Barring Drug Felons From Food Stamps Puts Them at Risk of HIV

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A congressional ban that restricts convicted drug felons from receiving food stamps or cash assistance may be sending young mothers into a life of prostitution, raising their risk of contracting HIV, The New York Times reports. In 1996 Congress passed a law forbidding people convicted of drug felonies from receiving food stamps or financial subsidies unless they live in a state opting out of the ban. While most states have opted out of the ban, around a dozen have accepted its terms fully and other states have allowed some restrictions on cash assistance and food stamps.

Investigators at the Yale University School of Medicine have published a study highlighting the law's ill effects in the March-April issue of the journal AIDS Education and Prevention. Working in partnership with a California prisoner rights organization All of US or None, the Yale researchers studied 110 recently released inmates. Thirty-seven percent of the group were homeless.

The study subjects came from three states that represent different faces of the ban. Texas has a total ban of food stamps for drug felons; California's ban is only partial; and Connecticut allows food stamps for those who observe the terms of their sentences. More than nine in 10 of the study subjects were concerned about obtaining food for themselves and their families.

Those living in Texas or California were more likely to suffer from hunger. Those who did lack proper nourishment were more likely to engage in prostitution. The study found that those in Connecticut were still not getting the assistance they needed.

In an editorial, the Times lambasted the congressional law as "destructive policy," called the bans "counterproductive" and said that "it is time for states that have not completely lifted [the bans] to do so."

To read the Times editorial, click here.

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