

THE DAILY CALLER

Feds, Alabama Officials Uncover Massive Food Stamp Scheme

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A multi-agency federal welfare fraud investigation in Alabama ended Wednesday with several simultaneous police raids.

According to authorities, owners at several local convenience stores have been arrested for abusing the food stamp system with a series of fraudulent transactions. After an early morning raid, dubbed Operation T-bone, 11 locations were hit simultaneously resulting in 17 arrests.

Jefferson County District Attorney Brandon Falls [told the Associated Press](#) that the storeowners have been buying Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards from benefit recipients for half the actual value to flip them for more expensive food from wholesalers. As a result, recipients had cash on hand to buy alcohol, tobacco and drugs which they would otherwise be barred from purchasing with their welfare benefits.

“They’re selling their cards to get those things,” Deputy District Attorney Cynthia Raulston [told the Alabama Media Group](#).

EBT cards, a government-issued debit card, replaced printed food stamps in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

“Part of the problem, in my opinion, is now they don’t have their food stamps card so they don’t have the money to take care of their families or themselves,” Raulston continued. “I think it’s a huge cycle of remaining impoverished.”

The investigation itself was a huge effort by local and federal agencies, including the District Attorney's Office, the FBI, the Gardendale Police Department, the Alabama Department of Human Resources and the Secret Service along with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) which administers the federal SNAP program.

“This is the largest cooperative investigation I have ever been a part of,” Chris Clark, the lead investigator in the case for the district attorney's office, told the Alabama Media Group. “Every agency did anything they could to help and we look forward to continuing this effort into the future.”

Despite the massive size of the investigation, it started out with a couple of steaks being shoplifted at a Walmart three months ago. When police asked one of the shoplifters, he told them that he was planning on selling the goods to two convenience stores.

When investigators contacted Walmart's Global Investigations Unit, they learned the company was already investigating those two convenience stores for EBT fraud and selling goods that originally came from Walmart.

SNAP is the nation's largest food-assistance program. According to a [report from the USDA](#), the program has increased from 17 million participants in 2000 to nearly 47 million in 2014. The size alone has prompted concern among [many lawmakers of the potential for abuse](#).

Though some, primarily on the left, blame the bad economy, others see the program's expansion as a result of rules and requirements being relaxed, making it much easier to become a recipient.

“The evidence suggests that much of the increase was due not to the economy[,] but to deliberate policy choices by both federal and state governments, which loosened eligibility standards and actively sought new participants,” [a report from the libertarian Cato Institute detailed](#). “At the same time, evidence that the expansion of SNAP has significantly reduced hunger or improved nutrition among low-income Americans is scant at best.”