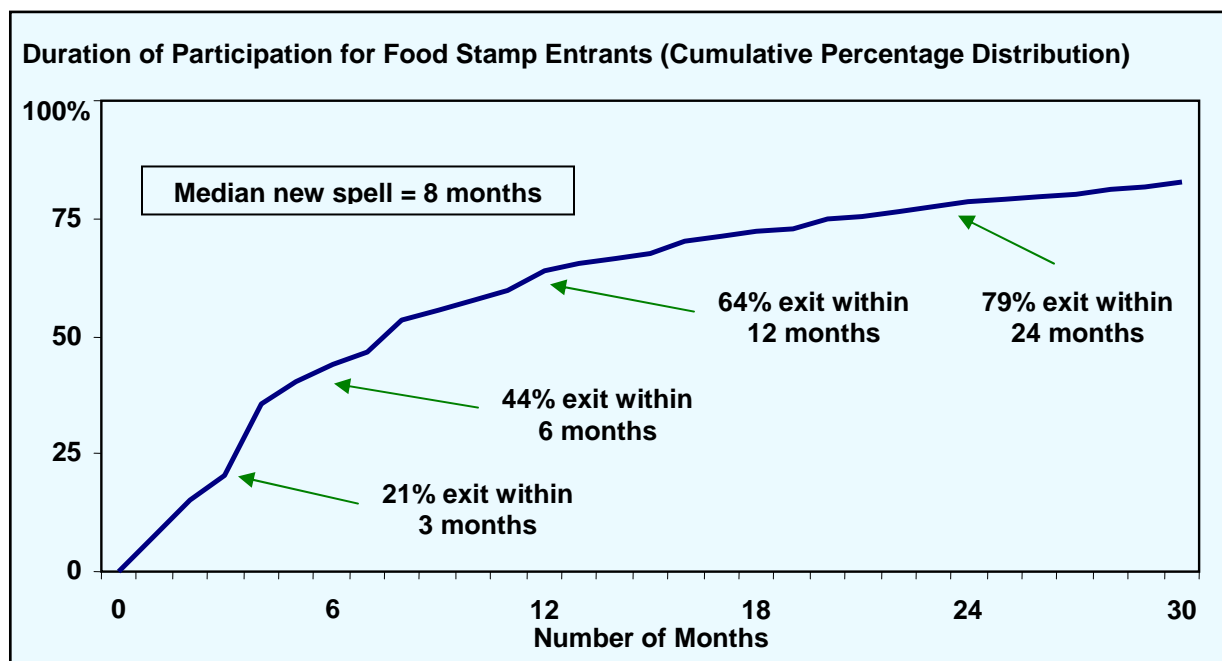


The dynamics of food stamp participation can be described from two perspectives: in terms of new participants as they enter the program and in terms of a cross-section of current participants in a given month. These two perspectives yield different and seemingly contradictory results. For example:

- Half of the individuals entering the program during the 1990s received benefits for eight months or less; nearly four out five left the program within two years (see figure below).
- Half of all participants in a typical month during the mid-1990s were in the midst of a spell (a period of continuous participation) that had lasted more than 4½ years.

In any given month, the food stamp caseload consists of individuals in the midst of short-term spells that started recently and individuals in the midst of long-term spells, some of which may have started years ago. If even a small proportion of new entrants stay on the program for a long time, the cumulative effect is a much larger share of the current caseload in the middle of a long participation spell.



Source: Cody et al (2005). [*Food Stamp Program Entry and Exit: An Analysis of Participation Trends in the 1990s*](#). Report prepared for the Economic Research Service, USDA.

Note: Based on data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation, August 1990 – October 1999. Spells are measured from date of entry to closure (filling one-month gaps).