Recent Trends in the Distribution of Social Safety Net Support:

Inequality in Government Transfers

A Research Note

Carolina Cardona
Johns Hopkins University

Robert A. Moffitt
Johns Hopkins University

Gwyn Pauley
University of Wisconsin

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Abstract

We update past work by charting how the distribution of transfers to low income families has evolved through 2016. Over the past 30 years, the U.S. safety net has increasingly provided support to low income families with significant levels of earnings and other private income relative to support for the poorest families, especially those with no members of the family who are working. In some periods, support to the poorest families declined in absolute terms, not just relative to those with higher incomes. By 2016, the poorest families with children received less support than those with higher incomes, inverting the usual negative correlation of support and private income. While this long-term trend has been punctuated with greater support to the poorest families during recessions, the trend toward greater support for working but low-income families reflects continued favored treatment by policy makers and presumably voters to that group.

Among the many dimensions by which inequality can be measured, an important dimension that reflects concrete government policy decisions is how social safety net expenditures are distributed across the low-income population. In 2018, the U.S. spent a little over 1 trillion dollars on the largest means-tested safety net programs.[1] While, by necessity, these expenditures went, on average, to lower income families in the U.S., who received the most support within that population? The poorest of the poor? Those who are better off and just poor by the measure of the government policy line? Those who are "almost" poor, with incomes somewhat above that line? Even higher income families? Many would assume that the poorest families receive the most support, but is this true? What does inequality of safety net support look like?

This essay updates the answers to these questions provided in past research. Moffitt (2015) found that, over the 20-year period from 1984 to 2004, the lowest income families saw declining support and somewhat higher income families saw increasing support. The poorest single mother families, for example, saw a 35 percent decline in support from safety net programs over that period.[2] This was a result of a decline in programs providing cash transfers to families who had no members employed or employed at low earnings (like the AFDC program), and the rise of programs that primarily support those who were employed with substantial earnings (like the Earned Income Tax Credit). Moffitt interpreted this trend as reflecting centuries-old preferences for supporting the "deserving poor"—those who work and have been able to garner significant private income on their own.

But Moffitt (2013) showed that the Great Recession (approximately 2008 to 2011) reversed this trend, with support going disproportionately to the poorest households.[3] This was a result of a major set of increased funding of programs which supported nonworkers and families with low earnings, such as the SNAP program and TANF. However, from the end of the Recession to 2013, Moffitt and Pauley (2018) showed that, while the poorest families experienced gains in safety net support—primarily from large increases in support from the SNAP program—those with somewhat higher incomes saw even greater growth in support. As a result, the gap in support between the poorest of the poor and the working poor increased, thereby increasing the inequality of government safety net expenditures.

Since 2013, there has been one major change in the safety net—the expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Medicaid was already the largest safety net program in terms of dollars, and the ACA made it even larger. The estimates reported in past work omitted Medicaid expenditures from their calculations of government support, for data reasons. In this essay, we use new data to add Medicaid to the picture, and we update all trends through 2016, two years after the start of the ACA. In 2016, a second policy change occurred when Congress enacted a little noticed but important expansion of the Child Tax Credit—the program under which families filing tax returns can get some credits depending on their numbers of children.

The other major development since 2013 was the massive increase in transfer program support in 2020 and 2021 in response to the Pandemic Recession. While no data at the same level of accuracy and detail as we use in our other analysis are yet available for this period, we describe the type of programs expanded and how they are likely to affect families at different levels of income.

Trends in Aggregate Transfers Through 2018

Figure 1 shows the trend in total per capita real expenditures summed over the 17 largest transfer programs through 2018. These include both means-tested transfers—those requiring low income for eligibility—and so-called social insurance programs like Social Security, Medicare, Disability Insurance, and Unemployment Insurance which, though not targeted on low income families per se, nevertheless support many of them.

The Figure shows a steady long-term growth in real expenditures per capita, with a small jump up in the Great Recession and a decline after that left expenditures higher than before. Both social insurance expenditures and means-tested program expenditures have grown. However, Medicaid expenditures have grown faster than that of other means-tested programs and that, after 1998 Medicaid expenditures were higher than all other means-tested program expenditure combined.

Although non-Medicaid means-tested transfers have grown more slowly than those for Medicaid, that growth is a result of expansions of some programs and contractions in others. Appendix Figure 1 shows that growth to be primarily from growth in the EITC and SNAP programs and in tax credits from the Child Tax Credit (which was expanded dramatically in 2018). AFDC/TANF expenditures experienced a major decline and per capita housing expenditures have slowly declined since 1995. Appendix Figure 2 shows that most growth in social insurance programs have been from Social Security retirement and Medicare.

Trends in the Distribution of Transfers Through 2016

For our examination of trends in the distribution of transfers, we first examine how expenditures have changed for different demographic groups. We examine three: single-parent families, two-parent families, and childless families, excluding the disabled and elderly in order to minimize the influence of retirement and disability programs. The U.S. transfer system provides very different levels of support to these three groups. We then move on to the critical issue of how transfers have changed for families of different income levels.

Figure 2 shows trends in the distribution of transfer income support (both social insurance and means-tested transfers) from 2004 to 2016 for the three demographic groups, computed only for families with incomes below twice the poverty line.[4] Support is measured as average total government dollars spent on 12 major programs per family in each demographic group. The figure shows that average support is greatest for single parent families, second largest for two-parent families, and smallest for childless families. These differences could be a result of differences in income which, as we will see momentarily, is part of the explanation. And the small amount of support for childless families is mostly a result of the much greater support in

US transfer programs for families with children.

Nevertheless, there have been no major trends in the inequality of support from 2004 to 2016 across these demographic groups. All groups saw major increases in support during the Great Recession, but that support has gradually lessened as the temporary programs enacted by Congress have expired and as the economy has improved.

