

# Social safety net programs and instability: Service delivery approaches for the 21st century

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Moderator: Matt Stagner, Mathematica Policy Research

1. Income Instability and the Safety Net: Considerations for Policy and Practice  
*(Authors: Jennifer Romich, Heather Hill, Matt Stagner\*)*
2. Changing Demography of Social Safety Net Programs *(Authors: Yumiko Aratani\* and Colleen Heflin)*
3. Engaging High-Poverty Neighborhoods in Service Improvement *(Author: Robin Phinney\*)*
4. Implementing an app to improve TANF program participants' experiences  
*(Author: Sook Jin Ong\*)*

*\*Presenters*

Income instability and the safety net



# THE CONSORTIUM

stimulating self-sufficiency & stability scholarship

May 2017

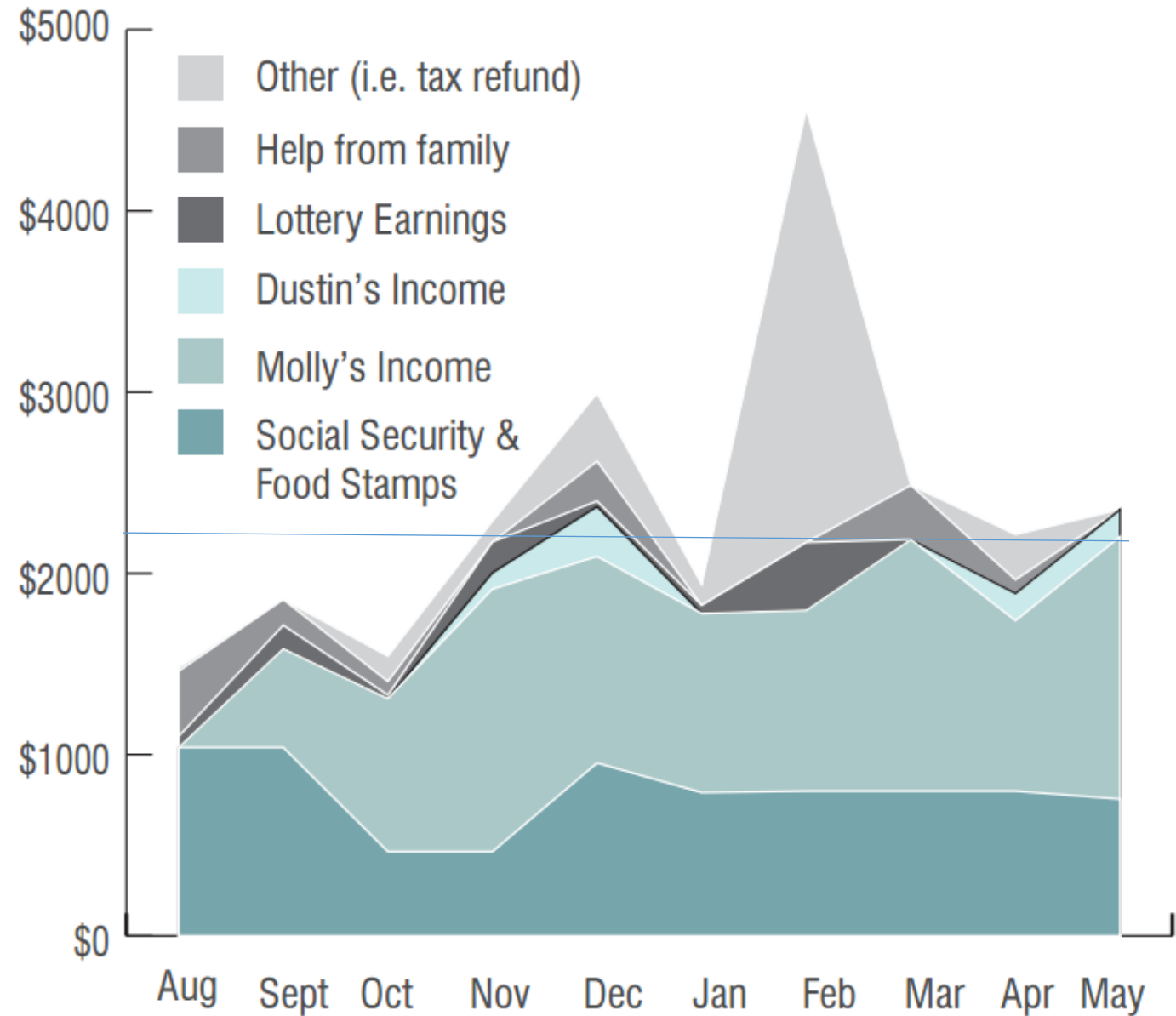
By Jennifer Romich and Heather D. Hill, University of Washington

