



Economic
Research
Service

Economic
Information
Bulletin
Number 274

June 2024

The Food and Nutrition Assistance Landscape: Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Report

Jordan W. Jones and Saied Toossi



The U.S. Department of Agriculture administers 16 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs that account for roughly two-thirds of the Department's annual budget. These programs—which vary by size, type of benefits, and target population—form a nutritional safety net for millions of children and low-income adults.

Economic Research Service

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Recommended citation format for this publication:

Jones, J. W. and Toossi, S. (2024). *The food and nutrition assistance landscape: Fiscal year 2023 annual report* (Report No. EIB-274). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.



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The Food and Nutrition Assistance Landscape: Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Report

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Abstract

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers 16 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs that affect the lives of millions of people and account for roughly two-thirds of USDA's annual budget. In response to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, USDA launched additional temporary programs and implemented numerous policy changes that expanded the scope and coverage of existing programs. Together, these programs contributed to \$166.4 billion in spending on food and nutrition assistance programs in fiscal year (FY) 2023 (October 1, 2022–September 30, 2023). This report uses preliminary data from USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to examine program trends and policy changes in USDA's largest domestic food and nutrition assistance programs through FY 2023. It also summarizes two 2023 USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) reports including one that examines the prevalence of household food insecurity in the United States in 2022 and another that documents the share of households with school-aged children reporting that paying for school meals made it difficult to pay for other expenses after pandemic waivers allowing schools to serve free meals expired in 2022.

Keywords: Food and nutrition assistance programs, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT), Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer Program for Children (Summer EBT), emergency allotments, food security, Coronavirus, COVID-19 pandemic, economic conditions

Acknowledgments

The authors thank USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) and USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) reviewers for their reviews of this report. They also thank USDA, ERS product coordinator Debbie Rubas; USDA, ERS editors Jana Goldman, Grant Wall, and Casey Keel, and USDA, ERS designer, Christopher Sanguinett for layout and design.

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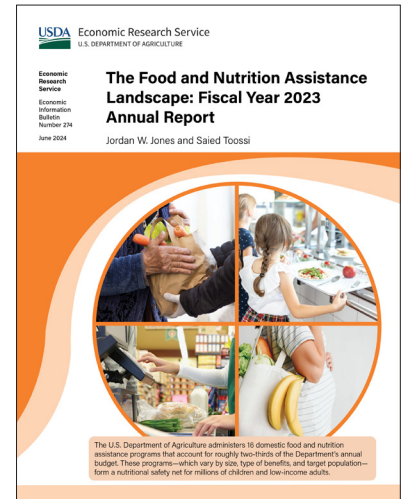


The Food and Nutrition Assistance Landscape: Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Report

Jordan W. Jones and Saied Toossi

What Is the Issue?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers 16 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs that affect the lives of millions of people and account for roughly two-thirds of USDA's annual budget. Over a typical year, about one in four people in the United States participates in at least one of these programs. In response to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic beginning in fiscal year (FY) 2020, USDA implemented additional temporary programs and numerous policy changes that expanded the scope and coverage of existing programs. As a result, participation in and spending on these programs changed substantially. This report examined trends in USDA's largest domestic food and nutrition assistance programs through FY 2023 (October 1, 2022–September 30, 2023). The report also documented policy changes in FY 2023 and trends in economic and social indicators affecting participation in and spending on food and nutrition assistance programs. In addition, it summarized two 2023 USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) reports including one that examined the prevalence of household food insecurity in the United States in 2022 and another that documented the share of households with school-aged children reporting that paying for school meals made it difficult to pay for other expenses after pandemic waivers allowing schools to serve free meals expired in 2022.



What Did This Study Find?

Total Federal spending on USDA's food and nutrition assistance decreased substantially in FY 2023.

- Spending amounted to \$166.4 billion, 9.7 percent lower than the total of \$184.2 billion in FY 2022. Adjusted for inflation, spending was 13.0 percent lower than in FY 2022 and 54.5 percent higher than in FY 2019, the last full fiscal year before the pandemic.
- The decrease was driven by lower spending on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), child nutrition programs, and the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program.

SNAP spending decreased in FY 2023, even as participation levels rose.

- On average, 42.1 million people participated in SNAP each month, 2.3 percent more than in FY 2022. Overall reductions in benefit levels driven by the expiration of emergency allotments contributed to lower SNAP spending of \$112.8 billion, 5.6 percent less than in FY 2022.

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Participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) increased in FY 2023 among women, infants, and children. Fiscal year 2023 was the first year since 2009 that the number of infants participating in WIC increased.

- On average, 6.6 million people participated in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) each month, 5.0 percent more than in FY 2022. Total WIC spending was \$6.6 billion, 14.9 percent more than in FY 2022, reflecting an increase in participation and food costs.

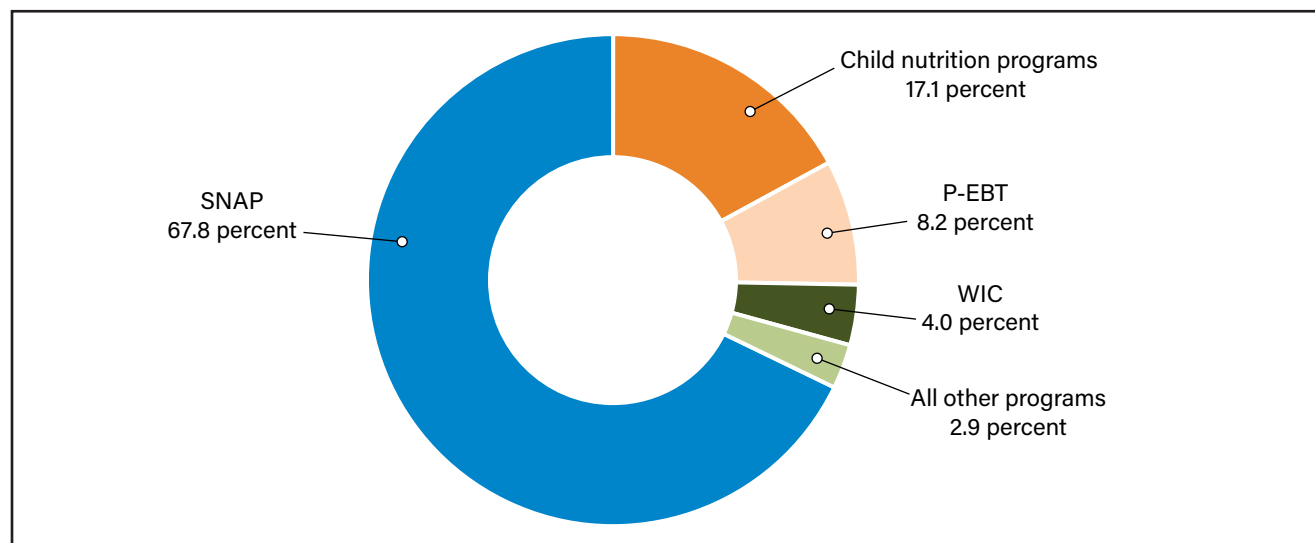
Total spending on the largest child nutrition programs declined in FY 2023, as did the number of meals served through these programs.

- A total of 8.8 billion meals were served across the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP).
- Total spending on these programs was \$26.9 billion, 20.9 percent less than in FY 2022.

USDA continued to operate P-EBT through the end of FY 2023. P-EBT benefits were issued to eligible families at a cost of \$13.7 billion, 23.9 percent less than the amount issued in FY 2022.

USDA food and nutrition assistance spending by program, FY 2023

SNAP accounted for about two-thirds of spending



FY = Fiscal year. SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. Child nutrition programs = National School Lunch Program; School Breakfast Program; Child and Adult Care Food Program; Summer Food Service Program; related State administrative expenses; and other related child nutrition costs. P-EBT = Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer. All other programs = Nutrition family assistance grants to Puerto Rico, the Northern Marianas, and American Samoa; Commodity Supplemental Food Program; the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations; the Nutrition Services Incentive Program; the Special Milk Program; Disaster Feeding; The Emergency Food Assistance Program; and nutrition programs administration.

Note: The figure is based on preliminary data from the September 2023 *Program Information Report (Keydata)* released by USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in December 2023.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, FNS data.

How Was the Study Conducted?

This report used preliminary data from USDA, Food and Nutrition Service to examine program trends through FY 2023. It compared FY 2023 program metrics to those from previous fiscal years. This report compared nominal dollar values over time in some instances and adjusted past dollar values for inflation in other instances to make more accurate historical comparisons. Data for FY 2023 came from the September 2023 *Program Information Report (Keydata)* released in December 2023. This report also used supplementary data to examine economic and social indicators.

