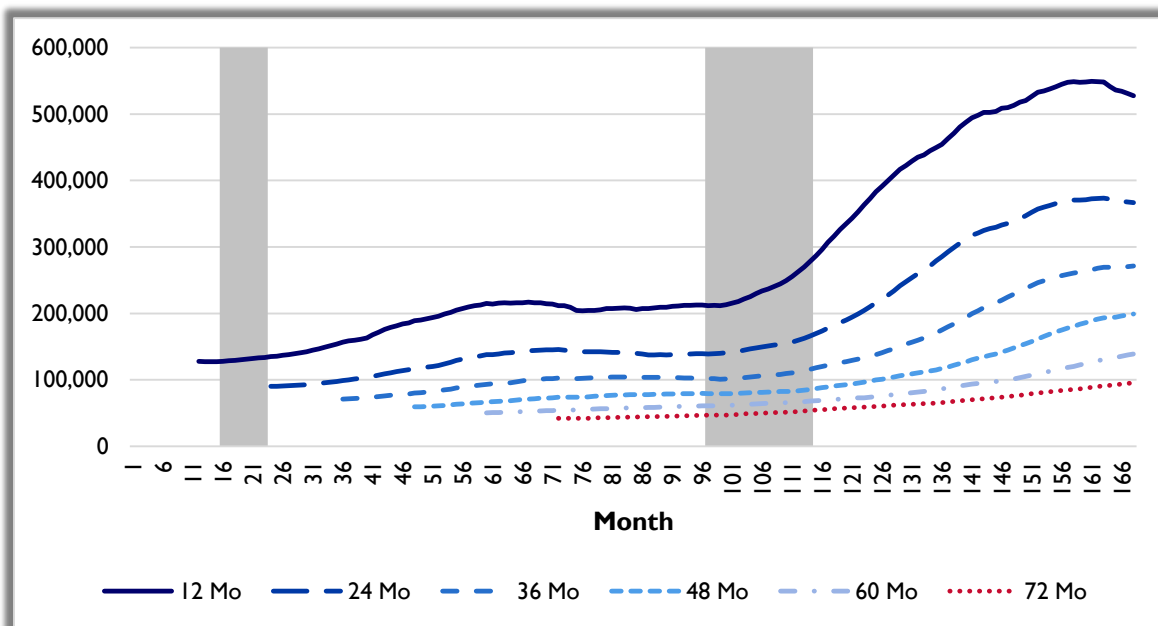
⁴ See Ganong and Liebman (2013) and Ziliak (2013) for a more detailed discussion of the national trends in SNAP enrollment.

Figure 6: Total Monthly SNAP Retention, 2000-2013

Source: Georgia Department of Labor administrative data for SNAP and TANF as compiled by the authors.

Figure 7 shows the number of total AUs enrolled in SNAP who have been continuously enrolled for a given number of months. The five lines in Figure 7 reflect durations of at least one year (12 months) to at least six years (72 months). In contrast to the average duration for TANF enrollment (Figure 3), the duration for SNAP participants is longer. In December 2008, 49.2 percent of enrollees had been on SNAP for at least 12 months; whereas, in December 2013, it is 60.6 percent. There is also an increase in the number of AUs for all SNAP durations, yet there is a decrease for each TANF duration. For example, the proportion of total SNAP enrollees on the program for at least three years increases from 21.9 percent to 30.3 percent over this period. The average length of a spell on SNAP over this period is 12.0 months for adult AUs and 10.1 months for children-only AUs, while the average total time an AU of either type spends on SNAP is 26.4 months over the sample period, 26.7 months for adult AUs, and 18.6 months for children-only AUs. The average number of spells for adult cases is 2.2 and 1.8 for children-only cases.

