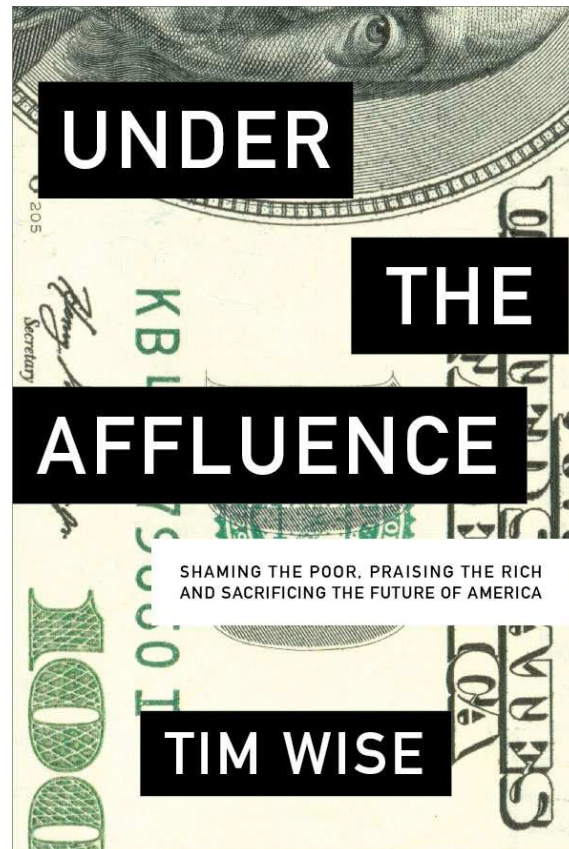


<https://medium.com/@timjwise/still-lying-after-all-these-years-deceptive-data-spurious-stereotypes-and-welfare-bashing-as-an-df2836f216b4>

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## **Still Lying After all These Years: Deceptive Data, Spurious Stereotypes and Welfare-Bashing as an American Hobby**



Have you heard the one about the guy buying king crab legs with food stamps? Or perhaps lobster?

If not, just wait a while and you probably will.

Not because this actually happens as often as some believe, but because the urban legend suggesting its veracity is just that: *legendary*. So legendary that people still claim to see folks whipping out stamps for these items, even though *there are no more food stamps*, and beneficiaries pay with an EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) card, largely indistinguishable from the standard debit cards the rest of us use.

When Ronald Reagan first popularized the idea that so-called welfare recipients indulge gourmet tastes at taxpayer expense, the story was about the profligate purchasing of T-bone steaks by “strapping young bucks” (because one wouldn’t want the racial dog whistle to go unheard). Apparently the rather pedestrian T-bone was a bigger deal in the 1970s than today.

But modern lies require modern upgrades, and so we can fully expect that within a few years the claim will metastasize into a right-wing horror story about the poors buying cedar-planked salmon with a red pepper coulis, or perhaps a balsamic reduction, a side of fennel and braised kale.

In truth, of course, it’s a bit hard to believe in the ubiquity of such splurging by the poor, when you consider a few pertinent facts. Not beliefs, or shit you heard from your uncle on Facebook, but facts.

[<https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/characteristics-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-holds-fiscal-year-2016>]

Like the fact that the average monthly benefit for a recipient of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) — or what used to be called “Food Stamps” — is a whopping \$125, or about \$1.40 per meal, per person.

Which is to say that even if a recipient made the strategic mistake of blowing their benefits one month on prime cuts of meat and seafood, they wouldn’t likely make the same error again once confronted with the food insecurity that would follow for the *remainder* of the month. It’s not like one’s EBT card refills upon early depletion like a cup of coffee at the Waffle House.

Likewise, the idea that SNAP recipients need to be made to work — part of a longstanding belief in their shiftlessness, which animates the Trump administration’s latest rumblings to require work from such folks — is rooted in falsehood and stereotype.

First, most SNAP beneficiaries are not really work eligible. In fiscal year 2016 — the latest year for which we have data — about two-thirds of SNAP participants were either children (44 percent), elderly adults (12 percent), or non-elderly adults with disabilities (9 percent).

Second, about two-thirds of SNAP beneficiaries already live in households with a labor force participant, and indeed 40 percent live in a household where someone already works full-time [<https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/257521/WelfareIndicators.pdf>] but earns too little to pull the family out of poverty or the near-poverty status that allows them to remain eligible for the program. Over the years companies like Walmart, with a reputation for low-wage employment, have actually assisted their employees in applying for SNAP and other benefits due to the inability of the wages they pay to bring folks above the eligibility threshold.

