

Webinar Transcript: Food and Nutrition Assistance Landscape: Fiscal Year 2021 Annual Report

Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Ashley Murdie, your host for today's webinar. On behalf of USDA's Economic Research Service, welcome and thank you for joining us. Before we begin, I'd like to remind you that this webinar is being recorded and will be posted on the ERS website next week. If you have any questions, please enter them into the chat feature at the bottom, left hand corner of the screen, and our Economist will answer them during a Q&A session after the presentation. Now, it's a pleasure to introduce Jordan Jones, our speaker today. Jordan is a Research Economist in the food assistance branch of our Food Economics division. His research focuses on the workings and various impacts of federal food assistance programs, especially the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as SNAP. Jordan's recent work involves measuring the extent of state SNAP eligibility expansion, identifying the determinants and outcomes of senior SNAP participation, and estimating the impacts of the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilots. Thanks for joining us today, Jordan. The floor is yours.

All right, thanks Ashley for that introduction. Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for tuning in today. I will be presenting an overview of the fiscal year 2021 edition of the Food and Nutrition Assistance Landscape Report series, which released yesterday. I'd also like to acknowledge my colleagues and co-authors on this report, Saied Toossi and Leslie Hodges of USDA's Economic Research Service. They'll be available near the end of the webinar to help me field your questions.

So, here's an outline of what we'll be going over today. First, I'll provide a bit of information about the report itself and some brief highlights. Then, I'll provide an overview of USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs and talk about total program spending and the makeup of that spending. After that, I'll discuss the sections of the report, focusing on the individual nutrition assistance programs. In each section, I'll provide an overview of the program itself, how it's changed during the pandemic with a focus on changes in fiscal year 2021, and information about program trends and some other relevant information. Then, we'll close.

So, the Food and Nutrition Assistance Landscape Annual Report series provides information on USDA's domestic food and nutrition assistance programs, focusing on developments in the most recent fiscal year. There are overview sections for each of the largest of these programs including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children or WIC and the major child nutrition programs. All but one of the programs covered in this year's report are administered by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service.

The report provides information about historical trends and program participation and spending and how the most recent year's developments relate to these trends. We discuss policy developments affecting how programs operate and how these changes are reflected in participation in spending. U.S. fiscal years run from October through September, so this year's report focusing on fiscal year 2021 includes the period from October 1, 2020 through September 30, 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic began in the United States midway through the previous fiscal year in 2020 affecting public health and the economy. The pandemic impacted the normal operation of schools, businesses, and various facilities involved in the provision of food and nutrition assistance through USDA's programs. In response to these challenges, the federal government passed legislation and otherwise authorized changes altering how the programs covered in this report operate throughout fiscal year 2020 and 2021. This includes the operation of two additional temporary programs, Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer or P-EBT and the Farmers to Families Food Box Program. 2021 notably represents the first full fiscal year in which these pandemic-related changes were in place, and the overview that I'm going to present today will represent that.

So, here are some highlights from the report before we jump into the finer points. Total spending on USDA's nutrition assistance programs, including the two temporary ones that I mentioned earlier, was 182.5 billion dollars in fiscal year 2021. This represents a historic high in total program spending, uh, exceeding inflation-adjusted spending from any previous fiscal year. The increase in total spending was of course driven by changes in each of the programs contributing to the total, especially increases in spending on SNAP and P-EBT. SNAP spending also reached a record high of nearly 114 billion dollars in 2021, and P-EBT benefits were reported to total about 28.3 billion. Additionally, total meals served through the major child nutrition programs rebounded from their pandemic related low in 2020.

So, here I'm showing you total program spending for each fiscal year from 1970 to 2021 for some historical context. Spending shown here is adjusted for inflation in past years, allowing us to make easier comparisons to the present. And so, this is spending on all programs, and you can see that spending on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP is broken out from all of other programs, and you can see how much SNAP spending contributes to total spending, both historically and in the present. In most years, SNAP accounts for about two-thirds of total program spending with all other programs accounting for the other third. You can see a clear upward spike in total program spending during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. This is due to both increased usage of nutrition assistance during the economic downturn as well as expansions and changes in how assistance was provided in response to the various challenges and needs related to the pandemic, which I'll touch on a little bit later. As I mentioned earlier, spending in fiscal year 2021 was at a new record high of 182.5 billion dollars. This was 43% higher than the 127.5 billion of spending in 2020, which was the previous record high, and 47%

higher than the total of 124.5 billion dollars in fiscal year 2013. That was the peak of program spending following the great recession.

