Food Assistance and Labor Force Outcomes of Childless Adults: Evidence from the CPS

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines the implications of restrictions to participation in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs). The U.S. social safety net is designed to protect vulnerable households from economic insecurity, and to provide assistance when most needed. While a strong safety net is a central feature of most developed nations, there is an ever-present concern that investments in the social safety net can generate counterproductive incentives, such as reduced work effort. These tradeoffs, between social safety and work incentives, are perhaps featured most prominently in policies that govern program participation among adult-only households with no disabilities. ABAWDs' SNAP participation is restricted to up to three months in any three-year period, unless they comply with certain work requirements.

The Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 led by the housing crisis has resulted in substantial economic insecurity among U.S. households, with poverty rates reaching 15 percent, unemployment 10 percent, and food insecurity at a record high 14.9 percent in 2010. SNAP is the largest component of the U.S. food safety net. Between 2007 and 2011, participation in SNAP increased from 26.3 million to 44.7 million and spending increased from $33.2 billion to $75.7 billion (USDA, 2012).

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), the key piece of legislation enacted in the wake of the crisis, included two significant changes to SNAP: an unprecedented increase in the amount of SNAP benefits to households, and a nationwide one-year waiver of program use restrictions for ABAWDs. The large and rapid increases in program participation and the speed with which increases in SNAP generosity were implemented in response to an

economic crisis speak to SNAP being a flexible part of the social safety net. On the other hand, policymakers may worry that increased generosity might lead to welfare dependence and counterproductive incentives.

We take advantage of the broad work-restriction waivers afforded by the ARRA as well as several waivers issued at the county and state level in years preceding the ARRA to study the impact that these restrictions have on program participation and work decisions of ABAWDs.

BACKGROUND ON ABAWD POLICY

Since 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) has restricted able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs), between the ages of 18 and 50, to receiving no more than three months of food assistance from SNAP in a period of three years if the individual is not complying with certain work requirements. Namely, ABAWDs may receive more than three months of assistance if they are employed at least 20 hours per week, 80 hours per month, or making the equivalent of 80 hours' worth of minimum wage pay in one month. Several states have also added options to participate in a workfare program as well as other qualified work-related activities, such as various forms of employment training. States also have some flexibility in implementing certain regulations that pertain to ABAWDs. While no state may choose to waive these restrictions for all adults unilaterally, states do have authority to exempt some ABAWDs from work requirements.

First, states may request waivers from the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) for jurisdictions that do not have a "sufficient number of jobs." The FNS allows several definitions of a sufficient number of jobs. First, each year, the Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration (DOLETA) publishes a list of "labor surplus areas," which can include

counties, cities, and other equivalent sub-state jurisdictions. A jurisdiction is classified as a labor surplus area when its average unemployment rate is at least 20 percent above the average unemployment rate for the nation during the previous two calendar years, with a ceiling of 10 percent and a floor of 6 percent for periods of very high or low national unemployment.[1]

In addition, states may apply the same rule (20 percent over the national average over 24 months), but to loosely defined economic areas (which could include counties, cities, or parts of counties, as well as multiple-county economic regions). Waivers can also be requested for areas with unemployment of at least 10 percent, on average, over the last 12 or 3 months, if an area had a historically high seasonal unemployment, or had experienced rapid economic changes. Finally, if a state is eligible for extended unemployment benefits at any point, it is eligible for a statewide waiver for the ensuing fiscal year.

In addition, due to The Balanced Budget Act of 1997, state agencies are permitted to exempt from work requirements up to 15 percent of their ABAWDs who would be subject to restrictions otherwise. States have substantial freedom on how to apply these exemptions, and use them in a variety of ways.

The authors obtained the full history of waiver requests from the FNS since 2004. In addition, we contacted each state's department of human services to obtain lists of waivers implemented by each state, and an overview of their ABAWD policies. We were able to collect this information for 22 states and the District of Columbia.

