

Study on food stamp distribution and theft underscores hunger crisis in Illinois

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A study published earlier this month seems to indicate a correlation between a drop in thefts committed at grocery stores in Chicago and the implementation of an Illinois policy change in the disbursement of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance program (SNAP) benefits, also known as food stamps. The study, conducted by Jillian B. Carr of Purdue University and Analisa Packman of Miami University, found an overall drop in grocery thefts after Illinois implemented a staggered disbursement schedule for SNAP benefits starting in 2010.

The study points to the desperate conditions faced by millions of Illinois residents every day, including those forced to subsist on meager food stamps benefits. Faced with the choice to starve or shoplift in order to obtain food, an increasing number of households reliant on food stamps are left with few choices other than food theft to survive.

The new Illinois policy implemented changes to the schedule of state SNAP benefit disbursement that spread payments throughout the month. Where previously over 60 percent of benefits were distributed on the first day of the month, under the new plan more benefits were disbursed between the second and 23rd days of the month. The study found that theft rates dropped by 15-20 percent at grocery stores in Chicago after the new disbursement policy went into effect. In total numbers, incidences of all crimes reported at grocery stores dropped by some 500 cases per year.

The study demonstrated that grocery store thefts are more likely to occur in the week before benefit disbursement, when financial resources are running low and recipients are pushed to the brink of desperation. Theft is also more likely to be committed by women during the final week of the benefit cycle, pointing to a desperate attempt to feed their children.

The study suggested the motive behind grocery theft by SNAP recipients. “Because half of all families receiving SNAP exhaust their SNAP benefits in two weeks,” the study states, “recipients may face a scarcity of resources during the remainder of the month. In response to this scarcity, they may turn to crime to meet nutritional needs.”

Cook County, which encompasses the city of Chicago and the area on which the study is focused, has one of the highest rates of food insecurity and food stamp usage of any county in the US. Some 16.8 percent of Cook County residents rely on food stamp benefits, compared to 13.1 percent of the total US population—still a staggeringly high number for the wealthiest capitalist country in the world. A family of four must earn no more than \$3,342 per month in gross income to become eligible for food stamp benefits in Cook County, a rather paltry amount considering the high cost of living in the Chicago area.

As income inequality and the cost of living continue to skyrocket, more and more residents are applying for food assistance in the county each year. In the past year, Cook County has seen a 10 percent increase in households receiving food stamp benefits. The crisis has been exacerbated by layoffs, slow economic growth and declining wages.

The maximum food stamp benefit for a family of four in Cook County is \$649 per month, a mere \$162.25 per person. Even at the maximum, a person would need to skip meals and consume the bare minimum amount of calories per day in order to survive. It should come as no surprise that those in such a dire situation might feel compelled to steal food.

It is not clear exactly why the new Illinois policy was implemented. The study points to possible reasons, including the desire to curb incentives for grocers to

raise their prices during the first week of the month in order to take advantage of the influx of business from food stamp disbursement. This idea, however, was eventually proven to be false in a 2016 paper published by Goldin et al., that found that grocery store prices do not fluctuate in response to perceived patterns of benefit distribution.

Reports also suggest that a staggering of food stamp benefits leads to lowered grocery store theft because of its impact on first-of-the-month “income shocks.” These shocks, which come from the disbursement of other state benefits such as disability insurance, unemployment benefits, Medicaid, as well as wages from work, can lead recipients to exhaust their resources early on in the month when benefits come. The study suggests that the smoothing of disbursement leads to a more even consumption pattern over the course of the month.

In all events the study concludes with proposals that are entirely conventional and accept the starvation level of social assistance in the US. Thus the authors recommend states consider staggering the disbursement of other state-issued benefits as well as wages in order to further decrease the amount of retail theft in communities.

Bipartisan cuts to the federal SNAP program carried out since 2008 by the Obama administration have resulted in dwindling benefit amounts year after year, as the number of those forced to depend on federal food assistance continues to grow. At the height of the so-called “economic recovery” in 2013, a record 20 percent of American households received SNAP benefits. That same year, the Obama administration announced a draconian \$11 billion cut to the food stamp program to be implemented over the next three years.

The ruling class has no progressive answer to the hunger crisis in the US. Even as the stock market continues to soar, millions of workers face hunger and devastation in their daily lives. Policies like the one implemented in Illinois are an attempt to temporarily stave off mass opposition to the cuts being implemented at all levels—state, federal and local. At the same time benefits are being slashed and billions are being poured into the financial markets to meet the insatiable greed of Wall Street.

In May, the Trump administration signed into law a

bipartisan budget plan that hacks away another \$2.4 billion from the national SNAP program through September 30, creating an even more desperate crisis for the millions of Americans who face hunger every day. The problem of hunger will not be solved by the political representatives of the ruling class, but by an independent movement of the working class in the fight for socialism.



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