Here is a more detailed breakdown of USDA funding on food and nutrition assistance in 2021. So, SNAP made up the largest share at about 62% of spending. Combined spending on the four largest child nutrition programs made up the second largest share at 15.6%, and that was followed closely by P-EBT at 15.5%. WIC, uh, accounted for about 3% of spending, and the food box program accounted for about 2%, uh, with all other programs and expenses combined accounting for the remaining 2.2%. The shares attributable to SNAP, WIC, and the child nutrition programs were smaller in fiscal year 2021 than they were prior to the pandemic not because spending on these programs fell but because total spending itself grew so much, especially with the added expense of P-EBT and the food box program.

Next, I'll talk about developments with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP. SNAP is the largest individual program of all of USDA's nutrition assistance programs. It's an entitlement program available to all households meeting its eligibility requirements, which are based on gross income, net income, assets, and certain work and immigration status criteria. Participating households receive monthly benefits that can be used to purchase groceries at authorized retailers, the electronic benefit transfer card or EBT. Benefits increase with household size and decrease with household net income, and they can't be spent on tobacco, alcohol, items other than food, or hot prepared foods, except under certain circumstances. So, beginning in fiscal year 2020 and then continuing through 2021, the program changed in several ways. First, the maximum SNAP benefit was temporarily increased by 15% from January through September of 2021. After this expired, the maximum baseline SNAP benefit was increased by roughly 21% beginning in October 2021, in fiscal year 2022, and this was due to the re-evaluation of USDA's thrifty food plan, which is what the snap benefit amount is based on. Second, supplemental emergency allotments continued to be issued. Beginning in 2020 with the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, USDA allowed states to issue emergency allotments to SNAP households. So, this brought up household's total monthly benefit to the maximum allowed for their size if they weren't already receiving the maximum. Then, in April 2021 USDA updated guidance to provide a minimum monthly emergency allotment of 95 dollars minimum to all recipients. So, this increased the benefits going to households that previously weren't receiving an emergency allotment or were receiving an emergency allotment smaller than 95 dollars per month. At the beginning of fiscal year 2021, all states, Washington, D.C., Guam, and the Virgin Islands supplemented regular SNAP benefits with monthly emergency allotments, and by the end of the year eight states had stopped doing so. Next, the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot expansion continued to expand in 2021. This pilot allows households and participating states to purchase groceries online from authorized retailers with their SNAP benefits. The pilot was rapidly expanded beyond its initial scope in 2020 to most states, and it was further expanded in fiscal year 2021 to two additional states and to more grocery retailers. Additionally, time limits on

benefit receipt for able-bodied adults without dependents were temporarily suspended in fiscal year 2020, and this suspension continued through 2021. Then, last USDA continued to grant state agencies several temporary administrative flexibilities in 2021 such as adjustments to interview and recertification requirements.

So, here you can see a figure showing annual inflation-adjusted SNAP spending and average monthly SNAP participation in each year from 2000 to 2021. The bars represent spending, which is shown on the right axis, and the line represents participation, which is shown on the left axis. Federal spending on SNAP totaled 113.8 billion dollars in 2021. This was a record high and a substantial increase over the previous fiscal year spending of 79 billion dollars. The previous record for annual spending, uh, was in 2013 at 91 billion dollars adjusted for inflation. Emergency allotments are responsible for a lot of the increased spending in 2021. They accounted for about a third of the total dollar amount. In 2021, an average of 41.5 million people participated in SNAP per month or about 12.5% of the U.S. resident population. This was up from average participation of about 40 million in fiscal year 2020 but still below the record high participation of 47.6 million in 2013. The average monthly benefit was just over 218 dollars per person per month, and that's inclusive of emergency allotments and other non-standard benefits.