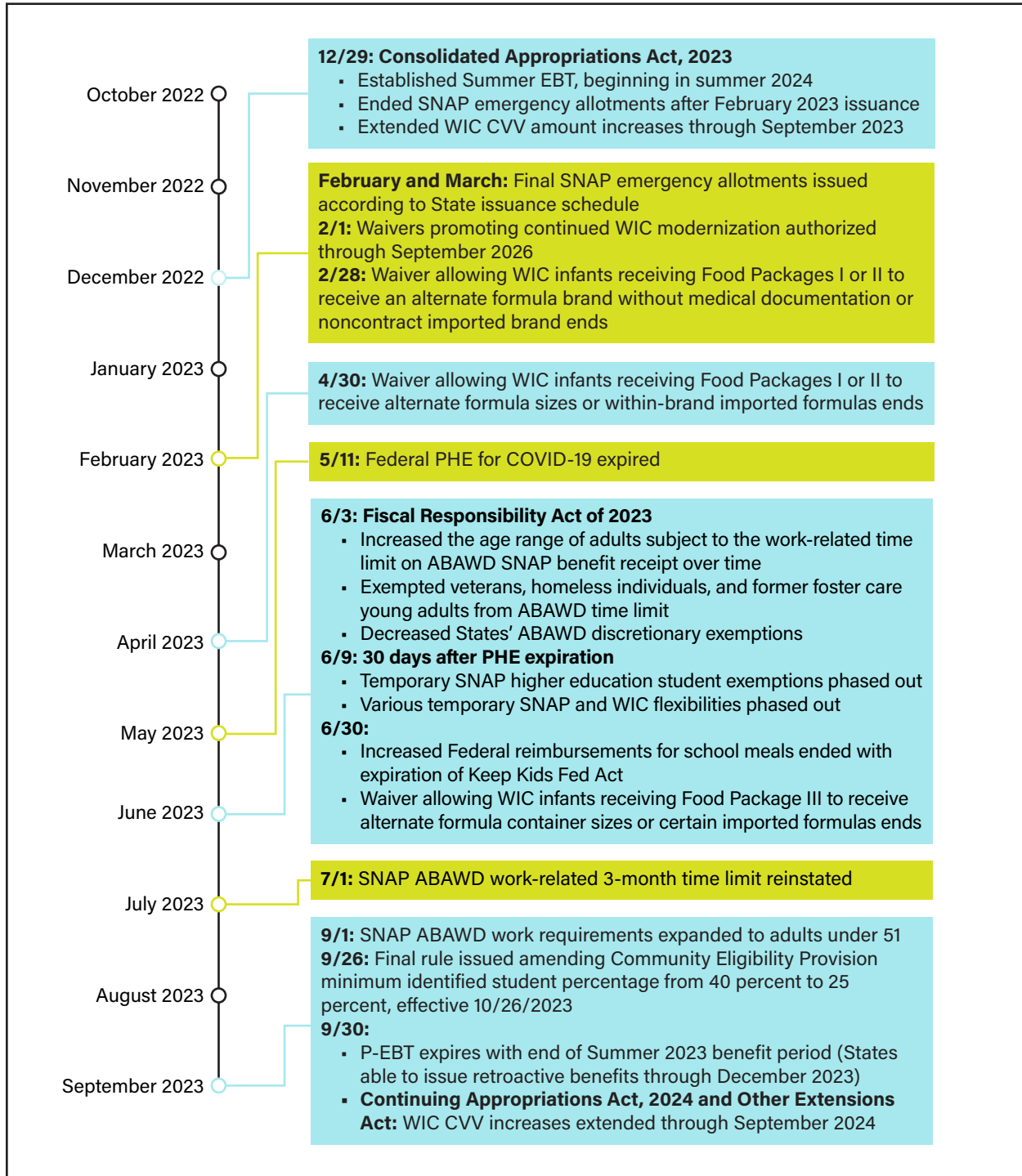
The Food and Nutrition Assistance Landscape: Fiscal Year 2023 Annual Report

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers 16 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs, accounting for two-thirds of USDA's annual budget. Together, these programs (which vary by size, type of benefits provided, and target population) form a nutritional safety net for tens of millions of children and low-income adults. Over the course of a typical year, about one in four people in the United States participates in at least one of these programs. The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and its economic impacts led to millions more individuals relying on these programs beginning midway through fiscal year (FY) 2020 (October 1, 2019–September 30, 2020). In response, several policy changes took place in FY 2020–22 to expand the scope and reach of USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs (see box, "USDA Food and Nutrition Assistance Policy Changes in FY 2020–22"). Program developments in FY 2023 (October 1, 2022–September 30, 2023) included changes to benefits, the expiration of waivers affecting the scope and coverage of existing programs, and the continued operation of the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, which was created in the initial aftermath of the pandemic (figure 1).

Figure 1

Timeline of Federal food assistance policy changes, fiscal year 2023



Summer EBT = Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer Program for Children. SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. CVV = Cash-Value Voucher. PHE = Public Health Emergency. ABAWD = Able-bodied adult without dependents. P-EBT = Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, Food and Nutrition Service information.

This report used preliminary data (subject to change as data become final) from USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to examine trends in USDA's largest food and nutrition assistance programs through FY 2023, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the National School Lunch Program (NSLP); the School Breakfast Program (SBP); the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP); the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP); and P-EBT.¹ This report compared FY 2023 program metrics to those from previous fiscal years. It compared nominal dollar values over time in some instances, and it adjusted past dollar values for inflation in others to make more accurate historical comparisons. FY 2023 data for USDA, FNS programs were from the September 2023 *Program Information Report (Keydata)* released by USDA, FNS in December 2023.

This report also provided an overview of USDA food and nutrition assistance programs, documented recent program policy changes, examined trends in economic and social indicators that affect program participation and spending, and summarized two 2023 studies from USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) relevant to these programs. One of these studies examined the prevalence of household food insecurity in the United States in 2022, and the other study documented the share of households with school-aged children that reported difficulty paying for expenses after pandemic waivers allowing schools to serve free meals expired in 2022.

USDA Food and Nutrition Assistance Policy Changes in FYs 2020–22

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic led to a greater need for food assistance while also disrupting the normal operations of several food assistance programs. In response, the Federal Government passed several pieces of legislation allowing USDA to temporarily address need and program disruptions. Broadly, pandemic-related changes taking place in FYs 2020–22 included:

- Increases in benefits issued through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC);
- Waivers that allowed schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) to serve free meals to all students;
- Higher Federal reimbursements for meals served through NSLP, SBP, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP);
- Expanded scope and coverage of existing programs, such as CACFP and the Summer Food Service Program;
- Greater administrative flexibilities in the operation of programs;
- An authorized Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, which reimbursed eligible families for missed school meals due to COVID-19-related school closures; and
- An authorized Farmers to Families Food Box Program, which purchased and distributed agricultural products to those in need.

continued on next page ►

¹ Other programs not discussed in this report include the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program; Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program; Patrick Leahy Farm to School Program; Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program; Special Milk Program; Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children; Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations; Commodity Supplemental Food Program; The Emergency Food Assistance Program; and USDA Foods in Schools.

Other developments stemmed from pandemic-related supply chain disruptions of infant formula that intensified in FY 2022, when a major U.S. manufacturer of infant formula announced a recall of powder formulas produced at one of its facilities and the facility's temporary closure. In response, the Federal Government issued another set of waivers that allowed WIC participants to exchange recalled formula, as well as to receive different brands, forms, and sizes of infant formula than they typically would. These waivers began expiring after February 2023 as the supply of formula recovered.

For further details on policy developments during these years, see *The Food and Nutrition Assistance Landscape: Fiscal Year 2020 Annual Report* (Toossi et al., 2021), *Fiscal Year 2021 Annual Report* (Jones et al., 2022), and *Fiscal Year 2022 Annual Report* (Toossi & Jones, 2023).

Policy changes continued in FY 2023. Major developments are summarized in figure 1 and discussed further in the following sections.

Total Food and Nutrition Assistance Spending

Spending Fell for a Second Fiscal Year

Federal spending for USDA's domestic food and nutrition assistance programs totaled \$166.4 billion in FY 2023. Federal spending in FY 2023 was 9.7 percent lower than the nominal spending of \$184.2 billion in FY 2022 (table 1). Adjusted for inflation, spending was down 13.0 percent from a total of \$191.1 billion in FY 2022 (adjusted to 2023 dollars using the Personal Consumption Expenditures price index from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis) and down 17.8 percent from a peak of \$202.4 billion in FY 2021 (figure 2). Adjusted for inflation, FY 2023 spending was 54.5 percent higher than in FY 2019, the last full fiscal year before the pandemic, and 21.2 percent higher than in FY 2013, the prepandemic high.

Table 1

USDA food and nutrition assistance at a glance, fiscal years 2022 and 2023

Program		FY 2022	FY 2023	Percent change
SNAP	Average monthly participation (millions)	41.2	42.1	2.3
	Average benefit per person (dollars per month)	230.48	211.93	-8.0
	Total spending (billion dollars)	119.6	112.8	-5.6
WIC	Average monthly participation (millions)	6.26	6.57	5.0
	Women	1.40	1.49	6.1
	Infants	1.43	1.47	2.9
	Children	3.43	3.62	5.5
	Food cost per person (dollars per month)	47.75	55.95	17.2
	Total spending (billion dollars)	5.74	6.60	14.9
NSLP, SBP, CACFP, and SFSP	Total meals served (billions)	9.6	8.8	-7.6
	Total spending (billion dollars)	34.0	26.9	-20.9
P-EBT	Total spending (billion dollars)	18.0	13.7	-23.9
All programs	Total spending (billion dollars)	184.2	166.4	-9.7

FY = Fiscal year. SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. NSLP = National School Lunch Program. SBP = School Breakfast Program. CACFP = Child and Adult Care Food Program. SFSP = Summer Food Service Program. P-EBT = Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer.

Note: The FY 2023 information is based on preliminary data from the September 2023 *Program Information Report (Keydata)* released by USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in December 2023. Spending is in nominal terms and total spending in the last row includes the cost of programs not shown in the table. Average SNAP benefit per person is calculated as total annual benefits divided by average monthly participation, divided by 12. WIC food cost per person is calculated the same way.

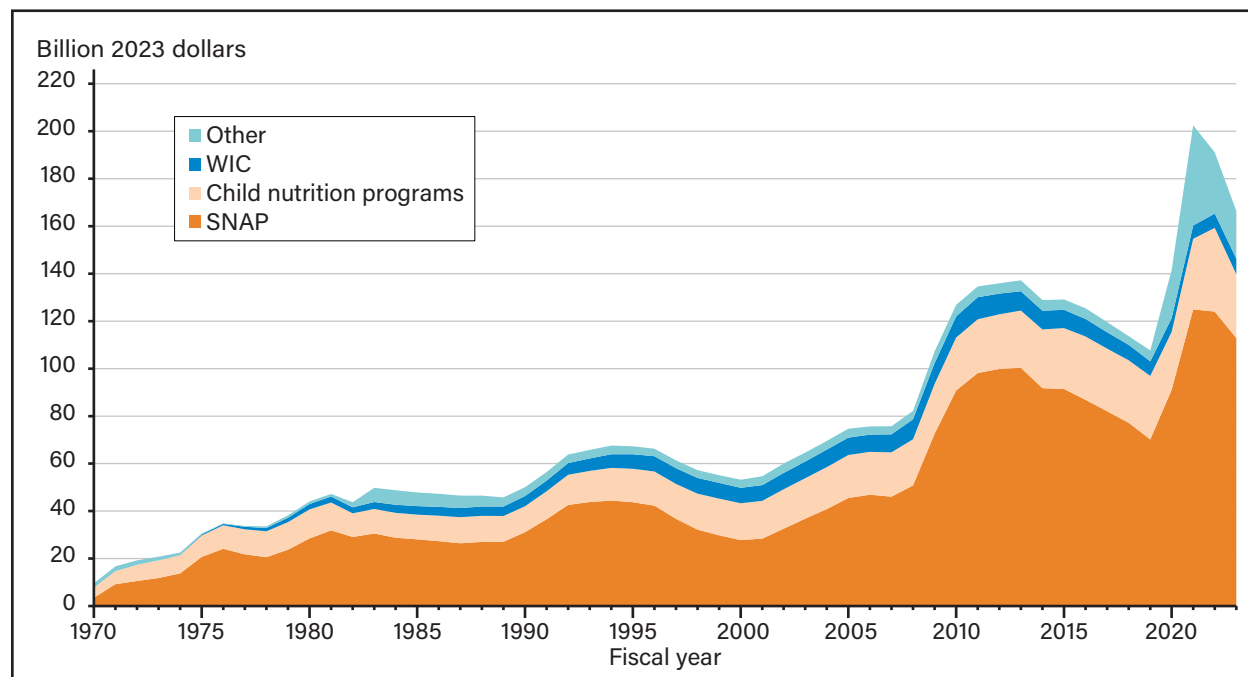
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, FNS data.

