

The double-standard of making the poor prove they're worthy of government benefits

By Emily Badger

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The actual contents of a Rhode Island woman's cupboard after two shopping trips paid for with food stamps. (Michael S. Williamson/The Washington Post)

Poverty looks pretty great if you're not living in it. The government gives you free money to [spend on steak and lobster](#), on [tattoos and spa days](#), on — why not? — cruise vacations and psychic visits.

Enough serious-minded people seem to think this is what the poor actually buy with their meager aid that we've now seen a raft of bills and proposed

state laws to nudge them away from so much excess. Missouri wants to curtail what the [poor eat with their food stamps](#) (evidence of the problem from one state legislator: "I have seen people purchasing filet mignons"). Kansas wants to block welfare recipients from [spending government money at strip clubs](#) (in legalese: any "sexually oriented business or any retail establishment which provides adult-oriented entertainment in which performers disrobe or perform in an unclothed state for entertainment").

[[Missouri Republicans are trying to ban food stamp recipients from buying steak and seafood](#)]

Then there are the states that [want to drug-test welfare recipients](#) — the implication being that we worry the poor will convert their benefits directly into drugs.

No steak, no seafood, no strip clubs: There's a logical gap in the recent laws that bash the poor who receive government welfare and food stamps. Wonkblog's Emily Badger explains. (Tom LeGro/The Washington Post)

Sometimes these laws are cast as protection for the poor, ensuring that aid is steered in ways that will help them the most. Other times they're framed as protection for the taxpayer, who shouldn't be asked to help people who will squander the money on vices anyway.

But the logic behind the proposals is problematic in at least three, really big ways.

The first is economic: There's virtually no evidence that the poor actually spend their money this way. The idea that they do defies [Maslow's hierarchy](#) — the notion that we all need shelter and food before we go in search of foot massages. In fact, the poor are much more savvy about how they spend their money because they have less of it (quick quiz: do you know exactly how much you last spent on a gallon of milk? or [a bag of diapers](#)?). By definition, a much higher share of their income — [often more than half of it](#) — is eaten up by basic housing costs than is true for the better-off, leaving them less money for luxuries anyway. And contrary to the logic of drug-testing laws, the poor are [no more likely to use drugs](#) than the population at large.

[Kansas wants to stop people on welfare from spending money on cruises]

The second issue with these laws is a moral one: We rarely make similar demands of other recipients of government aid. We don't drug-test farmers who receive agriculture subsidies (lest they think about plowing while high!). We don't require Pell Grant recipients to prove that they're pursuing a degree that will get them a real job one day (sorry, no poetry!). We don't require wealthy families who cash in on the home mortgage interest deduction to prove that they don't use their homes as brothels (because surely *someone* out there does this). The strings that we attach to government aid are attached uniquely for the poor.

That leads us to the third problem, which is a political one. Many, many Americans who do receive these other kinds of government benefits — farm subsidies, student loans, mortgage tax breaks — don't recognize that, like the poor, they get something from government, too. That's because government gives money directly to poor people, but it gives benefits to the rest of us in ways that allow us to tell ourselves that we get nothing from government at all.

Political scientist Suzanne Mettler has called this effect the "[submerged state](#)." Food stamps and welfare checks are incredibly visible government benefits. The mortgage interest deduction, Medicare benefits and tuition tax breaks are not — they're submerged. They come to us in round-about ways, through smaller tax bills (or larger refunds), through payments we don't have to make to doctors (thanks to Medicare), or in tuition we don't have to pay to universities (because the G.I. Bill does that for us).

[The terrible loneliness of growing up poor in Robert Putnam's America]

Mettler's research has shown that [a remarkable number of people](#) who don't think they get anything from government [in fact benefit from one of these programs](#). This explains why we get election-season soundbites from confused voters who want policymakers to "keep your government hands off my Medicare!" This is also what enables politicians to gin up indignation among small-government supporters who don't realize they rely on government themselves.

Mettler raises a lot of concerns about what the submerged state means for how we understand the role of government. But one result of this reality is that we have even less tolerance for programs that help the poor: We begrudge them their housing vouchers, for instance, even though government spends [about four times as much](#) subsidizing housing for [upper-income homeowners](#).

That's a long-winded way of saying that these proposed laws — which insist that government beneficiaries prove themselves worthy, that they spend government money how the government wants them to, that they waive their privacy and personal freedom to get it — are also simply a reflection of a basic double-standard.

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