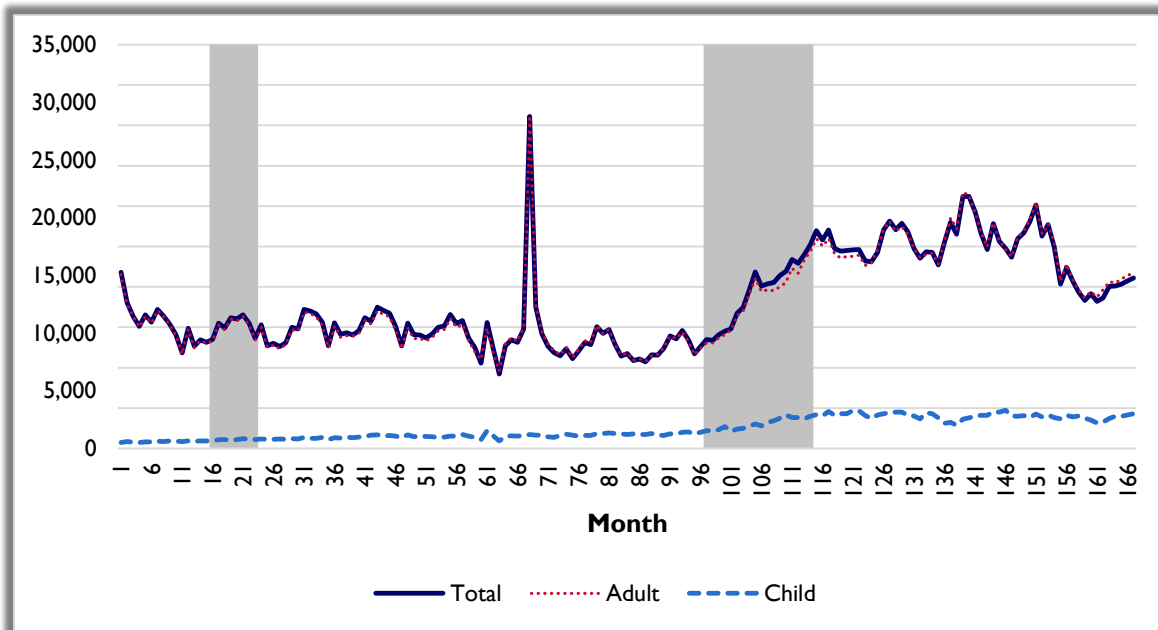
Figure 7: Consecutive Total SNAP Enrollment by Year, 2000-2013



Source: Georgia Department of Labor administrative data for SNAP and TANF as compiled by the authors.

Figure 8 shows new SNAP enrollees by month. For each month, the number represents AUs who were not enrolled in any previous month during our sample period. The number of new AUs is generally between 9,000 and 11,000 per month until month 95 (November 2007) but with a slight downward trend. However, it is unclear why there is an unusual spike in September 2005, although a data error is suspected. Beginning in month 96 (December 2007), i.e., just before the onset of the Great Recession, new enrollments begin to increase, reaching a peak of about 22,000 in August 2011. The patterns for adult and children-only AUs are very similar; although, the number of new children-only cases is much smaller than for that of adults.

Figure 8: Unique Monthly SNAP Enrollment, 2000-2013



Source: Georgia Department of Labor administrative data for SNAP and TANF as compiled by the authors.

Total SNAP enrollment (in terms of AUs) in January 2008 was 400,444. During 2007, the number of new enrollees was 103,067, which is a 26.6 percent increase in total enrollment over January 2006. Thus, 90,559 AUs or 28.6 percent dropped out of SNAP during 2007. Doing the same calculations for January 2012, there is a 28.6 percent increase in new AUs relative to the previous January. During 2011, 122,687 SNAP participants dropped out of the program, which is 16.0 percent of January 2011 enrollment. In sum, there is a small increase in the rate of new enrollees and a large decrease in the dropout rate over the sample period. Thus, it appears that the growth in total enrollment over the sample is due to an increase in retention rather than an increase in the growth in new enrollments.

