

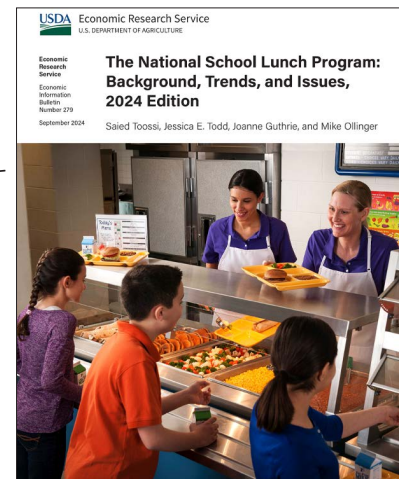


The National School Lunch Program: Background, Trends, and Issues, 2024 Edition

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What Is the Issue?

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is the Nation's second-largest food and nutrition assistance program. The program operates in about 100,000 schools and provides billions of meals to tens of millions of children and adolescents each year (hereafter “children” or “students” as applicable for brevity). USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) periodically reports on NSLP policies and operations following major changes to the program. The last such report was published in 2008. Since then, the program underwent major changes precipitated by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) and the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Changing economic conditions may have also affected program participation and spending. This report provides an overview of the NSLP, documents major changes to the program since 2008, and examines historical trends and participant characteristics. It also summarizes relevant research on the financial status of school food authorities (SFAs) responsible for implementing the program at the local level, program participation, the nutritional quality of school lunches, and the impact of the program on children’s diets.



What Did the Study Find?

Notable policy changes since 2008:

- The HHFKA required USDA to update the program’s nutrition standards, encouraged the use of local foods in the preparation of school meals, and added another provision to allow schools and school districts with high shares of low-income students to serve meals at no cost to all students (universal free meals or UFM), among other changes. Per the HHFKA, a USDA rule updated nutrition standards again in 2024.
- In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, USDA waived certain program requirements (e.g., when and where lunches could be served and consumed), allowed all schools to adopt UFM, and increased funding for the program. Most of these changes expired in June 2022.

ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

Trends in participation, lunches served, and Federal expenditures:

- From Federal fiscal years (FY) 1969 through 2022, the NSLP served 236 billion lunches. The number of lunches served peaked in 2010 at about 5.3 billion, declining each year afterward to 4.9 billion in FY 2019. Further declines occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the number of lunches increased to prepandemic levels in FY 2022.
- The share of students participating in the program declined from 64.3 percent of all students enrolled in public schools in FY 2010 to 58.3 percent in FY 2019, when 29.6 million children participated in the program per day, on average.
- Students receive free, reduced-price, or full-price lunches depending on their household's income and size. All students receive free meals in schools that have adopted UFM. The share of lunches served for free or at a reduced price rose from 15.1 percent in FY 1969 to 60.1 percent in FY 2008 and to 74.1 percent in FY 2019. USDA waivers facilitated the free provision of nearly all lunches during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In constant 2022 dollars, Federal spending on the NSLP increased from \$1.3 billion (\$64.56 per participating student) in FY 1969 to \$10.8 billion (\$346.95 per participating student) in FY 2008 and to \$14.4 billion (\$487.45 per participating student) in FY 2019. During this time, there was an increase in the number of schools and students participating in the program, changes to Federal funding for the program, and an increase in the share of lunches served free or at a reduced price.
- The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the NSLP's operations. Program spending declined in FY 2020–21 as schools utilized a USDA waiver to serve meals through the Summer Food Service Program instead. Spending surpassed prepandemic levels in FY 2022, amounting to \$21.4 billion (\$712.62 per participating student). This increase was attributable to schools once again serving lunches through the NSLP, a greater share of lunches being served for free, and higher Federal funding for each free lunch served.

Financial status of SFAs:

- In a survey of SFAs in the 2016–17 school year, 71 percent reported balanced budgets or a surplus. In another survey, 82 percent reported the same for the 2021–22 school year, when COVID-19 pandemic waivers and other changes were in place. However, only 62 percent reported balanced budgets or a surplus in the first part of the 2022–2023 school year, after the waivers had expired and during a period of high inflation.

Relationship between the NSLP and children's well-being:

- Research suggests that the HHFKA led to improvements in the nutritional quality of NSLP lunches without reducing program participation or students' consumption of school meals. Research also suggests that participation in the program helps improve students' dietary intake.

How Was the Study Conducted?

USDA, ERS researchers examined NSLP's rules and regulations, studied program trends using data from USDA, Food and Nutrition Service and other sources, and reviewed numerous NSLP-related research publications.