

Demonizing the Poor

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The Massachusetts legislature has established an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) Commission, which is now holding hearings on how people use their EBT (food stamp, aka SNAP) cards. They heard that a Massachusetts resident had used an EBT card in Hawaii. They concluded that there must be some fraud involved, which they should investigate and put a stop to. In fact, food stamps are national, administered by the United States Department of Agriculture, and can be used in any state. In order to avoid stigmatizing food stamp recipients, USDA said that an EBT card should be no different than any other credit card. When a member of the EBT Commission proposed to put a photo ID on EBT cards, a representative of retail stores said that this would be a nightmare because every shopper would have to have a photo ID, which the cashier would have to inspect.

Rather than investigating the shady practices of banks that forced millions of people out of their homes, politicians choose to stigmatize the poor. They mount investigations of presumed fraud and investigate what kind of food parents are buying, even though a parent of two children receives only \$238 a month from food stamps. Many people who are eligible for food stamps can't even receive them because the DTA workers are so overwhelmed. Each worker has over 1,000 cases.

A Massachusetts study of welfare fraud (including TAFDC and Medicaid) found that almost all fraud was vendor fraud, e.g. contractors for computer systems, medical supply companies, druggists, doctors, and pharmacies. They get the big money from the government. Why not investigate them?