The largest food and nutrition assistance programs in FY 2023 included the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and P-EBT. Together, these programs accounted for approximately 97 percent of USDA spending on domestic food and nutrition assistance. With the exception of WIC, spending on each of these programs was lower in FY 2023 than in FY 2022.

Figure 2

Inflation-adjusted USDA spending on food and nutrition assistance, fiscal years 1970–2023

Spending continued to fall in FY 2023 but remained higher than in prepandemic years



FY = Fiscal year. SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Child nutrition programs = National School Lunch Program; School Breakfast Program; Special Milk Program; related commodity costs; Child and Adult Care Food Program; and Summer Food Service Program. WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. Other = All other program and administrative spending, including Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) in FYs 2020–23 and the Farmers to Families Food Box Program in FYs 2020–21.

Note: The figure is based on historical program data released by USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in December 2023 and total spending data from the September 2023 *Program Information Report (Keydata)* released by USDA, FNS in December 2023. Spending is noted in billions of 2023 dollars, adjusted using the Personal Consumption Expenditures price index, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, FNS data and USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service data.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Benefits and Spending Fell While Participation Increased

SNAP is USDA’s largest food and nutrition assistance program, accounting for 67.8 percent of USDA food and nutrition assistance spending in FY 2023. Unlike other programs that target specific groups, SNAP is available to all households that meet the program’s income and asset criteria, subject to certain work and immigration status requirements. Participating households receive monthly benefits that can be used to purchase food items at authorized retailers via electronic benefit transfer (EBT). Benefits increase with household size and decrease with household income. Benefits cannot be spent on tobacco, alcohol, or nonfood items. Benefits also cannot be spent on hot or prepared foods, except in some areas under certain circumstances.

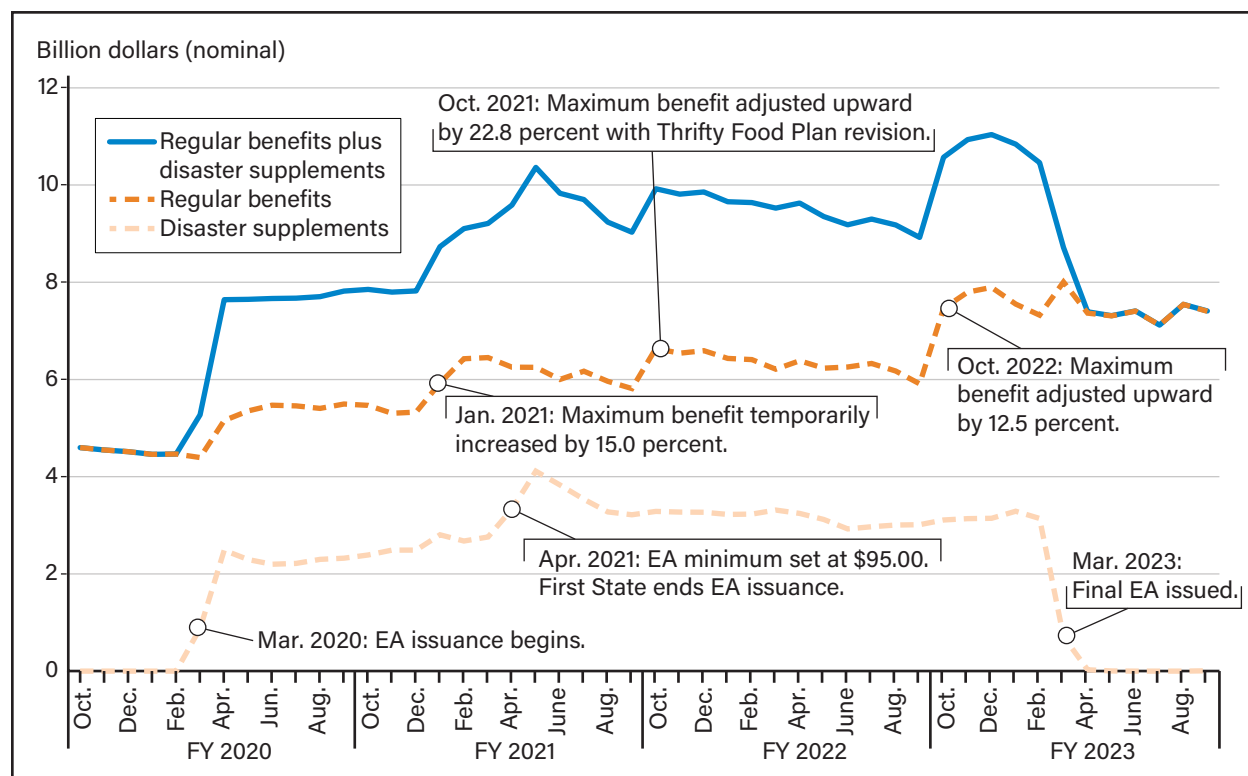
Several changes to SNAP were made in FYs 2020–22 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including temporary benefit increases, exemptions from some normal program requirements, and various administrative flexibilities (for more information, see box, “USDA Food and Nutrition Assistance Policy Changes in FYs 2020–22”). Program developments continued in FY 2023 (figure 1). The end of the Public Health Emergency

(PHE) in May 2023 led to the sunsetting of additional exemptions that expanded eligibility among higher education students and waivers allowing certain administrative flexibilities. There were also substantial changes to the work requirements on “able-bodied adults without dependents” (ABAWDs) following the PHE expiration and the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023. Separately, in FY 2023, the SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot continued to grow and expanded in scope to include all 50 States and Washington, DC (for more information, see box, “Growth in Online SNAP Purchasing in FYs 2020–23”).

SNAP benefit spending grew overall from FY 2020 to FY 2023 and varied with adjustments to the maximum benefit and the issuance of emergency allotments (figure 3). In FY 2023, the maximum benefit was adjusted upwards for inflation by 12.5 percent, a relatively large adjustment compared with prior years because of the high food price inflation from June 2021 to June 2022.² Spending on regular benefits grew accordingly in FY 2023. Emergency allotments were disaster supplements that increased households’ total monthly SNAP benefit to the maximum benefit allowed for their household size, or, beginning in April 2021, by a minimum of \$95.00. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 mandated the end of emergency allotments nationwide (in areas where issuance had not already stopped) after the February 2023 benefit issuance. Monthly disaster supplement spending fell from \$3.1 billion in February 2023 to less than \$5 million in May 2023.

² SNAP maximum benefit amounts are updated every fiscal year based on the value of the Thrifty Food Plan (TFP) in the previous June. Before the FY 2023 adjustment, the maximum benefit was also temporarily increased from January 2021 through September 2021 by 15 percent over the cost of the FY 2021 TFP and permanently adjusted upward in FY 2022 by 22.8 percent over the cost of the FY 2021 TFP. However, the actual increase from September 2021 to October 2021 was 6.8 percent due to the concurrent expiration of the temporary increase.

Figure 3
Monthly Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) spending on regular benefits and disaster supplements, fiscal years 2020–23
Benefit spending fell substantially in FY 2023 but remained above prepandemic levels



FY = Fiscal year. EA = Emergency allotment(s).

Note: The figure is based on preliminary data from the September 2023 *Program Information Report (Keydata)* released by USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in December 2023. Disaster supplements include only those issued to ongoing recipients. Emergency allotments made up almost all of the disaster supplements issued to ongoing SNAP recipient households during this time period.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, FNS data.

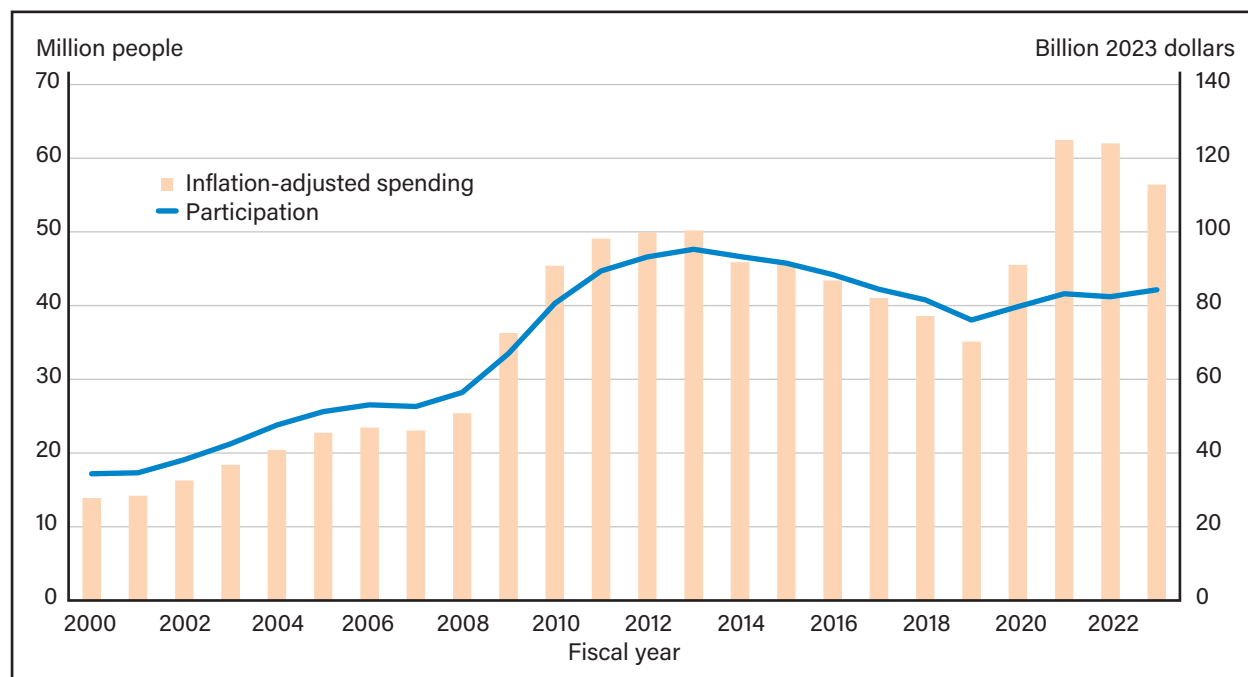
Overall, spending on SNAP decreased between FY 2022 and FY 2023, despite increasing participation. Lower benefit levels are why these two trends worked in opposite directions. In FY 2023, Federal spending on SNAP totaled \$112.8 billion, a 5.6-percent decrease from the previous fiscal year.

