

Key Findings

1

THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM IS **FAILING TO PROVIDE A MORE NUTRITIOUS DIET** FOR ENROLLEES.

2

FOOD STAMPS ARE FUELING THE JUNK FOOD EPIDEMIC, WITH **SODA RANKING AS THE NUMBER ONE COMMODITY BOUGHT WITH FOOD STAMPS.**

3

TAXPAYERS ARE FUNDING A GROWING HEALTH CRISIS, INCLUDING THE CHILDHOOD OBESITY CRISIS.

4

BANNING SODA AND CANDY FROM FOOD STAMPS WOULD PRIORITIZE HEALTH AND NUTRITION WHILE ALSO REDUCING TAXPAYERS' OUT-OF-CONTROL MEDICAID COSTS.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

STATES SHOULD IMMEDIATELY SEEK WAIVERS TO BAN SODA AND CANDY FROM FOOD STAMPS. ULTIMATELY, CONGRESS SHOULD REALIGN FOOD STAMPS WITH ITS STATUTORY INTENT TO FIGHT HUNGER, NOT FUEL DISEASE.

Overview

The purpose of the food stamp program is to provide a more nutritious diet for low-income households.¹ In particular, Congress sought to alleviate hunger and malnutrition.² But the program has departed from its purpose.

Chronic illnesses are skyrocketing due to poor diet and lifestyle factors. And for the most vulnerable, the government funds a diet that fuels disease. Taxpayers pick up the tab for this and the health crisis that an unhealthy diet accelerates.



THE PURPOSE OF THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM IS TO PROVIDE A MORE NUTRITIOUS DIET FOR LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS.

Food stamps is the largest government food program, with taxpayer funds loaded onto enrollees' Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards every month.³ The cost of the program has exploded, and taxpayers are funding junk food, fueling an expensive health crisis. A whopping 42 million people are enrolled in food stamps, costing taxpayers \$113 billion per year.⁴ Soda and candy make up a large part of this spending.⁵ These products have done glaring damage to human health and flourishing that cannot be ignored. States and Congress can act to ensure taxpayers no longer foot the bill for this harm. States should seek waivers to end taxpayer funding of soda and candy in food stamps. Ultimately, Congress should codify a ban to make these products ineligible for purchase with food stamps.

The food stamp program is failing to provide a more nutritious diet for enrollees

The purpose of the food stamp program is to provide a nutritious diet for low-income households.⁶ But food stamps have little to no effect on nutritional quality.⁷ Even worse, food stamp enrollees consistently fall short of recommended dietary standards. Food stamp enrollees' Healthy Eating Index scores—a measure of diet quality—are significantly worse than individuals not on food stamps, even among those with the same income levels.⁸⁻⁹



