

## Measuring self-employment in the United States

*About 1 of 11 workers in the United States was self-employed in 1994; the Current Population Survey has been the lone source of data on self-employment over the past 55 years*

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Data on self-employment in the United States are regularly collected as part of the monthly Current Population Survey (CPS) of the U.S. labor force. The CPS began in 1940, and data have been available essentially consistently since 1948. The survey came into being as a basis for determining how many people were unemployed at a time when the United States was still suffering the effects of the Great Depression of the 1930's.<sup>1</sup>

The CPS classifies employment in three principal ways: according to industry, for which a Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) system is used; according to occupation, for which a Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system is utilized; and according to class of worker. Self-employment is identified under this third schema, in which delineations are made among *wage and salary employment*, *self-employment*, and *unpaid family work*. Subdistinctions are also possible, such as *private* and *government* within wage and salary employment and *employer* and *own account* within self-employment. With regard to the latter, the United States only partially follows the most recent standards set by the International Labor Organization (ICSE-93).<sup>2</sup>

This article describes the measurement of self-employment over the course of the post-World War II era; the changes that have occurred over time in this measurement, including those modifications associated with the revamping of the entire labor force questionnaire beginning in 1994; and some additional questions that elicit information on the extent to which the self-em-

ployed hire wage and salary workers, added in January 1995.<sup>3</sup> The article also includes a short analysis of trends in self-employment, covering the entire period from 1948 to the present.

### Measurement of self-employment

As in all labor force surveys, the major thrust of the CPS is to delineate persons in the population above a certain age (16 in the United States) according to whether they have jobs and therefore are employed; are looking for work and therefore are unemployed; or are out of the labor force altogether. Employed persons can be subdivided in many ways, including class of worker. (In the measurement of class-of-worker status for the unemployed, the identification relates to their status in the job last held, if any.) This classification is fairly straightforward. In the current survey—that is, as of January 1994—persons who are employed are asked the following question: “Were you employed by government, by a private company, a nonprofit organization, or were you self-employed (or working in a family business)?” The parenthetical part is asked only of households in which a family business has already been identified at the beginning of the questionnaire and is therefore used as a basis for identifying unpaid family workers.

Persons responding in the CPS that they were employed by a government, a private company, or a nonprofit organization are classified as wage and salary workers. Persons who respond that they are self-employed are asked, “Is this busi-

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ness incorporated?" Those who respond in the affirmative are also classified as wage and salary workers. The "no's" are the self-employed. The rationale for classifying the incorporated self-employed as wage and salary workers is that, legally, they are the employees of their own businesses.

This form of questioning has been followed on a fairly consistent basis since 1948. However, prior to 1967, there was no question on incorporation of a business for those responding that they were self-employed in their own businesses; the addition of such a question had an immediate and marked impact on measurement, as can be seen in table 1, which presents annual average data on the number and percentage of self-employed persons from 1948 to 1994. Changes relating to the measurement of class-of-worker status as a result of the 1994 cps redesign were quite limited. The main addition was the identification of persons working for nonprofit organizations, which, of course, has no effect on measuring self employment. Also, the questions pertaining to the class-of worker identifier were shifted to precede questions on industry and occupation, which could have had some effect on the estimates.

### Postwar trends in self-employment

Several conclusions are immediately evident from table 1. One is that self-employment is not nearly as significant a part of employment in the United States at present as it once

was: even with a growing population, the total number of self-employed persons in 1994 was less than in the late 1940's. The primary reasons for this are twofold. First, agriculture in general, and small farming in particular, has diminished greatly in the United States. The cause of this is multifaceted, but certainly involves the disappearance of the small farm in favor of large farming operations, extensive mechanization, and the concomitant growth in farm productivity. Second, there has been a marked trend toward incorporating businesses, both in agriculture and in the non-agricultural sector. The latter is particularly evident in the change from 1966 to 1967. In that 1 year, when a question was added to the survey that sought to determine whether the self-employed business was incorporated, there was a marked drop in both the number and percentage of self-employed persons.