- Spending was 9.7 percent below the inflation-adjusted peak of \$125.0 billion in FY 2021 (figure 4).
- Of the total \$112.8 billion in Federal SNAP spending, \$90.2 billion funded regular SNAP benefits and \$16.6 billion funded disaster supplements to ongoing SNAP recipients, almost all of which were emergency allotments (figure 2). The remaining \$6.1 billion funded the Federal share of administrative costs and other benefits and expenses.
- SNAP benefits averaged \$211.93 per month per person, an 8.0-percent decrease from FY 2022.

Figure 4

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) average monthly participation and inflation-adjusted annual program spending, fiscal years 2000–23

Participation rose and inflation-adjusted spending fell in FY 2023



FY = Fiscal year.

Note: The figure is based on preliminary data from the September 2023 *Program Information Report (Keydata)* released by USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in December 2023. Spending was adjusted using the Personal Consumption Expenditures price index, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. FY 2019 average monthly participation excludes January and February 2019 counts, which were affected by a partial Federal Government shutdown.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, FNS data.

FY 2023 SNAP participation averaged 42.1 million people per month, 2.3 percent higher than the previous fiscal year (figure 4).

- This was the highest participation level since 2017.
- About 12.6 percent of the U.S. resident population participated in SNAP in an average month, up from 12.4 percent in FY 2022 (figure 9).

Several changes in FY 2023 affected work requirements on able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs). Typically, ABAWDs are required to work or meet other requirements for 80 hours per month to continuously receive SNAP benefits. ABAWDs are subject to a time limit restricting benefit receipt while not meeting these requirements to any 3 months out of a 3-year period. Beginning in FY 2020 and continuing through most of FY 2023, this time limit was suspended in most circumstances. Following the end of the PHE, the time limit was reinstated beginning in July 2023, meaning some ABAWDs would be subject to the time limit as early as October 2023. Additionally, the Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA) of 2023 modified the ABAWD work requirements through FY 2030. Prior to the FRA, adults aged 18–49 were subject to these work requirements. In addition, the FRA subjected additional older adults to the ABAWD requirements in intermittent steps, expanding the age range to adults under 51 beginning September 1, 2023, and adults under 53 beginning in FY 2024, with a final expansion planned for adults under 55 beginning in FY 2025. The age range is planned to revert to 18–49 in FY 2030. The Act exempted veterans, people experiencing homelessness, and young adults under age 24 who were formerly in foster care from the ABAWD require-

ments. It also decreased the number of discretionary exemptions from the ABAWD time limit available to States and limited the ability to roll over unused exemptions.

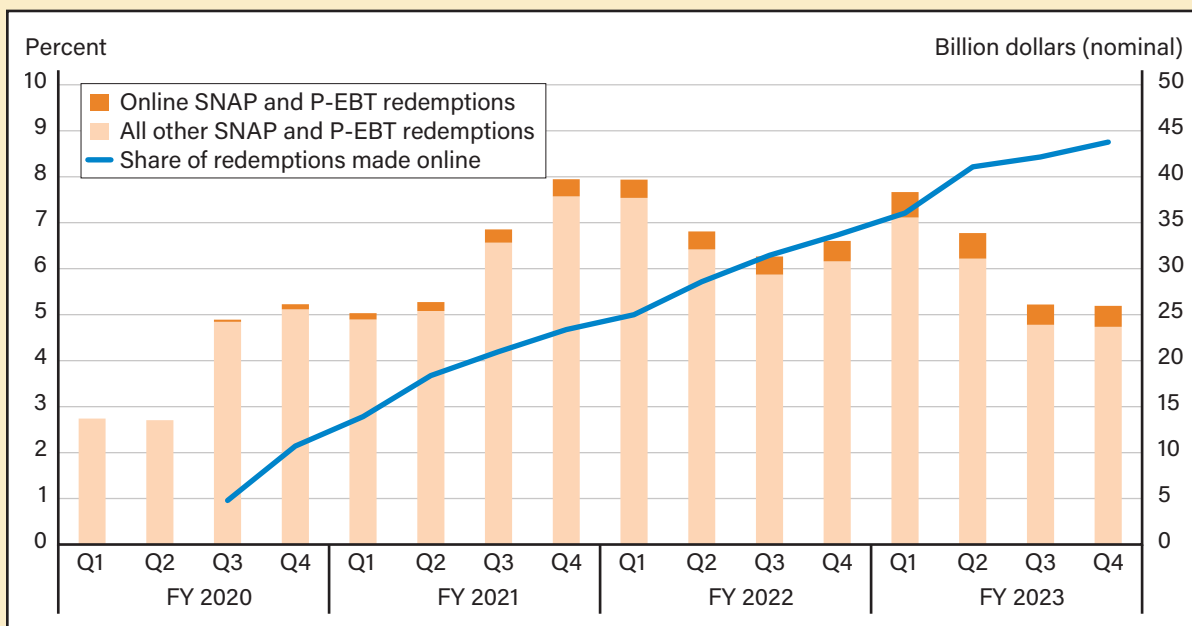
Growth in Online SNAP Purchasing in FYs 2020–23

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Online Purchasing Pilot allows households in participating States to purchase groceries online from select authorized retailers using SNAP and Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) benefits. The pilot was originally limited to eight grocery retail chains in eight States and was slated to roll out in FY 2019 and FY 2020. Given the onset of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the need for social distancing, USDA rapidly expanded the pilot beginning midway through FY 2020 to additional States and retailers. By the end of FY 2020, online purchasing was available in 45 States and Washington, DC. The pilot expanded to Alaska, the final State, in June 2023.

While the Online Purchasing Pilot expanded to additional States, it also expanded to additional retailers, which allowed SNAP recipient households to redeem their benefits at a greater variety of stores at the national, regional, and local levels. At the end of FY 2020, households could only redeem benefits online with seven retailers nationwide. This number increased to 88 by the end of FY 2021, 211 by the end of FY 2022, and 341 by the end of FY 2023.

Online SNAP and P-EBT benefit redemption grew steadily from FY 2020 to FY 2023. In the third quarter of FY 2020 (the first quarter for which complete information on online redemptions was available), \$234 million in benefits were redeemed online, or just under 1 percent of total SNAP and P-EBT redemptions. By the last quarter of FY 2023, the value redeemed online had increased almost tenfold to \$2.3 billion, or 8.8 percent of all redemptions.

Average quarterly share of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) redemptions made online, fiscal years 2020–23



FY = Fiscal year. Q = Quarter.

Note: The figure is based on a data extract from USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Store Tracking and Redemption System (STARS) totaling Internet Retailer redemptions and all other redemptions by month. Data on Internet Retailer redemptions are redacted prior to February 2020.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, FNS data.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

Participation Increased Relative to Prior Fiscal Year

WIC helps safeguard the health of low-income pregnant and postpartum women as well as infants and children up to 5 years of age who are at nutritional risk. It provides supplemental food packages, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and healthcare referrals at no cost to participants. WIC food packages are tailored to each group and designed to meet participants' nutritional needs. Participants receive an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card to purchase foods in their food packages at authorized retailers. To be eligible, applicants must meet categorical, residential, income, and nutrition risk criteria. A person who participates or who has certain family members who participate in other benefit programs, such as SNAP, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, may automatically meet income eligibility requirements for WIC.

In FYs 2020–22, several program changes were mandated by law or allowed by USDA to help meet the increased need for food and nutrition assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic and address supply chain disruptions. These included changes in eligibility and recertification criteria, benefit issuances, food packages, and administrative rules (for more information, see box, “USDA Food and Nutrition Assistance Policy Changes in FYs 2020–22”). These changes continued in FY 2023 until they expired by June 2023 (figure 1).

Beginning in March 2021, WIC State agencies were given the option to issue a larger Cash-Value Voucher (CVV) for fruit and vegetable purchases for a period of up to 4 consecutive months, increasing the previous value from \$9.00 (adults) and \$11.00 (children) to an amount less than or equal to \$35.00 per participant. The temporary authority to issue this increased amount expired on September 30, 2021. However, Congress passed other legislation in FY 2022 and FY 2023 that allowed USDA to extend the CVV increase. In FY 2022, WIC State agencies were required to issue the CVV in amounts of \$24.00 for children, \$43.00 for pregnant and postpartum women, and \$47.00 for breastfeeding women. In FY 2023, the amounts were adjusted for inflation to \$25.00 for children, \$44.00 for pregnant and postpartum women, and \$49.00 for breastfeeding women (figure 1).

Also, in February 2023, USDA provided WIC State agencies with the opportunity to opt into waivers that promote modernizing the program, including through building or enhancing remote eligibility determinations and benefits issuance. These waivers generally remain in effect through September 2026 (figure 1). WIC State agencies may also request waivers to support other modernization efforts, such as waivers to support online shopping projects.

Participation in WIC averaged 6.6 million people per month in FY 2023, 5 percent higher than in the previous fiscal year. This increase was driven by greater participation across all participant groups (figure 5).

