

Soft drinks, hard-liners

A debate over whether food stamps should cover soda pits public health officials against anti-hunger allies

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Federal law prohibits food stamps from being used to purchase medicine, tobacco, alcohol, pet food or cosmetics.

Soda pop, which is linked to a growing rate of obesity and diabetes in the United States, may soon be on the list if public health advocates and some government leaders have their way.

The idea of eliminating carbonated drinks from the federally funded food program has caused a rift between public health advocates and anti-hunger advocates, two groups that usually agree.

Public health advocates say it's time for the federal government to stop buying the world a Coke.

Anti-hunger advocates prefer to make healthy foods cheaper and more easily accessible.

The stakes are high and getting higher all the time.

Almost 48 million people around the nation use food stamps. That number that has grown by a million in the last year alone.

At the crux of the debate is how best to encourage people to improve their diets: With a carrot or a stick?

Big gulps

Soda consumption spans economic classes. High-paying employers, like Google, often tout free, unlimited soft drinks as one of their employee perks. But poor people tend to consume soda at higher rates than the rest of the population.

Soda is more than a drop in the bucket for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as food stamps.

More than half of the beverages people purchased in households that use SNAP were for carbonated soft drinks, according to a 2012 study the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yales published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. The study estimated that the federal government spends as much as \$2 billion annually on sugar-sweetened beverages purchased through SNAP.

Through SNAP, a family of four can receive as much as \$668 a month to spend.

Not surprisingly, soda has long been on state agencies' hit lists. In 2011, the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance unsuccessfully sought permission from the federal government to ban soda from food stamp purchases.

Officials from California, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Texas and Vermont joined the conversation, asking the feds to allow states to decide what items people can purchase with food stamps.

Recently, government leaders followed suit. In June, 18 mayors from large cities urged Congress to fully fund the food stamp program but added that it was time to research how to stop people from using their benefits to buy soda.

Portland Mayor Charlie Hales signed on to the letter, as did Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Most public health experts support them. Marlene Schwartz, director of the Rudd Center, said adding soda to the list of items food stamp users can't buy is a move that's long overdue.

The federal government has already reformed what is served at public schools, day care and senior centers, she said. The Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, which provides new mothers with up to \$100 a month to spend on groceries, can be used only for nutritious foods, such as milk, eggs, fresh fruits and vegetables and whole wheat bread.

"The government regulates every single other food program it has," Schwartz said. "I can't figure out how SNAP has escaped that all these years."

Some experts are skeptical that cutting soda from the food stamps program will diminish consumption.

People who receive SNAP benefits have other sources of income and will likely buy it anyway, said Robert Plotnik, a professor at the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Affairs.

"The truth is, it's not going to make much difference," he said.

A straw man?

Others argue that in the debate over poor peoples' diets, soda is a straw man.

The campaign against soda fails to take into account many market forces, such as farm subsidies, that flood the market with cheap, empty calories, said Marcy Bowers, director of Statewide Poverty Action Network.

"It's more affordable to eat food that's not healthy," Bowers said. Poor people may also live in areas where there are few places to buy healthy food.

There are better ways to improve the eating habits of low-income people, Bowers said.

Among them: Seattle's Fresh Bucks program, which replaces the stick with a carrot — literally. People can double the value of their SNAP benefits when they purchase produce at Seattle's farmers markets.

In New York, a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program provides fresh produce for a lower price to people on food stamps.

"We have found that when low-income individuals are given a choice between nutritious and less-nutritious options at the same time, they overwhelmingly choose the nutritious option," said Michelle Friedman, spokesperson for The New York City Coalition Against Hunger, which sponsors the program.

Schwartz, of the Rudd Center, lauded the programs but said they don't replace banning soda from the food stamps program.

"I just want to speak out to both public health and hunger advocates and say we need to work on this together," Schwartz said. "We need to use all the tools we have: one carrot, one stick."

Reprinted from Real Change News, Seattle

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