

**Setting the Baseline:**  
**Patterns of Recidivism in Maryland under AFDC**

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## **Executive Summary**

The introduction of lifetime limits on adults' receipt of cash assistance under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 requires that policy-makers and program managers pay close attention to how long their customers spend receiving welfare. To date, most discussion on this topic has focused on long-term welfare users, those at risk of reaching the five year lifetime limit in one, long continuous spell. Much less attention has been paid to the much larger group of clients who may hit the 60 month time limit by accumulating time on welfare through multiple spells of cash assistance receipt interspersed with periods of non-receipt.

The present report draws on a wealth of longitudinal data developed through the decades-long policy research partnership between the School of Social Work, University of Maryland and the Family Investment Administration, Maryland Department of Human Resources, to provide policy-makers with historical, empirical data on this larger issue of welfare dynamics. The report is the first in a new, *Setting the Baseline* series. Each report in the series will focus on a separate topic or theme and, using pre-reform AFDC data, will provide our state with empirical starting points or baselines against which post-reform findings (TANF outcomes) can be assessed.

Today's report focuses on the critical question of recidivism or returns to the welfare rolls. It describes pre-reform recidivism patterns in Maryland over a nine year period, identifies recidivism risk factors and discusses policy implications. The analysis is based on data for 453 women who began receiving welfare for the first time in their own names in 1987 and who, over the next nine years, exited AFDC at least once and remained off welfare for 30 days or more. Two data sources are used. The first is an

extensive personal interview conducted with each participant within a few months of her initial receipt of AFDC. The second is monthly AFDC receipt data obtained from state data systems for a nine year period from the participants' first AFDC check (1987) to May, 1996.

Together these data permit us to describe the extent and nature of recidivism (returns to welfare after an exit lasting at least 30 days) for a large, representative statewide sample and to examine characteristics that differentiate recidivists from non-recidivists. Key findings that may have practical utility for both program design and individual client assessment in the new time-limited welfare world are several.

### **1. Recidivism is not uncommon.**

The majority (53%) of first-time recipients who exited welfare did not return to the rolls, but a large proportion (47%) did. This suggests that, for program managers, the glass is both half-full and half-empty. To the extent that trends observed under AFDC continue to prevail under TANF/TCA, the majority of welfare exits we are witnessing today may, indeed, be long-lasting ones. At the same time, the results indicate that our work is not done and success has not necessarily been achieved just because a client's cash assistance case closes; nearly as many customers (47%) may return to welfare for a second spell as may not (53%).

This finding speaks particularly to the importance of such DHR initiatives as Project Retain and recent changes to the state's Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) program, but also to our need to devote as much time and resources to designing post-exit support services as we have to redesigning our cash assistance program. In addition, another useful strategy may be to consider adding a "child support last"

component to complement the "child support first" strategy already in place. That is, as families leave cash assistance, particularly as families leave welfare for work, their ability to remain off the rolls may be enhanced by an intense examination of their child support case status and, if necessary, increased efforts to collect court-ordered support.

**2. Recidivism tends to happen fairly quickly; if clients can stay off the rolls for three years, they are unlikely to return.**

About one in three recidivists comes back on welfare within six months of her first exit. About half of those who come back will do so within the first year; 36 months post-exit, almost all of those who return will have done so (85.4%). The implication here is that Maryland is on the right track in current efforts to devise and make post-exit support services available, particularly services related to job retention. However, our data suggest that, to be maximally effective in view of time limits, the state may need to make such services available over an extended period of time, perhaps as long as three years.

**3. Preventing recidivism is crucial to the success of welfare reform.**

Expectedly, recidivists in our sample accumulated more time on welfare in the nine year study period than did non-recidivists, but the magnitude of the difference is surprisingly large; recidivists, on average, had more than twice as much time on welfare (53.1 months) than non-recidivists (24.0 months). Notably, the largest group of recidivists (40.4%) were those who accumulated more than 60 months (five years) on welfare during the nine year period; only 11.7% of non-recidivists crossed the five year

threshold. Considering both groups together and assuming these trends hold under TANF/TCA, the data show that, absent intervention, one of every four first-time welfare recipients would cross the five year time limit in a nine year period.

**4. Some clients are at greater risk of recidivism than others; lack of work experience is one risk factor, but not the only one.**

Every family's situation is unique, but there are some factors, none of them surprising, that do appear to distinguish recidivists from non-recidivists. Women who begin to receive welfare at an early age (under 22), those who have a child before the age of 18, those with less than a high school education, those with no work experience, those who have never married, and those with a family history of welfare are at greatest risk of returning to welfare after their initial exit from cash assistance. These data suggest that, in refining assessment practices and tools, as well as in the design and targeting of post-exit support services, state and local program officials would be wise to focus not just on clients' prior work history, but also on obtaining information about these other risk factors.

**5. The length of a client's initial welfare spell, by itself, is not a useful predictor of recidivism risk.**

There are no significant differences between recidivists (21.3 months) and non-recidivists (24.0 months) in the average duration of their first welfare spell. The implication here is that, as local welfare officials certainly know, the greatest challenge we face in the new time-limited world is not getting clients off the welfare rolls, but helping them be able to remain off assistance. Recidivists and non-recidivists in our

sample all exited from their initial welfare spell and did so at about the same time, roughly two years after coming on the rolls. Yet, over a nine year period, the plurality of those who came back, the recidivists, - a little less than half the sample - accumulated more than five years of welfare receipt.

Admittedly, the recidivism risk profile and recidivism prevention strategies suggested in this paper are tentative in that they are based on longitudinal welfare dynamics data describing clients' experiences under the old AFDC program. Nonetheless, the findings outlined in this paper are an accurate description of old realities in our state and, at minimum, do provide a baseline against which recidivism patterns under TANF/TCA can be assessed. We think the findings and recommendations also do provide at least a beginning, working model that state and local policy-makers and program administrators would do well to consider as they move forward into the still uncharted waters of the out-years of welfare reform in Maryland.

## **Introduction to the *Setting the Baseline* Series**

For nearly 20 years the University of Maryland School of Social Work (SSW) has partnered with the Maryland Department of Human Resources (DHR) to conduct studies on the State's welfare and child support programs. The partnership is one of the nation's oldest and is truly collaborative in nature. Specific topics under study vary from year to year, but three commonalities tie the research program together. First, all studies are designed and conducted to provide Maryland policymakers with state-level (and often county-level) empirical data which they can use to inform policy development, program management and program monitoring and evaluation.

Second, all studies rely to some extent on the use of administrative data. The administrative data provide a great deal of information at a relatively low cost; this strategy allows the state to save more costly research methods such as surveys and interviews for gathering additional information not available in administrative data.

Finally, studies conducted through the SSW-DHR partnership are generally longitudinal, spanning as long as a decade or more. The longitudinal character of our studies allows us to address critical issues such as the true extent of lifetime welfare receipt with more extensive data than is typically available in cross-sectional research or survey designs with limited data collection points.

Numerous reports have resulted from partnership studies over the years.<sup>1</sup>

Enactment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example: Born, 1992, 1994; Born, Klayman, McLeaurin, Prince, and Walston, 1983; Born and Kunz, 1990; Born, Taylor, and Osgood-Sojourner, 1989; Caudill and Born, 1997; Kunz and Born, 1996; Orlin, Caudill, and Born, 1995; Welfare and Child Support Policy Research and Training Group, 1997a, 1997b, 1998a, 1998b.

1996 (P. L. 104 -193) and the bipartisan state-level Welfare Innovation Acts of the past few years, Maryland's implementation of its TANF program (Family Investment Program, FIP), and the resulting radical changes in public welfare programs have added new urgency and importance to the joint SSW - DHR research endeavor.

Paradoxically, welfare reform does not just require the conduct of studies to look at the effects of new program features or to examine the characteristics of new users of redesigned cash assistance programs. It also requires that we take another research look at some of the voluminous data collected under the old welfare system to try to establish pre-reform baselines in such key areas as recidivism, child welfare, and patterns of welfare use. Absent these baselines, it will be difficult if not impossible to accurately determine the true effects of welfare reform.