- The number of women participating in WIC increased by 6.1 percent, the second consecutive year of increasing participation among women. FY 2023 also marked the first increase in participation among infants since 2009 and the third consecutive fiscal year that participation increased among children. The number of infants participating in WIC increased by 2.9 percent from the previous fiscal year while the number of children increased by 5.5 percent.
- Children aged 1–4 years made up more than half (55.0 percent) of all participants, whereas infants constituted 22.4 percent and women comprised 22.6 percent.

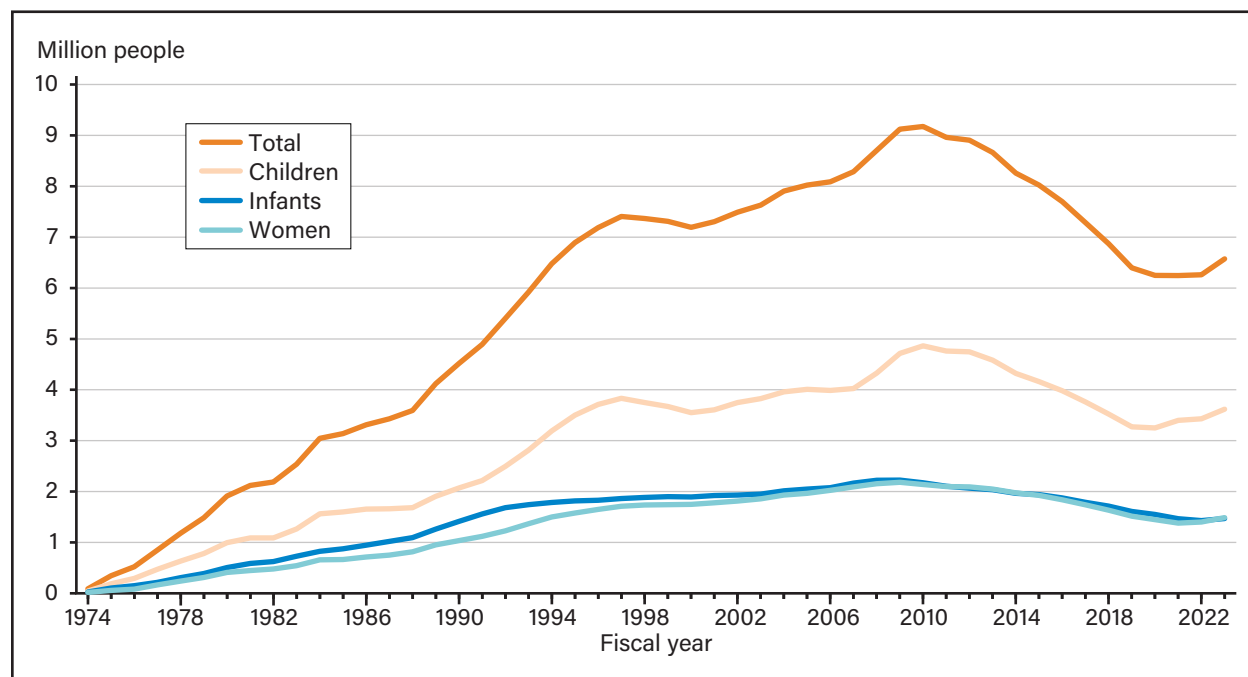
Federal spending on WIC increased in FY 2023 relative to FY 2022. This increase was driven by higher participation and benefit levels.

- In FY 2023, Federal spending on WIC totaled \$6.6 billion, 14.9 percent more than the previous fiscal year but 29.1 percent lower than the inflation-adjusted historical high of \$9.3 billion set in FY 2011 (\$7.2 billion in nominal 2011 dollars).
- Food costs per person averaged \$55.95 per month, an increase of \$8.21 (17.2 percent) from the previous fiscal year. After adjusting for inflation, average per person food costs were at their highest level since FY 2013.

Figure 5

Average monthly participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) by group, fiscal years 1974–2023

Participation rose for women, infants, and children in FY 2023



FY = Fiscal year.

Note: The figure is based on preliminary data from the September 2023 *Program Information Report (Keydata)* released by USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in December 2023.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, FNS data.

Child Nutrition Programs

Fewer Meals Were Served Relative to the Prior Fiscal Year

The three largest USDA child nutrition programs are the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). A fourth, much smaller, program is the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP).

NSLP and SBP provide nutritious meals and snacks at low or no cost to children in participating schools and childcare centers. Schools participating in the programs receive Federal subsidies for reimbursable meals served and some commodities (or cash in lieu of commodities) from USDA. In return, they must serve

breakfasts and lunches that meet Federal nutrition requirements and offer free or reduced-price meals to qualifying students. All students can participate in these programs, and meals are provided through a three-tiered system where students from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty level (FPL) are eligible for free meals, those from families with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the FPL are eligible for reduced-price meals, and those from families with incomes over 185 percent of the FPL pay full price, although these meals are also slightly subsidized. Schools can also provide free meals to all students regardless of their household income through several provisions. Notably, the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) allows an individual school, groups of schools, or school districts in low-income areas to provide school meals at no charge to all students if at least 25 percent (40 percent prior to October 26, 2023) are directly certified or categorically eligible for a free lunch through participation in SNAP or other specific means-tested programs.

CACFP subsidizes healthy meals and snacks in participating childcare centers, daycare homes, and adult daycare facilities. The program primarily serves children and youth, as well as disabled adults or adults over the age of 60 in adult daycare facilities. All participating providers must be licensed or approved according to Federal, State, or local standards. Care providers are reimbursed for each type of qualifying meal they serve (breakfast, lunch, dinner, or snack). In addition to cash reimbursements, USDA makes donated foods, or cash in lieu of donated foods, available to institutions participating in CACFP.

Through SFSP, organizations sponsored by school food authorities, local government agencies, private nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, and universities operating federally funded sports camps provide free meals to children, typically in congregate settings, when school is not in session (e.g., the summer months or unanticipated school closures between October and April) in areas or sites where at least 50 percent of children qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. Schools operating on a continuous year calendar may serve meals through SFSP when school is out of session for 15 days or more. SFSP meals are reimbursed at a higher rate than NSLP and SBP meals.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the normal provision of meals through these programs in FYs 2020–22. In response to these disruptions, USDA issued waivers beginning in March 2020 expanding the scope and coverage of these programs and allowing for flexibilities in program administration (for more information, see box, “USDA Food and Nutrition Assistance Policy Changes in FYs 2020–22”). Most of these waivers, including waivers allowing schools to serve meals free of charge to all students and to receive the higher SFSP reimbursement rate for each meal served, expired at the end of June 2022; the remainder expired at the end of September 2022. While the administration of the child nutrition programs largely reverted to their prepandemic operations in FY 2023, other changes took effect to support schools and childcare providers as they continued to struggle with the consequences of the pandemic, such as rising costs due to inflation (for a timeline of policy changes, see figure 1). The Keep Kids Fed Act, passed in June 2022, temporarily raised Federal reimbursement rates for meals served through NSLP, SBP, and CACFP (by \$0.40, \$0.15, and \$0.10, respectively) through June 2023. It also allowed SFSP sites to be located in all areas, regardless of income, and to provide meals for consumption in noncongregate settings (e.g., at home instead of onsite) through September 2022. Additionally, USDA, FNS issued temporary, transitional nutrition standards in July 2022 for NSLP, SBP, and CACFP, relaxing certain requirements pertaining to milk, whole grains, and sodium for the 2022–2023 school year to support the continued provision of nutritious meals as schools and childcare centers responded to and recovered from the pandemic. Lastly, a September 2023 rule lowered the threshold of students who must be directly certified for free lunch before schools or school districts can exercise CEP from 40 percent to 25 percent, effective October 2023.

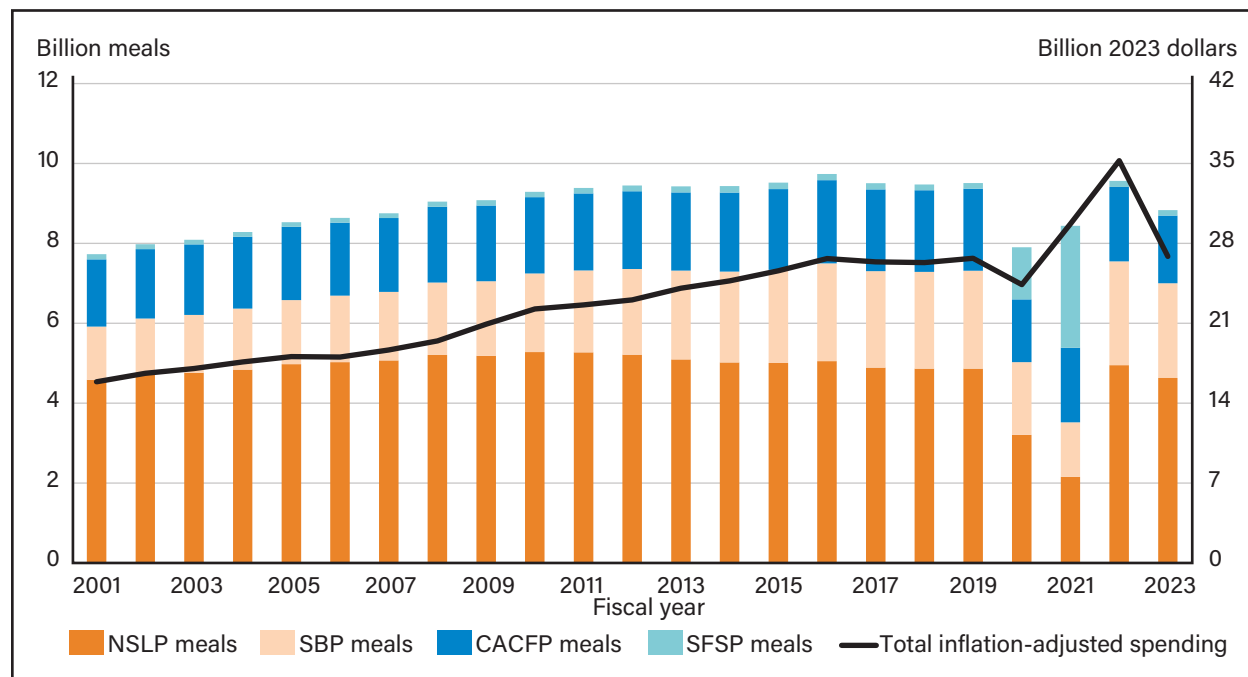
Overall, 8.8 billion meals were served across all four programs in FY 2023, which was 7.6 percent less than in FY 2022 and 7.1 percent less than in FY 2019, before the pandemic. Total Federal spending on the programs declined to \$26.9 billion in FY 2023, a 20.9-percent decrease from the previous fiscal year. These declines

may partially be due to the expiration of Federal waivers allowing school meals to be served free of charge to all students and raising Federal reimbursements for each meal served at the end of FY 2022. Adjusted for inflation, FY 2023 spending was 23.8 percent lower than FY 2022 (figure 6).