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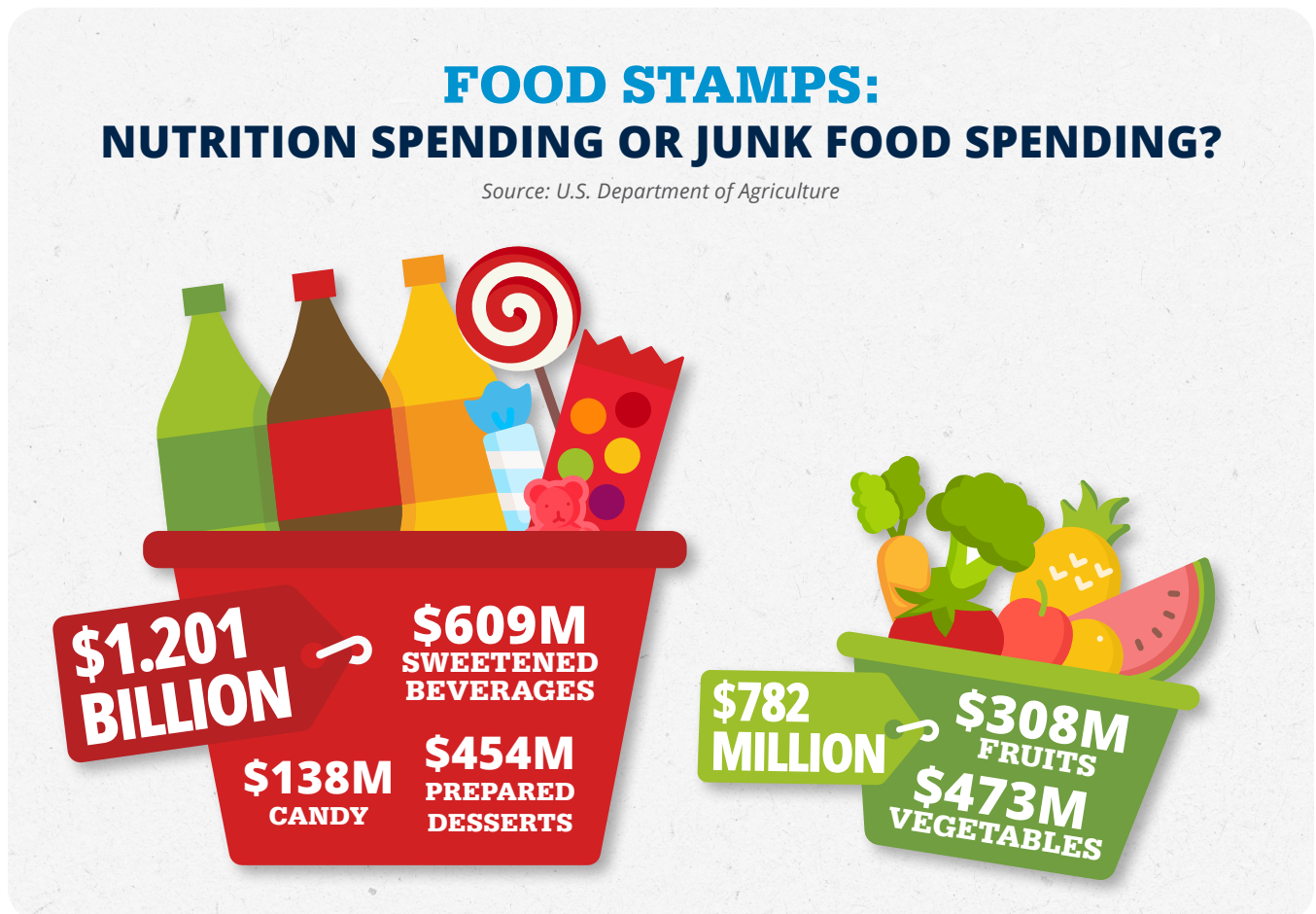
Food stamps do not improve diet quality. Adults on food stamps have a higher rate of obesity than nonparticipants with similar incomes.¹⁰ Obesity can cause severe health problems, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and osteoarthritis, and increases the risk of stroke and cancer.¹¹ In fact, food stamp enrollees are more likely to be at very high or extremely high risk of disease.¹²

Worse still is the effect on children. Children on food stamps have substandard diets and are more likely to have elevated disease risk than nonparticipants with similar incomes.¹³ They also consume 43 percent more sugar-sweetened beverages than nonparticipants of similar income levels.¹⁴

This is not the case for other programs like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). WIC has tighter nutrition standards, and participants of WIC saw positive effects on diet quality.¹⁵ Notably, soda and candy are not eligible for purchase through WIC.¹⁶

Food stamps are fueling the junk food epidemic, with soda ranking as the number one commodity bought with food stamps

Soda is the number one commodity purchased with food stamps.¹⁷ More food stamp money is spent on soda, candy, snacks, ice cream, and cakes than on fruit, vegetables, eggs, pasta, beans, and rice.¹⁸ Purchases of sweetened beverages, desserts, and candy exceed the program's combined sales of fruits and vegetables by \$400 million a year.¹⁹



Sweetened beverages and candy alone account for an alarming 11 percent of all food stamp spending.²⁰ And food stamp enrollees drink far more sugary drinks than non-enrollees with similar incomes.²¹ One study indicated this might be because households on food stamps spend food stamp money differently than their own money.²²

“Big soda” reaps the benefits as hundreds of millions of dollars in food stamp money are spent on sweetened drinks every year.²³ The American Beverage Association, an industry group that represents brands like Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, raked in \$6 billion in profits from food stamps in 2016.²⁴ These companies line their pockets with taxpayer money as Americans’ health declines. Their tenacious corporate lobbying efforts to stop restrictions on food stamps have been so successful that efforts to study the impact of sugar-sweetened beverage restrictions have been shut down even at the pilot level.²⁵ Junk food corporations lobby aggressively to keep soda and candy on the approved list.²⁶ But today’s health crisis is cataclysmic and needs to be addressed. To make America healthy again, the government must stop doing big soda’s bidding on the taxpayer’s dime.



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Taxpayers are funding a growing health crisis, including the childhood obesity crisis

The United States is experiencing a health crisis. One in every two Americans has or is at risk of developing diabetes.²⁷ That is not a product of personal choices gone wrong or a lack of willpower. Obesity is a solvable problem. Unfortunately, unhealthy food choices are too easy to make. To reverse course for those on food stamps, the government should stop pouring money into products known to be disastrous to health.