One might conclude from the 1967 change that a total break in the series had occurred, and such an assessment would be largely correct. However, it is probably also accurate to surmise that incorporating businesses—often for tax purposes—has been a growing trend in the United States. Therefore, it is likely that, if the incorporation question had been asked over the entire 1948–66 period, the data would still show almost the same degree of change overall in the incidence of self-employment. In other words, close to the same drop in percentage would have occurred—that is, from 18.5 percent to 9.6 percent—but there would have been no

**Table 1. Self-employment in the United States, annual averages, selected years, 1948–94**

[Numbers in thousands]

Year	All industries			Nonagricultural industries			Agriculture		
	Total employed	Self-employed	Percent	Total employed	Self-employed	Percent	Total employed	Self-employed	Percent
1948 .....	58,343	10,775	18.5	50,714	6,110	12.0	7,629	4,665	61.1
1950 .....	58,918	10,359	17.6	51,758	6,019	11.6	7,160	4,340	60.6
1955 .....	62,170	9,577	15.4	55,722	5,851	10.5	6,450	3,726	57.8
1960 .....	65,778	9,098	13.8	60,318	6,303	10.4	5,458	2,795	51.2
1965 .....	71,088	8,394	11.8	66,726	6,097	9.1	4,361	2,297	52.7
1966 .....	72,895	8,127	11.1	68,915	5,991	8.7	3,979	2,136	53.7
1967 <sup>1</sup> .....	74,372	7,170	9.6	70,527	5,174	7.3	3,844	1,996	51.9
1970 .....	78,678	7,031	8.9	75,215	5,221	6.9	3,463	1,810	52.3
1975 .....	85,846	7,427	8.7	82,438	5,705	6.9	3,408	1,722	50.5
1980 .....	99,303	8,642	8.7	95,938	7,000	7.3	3,365	1,642	48.8
1985 .....	107,150	9,269	8.7	103,971	7,811	7.5	3,179	1,458	45.9
1990 .....	117,914	10,160	8.6	114,728	8,760	7.6	3,186	1,400	43.9
1993 .....	119,307	10,335	8.7	116,232	9,003	7.7	3,074	1,332	43.3
1994 <sup>2</sup> .....	123,060	10,648	8.7	119,651	9,003	7.5	3,409	1,645	48.3

<sup>1</sup> Prior to 1967, estimates of the self-employed included persons who operated their own incorporated businesses. These individuals were not identified as wage and salary workers until that year.

<sup>2</sup> Data for 1994 are not directly comparable with data for earlier years due

to a major redesign of the cps and the introduction of 1990 census-based population controls, adjusted for the estimated undercount.

SOURCE: Current Population Survey.

**Table 2. Unpaid family workers in the United States, annual averages, selected years, 1948–94**

[Numbers in thousands]

Year	All industries			Nonagricultural industries			Agriculture		
	Total employed	Unpaid family workers	Percent	Total employed	Unpaid family workers	Percent	Total employed	Unpaid family workers	Percent
1948 .....	58,343	1,701	2.9	50,714	384	0.8	7,629	1,317	17.3
1950 .....	58,918	1,573	2.7	51,758	383	.7	7,160	1,190	16.6
1955 .....	62,170	1,634	2.6	55,722	511	.9	6,450	1,123	17.4
1960 .....	65,778	1,499	2.3	60,318	598	1.0	5,458	901	16.5
1965 .....	71,088	1,278	1.8	66,726	600	.9	4,361	678	15.5
1966 .....	72,895	1,142	1.6	68,915	564	.8	3,979	578	14.5
1967 .....	74,372	1,052	1.4	70,527	505	.7	3,844	547	14.2
1970 .....	78,678	1,001	1.3	75,215	502	.7	3,463	499	14.4
1975 .....	85,846	869	1.0	82,438	483	.6	3,408	386	11.3
1980 .....	99,303	710	.7	95,938	413	.4	3,365	297	8.8
1985 .....	107,150	474	.4	103,971	289	.3	3,179	185	5.8
1990 .....	117,914	359	.3	114,728	252	.2	3,186	107	3.4
1993 .....	119,307	323	.3	116,232	218	.2	3,074	105	3.4
1994 <sup>1</sup> .....	123,060	180	.1	119,651	131	.1	3,409	49	1.4

<sup>1</sup> Data for 1994 are not directly comparable with data for earlier years due to a major redesign of the cps and the introduction of 1990 census-based popu-

lation controls, adjusted for the estimated undercount. Source: Current Population Survey.

sharp reduction in self-employment in 1967.

