

How Paternalistic Preferences
Shape the Welfare State:
The Case of In-Kind Nutrition Assistance

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Motivation

- ▶ Welfare systems often rely on in-kind transfers. We focus on food stamps. (Other examples: education, medical system)
- ▶ Textbook economics: unconditional cash transfers raise recipient welfare most effectively

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Why do transfers often come in-kind?

- ▶ Some theoretical explanations
 - ▶ improving efficiency of tax system (fewer distortions), insurance (less exposure to price risk), pecuniary effects, self-targeting (like ordeal-mechanism), etc.
- ▶ Paternalistic preferences?

Food stamps history

Origins: aftermath of Great Depression (1939)

- ▶ Massive agricultural surpluses
- ▶ Masses of people cannot afford to buy it

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How do these vary across Choice Architects?

What do Choice Architects seek to achieve with in-kind transfers?

Why and how do citizens want to restrict welfare recipients' consumption bundles?



Why and how do citizens want to restrict welfare recipients' consumption bundles?

These are first-order questions

- ▶ 13% (41.5 mio.) of the US population lived in a household benefitting from SNAP (food stamps program) in 2021 alone
- ▶ *“One of the most striking aspects of in-kind programs is how widespread and important they are.”* (Currie, Ghavari, JEL, 2008)



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Method

Lab-in-the-field experiment in which nationally representative citizens decide about consumption opportunities of SNAP participants (food stamp recipients; SNAP = supplemental nutrition assistance program).



Literature

In-kind transfers:

- ▶ Review: Currie, Ghavari (2008)
- ▶ Merit goods literature (starting with Musgrave, 1959)
- ▶ Survey studies: Campbell, Gaddis, 2017, Liscow, Pershing, 2022

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Poverty assistance and recipient demographics

- ▶ About how much to give, not in what way
- ▶ E.g. Luttmer, 2001, Akesson et al., 2022

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Positive welfare economics: What welfare criteria do people support?

- ▶ E.g. Ambuehl, Bernheim, Ockenfels, 2021, Ambuehl, Bernheim, 2022, Bartling et al., 2022

Hypothesis 1: Specific egalitarianism



The *Specific Egalitarianism* hypothesis (Tobin, 1970, Harberger 1984)

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Specific egalitarianism is about ensuring minimum consumption of 'good' items
(e.g. healthy food)

Hypothesis 2: Ward paternalism

He who pays the piper, calls the tune — and why shouldn't the tune be, 'Get your life in order'? ...Why can't taxpayers ... protest, 'It's our money and you'll use it as we think best'?

– Bryan Caplan

Hypothesis 2: Ward paternalism

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**Ward paternalism is about ensuring
limited consumption of 'bad' items**
(e.g. alcohol, video games)

Potential Role of Stereotypes



Linda Taylor, branded *The Welfare Queen* by Ronald Reagan

- ▶ Many potential stereotypes: 'welfare queen', 'white trash', 'absent black fathers', 'hillbillies', etc.
- ▶ Do they affect interventions? For which demographics?
- ▶ Do stereotypes affect behavior towards welfare recipients, or do they only affect beliefs about who is a welfare recipient?

Design

Overview

Lab-in-the-field experiment

- ▶ Choice Architects (US general population sample) decide about the options that will be available to a recipient paired with them.
- ▶ Recipients: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, i.e. food stamp) participants in the USA

Overview

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Incentives

- ▶ 1 in 20 Choice Architects see a real SNAP participant, others decide about hypothetical participants. Do not know whether their participant is real.
 - ▶ One decision selected at random for implementation
- ▶ No material incentives for Choice Architects' main decisions
 - ▶ But incentivized belief elicitation

Decisions

All decisions involve:

- A. Monthly deliveries of a food box for half a year
- B. Monthly deliveries of cash equivalent for half a year

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Food boxes

- ▶ Two different types: (i) Healthy, (ii) Representative
- ▶ Each Choice Architect makes decisions about only one of them; does not learn of the other one.

The healthy food box

Contents satisfy intake of macronutrients recommended by the American Heart Association for 2 weeks for a 2000 calorie diet (Lloyd-Jones et al., 2010)



Healthy food box

Fruit and vegetables



Whole carrots, 16oz



3 bell peppers



1 iceberg lettuce



2 cucumbers



Navel oranges, 2lb



6 bananas



Fuji apples, 3lb



4 Roma tomatoes



Frozen sweet peas,
2lb



Frozen berries, 16oz



Frozen broccoli florets,
32oz



Canned tomato sauce, 8oz,
no salt added



Canned sliced carrots,
8.25 oz



2 cans of no-salt-added whole
kernel corn, 15.25 oz each



6 ct Motts apple sauce,
no sugar added

Fiber



2 loafs of whole wheat
bread, 20oz



Rolled oats (whole grain), 42oz



Russet baking potatoes 5lb

Legumes, nuts, and seeds



2 cans of pinto beans,
15.5oz each



Walnuts, 4oz



2 cans of chickpeas,
15.5oz each

Healthy oils and fats, and other nutrients



Olive oil (extra virgin)



2 cans of salmon, 14oz
each



2% Milk, half-gallon

Cost: \$51.68 (walmart.com, Sacramento CA, June 2022)

The representative food box

Contents chosen to match the macronutrient and food group intake of the average SNAP participant for 2 weeks (Zhang et al., 2018)



Representative food box

Soda, cookies, and snacks



2 bottles of Coca-Cola, 2L

Mountain Dew, 2L

Fanta, 2L



Pringles, 5.2oz

2 bags of honey-roasted peanuts, 2.7oz each

Buttery crackers, 13.7oz

Sandwich cookies, 14.3oz

Ready-made meals



4 cans of SpaghettiOs, 15.8oz each

Beef ravioli, 15oz

Beef vegetable soup, 18.8oz

Pea soup, 18.8oz

Meat and fish



Pulled pork, 2.6oz

Rotisserie chicken, 9oz

Oscar Meyer wieners, 8ct

2 cans of tuna, 5oz each

Dairy



Cheddar cheese, 8oz

2% Milk, half-gallon

Yoghurt, 6oz

Fruit and vegetable products



Green beans, 14.5oz

Tomato sauce, 8oz

Bell pepper slices, 12oz

Frozen sweet peas, 2lb



Dill pickles, 24oz



6 bananas



Orange juice, 64oz

Carbs and proteins



2 loafs of white bread, 20oz

Crunchy honey oats, 18 oz

Spaghetti, 16 oz

Cost: \$51.73 (walmart.com, Sacramento CA, June 2022)