Next, I'll talk about developments with the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children or WIC. WIC is targeted towards low income pregnant and postpartum women as well as infants and children up to five years of age at nutritional risk. Eligibility is based on categorical, residential, income and nutrition risk criteria. WIC provides supplemental food packages and other services to participants. These food packages are tailored to each participant group's needs and are redeemed via EBT card or paper vouchers at authorized retailers for the corresponding foods. Beginning in fiscal year 2020 and continuing through 2021, several program changes also occurred with WIC. First, USDA waivers allowed state agencies to temporarily alter various aspects of program administration and operations. This included changes to certification procedures, documentation requirements, and rules about picking up food benefits in person. State agencies were also allowed to accommodate supply chain disruptions by allowing various food substitutions in their packages. These waivers continued into fiscal year 2021. Second, the American Rescue Plan Act passed in March 2021 gave WIC state agencies the option to increase the cash value voucher recipients, uh the cash value voucher that recipients use for fruit and vegetable purchases. This amount increased from nine dollars for adults or eleven dollars for children to 35 dollars per participant for up to four months during the period between April through September of 2021. Another act passed in September 2021 required a continued increase in these cash value voucher amounts for the three month period beginning in October of 2021. Last, 390 million dollars in funding was provided to support outreach, innovation, and program modernization intended to increase WIC participation, WIC benefit redemption, as well as certain program flexibilities.

Here you can see a figure showing average monthly WIC participation in each year from 1974 to 2021. Participation is shown separately for women, infants, children, and for all participants combined. That's the total line. Total WIC participation reached a peak of 9.2 million people per month in fiscal year 2010 and then declined every following year. In recent years, that rate of decline slowed, and in fiscal year 2021 total participation was 6.2 million people per month, virtually the same as in 2020. Children aged one to four made up 54% of participation in 2021, and women and infants made up 22% and 23% respectively. Women and infant participation in WIC fell by about 5 to 6% from the previous year but child participation increased for the first time since fiscal year 2010. Food costs averaged just over 35 dollars per person per month in fiscal year 2021. These costs were down 8% from 2020 and the lowest in program history. However, federal spending on WIC totaled 5 billion dollars, up slightly from the previous fiscal year but well below the historic high of 8.5 billion said in 2011.

Next, I'll talk about developments with USDA's major child nutrition programs. The National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program are the major federal school meal programs. They provide nutritious breakfasts, lunches, and snacks at low or no cost to children in participating schools and childcare centers. Schools in the program receive subsidies for reimbursable meals served from USDA. Meals are provided in a three-tiered system based on income: free, reduced price, or full price. So, these are still subsidized. Some schools provide free meals for all students regardless of household income through one of several provisions. The Child and Adult Care Food Program subsidizes healthy meals and snacks in participating childcare centers, daycares, and adult daycare facilities. The program primarily serves children and youth but also serves some disabled or elderly adults. Care providers are licensed or otherwise approved, and they're reimbursed for serving qualified meals. The Summer Food Service Program allows schools and other organizations like community centers, churches, or camps to provide free meals to children when school is not in session, typically during the summer months or during unanticipated school closures. The SFSP operates in areas where 50% of children or more qualify for free or reduced price meals. So, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the normal operation of these programs through obstacles like school and facility closures and moves to at home or hybrid learning, where it's more difficult to provide meals. Disruptions were more severe earlier on in the pandemic, but they did continue into fiscal year 2021. Supply chain disruptions and staff shortages further complicated meal provision through these programs. USDA responded in several ways that I'll briefly touch on here. First, beginning in 2020, schools and organizations were allowed to provide free meals through the Summer Food Service Program and the school meal program's Seamless Summer Option, which allows schools to provide free meals much like the SFSP does. Meals were provided to students in all areas throughout the year regardless of income. Schools were allowed to continue this practice into fiscal year 2021, and a waiver announced in April 2021 allowed schools to temporarily offer free meals through the Seamless Summer Option at the higher SFSP reimbursement rate beginning in July of 2021. Second, USDA temporarily waived federal requirements relating to meal patterns,

mealtimes, non-congregate feeding, parent or guardian meal pickup, wellness programs, after school activities, and guidelines allowing students to decline food items that they don't intend to eat. These waivers started in 2020 and also continued into fiscal year 2021. Third, USDA extended waivers of various federal reporting and monitoring requirements in order for- in order to facilitate the provision of safe, accessible meals, and last, USDA announced in September of 2021 that going forward into the next fiscal year it would make 1.5 billion in aid available to school districts going forward to help support the procurement of food for school meals.