Obtaining the information from the states is important, because implemented waivers in each state differ from those authorized by the FNS in two important ways. First, states' use of

[1] During periods of high national unemployment, an area is classified as a labor surplus area if its unemployment rate is at 10 percent or more, even if it does not exceed 20 percent relative to the two-year national average. The 10 percent ceiling is binding whenever the national two-year average unemployment rate is 8.3 percent or above, while the 6 percent floor is used during periods when national unemployment is at 5 percent or less.

their 15 percent exemptions often supplements ABAWD exemptions in geographic areas other than those that are approved for a waiver by the FNS. For example, some states often exempt areas that had received approval for previous years from the FNS in years when their unemployment numbers fall short for qualifying for such waivers (e.g., New York). When states extend exemptions to particular counties, they do not necessarily exempt all adults. For example, Maryland often used their 15 percent exemptions to cover counties that had been previously waived by the FNS, during years when such counties did not qualify, but only for adults aged 47 to 59. So several counties in Maryland cover all adults in years when they receive FNS-approved waivers, but only older adults in off years. Other states allocate their exemptions under the "15 percent cap" to all non-waiver counties, in proportion to each county's historical SNAP caseload, and delegate some discretion on how to use the exemptions to county offices (e.g., California). Other states, such as Virginia, use 15 percent exemptions to extend reporting periods for ABAWDs to six months.

Additionally, states and counties are not obliged to waive work requirements even if a waiver is issued. Areas covered by waivers can choose to continue to impose restrictions if they pledge to guarantee a spot in their employment and training program or other qualifying program to adults who have reached their third month of eligibility. A few areas in "pledge states" continued to impose restrictions, some even during the nationwide ARRA waiver. For instance, Delaware, certain areas in Colorado, some counties in Texas, and all of New York City did not implement a waiver before, during, or after the ARRA.

Prior to the ARRA, many states had requested waivers for a number of sub-state areas, under a combination of the conditions above. As of early 2009, all but four states had some active waiver for at least part of the state, with a few of them being statewide waivers. The

ARRA waived the work requirement for all states from April 1, 2009, to September 30, 2010. After the expiration of the nationwide ARRA waiver, for fiscal year 2011, all states with the exception of Nebraska were eligible for statewide waivers based on the extended unemployment benefit trigger.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies have found that ABAWD participation in SNAP appears to differ from that of other recipients. Farrell et al. (2003), McKernan and Ratcliffe (2003), and Bartlett et al. (2004) estimated household-level determinants of participation in SNAP/the Food Stamp Program[2] and each found that, compared to other households, ABAWDs were less likely to participate. Gleason et al. (1998) estimated a dynamic model of Food Stamp Program participation for different types of households, and found that macroeconomic factors were highly influential on the length of participation in food stamps for ABAWDs. Using state-level food stamp caseload data, Kornfeld et al. (2002) found that economic trends explain changes in adult-only household participation. Currie and Grogger (2001) differs from these studies by finding that participation by households made up of lone adults was not as sensitive to economic conditions as participation by other households.

There are mixed results on the effect of work requirements on food stamp participation for ABAWDs. Wilde et al. (2000) and Ziliak, Gunderson, and Figlio (2003) used state-level caseload data and found that the share of ABAWDs covered by a waiver is associated with a higher caseload, though this result was not robust to different specifications (Wilde et al., 2000). Danielson and Klerman (2006) used state-level caseload data and a broader index measure

[2] The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was called the Food Stamp Program prior to October 2008. We refer to the program by its current name, except when citing other studies.

representing the severity of ABAWD time-limit policies, and found no effect of ABAWD policies on caseloads. Though suggestive, these studies use aggregated data that hide within-state variation in ABAWD policies and do not necessarily represent household-level decision-making. Ribar et al. (2010) try to correct for this by using administrative data from South Carolina to analyze the length of time and frequency that adult-only households received SNAP benefits. Households in their study who were subject to ABAWD time limits received benefits for a shorter amount of time.