Because of the decades-old SSW-DHR partnership, Maryland is fortunate to have a rich body of empirical data from which these needed baselines can be constructed. Today's paper represents the first in a planned series of *Setting the Baseline* reports, each of which will focus on a separate topic or theme. Using pre-reform AFDC data, these analyses will provide our state with empirical starting points against which post-reform findings (TANF outcomes) can be assessed. Today's *Setting the Baseline* paper focuses on the critical question of recidivism or returns to the welfare rolls. Specifically, pre-reform recidivism patterns in Maryland are described over a nine year period, risk factors are identified, and policy implications are discussed.

## **Introduction**

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 abolished the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program and established in its place the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program. One of PRWORA's most radically different features is the five-year cumulative lifetime limit on adults' receipt of federally-subsidized cash assistance. In contrast to the AFDC program which had no specified limit on the length of time a person could receive benefits, TANF limits cash assistance to a five-year period during the course of an adult recipient's lifetime. Once the total length of time on welfare crosses this five year threshold, the adult is no longer eligible to receive federally funded cash assistance, though they may continue to receive other benefits such as Food Stamps or Medical Assistance.<sup>1</sup>

In the short term, people who may hit the time limit first by receiving TANF continuously for the first five years of reform are of the greatest concern. However, over time, another probably considerably larger group of adults are also likely to reach the time limit by accumulating 60 months of cash assistance receipt via separate spells of welfare interspersed with periods of being off the welfare rolls.

The majority of studies investigating welfare dynamics under the AFDC system have addressed the factors which lead people to use AFDC and other public assistance programs (e.g., Food Stamps), to have long or short spells on welfare, and to leave the welfare rolls. Unfortunately, many of these studies may be of limited use under TANF.

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<sup>1</sup>States may continue to provide cash assistance beyond the five year mark, but would have to use state, not TANF, funds to do so. States are also free, under TANF, to set limits less than the five year federal maximum. At the end of the time limit Maryland will continue to fund children with vouchers.

Analyses of single spells and total time on welfare have generally ignored breaks in receipt as well as why these breaks occur and how long they last, thus drawing an incomplete picture of welfare dynamics. In addition, for many years, researchers neglected to address welfare recidivism, defined as a return to the welfare rolls after a previous exit. Only within the last decade and a half has recidivism been routinely addressed in the welfare literature (see, for example, Blank and Ruggles 1994 as cited by Cao 1996; Brandon, 1995; Cao 1996; Ellwood 1986; Weeks 1991).

While total time and single spell analyses are helpful for identifying the first group of those who will reach the time limit (i.e. the five-years-in-five-years cohort), they are of limited use in determining the second risk group, those who will exit TANF and return for subsequent spells over a period of years. Without a specified time limit on welfare receipt, distinguishing between these two quite different groups of long term welfare users was not of prime interest to researchers, policymakers, and program managers. That is, the way in which families accumulated time (e.g., one long spell vs. multiple shorter spells) was not generally of concern.

Today not only is the total time a family receives cash assistance relevant but how families accumulate this time is also pertinent. Program managers must now consider the long-term future of their customers. If a family leaves cash assistance but then returns they will be at greater risk of reaching the time limit. If client characteristics associated with an increased risk of recidivism can be identified, program managers can gear post-TCA support services to those clients.

In order to fill this critical information gap for Maryland welfare policy-makers, this study examines the characteristics that have distinguished recidivists and non-

recidivists in Maryland under AFDC and may differentiate between recidivists and non-recidivists in Maryland under TANF. Drawing on a rich data set including both data from an interview of first-time AFDC recipients and administrative data collected over a nine year study period, patterns of recidivism are also explored. Before presenting the methods and results of the present analysis of factors associated with an increased risk of recidivism, the next chapter presents a summary of the empirical literature on welfare dynamics and recidivism.

## **Background**

Previous research has focused on identifying characteristics which predict long-term welfare use. In general, these studies (for example, Bane & Ellwood, 1995), indicate that the critical variables in predicting long-term welfare usage are education, marital status, work experience, race, and disability status.

Ellwood's 1986 study using data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) was the first major investigation to focus on welfare recidivism. Ellwood reported that more than 40% of welfare recipients had multiple spells of AFDC receipt. Over a 15-year period, of those who returned, 11% did so within 12 months of exiting. He reported that low levels of education and work experience along with never having married, large numbers of children, and disabilities make it more likely that a person would return to welfare after leaving the rolls.

However, Ellwood's study used annual spells, counting a year of welfare receipt as any year in which \$250 of AFDC benefits were received. The use of annual data did not allow investigation into breaks in receipt, or returns to the rolls during the course of the year. Therefore, periods of receipt may have been overestimated, and the occurrence of recidivism underestimated. Other researchers (Cao, 1996; Greenberg 1993) using monthly data have found greater recidivism rates than those originally reported by Ellwood. Greenberg, in his survey of state-level data collected in Minnesota, Washington, California, and Vermont found the recidivism rate to be approximately 50% in California over the three year study period and 47% in Washington over a 5 year period. Recidivism rates for Minnesota and Vermont were not provided due to differences in methodology and data collection.

In a study which more closely parallels the current analyses, Cao (1996) used monthly data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY). He found that the first-time AFDC recipients in his sample had a mean age of about 22 years, about 70% of the sample had never been married, and 37% had given birth to their first child while still a teenager. He also found that, on average, they had 11 years of education and that 10% were disabled.

Cao's study, which is unique in the recidivism literature in that it focuses on first-time AFDC recipients, also shows that the majority had more than one spell over a 14 year period. About 58% of those who exited (an exit in Cao's study is defined as a break in welfare receipt lasting more than one month) returned to the welfare rolls at least once. About 47% of the recidivists had two spells on welfare, and 20% had three spells. The average length of first spell was found to be about 20 months with a time between first and second spells of approximately 20 months.

Previous studies by the University of Maryland School of Social Work have shown that client characteristics are useful in differentiating between clients likely to use welfare for a short period of time and those who are likely to reach the new five-year time limit (see for example, Caudill and Born, 1997). However, previous studies concentrated on the total time a family spends receiving welfare during a certain period. The present study goes beyond these analyses by considering how families accumulate time on the welfare rolls. The purpose of this report is to expand the welfare dynamics literature, describe the historical patterns of welfare recidivism in Maryland and to determine whether there are characteristics which differentiate between recipients who use the welfare system once and those who return to welfare after exiting. The goal of

the study is to see if these data yield information which has practical implications for front-line practice in the new world of welfare. In particular, our hope is to provide information that agencies can use as they begin to tackle a key new challenge brought by welfare reform: providing post-welfare job retention and other services to former cash assistance recipients.

## Methodology

### Sample

In early 1987, the University of Maryland in partnership with the Maryland Department of Human Resources began a study of the characteristics of individuals receiving AFDC in Maryland for the first time in their own names. The study involved lengthy face-to-face interviews with 663 first-time AFDC recipients; the majority of these payees (n=580 or 87%) were the mothers of children for whom welfare support was being provided. Because single parents rather than other caretaker relatives historically have comprised the large majority of welfare household heads (or payees), this group has been and remains of primary concern to policy-makers. For this reason only the 580 first-time AFDC mothers are considered in the present analysis.

Monthly AFDC receipt data is complete for 493 (or 85%) of the first-time AFDC mothers from the time they received their first check in 1987 to May 1996.<sup>2</sup> For the present analysis of welfare spells and recidivism, 40 of the 493 women are excluded because they received AFDC during the entire study period and were therefore not at risk of experiencing a second welfare spell.<sup>3</sup> Thus, our analysis is based on a sample of 453 female, first-time welfare recipients who began receiving AFDC for the first time in their own names between February and December of 1987. This sample is a subset of 663 first-time recipients who entered in 1987.

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<sup>2</sup> The 127 excluded from the analysis were compared to the 453 included cases and were found not to differ significantly on key demographic variables.

<sup>3</sup> The 40 women who remained on welfare during the entire nine year study period will be the subject of a separate paper.

## **Data Sources**

The data presented in this report were collected from two sources. The first was a lengthy face-to-face interview with the participants within a few months of their first AFDC receipt. The interview covered a wide range of topics including demographics, family background information, employment experiences, aspirations and attitudes, educational levels, ratings of physical and mental health and more.

