



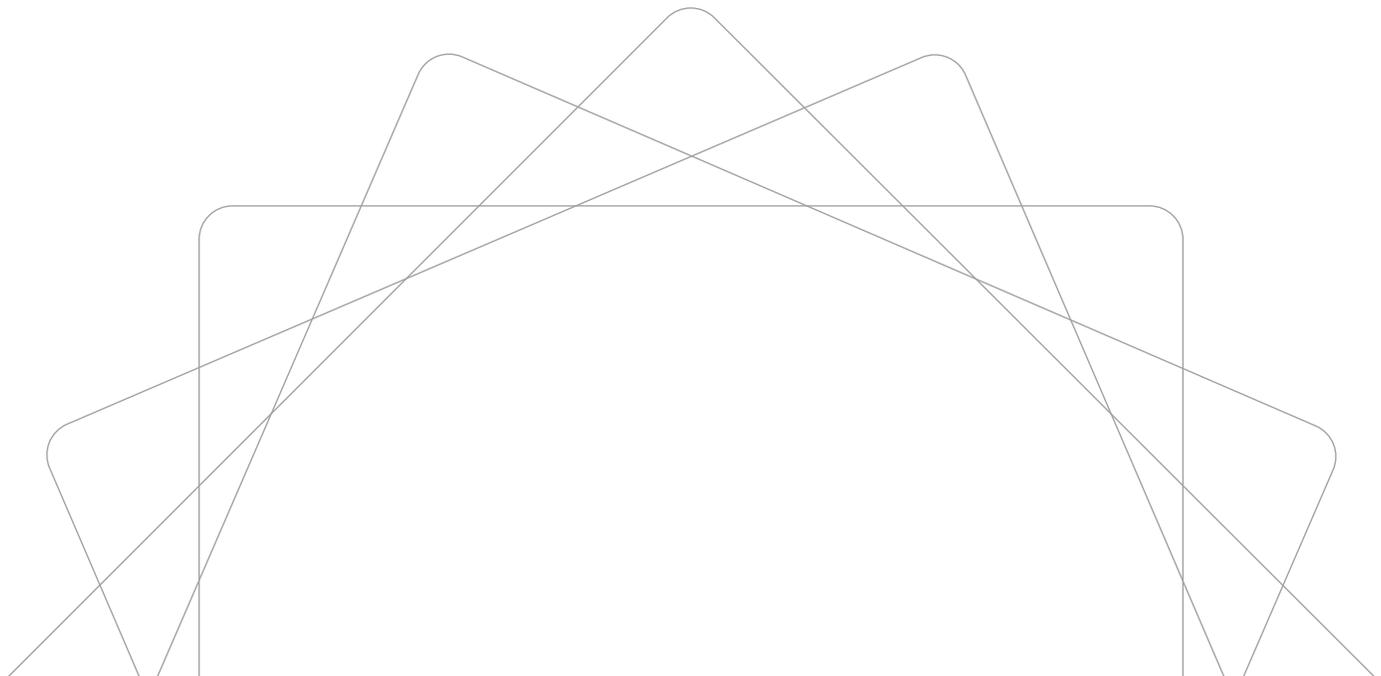
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ABT THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PAPER

A Second Look at “Harvest Box”

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Introduction

Without warning, the Trump administration's Fiscal Year 2019 budget included a proposal to radically reform the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps. In recent years, SNAP has provided nutrition benefits via an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card—similar to a credit card—intended to reduce stigma and increase program participation relative to use of paper coupons. The EBT card could be used to purchase almost any foods,¹ thus maximizing consumer choice and the value of SNAP to the recipient, while minimizing paternalism (i.e., the government making choices for the poor).

In sharp contrast, the [administration's "Harvest Box" proposal](#) would replace about half of the dollar value of the SNAP benefit with a home-delivered, USDA-specified package "which would include items such as shelf-stable milk, ready to eat cereals, pasta, peanut butter, beans and canned fruit, vegetables, and meat, poultry or fish." (p. 128)

The proposal has been widely and sharply attacked. Nutrition advocates and retailers have derided Harvest Box as impractical, immoral, or both, with some commentators going so far as to dismiss the proposal as an [unserious attempt to troll liberals](#).

This paper gives the Harvest Box proposal more careful consideration, drawing on existing literature to assess its likely impacts, and sketching a plan for a formal evaluation of the program's feasibility and impact.