More important, Figure 3 shows, in histogram form, trends in support for families of different income levels within these demographic groups for our initial year (2004), a middle, Great Recession year (2010), and our final year (2016). We stratify families into four groups, depending on the level of their pretax pretransfer family income relative to the poverty line: those with income less than 50 percent of the poverty line for their family size (usually called "deep poverty"), those with income more than 50 percent but less than 100 percent of their poverty line (usually called "shallow poverty"); those with income between 100 percent and 150 percent of the poverty line (usually called "near poverty"); and those with income between 150 percent and 200 percent of the poverty line (which we will call the "nonpoor"). In 2020 dollars, the poverty line for a family of three was approximately $20,900, so those in deep poverty had incomes between approximately $0 and $10,450; those in shallow poverty between $10,450 and $20,900; those in near poverty between $20,900 and $31,390; and the nonpoor with incomes greater than $31,390.

Panel (a) of the Figure shows that, while benefit support in 2004 and 2010 was, as expected, greatest for the poorest families, this was reversed by 2016, with the poorest families receiving less than those with somewhat higher incomes. Appendix Tables 1 and 2 show that this was a result of differences in which program benefits each income group receives and different trends in benefit receipt of those programs. The poorest single mother families disproportionately receive benefits from most programs, with the major exception being the EITC, which is concentrated on those in shallow poverty and near poverty. But benefit receipt from most of those programs declined over time. TANF continued to decline through 2016, as did receipt of housing subsidies because subsidized housing units have stayed fixed while the population of poor single mothers has grown. In addition, the large differences in EITC receipt between those with low incomes and those with higher income families widened. Further, the temporary expansion of the Child Tax Credit in 2009, which was later made permanent, had a much greater impact on support for those in shallow poverty because that credit increases in amount over those ranges of low income. SNAP support also grew more for higher income families over this period, as income eligibility levels were raised and more working poor families participated in the program.

Offsetting this to some degree was a greater growth in Medicaid expenditures for those in deep poverty, although Medicaid grew for those at higher incomes as well (primarily because income eligibility points for Medicaid have drifted upward). But this offset was not enough to outweigh the other factors. The combination of these forces led average monthly support for the poorest single mother families in 2016 ($785 per month in 2009 dollars) to fall below that received by families with higher incomes in shallow poverty ($1,012). Indeed, it also below average monthly support for those single mother families in 2004 ($896).

Panel (b) shows that receipt of benefits by two-parent families, even within the same income bin, was below that of single mother families, with the Great Recession period something of an exception because two-parent families received more additional support then than did single mothers. But, as shown in the Appendix tables, program receipt is quite different for the two groups. Single mother families receive more TANF, SNAP, housing subsidies, and Medicaid, but two-parent families receive more EITC credits and often more social insurance benefits from Unemployment Insurance, presumably because more adults qualify (again, even if in the same income range, including the lowest). The former differences are greater than the latter, leading to greater support single parent families.

But the same inversion of benefit support by income occurs for two-parent families in 2016 and almost occurs in 2004. For the same reason that two-parent families receive less support at very low incomes than single mothers, and because the greater support received by those with higher incomes grew faster over time, it is even more common than for single mothers for the poorest two parent families to receive less support than those with higher incomes.,

Panel (c) shows that childless families receive much less support than families with children, even if in the same income range. But lower income childless families always receive more support than higher income childless families, and this has not changed over time.[5]

The Pandemic Recession

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the national unemployment rate jumped abruptly from 4.4 percent to 14.8 percent in one month as millions of business closed and shutdown policies began. The unemployment rate drifted down gradually, returning to near-normal levels only in the Spring of 2021. Moffitt (2013) showed that the most important programs in the Great Recession benefitting the poorest families were UI and SNAP.[6] Both should be expected to provide additional support automatically in the Pandemic Recession as unemployment rose and incomes fell. As for the Congressional response, Moffitt and Ziliak (2020) noted that that response was very different than in the Great Recession. In the Great Recession, additional support was provided across a broad range of programs—SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, EITC, subsidized housing, child care, and UI, for example—whereas the only one of these programs that Congress provided major additional support to in the Pandemic Recession was UI.[7] However, the pandemic response was greater than that in the Great Recession in two respects. First, the UI response was much greater . In addition to extending the length of time UI benefits could be received—the main Great Recession policy--Congress provided an extra benefit to UI recipients of $600 per week for several months, an amount far greater than most recipients' normal UI benefit. It also provided extra coverage to some groups not ordinarily eligible. Second, different than in the Great Recession, Congress provided a one-time sizable cash payment (the so-called Economic Stimulus payments) to all adults and children with incomes below fairly high levels. Both of these forms of support should benefit the poorest families and not just those with higher incomes.[8]

As noted earlier, there are no data yet available to chart safety net support in different parts of the low income population at the same level of detail and comprehensiveness for this period as for prior periods. Moffitt and Ziliak (2020) obtained data on SNAP and UI receipt over the first few

months after the March 2020 onset and found a major positive response, as did Bitler et al. (2020). Hembre (2020) found, surprisingly, that TANF caseloads also rose. Since these are programs that support the lowest income households, this suggests strong support for such families. Medicaid support also rose, by almost 15 percent from February 2020 to March 2021.[9] Medicaid provides support to those with low incomes, including nonworkers. That all of these programs provide important support to the lowest income families, including those currently out of work, suggests that the safety net response in the Pandemic Recession may, like that in the Great Recession, be distributionally favorable. But much depends on the take-up rate of benefits for the poorest families and their access to the newly provided benefits.