Figure 6

Total meals served and total inflation-adjusted spending across the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Summer Food Service Program, fiscal years 2001-23

Total meals served and spending fell in FY 2023



FY = fiscal year. NSLP = National School Lunch Program. SBP = School Breakfast Program. CACFP = Child and Adult Care Food Program. SFSP = Summer Food Service Program.

Note: The figure is based on preliminary data from the September 2023 *Program Information Report (Keydata)* released by USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in December 2023. Spending is adjusted for inflation to 2023 dollars using the Personal Consumption Expenditures price index, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using USDA, FNS data.

The number of meals served through NSLP and SBP was lower in FY 2023 compared with FY 2022, as was spending on the two programs.

- NSLP lunches served totaled 4.6 billion in FY 2023, 6.5 percent less than in FY 2022. SBP breakfasts served totaled 2.4 billion in FY 2023, 8.8 percent less than in FY 2022.
- Federal NSLP expenditures amounted to \$17.2 billion in FY 2023, 25.2 percent less than in FY 2022. Federal SBP expenditures amounted to \$5.2 billion in FY 2023, 19.8 percent less than in FY 2022. These changes were primarily due to a decline in the number of meals served, as well as lower Federal reimbursements for each meal served relative to reimbursements in FY 2022. These Federal expenditures did not include additional spending by some States to support the continued provision of free meals to all students after the pandemic waivers had expired (for more information, see box, “State Universal Free School Meal Policies”).

The number of meals served through CACFP also declined in FY 2023 relative to FY 2022, but spending remained similar.

- CACFP served 1.7 billion meals, 8.9 percent less than in FY 2022. Spending on the program was \$3.9 billion, about the same as in FY 2022. Although fewer meals were served through this program in FY 2023 compared with FY 2022, the Federal reimbursement rate for each meal served was higher in FY 2023 than in FY 2022.

The number of meals served through SFSP, total spending on the program, and program participation were lower in FY 2023 compared with FY 2022.

- Participation in SFSP was 2.2 million in July 2023 (the month when participation in the program typically peaks), 20.3 percent less than in July 2022, when SFSP sites were able to be located in all areas and to serve meals for consumption in noncongregate settings. Participation was also 19.1 percent less than in July 2019, before the pandemic. Throughout FY 2023, the program served 136.1 million meals at a cost of \$546.6 million. These figures were 9.8 percent and 8.9 percent lower, respectively, than the previous year.

State Universal Free School Meal Policies

Federal guidelines require that students in schools operating the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program be served meals for free if their household's income is 130 percent of the Federal poverty level (FPL) or lower, at a reduced price if their household's income is greater than 130 percent to 185 percent of the FPL, and at full-price if their household's income is greater than 185 percent of the FPL. Schools and school districts in which at least 25 percent (40 percent prior to October 26, 2023) of students are directly certified to receive free school meals through their participation in select other means-tested programs may also provide free meals to all students through the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP).

To facilitate the continued provision of meals to children during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Federal Government issued waivers allowing all schools to serve free meals to all students regardless of their household's income, a policy colloquially referred to as "universal free meals" (UFM), in the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years. Beginning with the 2022–2023 school year, non-CEP schools were once again required to charge some students for school meals. In response, several State governments opted to subsidize the continued provision of free meals to all students in their State. As of August 2023, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Michigan, New Mexico, and Vermont had adopted statewide UFM on a permanent basis, while Connecticut adopted the policy for the 2022–2023 school year, and Nevada did so for the 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 school years.

Other States took a more limited approach. New Jersey authorized free meals for students from households with incomes up to 200 percent of the FPL, and Louisiana and Arizona did so for students from households with incomes up to 185 percent of the FPL for the 2023–24 school year. Pennsylvania authorized the provision of free school breakfasts for all students, and Texas did the same for students from households with incomes up to 185 percent of the FPL. When Connecticut's adoption of statewide UFM expired at the end of the 2022–2023 school year, the State government authorized universal free breakfast for all students and expanded free lunch to students from households with incomes up to 185 percent of the FPL for the 2023–2024 school year.

Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT)

Spending on the Program Continued to Decline in Its Last Year of Operation

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act provided States, Washington, DC, Guam, and the Virgin Islands with the option of submitting requests to USDA for reimbursements to qualifying households for the value of school meals that were forgone due to COVID-19-related disruptions to inperson learning at schools through a temporary program called P-EBT. Initially, program eligibility was limited to households with children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. In FY 2021–22, P-EBT benefits were expanded by 15 percent, the program was expanded to cover the summer months when most schools are closed for instruction, and eligibility was extended to additional groups of children (for more information, see box “USDA Food and Nutrition Assistance Policy Changes in FYs 2020–22”). The program expired at the end of FY 2023 following the end of the Public Health Emergency (figure 1). Summer 2023 was the final period for which most children were eligible for benefits. States were required to complete all retroactive benefit issuance for FY 2023 by the end of December 2023.

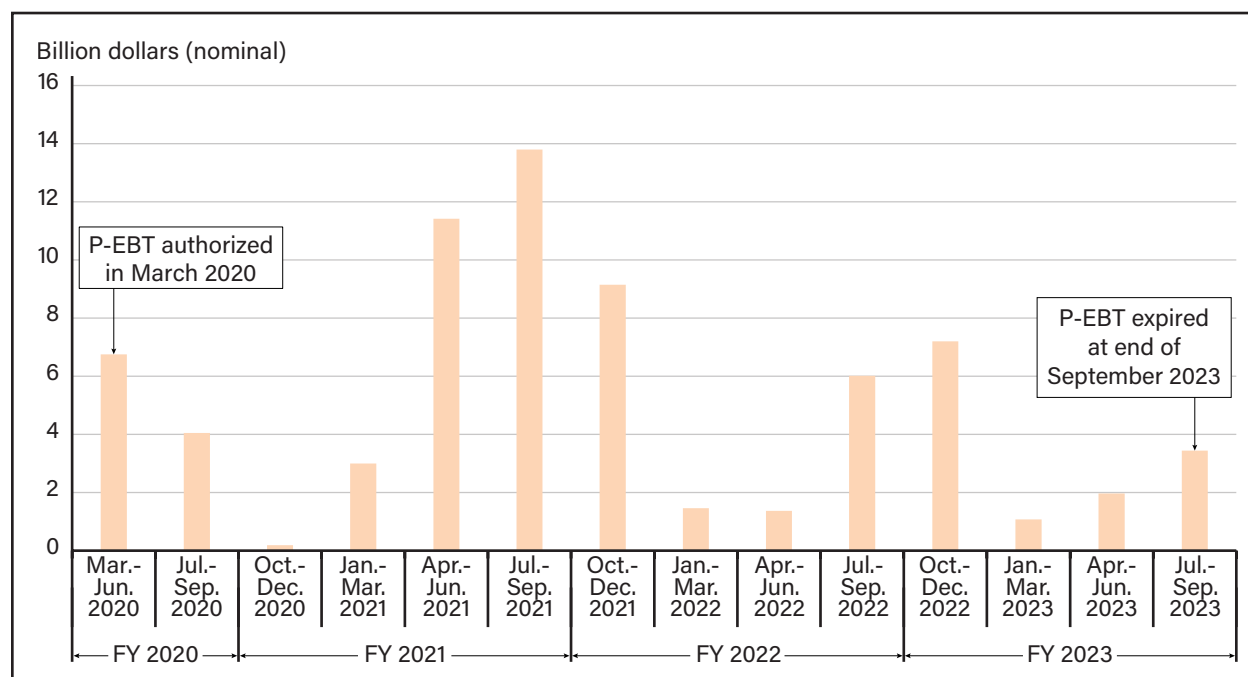
The States, Washington, DC, and U.S. territories had to submit requests to USDA for approval to issue P-EBT benefits for the 2022–2023 school year and the summer months of 2023. Requests to issue P-EBT benefits were approved by USDA throughout FY 2023. By the end of FY 2023, all States, Washington, DC, and territories except for Alaska, American Samoa, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Guam, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming had been approved to issue P-EBT benefits for the 2022–2023 school year. All but Alaska, Idaho, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, South Dakota, and Texas had been approved to issue summer P-EBT benefits. Depending on the State, District, or territory, benefits were issued in a lump sum or in multiple payments. In cases where P-EBT benefits issuance requests were not submitted and approved until after the start of the 2022–2023 school year or the summer months of 2023, benefits were issued for the period retroactively.

In FY 2023, States, Washington, DC, and territories reported issuing about \$13.7 billion in P-EBT benefits, 23.9 percent less than the \$18.0 billion reported as issued in FY 2022 (figure 7). Most of these benefits were issued in the first half of FY 2023.

Figure 7

Total reported Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) spending, March 2020–September 2023

Spending continued to decline in FY 2023



FY = Fiscal year.

Note: The figure is based on preliminary data from the September 2023, September 2022, and September 2021 *Program Information Reports (Keydata)* released by USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in December 2023, December 2022, and December 2021, respectively. Reported spending on P-EBT includes the cost of P-EBT benefit issuance and other minor Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program costs.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, FNS data.

Prior to P-EBT’s expiration, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 authorized the creation of a new food and nutrition assistance program called the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer Program for Children (Summer EBT). This program began operating in Summer 2024 and provides households with school-aged children eligible for free and reduced-price school meals with benefits that can be used to purchase groceries during the summer months when most schools are closed for instruction. Summer EBT benefits amount to \$40.00 per child per month or \$120.00 per child for the summer. States interested in operating the program in Summer 2024 were required to notify USDA, FNS by January 1, 2024. As of February 26, 2024, 37 States, the District of Columbia, 5 territories, and 3 Tribal nations had notified USDA, FNS of their interest.