This study investigates the implications of ABAWD restrictions for program participation and work related decisions with household-level data from the American Community Survey, using detailed policy data at the county level across multiple states, between 2006 and 2011. The inquiry is important for several reasons: first, while theoretical expectations are that a more generous safety net generates unproductive incentives, whether this is indeed the case with respect to SNAP, and if so to what extent, is an empirical question, and one that has been rarely investigated with quasi-experimental methods. Perhaps the best evidence of the impact of SNAP on labor market decisions comes from Hoynes and Schanzenbach (2012), who examine earnings using county-level variation in the timing of the program during the initial rollout of the Food Stamp Program in the 1960s and 1970s. They find that the program reduced work efforts and earnings during its rollout period. However, economic conditions and program parameters are different today.

In general, incentives to reduce work effort in means-tested programs are viewed as one of the "costs" of providing a safety net. In all means-tested programs, eligibility and benefits are tied to income (including earned income), and this lowers the marginal wage rate for eligible or near-eligible households. ABAWD restrictions are specifically designed to reduce these

incentives for childless adults who are able to work. In fact, the regulation creates sharp changes to marginal wage rates around the minimum work requirement (20 hours per week). Examining the impact of ABAWD waivers on work effort serves as a test of whether these regulations are fulfilling their intended purpose, but also sheds light on the magnitude of counterproductive incentives due to SNAP in general.

Second, ABAWD regulations are important to investigate because tracking adults and implementing waivers where needed has relatively high administrative costs. Czajka et al. (2001) surveyed Food Stamp Program directors, who, to a large extent, reported that they found ABAWD policy to be very complicated, and that tracking time limits was especially burdensome and costly. In fact, appropriate automated systems were so difficult and costly to develop that even by March 2000, 12 states had no tracking system. A U.S. GAO report (2003) similarly surveyed program officials, and found that the requirements, along with low ABAWD participation, discouraged states from using employment and training funds to serve ABAWDs. Finally, the recent surge in SNAP participation rates during and after the Great Recession is not yet well understood. We seek to separate the impact of economic conditions, as opposed to the policy changes implemented by the ARRA and after, on increases of participation rates of adults with no children.

DATA

This study uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) augmented with data on waiver policy. We obtained all 2004-2009 state waiver requests from the FNS, which allow us to identify areas waived due to local economic conditions. In addition to the FNS waiver data, we also attempted to identify how states used their discretionary 15 percent exemptions. For some states we were able to determine their rule directly from their state waiver

requests, through using publicly-available state documents, or through correspondence with state SNAP program administrators. When 15 percent exemptions were used to augment waivers in specific geographic areas within states, we incorporated this information into our waiver policy data. Using our waiver policy data, we identified as many individuals in the CPS as possible as living in either a waived or unwaived area in any given year. The CPS is publicly available as a set of repeated cross-sections of housing units ("households" in the CPS), with monthly basic labor force data as well as monthly supplemental data that address various special topics. We use data from the 2004-2009 December Food Security Supplements, which in addition to labor force participation information contain household-level food security and food assistance information.

Geography

The CPS provides a few layers of geographic information for many households. All households have state-level information. Some large counties and many metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) are also identified. Finally, the CPS identifies whether an individual lives in a principal city of an MSA (as defined by the Census Bureau), and even identifies some large cities within MSAs. We use all of these variables to identify as many individuals as possible as living in a waived or unwaived area each year. When the geographic information available and waiver coverage areas do not match, however, we are unable to determine whether households living in these areas are subject to restrictions or if restrictions are waived. For example, many MSAs are comprised of multiple counties, and often, principal cities also cross boundaries with multiple counties. In cases when all counties that intersect with an MSA, the principal city within an MSA or the remainder of the MSA (outside of the principal city) share the same waiver status in a given year, we are able to determine waiver status for all households in the area. In other cases, when larger geographic areas identified in the CPS intersect counties that do not share the

same policy on ABAWD restrictions, we are not able to determine if each household in the area is subject to the waiver.[3] In rare cases, only a very small percent (usually not more than 10%) of an area's population is unwaived, and we assign waived status to the whole area. Since a specific area's waiver status changes over time, sometimes an area that is identifiable in one year will not be identifiable in the next, resulting in an unbalanced geographic panel. In this paper, we focus on a balanced panel that identifies geographic areas that were subject to a waiver over the entire study period and those that switch status during, but whose status is always identifiable.