Additional data were collected from DHR's automated systems on the participants' receipt of AFDC from their first check in 1987 through May 1996. The Automated Information Management System (AIMS)/Automated Master File (AMF) and the Client Information System (CIS)/Client Automated Resource and Eligibility System (CARES) contain data concerning public assistance and social service utilization, as well as client characteristics at the individual and case levels. Use of these automated systems allows us to follow participants using original case-numbers and other identifying information so that AFDC receipt could be tracked even if they moved to another region of the state.<sup>4</sup>

These two sources of data (the interview and the administrative data) allow us to examine both quantitative data such as demographics, the length of the first welfare spell and the total time on welfare as well as more qualitative data such as the participant's perception of barriers to work and individual ratings of health.

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<sup>4</sup>The vast majority of participants (n = 415 or 91.6%) received welfare in only one jurisdiction throughout the study period.

## Analysis

Once the cohort of recipients who had exited welfare at least once was identified, data were coded according to whether or not the recipient had returned to welfare and thus, had more than one spell on welfare<sup>5</sup>. Those who had only one spell of welfare were coded as non-recidivists and those who had multiple spells on welfare were coded as recidivists. As noted, those who remained on assistance continuously throughout the study period (n = 40) were dropped from the analysis.

Using interview data collected in 1987, the characteristics of recidivists were then compared to those of non-recidivists. Contrasts were performed in three categories: time spent receiving welfare, client demographic characteristics, and client human capital and barriers to employment. Statistical tests (independent samples t-tests and chi-square) were conducted to determine whether differences between recidivists and non-recidivists are statistically significant. Drawing on the existing literature on recidivism and long-term dependency, 13 variables were examined:

### *Time on Welfare*

- Length of first spell on welfare
- Total time on welfare

### *Demographics*

- Age at first receipt of welfare
- Age at birth of first child

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<sup>5</sup>Consistent with the Federal AFDC Quality Control recommendation and emerging convention in recidivism research, an exit for purposes of this study was defined as a break of at least 30 days in the payee's receipt of cash assistance.

- Marital status at first receipt of welfare
- Racial/Ethnic group
- Family's public assistance status
- Friends' and neighbors' public assistance status
- Region of residence<sup>6</sup>

#### *Human Capital and Barriers to Employment*

- Education level
- Work history
- Barriers to work
- Ratings of overall health

The next two chapters describe the results of our analyses. The first discusses the extent of recidivism in Maryland over a nine year period under the AFDC system. Included are measures of recidivism rates, the intervals between spells, and the timing of returns. The second chapter is concerned with differences between recidivists and non-recidivists. The two groups are contrasted in areas including: length of time on welfare, payee demographic characteristics, and human capital and barriers to employment.

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<sup>6</sup>Local variations in case closing practices or “administrative churning” could influence the regional results, but our use of a 30 day cut off should minimize any such effects.

## **Findings: Extent of Recidivism**

### **Recidivism Rates**

Of the 453 participants in the study, 240, or 53% had only one spell on welfare between their entry in 1987 and May 1996. As shown in Table 1, the remaining 47% had between two and six spells on welfare during the nine year study period. About half (48.4%) of those who returned to welfare had only two spells. One third (33.3%) had three spells on welfare, and about one in five (18.3%) had four or more spells. This is consistent with previous research (e.g., Cao 1996; Greenberg 1993) which reported that a large percentage of recipients who exit welfare will return for a second spell, and are also at risk of returning for subsequent spells after exiting a second time.

To the extent that recidivism patterns documented under the old welfare system (AFDC) will continue to prevail under the new system (TANF), these findings offer state policy-makers and program managers reason to be cautiously optimistic, but also reason to be somewhat concerned. The good news illustrated in Table 1 is that, over a nine year period, a bit more than half (53%) of all mother-headed families who exited a first-ever welfare spell did not return to the AFDC rolls. Also heartening is the fact that of those who did have a subsequent episode of welfare (n=213, 47%), about half (n=103) had only one such spell in the nine year period. In other words, in a nine year period, fully three fourths (75.7%) of all study cases had two or fewer welfare spells. The implication, of course is that many exits from welfare are lasting ones and that constant cycling on and off welfare is not normative for most recipients, at least under the old welfare rules in Maryland.

**Table 1**  
**Entire Sample at Risk of More Than One Spell: Number of Spells.**

Number of Spells on Welfare	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
One	240	53.0%	53.0%
Two	103	22.7%	75.7%
Three	71	15.7%	91.4%
Four or more	39	8.6%	100.0%
Total	453	100.0%	
Mean	1.8 spells		
Median	1.0 spells		
Standard Deviation	1.1 spells		
Range	1 to 6 spells		

At the same time, the data depicted in Table 1 also illustrate that, particularly in the new time-limited, block-granted welfare world, we must guard against declaring victory prematurely – that is believing that lasting independence from cash assistance has been accomplished because a family has exited the welfare rolls. While half (53%) of the exiting cases did not return to welfare in our nine year study period, nearly half (47%) of them did; some in fact, had three or more returns to cash assistance after their initial exit. The implication for TANF/TCA is an obvious one: the job of welfare reform does not end at the point where families leave the welfare rolls. Rather, the Table 1 data show that post-exit supportive services are of at least equal importance if our goal is not just to increase the number of welfare exits, but also to try and ensure that those exits are lasting ones.

Our main purpose in this analysis is to establish an historical baseline on welfare recidivism in Maryland so that policy-makers may have an empirical basis for estimating what recidivism rates might look like in the new welfare world and crafting program strategies to address the recidivism phenomenon. Therefore, in addition to

documenting the overall rate of return, as shown in Table 1, it is important to also establish the baseline with regard to the timing of returns.

### **Interval Between Spells**

This section takes a closer look at the 213 recidivists in our sample, examining the length of time between their exit from the first welfare spell and the start of their second spell. The length of time between first exit and second spell start ranges from 31 days to more than seven years (93 months) with an average of 20 months and a median of 12.6 months (see Table 2). A few more than one in ten recidivists (13.6%) returned between 31 days and three months after their first exit. Between four and six months after their first exit, an additional 18.3% of recidivists returned to the AFDC rolls. Thus, cumulatively, about one third (31.9%) of Maryland recidivists returned for their second spell on welfare within six months of their first exit. Another 16.9% returned between seven and 12 months after their first spell ended. All together, about half (48.8%) of the recidivists in this sample had twelve months or less between the end of their first spell on welfare and the beginning of their second spell. These results are consistent with the findings of previous researchers who have found that nationwide, those who return to AFDC after an exit tend to do so quickly, many of them within a year of their original exit (for example, Blank and Ruggles, 1994 as cited by Brandon 1995; Cao 1996; Greenberg 1993).

Not all returns to welfare happen quickly, however. In this sample, to illustrate, one in five (19.7%) returned to welfare between 13 and 24 months after exiting, and 16.9% or about one in six returned between 25 and 36 months later. Thus for about

one in two recidivists (52%), more than a full year – in some cases as long as almost eight years– elapsed between their initial exit from welfare and their return to the rolls.

For policymakers, the findings suggest that LDSS-provided post-exit support services intended to help customers avoid coming back to cash assistance should be most concentrated in the first year when customers are at highest risk of recidivism. However, Table 2 shows that half of those who will eventually return do so more than twelve months after their initial exit. While the question remains as to whether the circumstances and causes of “early” recidivism differ from the circumstances and causes of “late” recidivism, the results suggest that policymakers would be well-advised to consider ways in which some type of post-exit support services might be able to be made available beyond the first year after exit and perhaps for as long as three years.

This finding also suggests that the challenge of preventing welfare recidivism should not be thought to belong solely to the welfare system. Rather, the findings clearly indicate that this is a community-wide challenge. This is especially true as it relates to persons who have been off welfare for a year or more but who may, as these data show, still be at risk for experiencing another welfare spell. In the out-years it would probably be more appropriate to focus on employment support service for the working poor, not just support services for former welfare recipients. These broader-based rather than narrowly targeted services perhaps could be accessed through some type of statewide hotline, for example. Policy makers, of course, would also have to decide which agency of government would be most appropriate to link former welfare

recipients and working poor families with services that would support their efforts to maintain employment and to remain financially self-sufficient.

