



# The Definitive Welfare Dictionary: From *Left to Reality*

## barriers [noun]

as in “program integrity measures create *barriers* for low-income families.”

**Related scare terms:** *hurdles*

**Translation:** The Left calls work requirements and program integrity measures “barriers” to access. But work is not a barrier—it is a powerful force for self-sufficiency and purpose. And program integrity measurers are only barriers to the ineligible. These “barriers” are critical for protecting the safety net for the truly needy. The greatest barrier in the welfare state is welfare. For able-bodied adults, it is dependency that blocks human flourishing.

## categorical eligibility [noun]

as in “*categorical eligibility* is a streamlined way to increase administrative efficiency.”

**Related scare terms:** *administrative efficiency*

**Translation:** Across welfare programs, categorical eligibility means an if-then, automatic path to eligibility along the lines of: “If a person is eligible for cash welfare, then that person is automatically eligible for food stamps.” However, categorical eligibility is ripe for abuse because it creates a path which bypasses necessary eligibility checks.

The food stamp program is a perfect example. Under so-called broad-based categorical eligibility, agencies bypass the federal asset test by giving an applicant a brochure or hotline number funded by the cash welfare program and enrolling them onto food stamps through categorical eligibility. This is fraud by design. And it’s why millions of people who do not meet federal asset guidelines are enrolled in food stamps.

## churn [noun]

as in “frequent eligibility checks create unnecessary *churn* for needy families and a greater administrative burden.”

**Related scare terms:** *continuous coverage/eligibility, welfare cliff, barriers, disruption*

**Translation:** Churn is when a person becomes ineligible and leaves a program only to reenroll again. The left uses this concept and term as an excuse to check eligibility less frequently. All this means is knowingly ignoring ineligibility for the program.

In other words, if someone becomes ineligible and leaves a program, then reenrolls if they become eligible, the Left views it as a failure. But how else should the system work? The alternative is knowingly distributing benefits to ineligible people.

## continuous eligibility [noun]

as in “*continuous eligibility* is a powerful administrative tool to reduce barriers and churn.”

**Related scare terms:** *continuous coverage, administrative efficiency, streamlining, churn, barriers*

**Translation:** Continuous eligibility is code for “skipping eligibility checks.” It is most often associated with Medicaid and means an agency should ignore how often individuals move, change jobs, get raises, get married, get divorced, and have boyfriends or girlfriends move in or out. In short, it means continued welfare enrollment must trump continued welfare eligibility.

## food insecurity [noun]

as in “work requirements increase *food insecurity* for low-income families.”

**Related scare terms:** *hunger, childhood hunger*

**Translation:** Bureaucrats and advocates point to “food insecurity” as a reason for expanding benefits or “reducing barriers.” For example, the Biden administration claimed that, in 2021, “One-tenth of households experienced food insecurity, meaning their access to food was limited by lack of money or other resources” and “nearly four percent of households in 2021 experienced very low food security, meaning they were regularly skipping meals or reducing their intake because they could not afford more food.”

There are real distortions with how these numbers are used. First, data on food insecurity is not usually based on comprehensive observational studies. Second, food insecurity is equated with hunger, but the technical definition of food insecurity involves access to both affordable and nutritious food, as defined by federal bureaucrats.

Third, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released a report during the Obama administration admitting that in “cross-sectional surveys, food insecurity has always been found to be more prevalent among SNAP participants than among similarly low-income nonparticipants, even controlling as completely as data allow for income, employment, household composition, and other household characteristics (emphasis added). And fourth, obesity is a much more significant problem than hunger among food stamp recipients, as addressed below.

## ex parte renewal [noun]

as in “*ex parte renewals* are necessary to reduce workload and remove barriers to access.”

**Related scare terms:** *administrative efficiency, administrative renewal, barriers*

**Translation:** When an agency renews an individual’s welfare enrollment—most often Medicaid—without an application, let alone an in-person interview, it’s called an *ex parte* (or “on behalf of”) renewal. Agencies essentially assume that nothing has changed in the preceding year in order to avoid removing an enrollee from the program. This is how ineligible enrollees can remain on the program for months and years at a time.

## hunger [noun]

as in “work requirements increase *hunger*.”

**Related scare terms:** *food insecurity*

**Translation:** The use of the term “hunger” occurs in political debates more often than actual hunger occurs in the food stamp program. In fact, data on actual hunger is rarely, if ever used. Instead, hunger is equated with food insecurity. Usually, the two terms are simply lumped together. This is a dodge and confuses two different things. And, as explained in the “food insecurity” entry, there are serious problems with how that term is used.

This may explain why, much like “global warming” has morphed into “climate change,” advocates are increasingly using “diet-related diseases” as the target of more spending, probably because obesity is more common than hunger by orders of magnitude. One study, for example, found that obesity prevalence among food stamp enrollees has been shown to be nearly double that of non-enrollees (30 percent vs. 17 percent).

## help [verb]

as in “families in poverty need more *help* from government.”

**Translation:** There will never be enough “help” because “help” means money. More specifically, it means money for groups in the welfare-industrial complex. Their existence depends on welfare spending and their growth depends on the growth of the welfare state. Real help for low-income families, on the other hand, means reforming the welfare state and, usually, less spending.

## poverty [noun]

as in “families in *poverty* need more help.”