Here you can see a figure showing the number of meals served annually by the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the Summer Food Service Program as well as annual inflation-inflation-adjusted combined spending on these programs from 2001 to 2021. The stacked bars represent meals served under each program, which is shown on the left axis, while the dotted line represents total spending on all of these programs, which is shown on the right axis, and is also adjusted for inflation. As you can see, the total number of meals served fell in fiscal year 2020 to 7.9 billion, a level similar to that as in 2001. Meals served then rebounded somewhat in 2021 to 8.4 billion. The composition of meals also shifted during the pandemic due to a transition toward free meal provision through the Summer Food Service Program and the Seamless Summer Option. Prior to the pandemic, the NSLP served the most meals, followed by the School Breakfast program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and then the SFSP. But, in fiscal year 2021, most meals were served through the Summer Food Service Program, then the NSLP, CACFP, and SBP, in that order. As meals served fell in fiscal year 2020, so too did combined spending on these programs. But spending rebounded and even surpassed pre-pandemic spending in fiscal year 2021, reaching 26.8 billion dollars. The prevalence of free meals during the year and greater provision through the SFSP for most of the year and SFSP having a higher reimbursement rate for those meals meant that more, there was more federal reimbursement to providers overall. And, to provide some specific information about the individual programs, uh, the Summer Food Service Program served about three billion meals at a cost of 10.7 billion in fiscal year 2021; the school meal programs together served 3.5 billion meals at a cost of 12.4 billion, and I'll note that this is inclusive of meals served through the Seamless Summer Option; and the CACFP served 1.9 billion meals at a cost of 3.8 billion.

Now, I'll talk about the two temporary programs operated by USDA as part of the pandemic response. The first is Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer or P-EBT. Like the other programs I've discussed so far, P-EBT is administered by the Food and Nutrition Service. P-EBT was authorized by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act in March 2020. The program allowed states to reimburse households with children for the value of free or reduced price school meals they missed out on due to COVID-19 related disruptions to in-person learning and school meal provision. P-EBT benefits are provided via EBT card and were administered through states' existing EBT systems. They can be spent much like SNAP benefits and are subject to the same

restrictions. States have to submit plans or requests to USDA for approval to issue benefits for each school year and summer period in which in-person meals were missed. Because these plans differed state by state, administration also differed state by state. So, in some states benefits were provided lump sum after the period in which meals were missed, and then, in other states benefits were provided in multiple payments. The program underwent several changes in fiscal year 2021. First, beginning in October of 2020, eligibility for P-EBT was extended to younger children under age six that were not yet enrolled in school if their households received SNAP benefits and schools were closed or operating on reduced hours in the area they lived. At the same time, P-EBT was expanded to additional U.S. territories, Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa. Second, the value of the daily P-EBT benefit was increased to include reimbursement for an after-school snack beginning in January of 2021. This increased benefits by about 15% for recipients. Third, the American Rescue Plan Act passed in March 2021 further expanded P-EBT to cover the summer months when schools are typically closed for instruction, and it also authorized the program for any future school year in which there's a COVID-19 public health emergency declaration in effect.

Here you can see a figure showing the total reported value of P-EBT benefits issued nationwide in each quarter from quarter three of fiscal year 2020, including March through quarter four of fiscal year 2021. I want to urge some caution and interpretation of these numbers as there have been some documented inconsistencies in how states reported benefits due to the need for the rapid rollout of the program, especially in the timing of benefit reporting early on in the pandemic. Still, we can see some variation in the timing of when benefits were issued. In fiscal year 2020, states reported issuing 10.8 billion dollars in P-EBT benefits, most of which would have been for school year 2019 and 2020, uh, school year 2019 to 2020 rather. Then in fiscal year 2021, this amount increased to 28.3 billion dollars in benefits with most of those benefits being issued in the last half of the fiscal year.

Finally, I'll talk about the second temporary program that was part of the pandemic response, the Farmers to Families Food Box Program or the food box program for short. Unlike the other programs I've discussed so far, the food box program was actually administered by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. So, USDA launched the food box program in April 2020 using flexibilities afforded by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. The program's stated intention was- was to provide assistance for those in need as well as business for food producers, processors, and distributors, who were especially impacted during the closure of restaurants and other food service businesses early on in the pandemic. Through this program, USDA purchased fresh produce, dairy, and meat products from U.S. producers which distributors then packaged into boxes sized for families. These boxes were transported to food banks and other non-profit organizations where they were then distributed to households in need. The program was administered in five rounds, each lasting several weeks or months, and it expired in May of 2021, a little more than a year after it began distributing boxes.