Cash equivalent

Goal: Cash equivalent that cannot buy groceries (reason later)

- ▶ *Necessities*: Inexpensive clothing, home improvement, gas, and spending at gas stations other than alcohol and tobacco
- ▶ *Luxury*: full service restaurants, travel, and brand-name clothing stores
- ▶ *Lethargy*: on-screen entertainment and consumer electronics, fast food, and hot foods purchased at gas stations
- ▶ *Sporting goods*
- ▶ *Addictive goods*: Alcohol, tobacco (through gas station gift cards)

Sporting goods



Gas stations and associated convenience stores



Gas station convenience stores sell many items including tobacco products, beer and wine, lottery tickets, packaged snacks and candy, and over-the-counter medication, such as these:



Inexpensive and fast-food restaurants



Home improvement and office supplies



Fine clothing and apparel stores



Travel: airlines, trains, hotels, and motels



Flightgear offers access to over 300 airlines including



Hotels.com offers accommodation in nearly any hotel or motel across the US and abroad, including



Inexpensive clothing stores



Full-service restaurants, coffee houses, and food delivery services



Gaming, video streaming, TV, and electronics



Treatments

- ▶ Healthy vs. representative food box

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- ▶ Healthy vs. representative food box
- ▶ Demographics of the recipient
 - ▶ Race (black, white). Unobtrusively conveyed through pixelated mugshot.

You are now making decisions about the following welfare recipient.



Morgan (and her two-year old child)

(Image pixelated for anonymity.)

Age: 20-29

Children: One two-year old

Marital status: No partner present

Citizenship: US

Collects SNAP benefits ("food stamps")

Place of residence: FL, rural area.

This welfare recipient has **no food restrictions**. She has access to a fridge, to a freezer, and to a cooking appliance such as a stove.

Treatments

- ▶ Healthy vs. representative food box
- ▶ Demographics of the recipient
 - ▶ Race (black, white). Unobtrusively conveyed through pixelated mugshot.
 - ▶ Gender (male, female)
 - ▶ Age (20-29, 50-69)
 - ▶ Parental status (only for young women)
 - ▶ Place of residence {NY, CA, TX, FL}, {urban, suburban, rural}

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Recipient description

- ▶ Only single individuals (to obviate inference about partner or need to describe that person).
- ▶ If children, then one two-year old

Structure

1. Decisions in 5 scenarios, in sequence
2. Elicitation of beliefs and attitudes

Decision scenarios

Scenario 1: How do individuals restrict others?

- ▶ Paternalistic choice. Yields *enforcement price*

Paternalism decision

Choose one of the following

**Welfare recipient gets the
Healthy Food Box monthly
(no choice)**



Morgan will receive the food box.

OR

**Welfare recipient chooses
between Healthy Food Box
monthly and monthly gift
cards**



or



Morgan will choose between the monthly food box delivery and the monthly gift cards.

Please decide on each line whether Morgan can choose between the monthly food box and the monthly gift cards, or must receive the monthly food box.

If the gift card allowance is **\$130** each month:

Choice: Morgan chooses between the monthly food box OR \$130 in gift cards each month

Recommend food box

Recommend gift cards



Food box (no choice): Morgan will get the monthly food box

If the gift card allowance is **\$105** each month:

Choice: Morgan chooses between monthly food box OR \$105 in gift cards each month

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Food box (no choice): Morgan will get the monthly food box

If the gift card allowance is **\$85** each month:

Choice: Morgan chooses between monthly food box OR \$85 in gift cards each month

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Food box (no choice): Morgan will get the monthly food box

Decisions for values \$0, \$25, \$45, \$60, \$70, \$85, \$105, \$130

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Scenario 1: How do individuals restrict others?



- ▶ Paternalistic choice. Yields *enforcement price*

Scenario 2: What do people believe others should do (net of willingness to act on that judgment)

- ▶ Surrogate choice. Yields *surrogate reservation price*

Surrogate choice

Choose one of the following

<p>Welfare recipient gets monthly food box</p>  <p>Morgan will get the food box each month</p>	<p>OR</p>	<p>Welfare recipient gets monthly gift cards</p>  <p>Morgan will select the gift cards she will get each month.</p>
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Cannot leave choice to the recipient

If the gift card allowance is **\$130** each month:

Gift cards: Morgan selects gift cards worth \$130 for each month (no food box, no groceries)

Food box: Morgan will get the food box each month.

If the gift card allowance is **\$105** each month:

Gift cards: Morgan selects gift cards worth \$105 for each month (no food box, no groceries)

Food box: Morgan will get the food box each month.

If the gift card allowance is **\$85** each month:

Gift cards: Morgan selects gift cards worth \$85 for each month (no food box, no groceries)

Food box: Morgan will get the food box each month.

If the gift card allowance is **\$70** each month:

Gift cards: Morgan selects gift cards worth \$70 for each month (no food box, no groceries)

Food box: Morgan will get the food box each month.

Decision scenarios

Scenario 1: How do individuals restrict others?

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Scenario 3: What do people believe others would choose absent restrictions?

- ▶ Belief elicitation. Yields *reservation price beliefs*

Belief elicitation

If the choice is between **\$130 in gift cards** every month for half a year and the food box each month, what is the chance Morgan will opt for the food deliveries?

0 of 10	1 of 10	2 of 10	3 of 10	4 of 10	5 of 10	6 of 10	7 of 10	8 of 10	9 of 10	10 of 10
choose food	choose food	choose food	choose food	choose food	choose food	choose food	choose food	choose food	choose food	choose food
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

If the choice is between **\$105 in gift cards** every month for half a year and the food box each month, what is the chance Morgan will opt for the food deliveries?

