

## Politicians, health advocates seek transparency, restrictions in food stamp program

Goal is for better accounting of billions spent, healthier choices

By [Monica Eng](#), Chicago Tribune reporter

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On a recent steamy holiday weekend, customers at a discount grocery store in [Evanston](#) loaded their carts with bags of chips, boxes of cookies, 2-liter soda bottles and jugs of fruit punch, among other items, then paid for it all with food stamp credit.

Although some might be surprised to see "nutrition assistance" dollars going to buy food with little nutritional value, it's perfectly legal under federal rules.

Some politicians and health advocates want that to change, saying restricting food stamp purchases to healthier items would encourage better diets, reduce health care costs and make better use of precious tax dollars.

Critics of the idea say such proposals are condescending, probably wouldn't be effective and would stigmatize aid recipients.

Lawmakers in several states, including Illinois, have unsuccessfully pushed bills to make soda, chips and candy ineligible for purchase with [food stamps](#), now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Others have suggested that the program, which is administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, could be modified as part of the current farm bill negotiations in Congress.

Supporters of restrictions say they could divert billions of food stamp dollars from junk food to healthier choices, thus saving billions more in [obesity](#)-related health care costs, which are predicted by the government to reach \$550 billion by 2030.

But just how many taxpayer dollars go to purchase soda, chips, snack cakes and candy each year? The [USDA](#) says it has no idea.

"They don't keep track of what is purchased," said Republican state Sen. [Ronda Storms](#) of Florida, who introduced a failed bill to restrict junk food purchases.

"How then ... does the state know whether the purchases are for legal items and not, say, toilet paper, magazines, beer, etc.? Ask that question and you might hear the crickets chirping."

One California watchdog group released a report last week suggesting that this lack of transparency covers up what amounts to billions of dollars in corporate welfare for junk food makers and other companies at a time when Congress is contemplating blanket cuts to a program that provides crucial assistance to hungry people.

"We don't have the information because there are huge economic interests who prefer this information to remain secret," said Michele Simon of Eat Drink Politics, who wrote the report. "It's convenient for USDA to say that we are not authorized to collect information on what people buy with food stamps, but the truth of it is that Wal-Mart knows exactly how much was spent on what."

The USDA has opposed restrictions on junk food purchases. Although government data have linked poverty to higher obesity levels and more soda consumption, the department's website says: "No evidence exists that food stamp participation contributes to poor diet quality or obesity."

Simon counters that that is precisely why the data are needed: so the public, researchers and policymakers can determine if the program is contributing to poor diet quality and what programs, if any, can improve that.

USDA representatives say the department is "interested in understanding the food purchase and consumption choices of SNAP clients but relies on other data sources, such as national food consumption surveys" that don't break out statistics on program participants.

Still, in recent months the department has explored a more focused approach. This year, the USDA will launch a feasibility study on gathering point-of-sale data for food stamp recipients. And, according to documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, the department has contracted with a private company to examine proprietary retail data with the goal of learning, among other things, "what food items are most frequently purchased with SNAP benefits."

But USDA officials caution that none of that information about food stamp recipients' choices will "tell us anything at all about how they would spend their money if restrictions were imposed."

There's no question that, in a time of lean budgets and class tensions, data on food stamp purchases could be a political hot potato. Simon acknowledges that some observers might use it to "judge and stigmatize" people who use food stamps.

"This would be counterproductive especially when cuts to the program are being considered," she noted in her report. "But fear should not keep us from accurately evaluating the effectiveness of SNAP, particularly given the program's potential for positive impact."

Supporters and opponents of the bans are remarkably diverse groups, with conservative fiscal hawks and liberal public health advocates tending to favor the idea. On the other side are not only large food corporations and anti-regulation conservatives but groups working to feed the hungry.

"We believe that choice leads to dignity and that individual choice should not be impeded," a spokesman for the Greater Chicago Food Depository wrote in an email to the Tribune. "We provide food for hungry people and help people access SNAP without placing judgment on their choices."

Simon and other critics note that many of these groups receive significant funding from food manufacturers. The depository's top donors include [Kraft Foods](#) and Sara [Lee](#), and funders of the national Feeding America organization, based in Chicago, include [Coca-Cola](#), [PepsiCo](#) and Kraft Foods.

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