How Long Do Families Stay on AFDC in Washington?

There are **two** answers to this question. Different definitions of "who is on welfare" provide different **median*** lengths of stay.

Who is on welfare?

➤ **Looking only at *new entrants* to AFDC** (e.g., all households that entered for the first time, or re-entered, in a given month) and following their experience on welfare for five years, the median length of stay will be relatively short.

Who looked at it this way?   *Department of Social and Health Services*
What was the median length of stay?   **11** months

*Following a sample of **new entrants** is a good way to see if the characteristics of the new entrants are changing, but it does not capture those families who are in the midst of a long stay on welfare.*

➤ **Looking at the *caseload* at a point in time** (e.g., all households receiving AFDC in a given month), noting recipients' experience on welfare in the past, and following their experience on welfare for five years, the median length of stay will be longer.

Who looked at it this way?   *Family Income Study*
What was the median length of stay?   **36** months

*Following a sample of **the caseload at a point in time** is a good way to study welfare dependency and the dynamics of the caseload, because it captures a few first time entrants, those in the midst of short stays on welfare, those in the midst of long stays, and those who returned to AFDC after an exit. It does not capture recent changes in the characteristics of new entrants.*

Why is the median length of stay so different?

Most new entrants stay for just a short time and then leave (although some may return to welfare later), while those few who stay for a long time continuously "accumulate" in the system. Only a small percentage of new entrants will become long-term recipients, but the long-term recipients represent a significant portion of the welfare caseload at any given time.

If you have any questions, please call Carol Webster or Greg Weeks at the Institute.

* **Median** is the midpoint; half stay a shorter
  time and half stay a longer time