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Choice Architect matched with real recipient may be paid for accuracy on this prediction (up to \$5).

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Results

Data

- ▶ 152 SNAP participants (recipients)
- ▶ 4,166 Choice Architects, online (provider: Kantar)
- ▶ August - October 2022

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Survey weighting

By political preference, gender, race, and age to make it representative of US population (2021 General Social Survey)

Aggregate behavior

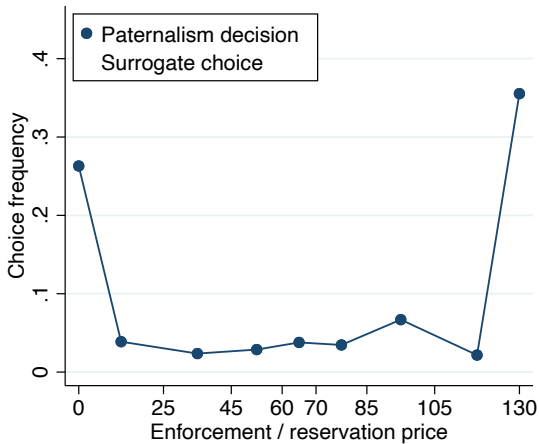
Questions

1. Are Choice Architects paternalistic? In what ways?

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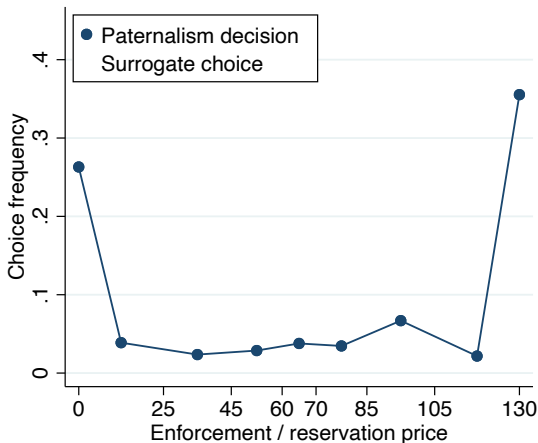
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2. Which hypotheses explain the interventions?

Paternalistic interventions



(Enforcement price = highest gift-card value for which food enforced)

Paternalistic interventions



(Enforcement price = highest gift-card value for which food enforced)

- ▶ Many 'libertarians' ($s = 0$) and 'authoritarians' ($s = 130$)

1. How do people restrict?
 - ▶ Combines 'What do people consider right for recipients' and 'How much are they willing to act on that judgment?'
2. What do people consider right for typical recipients?
 - ▶ What recipient do people have in mind when deciding about 'typical' recipients?
3. How does what people consider right compare to what they believe recipients want?
 - a) In terms of levels
 - b) In terms of effect of recipient preferences (beliefs thereof) on CA choices

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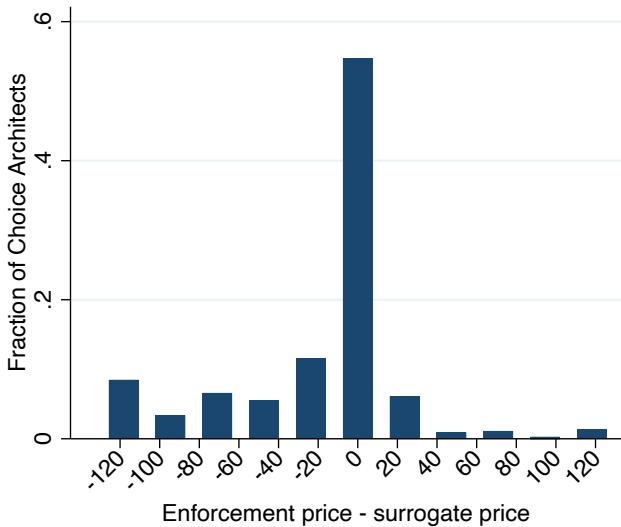
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2. Do CAs' conception of 'right' depend on recipient preferences at all?

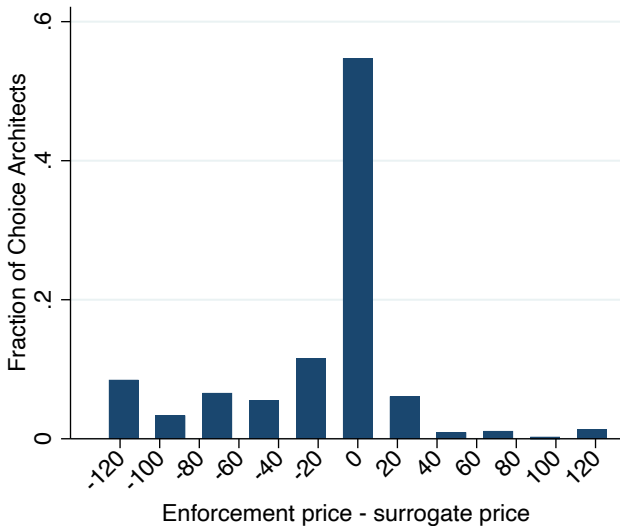
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 - ▶ Too loose: Gift-cards to those who would like food
 - ▶ Too tight: Food to those who would like gift-cards

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 - ▶ Real policies are one-size-fits-all. Must trade off two errors:
 - ▶ Too loose: Gift-cards to those who would like food
 - ▶ Too tight: Food to those who would like gift-cards
 - ▶ Relevance: Policy support depends on this tradeoff





What you may do (enforcement price)

=

What's 'right' for you (surrogate price) + a little discretion (if any)

Additional experiment stages

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1. Information about recipient's reservation price

Morgan said she prefers \$65 in gift cards each month over the monthly food box deliveries:



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Rian said he prefers the monthly food box deliveries over \$65 in gift cards each month:



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2. Informed surrogate choice

