

Food Stamps and Soda Pop: A Bureaucratic Mess?

Should welfare recipients be able to buy unhealthy foods like soda and sweets on the government's dime?

That question was debated last week by lawmakers on Capitol Hill. According to [CBS News](#):

“Debate about how food-stamp benefits are spent was sparked by a November report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which found that households receiving SNAP benefits used 20 cents of every dollar to buy soda, candy, desserts and other unhealthy foods.”

The raw numbers of this report can be seen in [the chart](#) below, displaying the top five items bought with food stamps. As can be seen, sweetened beverages alone make up nearly 10 percent of expenditures.

Summary Category	SNAP Household Expenditures		
	Rank	\$ in Millions	% of Expenditures
Meat, Poultry and Seafood	1	\$1,262.9	19.19%
Sweetened Beverages	2	\$608.7	9.25%
Vegetables	3	\$473.4	7.19%
Frozen Prepared Foods	4	\$455.2	6.92%
Prepared Desserts	5	\$453.8	6.90%

Given these numbers, many individuals would like to see soda and other sweets banned from the list of food stamp purchases not only to improve health, but also to make better use of the taxpayer's dollar. But as *CBS* goes on to report, doing so may open whole new cans of worms by:

- Increasing administrative costs of the food stamp

program

- Creating heightened costs for retailers who accept food stamps
- Bringing financial harm to food and beverage manufactures due to a loss in consumption

In 1835, French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville wrote [A Memoir on Pauperism](#), which explored the difficulties stemming from public charity programs similar to that of our modern food stamp system. While Tocqueville admitted that public charity is beneficial, he also warned that any public charity which extends beyond a temporary situation is fraught with unintended and disastrous consequences:

“But I am deeply convinced that any permanent, regular, administrative system whose aim will be to provide for the needs of the poor, will breed more miseries than it can cure, will deprave the population that it wants to help and comfort... will stop the accumulation of capital, will retard the development of trade, will benumb human industry and activity...”

Are we seeing Tocqueville’s prophetic warning coming true in our current food stamp program? Would the American people – both those on and off of welfare – be better served by returning public assistance to the [local level](#)?

Image Credit: <http://gph.is/28TPmHi>