Food Stamp Programs Cause Obesity

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“Obesity has many causes, but some experts believe that the structure of [the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] deserves some of the blame.”

In the viewpoint that follows, Laura Vanderkam acknowledges that obesity in America has many and diverse causes, but she indict[s] the food stamp program for encouraging binge buying of junk food among recipients. According to Vanderkam, the once-a-month disbursement of food stamps should be changed to biweekly disbursement to prompt recipients to ration their benefits and make better choices of purchased foods. In her opinion, giving out food stamps in one lump sum each month simply leads shoppers to spend all they have in one trip, prompting them to purchase more junk food and engage in “binge-starvation” cycles because they have the stamps and do not see the rationale of saving them for later trips during the month. Laura Vanderkam is a member of *USA Today*’s Board of Contributors and the author of *168 Hours: You Have More Time than You Think*.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. As Vanderkam reports, how many Americans currently rely on food stamps to make food purchases?
2. According to Jay Zagorsky, why do food stamp recipients often fail to ration their benefits over each month?
3. As the author states, why do some advocates for the hungry object to the biweekly disbursement of food stamps?

Like kids in a cafeteria, Congress is busy these days complaining about school lunch. Reformers want to tighten nutrition standards because, as Kevin Concannon of the Agriculture Department told reporters recently [in April 2010], "Getting kids started eating healthier is one of the most important long-term goals we have as a country."

That's true, but school lunches already have to meet reasonable nutrition standards. The real next frontier in the war on obesity should be the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or “food stamps.” Some 38 million people—one in eight Americans—rely on this program, up from one in 50 in the 1970s. Food stamps have done a good job fighting hunger since their 1964 rollout, but as the program has grown, so has the percentage of Americans who are obese—from 13% in the early 1960s to about 35%. Now there's some evidence the two are related. Jay Zagorsky, a scientist at Ohio State University, has calculated that, controlling for socioeconomic status, women who received food stamps were more likely to be overweight than non-recipients. They gained weight faster while receiving assistance than when not.

The Habits of Food Stamp Users

Correlation is not causation, and obesity has many causes, but some experts believe that the structure of SNAP deserves some of the blame. As Americans debate how we can be healthier, the food stamp program deserves as critical a look as Congress is giving school lunch.
The one in eight Americans who rely on food stamps are a varied crew, from urban single moms to the "hipsters on food stamps" a recent [March 15, 2010] *Salon* article claimed to have discovered buying raw honey and shopping at organic markets. But for all the diversity, states run their programs pretty much the same way. Once a month, benefits are loaded electronically onto cards that can then be used at retailers.

This monthly cycle encourages certain habits. "A good chunk of people buy early in the month and store for later use," says Parke Wilde, a professor of nutrition at Tufts University who has studied shopping patterns and wrote a landmark 2000 paper on the topic. "The spending cycle is very, very sharp." In many cases, families spend most of their benefits in that first shop. They struggle to ration food evenly over a month (particularly since the average benefit is a not-so-princely $124 per person), and by week four, they are out of food and money.

One way or another, people make do, using food pantries, for instance. Wilde found that children's calorie consumption was even across the month. But women experienced a sharp calorie decline in week four for a simple reason: When times are tight, moms starve themselves so their kids can eat.

The result is that when the money comes through again, "you're literally shopping on an empty stomach," says Zagorsky. "We're not rational when food is in front of us." Anyone who has flipped through supermarket tabloids knows that this binge-dieting cycle packs pounds onto the celebrities who try it, before you even consider whether you're eating wholesome food or junk. Other women experience the same effect.

To be sure, not every SNAP recipient shops this way. Corbyn Hightower, a Sacramento-area mom of three who lost her job more than a year ago, says she shops two to three times a week at Trader Joe's, buying rice, beans and produce. Her car was a casualty of the recession, but on weekends she bikes to Whole Foods and carts home groceries in her bike trailer. She has also used food stamps to purchase seeds for a family garden, ensuring that she'll be able to harvest fresh produce daily this summer.

Though food stamp gardening is rare, Wilde found that people who shop frequently, like Hightower, don't experience the same deprivation cycle that could cause SNAP recipients to put on pounds. So Wilde and others have proposed a simple change: Pay SNAP money twice a month, not once.

### Pilot Programs First

It's a neat answer. Unlike mailing actual "stamps," in this electronic era, the cost to do additional transfers is low, though there could be other problems. If people without cars don't live near supermarkets, it's inconvenient to take a cab twice a month or ask for rides. Some advocates for the hungry fear this would discourage participation. That's why a few states should try pilot programs and ask clients whether they like the new cycle before rolling it out broadly (initial reactions are, admittedly, mixed).

But it's important to note that even with twice-monthly transfers, families could still shop once a month if they wanted by saving up their benefits. It's just that the default behavior would be to shop more often. This makes switching the cycle a classic "nudge," a term popularized by behavioral economics experts Richard Thaler, a University of Chicago professor, and Cass Sunstein, the administrator of the White
House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. You can do whatever you want, but the program provides a gentle push toward better choices.

Healthy choices are always a good idea, but now that President [Barack] Obama's health care reform bill is law, the American people have even more of a financial stake in questions of public health. You can argue whether programs such as food stamps should exist. If they do, though, they shouldn't make our medical woes worse. Reforming SNAP is an idea that deserves a look.

**Further Readings**

**Books**


• Mark Winne *Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2008.

**Periodicals**

• Julian M. Alston et al. "Likely Effects on Obesity from Proposed Changes to the US Food Stamp Program," *Food Policy,* April 2009.

• John Cawley "The Economics of Childhood Obesity," *Health Affairs,* March 2010.


• Bidishaa Mandal "Use of Food Labels as a Weight Loss Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Affairs,* Fall 2010.


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