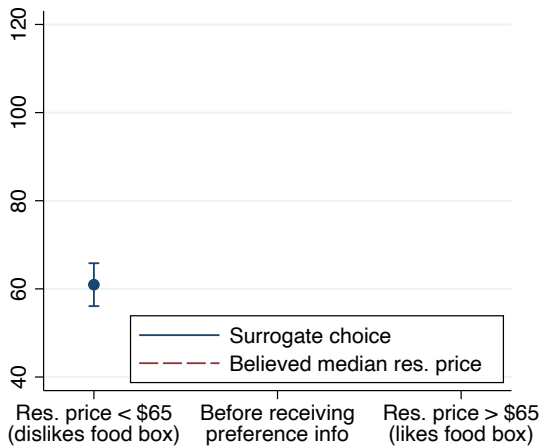
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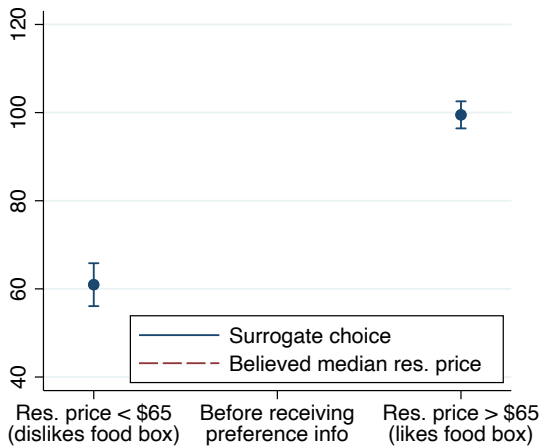
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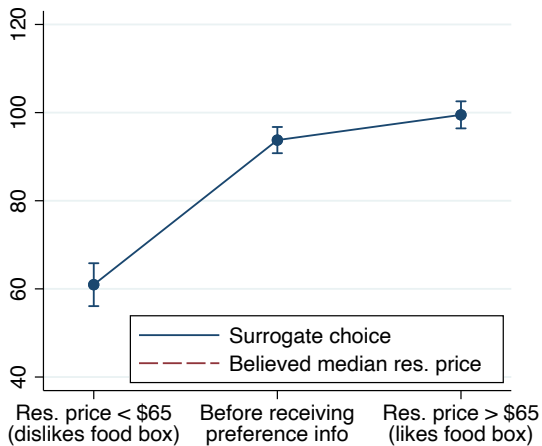


2. Informed surrogate choice
3. Informed reservation price beliefs

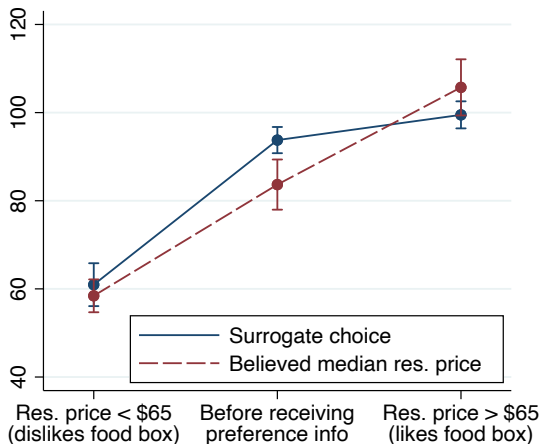




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- ▶ CAs account for recipient preferences
- ▶ Surrogate choice without information places much more weight on those who like the food box.
 - ▶ Effect does not simply reflect parallel asymmetry in beliefs

How much do CAs believe they restrict recipients?

- ▶ Food box costs $c = \$52$

Notes: Values off grid points estimated by linear interpolation. Estimates correct for variation in beliefs about food costs. Absent correction, $R_{believed} = 20\%$ and $R_{actual} = 44.7\%$.

How much do CAs believe they restrict recipients?

- ▶ Food box costs $c = \$52$
- ▶ Average CA restrictiveness:

$$R_{actual} = P_{actual}(\text{Recipient prefers } \$52 \text{ in gift cards to food box}) \\ \times P(\text{CA forces food at } \$52)$$

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Notes: Values off grid points estimated by linear interpolation. Estimates correct for variation in beliefs about food costs. Absent correction, $R_{believed} = 20\%$ and $R_{actual} = 44.7\%$.

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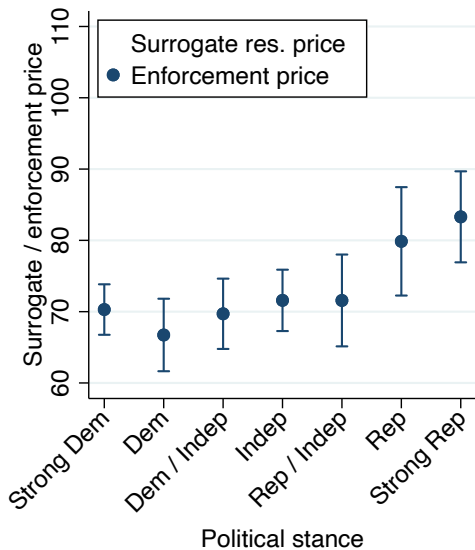
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→ Because CAs mispredict the effect of their interventions, they must be (partially) misguided!

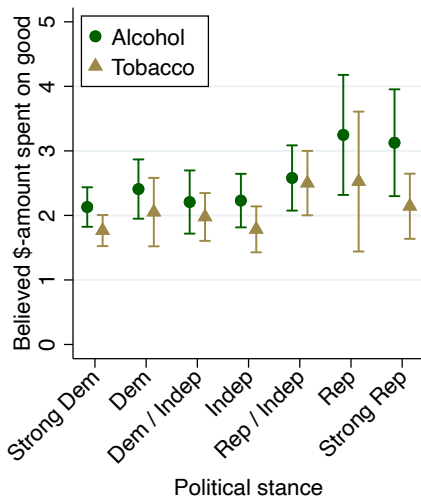
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Paternalism by political stance