Of those who are able-bodied adults (only about one-third of recipients), most either work already, reside in a household where another adult works (while they often provide care to young

children), or are actively seeking employment but unable to find a job. Ultimately no more than 1 in 7 recipients even remotely fit the stereotype promulgated by the right — that of an able-bodied adult engaged in no work or work search activity.

Additionally, and contrary to popular assumption, most recipients of SNAP or TANF (the cash program that replaced AFDC after the 1996 welfare reform) do not remain on the program(s) for excessively long periods, let alone “intergenerationally.”

[<https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/257521/WelfareIndicators.pdf>]

Of those who come onto the SNAP rolls at some point, most will exit those rolls within a year and two-thirds will be off SNAP within twenty months.

For cash benefits, widespread dependence is even more infrequent. Currently only about 950,000 adults in the *entire nation* receive TANF benefits (and fewer than 300,000 black adults do, meaning that 99 percent of black adults do not, contrary to racist stereotype). Of all TANF recipients (child or adult, about 4 million in all) 8 out of 10 who come onto the TANF rolls will exit within one year, with a majority remaining on the rolls for fewer than six months.

The right of course lies about this by offering up a much more ominous sounding statistic that suggests long-term dependence is the norm, rather than exception. To wit, the claim you’ll sometimes hear made that for SNAP recipients, half of all persons on the program at any given moment will receive benefits for an average of seven years. Ooh, *scary!*

And entirely deceptive.

Yes, this claim is true, as per data from the Department of Agriculture, which administers the program. But it doesn’t mean what conservatives think it means, and it does not alter the fact that most people who come onto the SNAP rolls are there for a short time.

How can this be? How can most SNAP recipients be off the program within a year, and two-thirds be off within 20 months, while half of the people on the rolls at a given time will be on them for *seven* years? It seems like a brain-teaser or riddle of some sort, but it’s not hard to understand once you think about it, or once you understand how to analyze data, neither of which right-wingers show much inclination to attempt.

Fact is, looking at the SNAP (or TANF) rolls at any given moment in time will give you a skewed impression of what most recipients are like. Why? Think about it. By definition, anyone who is a long-term recipient of one or both of the programs is going to show up in the data at whatever point in the year you sample the rolls, right? So if someone is going to be on the rolls for seven years, whether you take your snapshot of beneficiaries on January 1 or December 31, you’ll see them.

But the person who comes on the rolls in January and is off by June will just as readily be missed

if you take your snapshot in August. In other words the majority of short-term recipients will be missed because they had already cycled off before you examined the rolls, while every long-term recipient will show up in the data, because they were on the rolls all year.

As an analogy consider your local hospital.

On two occasions in the last decade I had to go to a hospital: once for asthma, and another time because I was convinced I was having a heart attack — mostly because I'm a hypochondriac who apparently thought a pulled muscle was a good reason to blow \$5000 towards my still-not-met deductible.

In both cases, tests were run, care was administered and I was on my way within a few hours.

And that's how it is with most people who enter a hospital in the course of a year. They get in, they get taken care of, and they're out the door.

But if you were to go to either of the two hospitals I visited on those occasions and look at those *currently* occupying beds there, a disproportionate share of them would be suffering from serious conditions from which they may not recover and certainly not quickly. Why? Because anyone who is in serious condition and there for a longer period is more likely to be captured at whatever moment you sample the hospital beds, while people like me who cycled in and out will be missed.

If you assessed the efficacy of the doctors based solely on the share of chronically ill patients remaining in a hospital bed at any given moment, your assessment wouldn't be very good. But if you assessed their effectiveness by looking at the results obtained for *all* patients admitted, the hospital and its doctors would look far better.

The same is true with welfare programs.

The important point is that most people who enter the programs won't stay long, and this is why we can say that such initiatives do not foster dependence. If welfare benefits *did* foster dependence, let alone a *culture* of dependency, we would expect that the majority of such persons coming onto the rolls would find themselves trapped on them, unable or unwilling to leave, and that is simply not the case.

So please, if you oppose public assistance programs on philosophical grounds, feel free to make *that* case. But at the very least, stop lying or ignorantly using data you don't remotely understand in order to justify your cruelty jones. It would all be so much easier if you just admitted you detest the poor for simply being poor, and that you view their poverty as evidence of a lack of virtue.

In short, if you're going to resurrect Ebenezer Scrooge as your personal moral avatar, just do it.

Own it. But don't rely on phony anecdotes about your latest foray to Whole Foods, or on presenting shady statistics to make your case. We see you. We have always seen you, just like Dickens did, and you have not changed since.

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