

Written Testimony of Brian Wansink, Ph.D.

Before the
U.S. House Committee on Agriculture
“Pros and Cons of Restricting SNAP Purchases”

February 16, 2017

Good Morning Chairman Conway , Ranking Member Peterson, Members of the Committee: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present my perspective on the pros and cons of restricting SNAP purchases. I will be addressing three questions today: 1) What happens when food purchases are restricted? 2) Who has the most potential to shop healthier, and 3) How can this be best encouraged?

When Happens When Food Purchases are Restricted?

As a behavioral scientist and Director of the Cornell Food and Brand Lab, I focus on changing eating behaviors in a *practical* way. As the former USDA Executive Director for the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion – the Dietary Guidelines – I focused on changing eating behaviors in a *scalable* way.

When Food Stamps were first introduced, their purpose was to fill bellies with calories. Seventy years later we have another important opportunity. Fill bellies with the *right* calories. With increasing health care costs threatening the future of the American economy, one place we can begin turning this around – starting tonight – is with what we eat in our homes. Of all the health concerns that face Americans, diet-related disease and obesity are the ones that we can tackle most immediately.

What is critical to remember, however, is this: Our best and worse eating habits start in the grocery store. If we can change what people bring home from the grocery store or market, we can change how they eat.

Do people shop differently when they’re given extra money – such as a rebate or SNAP benefits? Two preliminary studies give us some insight here.

Exhibit #1. How does shopping behavior change *after* versus *before* people receive SNAP benefits? A new 6-year study of SNAP recipients in Rhode Island showed that the spending on SNAP eligible products went up once they received benefits, but the general purchase of SNAP ineligible benefits did not go down (Hastings and Shaprio 2017). Further unpublished analyses (learned through conversation) also suggest that purchase of convenient-to-eat foods goes up once a person receives SNAP benefits. They trade their SNAP benefits for convenience.

Exhibit #2 looks at incentives. What if we specifically financially incentivize shoppers to buy more fruits and vegetables? In one six-month study of 208 families

in Utica, NY, we gave shoppers a 10% bonus – 10% more money back on their debit card – when they bought healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables. When low-income shoppers (poverty ratio less than 1.3) were given this extra money as a subsidy, they spent \$33 more per week on healthier foods – including fruits and vegetables, but they also spent \$21 more per week on less healthy foods, such as snack foods (Cawley, *et al.* 2016). Some of the money they saved on the healthy foods, they appeared to spend on less healthy foods.

Although both of these are single, preliminary white papers in the National Bureau of Economic Research, they point at the idea that extra money – in the form of SNAP benefits or subsidies – changes the way people shop. They *do* buy more of the healthy, incentivized foods, but they also buy more of the less healthy foods. They just use their own money instead.

A key question, however, is “Who has the most potential to eat better?”

The Hierarchy of Health Predisposition

When I was the Executive Director of the USDA’s Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, I saw people off-handedly dismiss potentially useful ideas for new initiatives if they would not benefit 100% of the population under discussion.

In trying to solve difficult problems, it is very useful to not view 100% of all people – such as all SNAP benefit recipients – as the same. Some people already eat very healthy, some people do not want to eat healthy, and some people want to, but they need help. When trying to predict how a SNAP shopper would respond to a restriction, it is useful to understand that there is a Hierarchy of Health Predisposition.

Not all SNAP shoppers shop alike and we can view them – like all shoppers – on how predisposed they are to wanting to make a healthier shopping decision. We can view them as belonging to one of three fluid groups within a Hierarchy of Health Predisposition. The top segment of this hierarchy are Health Vigilant shoppers. They are highly informed, conscious of calories, and they are influenced by nutrition information. At the bottom extreme, Health Disinterested shoppers have little interest in changing their eating choices because of either the effort, sacrifice, or perceived futility of doing so. The segment in the middle are the Health Predisposed shoppers. They would prefer to make healthier food choices, but they have difficulty consistently doing so unless it involves very little sacrifice on their part. This Predisposed segment is the one that buys the 100-calorie packages of snacks and the sugar-free yogurt. For all people, this segment is larger on New Years Day than it was in December; it was larger this past Monday morning than it was during the prior Friday night’s shopping trip.