In January 1994, an entirely new questionnaire was introduced into the CPS, with data collection carried out in a wholly automated environment. In addition, another break in the series occurred at that point in time as a result of the introduction into the estimation process of 1990 population figures, adjusted (for the very first time) for an estimated undercount of the population.<sup>4</sup> (In early 1996, data for the years 1990–93 will be readjusted for these population effects, thereby pushing this break in the series back to the beginning of the decade.) Because of these changes, data comparisons that bridge the year 1994 must be made with caution. BLS researchers Anne E. Polivka and Stephen M. Miller have addressed the non-population-related data effects that occurred in 1994 and estimate that the new-questionnaire/new-data-collection effects would yield about 640,000 more self-employed in 1993 than did the official procedures then in place.<sup>5</sup> Switching from 1980 to 1990 census weights seemed to have very little impact on estimates of self-employment, unlike the estimates for total employment. Using data for May of 1993, BLS researchers calculated that, if anything, the population adjustment produced a small decline in total self-employment, an inconsequential decrease of 32,000. With a numerical increase in measured self-employment of only 313,000 between 1993 and 1994, given the combined estimation and population effects, it can only be concluded that there was a reduction in the incidence of self-employment between the 2 years.

One might ask, given that there was very little change in

the direct question relating to the class-of-worker category, why there was a somewhat pronounced positive data effect. Polivka and Miller found that the increase was essentially limited to women: at the same time that there were more self-employed women, “a significantly smaller proportion were classified as wage and salary workers—either government or private—and as unpaid family workers,”<sup>6</sup> implying a small shift in the class-of-worker categorization. They surmise that this was “probably due to a combination of changes incorporated into the revised questionnaire, including a direct question about household businesses at the beginning of the labor force questions, the reordering of the class-of-worker and industry/occupation questions to prevent interviewers from entering responses without asking all the appropriate questions, and the general changes in the measurement of employment embodied in the revised cps.”<sup>7</sup>

### Unpaid family workers

Unpaid family workers are persons who work on a family farm or in a family business for at least 15 hours a week and who receive no earnings or share of the profits of the enterprise. Data for this group, like data for their self-employed “relatives,” have been available on a fairly consistent basis since 1948 and appear in table 2. The most interesting feature of the data is that the incidence of unpaid work in family businesses has steadily diminished over the 46-year period examined, whereas self-employment stopped declining (as a percent of total employment) during the early 1970’s.

The decline in unpaid family work has been particularly marked in agriculture: whereas such work had once been common on farms throughout the Nation, it is now virtually nonexistent. The trend has four main causes: a decline in agricultural employment in general; a decline in family size, resulting in fewer children being available to be family workers; a reclassification of "farmers' wives" from family worker to self-employed status; and increased employment of rural women in nonfarm wage and salary jobs. Clearly, unpaid family work has all but disappeared in the nonagricultural sector as well.

In developing an "optimal" set of labor force questions dealing with the 1994 changes, BLS researchers attempted to improve the measurement of unpaid family work. The effort began with the initial question on the existence of a business in the household and branched off to determine whether any members of the household in which a business existed worked in that business, even without pay. (In the past, such information needed to be inferred or required alert interviewers.) Importantly, however, a question was also added to determine whether such family members "shared in the profits of the business." The net result of the endeavor was a reduced incidence of unpaid family work in 1994, both in agriculture and in nonagricultural industries, which was something of a surprise to all who had worked on the questionnaire.

The outcome was surprising because it had been felt that the process of identifying households in which businesses were operated by family members and then asking all household members who were not owners of the business whether they performed any work for it—all possible with the advent of computer-assisted technology—would result in the identification of more unpaid family workers. One possible reason the opposite result was seen was the addition of the aforementioned question to determine whether unpaid workers shared in the profits of the businesses. This served to reclassify people from unpaid family work to self-employment or, more likely, to wage and salary work. But the upshot of all of this is quite clear: for all intents and purposes, unpaid family work is now virtually extinct in the United States.