USDA, Economic Research Service Report Summary: Prevalence of Food Insecurity

Households in the United States are categorized as food secure if all members have consistent and dependable access to enough food for an active, healthy lifestyle. Households are food insecure if, at times during the year, they struggled to afford adequate food for one or more household members. The latter are further classified as having either low food security or very low food security. In households with very low food security, the eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and their food intake was reduced

at some point during the year. USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs increase food security by providing low-income households with access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education.

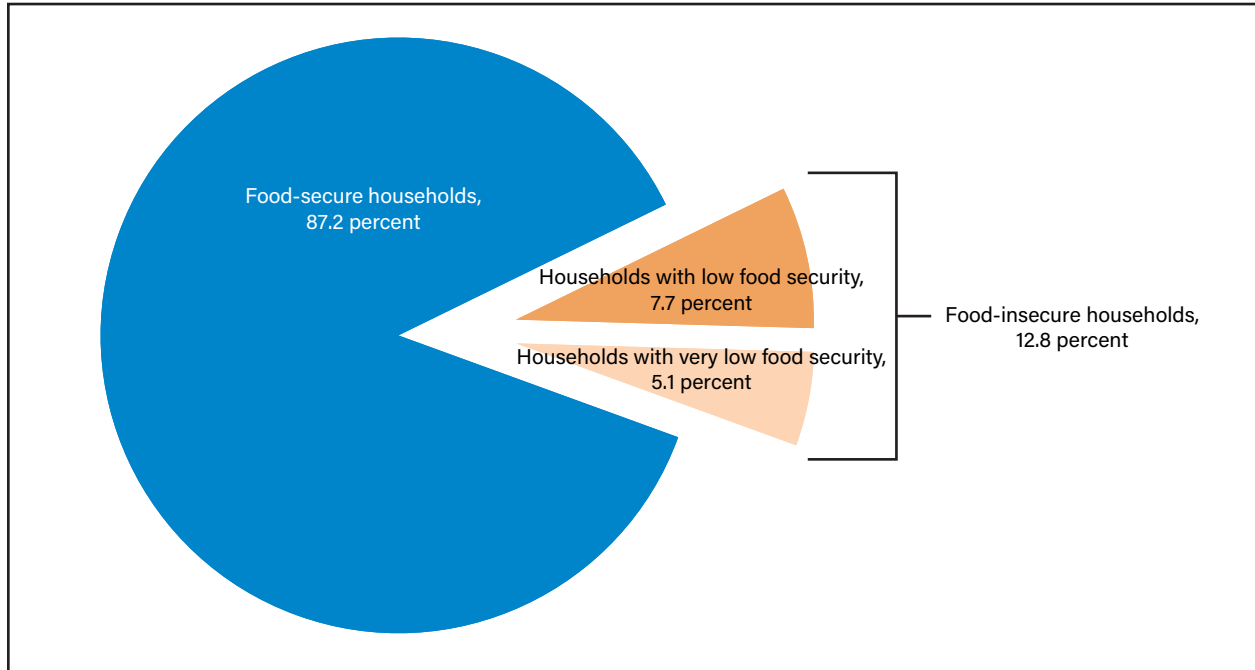
USDA monitors household food insecurity in the United States through an annual nationally representative survey conducted in December, sponsored by USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS). A household's food security status is based on responses to a questionnaire about experiences and behaviors relating to food security in the prior 12 months, such as being unable to afford balanced meals or being hungry due to a lack of money for food. Results from the survey are published in an annual USDA, ERS report.

The most recent report examines data covering 31,948 sample households from the December 2022 survey and covers calendar year 2022 (Rabbitt et al., 2023). The report provides important context for understanding the role of food and nutrition assistance during the pandemic.

The prevalence of both food insecurity and very low food security increased from 2021 to 2022 for nearly all subgroups of households described in the report (e.g., households with and without children, households with incomes below, at, or near the Federal poverty level, and by area of residence). Detailed findings for 2022 include:

- An estimated 12.8 percent (17.0 million) of households were food insecure at least some time during 2022, higher than the 10.2 percent recorded in 2021 but lower than the high of 14.9 percent in 2011.
- A total of 5.1 percent of all households (6.8 million) had very low food security, higher than 3.8 percent in 2021 (figure 8). On average, households classified as having very low food security experienced the condition in 7 months of the year, for 1 to 7 days of the month.
- Rates of food insecurity increased for households with children under age 18 to 17.3 percent (6.4 million households) from 12.5 percent in 2021. In about half of food-insecure households with children, only adults were food insecure (8.5 percent of households with children); in the rest (8.8 percent of households with children), children were also food insecure. In 1.0 percent of households with children (381,000 households), food insecurity was so severe that caregivers reported that children were hungry, skipped a meal, or did not eat for a whole day at some point during the year because there was not enough money for food.

Figure 8
U.S. households by food security status, 2022



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service report by Rabbitt, M.P., Hales, L., Burke, M.P., & Coleman-Jensen, A. (2023). *Household food security in the United States in 2022* (Report No. ERR-325). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

Table 2
U.S. food security at a glance, 2021-22

	2021		2022	
	Thousands	Percent	Thousands	Percent
All households	132,043	100.0	132,730	100.0
Food-secure households	118,533	89.8	115,750	87.2
Food-insecure households	13,510	10.2	16,980	12.8
With low food security	8,428	6.4	10,187	7.7
With very low food security	5,082	3.8	6,793	5.1
All households with children	36,765	100.0	37,235	100.0
Food-secure households	32,170	87.5	30,798	82.7
Food-insecure households	4,595	12.5	6,437	17.3
With food-insecure children	2,290	6.2	3,265	8.8
With very low food security among children	274	0.7	381	1.0

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service report by Rabbitt, M.P., Hales, L., Burke, M.P. & Coleman-Jensen, A. (2023). *Household food security in the United States in 2022* (Report No. ERR-325). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

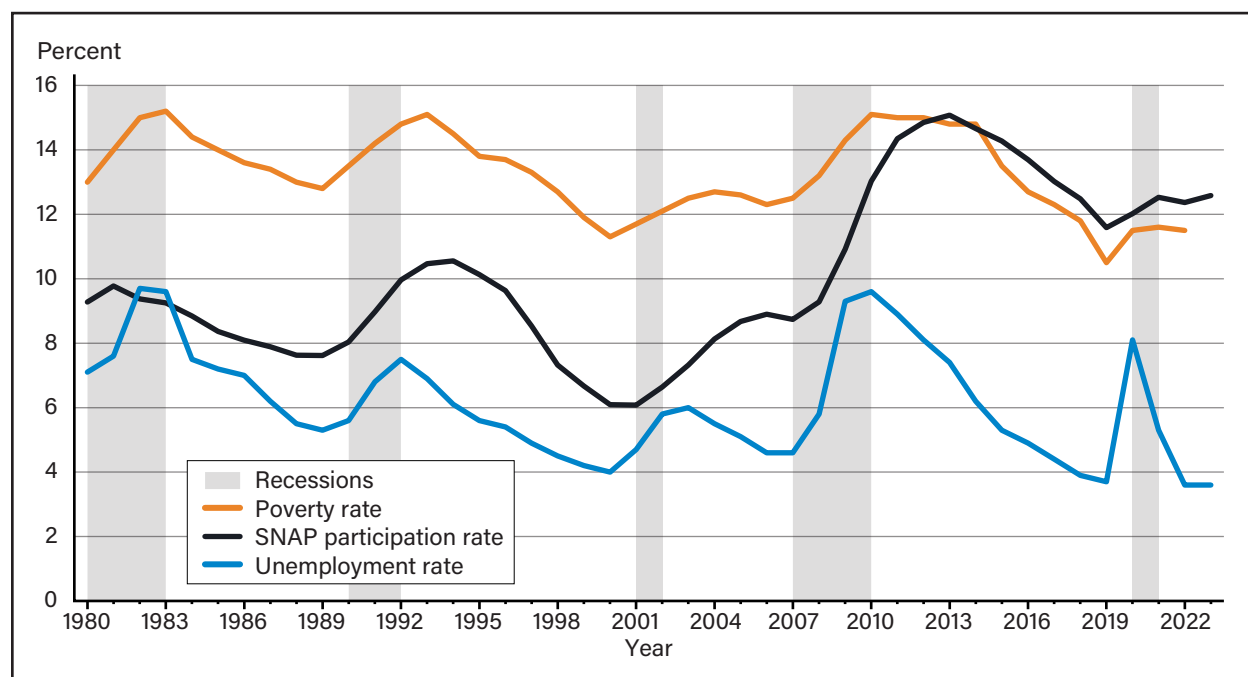
Economic and Social Indicators Related to Participation in Food and Nutrition Assistance Programs

Economic and demographic conditions, among other factors, affect participation in and spending on food and nutrition assistance programs by influencing the sizes of the eligible populations, the rates of participation, and benefit levels.

Since USDA’s food and nutrition assistance programs are means-tested, the number of people eligible to participate in the programs is linked to the strength of the economy. In particular, SNAP caseloads and benefits are strongly associated with economic conditions. SNAP is one of the United States’ primary countercyclical programs, expanding during economic downturns and contracting during periods of economic growth. The number of SNAP participants generally tracks the number of unemployed people and the number of people in poverty (figure 9). However, improvement in economic conditions during the early stages of recovery may take longer to be felt by low-wage workers who are more likely to receive SNAP benefits, which can result in a lagged reduction in SNAP participation relative to reductions in unemployment.

Figure 9
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participation, unemployment, and poverty rates, 1980-2023

Economic conditions influence participation in SNAP



Note: SNAP participation is based on preliminary data from the September 2023 *Program Information Report (Keydata)* released by USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in December 2023. The SNAP participation rate is calculated as the average level of monthly participation in each fiscal year over the estimated U.S. resident population in July of the corresponding year. Grey vertical bars indicate years when recessions occurred (January–July 1980; July 1981–November 1982; July 1990–March 1991; March–November 2001; December 2007–June 2009; and February–April 2020).

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, FNS, SNAP participation data; U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, unemployment rate data; and U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, population and poverty rate data.