Likely Effects

The existing literature on SNAP, food assistance programs, and, even more broadly, transfer programs, suggests likely impacts of the Harvest Box reforms. Specifically, a well-designed and well-implemented Harvest Box program is likely to:

- **Reduce the SNAP caseload.** Delivering part of the SNAP benefit, not through an EBT card with a broad choice of foods, but instead through Harvest Box is likely to cut the SNAP caseload. Some families will find the specified foods and the additional stigma (e.g., if neighbors see the box or recognize the specified foods) sufficiently unattractive that they will choose to stop participating in SNAP. The administration's proposal would only apply Harvest Box to families receiving more than \$90 per month in SNAP benefits, implying a dollar value of at least \$45 per month for the Harvest Box benefit and \$45 dispensed via the EBT card. The extent to which increased stigma alone would be sufficient to convince families with such non-trivial SNAP benefits to forgo SNAP entirely is unclear. Recent work by Rydell et al. (2018) suggests that SNAP participants may accept some limitations on what they can purchase with their benefits, though these results may not generalize to this more extreme and visible form of restriction. Older data suggests take-up of the USDA Commodity Supplemental Food Program --which provides boxes of shelf-stable food to low-income seniors, usually via a central location such as a community center or food bank--was [near 50 percent](#) in the areas where that program was most widely available; in comparison, [less than a third](#) of eligible low-income seniors participated in SNAP over the same period.
- **Improve nutrition.** Our research on nutrition policy suggests that specifying a food package with healthy foods has the potential to increase consumption of healthy foods (Klerman et al., 2017). However, this prior work investigated less severe restrictions on choice than Harvest Box, with consumers still given some flexibility to select specific foods within pre-specified categories (e.g., canned corn instead of canned green beans; Cheerios instead of Grape Nuts). The degree to which nutrition will improve as a result of Harvest Box will depend both on the nutritive content of the USDA-selected foods relative to what the household would have otherwise

¹ The only major exception is hot ready-to-eat foods; alcohol and tobacco also are excluded. SNAP benefits must be redeemed at participating retailers, but the SNAP network is incredibly broad. Nearly every supermarket and food store and

chosen and on the extent to which recipients will actually eat what is provided in the box. Here issues of cost, cultural appropriateness, food allergies and sensitivities, and personal preferences may have an impact, as would the still-undetermined [details of implementation](#).

- **Worsen food security.** If households drop out of SNAP, or if they continue on SNAP but perceive (some of) the foods in the package as so unattractive that they choose to go hungry instead of eating them, food security will worsen. Our work and the work of others provide clear evidence that additional food assistance improves food security (Collins et al., 2017; Nord, 2013). However, our research on limiting food choice did not find evidence of food security worsening as a result of less-severe restrictions on benefits (Klerman et al., 2017).
- **Increase or decrease access to food retailers.** The “food desert” literature expresses concern about households’ access to food because of limited retail opportunities and poor access to transportation (Larson et al., 2009). Our research suggests that access is not a major issue (Furey et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2017). However, inasmuch as access to a retailer is an issue, home delivery eliminates that concern for the delivered foods. (More broadly, USDA is currently testing [online purchasing and home delivery of SNAP foods](#).) On the other hand, in some low-income communities, SNAP dollars make up a large share of food expenditures. Harvest Box might lead to the shrinkage of already weak local food retailer networks. If shrinkage occurs, household time and out-of-pocket costs for shopping for the balance of the SNAP package (the part that remains on an EBT card) would increase. However, the home delivery network that delivers Harvest Box in poor neighborhoods could also serve as the basis for low-cost delivery of other foods.²

- **Lower program cost.** The USDA estimates that the Harvest Box proposal would save [\\$129 billion over 10 years](#). Clearly, all else equal, any drop in the SNAP caseload would lead to lower program costs. In addition, there is the potential for savings in food costs. Experience with the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) suggests that state food authorities should be able to [negotiate substantial discounts](#) relative to the retail prices that SNAP participants currently pay. Administration officials have cited these expected cost savings as a key benefit of the proposal, with USDA budget materials indicating an expectation that food could be acquired at [half the retail cost](#). The WIC experience suggests substantial, but smaller, cost savings. Any lower costs for food would be at least partially offset by distribution costs of the Harvest Box, which do not appear to be accounted for in the budget proposal.

Good or Bad?

