

Characteristics of Families Receiving Multiple Public Benefits

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INTRODUCTION

A variety of government benefits exist to support low-income families. Many of these benefits provide resources that can reduce immediate hardship. For example, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (formerly called food stamps) are designed to reduce food insecurity, public housing and subsidized rent provide shelter, and Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) provide coverage for health care to those in low-income families.

These and other benefits provide a social safety net that is intended to help families who do not have sufficient income to meet their basic needs. In their absence, families that are not employed or are experiencing periods of under-employment or low-wage employment may face hardships with immediate and/or long-term impacts on parents and their children. By providing support for basic needs, public benefits can help families cope with hardship and stabilize them during a time of crisis. This stability can, in turn, put families in a better position to engage in activities that improve their employment and economic circumstances.

The various safety net programs differ in many ways, including funding sources, eligibility requirements, application and recertification process, and benefit type. These distinctions can make obtaining benefits confusing and complicated. As a result, many low-income families likely do not receive all the benefits to which they are entitled (Waters-Boots 2010; Zedlewski et al. 2006).

Little is known about the extent to which low-income households receive multiple benefits and in what combinations. Some past studies have examined receipt of pairs of benefits (Acs and Loprest 2005; Rosenbaum and Dean 2011). They find that participants in certain benefit programs are likely to receive a second benefit. For example, among Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients, 98 percent receive Medicaid, 81 percent receive SNAP, and 14 percent receive housing assistance (Zedlewski 2012). Among individuals in households receiving SNAP, 81 percent live in households that also receive Medicaid or CHIP (Gothro and Trippe 2010).

Receiving a combination of more than two benefits is substantially more common among TANF recipients than SNAP recipients. Cancian, Han, and Noyes (2011) find that over 50 percent of TANF recipients participate in four or five programs, while over 80 percent of the SNAP population receives only one or two benefits.

Considering all low-income families, rather than specific benefit program populations, yields lower estimates of multiple benefit receipt. Nichols and Zedlewski (2011) find that only five percent of low-income families with a low level of work receive TANF, unemployment insurance, and SNAP.¹ A previous study similarly found that five percent of low-income families received a package of four benefits:

public health insurance, SNAP, child care subsidies, and the Earned Income Tax Credit (Zedlewski, Adams, Dubay, and Kenney 2006). Among poor, single-parent families, the prevalence is higher, with 15 percent of these families receiving all four benefits. These low rates of multiple benefit receipt may be, in part, a result of the programs considered. For instance, child care subsidies are difficult to access, so low-income families are unlikely to receive all four benefits studied.

This brief builds on what is currently known by answering three research questions:

- What types of benefits do low-income families with children receive?
- How many benefits do low-income families with children receive?
- What are the characteristics of families receiving different benefit packages?

In answering these questions, we provide a more complete understanding of what benefits low-income families with children receive, how these families combine benefits, and what distinguishes families that receive different benefit packages.

We find that multiple benefit receipt is common among low-income families with children, with 56 percent of families receiving two or more benefits. However, when we look beyond the receipt of food assistance and public health insurance, a minority of families receive other benefits—fewer than 20 percent receive shelter assistance (housing or energy), cash assistance (TANF or Supplemental Security Income [SSI]), or work supports (child care or transportation assistance). Families that receive one to three benefits generally access food assistance and public health insurance, with limited use of other public benefits. Only when families receive four or more benefits do they branch out to other benefits (e.g., shelter, cash, work supports) in significant numbers. Families that receive the most benefits are the most disadvantaged and tend to have lower incomes, lower attachment to the labor force, and lower educational attainment. They experience greater economic hardship than families that receive fewer benefits.

DATA, SAMPLE, AND ANALYSIS

This analysis uses the 2004 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), which follows individuals in the civilian population over a 48-month period between October 2003 and December 2007. This precedes the Great Recession and thus does not consider the spike in the number of low-income families that resulted from the economic contraction. SIPP respondents, a nationally representative sample of the noninstitutionalized population, answer questions every four months about the previous four-month period, providing information on demographic and family characteristics, income, employment and wages, job characteristics, and receipt of government benefits.^{2, 3}

Our sample consists of low-income, working-aged families with children. Each family has income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level,⁴ at least one child under age 18, and the family head or spouse between 18 and 55 years old. Each month that a low-income family with children appears in the SIPP, the family is included in the analysis sample as a separate observation. In all, the analysis sample includes 192,507 observations, representing 10,759 unique families.⁵