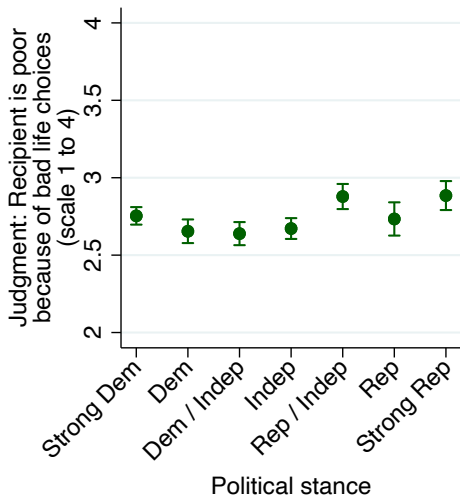
Beliefs about recipients' choice quality

Believed amount spent on alcohol and tobacco (of \$100 in gift cards)

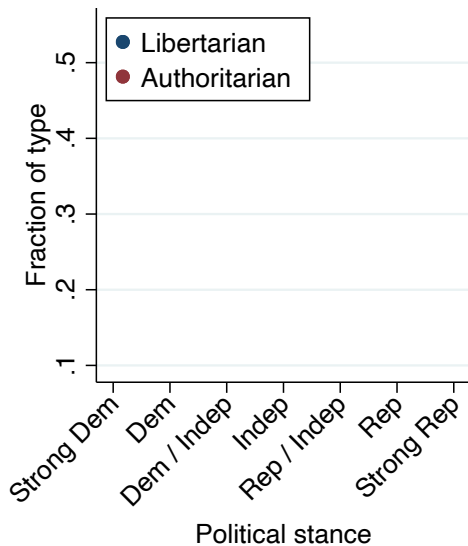


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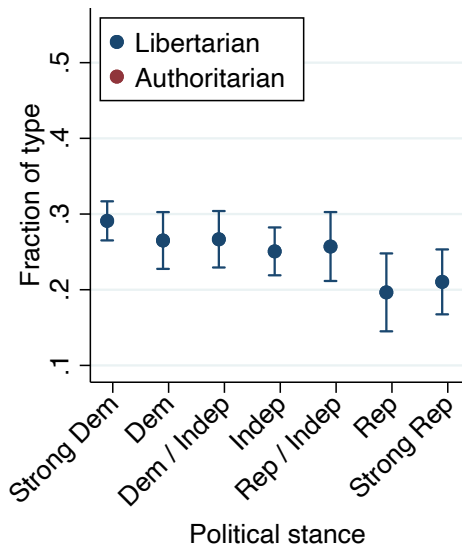
Attribution: Recipient is poor because of bad life choices
(scale 1 to 4)



Types by political stance

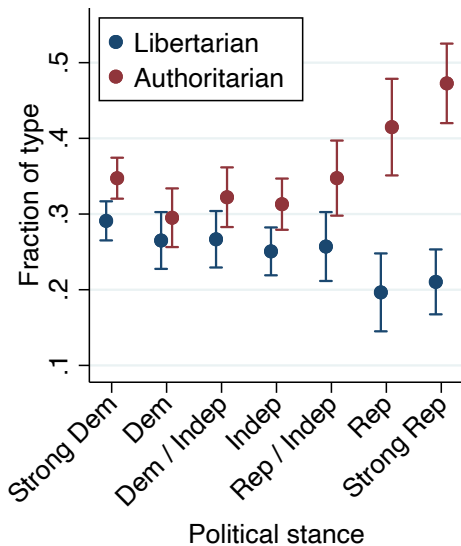


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(Slope coefficient $p < 0.001$ in both cases)

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Ensure sufficient consumption of (healthy) food.
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Ensure sufficient consumption of (healthy) food.
 - Beliefs about use of gift cards and cause of poverty (largely) irrelevant
- ▶ Ward paternalism:
Limit consumption of 'inappropriate' items
 - Beliefs about use of gift cards and cause of poverty highly predictive

	(1) Enforcement price	(2) Surrogate price	(3) Enforcement price	(4) Surrogate price
<i>Gift card use</i>				
Lethargic	0.178*** (0.063)	0.164*** (0.048)		
Sporting	-0.392*** (0.136)	-0.584*** (0.163)		
Luxury	0.040 (0.069)	-0.044 (0.055)		
Alc, Tobacco	0.051 (0.070)	0.084 (0.054)		
<i>Poverty attribution</i>				
Person			3.347*** (0.533)	0.970** (0.411)
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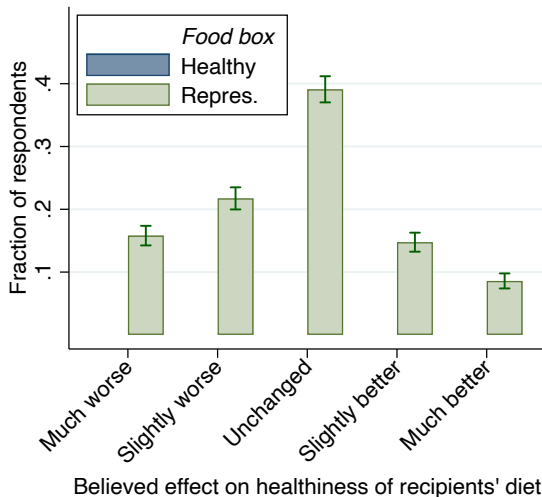
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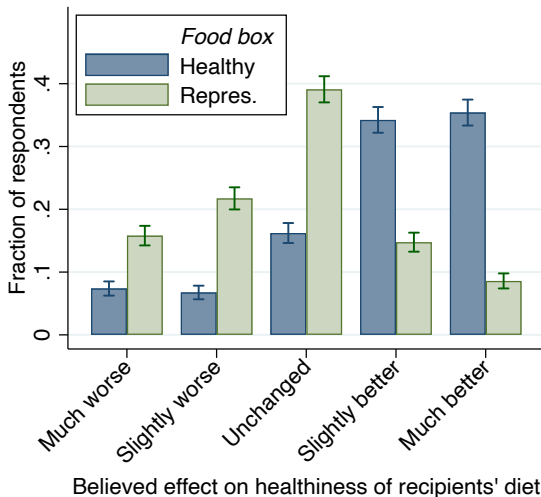
Hypothesis: Health paternalism

Do respondents even believe that the healthy box tends to improve dietary quality?