How should we assess these likely changes? We consider each:

- **Lower the caseload.** Inasmuch as the food is perceived as less valuable (e.g., not what households want to eat, more stigma) the caseload will decline. Whether this is a good thing or a bad thing, all else equal, is a matter of perspective (see below).
- **Improve nutrition.** Providing a “more nutritious diet” is a [statutory purpose of SNAP](#). The available evidence suggests that SNAP households have poor diets. In this, they are like other poor Americans and only moderately worse than non-poor Americans (Andreyeva et al., 2015). All else equal, improving nutrition would be a good thing, addressing one of SNAP’s statutory purposes.
- **Worsen food security.** The other goal of SNAP is to [alleviate “hunger and malnutrition.”](#) Inasmuch as Harvest Box would worsen food security through a smaller caseload, it would be a bad thing, working against another of SNAP’s statutory purposes.

² Some nutrition advocates have likened Harvest Box to [Depression-era “soup lines” or wartime rations](#), implying that some or all households would receive the box by traveling to centralized distribution centers; our read of the administration proposal is that home delivery is a key component. On this issue, as with many others, details will matter—a lot.

- **Increase or decrease access to food retailers.** Lowering household time and cash costs to acquire food—through home delivery—would be a good thing. However, the net effect might be to weaken the local food retailer network, which would increase time and cash costs to acquire other food, which would be a bad thing.
- **Lower program cost.** For a given level and quality of food actually provided, lowering program costs would be a good thing.

Given our assessment of likely impacts, the last four changes seem on net likely to be moderately positive for a well-designed, well-implemented program. (Of course, details will matter—a lot; see below.) The first change—a smaller caseload and therefore less nutrition assistance distributed—will be viewed as positive by some and as negative by others. Some would argue that if households “really” needed the food, they would take whatever was in the Harvest Box package. Others would argue that households poor enough to be eligible for the program should be able to spend the benefits on whatever foods they desire.

Better Understanding the Trade Offs

As a nation, we are deeply divided on these issues around transfer program policy—whether more food assistance is better or worse and whether the poor should be able to choose what food they will consume. Many Americans are sympathetic to both perspectives. For them, whether Harvest Box is, on net, a good policy will depend on the magnitude of the impacts: How much does the caseload shrink? How does nutritional quality change? Does food security decline? What happens to net time and money costs of shopping? What happens to food retailer networks in poor communities? How much do food costs decrease?

These are not questions that can be answered by theory or op-eds. They are, however, questions that can be answered by rigorous social program evaluation. The

Harvest Box concept lends itself easily to random assignment evaluation methods.

Following USDA’s model for the evaluation of the Summer EBT for Children program (which Abt evaluated; see Collins et al., 2016, 2018), interested states would apply to USDA for a waiver allowing testing of one or more Harvest Box concepts.

- Year one would be dedicated to designing a program, including specifying the food package and developing an approach—implemented by government, non-profits, or for-profits—to assembling and delivering the package to SNAP participants.
- Year two would be a proof of concept year, with small-scale rollout in a small number of locations to identify first-order implementation issues.
- Year three would be a larger rollout in a larger number of locations.

In both years two and three, households would be randomly assigned to the Harvest Box intervention, with other households continuing to receive standard benefits.

Also in both years, both households assigned to Harvest Box and some of the households randomly assigned to continue on standard benefits would be surveyed to collect information on participation in SNAP, food security, food intake (and therefore nutrition), shopping patterns (including time and out-of-pocket costs), and households’ subjective impressions of Harvest Box (e.g., convenience, stigma, limitations on choice). Depending on the number of states and the size of the survey, evaluation costs for a rigorous three-year evaluation might be \$5 to \$30 million.

As with the Harvest Box program itself, design and implementation details of the evaluation will be crucial. In particular, with large enough samples (perhaps 10,000 households), we could consider testing two Harvest Box alternatives of equal cost—against each other and against current SNAP rules (i.e., no Harvest Box). One

Harvest Box alternative could be optimized to make the package as unappealing as possible (e.g., minimal choice, strong branding, only packaged/canned foods), the other Harvest Box alternative could be optimized to make the package as appealing as possible (e.g., maximal choice, minimal branding, fresh fruit and vegetable vouchers to replace some portion of packaged/canned foods). Such a design would explicitly address many concerns raised by critics of the administration's proposal, and it would allow us to better understand implementation trade-offs.

Rather than writing op-ed pieces conjecturing about Harvest Box's effects, why not rigorously evaluate several variants of it? Once we have solid estimates of likely impacts, we as a nation can make informed policy choices.

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