The Hierarchy of Health Predisposition



One reason nutrition guidance systems (such traffic lights or Guiding Stars) have had only modest influences on the sales of healthy food may be because they mainly resonate with only the top of the Hierarchy. Health Disinterested shoppers ignore these programs, and Health Predisposed shoppers inconsistently follow them. If the only segment they reach are the Vigilant shoppers, interventions like this will have hardly any impact on sales since this segment is already shopping in a healthy way.

This is important because SNAP restrictions may not have the same impact on healthy shopping behavior that we desire. The Health Vigilant shoppers will already be shopping healthy, and they do not need them. At the other extreme, Healthy Disinterested shoppers might simply rechannel their own money toward what they would have bought anyway. What this importantly raises is the question as to whether there other ways to guide SNAP shoppers to eat healthier – particularly those in this middle section.

Non-Restrictive Options to Encourage Healthier SNAP Shopping Patterns

One extreme way to try and encourage SNAP shoppers to eat better is to restrict what they can purchase. Some people might say this is not practical for retailers. Other people might say this is not respectful of the dignity or free choice of SNAP shoppers.

What is not asked when it comes to restricting SNAP purchases is, “Will it even work?” As just noted, for the Health Vigilant, it wouldn’t have any impact because they already eat healthy. At the other end, for the Health Disinterested, it may not work because they will simply spend their cash on what they would have otherwise bought anyway. There are two open questions: 1) Will a restriction work with the Health Predisposed – this middle segment, and 2) Would something else work better?

First, as said earlier, it is not clear if the retail hassles and the shopper dignity and free choice issues related to a restriction would merit a change. There may be a solution to this, however. Suppose a nutritionally predisposed shopper had one of two options. One option would be to have 100% of their SNAP benefits to purchase whatever they wanted (foods that are currently eligible). A second option would be that they could agree to self-restrict themselves from buying certain foods in exchange for, say, 125% of their SNAP benefits. In effect, if they agreed to restrict their SNAP benefits to buy only predetermined healthy foods – say fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean meat and dairy – they would get more 25% (or however much) more buying power. Such a system would still give people an option – they could either choose the 100% unrestricted plan or they could choose the 125% restricted plan – and it would help those who wanted to eat better to more easily do so. Of course, we have no evidence of how effective this would be in practice, but it is an idea that merits pilot testing. It lets people be free to choose while also providing them an incentive to eat better. The SNAP recipient chooses what they want.

A second option is far easier to implement and can be scaled quickly. It involves providing simple guidelines to retailers – perhaps even a certification – on how to make it easier for SNAP shoppers (and all shoppers) to buy healthier foods by making it more convenient, attractive, and normal (the CAN framework) to do so. This notion of “Healthy Shopping by Design” is fashioned off of the Smarter Lunchroom Movement which is a USDA-sponsored initiative that trains food service directors on the dozens of ways they can guide students toward making healthier selections in the school lunchroom (Hanks, *et al.* 2013). The 66-point scorecard shows whether the way they set up, serve, and promote foods make kids fit or fat. For instance, a score of 25 out of 66 indicates there is easy room for improvement, but also points at the 41 other changes they could make (Appendix).

There is precedent for a Healthy Shopping by Design program that is beginning to work in food deserts. In 2016, the National Association of Convenience Stores, working with the Cornell Food and Brand Lab developed and launched a new toolkit titled, “Ideas That Work to Grow Better-for-You Sales,” and they include evidence-based tactics to increase the sales of healthier foods. It is one reason you can often buy a banana when you buy gas – they are sitting right next to the cash register (Lenard and Schare 2016). These are small easy changes to make, but they are win-win and benefit both retailers and (food desert) shoppers.

Systematically giving other retailers the guidance of how to make healthy nudges, and the credit for doing so could change healthy shopping for SNAP shoppers just as the Smarter Lunchroom Movement is changing lunchtime for school children (Wansink 2017; 2014). In Norway, this is currently underway as a Nordic Solution to sustainability and obesity (which is related to the EAT Foundation and GreeNudge). Over there, supermarkets are being guided how to make small changes to the signage, structure, and service, and the results have been increased fruit and vegetable sales for all (Wansink, Karvold, and Tran 2017).

