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## Soda bans won't make SNAP beneficiaries healthier

By Dr. Jonathan Ellen November 01, 2023

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But there's little reason to believe that the use of SNAP funds to purchase sodas would do much to reduce obesity at the population level. The Food and Drug Administration reports that, as of 2020, less than 6% of the typical diet is made up of sugar-sweetened beverages, and according to the Beverage Marketing Corporation, our country's overall consumption of these drinks is down nearly 20% over the past two decades. This generational shift is most obvious among children, who are drinking 36% fewer calories every day.



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## **SODA BANS WON'T MAKE SNAP BENEFICIARIES HEALTHIER**

Dr. Jonathan Ellen | Nov 01, 2023



As a physician, social and behavioral epidemiologist, and longtime hospital executive, I understand all too well how dire our nation's health crisis is, especially in underserved communities. It is certainly true that poorer populations, such as those families eligible for food stamps, have worse health outcomes and higher rates of obesity than the rest of the population. As a result, their medical care can be costly.

These are no doubt just some of the reasons that Sens. Cory Booker (D-NJ) and Marco Rubio (R-FL) introduced S. 1485, the Healthy SNAP Act of 2023, which would ban the use of food stamps for the purchase of any soft drink, whether it be full-calorie or zero. Supporters insist that the legislation is an important way of using the might of the federal government to address the growing obesity epidemic.

But there's little reason to believe that the use of SNAP funds to purchase sodas would do much to reduce obesity at the population level. The Food and Drug Administration reports that, as of 2020, less than 6% of the typical diet is made up of sugar-sweetened beverages, and according to the Beverage Marketing Corporation, our country's overall consumption of these drinks is down nearly 20% over the past two decades. This generational shift is most obvious among children, who are drinking 36% fewer calories every day.

Even still, obesity in America is rising at alarming levels. In less than 20 years' time, the obesity rate among adults and children has risen 39%. Diabetes across all ages went up 51% over that same time period.

Experts point to a variety of nutritional culprits, such as fats, oils, and starches, consumed in excess as the causes of our growing waistlines. The Agriculture Department says our collective increased caloric intake has added about 417 calories to our average daily diets in 40 years — 32 of those added calories can be attributed to sugars. But with nearly 60% of beverages sold in the United States containing zero sugar, it's hard to see how prohibiting the use of food stamps to buy any type of soda would accomplish anything.

It is also not clear how supporters of this legislation intend for it to work. Their presumption is that reducing the intake of high-caloric beverages will improve people's health. But clearly, there is limited evidence that this strategy would lead to reductions in obesity.

If we care about improving our national health, we must embrace a holistic approach. That begins with fundamentally transforming our culture's relationship with food. Research shows that balance and moderation, not deprivation and prohibition, properly orient our brains to make nutritious choices that, compounded over time, help keep our bodies healthy and strong for as long as possible.

We also know that when we are obsessed with calorie-counting and restrictive diets, we aren't teaching the healthy habits that flourish into healthy lifestyles. This can catalyze harmful disordered eating and often leads to yo-yo dieting, which does nothing to remedy or prevent the systemic health problems associated with poor eating.

Instead, the public health goal should be to encourage balanced living, including properly fueling our bodies, staying active, and prioritizing our emotional well-being. Physicians know that when patients focus on this comprehensive approach to their wellness,

they'll end up with better outcomes, since nutrition, activity, and emotional well-being can all affect our weight, shaping our overall health. Such patient conscientiousness is key to meaningful and lasting change that, when applied across populations, can truly make a difference in public health and reduce costs.

Moreover, with this bill, proponents would allow the government to decide what people could eat, but they reserve such an indignity only for those unfortunate enough to rely upon the program to put food on their tables. This raises ethical questions about whether or not the government should have the ability to force lifestyle changes on the poor, even if officials believe it is in their best interest to do so. If we want to condition how people become eligible for SNAP — fine. But dictating what foods they may buy once they qualify veers into some pretty dangerous policy territory without making people any healthier.