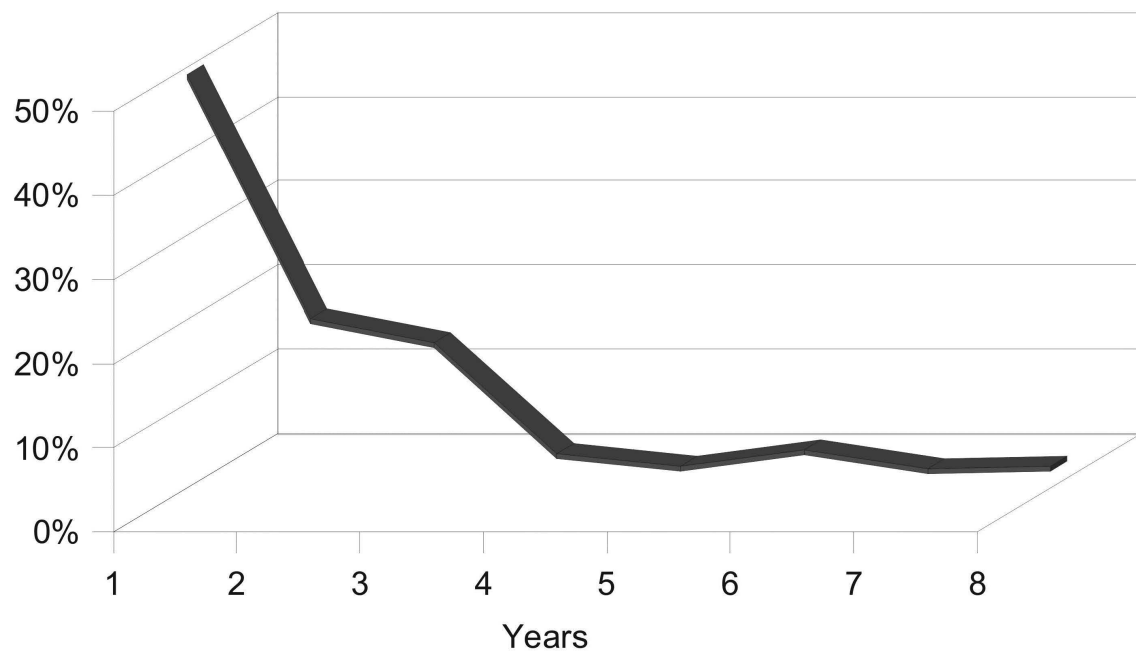
**Table 2**  
**Length of Time in Months Between First and Second Spells - Recidivists (n=213).**

Length of Time Between First and Second Spells	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
31days - 3 months	29	13.6%	13.6%
4 - 6 months	39	18.3%	31.9%
7 - 9 months	19	8.9%	40.8%
10 - 12 months	17	8.0%	48.8%
13 - 24 months	42	19.7%	68.5%
25 - 36 months	36	16.9%	85.4%
37 - 48 months	8	3.8%	89.2%
49 - 60 months	5	2.3%	91.5%
More than 60 months	18	8.5%	100.0%
Mean	20.0 months		
Median	12.6 months		
Standard Deviation	21.0 months		
Range	1.1 to 92.5 months		

## Timing of Returns

Figure 1, following this discussion, illustrates the pattern of returns to welfare over the nine year study period. As can be seen, the graph emphasizes the point that under AFDC in Maryland, first time recipients who returned to the welfare rolls after their first exit tended to do so relatively quickly. The great majority of the returns to AFDC, 85.4%, occur within the first three years after exiting. About half (48.8%) occur in the first year after exiting. After the first year, returns decline sharply, with only about one fifth returning after two years and fewer than one in five (16.9%) returning in the third year after exiting. Fewer than 5% return per year in the fourth through eighth years after exiting.

Figure 1. Time in Years Between First and Second AFDC Spells - Recidivists



## **Findings: How do Recidivists Differ from Non-recidivists?**

Much of the current literature on recidivism (see for example, Bane & Ellwood, 1994 and Pavetti, 1993) has focused on the characteristics of recipients which may put them at greater risk of returning to welfare after they exit the system. As with most of the pre-PRWORA welfare literature, it is unclear the extent to which the results of studies conducted under the old welfare system will continue to hold true under the new one. The great unknown is the behavioral changes new PRWORA features may produce in recipients and thus, in their recidivism patterns. However, pre-reform studies can provide policymakers with some information and estimates about what impact recidivism may have on individuals' ability to avoid cash assistance time limits and about factors that will likely increase a person's risk of coming back on the rolls after an exit. Most important, these analyses may assist program managers to design strategies to lower recidivism rates by providing job retention and other needed services to those who have exited the cash assistance rolls and are at greater risk for returning. Thus, in this chapter, using nine years of Maryland AFDC use data, we contrast recidivists and non-recidivists and explore differences between the two groups.

### **Length of Time on Welfare**

#### Length of First Spell

How long do recidivists and non-recidivists spend on welfare? In the current sample, the length of the first spell on welfare ranged from less than twelve months to over five years, with a mean first spell of almost two years (22.7 months) and a median of 13.8 months. Almost half of the entire sample (46.4%) had a first spell that lasted less than 12 months. About one in four (23.6%) had a first spell which lasted between

13 and 24 months, and one in ten (10.6%) had a spell that lasted between 25 and 36 months. About 10% had a first spell that lasted between 37 and 60 months, and another 10% had spells that lasted more than 60 months.

As shown in Table 3, the length of first spell did not differ significantly between recidivists and non-recidivists. This is consistent with previous research which has not found a conclusive relationship between length of first spell and recidivism (Ellwood 1986). As illustrated in Figure 2, the mean length of first spell for recidivists was 21.3 months and 24.0 months for non-recidivists. These numbers are consistent with the average first spell length of 20 months which has been found using national data (Cao, 1996). A smaller proportion of non-recidivists (17.5%) in our sample had a first spell that lasted between 13 and 24 months than did recidivists (30.5%). Somewhat curiously, a larger proportion of non-recidivists had spells that lasted more than 60 months (11.7%) than did recidivists (7.5%). None of these differences, however, were statistically significant.

For policymakers, these data imply that the length of a family's first welfare spell does not by itself provide any predictive information about that family's risk of returning to the rolls. First-time AFDC recipients who experience short AFDC spells (e.g. less than 12 months) are just as likely to return for a second spell as are those who have long initial spells (e.g. 24 months or more).

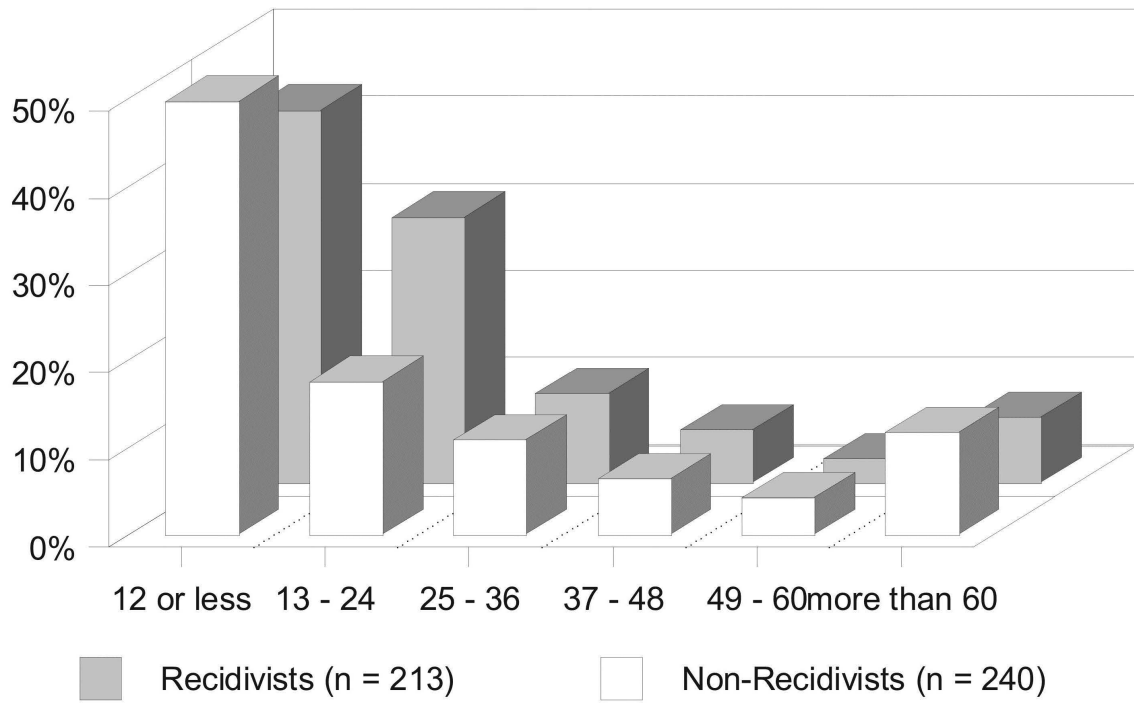
**Table 3**  
**Recidivists vs Non-recidivists: Length of First Spell.**

