

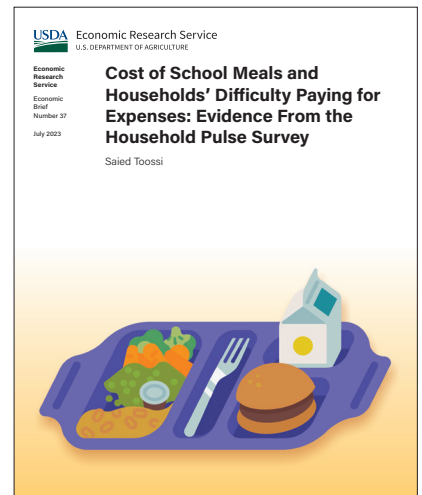
Cost of School Meals and Households' Difficulty Paying for Expenses: Evidence From the Household Pulse Survey

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Summary

Typically, children can get school meals for free, at a reduced price, or at full price, depending on their household's income. During the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued a waiver that allowed schools to provide meals at no cost to all children, regardless of their household's income, in the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years. These waivers expired on June 30, 2022, and many schools reverted to charging children for meals in the 2022–2023 school year. In response, some advocates and policymakers expressed concern that charging for school meals places a financial burden on families who may continue to feel the effect of the pandemic and its economic consequences, such as rising inflation. Yet, whether charging children for school meals makes it difficult for households to pay for their other expenses is unclear. This economic brief uses recently released data from the Household Pulse Survey on the experiences of households with children aged 5–17 to provide descriptive statistics that can help add context to these discussions. Key findings include the following:

- The share of households with children aged 5–17 reporting that it was somewhat or very difficult to pay for their expenses increased from 37.7 percent (10,516,959 households) in the period from September 29 through October 11, 2021—before the waiver's expiration—to 49.1 percent (13,829,026 households) in the period from October 5 through October 17, 2022—after the waiver expired.
- In the period from September 29 through October 11, 2021, 38.5 percent of households with children aged 5–17 that had trouble paying for their expenses reported that their children received school meals. This share declined to 30.2 percent in the period from October 5 through October 17, 2022.



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- In the period from December 7 through December 19, 2022, 31.6 percent of households with children (2,208,777 households) who paid for school meals reported that doing so made it difficult for them to pay for other usual expenses. The share reporting the same among households with children aged 5–17 and incomes below 225 percent of the Federal poverty level, and among non-White households with children aged 5–17, was higher than the overall share.

Although these descriptive findings provide valuable context, further research is needed to establish whether—and to what extent—the cost of school meals contributes to households’ financial hardship relative to other factors such as inflation or other policy changes.