Our analysis examines nine benefits that are designed to help families meet their basic needs and maintain employment:⁶

1. Public health insurance (Medicaid, CHIP, and/or other state children's health insurance program);⁷
2. SNAP benefits;
3. Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) benefits;

4. Free or reduced price school meals, through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program; (SBP)
5. TANF benefits;
6. SSI benefits;
7. Housing assistance (public housing, Section 8 housing, or subsidized rent);
8. Energy assistance via the low income home energy assistance program (LIHEAP); and
9. Work supports (transportation assistance and/or child care subsidies).

By considering these nine benefits, which fulfill different types of needs, including health care, food, shelter, income support, child care, and transportation, we develop a detailed picture of how families combine benefits.

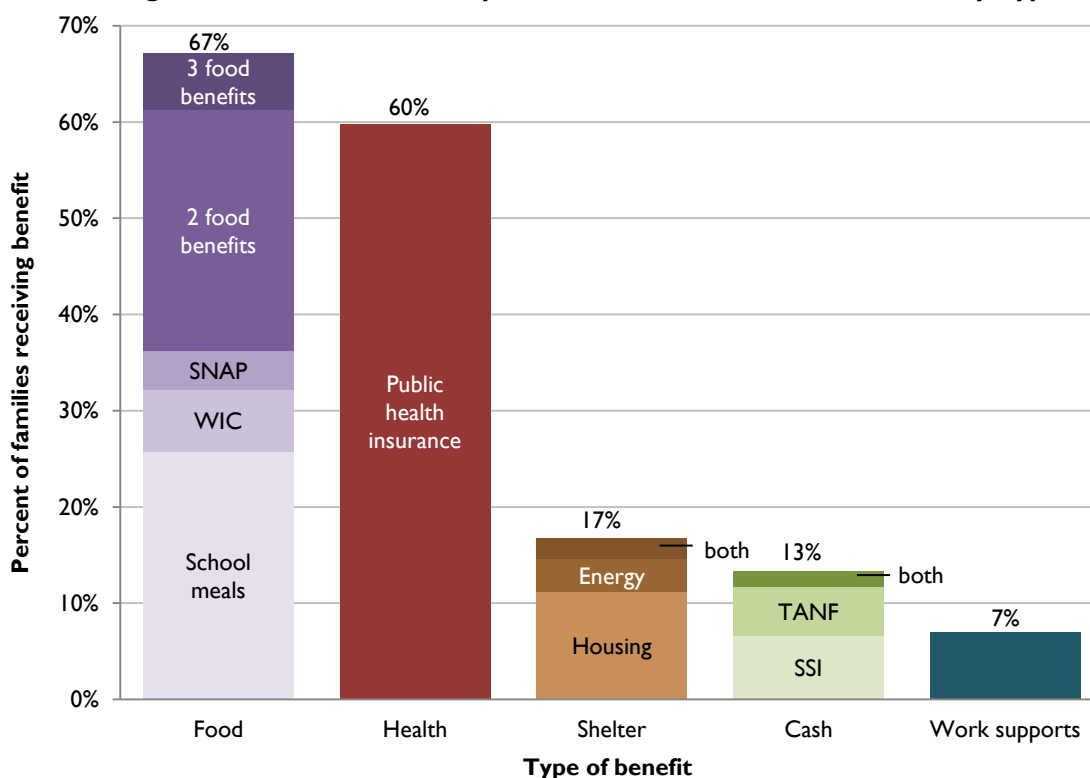
Our analysis begins by describing the types of benefits received by low-income families, recognizing that both program eligibility rules and family decision-making factors influence benefit receipt. Next, we examine the number of benefits received and how that relates to type of benefits received. Finally, we conduct a *cluster analysis* of benefit receipt, which assigns families to clusters (or groups) such that families in each cluster are similar to one another with regards to chosen attributes (Tan, Steinbach, and Kumar 2005). In this case, the attributes are the families' receipt of the nine benefits. Once the clusters are defined, we describe what benefit combinations and demographic characteristics go together.

WHAT TYPES OF BENEFITS DO LOW-INCOME FAMILIES RECEIVE?

