

Shaming at the grocery store: the perils of shopping with food stamps

By Rosalind Bentley

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The family celebration was to have been a simple one: soda, dessert and a few high-fives around the dinner table to congratulate the middle child for graduating pre-k and the oldest on his upcoming transition to middle school.

So, Meg Johnston headed to a grocery store around the corner from her Marietta house for provisions. With soft drinks, ice cream and other items in her cart, Johnston pulled paper WIC vouchers from her purse to make sure she had enough to pay for some of the limited essentials the government vouchers allow: milk, cereal, eggs.

To pay for the party snacks not covered by the vouchers, Johnston had a little cash. Even now, the 32-year-old working wife and mother of an infant son and two older children tears up when she relays what came next.

Standing in the chill of the frozen foods aisle, another woman was watching her, looking alternately at the oversized vouchers stamped "Georgia WIC Program" and the snacks. "You know, if you're on government assistance you really shouldn't be buying ice cream and soda," Johnston recently recalled the woman saying. "I was stunned. I didn't know what to say. I held it together long enough to pay and get to my car, but I was bawling by the time I got in."

The political debate over reducing the numbers of Americans on government assistance -- and in turn the nation's debt-- is often couched in colloquial terms of makers and takers, hand-ups or handouts. But in frozen food aisles, checkout lines and on airwaves, the act of publicly shaming recipients has become an increasingly contentious part of the entitlements argument.

Like Johnston's case, the incidents are almost impossible to quantify; judgments rendered in smirks and murmurs, with the only witnesses being the parties involved and

maybe a few bystanders. There have, of course, been those prominent public critics, such as New York Post columnist and Fox News contributor Michael Goodwin, who have openly lamented that "the sense of shame is gone" among those receiving government help. But in letters to news outlets, posts on social media, and conversations with caseworkers, cashiers and academics, aid recipients around the country describe the unsolicited and often derogatory comments they hear when they pay for their food with a government benefit.

And yet, even as there are official mechanisms in place to monitor and prosecute actual entitlement fraud, is it right for a fellow shopper to police how another feeds her family and shame her for how she does it?

'Poor people should only eat certain things'

Federal assistance to needy families is delivered in a sea of acronyms: SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the official name for food stamps); EBT (the plastic Electronic Benefit Transfer card that replaced paper food stamps); WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, which supplements the diets of pregnant women and is also available to mothers of youngsters up to age 5).

Whatever form the aid takes, it is contentious.

"I hear it a lot from clients, that they go to pay for their food and they pull out an EBT card or WIC, or maybe they have a soda, and then they hear snide remarks from customers behind them, or they notice a change in the cashier's attitude," said Extriara Gates, benefits screener for the Atlanta Community Food Bank. "I guess the assumption is that poor people should only eat certain things."

At a Kroger store in Warner Robins, as other customers watched, Cynthia Nerger was reduced to tears when three store employees, including a store manager, got into a debate at the register over which items were covered by Nerger's food stamps. At the time, in late 2012, Nerger told a local television station that the manager ended the argument by saying to her, "'Excuse me for working for a living and not relying on food stamps like you.'"

The incident gained national exposure after Nerger posted an account of it on her Facebook page. At the time Nerger was waiting on a kidney transplant. She and her husband, a carpenter with irregular employment, needed help feeding their young daughter.

Kroger later apologized to her. In an email last week, Kroger's regional corporate office declined further comment on the episode, saying the "matter was isolated and was resolved mutually between the customer and Kroger."

Nerger, 30, said she still carries with her the humiliation of that day.

"People don't understand how hurtful words can be, especially when you're in crisis," Nerger said recently. "It's sad that people are just mean these days and don't think before they speak."

'Of course there's resentment'

Whitney Graves, who has been a manager in the grocery industry in metro Atlanta for more than 15 years, said she has seen episodes of shaming throughout her career. Usually the incidents happened from customer to customer.

"You see somebody with crab legs and every month they are buying them, and you make a good wage and you can't, of course there's resentment," Graves said. "You hear chatter from folks in line and it's like, 'How did you get that because I can't.'"

Graves said that at one chain she worked for, some higher-priced items were marked down at certain times of the month, usually on the 13th, because that was the day their stores did the most traffic in food stamps and WIC.