Due to the timing of waivers – which often run from April to March of the next year, but with substantial variation – as well as the month of the CPS Food Security Supplement, we identify an area as being waived if it is waived in December of that year. Thus, since most of the country was waived starting in April of 2009, it is identified as being waived in December of 2009.

We will focus this paper on the areas that we can identify as either always waived, or never waived from 2004-2008 and only waived starting with the ARRA. In order to cleanly measure the impact of the ARRA on SNAP participation and work outcomes, we use only areas that were either always or never waived till the ARRA. In our figures and regressions, we use the total proportion of ABAWDs in each classification (always vs never waived) to measure the impact of the ARRA.

ABAWD Definition

We define ABAWDs as individuals between the age of 18 and 49 who are not disabled or in school and who live in households without children under the age of 18. For the years that we wish to use (2004-2009), the CPS asks about disability only in relation to work outcomes. Thus our definition of not disabled is if an individual is classified into any labor force participation

[3] Although we can identify the share of the area's population that is subject to the waiver.

category other than being out of the labor force due to a disability. In 2009, the CPS introduced questions disability-specific questions. We used the 2009 data to compare, the two methods agree to a very large extent (see Table 1), lending validity to our method of identifying those who are not disabled.

As mentioned above, the CPS defines households as housing units, or all those living in a specific dwelling. The CPS information on SNAP participation is therefore at the level of the housing unit. The CPS households are not necessarily SNAP households, however, since the members need not purchase food and eat together. We therefore restrict our definition of ABAWD to all ABAWDs who are plausibly part of a SNAP household within the CPS household[4]. In doing so, we make the assumption that the primary family members are more likely to be SNAP participants than any non-related ABAWD living in the CPS household. While we feel this is a plausible assumption and strategy, none of our results are affected by a more liberal definition of ABAWD.

To examine the validity of our definition of an ABAWD, Table 1 presents the percent of SNAP participants who are ABAWDs by year. We can compare our definition using the CPS data to information from each year's report on the characteristics of SNAP participants, published by the FNS. For this comparison, we include all primary-family ABAWDs who were in a household that received SNAP benefits at some point in the past year. We present this comparison at both the individual and household level. Although we do not use this definition elsewhere in this paper, to match the FNS SNAP reports we define an ABAWD household as a household with no elderly, no children under 18, and no disabled individuals. Our definition consistently identifies 1-3 percent more ABAWDs and ABAWD households than the SNAP

[4] We exclude from our definition of ABAWDs those who are nonrelatives of the household reference person, housemates/roommates, and roomers/boarders.

reports. These differences can be due to the fact that we do not observe pregnancy status[5], the uncertainty behind reconciling the CPS household definition with that of SNAP, and the possibility that the SNAP definition of disabled does not necessarily include only those whom CPS would classify as disabled.

Outcomes

In this paper we focus on the impact of waivers on the probability of an ABAWD being in a household that participates in SNAP, the probability that an ABAWD is employed, and the probability that an ABAWD worked 20 or more hours in the past week. As noted, the impact of the regulation on effective marginal wage rates is greatest around the 20-hour cutoff. For instance, an ABAWD that has already used the allowed three months and works only 19 hours per week is not eligible, while if they were to increase their labor supply by one hour, they could enroll in SNAP. Thus the probability that an ABAWD worked 20 hours or more in the past week is a test of how potential work disincentives may impact work intensity. We define "employed" as being classified by the CPS as either "employed-at work", or "employed-absent". Hours worked is defined as the sum of the hours worked in a primary and any secondary job. While this information is unavailable for workers who were absent from work the past week, our results do not change if we use usual hours of work (which is available for many of these workers). To keep the definition as close to current (as of December) employment intensity, we therefore use hours worked in the past week.