U.S. labor market statistics in 2023 were similar to those in 2022 (table 3). For example:

- The number of employed persons increased by 2.7 million, and the number of unemployed persons increased by 0.1 million.
- The national unemployment rate remained at 3.6 percent in 2023.
- The labor force participation rate increased to 62.6 percent in 2023.

The cost of food and other goods increased in 2023, but inflation slowed relative to the previous year:

- The Consumer Price Index (CPI) for food, an indicator used to measure inflation, rose by 5.8 percent. This was down from food inflation of 11.4 percent in 2022 but higher than inflation of 3.5 percent in 2021.
- The CPI for all items increased by 4.1 percent in 2023. This was down from inflation of 4.7 percent in 2021 and 8.0 percent in 2022.

The U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (Census Bureau) measures household income and poverty each year. The Census Bureau measures poverty in two ways: (1) the official poverty measure, which is based on household cash resources; and (2) the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which also incorporates noncash resources and certain household expenses. The latest income and poverty data indicate that in 2022:

- The nominal median household income rose to \$74,580. However, the inflation-adjusted median income in 2021 was \$76,330, meaning real household income actually fell 2.3 percent in 2022.
- There were 37.9 million people, including 10.8 million children, living in households with income below the official poverty line (\$30,000 for a family of four). Overall, the poverty rate of 11.5 percent was not statistically different from 11.6 percent the previous year.
- The SPM rate was 12.4 percent, representing an increase of 4.6 percentage points from 2021 and the first increase in the SPM rate since 2010.

Table 3

Selected economic and demographic indicators, 2020–23

Indicator	2020	2021	2022	2023
Population in July (millions)	331.5	332.0	333.3	334.9
Births (millions)	3.6	3.7	3.7	NA
School enrollment (millions)*	55.4	56.0	55.7	54.8
Prekindergarten–grade 8	38.6	39.0	38.6	37.8
Grades 9–12	16.8	17.0	17.1	17.1
Employed persons (millions)	147.8	152.6	158.3	161.0
Unemployed persons (millions)	12.9	8.6	6.0	6.1
Unemployment rate (percent)	8.1	5.3	3.6	3.6
Labor force participation rate (percent)	61.8	61.7	62.2	62.6
Median household income (nominal dollars)	\$67,521	\$70,784	\$74,580	NA
Official Poverty Measure				
Persons in poverty (millions)	37.5	37.9	37.9	NA
Poverty rate (percent)	11.5	11.6	11.5	NA
Children in poverty (millions)	11.8	11.1	10.8	NA
Poverty rate for children (percent)	16.0	15.3	15.0	NA
Supplemental Poverty Measure				
Persons in poverty (millions)	30.0	25.6	40.9	NA
Poverty rate (percent)	9.2	7.8	12.4	NA
Children in poverty (millions)	7.2	3.8	9.0	NA
Poverty rate for children (percent)	9.7	5.2	12.4	NA
CPI for all items (annual percent change)	1.2	4.7	8.0	4.1
CPI for food (annual percent change)	3.4	3.9	9.9	5.8
CPI for food at home	3.5	3.5	11.4	5.0
CPI for food away from home	3.4	4.5	7.7	7.1

NA = Data not available. CPI = Consumer Price Index.

Note: The asterisk (*) indicates school enrollment for 2022 and 2023 are projections.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, population, poverty, and household income data; National Center for Health Statistics, births data; National Center for Education Statistics, school enrollment data; and the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment, unemployment, labor force participation, and CPI data.

USDA, Economic Research Service Research Update

USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) staff conduct research related to domestic food and nutrition assistance. Recently released USDA, ERS reports concerning food and nutrition assistance include:

- *Cost of School Meals and Households' Difficulty Paying for Expenses: Evidence From the Household Pulse Survey* (summarized below): Documented the share of households with school-aged children reporting that paying for school meals made it difficult to pay for other expenses after pandemic waivers allowing schools to serve free meals to all students expired in 2022 (Toossi, 2023a).

- *Trends in U.S. Whole-Grain Intakes 1994–2018: The Roles of Age, Food Source, and School Food:* Examined trends in whole-grain intakes over a 24-year period by age group and food source, including the role of whole-grain foods obtained at school (Lin et al., 2023).
- *U.S. Agricultural Policy Review, 2022:* Documented developments in U.S. agricultural policies, including a partial focus on food and nutrition assistance policy, during the 2022 calendar year (Baldwin et al., 2023).

USDA, ERS began a COVID-19 Working Paper series to publicly release preliminary analyses relevant to the effects of the pandemic on agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America in a timely manner. USDA, ERS COVID-19 working papers include:

- *Consumer Food Spending Changes During the COVID-19 Pandemic:* Examined differences in food purchasing behaviors before and during the early onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, including differences between SNAP and non-SNAP households (Okrent & Zeballos, 2022).
- *Obesity Prevalence Among U.S. Adult Subpopulations During the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic:* Measured changes in U.S. adult obesity rates during the first year of the pandemic across several demographic and socioeconomic subgroups, including respondents with household income making them eligible for SNAP (Ehmke & Restrepo, 2023).

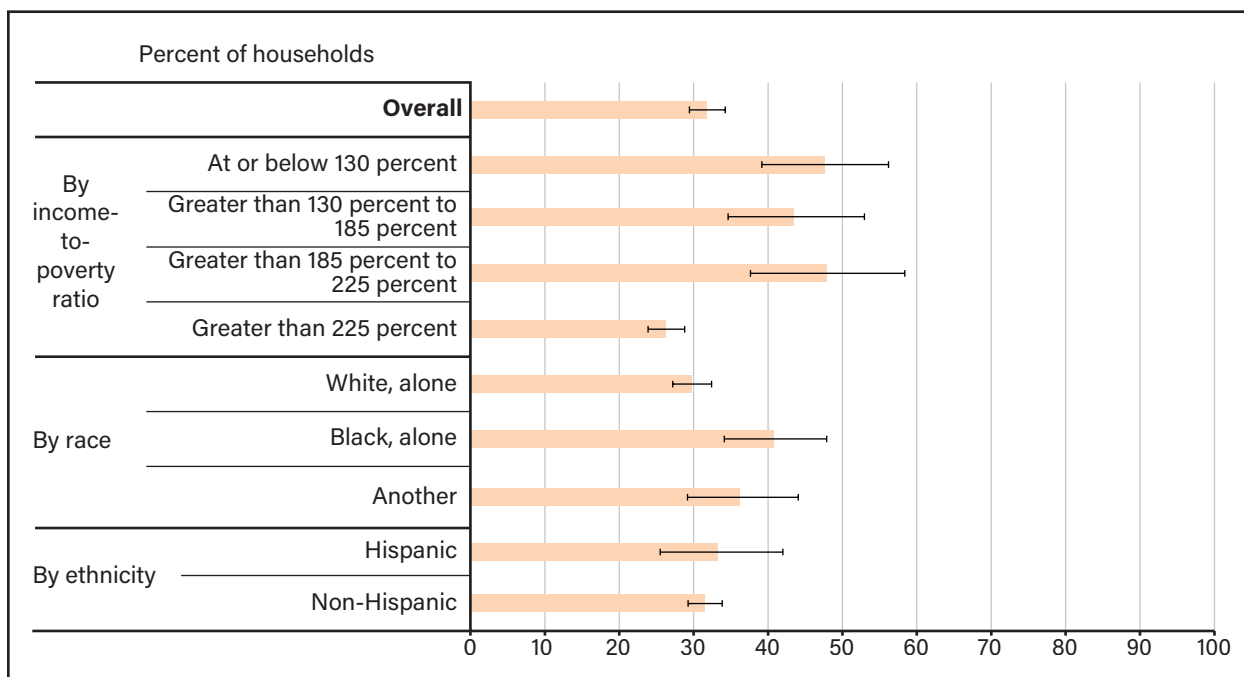
Report Summary: Cost of School Meals and Households' Difficulty Paying for Expenses: Evidence From the Household Pulse Survey

Typically, children receive meals through the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program for free or at a cost, depending on their household income. During the COVID-19 pandemic, USDA waivers allowed schools to provide meals at no cost to all children, regardless of household income. These waivers expired at the end of the 2021–2022 school year, leading schools to revert to charging some children for meals in the 2022–2023 school year. One USDA, ERS report, titled *Cost of School Meals and Households' Difficulty Paying for Expenses: Evidence from the Household Pulse Survey*, examined the share of households with school-aged children reporting that paying for their children's school meals contributed to their financial hardship (defined in the report as having difficulty paying for household expenses) in the period after the expiration of USDA's waivers (Toossi, 2023a). The study used data from the Household Pulse Survey, which has provided frequent information on how the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues have affected U.S. households since 2020. The study also focused on related experiences of households with school-age children before and after the USDA waivers to produce descriptive information relating to household financial hardship and receipt of school meals.

The study found that the share of households with school-aged children reporting that it was difficult to pay for their expenses was higher in October 2022 (after the waiver's expiration) than in October 2021 (before the expiration). The rate was 49.1 percent in October 2022, up from 37.7 percent in October 2021. Among households with school-aged children who reported difficulty paying for their expenses, the share reporting that their child(ren) received school meals declined from 38.5 percent in October 2021 to 30.2 percent in October 2022. Further, in December 2022, 31.6 percent of households with school-aged children who paid for school meals reported that paying for meals made it difficult to pay for other expenses (figure 10). The share reporting that difficulty was higher for subsamples of relatively lower-income households and non-White households. A later update of this study appearing in USDA, ERS' *Amber Waves* found that the share of households with school-aged children reporting that paying for the meals their children received at school made it difficult to pay for their other expenses remained about the same in the period from December 2022 to May 2023 (Toossi, 2023b).

Figure 10

Share reporting that paying for school meals made it difficult to pay for other expenses among households with children aged 5-17 that reported paying for school meals, December 2022



Note: This figure is based on a sample of households with children aged 5-17 that reported paying for reduced-price or full-price school meals from Household Pulse Survey week 52 (December 7-December 19, 2022). The figure presents the share of households reporting that having to pay for school meals contributed to difficulty paying for their other expenses overall and by income-to-poverty ratio, race, and ethnicity. Income-to-poverty ratios are based on household income in 2021. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service report by Toossi, S. (2023). *Cost of School Meals and Households' Difficulty Paying for Expenses: Evidence From the Household Pulse Survey* (Report No. EB-37). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

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