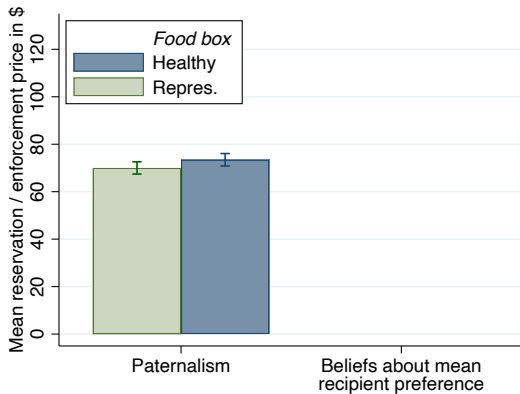


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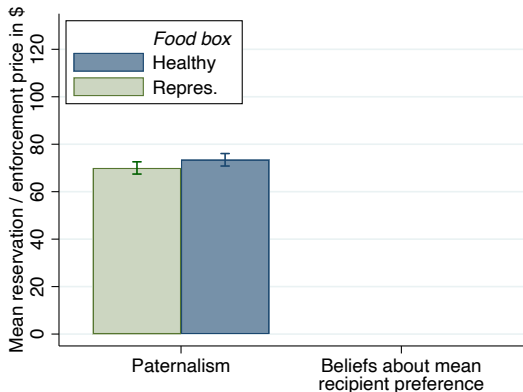


Yet, healthiness has only small effect on enforcement prices.



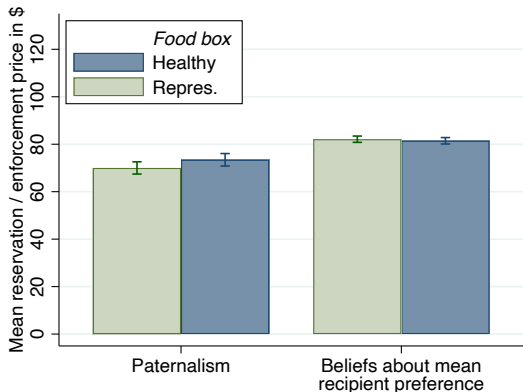
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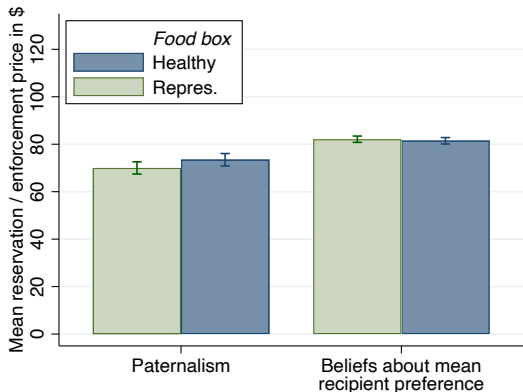
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- ▶ Actual recipient reservation prices: \$38.64 (representative box), \$32.09 (healthy box), $p < 0.05$
- ▶ Paternalism is not mainly about making recipients consume (healthy) food. It is about preventing respondents from consuming other things.

Questions

1. Are Choice Architects paternalistic? In what ways?
 - ▶ Yes. 40% authoritarians, 30% restrict at some prices.
 - ▶ Restrictions twice as severe as Choice Architects think they are. Must be (partially) misguided.
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Potential Role of Stereotypes



Linda Taylor, branded *The Welfare Queen* by Ronald Reagan

- ▶ Many potential stereotypes: 'welfare queen', 'white trash', 'absent black fathers', 'hillbillies', etc.
- ▶ Do they affect interventions? For which demographics?
- ▶ Do stereotypes affect behavior towards welfare recipients, or do they only affect beliefs about who is a welfare recipient?

Potential stereotype 1: use of gift cards for alcohol

$$Dep.var. = \beta_0 + \beta_{black}black + \beta_{female}female + \beta_{old}old + \beta_{kids}kids + \epsilon$$

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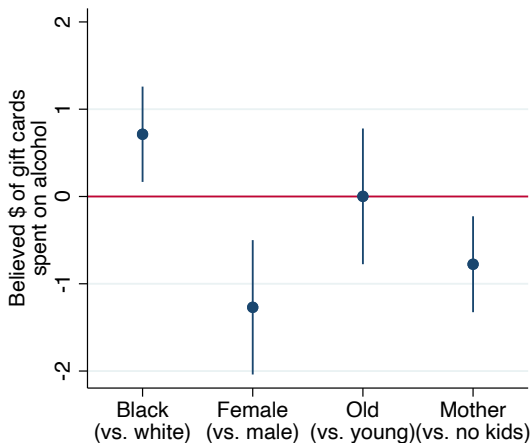
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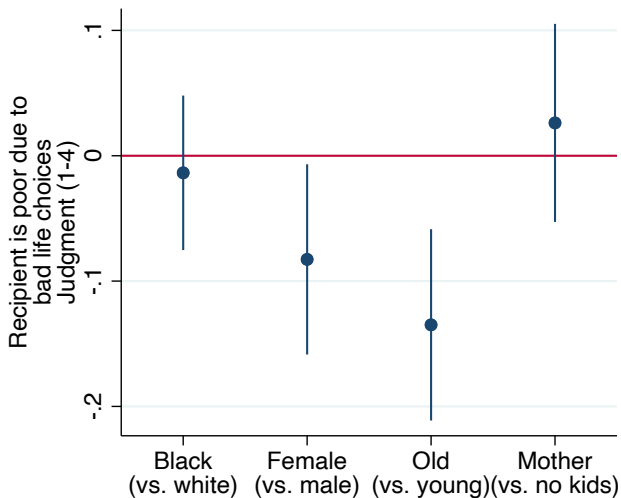
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Controls: CA demographics, beliefs about food box cost, type of food box