Food assistance and public health insurance are the benefits most often accessed by low-income families with children (figure 1). Two-thirds (67 percent) of families receive a food-related benefit, with 36 percent, 25 percent, and 6 percent receiving one, two, and three food benefits, respectively. Among these food related programs, the most common is free or reduced price school meals (52 percent), followed by SNAP (29 percent) and WIC (22 percent). A majority of families also receive public health insurance—60 percent. The high level of school meal and public health insurance receipt results from broad program eligibility. Children in families with income up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level can access reduced price school meals, and income limits for state health insurance coverage for children are usually at or above 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Food and health benefit receipt by families is also dependent on children's ages. For example, only families with a pregnant mother or a child under five years old are eligible to receive WIC and, among children eligible to receive reduced price school meals, younger children are more likely than older children to be signed up for the program (Dahl and Scholz 2011). Further, many states set a higher income eligibility limit (i.e., more lenient) for public health insurance coverage for younger children than for older children.

Benefits that are not food or health related are much less commonly received. Seventeen percent of families receive assistance with shelter costs, in most cases housing assistance (13 percent), but sometimes energy assistance (6 percent). Even fewer families receive support in the form of cash benefits—7 percent receive TANF and 8 percent receive SSI. Likewise, 7 percent receive a work support benefit.

Figure I. Benefits Received by Low-income Families with Children, by Type



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2004 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation. Sample includes low-income, working-aged families with children.

Notes: See Data, Sample, and Analysis section for description of benefit groups. All results are calculated using the SIPP family weight.

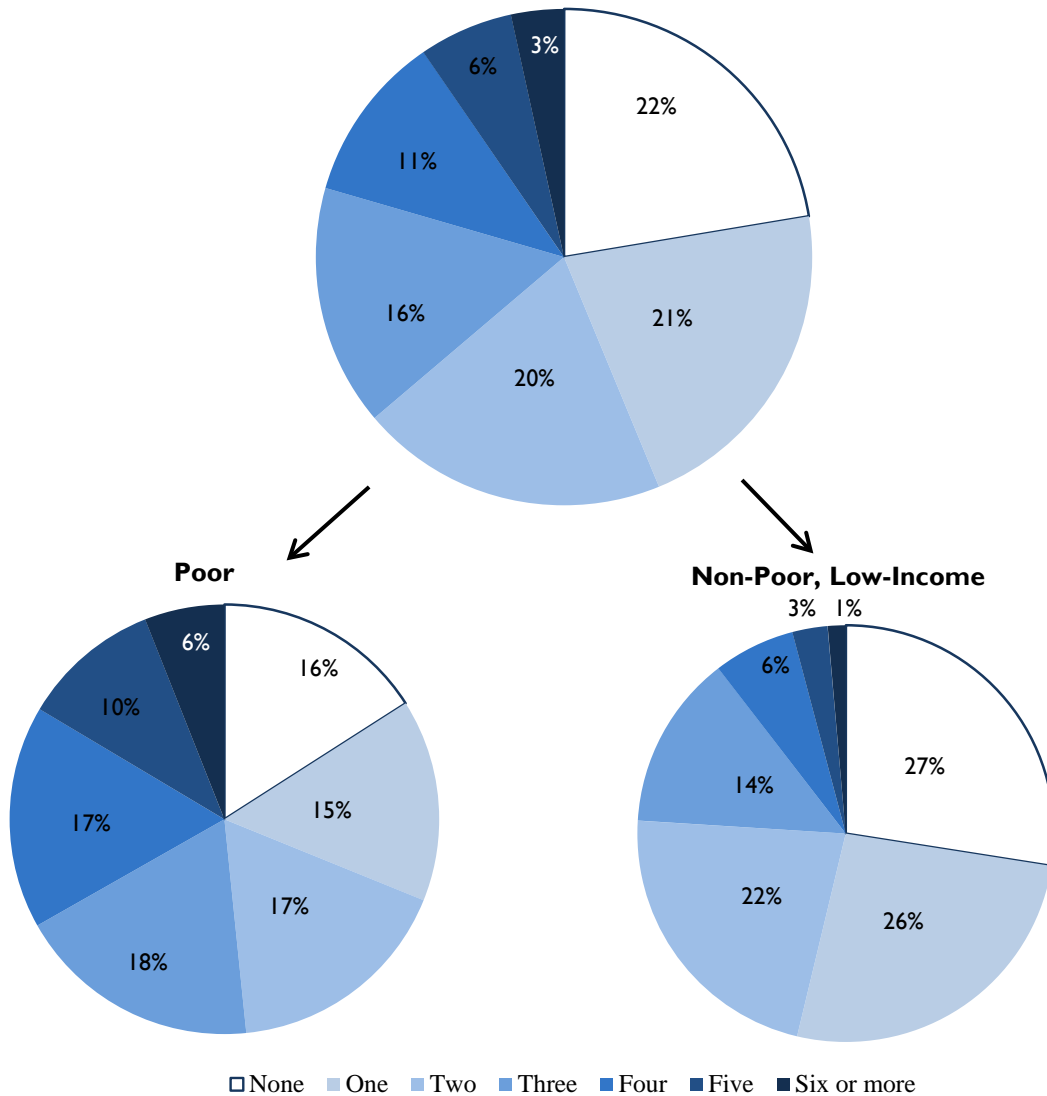
HOW MANY BENEFITS DO LOW-INCOME FAMILIES RECEIVE?