Summary

Over the past 30 years, the U.S. safety net has increasingly provided support to low income families with significant levels of earnings and other private income relative to support for the poorest families, especially those with no members of the family who are working. In some periods, support to the poorest families declined in absolute terms, not just relative to those with higher incomes. By 2016, the poorest families with children received less support than those with higher incomes, inverting the usual negative correlation of support and private income. While this long term trend has been punctuated with greater support to the poorest families during recessions, the trend toward greater support for working but low income families reflects continued favored treatment by policy makers and presumably voters to that group.

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[1] Medicaid, CHIP, SSI, TANF, EITC, CTC, ACTC, SNAP, Subsidized Housing, School Food Programs, WIC, and Head Start.

[2] His work built on prior work by Scholz et al. (2009), Moffitt and Scholz (2010) and Ben-Shalom et al. (2012). Hoynes and Schanzenbach (2018) calculated spending on children from 1990 to 2015 and found smaller increases for children in deep poverty than for children in families with higher incomes.

[3] See Ziliak (2015) and Anderson et al. (2015) for further documentation of increases in transfers in the Recession, and see Larrimore et al. (2015), Bitler and Hoynes (2016), and Bitler et al. (2020) for a comparison of the Great Recession to prior recessions.

[4] We use pre-tax, pre-transfer income for this designation. As in prior work, these results are computed using the Survey of Income Program Participation (SIPP), a nationally representative survey of the U.S. population, to measure support at the family level, for all programs except Medicaid. We use the 2004, 2008, and 2014 SIPP panels for our assessment of trends. For Medicaid, we use the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey from 2004 to 2016. Respondent reports of participation and benefits in both surveys have been adjusted for underreporting using administrative control totals. Hoynes and Schanzenbach (2018) found similar trends using administrative data.

[5] Appendix Figure 3 shows year-by-year trends and provides more detail than the histograms in Figure 3.

[6] A qualification to the importance of UI is that some very low-income families do not have sufficient work histories to qualify for UI. However, for those with earnings below 50 percent of the poverty line as a whole, UI transfers are very important.

[7] Congress did permit SNAP benefits to be raised to their maximum level. But in the Great Recession, Congress significantly increased the maximum benefit itself. Congress also provided for additional housing and Medicaid assistance, but only modest in magnitude.

[8] Congress enacted additional support in December 2020 and March 2021. We do not cover this legislation in the current paper and discuss only reforms covering the main 2020 year.

[9] https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/analysis-of-recent-national-trends-in-medicaid-and-chip-enrollment/

Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Annual Expenditure per capita, 1970-2018 (real 2009 dollars)