Potential stereotype 2: poverty attribution

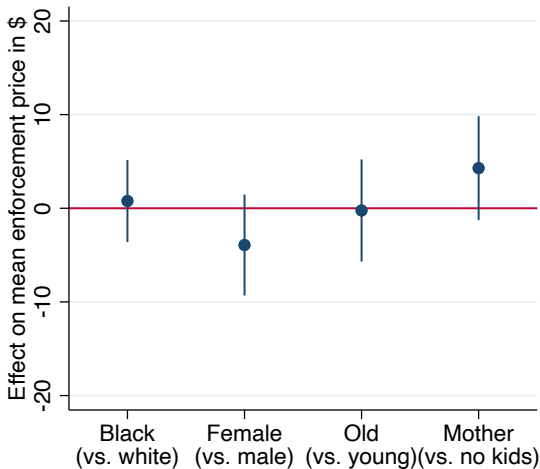
Judgment: Recipient is poor due to bad life choices (1 - 4)



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Effects of recipient demographics on enforcement prices

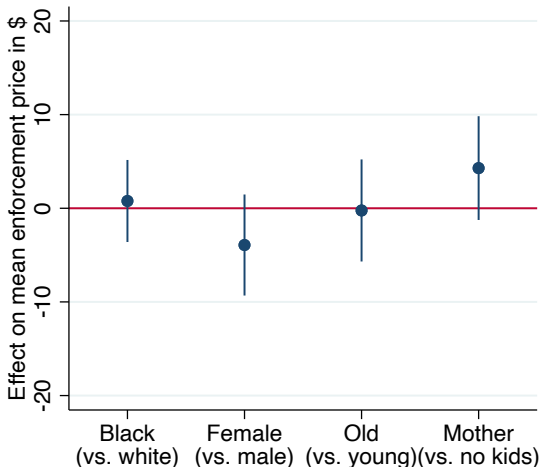
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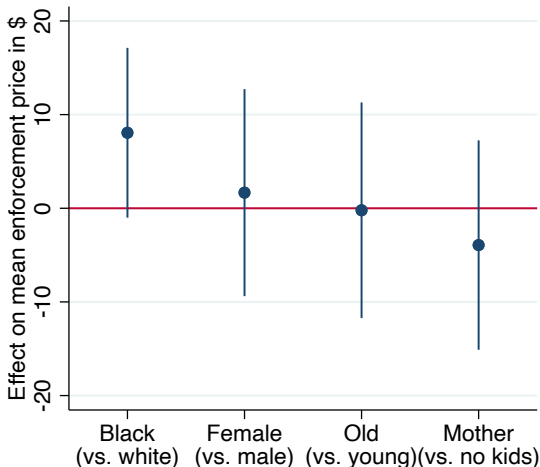
Do these results mask heterogeneity by political stance?



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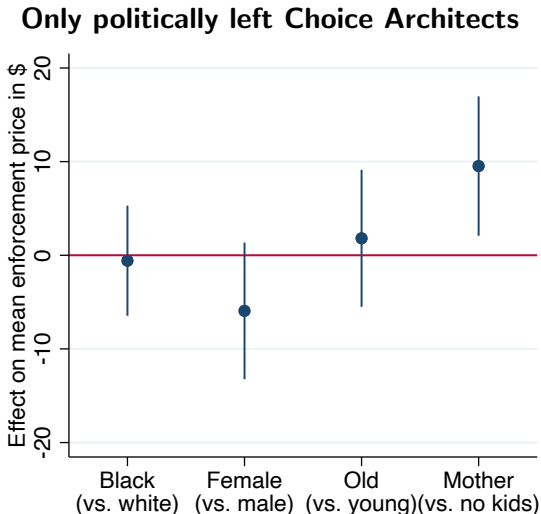
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Only politically right Choice Architects



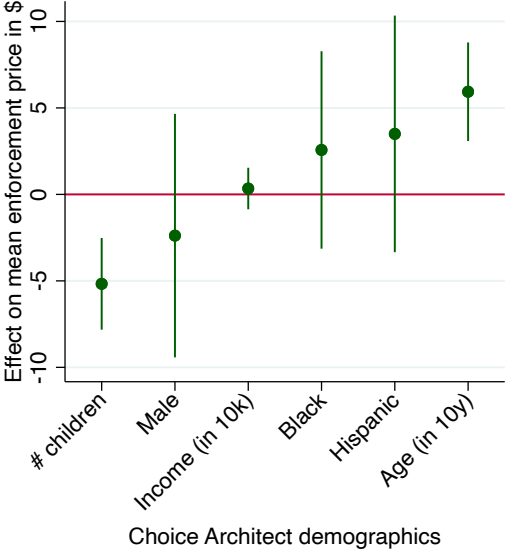
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Effect of CA attributes on interventions



Omitted category: white female. Controls include political stance.

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 - ▶ CAs less paternalistic if younger, white, more children

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Paternalism is a substantial political economy constraint in poverty assistance.

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Belief-based interventions to alter support should focus on use of funds rather than recipient demographics.

Healthy food box

Fruit and vegetables



Whole carrots, 16oz



3 bell peppers



1 iceberg lettuce



2 cucumbers



Navel oranges, 2lb



6 bananas



Fuji apples, 3lb



4 Roma tomatoes



Frozen sweet peas,
2lb



Frozen berries, 16oz



Frozen broccoli florets,
32oz



Canned tomato sauce, 8oz,
no salt added



Canned sliced carrots,
8.25 oz



2 cans of no-salt-added whole
kernel corn, 15.25 oz each



6 ct Motts apple sauce,
no sugar added

Fiber



2 loafs of whole wheat
bread, 20oz



Rolled oats (whole grain), 42oz



Russet baking potatoes 5lb

Legumes, nuts, and seeds



2 cans of pinto beans,
15.5oz each



Walnuts, 4oz



2 cans of chickpeas,
15.5oz each

Healthy oils and fats, and other nutrients



Olive oil (extra virgin)



2 cans of salmon, 14oz
each



2% Milk, half-gallon

Cost: \$51.68 (walmart.com, Sacramento CA, June 2022)

