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Junk Food Stamps

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Americans are getting fatter. The share of adults who are “overweight” or “obese” rose from 56 percent in the late 1980s to 70 percent today. The Centers for Disease Control says that obesity is linked to a wide range of serious health problems. The agency calls obesity an “epidemic,” and the federal government has launched many initiatives to tackle it.

Indeed, the government takes obesity so seriously that it funds a \$78 billion program for people to buy any type of food they want at 250,000 retail stores nationwide. The program subsidizes 46 million people to buy items such as “soft drinks, candy, cookies, snack crackers, and ice cream.”

Wait a minute. I’m confused—how will that help reduce obesity?

The program used to be called “food stamps,” but the government changed the name to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This “nutrition” program aims for people to “make healthy choices within a limited budget.” So it is bizarre that it subsidizes items like soft drinks and candy.

Alas, such contradictions are common in our obese welfare state. The government has grown so vast that its policies work against each other in a myriad of ways. The Women, Infants, and Children program, for example, gives away huge amounts of free baby formula, even though the government advocates that mothers use breast milk.

The food stamp program is one of the government’s biggest hypocrisies. The program ballooned in size during the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The number of recipients rose from 17 million in 2000 to 46 million by 2015. The costs quadrupled from \$18 billion in 2000 to \$78 billion in 2016.

The continued growth in food stamps is perplexing because social conditions are vastly improved since the program was created in the 1960s. Food stamps were created to tackle hunger, but Harvard University’s Robert Paarlberg notes that on a typical day less than 1 percent of households now face “very low food security.” That low figure contrasts with the 18 percent of U.S. households that receive food stamps.

The main food-related health problem for low-income households today is not hunger, but obesity. CDC data shows that, on average, people with low incomes are more obese than people

with high incomes. Children age 6 to 11 in low-income families are almost twice as likely to be obese than children in high-income families. In general, low-income Americans are suffering not from too little food, but from too much of the wrong kinds of food.

Food stamps can be used to purchase just about any edible item in grocery and convenience stores other than alcohol, vitamins, and hot food. So it is likely that many billions of taxpayer dollars for food stamps are being spent on junk food.

How much? We don't know because the government will not release detailed data on food stamp spending. The public pays the cost of the \$78 billion food stamp program, but the government will not let the public know how their tax dollars are being spent. That's a stance that rankles not just fiscal conservatives, but health care researchers as well.

The Association of Health Care Journalists is spearheading a campaign to require the government to provide data on what items food stamps buy and at which retailers. In a [2013 letter](#) to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which runs the program, the association argued that food stamp secrecy “runs contrary to President Obama’s promise of government transparency, and stands in sharp contrast with practices at other federal agencies. . . . With any federal program, but especially one as large as SNAP, records should be public unless there is a compelling reason to hide them.”

The USDA did release [a study](#) in 2015 showing that 40 percent of food stamp recipients were obese compared to 32 percent of low-income individuals not on food stamps. Both adults and children in food stamp families are more obese than other Americans.

The USDA has [also found](#) that food stamp recipients scored lower on a “healthy eating index” than other individuals with either lower or higher incomes. Food stamp recipients are less likely to consume whole grains and raw vegetables, and more likely to consume regular soda, than other people. So it is ironic that SNAP is called a “nutrition” program.

Some policymakers and health experts favor prohibiting food stamps to buy junk food. One advantage would be to reduce demand for the program, and thus reduce taxpayer costs. If policymakers decided that food stamps could only be used for items such as fresh fruits and vegetables, fewer people would use the program, which would be a good thing.

However, a better way to reform the food stamp program would be to end federal involvement altogether, and to transfer the program to state governments. Each state could then decide what level of benefits to provide, as well as decide if taxpayers should be subsidizing “soft drinks, candy, cookies, snack crackers, and ice cream.”

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