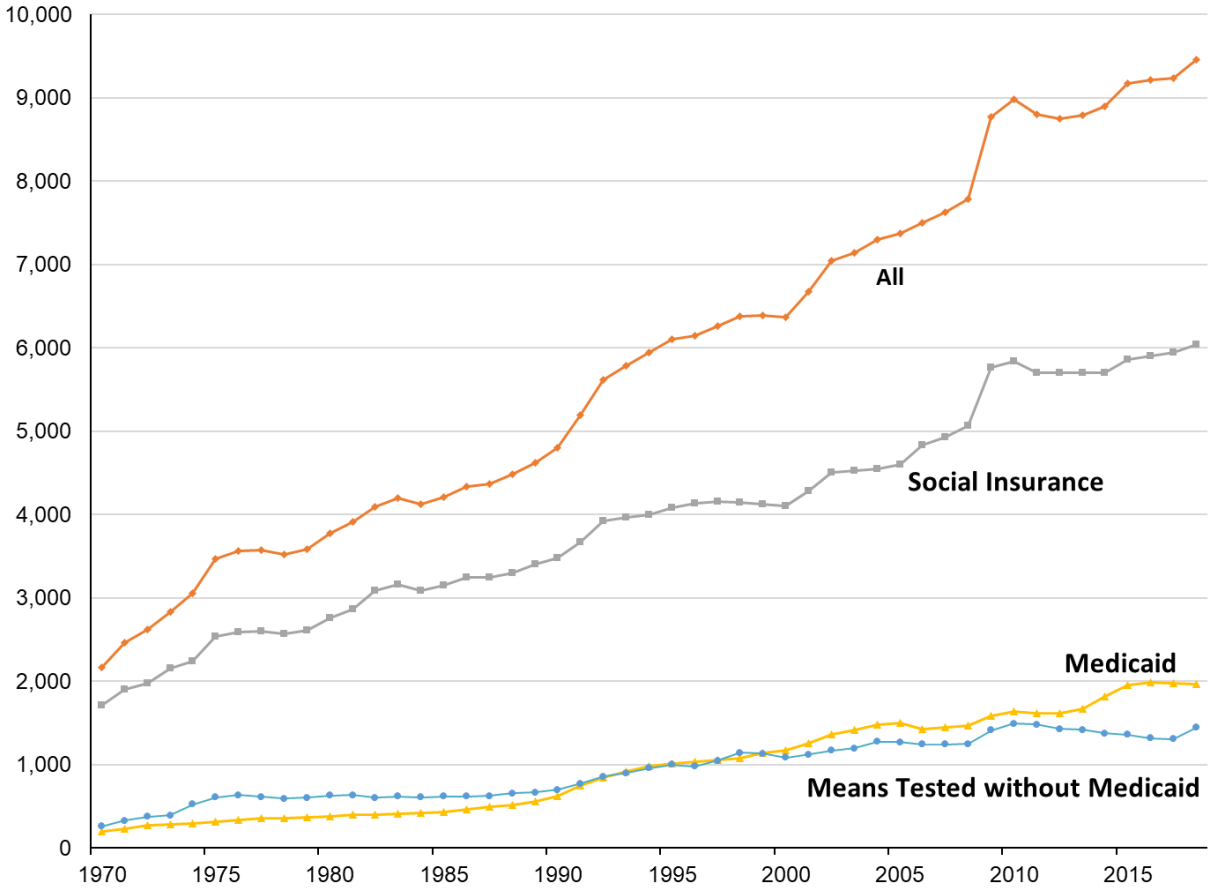
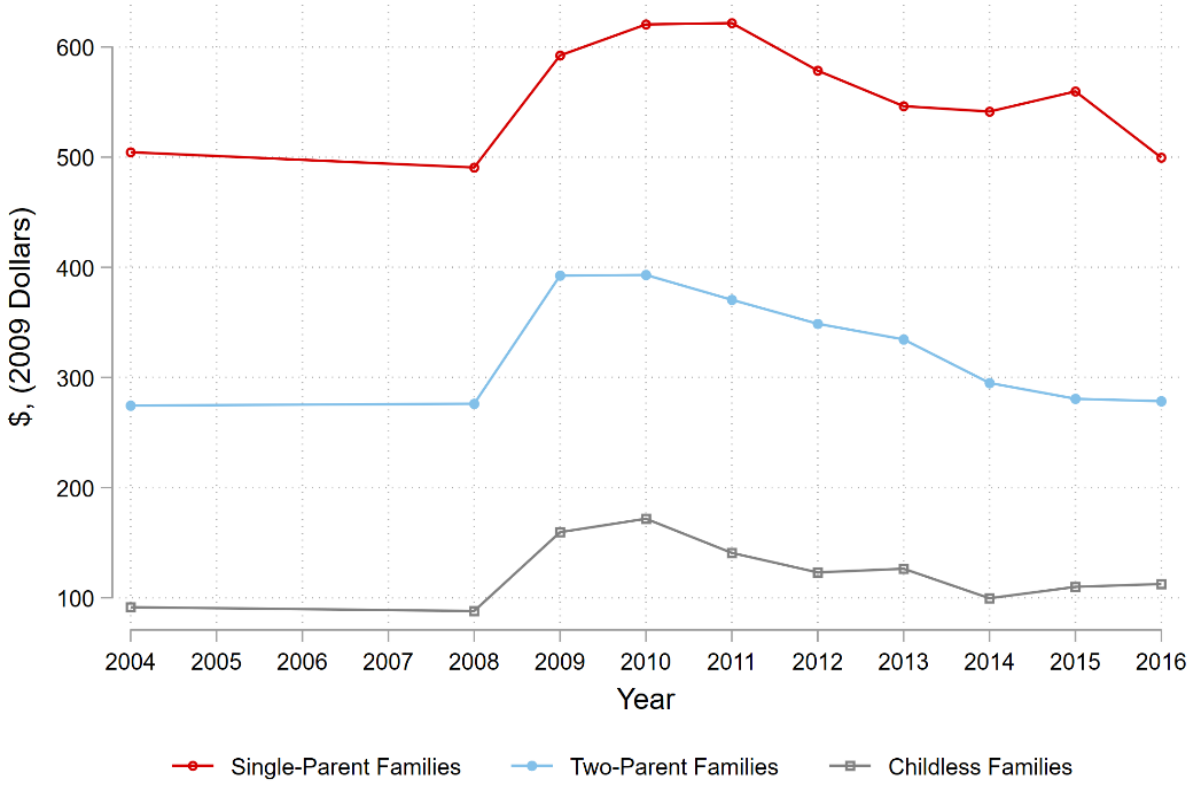


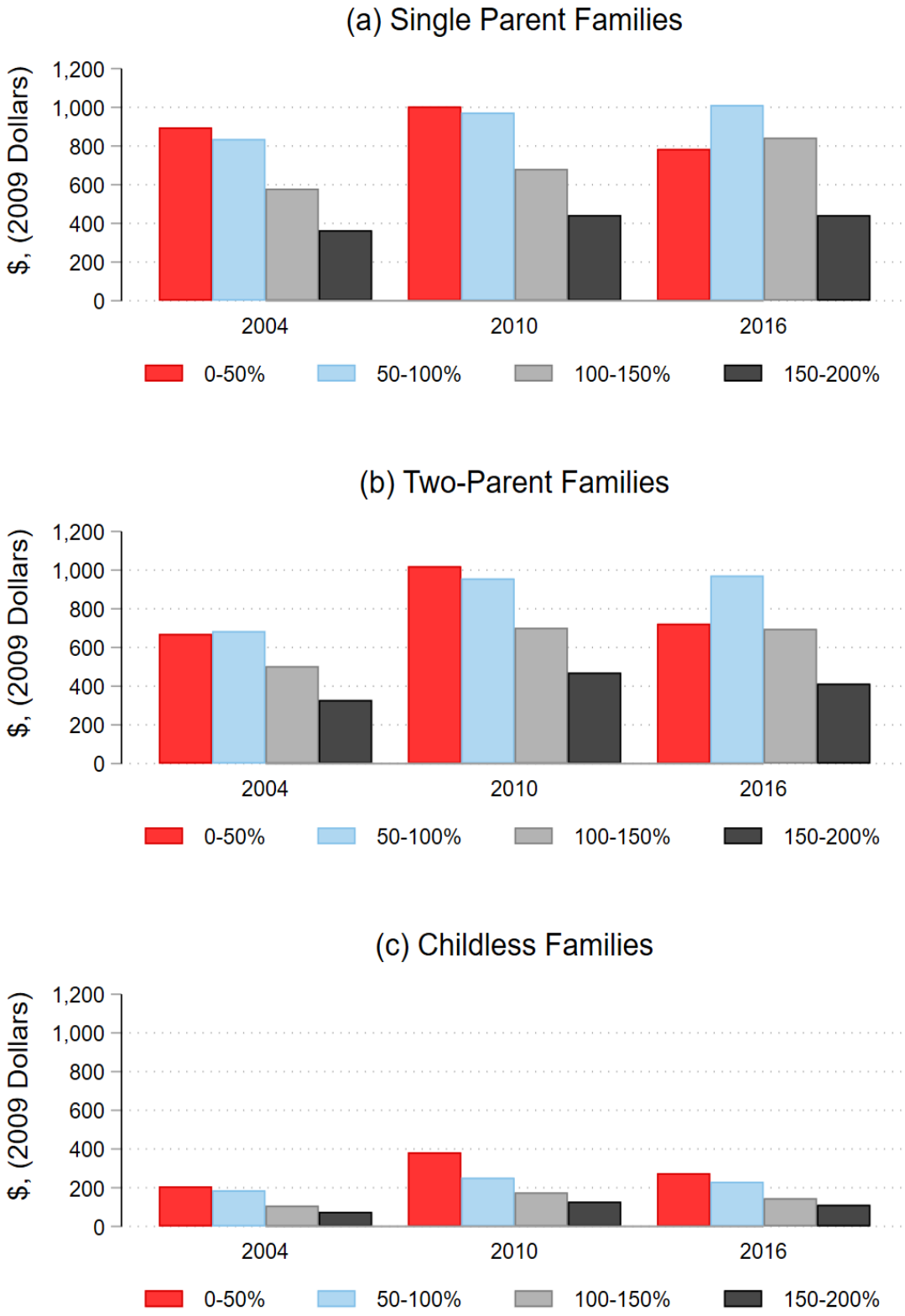
Figure 2: Monthly Expenditure per Family, by Family group (real 2009 dollars)