Summary

1. Giving SNAP recipients more benefits or restricted benefits may not lead them to only buy healthier food (they will also buy more convenient foods and less healthier foods).

2. There are three segments of shoppers: the Health Vigilant, the Health Predisposed, and the Health Disinterested. The easiest win will be to focus efforts programming on the Health Predisposed segment.
3. There are at least two ways to try and influence the Health Predisposed segment. One might be giving them 100% of their unrestricted benefits, or 130% of restricted benefits. A second would be to work with retailers to show them how they can be even more profitable by making it convenient, attractive, and normal for SNAP shoppers – indeed all shoppers – to shop healthier. Just as this program is responsible for putting bananas by the convenience store checkouts, and more vegetables in Norwegian shopping carts, it could be successful on a larger scale with supermarkets and other stores accepting SNAP benefits.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my perspective with you.

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Appendix. Example of Scorecards that Encourage Healthier Choices



Date _____ School Name _____ Completed by _____

The Smarter Lunchrooms Scorecard is a list of simple, no-cost or low-cost strategies based on research from Cornell University, that can increase participation, reduce food waste, and increase selection and consumption of healthy school food.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Review the scorecard before beginning.
2. Observe a lunch period. Check off statements that reflect the lunchroom.
3. Ask other school nutrition staff, teachers, or administration about items that have an asterisk.*
4. Tally the score.
5. Discuss the results with stakeholders. Choose unchecked strategies to implement in the lunchroom.



SmarterLunchrooms.org

FOCUS ON FRUIT

- At least two kinds of fruit are offered.
- Sliced or cut fruit is offered.
- A variety of mixed whole fruits are displayed in attractive bowls or baskets (instead of stainless steel pans).
- Fruit is offered in at least two locations on all service lines, one of which is right before each point of sale.
- At least one fruit is identified as the featured fruit-of-the-day and is labeled with a creative, descriptive name at the point of selection.
- A fruit taste test is offered at least once a year.*

Focus on Fruit Subtotal ____ of 6

VARY THE VEGETABLES

- At least two kinds of vegetables are offered.
- Vegetables are offered on all service lines.
- Both hot and cold vegetables are offered.
- When cut, raw vegetables are offered, they are paired with a low-fat dip such as ranch, hummus, or salsa.*
- A serving of vegetables is incorporated into an entrée item at least once a month (e.g., beef and broccoli bowl, spaghetti, black bean burrito)*.
- Self-serve spices and seasonings are available for students to add flavor to vegetables.
- At least one vegetable is identified as the featured vegetable-of-the-day and is labeled with a creative, descriptive name at the point of selection.
- A vegetable taste test is offered at least once a year.*



Vary the Vegetables Subtotal ____ of 8

HIGHLIGHT THE SALAD

- Pre-packaged salads or a salad bar is available to all students.
- Pre-packaged salads or a salad bar is in a high traffic area.
- Self-serve salad bar tongs, scoops, and containers are larger for vegetables and smaller for croutons, dressing, and other non-produce items.
- Pre-packaged salads or salad bar choices are labeled with creative, descriptive names and displayed next to each choice.

Highlight the Salad Subtotal ____ of 4

MOVE MORE WHITE MILK

- Milk cases/coolers are kept full throughout meal service.
- White milk is offered in all beverage coolers.
- White milk is organized and represents at least 1/3 of all milk in each designated milk cooler.
- White milk is displayed in front of other beverages in all coolers.
- 1% or non-fat white milk is identified as the featured milk and is labeled with a creative, descriptive name.