"The bottom line was it was money and you had to capitalize on it," Graves, 48, said. For as long as there have been aid programs, people using them have been scrutinized, from the "mother's pension" era of the 1910s, when indigent single mothers were evaluated by social workers on whether the women were "clean" or "moral" enough to receive aid, to the personal responsibility politics of 1990s welfare reform. Hand in hand with the scrutiny has been stigma. For decades the emblem of government aid was the easily recognizable food stamp voucher, as different in appearance from legal tender as Monopoly money. And while it might not be another person's business how a customer pays to feed his or her family, Gates said, there was no hiding it with the old food stamps or the current WIC vouchers, which look like oversized checks. The vouchers were clear indicators that the bearer needed help putting food on the table -- a stain that often kept people from applying for aid, Gates said. But over the past 15 years several changes aimed at reducing fraud and streamlining administration of the programs also had the effect of reducing stigma. Primary among the changes was the transition from paper food stamps to EBT cards, which look like debit cards. And the 2002 Farm Bill carried provisions designed to enroll more eligible people in the food stamp program. It also reduced some reporting requirements for recipients and offered bonuses to agencies that signed up new people who qualified for

the aid. In part, the idea was that food stamp recipients' spending would stimulate local economies.

'It's about belittling people'

Yet, as the food stamp rolls soared to a record 47 million Americans during the Great Recession, the cost of safety net programs became a target from statehouses to Congress. The 2014 farm bill rolled back a number of the program expansions from the 2002 farm bill. It barred state agencies from using federal money to promote SNAP in media campaigns and eliminated bonuses for agencies that signed up as many people as were eligible for SNAP in a county or state.

People getting the aid became targets as well, particularly in the media. Some commentators demanded to know why a person on aid would be allowed to buy certain kinds of produce and meat. Some asked whether reducing the stigma around aid would lead to greater dependency.

"These targeting campaigns tend to happen during economic downturns and unfortunately it's how some people try to resolve their own economic anxiety," said Ange-Marie Hancock, author of "The Politics of Disgust and the Public Identity of the Welfare Queen," and associate professor of political science and gender studies at the University of Southern California. "Whenever a person is seen as not living up to the values of industry and is perceived as getting something for nothing, then they are the subjects of shame and increased regulation of what they can and can't do, can and can't buy."

The result is a policing of the public purse that can spill over into store aisles and checkout lanes.

"I don't think this is something new," said Michael Leo Owens, associate professor of political science at Emory University.

"Historically there have always been these efforts to 'guide' the poor. 'Why give your child a sugary drink when you can give them milk?' But there's nothing patriotic about this kind of talk or morally upstanding about it. It's about belittling people." Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Libertarian Cato Institute and a staunch critic of entitlement programs, agrees.

"Whatever a person's opinions are, they don't justify being rude or abusive to another human being," Tanner said. "You don't criticize soldiers because you don't like the war. They should be criticizing the program, not the people."

But Tanner believes that removing the stigma from public assistance has a downside: "I think there has been an internal shift in the recipient population, a normalization of it among people that says, 'I should get it, I deserve it.' We've moved away from communities helping each other, and now there's a feeling that the government will do it."

'I've had to grapple with feelings of guilt'

Meg Johnston is clear about how she landed at poverty's edge. She makes \$10 an hour as a certified nursing assistant and works 22 hours a week. She said she was fired from her last job as a scheduler at a home health care firm for losing her temper. That was more than a year ago, and since then, she said, she has been trying to rebuild her career and studying nursing at Kennesaw State University.

Her husband, Joshua, is an assistant manager at a fast food pizza restaurant and hopes to manage his own franchise someday. Both of their jobs are in Canton, a 26-mile each-way commute from their small Marietta home.

When she got pregnant with her third child, the couple's income qualified her for Medicaid and WIC, the nutritional security plan for expectant and new mothers. She enrolled with mixed emotions.

"I've had to grapple with feelings of guilt of being 32 years old and not having an established career that can provide for my family," Johnston said. "But I'm not a welfare queen. I don't stay on the government dole. I am trying to make a better life for my family. But sometimes you've got to swallow your pride and ask for help."

Johnston said she hasn't been back to that store since the encounter. When her kids asked her that day why she was crying, she explained to them in terms they could understand: She told them someone had bullied her in the store.

"I wasn't using government money to buy junk," Johnston said. "I just wanted something nice for the kids because we were proud of them. But (another shopper) just decided I was doing something wrong."