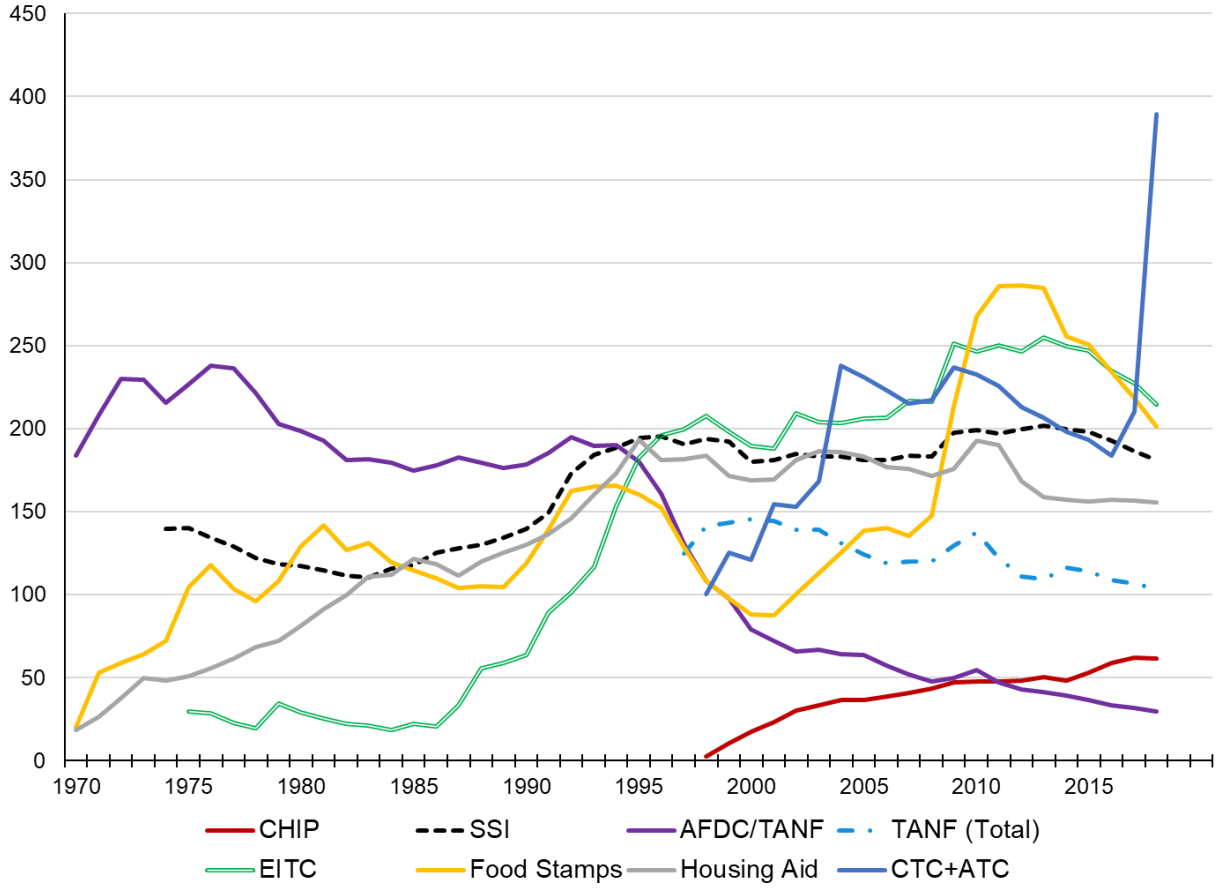
Note: Includes the following programs from the SIPP: AFDC, CTC, DI, EITC, Foster Kids, Housing, SNAP, Social Security, SSI, UI, WIC. Includes Medicaid from MEPS.