Benefit receipt and multiple benefit receipt are common among low-income families with children. Over three-quarters (78 percent) of families receive at least one benefit, with a minority (22 percent) receiving no benefits (figure 2). The numbers of families that receive one, two, and three benefits are somewhat similar: 21 percent receive one benefit, 20 percent receive two benefits, and 16 percent receive three benefits. Another 20 percent of low-income families receive four or more benefits.

Higher levels of benefit receipt are more common among poor families with children (incomes below 100 percent of the federal poverty level), as compared with non-poor, low-income families with children (incomes between 100-200 percent of the federal poverty level). Over half (52 percent) of poor families receive three or more benefits, as compared with a quarter (24 percent) of non-poor, low-income families with children. Examining even higher levels of benefit receipt, we find that a third of poor families receive four or more benefits, while 10 percent of non-poor, low-income families do so.

At the other end of the spectrum, roughly half (53 percent) of non-poor low-income families receive zero or only one benefit compared with about a third of poor families. Nearly half of poor families receive two or fewer benefits, despite having income that makes them eligible for most of the programs considered here. Some poor and low-income families may have incurred only temporary income drops, so may choose not to apply for benefits or focus on only a single benefit program.

Figure 2. Number of Benefits Received by Low-income Families with Children



Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2004 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation. Sample includes low-income, working-aged families with children.

Notes: Poor families have incomes below 100 percent of the federal poverty level; non-poor, low-income families have incomes between 100–200 percent of the federal poverty level. The nine program benefits include SNAP, WIC, free or reduced price school meals, public health insurance, TANF, SSI, work supports, housing assistance, and energy assistance. All results are calculated using the SIPP family weight.

Food assistance and public health insurance are the most prevalent benefits received either alone or in combination. If a family receives only one benefit, it is one of these two types in 97 percent of families, with only three percent receiving one of the other five benefits (table 1, row 1). Among families that receive two benefits, over 90 percent receive food assistance and over 80 percent public health insurance, while five percent receive housing assistance and fewer families receive energy assistance, TANF, SSI, or work support benefits (table 1, row 2). These “other” benefits (non-food and non-health insurance) are also received by a small minority of families (less than 15 percent) that receive three benefits.

Table 1. Type of Benefits Received by Number of Benefits Received (Percent)

Number of benefits	Food	Health	Housing	Energy	SSI	TANF	Work supports
One	60	37	2	0.3	0.3	0.03	1
Two	92	83	5	2	4	0.3	3
Three	98	95	14	5	13	3	7
Four or more	99.9	99	48	22	26	30	24

Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2004 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation. Sample includes low-income, working-aged families with children.

Notes: Number of benefits is out of nine possible benefits: the three "food" benefits (SNAP, WIC, and free or reduced price school meals) plus the others listed in the columns. All results are calculated using the SIPP family weight.

Only when we focus on families that receive four or more benefits do we see substantial fractions of families receiving benefits other than food assistance or public health insurance. Among families that receive four or more benefits, 90 percent receive a benefit other than food assistance or public health insurance (not shown). Nearly half (48 percent) receive housing assistance, and between 22 percent and 30 percent of families receive each of the other four benefits: energy assistance, TANF, SSI, and work supports (table 1, row 4). The lower level of receipt of these "other" benefits is a consequence of their more stringent eligibility requirements and/or more limited funding.

