

# ASPE RESEARCH BRIEF

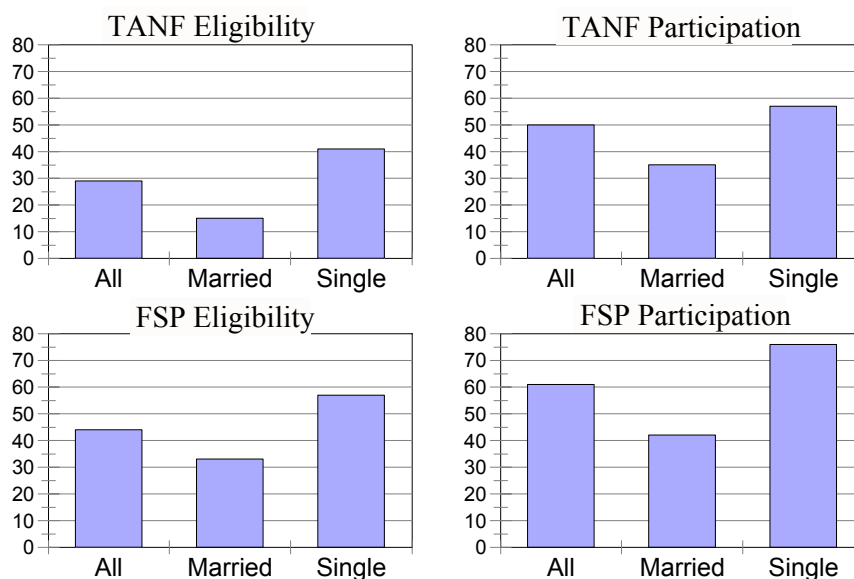
OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION  
OFFICE OF HUMAN SERVICES POLICY - U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

## **PUBLIC ASSISTANCE USE AMONG TWO-PARENT FAMILIES: An Analysis of TANF and Food Stamp Program Eligibility and Participation**

States increasingly are focusing on the TANF goals relating to promoting and supporting healthy marriage. To understand how state policies may affect marriage, it is useful to first examine the extent to which existing public assistance programs provide benefits to both married-parent and single-parent families. Specifically, this recent study by Mathematica Policy Research examines patterns of married- and single-parent families' eligibility and participation in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and the Food Stamp Program (FSP). Results are based on data from the 2001 Current Population Survey as well as microsimulation results from the TRIM3 and MATH models. Four key findings of the study are described below, and a full copy of the report can be accessed at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/05/2parent-part/>.

**Low-income married-parent families are less likely than single-parent families to be eligible for public assistance programs, and once eligible, are less likely to participate.**

This chart shows that among families under 200 percent of poverty, married-parent families have lower eligibility rates in both TANF and FSP, as one might expect. More notable is that even among those eligible, participation rates for married-parent families also are lower.



### **FSP and TANF caseloads have declined over time, for married- and single-parent families.**

Due in part to sweeping welfare reforms and a strong economy, TANF caseloads fell by just over half between 1996 and 2000, and FSP caseloads by over one-third. TANF declines were similar among both single and married parents, with FSP declines more prevalent among married parents. Caseload declines reflect a combination of reductions in the number of low-income families, the rate at which those families are eligible and the rate at which eligible families participate. For example, the first row of the table below shows that the TANF caseload for married parents fell by 276 thousand families--just over half.

Nearly all of this decrease (92 percent) was due to a drop in participation rates among eligible married-parent families. A decrease in the number of low-income married-parent families also was a factor, explaining 20 percent of the caseload decline. Eligibility rates among low-income married parents actually increased over the period, hence explaining –12 percent of the caseload decline (i.e. this would have caused caseloads to rise in absence of any other changes.) The relative importance of these factors differed for married- and single-parent families.

	<u>Caseload (1000s)</u>		<u>Change</u> '96-'00	<u>Percent of Decline Due to Change in:</u>		
	1996	2000		<u># of Low</u> <u>Income</u>	<u>Eligibility</u> <u>Rate</u>	<u>Participation</u> <u>Rate</u>
TANF						
Married Parent	543	267	-276	20%	-12%	92%
Single Parent	2,507	1,141	-1,366	29%	25%	46%
FSP						
Married Parent	1,452	723	-729	20%	13%	67%
Single Parent	3,774	2,461	-1,313	53%	24%	23%

### **Differences between married- and single-parent family participation rates persisted even within demographic and economic subgroups.**

Not surprisingly, the difference in eligibility rates between low-income married and single parents was largely explained by families’ financial situations—even among low-income families, married parents tend to have higher incomes. Demographics like family size and citizenship status also played a role. However, accounting for the gap in participation rates between married and single parents proved more difficult. Even when controlling for a wide variety of family demographic and economic characteristics, as well as state policy variables and conditions, most of the gap between family types remained. Eligible married parents were significantly less likely to participate in TANF or FSP compared to eligible single parents, even when faced with similar situations. While some of this difference may be partially explained by state policy differences that could not be captured in the model,<sup>1</sup> the results suggest that these family types make fundamentally different decisions about public assistance.

### **Cohabiting family outcomes generally fell between those for single and married parents.**

In addition to examining married- and single-parent families, the report examined eligibility and participation rates for cohabiting families. Cohabiting parents in the sample tended to be younger and more poorly educated than their married and single counterparts. While their TANF and FSP outcomes generally fell between those for single- and married-parent families, it is interesting to note that they more closely resembled single parents with respect to TANF participation and married parents with respect to FSP participation.

---

<sup>1</sup> While the model captured many state policy effects, it was unable to include program rules that treat single and two-parent families differently, yet do not vary across states (such as required work hours for single vs. married parents), because there was insufficient variation to estimate their effects. The model also could not capture any undocumented differences in how states may implement policies for single and married parents.