Figure 3: Monthly Expenditures for Single-Parent, Two-Parent, and Childless Families in 2004, 2010, 2016 by income Bin (real 2009 dollars)

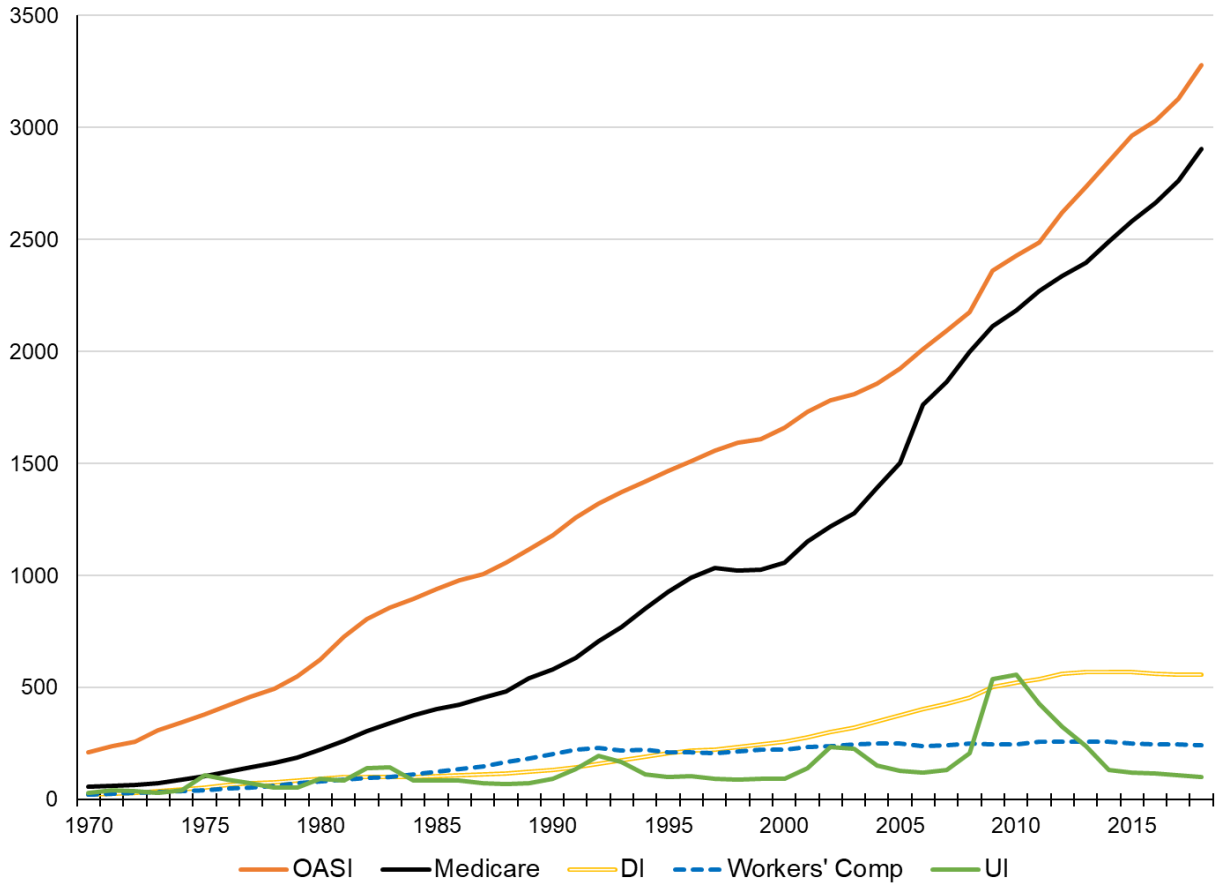
All Programs



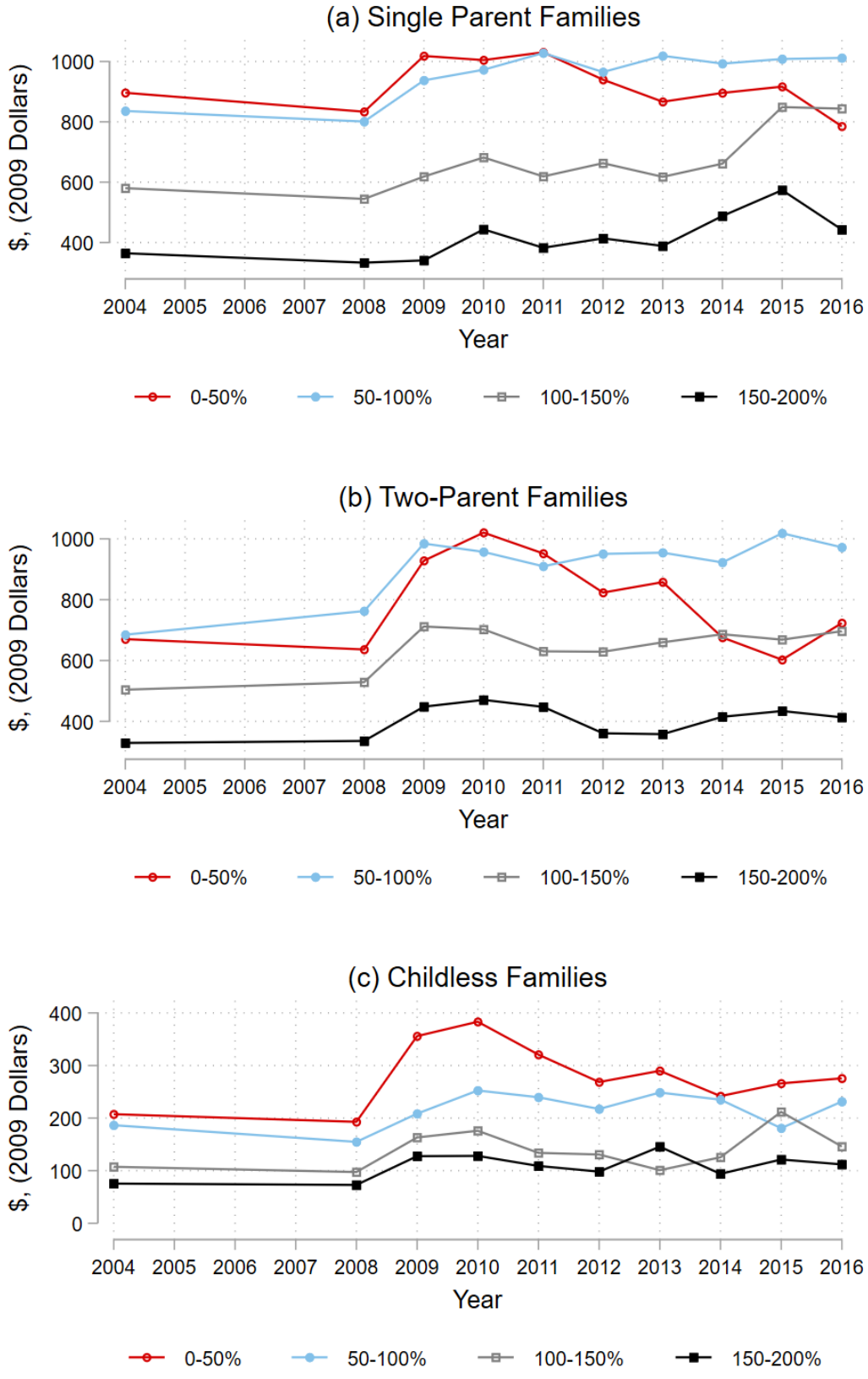
Appendix Figure 1: Annual Expenditure per capita, 1970-2018, Means-Tested Transfer Programs (real 2009 dollars)