Although food assistance and public health insurance dominate, other program benefits are important for the well-being of low-income families with children. To better understand how families who receive these less prominent benefits access different services, we examine benefit receipt by key program. For example, how do families who receive TANF combine that assistance with other types of government benefits?

TANF-recipient families have the highest level of benefit receipt, with families receiving an average of five benefits in a month (table 2, row 1).⁸ Beyond food assistance and public health insurance, which nearly all TANF families receive, 41 percent of these families receive housing assistance and 24 percent receive SSI, followed by work supports and energy assistance. The median income eligibility limit for TANF, which is set by states, was 49 percent of the federal poverty level in 2011 (Kassabian, Whitesell, and Huber 2012), so TANF recipients have very low incomes, making them likely to rely on many benefits.

Like TANF families, the vast majority of families receiving housing assistance also access food assistance (93 percent) and public health insurance (89 percent; table 2, row 3). In addition, between 15 percent and 21 percent of housing assistance families receive the other four benefits—energy assistance, TANF, SSI, and work supports.⁹ On average, these families receive 4.3 benefits in a month.

Beyond food assistance and public health insurance, families receiving energy assistance, work supports, and/or SSI are most likely to also receive housing assistance and TANF benefits.

In sum, families receiving between one and three benefits generally access food assistance and public health insurance, with limited use of other public benefits. Only when families receive four or more benefits do they branch out to other benefits in significant numbers.

Table 2. Additional Benefits Received by Benefit Recipient Group

Benefit received	Additional benefits received (percent)							Average number of benefits
	TANF	Energy	Housing	Work supports	SSI	Health	Food	
TANF	—	17	41	20	24	99	99	5.0
Energy	21	—	38	16	18	92	94	4.6
Housing	21	16	—	19	15	89	93	4.3
Work supports	20	13	37	—	7	89	89	4.3
SSI	20	12	24	6	—	96	89	4.2
Health	11	9	20	10	13	—	84	3.0
Food	10	8	18	9	11	74	—	2.9

Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2004 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Notes: Sample includes low-income, working-aged families with children. Food assistance includes three possible benefits: SNAP, WIC, and free or reduced price school meals. Mean number of benefits is out of nine possible benefits: the three food benefits mentioned plus the others listed in the columns. Health: public health insurance. Work supports: child care subsidies, transportation assistance. All results are calculated using the SIPP family weight.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILIES RECEIVING DIFFERENT BENEFIT PACKAGES?

To understand in more detail the specific packages of benefits different families receive, we conducted a cluster analysis. The cluster analysis identifies six distinct groups (or clusters) of low-income families with children, differentiated by the combinations of benefits they receive.¹⁰ The clusters range from families that receive no benefits (cluster 1) to families that receive an average of four benefits in a month (clusters 5 and 6, see Summary of Six Benefit Clusters box). Although there are differences within each cluster, the

Summary of Six Benefit Clusters

Cluster 1: Families do not receive any of the nine benefits.

Cluster 2: All families receive free or reduced price school meals; relatively few (15 percent) receive any other benefit.

Cluster 3: All families receive public health insurance and most receive SNAP or free or reduced price school meals (67 percent); few (17 percent) receive another type of benefit.

Cluster 4: All families receive WIC, most families receive public health insurance (82 percent), and a substantial fraction receives SNAP (40 percent). No families receive free or reduced price school meals and a minority of families receives other benefits (6 percent to 15 percent).

Cluster 5: All families receive WIC and free or reduced price school meals, most receive public health insurance (85 percent), and over half (52 percent) receive SNAP. Between 10 percent and 19 percent of families receive other benefits.

Cluster 6: Over 75 percent of families receive public health insurance, SNAP, and free or reduced-price school meals. Housing assistance is received by over half (55 percent) of families and other benefits are received by 22 percent to 29 percent of families (with the exception of WIC, received by virtually no families).

the six cluster groups can generally be described as: (1) no benefits, (2) school meals only, (3) predominantly school meals and public health insurance, (4) predominantly WIC and public health insurance, (5) predominantly school meals, WIC, and public health insurance, and (6) a mix of benefits, with school meals, WIC, public health insurance, and housing assistance received by a majority of families.