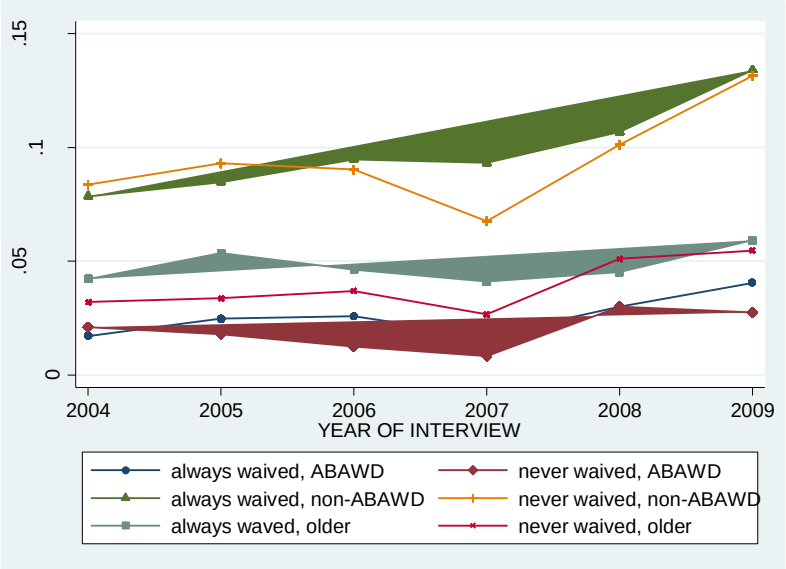
Outcomes by Year

We partitioned areas into two categories: 1) Those that were always waived from 2004 through 2009, and 2) those that had never been waived until 2009, but were waived in 2009. The following figures summarize outcomes by year for each aggregate pseudo-geographical

[5] Pregnant women are not considered ABAWDs subject to the work restriction.

category. The outcomes are proportion of individuals who are SNAP participants, proportion who are employed, and proportion who work 20 hours a week or more. We look at these proportions for the ABAWD population, the population of those 18-49 who are not ABAWDs ("non-ABAWDs"), and the population who are 50-65 years old ("older").

Figure1. SNAP Participation



Source for all figures and tables: Current Population Survey.

Figure 1 presents SNAP participation for each population subgroup of the always-waived and never-waived aggregate areas. Since waivers make it easier for ABAWDs to remain on SNAP, all else equal we would expect participation in never-waived areas to increase due to the ARRA. A difference-in-differences estimate would show a positive participation effect of waivers if ABAWD participation in the never-waived areas increased disproportionately greater

than the ABAWD participation in the always-waived areas. Note that for this analysis, our "control" group is those who have always been treated, and our "treatment" group is those who are exposed to the treatment for the first time in 2009. Interestingly, in 2009 the proportion of ABAWDs on SNAP does not increase at all and even slightly decreases. The proportion of older adults on SNAP in the never-waived area also does not increase as do the other subgroups, suggesting that there is something special about the never-waived areas that would not be taken into account with a difference-in-difference estimate. Looking at the ABAWD participation in never-waived areas relative to that of the always-waived ABAWDs and the older population in never-waived areas, it is not clear that ABAWD restrictions and/or waivers have had a major impact on caseloads.

Figure 2 focuses on employment among the same subpopulations. ABAWDs in general have much higher employment rates than the other two subgroups, and employment in both always- and never-waived areas decrease at similar rates from 2006 through 2009. If getting a waiver has an impact on ABAWD employment in the never-waived area such that there is now a disincentive to work, we would expect the proportion employed to decrease relative to the always-waived area, however we do not see this.

Figure 3 displays the proportion in each subpopulation that is working 20 or more hours per week. Similar to employment, in 2009 there is no obvious decrease in the proportion working 20 or more hours per week among ABAWDs in the never-waived area relative to ABAWDs in always-waived areas.