	<b>Recidivists (n=213)</b>	<b>Non-recidivists (n=240)</b>	<b>Total (n=453)</b>
<i>Length of first spell</i>			
less than 12 months	42.7% (91)	49.6% (119)	46.4% (210)
13 - 24 months	30.5% (65)	17.5% (42)	23.6% (107)
25 - 36 months	10.3% (22)	10.8% (26)	10.6% (48)
37 - 48 months	6.1% (13)	6.3% (15)	6.2% (28)
49 - 60 months	2.8% (6)	4.2% (10)	3.5% (16)
more than 60 months	7.5% (16)	11.7% (28)	9.7% (44)
Mean	21.3	24.0	22.7
Median	14.2	12.6	13.8
Standard deviation	20.7	25.8	23.5
Range	1.5 to 97.0	1.0 to 104.6	1.0 to 104.6

Note: An independent samples t-test was used to determine whether there were differences in means between recidivists and non-recidivists.

\* p <.05, \*\* p <.01, \*\*\* p <.001

Figure 2. Length of First Spell on Welfare in Months



### Total Time on Welfare

As one would expect, the total time (in months) on welfare during the nine year study period was significantly greater for recidivists than for non recidivists; however, some may be surprised at the magnitude of the difference. As presented in Table 4, when examining total time on welfare, it was found that recidivists had an average total time that was more than twice that of non-recidivists (53.1 months and 24.0 months respectively,  $p < .001$ ).

**Table 4**  
**Recidivists vs Non-recidivists: Total Time on Welfare in Months.**

	<b>Recidivists (n=213)</b>	<b>Non-recidivists (n=240)</b>	<b>Total (n=453)</b>
<i>Total time on welfare</i>			
less than 12 months	5.2% (11)	49.6% (119)	28.7% (130)
13 - 24 months	12.7% (27)	17.5% (42)	15.2% (69)
25 - 36 months	14.6% (31)	10.8% (26)	12.6% (57)
37 - 48 months	14.6% (31)	6.3% (15)	10.2% (46)
49 - 60 months	12.7% (27)	4.2% (10)	8.2% (37)
more than 60 months	40.4% (86)	11.7% (28)	25.2% (114)
Mean***	53.1	24.0	37.7
Median	27.3	25.8	30.6
Standard deviation	49.7	12.6	30.3
Range	3.3 to 104.4	1.0 to 104.6	1.0 to 104.6

Note: An independent samples t-test was used to determine whether there were differences in means between recidivists and non-recidivists.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

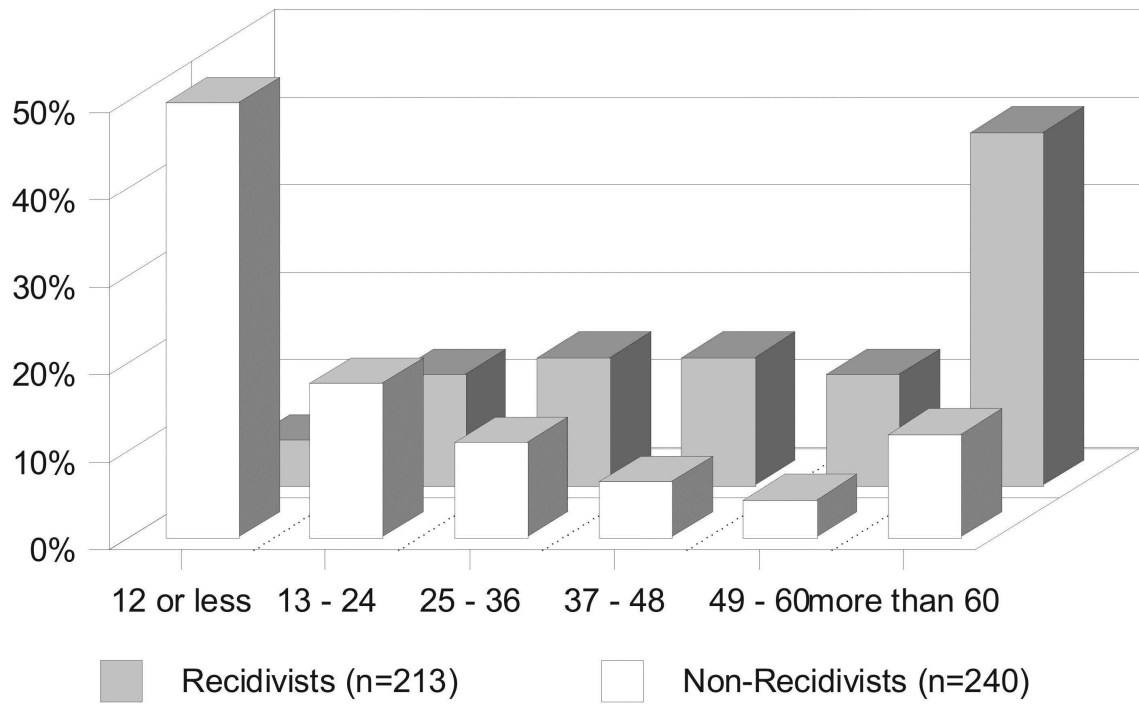
The most striking differences are found at the extremes. About half of all of non-recidivists (49.6%) have a total time of less than 12 months, but, as shown in Table 4 and Figure 3, following, only a very small proportion (5.2%) of recidivists have a total time of less than 12 months over the nine year period. Notably, the greatest proportion (40.4%) of recidivists had total times on welfare of more than 60 months, while only

about twelve percent (11.7%) of non-recidivists had total times on welfare equaling more than 60 months. In more moderate time spans, these large differences disappear. For example, 28.3% of non-recidivists and 27.3% of recidivists (27.8% of the total sample) had total times between 13 and 36 months.

For policymakers and program managers, the data displayed in Table 4 and Figure 3 have critically important implications relative to time limits. The fact that recidivists and non-recidivists do not differ in the length of their first AFDC spell, but recidivists spend more than twice as much time on welfare over a nine year period than non-recidivists illustrates the limited utility of single-spell analyses. Based on the single spell data, to illustrate, we would predict that only about 10% of sample families would reach the five year limit. However, when we consider multiple spells, the data show that *one out of four first-time welfare recipients will have more than five years of welfare receipt in a nine year period*. Admittedly, it is uncertain if these results under the old AFDC system will hold true under TANF. Also unknown at the time of this writing is the extent to which those customers in this study who reach the five year time limit would meet the TANF/FIP criteria for time-limit exemptions. Nonetheless, the fact that a quarter of our sample reached the five year mark in nine years makes it critical for policymakers to be able to identify, early on, client characteristics associated with returns to welfare and increased risk of long-term cash assistance receipt. The importance of this task is heightened by the fact that, as discussed, initial spell length alone is not a valid or reliable predictor of recidivism risk. Thus, local DSS staff, particularly front-line workers who are charged with assisting families to make lasting

transitions off welfare, have great need for information about client characteristics associated with increased risk of returning to welfare after an exit has occurred.