Here, I'm showing you information on the amount of spending and the number of food boxes delivered during each of the food box program's five rounds. The bars show the spending occurring in each round, which is shown on the right axis, and the line shows the number of food boxes delivered, which is shown on the left axis. The rounds aren't divided neatly between fiscal year 2020 and 2021 as round three takes place in September and October of 2020. But I can tell you that the program delivered roughly 103 million food boxes in fiscal year 2020 at a cost of 2.4 billion dollars compared to the roughly 73 million food boxes delivered in fiscal year 2021 when spending was 3.0 billion dollars. Over the entire course of the program's run that amounts to about 176 million food boxes at a cost of 5.5 billion.

So, in closing, I've covered the major developments in the Food and Nutrition Assistance Landscape in fiscal year of 2021. These assistance programs have undergone many changes since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, and they did so in fiscal year 2021 as well. These program changes, along with changing economic conditions affecting the rate at which the U.S. population is eligible for these programs, has led to overall higher spending and program usage with total USDA program spending reaching an all-time high of 182.5 billion dollars in fiscal year 2021.

I also want to say that the full report I'm discussing today contains additional information that I'm sure you'd be interested in given that you decided to tune in today. Today, I covered most of the major developments in these programs but the full report also includes information on several other things including a detailed timeline of relevant policy changes over fiscal year 2021, month-by-month program trends over the course of the pandemic, other factors impacting these programs such as declining births and supply chain disruptions, economic and social indicators related to program participation, and an overview of recent ERS research relevant to food and nutrition assistance. So, I would strongly encourage you to take a look at the full report for further information, which is up on ERS's website now. So, let me say thanks again so much for joining in and tuning in today, and with that I will turn it back over to Ashley for questions for myself and my co-authors.

Thanks Jordan, we'll go ahead and open the floor for questions now as you noted. As a reminder to the audience, questions can be submitted through the chat feature located at the bottom, left hand corner of your screen. Before we begin, I would like to introduce two more panelists who will be helping us answer questions. Joining Jordan today, we have Research Agricultural Economists, Saied Toossi and Leslie Hodges. Thank you both for joining us, it's great to have you here with us. Now for our first question, just a moment here, all right for the first question we have: why is SNAP so much larger than the other programs?

Uh sure, yeah so- so thanks for that question. So, as a quick reminder SNAP is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Um, so SNAP is the largest of USDA's food assistance programs in terms of spending, typically accounts for about two-thirds of spending in most years, a little less in fiscal year 2021. It was about 62%. So, unlike the other major programs SNAP isn't targeted to a specific segment of the population. Like for example, WIC is for women, infants, and children. Its primary eligibility criteria are based on income and assets, so there's a broader base of potentially eligible participants. So SNAP is also an entitlement program, meaning that all people who are eligible are entitled to receive benefits, and the program grows as needed, typically during economic downturns. So, additionally SNAP gives recipients a larger benefit on average than the other programs. In fiscal year 2021 that was more than 200 a month per person. So, uh, more recipients, a larger benefit means overall larger program, uh, at least in terms of spending.

Okay, thanks Jordan. The next question is also in regards to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program, and it asks, how did ERS decide on the 95 dollar minimum for SNAP emergency allotments?

Okay, yeah so, so I think you're referring to the fact that SNAP emergency allotments were revised so that SNAP household started receiving a minimum of 95 dollars in an emergency allotment, and that was in April of 2021. So, let me clarify that ERS itself does not make policy or administer these programs. Um, that's true with this report too. We don't make policy recommendations, instead we're intending to provide an overview of what happened with nutrition assistance in 2021, uh, to better inform policy makers and stakeholders. Uh, and so, along those same lines, ERS did not itself change emergency allotment policy. That was the Food and Nutrition Service, which administers SNAP. USDA was directed to revise policy on emergency allotments by an executive order, and that change to a 95 monthly minimum is what FNS arrived on. I don't know exactly how they arrived at that number, and I'd suggest you seek out some more information from the Food and Nutrition Service to learn more about that.

Okay, for the next question: does your report cover what the percentages are for different food groups that were reimbursed in the child nutrition programs, for example, produce, protein, etc.?

I'm going to pass that over to my colleague, Saied Toossi.

No, our report does not break down shares by specific food group. The meals served through the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, Summer Food Service Program, and Child and Adult Care Food Program are reimbursed at a- at different rates depending on whether the children receiving those meals are eligible for free meals, reduced price meals, or paid meals, not by specific food components.