Figure 2. Employment

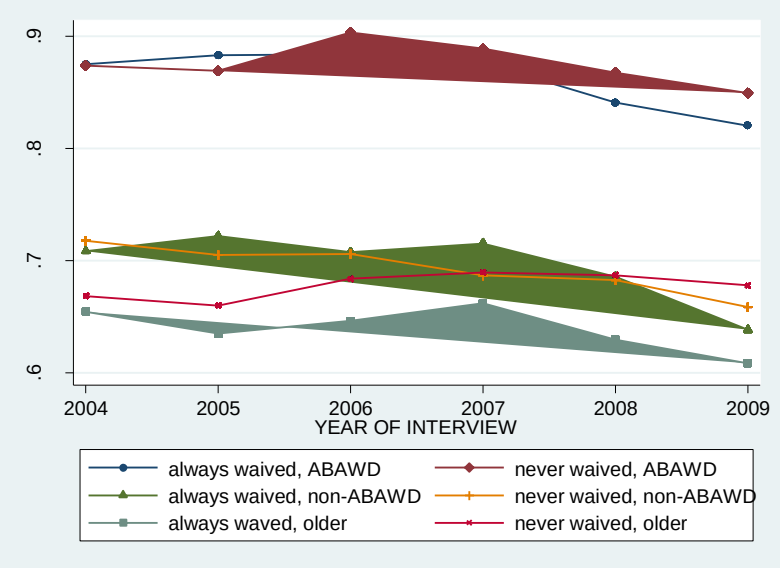
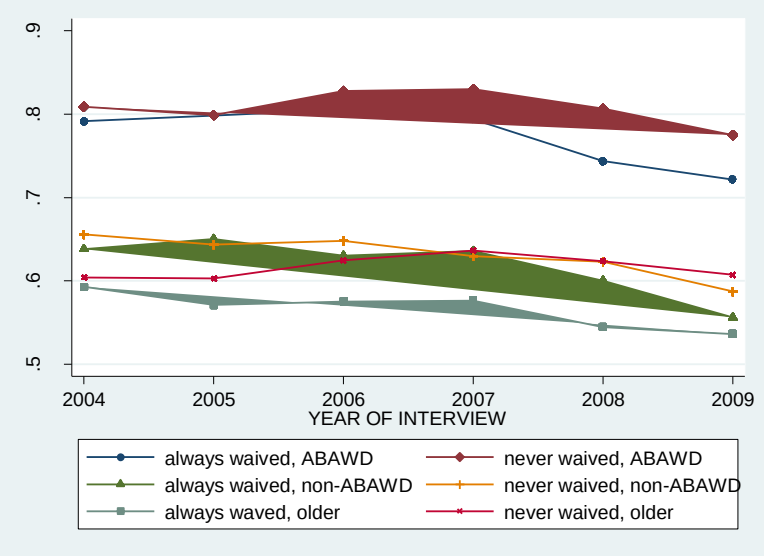


Figure 3. Work 20+ hours/week



EMPIRICAL METHODOLOGY

The previous discussion suggests that triple difference models are the most appropriate, using adults aged 50-65 as the additional control group. Thus we model the progam effects using linear probability models:

$$Y_{iat} = \beta_0 + \gamma ABAWD_i * PostARRA_t * Neverwaived_a + \beta_1 * X_{iat} + \beta_2 * ABAWD_i + \beta_3 * PostARRA_t + \beta_4 * NeverWaived_a + \beta_5 * ABAWD_i * PostARRA_t + \beta_6 * PostARRA_t * NeverWaived_a + \beta_7 * ABAWD_i * NeverWaived_a + \varepsilon_{iat}$$

where Y_{iat} is a binary variable for the outcome of interest (either SNAP participation or employment outcome) of individual *i* in area *a* and period *t*, *ABAWD* is a binary variable for whether the individual is an ABAWD (versus adult 50-65), *PostARRA* is a binary variable for whether the time period is December 2009, and *NeverWaived* is a binary variable for whether the area is the aggregate never-waived category. Note that γ is the coefficient of interest on the triple difference term, which for ease of reference we refer to as *DDD* in the results tables. Individual characteristics correlated with Y_{ict} are also included in X. We control for household size, sex, marital status, race, and education. Standard errors are clustered at the level of the original (disaggregated) area. Weights are person-level CPS supplement weights.