Figure 3. Total Time on Welfare in Months



### Payee Demographic Characteristics

Seven demographic characteristics were also examined to determine whether they would distinguish between recidivists and non-recidivists: age at first receipt of welfare as an adult; age at birth of the first child; marital status at first receipt; racial/ethnic group; region of residence; family's public assistance status and friends' and neighbors' public assistance status. A summary of these analyses is presented in Table 5, which follows this discussion. In brief, significant differences were found between recidivists and non-recidivists on six of the seven characteristics examined: age at first receipt of welfare as an adult; age at first child's birth; marital status at first receipt; region of residence; family's public assistance status and friends' public assistance status. No relationship was found between recidivism status and racial/ethnic background.

#### *Age at First Receipt*

As can be seen in Table 5, recidivists began their welfare careers at an earlier age than non-recidivists. The average age at first receipt for recidivists was 22.2 years, with a midpoint of 20.0 years ( $p < .05$ ). Non-recidivists however, had an average age of 26.0 at first receipt, with a midpoint of 24 years. A greater proportion of recidivists (59.2%) than non-recidivists (37.6%) were under the age of 22 when they first received welfare. While fully 20% of non-recidivists were over the age of 31 when they first received welfare, only 2.9% of recidivists first received welfare when they were older than 31.

These results show that AFDC recipients who first begin to collect benefits at a young age are more likely to return to the welfare rolls once they exit than are their

older counterparts. Younger women may be at greater risk of recidivism because they tend to have younger children for whom child care may be more difficult to find and more expensive. Also, younger women, in general, command lower wages in the marketplace than older women perhaps making lasting transitions from welfare to work more of a challenge. Whatever the reason for younger women's greater risk for recidivism, program managers may wish to pay special attention to this group of customers, those who enter welfare at an early age, in helping them transition off cash assistance and in providing support services to keep them from returning to the rolls.

#### *Age at First Birth*

Recent research by the US General Accounting Office (GAO, 1993) on teen childbearing has brought to light several relevant trends. Working women who gave birth as teenagers earn less than other women who work and did not give birth as teenagers. Women who begin childbearing during adolescence are less likely to have a high school diploma, are less likely to marry, and are more likely to have total family incomes below 50% of the poverty line.

Early childbearing was relatively common in our sample of first-time AFDC recipients, with a quarter of the overall sample beginning childbearing before the age of 18. Despite the prevalence of early childbearing in the sample as a whole, a statistically significant relationship was found between age at first birth and recidivism status. Recidivists were significantly younger than non-recidivists at the birth of their first child ( $p < .05$ ). On average, recidivists were 19.3 years old when their first child was born with a median of 18 years. Non-recidivists had an average age of 20.0 years when their first child was born with a midpoint of 19 years.

A greater proportion of recidivists (48.3%) than non-recidivists (36.8%) had their first child at or before the age of 18. In contrast, a greater proportion of non-recidivists (24.1%) than recidivists (16.0%) had their first child between the ages of 19 and 20. About 26% of both groups had their first child between the ages of 21 and 25. About one in ten non-recidivists and one in 20 recidivists had their first child between the ages of 26 and 30. No first births were recorded in either group at age 31 or older.

These results dramatically illustrate the relationship between early childbearing and welfare use, including recidivism risk. Women who give birth to their first child before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday are more likely to have repeat spells on welfare than to be single-spell welfare users. This effect may be due in part to generally lower levels of education and work experience among those who give birth to their first child at an early age. In designing programs and policies to reduce recidivism, managers should pay particular attention to customers who began childbearing early.

### *Marital Status*

Overall, 60% of the sample had never been married at the time they began to receive AFDC benefits, a figure which is consistent with national data (Page and Lerner, 1997). However, recidivists in our sample were significantly less likely to have been married than were non-recidivists ( $p < .001$ ). About seven out of every ten recidivists had never been married when they first received welfare, compared to about half of non-recidivists (52.1%).

One possible explanation for the consistent and powerful effect of marital status on welfare receipt patterns is the receipt of child support. Women who have ever been married to the father of their children are more likely to receive child support than are

women who have never been married to the father of their children (US Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1997). In their efforts to reduce recidivism and promote self-sufficiency, program managers may wish to consider adopting a “child support last” policy to complement the state’s “child support first” strategy already in place. That is, as a family leaves cash assistance for work their ability to remain free of cash assistance may be enhanced by an intense examination of their child support status and, if necessary, increased efforts to collect court-ordered support.

### *Racial/Ethnic Background*

No differences were found between recidivists and non-recidivists in terms of racial/ethnic background. About 48% of the total sample is Caucasian, another 48% are African American and the remaining 4% are of another racial or ethnic group. There were slight differences in the proportions of recidivists and non-recidivists who are Caucasian (45.5% vs. 50.2%) or African American, (52.1% vs. 43.5%), but these differences are not statistically significant.

### *Public Assistance Status of Family*<sup>7</sup>

The public assistance status of the payees’ mothers and siblings was also significantly different between recidivists and non-recidivists ( $p < .001$  and  $p < .05$  for mothers and siblings respectively). The mothers of about two out of five recidivists (39.5%) had received public assistance in contrast to a quarter of (24.1%) non-recidivists’ mothers. Two out of three (66.2%) recidivists also reported that a sibling

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<sup>7</sup> Data on the public assistance status of her family of origin were reported by study participants at the time of the interview and were not verified with administrative data.

had received public assistance in the year preceding our participant's entry to welfare for the first time, while only half of non-recidivists (47.7%) claimed to have siblings who had received public assistance.

#### *Public Assistance Status of Friends and Neighbors<sup>8</sup>*

Significant differences were also found between recidivists and non-recidivists with regard to the public assistance status of their friends and neighbors ( $p < .001$  and  $p < .05$  for friends and neighbors respectively). More than half (55%) of the recidivists reported having friends who had applied for public assistance, in contrast to only one third (35%) of the non-recidivists. Likewise, more than one in four (28.6%) recidivists had neighbors who had applied for public assistance compared to only one in five (19.5%) non-recidivists.

The effects of family, friends', and neighbors' public assistance status may be due in part to their being in less of a position to provide support to the customer exiting welfare. Although it has not received much attention in the welfare literature, social support, both material and emotional, may be critical in helping families transition from welfare to self-sufficiency. Customers who do not have an adequate support network because their close friends and family are in similar financial circumstances may be less able to weather crises and thus be more likely to return to the welfare rolls.<sup>9</sup> For program managers these results suggest that they may want to assess the extent to

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<sup>8</sup> Data on the public assistance status of friends and neighbors were reported by study participants at the time of the interview and were not verified with administrative data.

<sup>9</sup> This point, among others, is dramatically illustrated in the new PBS documentary, "Ending Welfare As We Know It."

which customers leaving cash assistance have informal resources from friends and family to help them weather minor setbacks. If customers lack a support network perhaps FIP workers can link them with formal support services before they leave cash assistance so that customers have the information they need and resources to draw on should a crisis arise.

**Table 5**  
**Recidivists vs. Non-recidivists: Demographics.**

Characteristics	Recidivists (n=213)	Non- recidivists (n=240)	Total (n=453)
<i>Age at first receipt</i>			
less than 18	4.7% (10)	1.7% (4)	3.1% (14)
18 - 19 years	35.7% (76)	24.2% (58)	29.6% (134)
20 - 21 years	18.8% (40)	11.7% (28)	15.0% (68)
22 - 25 years	18.8% (40)	20.4% (49)	19.6% (89)
26 - 30 years	16.0% (34)	22.1% (53)	19.2% (87)
31 years or more	6.1% (13)	20.0% (48)	13.5% (61)
Mean***	22.2	26.0	24.2
Median	20.0	24.0	22.0
Standard deviation	5.0	8.3	7.2
Range	16.0 to 46.0	16 to 57	16 to 57
<i>Age at first birth</i>			
Under 16	4.7% (10)	6.3% (15)	5.5% (25)
16	6.1% (13)	6.7% (16)	6.4% (29)
17	17.8% (38)	9.2% (22)	13.2% (60)
18	19.7% (42)	14.6% (35)	17.0% (77)
19	7.5% (16)	13.3% (32)	10.6% (48)
20	8.5% (18)	10.8% (26)	9.7% (44)
21 - 25	25.8% (55)	26.3% (63)	26.0% (118)
26 - 30	4.7% (10)	9.6% (23)	7.3% (33)
31 and over	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Missing	5.2% (11)	3.3% (8)	4.2% (19)
Mean*	19.3	20.0	19.7
Median	18.0	19.0	19.0
Standard deviation	2.9	3.2	3.1
Range	13.0 to 26.0	14 to 26	13 to 26
<i>Marital status at first receipt***</i>			
Never married	69.0% (147)	52.1% (125)	60.0% (272)
Married	31.0% (66)	47.9% (115)	40.0% (181)
<i>Racial/Ethnic Group</i>			
Caucasian	45.5% (96)	50.2% (120)	48.0% (216)
African-American	52.1% (110)	43.5% (104)	47.6% (214)
Other race	3.2% (5)	6.3% (15)	4.5% (20)