Appendix Figure 2: Annual Expenditure per capita, 1970-2018, Social Insurance Programs (real 2009 dollars)



Appendix Figure 3: Monthly Expenditures for Single-Parent, Two-Parent, and Childless Families by Year and Income Bin



Appendix Table 1: Expenditures per Family in 2004, 2010, 2016 for Means-Tested Programs

		Single-Parent Families				Two-Parent Families				Childless Families			
		0-50% PL	50-100% PL	100-150% PL	150-200% PL	0-50% PL	50-100% PL	100-150% PL	150-200% PL	0-50% PL	50-100% PL	100-150% PL	150-200% PL
All													
	2004	896.3	836.0	580.1	364.4	670.4	684.9	504.2	329.1	207.4	186.5	107.3	75.4
	2010	1004.7	972.7	682.0	443.7	1020.5	957.2	702.5	470.7	383.2	252.4	175.9	128.1
	2016	785.2	1011.9	843.7	442.9	723.2	972.1	696.5	413.3	275.6	231.4	145.9	111.9
TANF													
	2004	157.0	40.3	20.9	17.2	92.2	14.7	6.1	7.9	7.5	3.0	1.7	0.6
	2010	129.0	31.5	15.3	13.0	40.3	21.0	15.1	6.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	2016	78.6	19.0	29.3	33.4	3.3	21.0	17.4	0.8	2.5	1.1	3.1	6.2
CTC													
	2004	0.5	33.3	121.1	142.9	2.0	81.4	181.2	194.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	2010	11.3	118.9	136.2	123.5	33.3	157.4	166.3	159.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
	2016	10.7	118.7	120.3	111.8	33.0	168.3	170.7	159.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
EITC													
	2004	63.4	307.3	217.5	104.8	115.5	303.8	149.4	32.1	4.1	14.7	0.9	0.0
	2010	58.7	329.5	237.2	98.8	134.0	353.1	202.8	58.7	3.1	17.1	1.9	0.0
	2016	50.2	338.6	245.0	109.8	131.0	375.3	210.0	78.0	3.2	16.8	2.4	0.0
SNAP													
	2004	216.5	143.2	49.0	28.1	150.8	83.5	34.0	12.6	23.3	11.8	6.7	2.0
	2010	277.7	208.3	155.4	65.0	235.2	209.4	82.0	51.8	51.3	34.5	22.8	13.8
	2016	237.5	204.0	154.7	57.5	146.4	189.7	118.9	66.3	41.6	35.4	22.4	17.0
Housing													
	2004	244.0	145.8	90.1	27.9	83.9	41.9	27.5	8.5	29.5	21.5	10.7	11.3
	2010	203.3	137.6	54.4	51.3	42.3	16.9	15.5	12.1	26.1	21.7	15.8	7.5
	2016	122.4	120.3	66.5	31.8	31.0	64.9	10.8	5.2	29.8	12.3	11.9	9.1
Medicaid													
	2004	122.9	95.5	34.1	8.5	70.2	59.1	24.3	11.8	43.2	48.3	26.9	5.0
	2010	123.1	58.5	29.5	14.0	90.2	25.3	25.6	16.1	43.2	24.7	8.5	3.1
	2016	167.8	142.7	111.0	62.3	201.2	99.4	75.5	30.6	108.5	77.8	45.8	27.5

Note: A few childless families at interview had received TANF in one of the four months prior to interview, when children were present in the family.