### Wage and salary workers

Wage and salary employment, the third grouping within the class-of-worker classification, has become the overwhelmingly dominant form of employment in the United States in the postwar years. As can be seen in table 3, starting at under 80 percent of total employment in the late 1940's, the proportion of wage and salary workers expanded to about 91 percent by the late 1980's, where it has held for nearly a decade. Most of this increase undoubtedly stems from the declining importance of self-employment, but it is also clear

**Table 3. Wage and salary employment in the United States, annual averages, selected years, 1948-94**

[Numbers in thousands]

Year	All industries			Nonagricultural industries			Agriculture		
	Total employed	Wage and salary workers	Percent	Total employed	Wage and salary workers	Percent	Total employed	Wage and salary workers	Percent
1948 .....	58,343	45,868	78.6	50,714	44,222	87.2	7,629	1,646	21.6
1950 .....	58,918	46,985	79.7	51,758	45,355	87.6	7,160	1,630	22.8
1955 .....	62,170	50,962	82.0	55,722	49,361	88.6	6,450	1,601	24.8
1960 .....	65,778	55,180	83.9	60,318	53,418	88.6	5,458	1,762	32.3
1965 .....	71,088	61,418	86.4	66,726	60,031	90.0	4,361	1,387	31.8
1966 .....	72,895	63,628	87.3	68,915	62,362	90.5	3,979	1,266	31.8
1967 <sup>1</sup> .....	74,372	66,150	88.9	70,527	64,848	91.9	3,844	1,302	33.9
1970 .....	78,678	70,645	89.8	75,215	69,491	92.4	3,463	1,154	33.3
1975 .....	85,846	77,550	90.3	82,438	76,249	92.5	3,408	1,301	38.2
1980 .....	99,303	89,950	90.6	95,938	88,525	92.3	3,365	1,425	42.3
1985 .....	107,150	97,406	90.9	103,971	95,871	92.2	3,179	1,535	48.3
1990 .....	117,914	107,394	91.1	114,728	105,715	92.1	3,186	1,679	52.7
1993 .....	119,307	108,848	91.1	116,232	107,011	92.1	3,074	1,637	53.3
1994 <sup>2</sup> .....	123,060	112,232	91.2	119,651	110,517	92.4	3,409	1,715	50.3

<sup>1</sup> Prior to 1967, estimates of the number of wage and salary workers did not include persons who operated their own incorporated businesses. These individuals were not identified as wage and salary workers until that year.

<sup>2</sup> Data for 1994 are not directly comparable with data for earlier years due

to a major redesign of the CPS and the introduction of 1990 census-based population controls, adjusted for the estimated undercount.

Source: Current Population Survey.

that some of it results from an increase over the entire period in the incorporation of otherwise self-employed businesses.

The increased prominence of wage and salary employment has resulted in large part from the huge decline in agricultural employment, which, as has been seen, was an important source of self-employment and unpaid family work—on family farms—throughout much of the Nation's history. Over the past 50 years or so, however, the family farm has all but died out, being replaced by agribusiness, involving large corporate organizations.

### Characteristics of the self-employed

Included in table 4 are self-employed groupings for age, industry, occupation, and full-time and part-time distributions, by sex. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the table is those columns which depict the percentages of self-employment in each group relative to the employment total for the group. Here, we see, for example, that self-employment becomes increasingly common as one gets older. About a quarter of all employed persons 65 and older are self-employed. This results both from an age effect—those individuals started their careers when self-employment was more common—and from a tendency for some individuals to enter self-employment as a “second career” after retirement. In addition, what was once a “side business” (and thus not specifically counted, except through the measurement of dual jobholding) becomes the principal employment when people retire from their wage and salary jobs. A final factor is that younger workers are less likely to become self-employed, because they may lack the skills, as well as the financial resources, necessary to start their own businesses.

In terms of sheer numbers, the largest amount of self-employment occurs among persons in midcareer (35–44 years of age) and those in the very diverse services industry. With regard to the industry dimension, as one might expect, sizable numbers of individuals in agriculture, construction, and retail trade are self-employed. Occupationally, self-employment is even more diverse, with no single group standing out, other than, of course, the occupational side of agricul-

**Table 4** Self-employment in the United States, by selected characteristics, annual averages, 1994

(Number in thousands)