Move More White Milk Subtotal ____ of 5

BOOST REIMBURSABLE MEALS

- Cafeteria staff politely prompt students who do not have a full reimbursable meal to select a fruit or vegetable.
- One entrée is identified as the featured entrée-of-the-day, is labeled with a creative name next to the point of selection, and is the first entrée offered.
- Creative, descriptive names are used for featured items on the monthly menu.
- One reimbursable meal is identified as the featured combo meal and is labeled with a creative name.
- The combo meal of the day or featured entrée-of-the-day is displayed on a sample tray or photograph.
- A (reimbursable) combo meal is offered as a grab-and-go meal.
- Signs show students how to make a reimbursable meal on any service line (e.g., a sign that says "Add a milk, fruit and carrots to your pizza for the Power Pizza Meal Deal!")
- Students can pre-order lunch in the morning or day before.*
- Students must use cash to purchase à la carte snack items if available.
- Students have to ask a food service worker to select à la carte snack items if available.*
- Students are offered a taste test of a new entrée at least once a year.*

Reimbursable Meals Subtotal ____ of 11

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LUNCHROOM ATMOSPHERE

- Cafeteria staff smile and greet students upon entering the service line and throughout meal service.
- Attractive, healthful food posters are displayed in dining and service areas.
- A menu board with today's featured meal options with creative names is readable from 5 feet away when approaching the service area.
- The lunchroom is branded and decorated in a way that reflects the student body.
- Cleaning supplies or broken/unused equipment are not visible during meal service.

- All lights in the dining and meal service areas work and are turned on.
- Compost/recycling and trash cans are at least 5 feet away from dining students.
- There is a clear traffic pattern. Signs, floor decals, or rope lines are used when appropriate.
- Trash cans are emptied when full.
- A menu board with *tomorrow's* featured meal with creative names is readable from 5 feet away in the service or dining area.

Lunchroom Atmosphere Subtotal _____ of 10

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

- Student artwork is displayed in the service area or dining space.
- Students, teachers, or administrators announce today's menu in daily announcements.*
- Students are involved in the development of creative and descriptive names for menu items.*
- Students have the opportunity to volunteer in the lunchroom.

- Students are involved in the creation of artwork or marketing materials to promote menu items.*
- Students provide feedback (informal – “raise your hand if you like...” or formal – focus groups, surveys) to inform menu development.*

Student Involvement Subtotal _____ of 6

SCHOOL COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- A monthly menu is posted in the main office.
- A menu board with creative, descriptive names for today's featured meal options is located in the main office.
- A monthly menu is provided to students, families, teachers, and administrators.*
- Information about the benefits of school meals is provided to teachers and administration at least annually.*
- Nutrition education is incorporated into the school day.*
- Students are engaged in growing food (for example, gardening, seed planting, farm tours, etc.).*

- Elementary schools provide recess before lunch.*
- The school participates in other food promotion programs such as: Farm to School, Chefs Move to Schools, Fuel Up to Play 60, Share our Strength, etc.*
- The school has applied for the HealthierUS School Challenge.*
- Smarter Lunchrooms strategies are included in the Local School Wellness Policy.*

School Involvement Subtotal _____ of 10

SMARTER LUNCHROOMS SCORECARD TOTAL

- Focus on Fruit _____ of 6
- Vary the Vegetables _____ of 8
- Highlight the Salad _____ of 4
- Move More White Milk _____ of 5
- Reimbursable Meals _____ of 11
- Lunchroom Atmosphere _____ of 10
- Student Involvement _____ of 6
- School Involvement _____ of 10

Scorecard Total _____ of 60

AWARD LEVEL

-  **Bronze 15-25**
Great job! This lunchroom is off to a strong start.
-  **Silver 26-45**
Excellent. Think of all the kids that are inspired to eat healthier!
-  **Gold 46-60**
This lunchroom is making the most of the Smarter Lunchroom Movement. Keep reaching for the top!

For Scorecard FAQs visit: SmarterLunchrooms.org

The asterisk * indicates items that may need input from other school nutrition staff, teachers, or administration.

Smarter Lunchrooms Scorecard 2.0

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DEFINITIONS

- Point of Sale (POS):** Anywhere students leave the line with food and are charged or counted, such as at a register, check-out, or PIN pad
- Point of Selection:** Anywhere students select food or drink
- Service Line:** A designated line for meal selection—deli bar, salad bar, hot lunch line, snack window, etc.

- Grab-and-Go:** A pre-packaged reimbursable meal
- Reimbursable Meal/Combo Meal:** Any meal that meets all the USDA meal requirements and is priced as a unit
- Featured Items:** A fruit, vegetable, milk, or entrée that has been identified for promotion