Characteristics	Recidivists (n=213)	Non- recidivists (n=240)	Total (n=453)
<i>Family's public assistance status</i>			
Mother received public assistance***	39.5% (81)	24.1% (55)	31.4% (136)
Sibling received public assistance*	66.2% (45)	47.7% (31)	57.1% (76)
<i>Friends' and Neighbors' public assistance status</i>			
Friends have applied for AFDC***	55.0% (116)	35.0% (83)	44.4% (199)
Neighbors have applied for AFDC*	28.6% (57)	19.5% (44)	23.8% (101)

Note: An independent samples t-test was used to determine whether there were differences in means between recidivists and non-recidivists. The Chi-square statistic was used to test categorical data including marital status, racial/ethnic group, region, education level, and public assistance status of family and friends.

\* p <.05, \*\* p <.01, \*\*\* p <.001

### *Region of Residence*

Due to small sample sizes in individual counties, Maryland's 24 jurisdictions are divided into six regions: Baltimore City, the Baltimore Metropolitan area, Western Maryland, the Washington Metropolitan area, the Eastern Shore, and Southern Maryland. The Baltimore Metropolitan region includes Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, Harford and Howard counties, while the Western Maryland region includes Allegany, Frederick, Garrett and Washington counties. The Washington Metropolitan region consists of Montgomery and Prince George's counties, and the Eastern Shore region is made up of Caroline, Cecil, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's, Somerset, Talbot, Wicomico and Worcester counties. The remaining counties, Calvert, Charles and St. Mary's comprise the Southern Maryland region.

Place of residence does seem to matter in relation to recidivism risk in Maryland. As shown in Table 6, significant differences were found between recidivists and non-recidivists in their region of residence at the time they came on to the welfare rolls

( $p < .001$ ). Residents of Baltimore City are more likely to be recidivists (59.7%) than non-recidivists (40.3%). Residents of Western Maryland are also at great risk of becoming recidivists, with rates of return which are almost identical to those in Baltimore City. Not quite six of ten (56.9%) residents of Western Maryland counties returned to the rolls during the nine year study period while only four in ten (43.1%) had a single welfare spell.

Residents of the Eastern Shore counties are about as likely to return to the welfare rolls as they are to have only a single spell. In contrast to Baltimore City and Western Maryland, just under half (46.0%) of the first time recipients living on the Eastern Shore returned to the rolls. Just over half (54.0%) only had one spell on welfare.

Fewer recidivists than non-recidivists lived in the Washington Metropolitan area, in Southern Maryland and in the Baltimore Metropolitan area. About four in ten (38.6%) residents of the Washington metropolitan area returned to the welfare rolls, while the majority (61.4%) had only one spell on welfare. This same pattern was found in Southern Maryland, where 62.7% of recipients only had one spell on welfare over the nine year study period and 37.3% had more than one spell. The Baltimore metropolitan area had the lowest incidence of recidivism during the study period. Almost two thirds (65.8%) of the residents of this area had only one spell on welfare, leaving only one third (34.2%) to have more than one spell.

Differences in local economic conditions contribute to these varying recidivism patterns. In addition to local unemployment rate, job growth, the match (and possible

mismatch) between job seekers' skills and employers' needs, and transportation issues may explain at least some of the local variations in recidivism.

For program managers these results suggest that some jurisdictions may face a greater challenge than others in terms of reducing recidivism. Those localities that have historically experienced high recidivism rates may wish to invest greater resources in identifying and providing services for those clients at greater risk for recidivism.

**Table 6**  
**Recidivists vs Non-recidivists: Region of Residence.**

	<b>Recidivists (n=213)</b>	<b>Non-recidivists (n=240)</b>	<b>Total (n=453)</b>
<i>Region***</i>			
Baltimore City	59.7% (71)	40.3% (48)	100.0% (119)
Western Maryland	56.9% (41)	43.1% (31)	100.0% (72)
Eastern Shore	46.0% (23)	54.0% (27)	100.0% (50)
Washington Metro	38.6% (34)	61.4% (54)	100.0% (88)
Southern Maryland	37.3% (19)	62.7% (32)	100.0% (51)
Baltimore Metro	34.2% (25)	65.8% (48)	100.0% (73)

Note: The Chi-square statistic was used due to the categorical nature of the data.

\* p <.05, \*\* p <.01, \*\*\* p <.001

## Human Capital and Barriers to Employment

Recidivists and non-recidivists were also compared with regard to human capital (education level and work history), perceived barriers to work, and self ratings of health. As seen in Table 7, recidivists and non-recidivists differ in education level, work experience and perceived barriers to work, but not on perceived health status. A brief summary of the results follows.

### *Educational Level*

Non-recidivists attained a higher level of education than recidivists ( $p < .01$ ). Recidivists were more likely to end their education with some high school than were non-recidivists. Recidivists and non-recidivists graduated from high school at about the same rate, about 40%. Non-recidivists, however were more likely to have a GED than were recidivists (6.3% versus 1.9%).<sup>10</sup> While less than two percent of the entire sample completed college, non-recidivists (14.3%) were more likely to have some college experience than were recidivists (10%).

These results are probably not surprising to those familiar with the welfare dynamics literature. While all participants in our sample, regardless of their education level, were able to exit AFDC and remain off the rolls for at least one month, those with lower levels of education were more likely to return for a second welfare spell. No doubt the wages customers are able to command explain some of this effect. For program managers these results suggest that efforts to reduce recidivism should be

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<sup>10</sup>General Equivalency Diploma (GED) recipients were counted separately from high school diploma recipients due to emerging evidence that they may be more likely to resemble drop-outs in both employment and earnings than they are to resemble high school graduates (Heckman, 1993).

especially geared towards customers with low levels of education, especially those who lack a regular high school diploma.

### *Work History*

Recidivists and non-recidivists also differ in terms of pre-welfare work experience. While the majority of all first-timers had worked at some point since leaving high school, recidivists were slightly less likely to have worked. Almost nine of ten (88.3%) non-recidivists, compared to only about eight of ten (78.8%) recidivists had worked for pay since leaving high school ( $p < .001$ ). No significant differences were found between recidivists and non-recidivists with regard to whether they worked before the birth of their first child or during their first child's first year of life. About two thirds of the sample had worked prior to the birth of their first child, and about four out of ten worked during the first year of their first child's life.

These results further emphasize the importance of human capital in making welfare exits permanent. While customers with varying levels of work experience were able to exit AFDC, those with less experience were at greater risk of returning. A number of factors could account for this effect including differences between more experienced and less experienced workers in wages, benefits, and/or work behaviors. This confirms the wisdom of program managers' current practice of carefully considering a customer's work experience as one key factor (though not the only one) in developing the client's plan for self-sufficiency. Although it appears from these historical data that most customers will be able to obtain some type of employment, those with less work experience will be more at risk of losing their position and returning to cash assistance.

### *Barriers to Work*

Recidivists and non-recidivists did not differ in the mean number of barriers to work which they self-identified. Recidivists cited an average of 1.8 barriers to work and non-recidivists cited an average of 1.6 barriers to work. Transportation (46.2% of recidivists and 36.6% of non-recidivists) and possible loss of health care benefits (11.1% of recidivists and 14.5% of non-recidivists) were seen as barriers to work by both recidivists and non-recidivists. The one barrier to work where the recidivists and non-recidivists differed significantly was on childcare; 53.4% of recidivists cited childcare as a barrier to work as compared to only 41.7% of non-recidivists ( $p < .01$ ).