Category	Number			Ratio to total employment		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
<b>Age, years</b>						
Total .....	10,648	6,756	3,891	8.7	10.2	6.9
16–19 .....	193	116	78	3.1	3.7	2.6
20–24 .....	322	207	116	2.5	3.1	1.9
25–34 .....	2,010	1,232	778	6.2	6.9	5.3
35–44 .....	3,107	1,977	1,130	9.2	10.9	7.3
45–54 .....	2,460	1,532	927	10.5	12.3	8.5
55–64 .....	1,599	1,040	560	14.2	16.9	11.0
65 and older .....	956	654	303	26.0	31.3	19.0
<b>Industry<sup>1</sup></b>						
Agriculture .....	1,645	1,197	448	48.3	46.9	52.4
Nonagricultural industries .....	9,003	5,560	3,443	7.5	8.7	6.2
Mining .....	13	12	1	1.9	2.1	1.0
Construction .....	1,506	1,397	109	20.1	20.6	15.2
Manufacturing .....	426	278	149	2.1	2.0	2.3
Transportation and public utilities .....	385	327	58	4.4	5.3	
Wholesale trade .....	345	276	69	7.3	8.2	5.1
Retail trade .....	1,561	786	775	7.4	7.7	7.2
Finance, insurance, and real estate .....	625	402	223	7.7	12.0	4.6
Services .....	4,142	2,082	2,060	9.6	12.7	7.8
<b>Occupation</b>						
Managers .....	1,600	1,105	495	9.8	11.9	7.1
Professionals .....	1,506	906	600	8.6	10.9	6.5
Technicians .....	92	66	26	2.4	3.6	1.3
Sales workers .....	1,807	1,091	716	12.2	14.5	9.8
Administrative support .....	480	45	435	2.6	1.1	3.0
Service workers .....	1,178	207	971	7.0	3.0	9.6
Precision production, craft, and repair .....	1,739	1,608	131	12.9	13.1	10.5
Operators, fabricators, and laborers .....	639	508	131	3.6	3.8	3.0
Farming and related occupations .....	1,606	1,220	386	44.3	41.7	55.1
<b>Full- or part-time status</b>						
Full-time workers .....	7,680	5,531	2,149	7.7	9.4	5.2
Part-time workers .....	2,968	1,226	1,742	12.7	16.1	11.1

<sup>1</sup> Public administration not included.

Source: Current Population Survey.

ture—farming and related occupations. Typically, the self-employed work full time, although they are more likely than wage and salary workers to be on part-time schedules.

### Business incorporation

Table 5 presents some limited data, readily available only since 1989, on persons in the United States who claim to be self-employed but, when asked, respond that their businesses are incorporated. According to the table, the proportion of total employment made up of the incorporated self-employed was consistently about 3 percent over the 1989–93 period.

In 1994, spurred by the new questionnaire, the figure jumped a bit, to 3.3 percent. As with the incidence of total self-employment, the 1994 increase was particularly pronounced among women. It appears that the attempt to specifically identify businesses in all households at the beginning of the new questionnaire (as suggested by Polivka and Miller),<sup>8</sup> coupled with a careful, logical set of questions about the nature of employment, increased the reporting of all self-employment and may have had its greatest impact on identifying businesses that are incorporated.

The 3.3-percent figure for 1994 is not necessarily a valid indication of the extent of incorporated businesses in the United States. Indeed, it is likely that many owners of incorporated businesses are well aware that they are employed by their own firms and therefore do not respond in the survey that they are self-employed in the first place. Having correctly responded, then, that they are wage and salary workers, they are not asked whether they own an incorporated business.

Although data could not easily be obtained on the number and percentage of self-employed owners of incorporated businesses prior to 1988, limited statistics are available for March of 1976, 1979, and 1982. These data suggest that incorporation has definitely been on the upswing in the United States, with a progression from 1.5 million in 1976 to 2.1 million in 1979 and 2.8 million in 1982. As a percentage of total employment, the proportion rose from 1.8 percent to 2.2 percent and then 2.8 percent. The data from 1988 on do not add much to the percentage, other than the shift in measurement in 1994.

