Multiple Safety Net Program Participation: Incidence and Impacts from Reducing Administrative Burdens*

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Abstract

Multiple program participation among low-income households is a critical yet understudied aspect of the modern U.S. social safety net. Leveraging high-quality administrative records from Virginia, we find that half of program recipients participated in multiple programs despite significant gaps in take-up persisting among eligible populations. We evaluate the causal impact of a technological reform that streamlined applications for SNAP, Medicaid, and TANF via a centralized online platform. Introducing a novel framework that decomposes the reform's effects into "geographic" and "fixed" administrative burdens by distance to field office, we employ complementary research designs to identify the impacts of reducing each burden type. The policy reform markedly increased multiple program participation, predominantly among households with children, and targeted those with increased work histories and fewer criminal offenses. A partial identification analysis of recipient types reveals that a significant share of multiple program participation likely occurred along the intensive margin. Finally, using the marginal value of public funds (MVPF) framework, we evaluate the policy reform and demonstrate that MVPF calculations are sensitive to the inclusion of single versus multiple programs, highlighting the importance of considering multiple programs in welfare analyses. Collectively, our results suggest that reductions in administrative burdens to multiple programs can benefit low-income working parents who were previously leaving benefits on the table.

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