New post-TANF programs such as transitional medical assistance and children's health insurance programs may go a long way in helping to relieve health care concerns seen as a barrier to work under the AFDC program. Other programs such as "Bridges to Work" and the AdVANtage program may also alleviate transportation problems. The "Bridges to Work" program, places inner city residents in suburban jobs and then provides transportation and support services such as child care, counseling and crisis intervention to reduce the stressors that might be aggravated by the commute. Anne Arundel County's AdVANtage program, which trains unemployed residents to become operators of vans used to provide transportation to work will also help to relieve transportation concerns of workers, while simultaneously providing new employment opportunities.

### *Health*

As shown in Table 7, no differences were found between recidivists and non-recidivists in their overall self ratings of health. The large majority of both recidivists

(80.1%) and non-recidivists (72.1%) rated their overall health as excellent or good.

Only 4.3% of recidivists rated their health as poor, as did 5.8% of non-recidivists. About one in five (18.3%) non-recidivists reported an impairment or health condition that limited her ability to work. Fewer recidivists (15.6%) reported an impairment or health condition that limited work, however the difference was not statistically significant.

**Table 7**  
**Recidivists vs. Non-recidivists:**  
**Education Level, Work Experience, Barriers to Work and Health**

	Recidivists	Non-recidivists	Total
<i>Education Level**</i>			
Grades 1 - 8	6.2% (13)	5.4% (13)	5.7% (26)
Some High School	38.9% (82)	26.5% (63)	32.3% (145)
High School Diploma	40.3% (85)	42.9% (102)	41.6% (187)
GED	1.9% (4)	6.3% (15)	4.2% (19)
Business/Tech School	1.9% (4)	1.7% (4)	1.8% (8)
Some College	10.0% (21)	14.3% (34)	12.2% (55)
Finished College	<1.0% (2)	2.1% (5)	1.6% (7)
Graduate School	0.0% (0)	<1.0% (2)	<1.0% (2)
<i>Work History</i>			
worked since leaving high school**	78.8% (167)	88.3% (212)	83.8% (379)
worked before birth of first child	62.0% (132)	66.1% (158)	64.2% (290)
worked during 1 <sup>st</sup> year of 1 <sup>st</sup> child's life	37.1% (75)	40.7% (94)	39.0% (169)
<i>Barriers to work</i>			
Transportation	46.2% (73)	36.6% (63)	41.2% (136)
Child Care**	53.4% (111)	41.7% (98)	47.2% (209)
Possible loss of health care benefits	11.1% (23)	14.5% (34)	12.9% (57)
Mean number of barriers identified	1.8	1.6	1.7
<i>Health</i>			
Overall rating of health			
<i>Excellent</i>	32.7% (69)	31.3% (75)	31.9% (144)
<i>Good</i>	47.4% (100)	40.8% (98)	43.9% (198)
<i>Fair</i>	15.6% (33)	22.1% (53)	19.1% (86)
<i>Poor</i>	4.3% (9)	5.8% (14)	5.1% (23)
Health condition which limits work	15.6%	18.3%	17.1%

Note: The Chi-square statistic was used to test differences in work history and barriers to work.

\* p <.05, \*\* p <.01, \*\*\* p <.001

## Conclusions

Drawing on a rich body of longitudinal (nine years) data describing patterns of welfare use of several hundred, first time Maryland AFDC recipients, this paper attempts to provide state and local welfare officials with baseline information on one issue, recidivism, that is critically important in the new time-limited world of welfare. What key findings emerge from this analysis that may have practical utility for both program design and individual client assessment?

- Recidivism is not uncommon. While half of those who exit from a first welfare spell do not return (53%), about half (47%) do return and experience at least one subsequent episode of cash assistance receipt.
- Recidivism tends to happen relatively quickly. About one third (31.9%) of repeat users return to welfare within six months of their first exit. About half (48.8%) of all recidivists return within the first year and by the end of 24 months, two-thirds (68.5%) of those who return will have done so.
- To prevent sizable numbers of clients from reaching the five year time limit, efforts to prevent recidivism are required. In this study, 40.4% of all recidivists accumulated more than 60 months on welfare in a nine year period, compared to only 11.7% of non-recidivists.
- Length of a client's initial welfare spell, by itself, is not a useful predictor of recidivism risk. We find no significant differences between recidivists (21.3 months) and non-recidivists (24.0 months) in the average duration of their first welfare spells.

- Certain demographic characteristics do seem to be associated with a greater likelihood of returning to welfare after an initial exit. In particular, clients coming into welfare for the first time who are young (under 22), unmarried, or had a child before age 18 or who have a mother, sibling(s), friends, or neighbors who have applied for public assistance, are at greatest risk to experience a return to welfare. Clients living in Baltimore City, Western Maryland, and the Eastern Shore also are at increased risk of recidivism.
- Client education levels and work experience at the time of their initial entrance onto welfare are also predictive of recidivism risk. Those with less than a high school education and those who have no history of paid employment are at increased risk to return to welfare after their initial exit.
- Recidivists (53.4%) are more likely to perceive child care as a barrier to work than are non-recidivists (41.7%); both groups are about equally likely to cite transportation and fear of losing health benefits as barriers to work.

In the context of time limits, these findings suggest that, for welfare program managers, the glass is both half-full and half-empty. On the one hand, if the observed patterns continue under TANF/FIP, the implication is that the majority of welfare exits we are witnessing today will be long-lasting. On the other hand, the results also imply that our work is not done nor has success necessarily been achieved just because a client's cash assistance case closes; nearly as many clients will experience a return to welfare as will not. This finding certainly indicates that program managers are on the

right track in beginning to emphasize post-exit job retention and support services for clients who have left cash assistance.

The data also suggest that, minimally, post-exit services to prevent recidivism should be available at least for a full year after TCA case closure since half of all recidivists do return within the first 12 months. To be maximally effective, however, our findings also suggest we may be wise to consider making such services available over a longer period of time, perhaps for as long as three years; more than one third of all recidivists returned to welfare between 13 and 36 months after their first exit. Some readers may opine that a three year post-exit support service/job retention strategy would be too expensive, and/or not feasible. With careful program design and creativity, neither, we think, necessarily has to be true. What is true however, is that the first 36 months after a welfare exit appear to be critical. That is, clients who are able to remain off cash assistance for three years are unlikely to return. In today's welfare world, with inflexible, lifetime time limits, it thus may be more effective, humane, and cheaper in the long-run to invest in longer-term post-exit services than not to do so. For a variety of reasons though, in thinking about a potential out-years retention/support strategy, it would probably be more appropriate to focus on employment supports for the working poor, not just employment supports for former welfare recipients.

Today's research findings should also be useful to local agencies as they continue to refine their individual client assessment practices and tools. Each TCA family's situation is admittedly unique. Nonetheless, nine years of monthly Maryland welfare use data do show that, all else equal, some clients are more vulnerable to repeat welfare spells than others. It would probably behoove local program managers

to think about how to obtain and use information on these key risk factors as part of the assessment, decision-making and monitoring process for individual clients. In particular, clients who enter cash assistance at an early age (22 or younger), who had a child before age 18, who never married or never worked, those who have less than an high school education, and/or those who have a family history of welfare receipt are at particular risk to return to welfare after an exit. These findings suggest that in addition to job experience/work history, these additional items, at minimum, should be considered both in the initial assessment of individual clients and in the design and allocation of post-exit job retention and other support services.

There is no guarantee of course that these patterns and trends observed under AFDC will continue under TANF. For that reason, we acknowledge that both the recidivism risk profile and suggestions proffered with regard to recidivism prevention/reduction strategies are tentative. Despite this caveat, the report's findings and recommendations can be a useful yardstick against which recidivism patterns under TANF/TCA can be compared. These data do set the pre-reform recidivism baseline, without which we would be hard-pressed to accurately determine the effects of reform on this now very important program indicator. The findings and recommendations also provide at least a beginning, empirically based working model from which post-exit support and recidivism prevention strategies can be developed.

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