### New information for 1995

Beginning in January 1995, two questions were added to the cps which were designed to provide data on the self-employed that would be consistent with the intent of the 1993 resolution on status in employment at the Fifteenth International

Conference of Labor Statisticians. This resolution pertained to the categorization of self-employed persons according to whether they were employers or, alternatively, worked on their own account. Simply put, the questions sought to determine whether persons who were self-employed (and whose businesses were unincorporated) usually employed people for pay and, if so, the number of employees they usually had in their employ. Preliminary results suggest that the incidence of employment of others in self-employed businesses is quite low. That is, of the 10.4 million self-employed persons, on average in the first 5 months of 1995 (not seasonally adjusted), only 2.2 million (21.4 percent) had paid employees. Among the 2.2 million with employees, 33 percent had only one paid employee, while only 14 percent had six or more. Further, of the 2.1 million who held second jobs in which they were self-employed, only 6.9 percent hired employees.

These numbers clearly imply that the basic nature of self-employment in the United States involves persons working on their own account. What undoubtedly occurs is that, as the small businesses expand and bring on employees, the owners incorporate their businesses, thereby shifting the class-of-worker classification to wage and salary employment. This type of transitional shuffling, while not readily measurable, is very likely an ongoing event, so that the self-employed remain essentially single entrepreneurs.

SELF-EMPLOYMENT IS A VERY IMPORTANT SOURCE OF JOBS in the United States, accounting for roughly 1 out of every 11 employed people. This is much lower, however, than the proportion of nearly 1 in 5 that existed immediately after the end of World War II. Along with the reduced incidence came the virtual eradication of unpaid family work that supported the self-employed. As self-employment has diminished, incorporated self-employment and just plain "working for someone" have become more prominent. The measurements

**Table 5. Incorporated self-employment in the United States, annual averages, 1989-94**

[Number in thousands]

Year	All industries			Nonagricultural industries			Agriculture		
	Total employed	Incorporated self-employed	Percent	Total employed	Incorporated self-employed	Percent	Total employed	Incorporated self-employed	Percent
1989 .....	117,342	3,444	2.9	114,142	3,311	2.9	3,200	133	4.2
1990 .....	117,914	3,489	3.0	114,728	3,356	2.9	3,186	133	4.2
1991 .....	116,877	3,406	2.9	113,644	3,278	2.9	3,233	128	4.0
1992 .....	117,598	3,547	3.0	114,381	3,398	3.0	3,207	149	4.6
1993 .....	119,307	3,582	3.0	116,232	3,424	2.9	3,074	158	5.1
1994 <sup>1</sup> .....	123,060	4,049	3.3	119,651	4,049	3.4	3,409	197	5.8

<sup>1</sup> Data for 1994 are not directly comparable with data for earlier years due to a major redesign of the cps and the introduction of 1990 census-based population controls, adjusted for the estimated undercount.  
Source: Current Population Survey.

mentioned in this article are carried out today through the Current Population Survey—the same labor force survey that has been doing the job for the past 55 years. □

## Footnotes

ACKNOWLEDGMENT: Steven Hipple, an economist in the Division of Labor Force Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics, prepared the tables and verified the data presented in this article.

<sup>1</sup> For a history of the cps, see John E. Bregger, "The Current Population Survey: a historical perspective and BLS' role," *Monthly Labor Review*, June 1984, pp. 8–14.

<sup>2</sup> International Labor Organization, Bureau of Statistics, Newsletter no. 5, September 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Earlier *Monthly Labor Review* articles describing self-employment in the United States include John E. Bregger, "Self-employment in the United States, 1948–62," January 1963, pp. 37–43; Robert N. Ray, "A report on self-employed Americans in 1973," January 1975, pp. 49–54; T. Scott Fain, "Self-employed Americans: their number has increased," November 1980, pp. 3–8; and Eugene H. Becker, "Self-employed workers: an update to 1983," July 1984, pp. 14–18.

<sup>4</sup> The changes in the survey are described in Sharon R. Cohany, Ane E. Polivka, and Jennifer M. Rothgeb, "Revisions in the Current Population Survey Effective January 1994," *Employment and Earnings*, February 1994, pp. 13–37.

<sup>5</sup> Anne E. Polivka and Stephen M. Miller, "The cps after the Redesign: Refocusing the Economic Lens," forthcoming in National Bureau of Economic Research volume, for CRIW Labor Statistics Measurement Issues Conference held Dec. 15–16, 1994, in Washington, DC.

<sup>6</sup> Polivka and Miller, "The cps after the Redesign."

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

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