Thanks Saied. For the next question: is there any way to access the data specific to states, counties, and cities?

Um so, I'm- I'm- so to access the data, uh, specific to states, counties, and cities -- I'm not sure what data specifically, uh, the questioner would be responding to or would be asking about -- FNS does have some of this information at a state level. So, I would advise you to check out FNS's website to see if this information on participation and spending at least is available at a state level.

Okay, good to know and that's the Food and Nutrition Service, FNS.

That's right.

All right, next question: how does the fiscal year 2021 trend for WIC -- that's the women, infants and children program -- how does the fiscal year 2021 trend for WIC participation among eligible populations compare to the trend for overall WIC participation?

All right, thanks for that. Let me- let me pass that question over to Leslie Hodges.

Thanks Jordan. This is Leslie. So, we are just tracking participation and not what is referred to as the coverage rate, which is the share of the eligible population that participates in WIC. And more information about the coverage rate is also available from the Food and Nutrition Service on their WIC web page.

Thanks Leslie. This next question is asking, um, in reference to slide six, do you have a percent breakdown of the child nutrition program?

Okay, thanks for that question. I've- I've brought up slide six again. Um, Saied. Do you- do you want to take that question?

Uh yes, I'd be happy to take that question. So, the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program accounted for about 46% of that 26.8 billion. The next largest category is the Summer Food Service Program, which accounted for 40% of that total spending, and this is followed lastly by the Child and Adult Care Food Program, which accounted for about 14% of that total.

Good to know. Thanks Saied. Next question: do we know anything about the impacts of the Farmers to Families Food Box Program?

I will pass that back to Saied one more time.

Sure, so ERS will continue to monitor and examine all developments in the food and nutrition assistance programs, however, evaluating the impacts of the Farmers to Families Food Box Program was beyond the scope of this year's report. However, for anyone interested, the Government Accountability Office did release a report in September of 2021 about the program, and that report can be found on their website.

Okay, and this next question: what was participation in P-EBT like in fiscal year 2021?

Yeah, so um- so unfortunately, it's difficult to interpret information about the number of recipients of P-EBT with the available data. So, states issued P-EBT on varying schedules in 2021 according to the different plans that they submitted and had approved by FNS, the Food and Nutrition Service. So, some states issued benefits altogether in one or two months and then some spread benefits out more, and households are reported as participating in the available data if they receive benefits at least once in a month. So, this leads to higher reported counts of participation in states that issued benefits over several months and lower accounts in states that issued benefits in a shorter time span or lump sum. So, so, it's pretty difficult to interpret or compare annual participation, unlike the other programs, and so, because of this we don't report on P-EBT participation in this report. But I can tell you that states reported issuing you know more than 28 billion dollars in P-EBT benefits in 2021, and that made up about 16 % of program spending of the year.

Thanks Jordan. This next question asks: what was the impact of supply chain disruptions on the programs?

Well, I mean that's a little bit broad of a question, but we do have a section on supply chain disruption. Saied, do you want to take this question?

Absolutely, yes, as Jordan mentioned we do have a section in this year's report discussing supply and chain disruption, staff shortages, as they relate to the school meal programs, and that section is based on a USDA Food and Nutrition Service administered survey on supply chain disruptions, which was conducted in November and December of 2021 and released in March of 2022. So, in brief, about 90 of school districts reported experiencing challenges in obtaining the food products they needed to serve the meals that they would normally serve their students. Eighty percent reported difficulty in obtaining non-food supplies and equipment necessary to serve those meals. Another 73% experienced staffing challenges and shortages. School districts also reported experiencing cancelled contracts and deliveries, their also rising costs of their food products as well as their deliveries. There are more details available in our report as well as in the FNS report on these survey results, which can be found on their website.

Thanks Saied. The next question asks: why did full meals rebound to pre-pandemic meals if so many schools had reopened for in-person instruction in fiscal year 2021?

Uh, Saied, please take this question too.

Absolutely, that's a great question. So, at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year many schools were still only educating students virtually. Some did transition to hybrid learning in which students were present for school on some days and learning virtually others and still others were fully in person. What we observed is that throughout the school year more schools began transitioning to either hybrid learning or full in-person instruction, and we see this also reflected in our meals data, which is reported in this year's report. So, as the year went on, we saw an increasing number of meals served through the Summer Food Service Program, National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program, and in fact in September of 2021, the month corresponding roughly to the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, the number of meals served through these programs was about the same as in September of 2019, before the pandemic. So, we did see, uh, school meals rebounding quite a bit in fiscal year 2021.

