

The Food Assistance Landscape: Fiscal Year 2019 Annual Report

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What Is the Issue?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers 15 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs that together affect the lives of millions of people. These programs also represent a significant Federal investment, accounting for roughly two-thirds of USDA’s annual budget. This report uses preliminary data (which are subject to change as data become final) from USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to examine trends in food and nutrition assistance programs through Fiscal Year (FY) 2019. It also looks at trends in economic and social indicators that affect participation in and spending on food and nutrition assistance programs. In addition, the report highlights two recent Economic Research Service (ERS) studies: one that examines the prevalence of household food insecurity in the United States in 2018 and another that estimates the effects that increasing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits during an economic downturn would have on U.S. gross domestic product, employment, and incomes. **Readers should note that these are 2019 statistics and do not reflect potential impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that began in 2020.**

What Did the Study Find?

- Spending for USDA’s 15 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs totaled \$92.4 billion in FY 2019, about 5 percent less than in the previous fiscal year and 22 percent lower than the inflation-adjusted historical high of \$117.9 billion set in FY 2013 (equivalent to \$109.2 billion in 2013 dollars).
- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) accounted for 65 percent of all Federal food and nutrition assistance spending in FY 2019. (See chart below.) On average, 35.7 million people per month participated in the program, 12 percent fewer than in the previous fiscal year and 25 percent fewer than the historical high of 47.6 million in FY 2013. Reflecting the decrease in participation, Federal spending for SNAP totaled \$60.4 billion, or 8 percent less than in the previous fiscal year. This was 30 percent lower than the inflation-adjusted historical high set in FY 2013 of \$86.3 billion (or 25 percent lower than the FY 2013 nominal level of \$79.9 billion).
- On average, 6.4 million people per month participated in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in FY 2019, 7 percent fewer than in the previous fiscal year. This was the largest single-year percentage decrease in the program’s history. The decrease in participation combined with a decrease in average per person food costs in FY 2019 lowered total spending on the program to \$5.1 billion, 6 percent less than in the previous fiscal year and 36 percent less than the inflation-adjusted historical high of \$8 billion set in FY 2011 (or \$7.2 billion in 2011 dollars).

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.

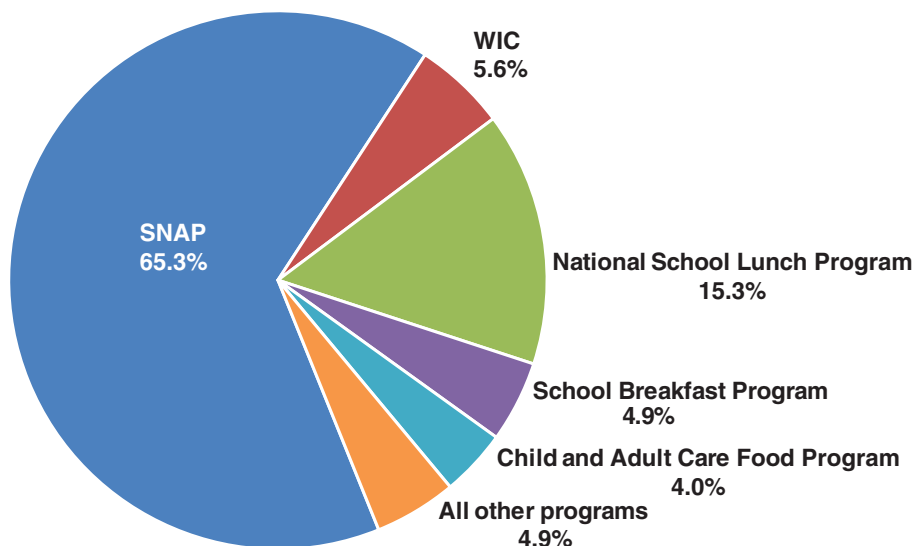
- On average, 29.4 million children participated in the National School Lunch Program each school day in FY 2019, less than 1 percent fewer than in the previous fiscal year and about 8 percent fewer than the historical high of 31.8 million set in FY 2011. Over two-thirds (68 percent) of participants received a free lunch and another 6 percent received a reduced-price lunch. The rest paid full price for their lunch.
- An average of 14.7 million children participated in the School Breakfast Program each school day in FY 2019, virtually unchanged from the previous fiscal year. This was the smallest annual percentage increase since 1982. Eighty percent of participants received a free breakfast and another 5 percent received a reduced-price breakfast. The remainder received breakfast at full price.
- About 2 billion meals were served in the Child and Adult Care Food Program, a slight increase (0.2 percent) from the previous fiscal year. The number of meals increased each fiscal year from 2006 to 2016 but declined in 2017 and 2018.

How Was the Study Conducted?

This report uses preliminary data from USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)—the agency responsible for administering the food and nutrition assistance programs—to examine program trends through FY 2019 (October 1, 2018, to September 30, 2019). It also looks at trends in economic and social indicators that affect participation in and spending on food and nutrition assistance programs and highlights two recent Economic Research Service (ERS) reports.

USDA food and nutrition assistance expenditures by program, FY 2019

SNAP accounted for nearly two-thirds of food and nutrition assistance spending



Notes: FY = Fiscal Year. SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. Expenditures for all food and nutrition programs totaled \$92.4 billion. They include nutrition family assistance grants to Puerto Rico, the Northern Marianas, and American Samoa; the Commodity Supplemental Food Program; the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations; the Nutrition Services Incentive Program; the Summer Food Service Program; the Special Milk Program; Disaster Feeding; The Emergency Food Assistance Program; and nutrition programs administration.

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