

Trends in USDA Foods Ordered for Child Nutrition Programs Before and After Updated Nutrition Standards

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What Is the Issue?

In addition to cash meal reimbursements, USDA helps compensate schools for the cost of meals served through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) through a program called USDA Foods in Schools (USDA Foods). Under the USDA Foods Program, USDA purchases foods from suppliers on behalf of schools, using entitlement funds made available for that purpose on the basis of the number of school lunches served in the previous year. Foods offered in the USDA Foods Program include foods typically included in school meals—such as cheese, meat, fruits and vegetables, and grain products—and are selected with input from Federal, State and local program staff. Each year, States select from foods available and can obtain fresh fruits and vegetables from the USDA Department of Defense (DoD) Fresh Fruit and Vegetable (DoD Fresh) Program. DoD Fresh permits States participating in USDA Foods to obtain fresh fruits and vegetables from the DoD Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) of Philadelphia.

USDA Foods provided 11 percent of the value of foods obtained by USDA school meal programs in school year 2009–10 (the most recent available data on school food purchasing). In 2021 dollars, this number would translate to a value of about \$1.40 billion for the 50 States and the District of Columbia. USDA budget figures indicate that spending on USDA Foods has not changed in real terms from 2011 to 2018 (the last available budgetary data). Besides the financial support, USDA Foods also increased school food service access to healthy options that align with USDA school meal nutrition standards (USDA, FNS, 2021) and can help school food authorities (SFAs) meet nutrition standards.

Passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2010 resulted in major updates in school meal nutrition standards that began to be implemented in 2012. These updates required USDA school meals to include whole-grain-rich foods, more fruits and legumes, and a broader mix of vegetables (including dark green and red/orange vegetables). The purpose of this report is to examine changes in food choices in the USDA Foods program during 2006–2017 in response to revised nutrition standards implemented in 2012.



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What Did the Study Find?

- In the years following implementation of updated nutrition standards, foods made available to schools through the USDA Foods Program included more products that supported achievement of the standards, such as dark green vegetables and whole grains. Product offerings were also included with reduced fat, sodium, and sugar content.
- The percent of fruits and vegetables distributed through the USDA Department of Defense (DoD) Fresh program rose sharply, from 6 percent of total USDA Foods distributed in 2012 to 15 percent of total USDA Foods entitlement funds used in 2017.
- Fruit from USDA Foods—mainly canned and frozen—as a percent of total USDA Foods entitlement funds used, rose 66 percent, from 9 percent in 2012 to 15 percent in 2017.
- Cheese, poultry, and red meat obtained with USDA entitlement funds dropped to a range of 60–70 percent of USDA Foods entitlement funds used during 2012–17 (from 65 to 75 percent of USDA Foods entitlement funds used during 2006–11).

How Was the Study Conducted?

Data were compiled from USDA Budget Explanatory Notes, as provided by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) for fiscal years (FYs) 2008–19. These notes indicate past, current, and proposed budgets, past expenditures, and agency and program information. The Budgetary Notes for FNS identify food obtained with USDA Food entitlement funds under the USDA Foods program. For this study, foods were categorized by food type and quality. For example, green beans were placed in the other-vegetable category, consistent with their classification in school meal guidelines. Data were then summarized graphically and evaluated, with means tests between the periods before and after changes in nutrition standards and trend analysis during 2006–17.