

Testimony of Parker Gilkesson
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Before the
House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform
Subcommittee on Government Operations on
Follow the Money: Tackling Improper Payments for More Equitable Service Delivery
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Good morning, Chairman Connolly, Ranking Member Hice, and distinguished members of this committee. Thank you for inviting me today.

My name is Parker Gilkesson and I'm a senior policy analyst at the Center for Law and Social Policy. My experience as a North Carolina caseworker led to my commitment to become a researcher, advocate, and expert on SNAP, TANF, and Medicaid. CLASP is a national, nonpartisan, anti-poverty nonprofit advancing policy solutions for people with low incomes. My testimony summarizes a [detailed paper](#) I published analyzing the racialized history of fraud in SNAP. I'd like to make 4 key points: (1) the intense focus on fraud in SNAP is tied closely to a history of racist stereotypes, (2) actual SNAP fraud is rare, (3) the focus on fraud makes programs less effective at reducing hunger, and (4) federal and state agencies have many practical fixes to reduce the barriers to SNAP caused by unnecessary fraud provisions.

Health care, food, secure housing, and a livable wage are basic human needs. And seeking the help you need to succeed is a statement of human dignity and justice. However, coded language, dog-whistling, and racist stereotypes have reinforced the lie that folks receiving public benefits are exaggerating how poor they are and are likely committing fraud. The perception of fraudulence based on poverty and race has a long history here. Anti-Black images born out of slavery labeled Black people as biologically inferior, inherently lazy, promiscuous, and untrustworthy. These harmful tropes were used to justify the forced labor of Black people and are still reflected in many U.S. policies today. In the last 50 years, policymakers have used tropes like the "welfare queen" to insinuate that people experiencing poverty—especially Black people—are fraudulent and must be forced to work. Legislators have used this "dog whistle" to justify benefit cuts while increasing spending to protect "program integrity." Even those promoting expansions for public benefits have reinforced stereotypes by emphasizing how these programs would only benefit the so-called "deserving poor."

Fraud is quite [rare](#), contrary to media portrayals. Yet despite that rarity, federal and state legislators prioritize fraud prevention with millions in grants and targeted funding for "program integrity." States even have tip lines for the public to report suspected fraud, although most reports are based on personal vendettas, or a belief that a person using SNAP is too nicely dressed to qualify for benefits. Also, due to complex SNAP rules, many honest mistakes get lumped in with fraud because recipients often misunderstand reporting rules. Eligibility workers are often better trained to look for fraud than to provide trauma-informed care or refer families to other necessary assistance based on the many challenges of living in poverty. This isn't surprising, as federal rules penalize states for any benefits granted in error, but **not** for failing to help people in need. Also, difficult and time-consuming applications meant to catch people attempting to commit fraud often present barriers to applicants and caseworkers—reducing access and increasing stigma and shame.

Of course, no program can survive if it doesn't take abuses seriously. However, when actions to improve program integrity have a strong negative and racially skewed impact that decreases access to basic life necessities, policymakers have a moral obligation to find less harmful ways to fight fraud. They also must repair the harm of these actions on innocent recipients' dignity and trust in government.

Recipients accused of fraud are often considered guilty until proven innocent. While they're supposed to be able to defend themselves in a hearing, they aren't entitled to representation. And some states have coerced people into waiving their rights by threatening criminal prosecution. Historically, anti-hunger advocates have been afraid to criticize the negative consequences of the focus on "program integrity" and its disproportionate impact on people of color for fear of being accused of defending fraud or legitimizing racist tropes. However, we must discuss and address fraud, program integrity, and the over-policing of people experiencing poverty to achieve policies that reflect equity, trust, and truth instead of mistrust, mistreatment, and systemic oppression.

Here are just a few of the equitable solutions state and federal policymakers should try:

- Simplifying SNAP rules so clients understand what changes to their income need to be reported, especially for the growing share of workers in the gig economy. Many improper payments are caused by confusion and honest mistakes.
- Rethinking quality control so we measure timeliness and accuracy, while also reaching all eligible households and assuring customer service satisfaction.
- Providing oversight and accountability to states for incorrect determinations of fraud, sanctions, and overpayments, as well as for violations of recipients' rights to due process.

For more detailed research, I would like my report to be officially submitted into the Congressional Record.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.