Cluster 3, families receiving a package of public health insurance and school meals, is the most common, representing over one-quarter of all families (table 3). Cluster 1, those receiving no benefits is the next biggest with over one-fifth of all families. Clusters 2, 4, 5, and 6 are similar in size, each representing about 10–12 percent of all families.

On average, families in the later cluster groups receive more benefits, have lower incomes, and are more likely to

experience economic hardship (table 4, top panel). Families in cluster 1 receive no benefits, while those in cluster 2 receive an average of 1.2 benefits. Families in the later clusters (clusters 3–6) receive multiple benefits at a time, on average. Families in clusters 3 and 4 receive an average of 2.0 and 2.7 benefits, respectively, while those in clusters 5 and 6 receive an average of four benefits.¹¹

Benefit receipt is related to income, although not perfectly. The average income of families in clusters 1 and 2—families that receive no benefits and an average of one benefit, respectively—is nearly identical, with average family income roughly 20 percent higher than the federal poverty level (120 percent). The income of families in clusters 2 and 3 are near the poverty line (106 percent and 99 percent, respectively), while those in cluster 6 have average family income that falls well short of the poverty line (76 percent). Employment and earnings follow a similar pattern with higher employment rates and earnings for families that receive fewer benefits on average. Along with lower employment, earnings, and income, families in cluster 6 are more likely to experience economic hardship. Half of families in cluster 6 report being unable to cover basic expenses in the last 12 months, compared with roughly 35 percent of families in clusters 2, 3, and 4 (receiving one to three benefits on average).

Table 3. Benefits Received by Cluster Group

	<u>Cluster 1</u>	<u>Cluster 2</u>	<u>Cluster 3</u>	<u>Cluster 4</u>	<u>Cluster 5</u>	<u>Cluster 6</u>	All families
	No benefits	School meals	School meals and health	WIC and health	WIC, school meals, health	Mixed benefits	
Benefits received							
School meals	0%	100%	62%	0%	100%	75%	52%
SNAP	0%	6%	22%	40%	52%	89%	30%
WIC	0%	0%	0%	100%	100%	0.4%	22%
Public health insurance	0%	0%	100%	82%	85%	89%	60%
Housing assistance	0%	5%	5%	15%	19%	55%	13%
Energy assistance	0%	2%	2%	6%	10%	22%	6%
SSI	0%	1%	7%	6%	11%	29%	8%
TANF	0%	0%	1%	8%	13%	29%	7%
Work supports	0%	2%	3%	11%	13%	22%	7%
Number of benefits	0	1.2	2.0	2.7	4.0	4.1	2.0
Number of family months	43,074	24,543	55,762	20,798	21,486	26,841	192,504

Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2004 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation. Sample includes low-income, working-aged families with children.

Note: All results are calculated using the SIPP family weight.

Another clear distinction across these groups is age of the children in the family (table 4, bottom panel). Families in the “school meals” group (cluster 2) must have school-aged children and, on average, have the oldest children of the six cluster groups. Conversely, families in the “WIC and health” group (cluster 4) have pre-school aged children (under age 5) or the mother is pregnant; this group has the youngest children of the six groups. On average, families have two children, although families in the group that receives both WIC and free or reduced price school meals (cluster 5) are larger with an average of three children.

Family structure, educational attainment, and race and ethnicity also differ across the clusters. Among families that receive no benefits (cluster 1), a minority are single-parent families (25 percent), with the majority being married-couple families (67 percent). Conversely, three-quarters of the most disadvantaged families (cluster 6) are single-parent families. Those families in the intervening clusters (clusters 2–5) are more similar to cluster one—a minority being single-parent families (between 33 percent and 41 percent).

Families that receive no benefits (cluster 1) are the most likely to have a college degree (28 percent) and are the least likely have no high school degree (7 percent).¹² The other cluster groups have substantially lower levels of educational achievement, with 17 percent to 26 percent of families having no high school degree. Finally, families with no benefits are more likely to be non-Hispanic white as compared with families in the other groups.