THE UNITED STATES IS EXPERIENCING A HEALTH CRISIS. ONE IN EVERY TWO AMERICANS HAS OR IS AT RISK OF DEVELOPING DIABETES.

Taxpayer-funded junk food has contributed to the obesity crisis. Junk food intake is associated with increased body mass index and weight gain.²⁸⁻²⁹ One additional sweetened beverage a day can add on 15 pounds in a year.³⁰ The sugary drinks themselves add calories, but those calories also prompt weight gain as they are not as satisfying as calories from nutritious, solid foods.³¹ Type 2 diabetes and heart disease are also linked to sugary drink consumption.³²

One in five Americans between ages two and 19 have obesity.³³ Among children ages two to five, the obesity rate is nearly 13 percent.³⁴ For adults, more than 40 percent of Americans are obese.³⁵ Obesity is not a standalone issue: Overweight and obese individuals fared far worse in the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁶ Obesity also increases the risk of certain cancers, heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes.³⁷ Heart disease already affects nearly half of Americans.³⁸ Cancer is rising at an alarming rate, especially among young people.³⁹ And a 77 percent increase in cancer is expected globally by 2050.⁴⁰

OPTIONS FOR **TAXPAYER-FUNDED** FOOD STAMP PURCHASES



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Worse yet, chronic diseases disproportionately affect low-income individuals living below the poverty line—those who are likely to be on food stamps at some point.⁴¹ The government should not be a major funder of junk foods that drive diet-related chronic diseases among the most vulnerable. Rather than take commands from corporate lobbyists, states and Congress should have the courage to cut out the junk from food stamp purchases.

Banning soda and candy from food stamps would prioritize health and nutrition while also reducing taxpayers' out-of-control Medicaid costs

America's health crisis is expensive. Taxpayers are helping to fund both the creation of the problem, the junk-food-induced obesity crisis, and its expensive treatment.

Welfare programs have notable overlap. Seventy-two percent of food stamp enrollees are also covered by government health insurance, mostly through the Medicaid program.⁴² Only 16 percent of food stamp enrollees are on no additional welfare programs.⁴³ These numbers are even higher for low-income children. More than 80 percent of children on food stamps are also covered by government health insurance.⁴⁴ Overall, the Medicaid program is in shambles.⁴⁵ Costs and enrollment are skyrocketing, and the federal government is helping to drive the enrollment explosion with various schemes.⁴⁶⁻⁴⁷

National health expenditures grew nearly eight percent in 2023 alone, and account for nearly 20 percent of the nation's Gross Domestic Product.⁴⁸

Roughly 74 percent of American adults are overweight or obese.⁴⁹ Among American teens, 30 percent have prediabetes, up from 11 percent in 2002.⁵⁰⁻⁵¹ Overall, U.S. life expectancy is on a steady decline.⁵² Removing soda and candy from food stamps is a commonsense step to prioritize health and curb rising health care costs.

THE BOTTOM LINE: States should immediately seek waivers to ban soda and candy from food stamps. Ultimately, Congress should realign food stamps with its statutory intent to fight hunger, not fuel disease.

States like Florida, Maine, and Minnesota have raised this issue before, though efforts have been unsuccessful.⁵³⁻⁵⁵ But momentum is currently building. Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders announced her intention to seek a waiver to prohibit using food stamps for junk food in Arkansas, citing widespread, chronic health conditions.⁵⁶

Other states should follow Arkansas and seek a waiver from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service to prohibit the purchase of candy and soft drinks using food stamps. Ultimately, for a permanent solution, Congress should make candy and soda ineligible for purchase within the program. Food stamps were never meant to cover junk food. Congress must step up to restore food stamps to their purpose of providing real nutrition, not corporate welfare for "big sugar" and "big soda".

The purpose of the food stamp program is to provide a more nutritious diet, not to provide unlimited choice. This is evident as the program already restricts items like alcohol, cigarettes, pet food, paper products, and party favors.⁵⁷ Cash register systems are equipped to handle both food stamp-eligible and non-eligible purchases in a single transaction.⁵⁸

One survey found that a majority of food stamp enrollees would support removing sugar-sweetened beverages from food stamp purchase eligibility.⁵⁹

Taxpayers are subsidizing junk food that is proven to undermine the health of American families. Raising levels of nutrition is the goal of the food stamp program, but this goal is not being met. It's time for states and Congress to take action and ban soda and candy in food stamps to make America healthy again.



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and ban soda and candy in food stamps to
MAKE AMERICA HEALTHY AGAIN.**



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