Rubio and Booker should be commended for their commitment to public health. Our country would be much better off if more politicians sought creative solutions to fostering a healthier society, and in turn, lowering federal healthcare costs borne by taxpayers now and in the future. But they should take it from me: Solving a public health crisis requires more than a quick fix.

*Dr. Jonathan Ellen is the CEO of Labrador Health, a medical innovation company. He previously served as CEO of Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital. He is a social and behavioral epidemiologist, pediatrician, and retired medical school professor.*

## **THE ENEMY CAN SHOOT YOU, BUT THE GOVERNMENT WILL 'PROTECT' YOU FROM A LARGE SODA AND CANDY BAR**

Bob Carey | Feb 28, 2024



There's a reason the military has a recruiting and retention crisis: The work is tough, the pay is lousy, and there's that pesky possibility of getting shot. But also, as the National Defense Committee unfortunately must point out every day across a broad variety of military and veteran benefits, our government simply does not trust the military to make even the simplest of choices for themselves, and "infantilizes" them with a pervasive attitude of condescending paternalism.

The National Defense Committee commits itself to defend military and veteran civil and legal rights. This should not be necessary, but while our government trusts military personnel with the lives of our sons and daughters, it does not trust them to choose how to balance their checkbook, where to use their earned educational benefits, or, in one of the most inane examples of that condescending paternalism, to choose whether to buy a soda at the local store.

I kid you not. This is a serious proposal from some government leaders, but a stupid one at that.

Such governmental paternalism isn't unique. As we wrote last November regarding military educational benefits, "The government doesn't tell me I can only spend my military retirement at the base exchange and the commissary — I'm free to shop at Target and Costco if I want. So why should the government restrict veterans' educational benefits in that same way?" Little did we know at the time that if we're a poor veteran, the government does, in fact, want to stop us from buying a chocolate bar.

Again, we are not joking.

In fact, last May, Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida (whose state, by the way, produces 55% of all the sugar produced in the United States) introduced S. 1485, The Healthy SNAP Act of 2023, where he stands alone on this bill as none of his Senate colleagues have cosponsored the legislation. Other senators probably see something Rubio ignores — the issue is a



loser and will do nothing to reduce American obesity or improve military readiness.

SNAP stands for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which many people know simply as “food stamps.” But what many likely do not know is about 128,000 active-duty military families experience “very low food security,” meaning they skipped and downsized their meals, ate less than they thought they should, and could not afford to eat balanced meals. That represents 10% of the active-duty military force, and the deputy assistant secretary of defense for military community and family policy said such food insecurity is a “readiness [and] national security issue.”

But Rubio, without citing any statistical or economic proof, claims the 40% obesity rate in the United States is because the SNAP program allows recipients to buy foods with added salt and sugar. Citing an 8-year-old Department of Agriculture study, which was itself based upon 2011 food purchasing data, Rubio proclaimed more than 20% of all SNAP spending goes to unhealthy food and drink.

But what Rubio forgot to divulge is that same 13-year-old data showed food buying patterns between SNAP-using households and non-SNAP households was almost identical — leading the report’s primary finding to be that, “There were no major differences in the expenditure patterns of SNAP and non-SNAP households, no matter how the data were categorized” and that, “Less healthy food items were common purchases for both SNAP and non-SNAP households.” But heaven forbid such inconvenient truths get in the way of a story too shocking to be true.

Because, in fact, it is not.

The Healthy SNAP Act is a bad idea that only hurts military and veteran families it mistakenly claims it is trying to protect. The real issue is the number of military families and veterans forced to use food stamps because Congress pays our military and an additional 1.2 million veterans such a pittance for their service, current and past, that they cannot feed their families without assistance through SNAP. Congress would far better serve military and veteran families (including 107,000 Florida veterans on food stamps) by raising military pay and veterans disability benefits so that they can provide for their families befitting of the service and sacrifice they make to protect our freedom.