Table 4. Economic and Demographic Characteristics of Families by Cluster Group

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5	Cluster 6	All families
	No benefits	School meals	School meals and health	WIC and health	WIC, school meals, health	Mixed benefits	
Number of benefits	0	1.2	2.0	2.7	4.0	4.1	2.0
Economic characteristics							
Income relative to federal poverty level	122%	121%	106%	99%	92%	76%	105%
Employed	90%	89%	81%	78%	77%	50%	79%
Earnings	\$1,948	\$1,945	\$1,486	\$1,385	\$1,533	\$630	\$1,523
Economic hardship							
Unable to meet basic expenses	22%	35%	35%	33%	39%	51%	34%
Experience multiple hardships ^a	25%	40%	40%	38%	43%	57%	39%
Children's age							
Age of youngest	7.3	8.4	7.1	1.3	2.1	7.5	6.2
Age of oldest	10.2	12.4	10.6	3.8	10.1	11.0	10.0
Number of children	1.9	2.2	2.0	1.8	3.1	2.1	2.1
Family structure							
Single adult ^b	24.6%	37.4%	40.9%	33.2%	35.8%	76.6%	40.4%
Married couple	67.4%	55.5%	46.0%	49.5%	54.9%	16.3%	49.2%
Cohabiting couple	8.0%	7.2%	13.1%	17.3%	9.3%	7.2%	10.4%
Education							
Less than high school	7%	18%	17%	19%	26%	20%	17%
High school diploma	23%	33%	33%	38%	36%	36%	32%
Some college or associates degree	42%	41%	40%	36%	33%	41%	39%
College degree	28%	8%	9%	7%	5%	3%	12%
Race and ethnicity							
White, non-Hispanic	68%	34%	44%	40%	24%	36%	44%
Black, non-Hispanic	11%	19%	20%	19%	23%	39%	21%
Hispanic	15%	42%	28%	34%	48%	18%	28%
Other	7%	6%	8%	7%	5%	7%	7%
Age	38.0	38.1	36.8	29.2	33.0	36.0	35.9
Number of family months	43,074	24,543	55,762	20,798	21,486	26,841	192,504

Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2004 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation. Sample includes low-income, working-aged families with children.

Notes: The family characteristics take account of both the family head and spouse. For example, education is the highest level attained by the family head and spouse. Age is age of the family head, or the spouse if the head is not 18–55 years old. When race or ethnicity of the head and spouse differ, family race is considered to be black if either one is black, Hispanic if neither one is black and one is Hispanic, or “other” if neither one is black or Hispanic and one is “other race.” All results are calculated using the SIPP family weight.

^a There are ten indicators of material hardship: food (1) insufficiency and (2) insecurity; inability to (3) cover basic expenses; (4) pay rent or mortgage, or (5) pay utilities; not seeing a (6) doctor or (7) dentist when needed; termination of (8) phone service or (9) utilities; and (10) eviction from home. Food insufficiency and insecurity are measured over a four-month period and the others over a 12-month period prior to the fifth SIPP interview.

^b Across the sample, 90 percent of the single parent families are headed by females. The percentage is highest in clusters 4, 5, and 6, and lowest in clusters 1 and 3.

Taken together, this analysis shows that low-income families with children receive a diverse package of benefits, although there are some factors that distinguish different types of packages. Families that receive the most benefits tend to have lower levels of employment, lower incomes relative to the federal poverty level, higher levels of economic hardship, lower levels of education, and a lower likelihood of being married.

CONCLUSION

This brief describes the type, number, and combinations of public benefits that low-income families with children receive, as well as the characteristics of these families. By considering a wide spectrum of benefits—nine in all—we find higher rates of multiple benefit receipt than prior studies.¹³ We find that a majority of low-income families with children—56 percent—receive multiple benefits: 20 percent receive two benefits and 36 percent receive three or more benefits. Still, over one-fifth of low-income families and one-sixth of poor families receive no benefits even though they may be eligible.

Many low-income families with children receive food support (SNAP, WIC, and/or school meals) and health benefits (Medicaid, CHIP, and/or other state programs), and the majority of families that receive one to three benefits are limited to these two categories of benefits. Fewer families receive housing assistance, energy assistance, TANF, SSI, child care subsidies, or transportation assistance. These benefits are rarely received on their own, but mostly as part of a package with four to five benefits. Higher levels of benefit receipt are associated with lower income, earnings, and employment, and greater material hardship, but the relationships are not exact. The number and age of children are key determinants of the type and often the number of benefits received. Family structure, too, is important as single-parent families receive more benefits on average.