Appendix Table 2: Ratio of Expenditures per Family between 2016-04 and 2010-04 for Means-Tested Programs

	Single-Parent Families				Two-Parent Families				Childless Families			
	0-50% PL	50-100% PL	100-150% PL	150-200% PL	0-50% PL	50-100% PL	100-150% PL	150-200% PL	0-50% PL	50-100% PL	100-150% PL	150-200% PL
All												
2004	896.3	836.0	580.1	364.4	670.4	684.9	504.2	329.1	207.4	186.5	107.3	75.4
2010/04	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.5	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.8	1.4	1.6	1.7
2016/04	0.9	1.2	1.5	1.2	1.1	1.4	1.4	1.3	1.3	1.2	1.4	1.5
TANF												
2004	157.0	40.3	20.9	17.2	92.2	14.7	6.1	7.9	7.5	3.0	1.7	0.6
2010/04	0.8	0.8	0.7	0.8	0.4	1.4	2.5	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
2016/04	0.5	0.5	1.4	1.9	0.0	1.4	2.8	0.1	0.3	0.3	1.8	9.7
CTC												
2004	0.5	33.3	121.1	142.9	2.0	81.4	181.2	194.7				
2010/04	24.8	3.6	1.1	0.9	16.9	1.9	0.9	0.8				
2016/04	23.4	3.6	1.0	0.8	16.8	2.1	0.9	0.8				
EITC												
2004	63.4	307.3	217.5	104.8	115.5	303.8	149.4	32.1	4.1	14.7	0.9	0.0
2010/04	0.9	1.1	1.1	0.9	1.2	1.2	1.4	1.8	0.8	1.2	2.0	
2016/04	0.8	1.1	1.1	1.0	1.1	1.2	1.4	2.4	0.8	1.1	2.5	
SNAP												
2004	216.5	143.2	49.0	28.1	150.8	83.5	34.0	12.6	23.3	11.8	6.7	2.0
2010/04	1.3	1.5	3.2	2.3	1.6	2.5	2.4	4.1	2.2	2.9	3.4	6.8
2016/04	1.1	1.4	3.2	2.0	1.0	2.3	3.5	5.3	1.8	3.0	3.3	8.4
Housing												
2004	244.0	145.8	90.1	27.9	83.9	41.9	27.5	8.5	29.5	21.5	10.7	11.3
2010/04	0.8	0.9	0.6	1.8	0.5	0.4	0.6	1.4	0.9	1.0	1.5	0.7
2016/04	0.5	0.8	0.7	1.1	0.4	1.5	0.4	0.6	1.0	0.6	1.1	0.8
Medicaid												
2004	122.9	95.5	34.1	8.5	70.2	59.1	24.3	11.8	43.2	48.3	26.9	5.0
2010/04	1.0	0.6	0.9	1.6	1.3	0.4	1.1	1.4	1.0	0.5	0.3	0.6
2016/04	1.4	1.5	3.3	7.3	2.9	1.7	3.1	2.6	2.5	1.6	1.7	5.5

Note: The 2004 rows of this table are the same as those in the previous table. . The other rows show the ratio of benefits in 2010 or 2016 to 2014 benefits.

Appendix Table 3: Expenditures per Family in 2004, 2010, 2016 for Social Insurance Programs

	Single-Parent Families				Two-Parent Families				Childless Families			
	0-50% PL	50-100% PL	100-150% PL	150-200% PL	0-50% PL	50-100% PL	100-150% PL	150-200% PL	0-50% PL	50-100% PL	100-150% PL	150-200% PL
All												
2004	896.3	836.0	580.1	364.4	670.4	684.9	504.2	329.1	207.4	186.5	107.3	75.4
2010	1004.7	972.7	682.0	443.7	1020.5	957.2	702.5	470.7	383.2	252.4	175.9	128.1
2016	785.2	1011.9	843.7	442.9	723.2	972.1	696.5	413.3	275.6	231.4	145.9	111.9
Social Security												
2004	11.3	28.3	19.8	17.4	8.8	27.4	25.1	8.8	27.7	41.5	31.9	32.1
2010	7.2	15.1	14.2	19.7	3.7	23.6	23.4	28.5	27.6	31.9	36.9	39.6
2016	59.5	34.0	65.1	27.4	41.8	26.1	56.8	46.7	52.8	64.1	52.3	41.4
Unemployment												
2004	50.7	22.9	13.1	6.7	112.7	29.7	28.3	33.3	57.7	27.4	21.9	18.0
2010	160.3	46.8	18.1	47.2	403.4	107.7	141.6	117.6	224.5	120.2	81.0	61.2
2016	21.1	6.6	26.2	1.1	96.8	1.1	16.5	2.0	19.7	15.6	2.6	4.4

Appendix Table 4: Ratio of Expenditures per Family between 2016-04 and 2010-04 for Social Insurance Programs

	Single-Parent Families				Two-Parent Families				Childless Families			
	0-50% PL	50-100% PL	100-150% PL	150-200% PL	0-50% PL	50-100% PL	100-150% PL	150-200% PL	0-50% PL	50-100% PL	100-150% PL	150-200% PL
All												
2004	896.3	836.0	580.1	364.4	670.4	684.9	504.2	329.1	207.4	186.5	107.3	75.4
2010/04	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.5	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.8	1.4	1.6	1.7
2016/04	0.9	1.2	1.5	1.2	1.1	1.4	1.4	1.3	1.3	1.2	1.4	1.5
Social Security												
2004	11.3	28.3	19.8	17.4	8.8	27.4	25.1	8.8	27.7	41.5	31.9	32.1
2010/04	0.6	0.5	0.7	1.1	0.4	0.9	0.9	3.2	1.0	0.8	1.2	1.2
2016/04	5.2	1.2	3.3	1.6	4.8	1.0	2.3	5.3	1.9	1.5	1.6	1.3
Unemployment												
2004	50.7	22.9	13.1	6.7	112.7	29.7	28.3	33.3	57.7	27.4	21.9	18.0
2010/04	3.2	2.0	1.4	7.0	3.6	3.6	5.0	3.5	3.9	4.4	3.7	3.4
2016/04	0.4	0.3	2.0	0.2	0.9	0.0	0.6	0.1	0.3	0.6	0.1	0.2

Note: The 2004 rows of this table are the same as those in the previous table. The other rows show the ratio of benefits in 2010 or 2016 to 2014 benefits.