

Food Stamps: Policy or Political Payoff

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In an early strategic preparation for the struggle to avoid the fiscal cliff, the president and several Democratic luminaries decided to redefine as essential several entitlement programs. In an old fashioned way of manipulating the public, they began to redefine commonly held beliefs. In the interest of time, we will share only one example.

Last December, Newark Mayor Cory Booker spent a much-publicized week trying to live the life of a food stamp recipient. And after a nationwide media tour, we learned many valuable lessons. First of all, we learned that giving up your daily Starbucks causes headaches, and leftovers are not as pleasant as five-star dining. Publicity stunts aside, food stamp usage is indeed at an all-time high. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported recently that nearly 48 million people were enrolled in the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). This is both the largest number of people and the largest percentage of the population ever.

In some ways this is unsurprising: we are in the midst of a weak economy. The program was intended to be supplemental; not a replacement for a family's entire food budget. It follows that an increasing number of families might have difficulty putting food on the table. A closer look at the situation, however, raises some concerns.



The first is that people are not necessarily “turning to” food stamps, as much as they are *being recruited* to receive them. Since 2008, the USDA has produced Spanish language radio advertisements about SNAP, with the expressed goal of *increasing* the number of Spanish speaking individuals receiving food stamps. The spots were created in the style of popular Spanish language soap operas. In each episode, characters talk to one another about the benefits of food stamps and how important they are to good health. Often they

encourage others to overcome their “pride” of self-sufficiency and enroll in the program.

The USDA believes that increasing SNAP enrollment among the Latino population will improve their overall health and wellbeing. The USDA’s website, explaining why it wants to increase enrollment while the federal government is running a trillion dollar deficit, says the campaign exists so that everyone “can feed their families healthy, nutritious food.” Apparently, they believe there are many “unreached” Latinos who cannot do this without government aid.

This is not new territory for the food stamp program. During the early days of President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs, thousands of federal “recruiters” were deployed to the black community to persuade African Americans to overcome their pride and accept food stamps. The USDA magazine reported in 1972 that, “With careful explanations . . . coupled with intensive outreach efforts, resistance from the ‘too prouds’ is bending.”

The USDA accomplished its mission: approximately 25% of black Americans are now enrolled in SNAP, and many of those households have been receiving food stamps for two generations. Has this improved black American health, as the USDA claims it will for Latinos? African Americans, even after three generations of food stamps, have lower life expectancies than whites (74.3 years to 78.4, respectively). While starvation is largely a thing of the past in America, blacks suffer from higher rates of heart disease, obesity and diabetes than their white counterparts. Ironically, Hispanic Americans currently outlive both whites and blacks.

As Professor Gary Galles of Pepperdine University points out:

Studies find little difference between the nutritional adequacy of the diets of low- and high-income families, so that the problem is vastly overstated. Added food spending also often fails to improve nutrition, as less nutritious but more convenient pre-prepared food is substituted for healthier home-prepared food. Further, obesity is a more common problem among low-income families today than lack of food. Therefore, trying to force recipients to consume more food than they would otherwise by giving food aid instead of cash would probably do little to improve nutrition, but would worsen obesity problems.

So it is by no means clear that increased enrollment in the food stamp program will improve the health of Latinos in our country. The aggressive USDA campaign goes to the heart of the program’s mission. The federal food stamp program was begun in 1939 as a way to get rid of large agricultural surpluses that the government had purchased from farmers. Years of the Great Depression had made hunger a real danger for some Americans, particularly in cities, but the program was discontinued in 1943 when widespread unemployment and unmarketable crop surpluses were no longer issues.

Food stamps were revived in the 1960s as part of President Johnson’s Great Society, and federal recruiters were dispatched to increase enrollment in the program. This marked a decided shift in the philosophy of what enables people to actually get out of poverty. One of the elders in my church, a PhD in economics, was actually part of evaluating the effectiveness of the early food stamps program. The problems with the program are the same today as they were then. A man with “get-up-and-go” would rather have help establishing a new business or leveraging the support he receives from the government. The American Dream was built on the idea of self-reliance: that given sufficient opportunity, anyone could succeed by hard work and determination. Despite slavery and Jim Crow, black income rose at a faster rate *before* Johnson’s programs than it did afterwards.

Anyone who works among the poor in America today knows the rarity of that “pride of self-reliance,” they also see the problem of generational poverty in both urban and rural America. Like crack cocaine, the government dole is very addictive. Blacks and Latinos need policies that will empower them, not federal recruiters to lure them into greater dependence. And at a time of unprecedented deficits—when our government needs to both raise revenues and cut spending—we need SNAP to enroll only those truly in need.