This study does not account for certain factors that may influence a family's package of benefits, such as ability to work, knowledge of benefit programs, and the presence of other members in the household (outside the family unit). Future analyses may wish to address these and other characteristics, and could consider an even more comprehensive group of benefits that includes unemployment compensation and the Earned Income Tax Credit, for example.

Overall, our findings suggest that low-income families with children are successful in obtaining a safety net of food and health benefits—benefits such as school meals and public health insurance, to which parents and children are entitled. Less frequently do they receive assistance with shelter (housing or energy), cash (TANF or SSI), or work supports (childcare or transportation assistance). In fact, only one of the six groups of low-income families with children (cluster 6) was found to receive these benefits at even a modest rate (between 22 percent and 55 percent). In three of the groups (clusters 3–5), receipt of these benefits was below 20 percent of families, even though the average incomes of these groups are near the federal poverty level (between 92 percent and 106 percent of the federal poverty level). This suggests that low-income families with children are not receiving benefits for which they are eligible. Coordination of program eligibility is likely one factor in this; the availability of resources for non-entitlement programs may also play a role. Many of these families, having young children, could better cope with hardship if they received additional benefits. Although there are concerns those additional programs benefits could increase dependency and reduce families' incentives to work, additional supports, particularly work supports, can be a stabilizing force, putting families in a better position to gain employment and move up the economic ladder.

NOTES

1. Low-income is defined as having cash income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.
2. Benefit receipt tends to be underreported in the SIPP, though less so than in some other household surveys, such as the Current Population Survey (Wheaton 2007). Whether this leads to underestimates or overestimates of single or multiple benefit receipt depends on how underreporting relates to the number of benefits received. Seam bias—the tendency for changes in estimates to be greater between two successive waves of a survey than between estimates measured within a single interview—is found in the 2004 SIPP (Moore 2008) and leads to both under- and over-reporting of benefits, depending on when receipt began and ended. It is unlikely to bias our findings in a meaningful way.
3. Some respondents do not answer all of the questions. In these cases, the Census Bureau uses statistical hot-deck imputation for the item nonresponse; we include these values in our analysis.
4. In 2012, the poverty threshold for a single parent with two children was \$18,498. Thus, this family was below 200 percent of the federal poverty level if it had income below \$36,996.
5. Some families appear in the sample for only a few months, while others appear for all 48 months of the panel. Over time, families may shift in their composition or split into two families.
6. We include only program benefits that are means-tested; that is, eligibility is based on a family's income. This excludes such benefits as unemployment compensation, which are important for stabilizing families after job loss but are based on one's work history (not current income). We do not include the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), another key support for low-income working families, because it is not a program that people apply for, but rather, a tax credit that people receive as a result of the tax filing process.
7. Medicaid provides coverage to children as well as some parents and other adults; CHIP covers children not eligible for Medicaid, and low-income pregnant women.
8. Ninety-two percent of TANF families receive four or more benefits (not shown).
9. Families that receive housing assistance may have their utilities partially covered if utilities are included in public housing rent.
10. The cluster analysis considers all nine benefit types in creating the six clusters.
11. See appendix table A-1 for more information on the number of benefits received by families in each of the six clusters.
12. Family educational attainment is measured as the greater level of attainment between the head of the household and the spouse, if present.
13. This analysis excludes benefits that are not means-tested, such as unemployment compensation and the Earned Income Tax Credit, which may be integral supports for some families. Higher rates of multiple benefit receipt would be found if we also considered these benefits.

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APPENDIX A

Table A-1. Number of Benefits Received, by Cluster Group

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3	Cluster 4	Cluster 5	Cluster 6	All families
	No benefits	School meals	School meals and health	WIC and health	WIC, school meals, health	Mixed benefits	
None	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	22%
One	0%	85%	27%	15%	0%	7%	21%
Two	0%	14%	44%	38%	11%	1%	20%
Three	0%	1%	28%	23%	30%	12%	16%
Four	0%	0%	1%	14%	25%	46%	11%
Five	0%	0%	0%	8%	18%	24%	6%
Six or more	0%	0%	0%	2%	16%	10%	3%
Mean number	0	1.2	2.0	2.7	4.0	4.1	2.0
Number of family months	43,074	24,543	55,762	20,798	21,486	26,841	192,504

Source: Authors' tabulations of the 2004 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation. Sample includes low-income, working-aged families with children.

Notes: All results are calculated using the SIPP family weight.

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