

“AMERICA’S HARVEST BOX” CAPTURES THE TRUMP-PIAN ATTITUDE TOWARD POVERTY

By Sasha Abramsky February 14, 2018



The proposed changes to SNAP reduce food assistance to a humiliation ritual. Photograph from Getty

On Monday, the Trump Administration rolled out a budget that would dramatically alter the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—also known as SNAP, or, more colloquially, food stamps—which helps protect almost a sixth of the American population from falling into hunger. There’s a good chance that the proposed changes to SNAP, like so many of the proposals contained in this budget, will end up in the congressional garbage can. But policymakers should be aware of the damage they stand to do—and of the window they offer into this Administration’s view of poverty and the poor.

Currently, SNAP benefits are delivered in the form of cash added to an electronic benefit-transfer (E.B.T.) card, and they're spendable at almost any store that sells food. The Department of Agriculture wants to dock about half of that money and replace it with an "America's Harvest box," consisting of "100 percent U.S.-grown and produced food." Not freshly harvested fruits and vegetables or meat, mind you, but processed "American" food in cans, tins, and jars. The Department suggests that the plan would encourage healthier eating habits and save taxpayer money, even though the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that ninety-three per cent of food-stamp dollars are spent on food for beneficiaries (making it one of the least wasteful federal bureaucracies) and, as the U.S.D.A. spokesman Tim Murtaugh admitted, to Politico, "The projected savings does not include shipping door-to-door for all recipients."

The new budget, which seeks to cut the SNAP budget by about two hundred and thirteen billion dollars over ten years, would also impose ever-more-stringent work requirements for able-bodied food-stamp recipients, even though many of them already work; SNAP has effectively subsidized the low pay offered by large corporations such as Walmart in recent decades. Since most of those who are able-bodied and on food stamps are already restricted to about three months of benefits, the Administration's focus on work requirements—and on increasing the age limit of those who would be subjected to those requirements—can be read as grandstanding to score political points with its conservative base.

The "Harvest Box" proposal, though, is a new kind of horrendous. (Mick Mulvaney, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, called it a "Blue Apron-type program.") How, exactly, will this Administration—which recently contracted with a desperately inept company to deliver millions of pre-made meals to Puerto Ricans after Hurricane Maria, only to withdraw the contract after almost none of the meals were delivered—actually get these boxes of food to millions of households? Or to recipients who move frequently, or end up temporarily homeless? What if the food is stolen or delayed? How will the box cater to the dietary needs and allergies of all the recipients? Or to children's finicky eating habits? Or simply to the fact that adults like to be treated like adults, which means having an element of choice—one might even say of personal responsibility—when making economic decisions, such as the ones bound up in grocery shopping? (*The Atlantic's* Annie Lowrey posted an invaluable Twitter thread on Tuesday that listed many of these questions, among others.)

Federal food assistance dates back to the Great Depression, when the government began distributing surplus agricultural produce to the poor as a way to shore up farmers' income. What became the food-stamp system expanded under the Great Society; both of the major political parties embraced it. SNAP, even in its weakened current state, is among the most successful parts of the social safety net; after unemployment insurance, it is the single program most responsive to an economic downturn, rapidly enrolling recipients and distributing assistance when people lose jobs and income. The Trump Administration's reimagining of SNAP reduces food assistance to a humiliation ritual: recipients would take whatever they are given, in whatever condition they are given it, and would be expected to feel gratitude.

Proponents of this package of change might argue that it is necessary to control ballooning federal deficits in the wake of massive tax cuts. Yet SNAP has never represented more than 0.5 per cent of the country's G.D.P. And, even before the Trump budget was released, the Congressional Budget Office had estimated that that number would fall, to about 0.25 per cent of G.D.P., over the coming decade. There are few federal programs that deliver such bang for their buck—SNAP is the single biggest reason why malnutrition has largely vanished from the United States. Trump's "reform" package would reverse these achievements, ratcheting up the country's misery index like few other public-policy changes of the past century. And, even if the proposal is just a fantasy, how telling it is that America's leaders fantasize in such detail about punishing the poor for being poor.

Video

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