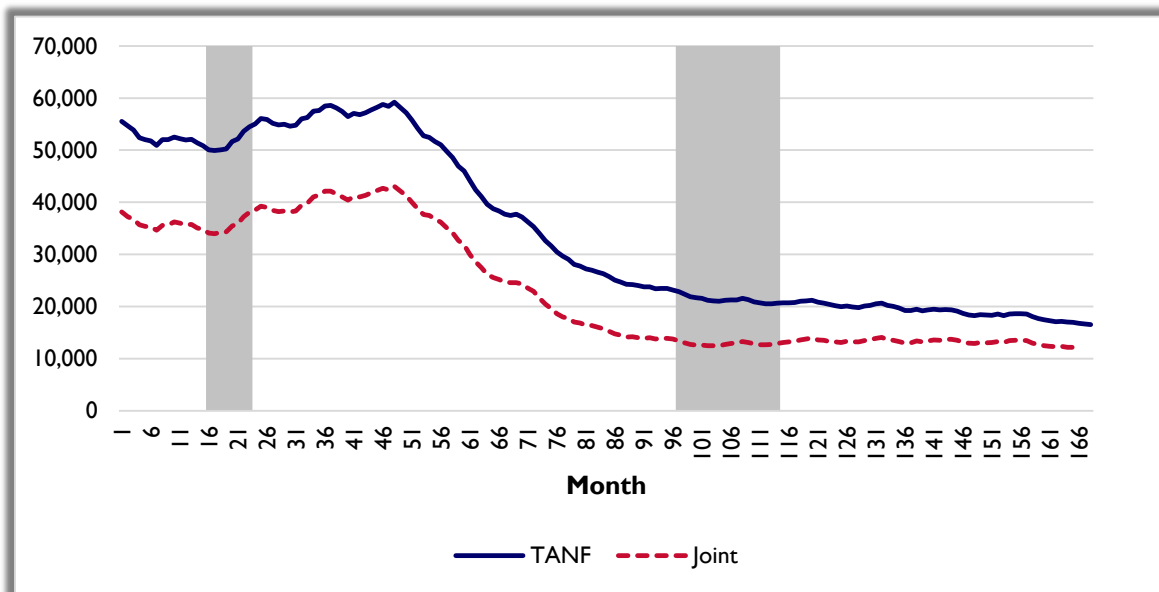
JOINT ENROLLMENT

To observe monthly joint enrollment, individuals were matched across programs using the unique identifier of the primary individual in AUs in a given month. Matching AUs using the unique identifier of the primary individual poses some practical problems since, for strategic reasons, administrative processes, or otherwise, individuals enrolled in both programs may not occupy the same position in the AU in each program. For instance, suppose that a family is enrolled in both programs but no single member of the AU is the primary individual in the case for either program. Alternatively, suppose that two individuals are enrolled together in the same AU in TANF but are enrolled in separate AUs in SNAP. There are a number of such issues in the data which pose challenges in merging to the two datasets.

Although these problematic cases are present in the data, they make up less than 3 percent of joint enrollment AUs; therefore, these issues do not create severe problems in terms of the reliability of the results obtained with the joint enrollment dataset. With this being said, the data are limited in that retention, continuous enrollment, and unique enrollment cannot be reliably tracked. Since primary individuals, not AUs, are matched between programs, retention and continuous enrollment will be significantly overestimated and unique enrollment will be underestimated.

Figure 9 shows the trends in total joint enrollment in both SNAP and TANF, along with the enrollment in just TANF (which is the same as shown in Figure 1). As is evident in Figure 9, the joint enrollment series tracks the TANF only series rather well, although the joint enrollment series is understandably smaller. This simply reflects the fact that not all AUs enrolled in TANF are simultaneously enrolled in SNAP. Between 2000 and 2004, joint enrollments vary between 35,000 and 40,000; thereafter, joint enrollments decline rapidly to around 12,000 in 2008, after which, the joint enrollment series remains relatively stable.

Figure 9: Joint Enrollment in SNAP and TANF, 2000-2013



Source: Georgia Department of Labor administrative data for SNAP and TANF as compiled by the authors.

The average length of a spell for AUs enrolled in both SNAP and TANF over our sample period is 16.8 months. In contrast, the average spell for AUs enrolled in either SNAP or TANF is 34.2 months. The average time an AU spends consecutively enrolled in both programs is 8.3 months, and for AUs consecutively enrolled in either program, the average spell is 13.8 months. It follows that the average number of spells for AUs enrolled in one or the other of the two programs but not both is greater than the average number of spells for AUs that are enrolled in both programs. More specifically, the average number of spells for joint enrollment is 2.0; whereas, the average number of spells for those enrolled in one or the other but not both programs is 2.5 spells. Notice that the numbers representing joint enrollment closely track TANF enrollment. This is to be expected since a much greater percentage of TANF beneficiaries are enrolled in both programs than the percentage of SNAP beneficiaries enrolled in both programs. In particular, monthly joint enrollment is between 60 and 70 percent of total TANF enrollment but is only between 2 and 15 percent of SNAP's total enrollment.

Summary

This descriptive report provides an overview of the long-run trends in SNAP and TANF participation in Georgia. As demonstrated with population-based administrative data, TANF cases in Georgia have fallen substantially over the 14-year period examined here. Most of the fall-off is due to the decline in adult cases – child cases remain relatively stable beginning in the mid-2000s. SNAP enrollment appears to be more responsive to prevailing economic conditions than TANF. More specifically, SNAP enrollment increased during the two recession periods before falling off. Moreover, joint enrollment closely tracks the trend in TANF enrollment.

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