## **Income Instability and Income Support Programs: Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

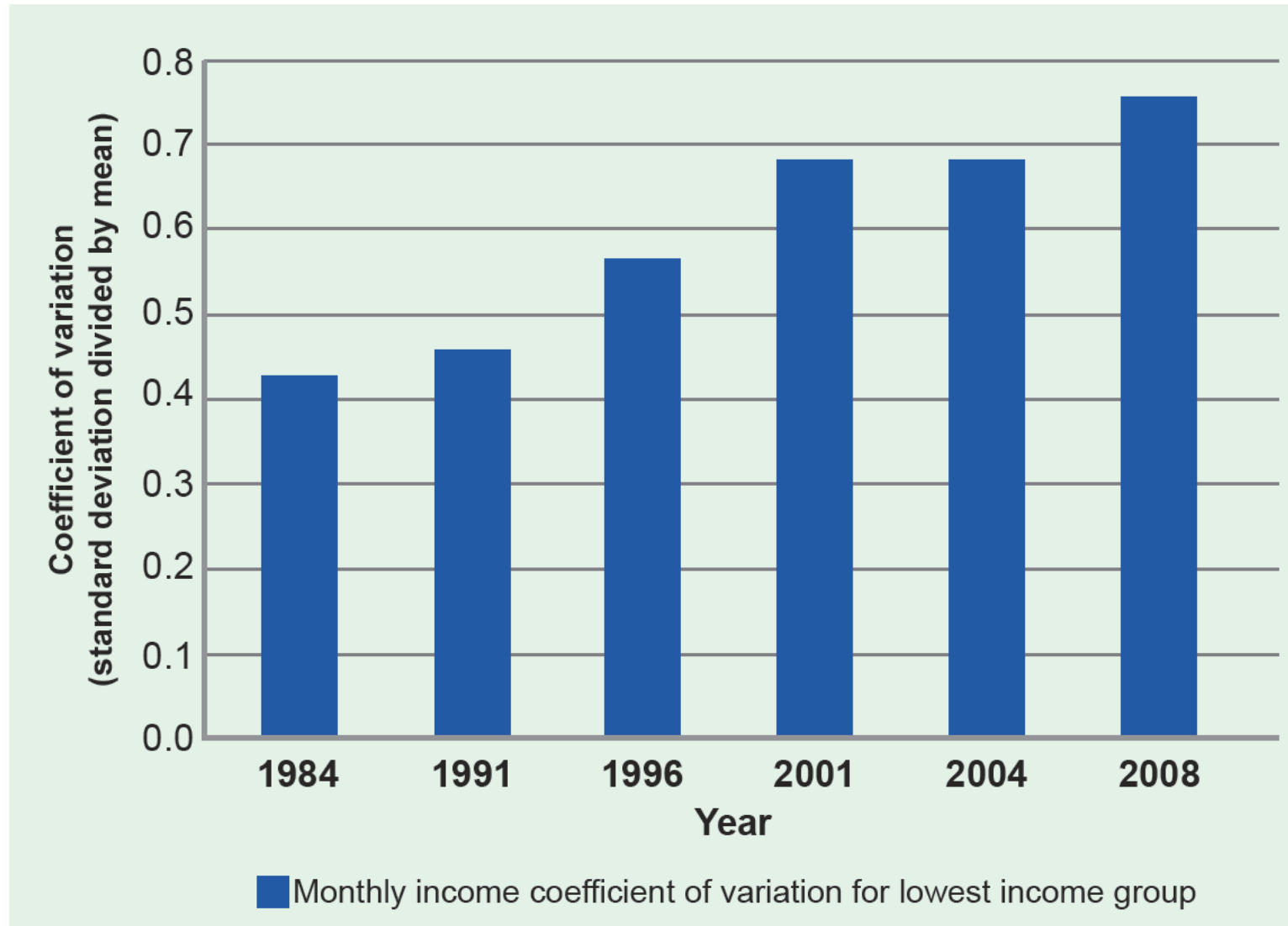
Since the 1970s, Americans' household incomes have become more volatile, fluctuating year-to-year and week-to-week.<sup>1</sup> Increased income volatility is particularly prominent among low-income families, many of whom are served by the U.S. system of means-tested income support programs.<sup>2</sup> These programs provide income, goods, and services to families who prove that their income (and sometimes assets) are low enough to qualify for a particular program and meet other program requirements.

At initial application, during benefit receipt, and at recertification periods, each income support program has unique rules about whether, how, and when income is counted. These rules have good intentions: to target limited resources to the families most in need. They were designed, however, in a time with far less instability in jobs, parental and family relationships, housing, and other aspects of family life. The current context requires greater attention to income fluctuations, particularly those that are detrimental and do not lead to economic mobility, what we call "income instability." This brief presents background on income volatility and income support programs before making recommendations for policymakers and program administrators to promote income stability and mobility with income *support programs*.

# “Taylor Family Income”



Income volatility is increasing in the lowest income households



Adapted from Morris et al.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 displays trends of average yearly coefficient of variation, which is the standard deviation of income divided by its mean. This analysis focused on families with children in the lowest income decile from the Survey of Income & Program Participation.



# Income instability and the safety net

- Increased exposure
- Administrative issues
- Reconsidering goals