**Translation:** Under the 2022 federal poverty guidelines, a single person must make less than \$13,590 per year to meet the federal definition of poverty. A two-person household must make less than \$18,310. A three-person household must make less than \$23,030. And a four-person household must make less than \$27,750. Most eligibility thresholds are not based on the maximum poverty guideline but some higher threshold. For example, households can remain on food stamps up to 130 percent of the federal poverty level and as high as 200 percent in many states due to broad-based categorical eligibility. And, in Medicaid, children are eligible in households with incomes anywhere between 170 percent of the federal poverty level (in North Dakota) to 400 percent (in New York).

But it’s important to note that the income which counts toward the federal poverty level only includes earned income, not welfare receipts like food stamps, housing, or Medicaid. This is why the term “poverty” is so often misused. Its technical definition makes it an inaccurate measure of material deprivation. Instead, it is a measure of economic engagement. Getting more able-bodied adults back to work—not more welfare spending—is the only way to reduce poverty.

## poverty rate [noun]

as in “we’ve got to increase public assistance to reduce the *poverty rate*.”

**Translation:** This is the percentage of Americans falling below the federal poverty guidelines. However, as explained above, more welfare does not decrease the rate. Why? Only earned income is counted. This is why, despite trillions in spending, the poverty rate remained between 11.1 and 15.2 percent between 1969 and 2018. In fact, all that spending may explain why poverty hasn’t declined because it disincentivizes workforce participation.

In other words, even if the federal government cut a check for \$1 million to every American, the poverty rate wouldn’t budge. The poverty rate should only be thought of as a measure of economic engagement, not deprivation. And the solutions to economic engagement usually look very different from those supported by advocates of more welfare spending.

## pre-populate [verb]

as in “Medicaid redetermination forms are required to be *pre-populated*.”

**Related scare terms:** *automatic renewal*

**Translation:** Current regulations require states to provide “pre-populated” forms on behalf of Medicaid enrollees when they are due to renew using “reliable” information. This facilitates fraud by making it difficult to detect. No wonder more than 80 percent of improper payments in Medicaid are caused by eligibility errors. Agencies can and should treat information as “reliable” if it has been verified within four months of a redetermination.

## self-attestation [noun]

as in “Medicaid applicants are checked for eligibility via *self-attestation*.”

**Translation:** When Medicaid applicants are asked for their residency, household composition, and parent/caretaker status to check for eligibility, their word is simply taken as true. This is called “self-attestation.” Through self-attestation, agencies accept an applicant’s statement at face value without any additional verification. As a result, to a large degree, eligibility systems are effectively run on the honor system.

## simplified reporting [noun]

as in “food stamp enrollees are already required to notify the state agency of changes that could make them ineligible because they are subject to *simplified reporting*.”

**Translation:** In food stamps, states are allowed to decide under what circumstances enrollees are required to report changes like a change in income. Most states use “simplified reporting.” In some ways, the name is apt because “simplified reporting” is simple—it means no reporting. Under simplified reporting, enrollees are only required to report changes if their “total monthly gross income exceeds 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Level.”

In other words, enrollees are only required to report a change if they know it makes them ineligible. Unsurprisingly, this is rare. That’s why changes in income or household circumstance are often not caught until an annual renewal. Under change reporting, enrollees are required to report all changes, including income or household changes, within 10 days so the department can reassess eligibility.

## suitable work [noun]

as in “work requirements force welfare enrollees to accept jobs that do not constitute *suitable work*.”

**Translation:** Often, especially in a strong economy with many open jobs, opponents of welfare-to-work reforms argue that these jobs are simply service-industry, lower-wage jobs and beneath all or some welfare enrollees. This rests on two faulty assumptions: one, that some jobs simply have more dignity than others, and two, that taxpayers should subsidize able-bodied adults while they wait for a perfect, higher-paying job when opportunities to work and gain skills are ready for them today.

## streamlined enrollment [noun]

as in “a *streamlined enrollment* system would remove barriers for applicants and reduce the agency’s workload.”

**Related scare terms:** *administrative efficiency, holistic approach, one-stop application, common application*

**Translation:** Similar to continuous eligibility, streamlined enrollment is code for “skipping eligibility checks.” It often means either not asking, not verifying conditions of eligibility, or incorporating multiple welfare program applications into a single system under the guise of efficiency. However, this efficiency comes at the expense—and significant financial expense—of maintaining the integrity of each program with its very different eligibility standards.

## welfare cliff [noun]

as in “if we don’t expand benefits into higher income brackets the *welfare cliff* will discourage work.”

**Related scare terms:** *churn, continuous eligibility*

**Translation:** As long as we have means-tested programs meant to only help low-income individuals, there will always be, by definition, a threshold at which someone becomes ineligible because they earn too much. But the “welfare cliff,” a dramatic line at which a person is discouraged from working more because of a sudden, major loss in benefits, is more rhetoric than reality. The truth is the problem has mostly been solved.

In cash welfare, the program already eases people back to work by reducing benefits gradually through “income disregards.” In food stamps, benefits already go down gradually as incomes rise and 20 percent of earned income is disregarded when calculating benefits. In Medicaid, there is a program designed specifically designed for people who move into work to give them the benefit even after they’ve become ineligible and more self-sufficient called Transitional Medicaid Assistance.