Representative food box

Soda, cookies, and snacks



2 bottles of Coca-Cola, 2L

Mountain Dew, 2L

Fanta, 2L



Pringles, 5.2oz

2 bags of honey-roasted peanuts, 2.78oz

Buttery crackers, 13.7oz

Sandwich cookies, 14.3oz

Ready-made meals



4 cans of SpaghettiOs, 15.8oz each

Beef ravioli, 15oz

Beef vegetable soup, 18.8oz

Pea soup, 18.8oz

Meat and fish



Pulled pork, 2.6oz

Rotisserie chicken, 9oz

Oscar Meyer wieners, 8ct

2 cans of tuna, 5oz each

Dairy



Cheddar cheese, 8oz

2% Milk, half-gallon

Yoghurt, 6oz

Fruit and vegetable products



Green beans, 14.5oz

Tomato sauce, 8oz

Bell pepper slices, 12oz

Frozen sweet peas, 2lb



Dill pickles, 24oz



6 bananas



Orange juice, 64oz

Carbs and proteins



2 loafs of white bread, 20oz

Crunchy honey oats, 18 oz

Spaghetti, 16 oz

Cost: \$51.73 (walmart.com, Sacramento CA, June 2022)

Sporting goods



Gas stations and associated convenience stores



Gas station convenience stores sell many items including tobacco products, beer and wine, lottery tickets, packaged snacks and candy, and over-the-counter medication, such as these:



Inexpensive and fast-food restaurants



Home improvement and office supplies



Fine clothing and apparel stores



Travel: airlines, trains, hotels, and motels



Flightgear offers access to over 300 airlines including



Hotels.com offers accommodation in nearly any hotel or motel across the US and abroad, including



Inexpensive clothing stores



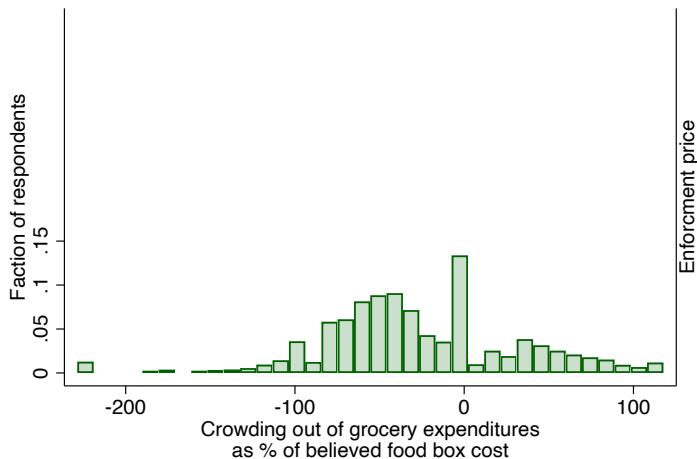
Full-service restaurants, coffee houses, and food delivery services



Gaming, video streaming, TV, and electronics

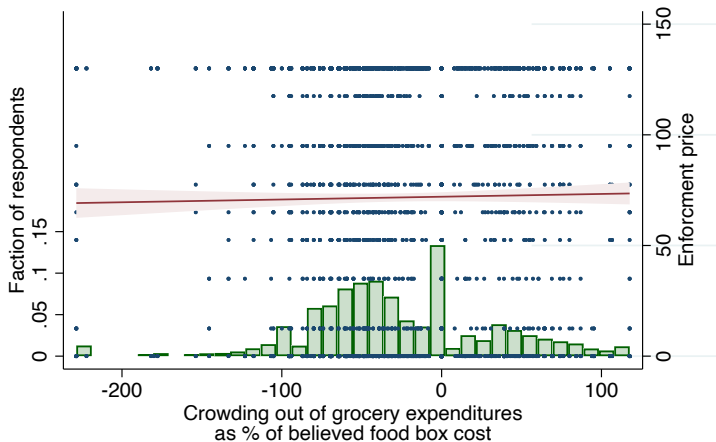


Effect of crowding out beliefs on enforcement price



- ▶ Real crowd out according to Hastings, Shapiro, 2018: $\sim -20\%$

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- ▶ Slope: $p = 0.22$

Experiment behavior vs. attitudes about SNAP

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Experiment behavior	Enforcement price	Enforcement price -belief	Altruism	Belief \$ spent on alcohol	Belief \$ spent on tobacco
Mean	71.401 (1.476)	-2.315 (1.843)	37.386 (0.375)	2.591 (0.172)	2.180 (0.155)
SNAP attitudes					
Tighten restrictions	3.883*** (0.910)	6.320*** (1.182)			
Make more generous			3.177*** (0.339)		
Recipients make bad choices with cash				0.368*** (0.141)	0.355*** (0.119)
Observations	1,400	1,052	1,499	1,563	1,563

Controls: Recipient characteristics, CA characteristics, food box type, belief about costs of food box

SNAP attitudes scale 1 to 5, except restrictiveness scale 1 to 7

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Make more generous			3.177*** (0.339)		
Recipients make bad choices with cash				0.368*** (0.141)	0.355*** (0.119)
Observations	1,400	1,052	1,499	1,563	1,563

Controls: Recipient characteristics, CA characteristics, food box type, belief about costs of food box

SNAP attitudes scale 1 to 5, except restrictiveness scale 1 to 7

Experiment behavior vs. attitudes about SNAP

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Experiment behavior	Enforcement price	Enforcement price -belief	Altruism	Belief \$ spent on alcohol	Belief \$ spent on tobacco
Mean	71.401 (1.476)	-2.315 (1.843)	37.386 (0.375)	2.591 (0.172)	2.180 (0.155)
SNAP attitudes					
Tighten restrictions	3.883*** (0.910)	6.320*** (1.182)			
Make more generous			3.177*** (0.339)		
Recipients make bad choices with cash				0.368*** (0.141)	0.355*** (0.119)
Observations	1,400	1,052	1,499	1,563	1,563

Controls: Recipient characteristics, CA characteristics, food box type, belief about costs of food box

SNAP attitudes scale 1 to 5, except restrictiveness scale 1 to 7