Results for models on the three outcomes are shown in Tables 2-4. The triple-difference variable *DDD* is never statistically significantly different from zero. The magnitude of the triple-difference variable is likewise very small, implying little economic significance in addition to statistical uncertainty. These results suggest that ABAWD waivers have had no noticeable impact on whether ABAWDs participate in SNAP. In addition, from this analysis we cannot

measure any work disincentive deriving from SNAP, on either the extensive or intensive margin of work.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study collected detailed policy and examined the impact that ABAWD restrictions have on SNAP program participation and work outcomes. Particular attention was devoted to the ABAWD restriction waiver implemented nationwide as part of the 2009 ARRA. The results of this study suggest that ABAWD restrictions do not affect participation in SNAP. ABAWD restrictions do not appear to be having the intended effect on work, as we found no evidence that newly waived adults changed their work patterns in response to the program change. This could imply that transaction and search costs of finding jobs might play a far more important role in employment/re-employment decisions than access to SNAP might play.

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Table 1. Comparison of ABAWD definitions

	Individuals		Households	
Year	SNAP Report[+]	CPS	SNAP Report[+]	CPS
2004	3.8	6.0	8	10.9
2005	3.7	6.2	7.7	11.8
2006	3.9	5.0	7.9	9.6
2007	3.9	5.4	7.9	10.5
2008	3.8	5.8	7.8	11.5
2009	5	6.8*	9.9	13.4**

[+]Values obtained using the SNAP Characteristics report from that year, Tables A.23 and A.1, available from http://www.fns.usda.gov/ops/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap-research.

*Using 2009 disability variables instead of labor force participation, this becomes 6.6.

**Using 2009 disability variables instead of labor force participation, this becomes 11.8.

Note: CPS values obtained using person-level supplement weights.

Table 2. Impact of ABAWD restrictions on ABAWD SNAP participation

Variables	
DDD	-0.001
	(0.00883)
Household size	0.013***
	(0.00142)
Married	-0.050***
	(0.00382)
Male	-0.014***
	(0.00124)
Education: less than high school	0.104***
	(0.00913)
Education: High school	0.036***
	(0.00284)
Education: some college	0.016***
	(0.00170)
Education: College +	0.005**
	(0.00155)
Black	0.043***
	(0.00569)
Hispanic	0.006
	(0.00737)
Other	0.012**
	(0.00432)
N	97196
R-squared	0.06

Fixed effects and interactions not shown.
Standard errors in parentheses
** p<0.01
* p<0.05
*** p<0.001

Table 3. Impact of ABAWD restrictions on ABAWD employment

Variables	
DDD	-0.012
	(0.0119)
Household size	-0.001
	(0.00208)
Married	0.025***
	(0.00493)
Male	0.062***
	(0.00770)
Education: less than high school	-0.318***
	(0.0102)
Education: High school	-0.160***
	(0.00548)
Education: some college	-0.097***
	(0.00558)
Education: College +	-0.040***
	(0.00411)
Black	-0.067***
	(0.0105)
Hispanic	0.0002
	(0.00849)
Other	-0.06***
	(0.00984)
N	97196
R-squared	0.11

Fixed effects and interactions not shown.
Standard errors in parentheses
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01
*** p<0.001

Table 4. Impact of ABAWD waivers on working 20+ hours/week

Variables	
DDD	0.001
	(0.0139)
Household size	-0.0064***
	(0.00164)
Married	0.0448***
	(0.00552)
Male	0.0781***
	(0.00614)
Education: less than high school	-0.331***
	(0.0111)
Education: High school	-0.162***
	(0.00632)
Education: some college	-0.116***
	(0.00484)
Education: College +	-0.0402***
	(0.00442)
Black	-0.0408***
	(0.00914)
Hispanic	0.0209*
	(0.00991)
Other	-0.0486***
	(0.0107)
N	97196
R-squared	0.10

Fixed effects and interactions not shown.
Standard errors in parentheses
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01
*** p<0.001