Okay, good to know. For the next question, how was the value of P-EBT benefits determined? And again, that's Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer.

Yes, so thanks for that question. So, uh, the value of P-EBT benefits, uh, were calculated as the value of a school lunch plus the value of a school breakfast, the, the reimbursement that a household would otherwise receive if they had received that school lunch or that school breakfast, but you know, they didn't because, uh, because of disruptions to in-person learning. Then, after January 2021 that also would include the value of a school snack, and all of that would be multiplied by the number of days of missed school meals and snacks. But the value of P-EBT benefits, uh, did vary somewhat across the country depending on federal reimbursements for school lunch, breakfasts and snacks as some areas receive higher reimbursement rates and also the number of days that students missed out on school meals and snacks because disruptions to learning, in person learning were not the same everywhere across the country.

Thanks. All right, for the next question: why were so many meals served through the Summer Food Service Program and not the Seamless Summer Option if they're so similar?

Uh, I will pass that question to Saied.

Yeah, so as was mentioned in Jordan's presentation, the two programs are quite similar and do serve a very similar function. However, one important difference between the two is the federal reimbursement rates. SFSP meals or Summer Food Service Program meals are served at a higher rate than the Seamless Summer Option meals, which are served, which are reimbursed at their

National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program rates. In April 2021, however, the USDA did announce that beginning on July 1st of that year SSO meals would be reimbursed at the higher Summer Food Service Program rate, and accordingly after July 1st, we saw a pretty large increase in the meals served through the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program's Seamless Summer Option and a corresponding decline in meals served through the Summer's Food Service Program. For anyone interested in learning more about these two programs, their similarities and differences, I recommend reading about them on the Food and Nutrition Service's website.

Thanks Saied and then, let's see here, for this next question: do we have information on the average length of stay on SNAP, so like how long people participate?

That's a good question. We do not have that information in this report, and I cannot off the top of my head think of any ERS reports that cover that. I do know that there is some research that covers that, so I'd encourage you to go and look into that yourself. But that is an interesting question. Thank you for that.

Thanks Jordan. This next question asks if we have any data that might show changes in what was purchased with the increased SNAP benefit during COVID?

Um, we- not to my knowledge, and I do not believe that ERS has any published research on that topic.

All right, and let's see. Next question: part of the requirement for WIC -- again that's the Women, Infants, and Children's program -- part of the requirement for WIC eligibility is that applicants be at nutritional risk. Since about half of all infants in the country participate in WIC, does that mean that half of our nation's infants are at nutritional risk, and if so, what kind of nutritional risk?

Okay yeah, thanks for that question. Leslie, can you take that?

Sure, thanks Jordan. So, I think that you're asking about the criteria that's used to determine nutritional risk, and federal guidelines list five categories of nutritional risk, which are used for determining WIC eligibility. These include nutritional conditions such as anemia, underweight or overweight, nutritionally related medical conditions such as metabolic disorders or lead poisoning, dietary deficiencies that are considered a risk to health such as inadequate dietary patterns for example, and then other mental or physical conditions that could directly affect the nutritional health of a person and this is, um, could be something like substance abuse, and then conditions that predispose people to an adequate nutrition or nutritionally related medical conditions and this could be something like homelessness or migrancy.

All right, thanks Leslie. That is all we have for today. Jordan, thank you for a great presentation on the Food and Nutrition Assistance Landscape. Many thanks to Saied and Leslie for your assistance during the Q&A session as well, and finally, thank you to our listeners for taking time to join us today. We hope this has been helpful. Also, if you have not already heard, we are hosting another ERS webinar next week. Be sure to mark your calendars for Wednesday, June 29th, and join us for the next segment of our data training webinar series. This round will spotlight ERS meat price spreads and price trends from farm to consumer. These data products compare food prices paid by consumers with the prices received by farmers for their corresponding commodities. Visit our website for more details in the coming weeks. Lastly, if you haven't already done so, check out the ERS Charts of Note Mobile App. This app is available free of charge on apple and android devices, and with it you can have digital snapshots, snapshots of ERS research delivered straight to your mobile device. Again, thanks for joining us today. This concludes our webinar.