*Bob Carey is director of the National Defense Committee, and previously served as national security adviser to two U.S. senators and a Senior Executive Service member in the Department of Defense. He is a retired U.S. Navy captain.*

## TARGETING FAMILIES ON SNAP WILL INCREASE COSTS AND FAIL TO ADDRESS OBESITY

Mario Lopez | Jan 27, 2024

Congress’ list of legislative “to-dos” this year includes finally addressing the reauthorization of the Farm Bill, a massive legislative package that includes support for millions of low-income families. The 2023 bill has been delayed into this new year. Given the delay and the importance of the law, Congress would be wise to avoid stuffing pet projects into the process.

Some members of Congress, led by Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), mistakenly believe that using the Farm Bill to restrict consumers’ grocery choices will fix our nation’s obesity crisis.

The chosen scheme would use the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the principal method used to administer aid that helps lower-income families buy food, providing a chance for millions of these families to rise above the poverty level.

Last year, Rubio introduced the Healthy SNAP Act. If enacted, this bill would effectively ban the use of food stamps for the purchase of any soft drink or treat under SNAP. While some are hailing this as a way to curb

obesity, it would misplace blame on a handful of products rather than bad habits. And would do so at a considerable cost.

This is certainly not the first time that some have chosen to rely on nanny state provisions. Lawmakers on the political left have long used such measures to go after products they simply don’t like.

Instead of focusing on productive policies that would actually lower obesity rates, lawmakers find it easier to insert the federal government between American consumers and the products they choose.

The nanny-state approach establishes a slippery slope where lawmakers would continuously propose prohibitions on grocery items they disfavor for an ever-widening number of reasons. Today, the target may be treats or occasional snacks, but down the road politically disfavored products could include red meat, whole milk, or farmed fish. Such bans in future SNAP regulations would discriminate against families in the unenviable position of needing government help to pay for their groceries. But certainly, that socio-economic group is only the initial target.

Embracing this path would be an especially sad irony for Republicans, who until recently claimed to be the party of individual liberty and limited government. For certain voting demographics—Hispanics, for example, it is precisely those principles that have caused some movement away from Democrats in certain areas of the country. Abandoning those principles will certainly have consequences—as of 2016, SNAP supported nearly 10 million Latinos, including 1.2 million children. One practical matter for Sen. Rubio might be a look at his own constituents. In Florida, nearly 310,000 families rely on SNAP benefits.

The task of discerning which food products will be in the crosshairs—and communicating it to the retailer—will land on all taxpayers in the form of higher administrative costs to SNAP, and not merely at the federal level. While the federal government pays for SNAP’s food assistance cost, federal and state governments evenly split the administrative expenses.

Retailers, and thus all consumers, will also face higher costs. Tens of thousands of grocery store items would have to be categorized by their eligibility status under SNAP, with changes to existing systems and data. This would be a cycle with no end, given that about 20,000 new food and beverage products are introduced each year and the new set of government guidelines are handed down every five years (the lifespan of every Farm Bill).

In terms of the policy itself, even taking politicians’ purported intentions about addressing obesity at face value does not hold water.

Former medical professor Dr. Jonathan Ellen summed up the best way to approach obesity: “Research shows that balance and moderation, not deprivation and prohibition, properly orient our brains to make nutritious choices that, compounded over time, help keep our bodies healthy and strong for as long as possible.” Ellen goes on to say that “the public health goal should be to encourage balanced living, including properly fueling our bodies, staying active, and prioritizing our emotion well-being.”

The proper prescription goes beyond the limits of what might be the practical scope of government policy, but that is precisely the point for those who truly wish to address obesity. Relying on the federal government to stick a band aid on a real problem by falsely blaming all products in a certain category and limiting consumer choice is not the answer.

The supposed benefits of the Healthy SNAP Act are illusory. Families receiving SNAP deserve options as much as any other family and can make decisions for themselves without nanny state intervention. Congress should be focused on more important issues and an approach to obesity that will work, not categorically vilifying certain food products or restricting consumer choice.

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